

EXCERPT

IVP Books

A Life of Listening
Discerning God's Voice and Discovering Your Own

September 3, 2019 | \$24, 208 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4573-6

In this memoir, lifelong minister of the gospel Leighton Ford tells his story as a personal history of listening for God's voice. Beginning with his earliest memories, he recounts the different ways God has spoken to him and the different ways he has learned to listen. Through the joys of ministry in many years as an evangelist with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, he remembers God's voice proclaiming, instructing, and reassuring. Through the pain of deep loss, he remembers God's voice calling out to him even in the deafening silence.

Leighton Ford Pens Memoir on Listening for God

That year when my mother left us could have been a terribly lonely time as I finished my first year of high school. But I had friends, especially Danny Goldsmith, whom I had known since fifth grade when we traded postage stamps. Danny and I would walk home from high school together. Sometimes I'd play the piano and we would sing some of the pop tunes of the day. Other times we'd play rugby after school at Tecumseh Park. Once I even persuaded my dad to buy me a pair of skis. That was weird because there were no hills for miles around except for a tiny twenty-foot slope on the riverbank of the park. Our attempts were a total mess up, and Danny nearly ended up in the river.

In late spring or summer Mother returned from her strange self-induced exile and things returned to what passed as normal.

She became interested in a new Bible conference called Blue Water, located on a riverside a few miles away. Except for the vivid blue river, the Bible conference grounds were unimpressive, nothing to equal the beauty of the lakes and rocks in the Muskoka region. But it did promise a change in the middle of a boring summer. Mother signed me up, and Danny and I went together.

The featured teacher that week was Oswald Smith, well known as the pastor of a large church.

"I am a very nervous person," he told us. "I find it hard to sit still. So when I pray I don't kneel down, I don't sit down, I don't stand. I walk up and down."

That was a new idea: I could pray and exercise at the same time.

"I have a very busy mind," he went on. "I get easily distracted. So I pray out loud instead of just thinking my prayers. So I don't keep using the same words over and over, I read a verse, perhaps from the Psalms, and turn that into a prayer."

That stirred my imagination. I sensed a strong urge to pray in a whole new way, not with rote words my mother had me repeat but in my own heart language. And I decided to try.

Early the next morning I walked out to a grove of woods and rambled among the trees, Bible in hand, a bit embarrassed, hoping no one would see me. I opened to one of the psalms and read it out loud, making it a prayer.

What those verses were I have no idea, but I must have prayed something like this: "God, you search me. You know me. How lonely I have been with Mom gone. She and Dad fighting so much of the time. I need you to be with me. Please be real to me, as you are to the other young people here. Help me to look up to you in the morning, as Dr. Smith said last night. Thank you that you care and understand. And show me what you want me to do."

Did I sense God speaking back to me that morning? I think so, at least inwardly I do know that I had a new and deeper understanding of how personally God cared for this teenage boy. A small flame began to burn in my heart.

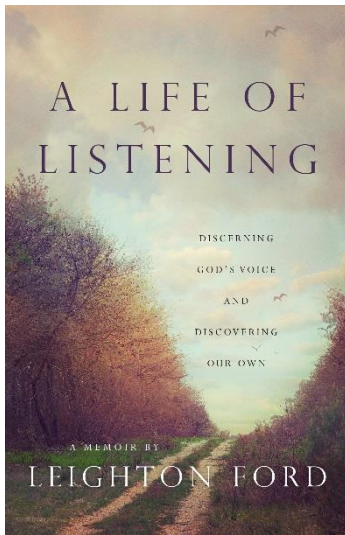


Alisse Wissman, print publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, broadcast and online publicity
800.846.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com

INTERVARSITY PRESS | ivpress.com/media





EXCERPT

IVP Books

A Life of Listening *Discerning God's Voice and Discovering Your Own*

September 3, 2019 | \$24, 208 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4573-6

Leighton Ford is president of Leighton Ford Ministries, which seeks to help young leaders worldwide lead more like Jesus. From 1955 until 1985 he served as associate evangelist and later vice president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. He is the author of numerous books, including *Transforming Leadership* and *The Attentive Life*. He lives in Charlotte, North Carolina.

On a morning sixty-plus years later, I drove with some friends twenty miles west of Chatham to find the site of Blue Water. Everything was so changed that I could not remember the way. I spotted a farm supply store and asked the owner if he remembered what used to be a conference center.

"Oh," he said, "you mean the Blue Water place. It ran down and then burned down, and they closed it years back. But some weird group took it over." He pointed down a side road and told us to look for a sign.

We made our way along the road running by bright blue water until we spotted the sign. A driveway led through a grassy field to a large house made of sections stuck together, surrounded by a collection of old trailers and derelict blackened cabins, a straggly row of trees, some unkempt lawns. Blue Water seemed a very plain and sparse place.

It was hard for me to imagine there had ever been a spiritual conflagration in this derelict place, but I remembered what had fired my heart.

I tried to retrace my long-ago prayer path to a small copse of trees where I went by myself to pray. The grove seemed much smaller.

What, I wondered, had left its mark on me long ago? Why here and why then?

I suppose I became a listener, or, as author Basil Pennington puts it, "a listening." It was not just the act of hearing a preacher that night but the reality of becoming a listener. Before I *had* to listen to Mom's voice. I now *chose* to be a listener for God's voice for myself.

Why did it happen at this ramshackle place, with only the vivid blue of the water as a hint of beauty? Perhaps the very ordinariness of the place led to an out-of-ordinary encounter. It has happened before in holy history.

Jacob, fleeing from his revenge-seeking brother, Esau, whom he had cheated out of his birthright, slept in the solitary desert with his head on a rock. That night he had a memorable dream of a ladder with angels ascending and descending. In the morning he woke with a startling certainty: "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

"How awesome is *this place!*" Jacob exclaimed. "This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). And he named the place Bethel.

Was the desert any different the morning after his dream? His stone pillow was still rock hard. The sands of the desert were dry and scorching. The landscape stretched across barren paths. But while the landscape was the same, his inscape was changed. To the eyes of his soul, this had become a "thin place," as the ancient Celts would have described it. It was made so not by its beauty but by the promise of a Presence in an ordinary place.

And why for me, then, that summer when I was fourteen? Adolescence is typically the time when conversions (of various types) take place. This was not exactly a conversion for me, but it was a very special awakening.

Was it perhaps the voice of *difference*? A different setting?

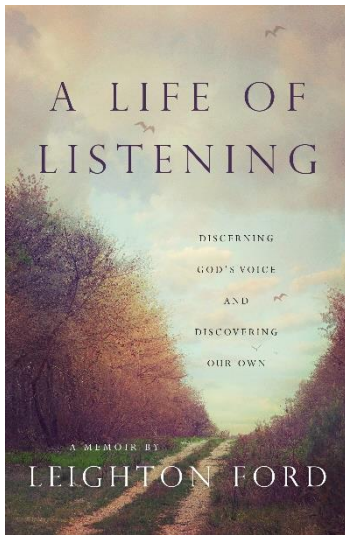


Alisse Wissman, print publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, broadcast and online publicity
800.846.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com

INTERVARSITY PRESS | ivpress.com/media





EXCERPT

IVP Books

A Life of Listening
Discerning God's Voice and Discovering Your Own

September 3, 2019 | \$24, 208 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4573-6

Or was it the voice of *absence*? Samuel's mother Hannah took him to the temple and left him there to serve God with the priest Eli. There he too became a listener. Three times he heard his name called, "Samuel, Samuel." Three times he went to Eli asking if he had called. Then the old priest helped him to distinguish God's voice in his soul from Eli's voice in his ear. And so he prayed, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3).

Was it for me also the voice then of *separation*? Of a new self-differentiation and God awareness? For Augustine, a journey from his mother, Monica, in North Africa to distant Rome brought him to a moment in the garden, when he heard a voice that forever changed him: "Take and read."

Was it perhaps the voice of *loneliness*? Of a teenager who had spent those nights listening to arguing voices? Or those long months alone when my mother was gone?

Was it, perhaps most of all, the voice of *longing*, longing for the reality of God? Perhaps that drab and flat piece of ground, framing the most vivid blue water I had ever seen, created the hunger for the beauty of the Lord in the dry ground of life.

I think that in that summer of 1945 I first realized that what is most deeply personal is also most widely universal. That sense of God caring for a lonely young man was the seed of a desire to help my peers to know Christ. It was the voice of my calling—to be an evangelist—a bearer of good news, to invite others into this transforming friendship.

—Adapted from chapter three, "Choosing to Become a Listener"



Alisse Wissman, print publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, broadcast and online publicity
800.846.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com

INTERVARSITY PRESS | ivpress.com/media

