

THE TELEPHONE

This is one of the previously written stories that came to my mind when I was writing in my essay "My Lord and My God" about God's ability to see and hear. (The other is "Halloween: Only Holding the Bag.") Dated January 11, 1996, this story became part of the family history gift that we gave our children for Christmas that year. I still smile when I think of the incident on which this essay is based and hope you will, too.

When I was a child we had no telephone. That was all right; many other people didn't have telephones, either. The important thing was to have access to a phone, and that we did, for my Grandma Hicks, who lived in the other side of our double house, owned this modern convenience. She didn't mind sharing her possession with us, so if any member of our family were asked for our phone number, we gave Grandma's number and said, "You can reach me here."

It was easy for Grandma to let us know if we had a call. All she had to do was rap on the common wall between our homes. After we rapped back to acknowledge her knock, she would say, "Telephone!" and one of us would exit our house, step over the banister that separated our front porches, enter her house and take the call. Simple!

All that changed when I was fifteen years old. It was now 1948. Grandma had moved away with her new husband and Dad, having sold the other side of the house, decided it was time for us to have our own telephone. How excited we were the day it was installed! The phone was placed on the buffet in the dining room, a good central location just under the stairway to the second floor and around the corner from the kitchen.

That night a strange thing happened in our house. We had all gone to bed, though I was still awake. Suddenly Dad's alarm clock rang with a sound that was new to me. It rang twice in quick succession, then paused and again rang twice. This happened several times and then it stopped. I was so puzzled! What could possibly have happened to his clock?

The next morning I related the story to Dad. He said he hadn't heard anything and the alarm had gone off at the usual time to wake him up for work, so he had no answer for me.

The mystery was solved as soon as I got to school. My classmate, Elsie, asked me why I hadn't answered the phone when she tried to call me the night before. I had told her we were getting a phone. She got our number from the operator and wanted to be the first to call me. She was, but I didn't know enough to recognize and answer the call. I was acting according to my limited experience, which included alarm clocks but not telephones. We had a good laugh over that one.

You may wonder about the ring: two shorts. We had gotten a two-party line, which means we shared the phone line with one other family. Their signal was one long ring, such as most phones have now. The two kinds of rings were heard in both homes but we would only answer when the two shorts indicated that the call was for us. If we wanted to make a call, we had to carefully pick up the phone and see if the other people were using it. If we heard voices, we gently hung up the phone and tried again later. Eavesdropping was a temptation we tried hard to resist!

A wonderful invention, the telephone! It makes the miles between family and friends disappear, at least for the duration of the call. Recently I made my first international call to a friend in Egypt. I still marvel that such a thing can be done. Oh, yes, I know that there are many fast and easy ways to communicate with the whole world right now and that I'm way behind in knowing about modern technology, but that doesn't bother me. I hope I will always find joy and amazement in things I do not understand, like how a telephone works. It seems to me that this is a childlike quality, which does not have to be put away as we mature.

It is not unusual to hear people talk about prayer as a telephone line to God. I find it troublesome, though, when adults sincerely think that God is too busy talking with others to hear their prayers or that their concerns are too minor to call to God's attention; why should he be concerned about them? How sad to feel this way! This is childish thinking that needs to be changed as we develop.

The truth is that God is not limited as we are. God does not have a party line; there's never a busy signal with him, and he never has to put people on hold to take another call. All of these are earthly things that have to do with time and space. God operates in the realm of the eternal. We must not think of him as limited to what we experience.

God's name is his phone number; that's easy to remember! And God issues this invitation to everyone: *"Call me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things that you do not know"* (Jeremiah 33:3). Isn't that something??!!

Update: When I wrote the above article nearly ten years ago, I never dreamed the time would come when I could no longer use the telephone, but it has. Not only is my voice gone, but even holding a phone to my ear is hard. However, a few months ago I finally got an email device and learned how to use it. I find email to be very much like talking on the phone. I "hear" the voices of my correspondents as I read their messages. There are problems, though. As in my childhood when not everyone had a telephone, so now not everyone I would like to talk with has an email address. Also I must face the fact that the use of my little Mailbug is temporary. I can well imagine a time when my fingers will no longer be able to type. Meanwhile I am grateful for any means of communicating still available to me, including the writing of these essays.

Technology has changed so much since we got our telephone in 1948. I explained what a party line was and what two short rings meant. Soon the one long ring may be obsolete as well, now that we have individual cell phones with their varied, musical tones instead of central family phones. With all the changes, and there surely will be more, we still contact God the same way Adam and Eve did! That communication system was perfect to begin with; it didn't need to develop!

Are calls to God local or long distance? Both, actually, for God is not only a God nearby but also a God far away (see Jeremiah 23:23,24). We don't need to worry, though, for our God will never send us a bill!

Can you imagine what our regular phone bills would be like if we constantly called people all over the world? Yet God invites us to talk with him all the time through Paul, who says, *"Pray continually"* (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

This is the kind of essay that I need to stop, rather than conclude, for there are always more fresh thoughts waiting to be discovered and enjoyed. So this time you finish the essay. If I have set your mind awirl, I will have done my part.