

Solitude & Silence 05

Encountering God



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INTRODUCTION

We are silent in the early hours of each day, because God is supposed to have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep, because to God also belongs the last word.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

This week we get to the real joy of the practice of solitude and silence - encountering God. All the saints and sages throughout christian history say in chorus that the practice of solitude and silence is foundational for the spiritual life - for in it we encounter God. And in unison they all testify that encountering God in the Secret Place is the greatest of all human experience. As John Mark Comer so wonderfully wrote,

Some days my mind is sharp and alert, my heart is burning for God, and I feel God's nearness. Other days (more often than not) my mind is like a "banana tree filled with monkeys," as Henri Nouwen once said—it's all over the place, my heart is troubled and afraid, and I struggle to pay attention.

But even then, my time in the quiet is usually the best part of my day. Truly. Something dazzling has to happen to outshine it. Because it's here, where I am most deeply aware of God, that I am most happy and at ease.

This intimacy with God is not just something for you to enjoy. God has made it clear in the Scriptures that it is what He desires. Friendship with God is the reason He created you in the first place. As someone once noted, the biblical story is not a story of how humans have sought for God, but a story of how God has sought for humans.

His love for you motivated His creation. And His love for you motivated His work of salvation through Jesus. Would you, in our fast-paced, productivity-obsessed, digitally distracted culture, be willing to slow down, be quiet and learn to - as John Mark Comer says - "let God love you into a person of love?"

A FEW TIPS

Here are a few tips to help you establish the practice of solitude and silence.

Be Intentional

If you wait until you have free time or more time to practice solitude, then you never will. The whole point of the practice of solitude is for you to make a conscious decision and discipline yourself to set aside time.

Start Small

Although we will ask you to practice a longer period of solitude by the end of this practice, do not put pressure on yourself to start there. Daily consistency with smaller amounts of time is most important at this point.

It is not about what you do, but about what you do not do.

The only thing you are doing is not doing anything to distract yourself.

Release any demand to experience anything

It is like falling asleep. The harder you try to fall asleep, the less likely you are. There are certain things that can come to you, but you cannot make it happen. Solitude is not about making anything happen, it is about making space for God to come to you.

Thought life

Contemplation is not trying to force yourself to think about God. Contemplation is about letting go of our mental preoccupation and resting in the presence of God. Don't get down on yourself or give up just because you have a lot of "mind chatter." Just discipline yourself to stay in solitude and silence and gently bring your thoughts back to God.

THE PRACTICE OF SOLITUDE

Find a quiet and comfortable place in your home or outside in nature. Do not bring anything with you except a Bible and journal. Make sure your phone (and any other device or possible distraction) is in a different room and not with you.

This week we are going to return to Listening Prayer from week #3 in our Practice of Prayer.

Daily Routine

Start with breathe prayer

- as described in the Appendix

Rest in God's love

- Once you feel "quieted," spend a few minutes just resting in God's love for you.
- Let the Holy Spirit make his presence known to you - body, soul and spirit. Just soak in his love, peace and joy. Let God love you.
- Don't try to make anything happen or control the experience – just be with God.

Meditate on a Scripture

- Select a passage from the reading list on page 4 and read slowly to lead your mind and heart towards God.

Listening Prayer

- Practice Listening Prayer (see page 5)
- Record what you hear

Gratitude

- Close your time with gratitude for God's presence and love

SCRIPTURES FOR MEDITATION

Exodus 33:7-11

Exodus 34:5-9

Psalms 1

Psalms 34:8-14

Psalms 35:5-9

Psalms 107:1-9

Psalms 131

Jeremiah 31:2-6

Zephaniah 3:14-17

John 15:1-8

John 15:9-17

Romans 5:1-11

James 1:12-18

1 John 4:7-21

LISTENING PRAYER

Listening prayer is the practice of learning how to quiet your inner thoughts to make room to hear God's voice. This is one of my personal favorite practices. It is also one of the most difficult because the human mind is fast and busy and works furiously to fill the void of silence.

But for those who persevere and don't quit, the rewards are spectacular. The ability to quiet the mind and listen for God is a beautiful experience of love, peace and joy. Nobody achieves this quickly, yet it is available to everyone, even the most ADHD personality, if you are patient and persistent.

Listening Prayer has these basic steps:

Breathe. Start with a few minutes of deep breathing. Focus on clearing your mind. Some like to simply pray "Jesus" or "Come Holy Spirit" as they breathe. I like to focus on my breathing as representative of taking in the life of Jesus by the Spirit.

Quiet. Sit in silence for a few minutes. This is generally the hardest step as our thoughts try to force their way into our attention. (Tip: bring a notepad with you and write down intrusive thoughts until they stop). Ask God for help in silencing your thoughts.

Ask God to speak to you.

Listen. Remember, the Spirit has direct access to your mind and your imagination. He may speak in a variety of ways, including a thought, a Scripture, a word, a phrase, an impression, a picture in your mind, a vision (like a little movie in your mind), a song, or a feeling/emotion.

Test. Because this is a highly subjective experience, it is particularly important to test what you hear against Scripture and to share it with those in your church community.

If you do not hear anything, don't worry or condemn yourself. It is ok. Just give thanks for God's presence and keep practicing until you do sense God speaking in some way.

REFLECTION

Write down any thoughts from your experience this week

APPENDIX

BREATHE PRAYER

"Let your memory of Jesus combine with your breath - then you will know the profit of silence." - St. John Climacus

In Hebrew the word for spirit and the word for breathe are the same word - for breathe represents life - and so the Spirit of God is like the breathe of God giving life. Since the 3rd century, christians have used the God-ordained process of breathing to attune themselves to God's Spirit and presence. Modern science has caught up and shown that deep, slow breathing calms your nervous system and helps center your mind. Try the following:

- Find a quiet place to pray and sit in an attentive, but comfortable posture
- Breathe deep and slowly (at least 5 seconds inhale / 5 seconds exhale)
- Relax, become present in the moment and then open your mind to God
- Combine a word or phrase with your breathing, repeating it as you breath. Or focus on a mental action with each breathe cycle. For example:
 - "Lord Jesus Christ" (inhale); "have mercy on me" (exhale)
 - "The Lord is my Shepherd" (inhale); "I shall not want" (exhale)
 - "In Christ alone" (inhale); "my soul finds rest" (exhale)
- Breathe in the peace of Christ... Breathe out worry, fear, anger, guilt, or shame.
- Breathe in Christ's love... Breathe out his love for another person

Extended Solitude

As mentioned at the beginning, we are encouraging you to participate in an extended period of silence and solitude. Here are goals to aim for:

- Ideally 6-8 hours
- No phone, email, TV, work, etc
- Find a spot where you can be alone and uninterrupted. If possible, go away to a cabin, beach house, park, or retreat center.

Like many things in life, this is going to take some planning. Try to arrange your day so you can be uninterrupted and remain in silence from the time you wake up until the time you finish. The following is a suggested schedule for how to spend the 8 hours:

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| 8 - 9 AM | Prepare your mind and heart. Take a walk or do whatever will help you set aside concerns over tasks and responsibilities. You can also spend part of this time writing down any thoughts that come about things you have to take care of after your retreat to help you clear your mind for the day. |
| 9 - 11 AM | Read and meditate on Scripture, taking time to stop and reflect when God seems to be speaking to you through the text. |
| 11 AM - 12 PM | Write down responses to what you have read. Speak to God about them. |
| 12 - 1 PM | Eat lunch and take a walk, reflecting on the morning. |
| 1 - 2 PM | Take a nap / rest |
| 2 - 3 PM | Set goals that emerge from the day's reflection. |
| 3 - 4 PM | Write down these goals and other thoughts in a journal. Thank God for your time together and ask if there is anything else he wants to say. Prepare to enter back into the flow of life. |

RESOURCES

An Invitation to Solitude and Silence

by Ruth Haley Barton

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