

The Spiritual Rhythms of Solitude, Silence and Meditation

by Larry Hinkle

About the Author

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“Listen to the voice of God in silence. Be willing to accept what he wants to show you. God will show you everything you need to know. Be faithful to come before Him in silence. When you hear the still, small voice within, it is time to be silent. This voice is not a stranger to your spirit. It is God’s voice within your spirit. This is not something mystical but something practical. Deep within you will learn to yield to God and to trust your Lord.”¹

--François Fenelon

Meditation

Ecclesiastes 3:7 says that “There is a time to be silent and a time to speak.” This is true in our relationships with others, and in our relationship with God. Silence and solitude for the purpose of meditation are ways we can position ourselves to be sensitive to the presence of God and to hear his voice. The exercising of these spiritual disciplines or rhythms are vital to the process of spiritual formation. Two Hebrew words (*hāgâ* and *śîaḥ*) are used some fifty-eight times in the Old Testament to convey the concept of meditation, and they bear various meanings such as: listening to and reflecting on the Word of God, rehearsing God’s actions and “ruminating” on the law of God.² Meditation may also be described as an act of worship, divine communion, and spiritual renewal.³

¹ François Fenelon, *The Seeking Heart* (Jacksonville, FL: SeedSowers, 1992), 54.

² Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 15-18.

³ G. B. Funderburk, “Meditation.” In *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Merrill C. Tenney and Steven Barabas, eds., 1976), CD-ROM, Zondervan, OakTree Software, Inc.

Old Testament examples include that of Isaac taking time out for hearing the voice of God as he “went out to the field one evening to meditate” (Gen. 24:63). The Psalms are replete with meditations of the people of God, and the entire Psalter is introduced with the encouragement to follow the example of the blessed man whose “delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Psa. 1:2). The psalmist’s words in Psalm 46 are instructive here regarding solitude and meditation: “Be still, and know that I am God. . .” (Psa. 46:10). Elijah was told to go up to a mountain and to stand in the presence of the Lord. When he obeyed, he experienced God in a “gentle whisper.” It was after this that he received a word from the Lord (1 Kings 19:11-13). A familiar biblical reference to meditation that reaches to the heart is found in Psalm 19:14, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight.” Psalm 119 contains eight references to meditation that provide a foundation upon which pastors and ministry leaders can base their personal meditation. They include meditating upon God’s: precepts, ways, decrees, wonders, and statutes (Psa. 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148). Psalm 62:5 (NASB) provides wise instruction for this experience: “My soul, wait in silence for God only, For my hope is from Him.” In the New Testament, we see the example of Jesus, who knew these scriptures well, and spent time in meditation and prayer, often in solitude very early in the morning (Mark 1:35).

Meditation helps us to be present to the God who is always present to us. As a spiritual rhythm of life, it also helps us to be aware of the sacrament of the present moment, and to acknowledge the voice of God. Prayer and meditation often go together. Richard Foster, in *Prayer: Finding The Heart’s True Home*, describes how meditative prayer works. He says that “The truth being meditated upon passes from the mouth into the mind and down into the heart, where through quiet rumination—regurgitation, if you will—it produces in the person praying a loving, faith-filled response.”⁴ Times of meditation in solitude and in silence allow us the freedom to re-orient our hearts and minds in order to focus upon that which is most important—the reality of God and his relationship with us.

⁴ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 142.

Solitude and Silence

Solitude and silence are closely related—so much so, says Richard Foster, that without silence there can be no true solitude.⁵ In solitude and silence we stand alone before God without external supports of people, places and things. Because of this, it may be quite difficult for some to intentionally take the time to experience the benefits of this practice. Adele Calhoun quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer as saying that “We are so afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment alone with ourselves, in order not to have to look at ourselves in the mirror.”⁶ The cultivation of the spiritual rhythms of an inner solitude through silence, however, can provide a deep sense of fulfillment and peace. Foster speaks of an inward solitude that is a state of the mind and of the heart, which can manifest itself in an outward solitude in being alone with God in a specific place.⁷ Robert Mulholland says that solitude is more than just being alone and spending time with God. In speaking specifically of silence, he relates that far from simply being still, it represents a deep inner reversal of our cultural tendencies of grasping, controlling and possessing—an internal act of intentionally “letting it go.” In the classical tradition of spiritual disciplines it represents a releasing of ourselves to be who we really are to ourselves and to God. It is a facing up to the inner dynamics of our being and allowing ourselves to be honest with what we see.⁸

Calhoun observes that solitude gives the Spirit of God time and space to go deep within our soul and, similar to Mulholland, says that we are often brought face to face with unhealthy motives and compulsions. We may notice things that we would rather not notice, such as pockets of sadness, anger, loneliness.⁹ At other times there may be moments of profound affirmation of the love and embrace of God. Joseph Driskill provides a good metaphor for showing how silence enables us to see and hear things of which we would not normally be aware:

⁵ *Celebration of Discipline*, 98.

⁶ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 111.

⁷ *Celebration of Discipline*, 96-97.

⁸ Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 138-140.

⁹ *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, 108.

You may have gone outside on a night that was especially still. Perhaps starlight filled the sky. Suddenly you noticed you could hear things from far away that you normally would not notice. There may have been a certain quality about the evening. Perhaps the air was calm or there was a gentle breeze, and although you were in a familiar place the atmosphere and sounds seemed different. Your threshold of attention may also have been transformed. . . . If God is an active agent in our daily lives, our call as people of faith is to discern where God's creative, transforming work of love is being embodied. Occasionally God does appear to get our attention by dramatic means (the wind and fire method!), but more often than not the subtlety of the 'still small voice' tries to break into our lives. If we are unable to stop, listen and hear because of the noise that surrounds us, we miss opportunities to walk in concert with God's gentle, guiding Spirit.¹⁰

On some occasions, in the experience of solitude and silence, we may find ourselves struggling with the feeling that we are wasting time since nothing seems to be happening. The good news, however, is that everything we begin to notice becomes an invitation to prayer¹¹ and an opportunity to experience a deeper communion with God that can lead to moments of inspiration, insight, and healing in the inner person. The fruits of solitude and silence may include not only a deepened introspection and a more intimate experience of the love and peace of God, but also a heightened compassion for others and an attentive sensitivity to their needs.¹² Calhoun also compares the spiritual experience of solitude with falling in love—a time where little else matters in the world at large, only being together and showing that the other person truly matters. She likens silence to a can opener that allows for a deeper access to God than we normally experience on other occasions. As the inner noise and internal chaos begin to settle, we find a greater capacity for opening ourselves up to God and allowing him access to places we may not have known even existed.¹³

¹⁰ Joseph D. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History and Practice* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 79-80.

¹¹ *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, 109.

¹² *Celebration of Discipline*, 108-109.

¹³ *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, 112, 109.

Formational Direction

The classic work of fifteenth century author Thomas à Kempis, in *The Imitation of Christ*, shows that the discipline of silence is a way to hear and be instructed by God's voice through Scripture. He wrote that "In silence and peace a devout soul makes progress and learns the secrets of the scriptures"¹⁴ In the midst of the instruction regarding a Sabbath-rest available to the people of God in Hebrews 4, we are told in verse 12 that the Word of God is both living and active. As Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), and "living," it is foundational to all aspects of renewal and spiritual formation in Christ. Exercising the spiritual rhythm of silence in the study of the Word of God opens up new avenues of thinking, believing and perceiving. Scripture is not meant to be primarily informational, instructing in things about God and man. That is only part of the picture, for its ultimate purpose is formational, in order that the reader be shaped by it into his or her true being in Christ.¹⁵ There is, therefore, a dynamic quality to God's revealed Word—it does something to us, it penetrates deep into our soul.¹⁶ The rhythms of solitude, silence, and meditation often provide the best environment for this to take place.

The ancient Christian practice of *lectio divina* (Latin for Divine or Sacred reading) is an effective way of reading scripture prayerfully and meditatively. It is being "rediscovered" in our day as an effective tool for hearing and responding to the voice of God through Scripture. Some have compared it to eating, in the sense that one bites off a small piece of text (reading), chews on it (meditation), swallows it (prayer), and then savors the good taste (contemplation). The practice of *lectio divina* utilizes the rhythm of silent meditation and contemplation to experience the presence of God through his Word.¹⁷

¹⁴ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Trans. William C. Creasy (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1989) 49.

¹⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation In The Art Of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 24.

¹⁶ Leon Morris, "Hebrews." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, 1990. CD-ROM. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Oak Tree Software.

¹⁷ Stephen D. Bryant, Janice T. Grana, and Marjorie J. Thompson, *Companions in Christ: A Small-Group Experience in Spiritual Formation, Leader's Guide* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2001), 68-70.

A Pastoral Perspective

Writing in the journal *Living Pulpit*, Brien J. Pierce addresses the importance of waiting in silence in contemplative prayer. He relates how the disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem, devoted to prayer in the upper room before the Pentecost experience, and how Elijah, faithfully waiting alone on the mountain, encountered the presence of the Lord in the midst of the sound of sheer silence. This gave him the confidence that he needed to return to his calling in ministry.¹⁸ This need for ministry enhancement through contemplative practice in the life of pastors and ministry leaders is well-addressed by pastoral counselor, spiritual director and retreat leader William C. Martin in *The Art of Pastoring: Contemplative Reflections*. As an experienced pastor he understands the stresses that are faced in ministry—oftentimes leading to a sense of overwhelming responsibility and helplessness in striving to fulfill the demands of congregants. He correctly says that in our Western world our professional approach to the pastorate has often erred on the side of “Martha,” and is in need of cultivating the quietness and openness of Mary in the Lord’s presence. Since this grace of God is sometimes forgotten in the midst of pastoral responsibilities, time needs to be taken in order to assure that the Living Word of God refreshes the heart of the pastor, “as the flowing stream refreshes the land, so the written words of Scripture may once again come to life.”¹⁹

Missional Application

From a missional perspective we see that Jesus began his ministry in solitude for forty spiritually formative days as he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Jesus did battle with the intoxicating human desire to achieve “his” kingdom and his identity in the power of a false self. In place of the self, however, he chose his true identity as the chosen Son of God. During his three years of ministry he returned over and over again to solitude

¹⁸ Brian J. Pierce, “Pentecost and Contemplative Prayer.” *Living Pulpit*, 13, no. 2: 42-43. (2004), ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed December 13, 2010).

¹⁹ William C. Martin, *The Art of Pastoring: Contemplative Reflections*. Pittsburgh, PA: Vital Faith Resources, 1994) vii-ix.

where his identity, life, and mission could all be put into proper perspective.²⁰ Silence and solitude help us to live as Jesus lived, and to join him in his perfect rhythm of a grace-filled, well-paced life. James Bryan Smith notes that Jesus lived his life at all times in the proper tempo, never rushed, never doing anything in haste. It is when we spend time in quiet and rest and contemplation, sitting at the feet of Jesus as it were, that we can acquire strength to respond to this world's frenetic hustle and bustle.²¹

Ruth Barton, in *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*, says that the invitation to solitude and silence is precisely that—an invitation. It is an invitation to enter more deeply into the intimacy of relationship that God desires to have with us away from the busyness of our lives.²² We are also invited to enter into a spiritual odyssey of authentic transformation “in the deepest places of our being, an adventure that will result in greater freedom and authenticity and surrender to God than we have yet experienced.”²³ It is this freedom, authenticity, and surrender that opens the way for us to effectively bear fruit in Christ's service (John 15:5).

May all of us who are privileged to serve in the ministry of Jesus Christ learn to appropriate the spiritual rhythms of solitude, silence, and meditation. It is in this way that we can give up control of our lives and ministries to the One who loves us, and in whom we can fully trust.²⁴ As Henri Nouwen so insightfully describes the experience:

²⁰ *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, 112.

²¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good And Beautiful Life: Putting On The Character Of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 181-182.

²² Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 16.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Lynda L. Graybeal, and Julia L. Roller, *Connecting with God: A Spiritual Formation Guide* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 70.

By leaving behind from time to time our many self-affirming actions and becoming "useless" in the presence of God, we transcend our inner fears and apprehensions and affirm our God as the one in whose love we find our strength and security.²⁵

We are told through the prophet Jeremiah that when we seek God with all of our heart, we will be found by Him (Jer. 29:12-13). In times of solitude, silence, and meditation, we can position ourselves to find and to be found by the Incarnate Christ who delights in our simply being still and knowing that He is God (Psa. 46:10). This encounter with the Lord may well lead us to depend less upon our own human efforts in ministry, and to experience a greater empowerment through his Spirit to participate with him in his mission to make disciples of all nations.

²⁵ Henri Nouwen, "Solitude and Community." *Worship* 52, no. 1 (1978): 22. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed November 18, 2010).