

A Morning of Solitude

FAQ's About a Morning of Solitude

What is a morning of solitude? It's a three hour time set aside to spend with your heavenly Father – just He and you. It's time spent unplugged from your normal routine, the demands of your job, other people, and your mobile phone.

Why is it a good idea? In the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus we see him often getting away to connect with his heavenly Father. If Jesus, in his humanity felt the need to make this a priority, shouldn't we? My computer gets bogged down and occasionally needs to be defragged, registries cleaned, old programs dumped. I function much the same. I need an occasional time of concentrated focus to renew the speed with which I connect with my heavenly Father. There's no substitute for the time required to offload life's burdens in the presence of my heavenly Father.

Why is it so counter intuitive for us to desire solitude? We all tend to suffer from the "Martha" syndrome (Luke 10:38-41.) We come to believe that our activity leads to productivity, and we subtly become dependent on our own ability to carry out tasks. Furthermore, we tend to define ourselves by how much we get done. But Jesus rebuked Martha by saying, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better (sitting at Jesus' feet,) and it will not be taken away from her."

A morning of solitude is counter intuitive because we don't think we can afford the time away from our busy and active schedules. It feels like we're not getting anything done. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our relationship with the Father is our greatest privilege and the fuel by which we can serve with great power and strength.

In addition, we are used to lots of noise in our lives. TVs, phones, radios, iPods, and conversations often keep us from ever hearing God speak in His "still small voice."

Who should attend? Any believer in Jesus Christ, but the busier you are the better. Too often those who are busiest serving the Lord and those who have positions of leadership in the church are the last to recognize the need for a periodic getaway with God.

What will I do with all that time? When you arrive, a brief introduction will be offered and some materials to help you should you need them. These materials will serve as an optional guide through your morning.

What will be the hardest part of this? Two things: Number one, just doing it. Committing to it. You'll find every reason not to do this. Secondly, once there, getting settled in. You will be very conscious of your body and distractions in the environment, not to mention the buzzing thoughts in your head. You'll likely need a good twenty minutes at least in the beginning just to settle into the presence of the Lord. You will be able to notice your interfering thoughts and then just let them go like clouds that pass overhead, and eventually, you will be able to just be present with God. The goal is not to achieve some momentous breakthrough spiritually or to achieve some incredible new

insight, but simply to give God your undivided attention. Brennan Manning was once asked after spending time in solitude what he got out of it. He answered, "I don't know. I just figure God likes it when I show up."

What will be the schedule?

9:00 – Brief Introduction and Orientation

9:20 – Seek out your place of solitude on our Grace Valley property

9:20-12:00 – Spend time with God

12:00-12:30 (Optional) Re-gather as a group for a brief time of sharing.

What should I bring? Bring your own lawn chair, your Bible, pen and notebook. Also bring any snacks and drinks you might need through the morning.

Where is the Grace Valley property located? At 435 Colmer Road in Canton, GA. Follow Hwy 20 West of Canton across Knox Bridge near Allatoona Lake until you come to Willie West Road. From there, take the fork to Colmer Road. Colmer Road turns into a gravel road for the last block or so before reaching the Merrefield's residence. The property adjoins their residence, so we will take a brief hike from their house to the property where we will eventually be spreading out.

Bible Reading Guide for your Time of Solitude

Here are two scripture passages for meditation. As you read them, picture the events as though you are actually there watching the various interactions. Before you begin, ask God to use His Word to reveal whatever truth He wants you to see in your own life.

Read John 12:1-8

What stands out to you from this passage?

Is there a lesson to be learned about what we should expect when making great sacrifices in ministry? If so, what is it?

Read Luke 10:38-42

What stands out to you from this passage?

What is God saying to you from this passage?

If you are not currently following a Bible reading pattern you want to continue now, here are a few suggested passages to select from for your time of solitude. Ask God to speak to your heart through His Word, to open your eyes to see wonderful things from His Word. Keep reading until something strikes you. Don't hesitate to stop, pause and reflect if something arising from the text causes you to meditate more deeply.

Select all or portions of one or more of the following:

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|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Genesis | Psalm 40-42 | Psalm 61-67 | 2 Corinthians 4-5 | Hebrews 11-12 |
| 1 Thessalonians | Mark | John | Ephesians | |
| Philippians | Psalm 40-42 | 1 John | | |

To bring some solitude into our lives is one of the most necessary but also most difficult disciplines. Even though we may have a deep desire for real solitude, we also experience a certain apprehension as we approach that solitary place and time. As soon as we are alone, without people to talk with, books to read, TV to watch, or phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again. Entering a private room and shutting the door, therefore, does not mean that we immediately shut out all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings, and impulsive desires. On the contrary, when we have removed our outer distractions, we often find that our inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force. We often use the outer distractions to shield ourselves from the interior noises. It is thus not surprising that we have a difficult time being alone. The confrontation with our inner conflicts can be too painful for us to endure. This makes the discipline of solitude all the more important.

Making All Things New

2.

Solitude is not a spontaneous response to an occupied and preoccupied life. There are too many reasons not to be alone. Therefore we must begin by carefully planning some solitude. Five or ten minutes a day may be all we can tolerate. Perhaps we are ready for an hour every day, an afternoon every week, a day every month, or a week every year. The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, life-style, and maturity. But we do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with, and listen to, God. We may have to write it in black and white in our daily calendar so that nobody else can take away this period of time.

Making All Things New

3.

Once we have committed ourselves to spending time in solitude, we develop an attentiveness to God's voice in us. In the beginning, during the first days, weeks, or even months, we may have the feeling that we are simply wasting our time. Time in solitude may at first seem little more than a time in which we are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our mind. One of the early Christian writers describes the first stage of solitary prayer as the experience of someone who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. Visitors who used to come and enter the home start pounding on the doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter. Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming. This is the experience of anyone who decides to enter into solitude after a life without much spiritual discipline. At first, the many distractions keep presenting themselves. Later, as they receive less and less attention, they slowly withdraw.

Making All Things New

4.

When we are not afraid to enter into our own center and to concentrate on the stirrings of our own soul, we come to know that being alive means being loved. This experience tells us that we can love only because we are born out of love, that we can give only because our life is a gift, and that we can make others free only because we are set free by God whose heart is greater than ours. When we have found the anchor places for our lives in our own center, we can be free to let others enter into the space created for them and allow them to dance their own dance, sing their own song, and speak their own language without fear. Then our presence is no longer threatening and demanding but inviting and liberating.

The Wounded Healer

The Vocation of Thought

By: Ravi Zacharias

One of the tragic casualties of our age has been that of the contemplative life—a life that thinks, a life that thinks things through, and more particularly, thinks God's thoughts after Him. A person sitting at his or her desk staring out the window would never be assumed to be working. No! Thinking is not equated with work. Yet, had Newton under his tree, or Archimedes in his bathtub, bought into that prejudice, some natural laws would still be up in the air or buried under an immovable rock. Pascal's *Pensees*, or "Thoughts," a work that has inspired millions, would have never been penned.

What is even more destructive is the assumption that silence is inimical (not favorable; hostile) to life. The radio in the car, Muzak in the elevator, and the symphony entertaining callers "on hold" all add up as grave impediments to personal reflection. In effect, the mind is denied the privilege of living with itself even briefly and is crowded with outside impulses to cope with aloneness. Aldous Huxley's indictment, "Most of one's life... is one prolonged effort to prevent thinking," seems frightfully true. Moreover, the price paid for this scenario has been devastating. As T.S. Eliot questioned:

Where is the life we have lost in the living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of heaven in twenty centuries
bring us farther from God and nearer to dust.

Is there a remedy? May I make some suggestions? Nothing ranks higher for mental discipline than a planned and systematic study of God's Word, from whence life's parameters and values are planted in the mind. Paul, who loved his books and parchments, affirmed the priority of Scripture. And Psalm 119 promises that God's statutes keep us from being double-minded. The average person today actually surrenders the intellect to the world, presuming Christianity to be bereft of intelligence. And many a pulpit has succumbed to the lie that anything intellectual cannot be spiritual or exciting.

Thankfully there are exceptions. When living in England, our family attended a church where preaching was taken quite seriously and one-hour sermons to packed auditoriums were the norm. Cambridge, being rife with skepticism, demanded a meticulous defense of each sermon text. When we were leaving Cambridge, our youngest child, who was nine years old, declared the preaching of this church to be one of his fondest memories. Even as a little boy he had learned that when the mind is rightly approached, it filters down to the heart. The matter I share here has far-reaching implications. We do a disservice to our youth by not crediting them with the capacity to think.

The Bible places great value on the thought-life and its capacity to shape all of life. "As one thinks in his heart,

so is he," Solomon wrote. Jesus asserted that sin's gravity lay at the level of the *idea* itself, not just the act. Paul admonished the church at Philippi to have the *mind* of Christ, and to the same people he wrote: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things" (Philippians 4:8). The follower of Christ must demonstrate to the world what it means not just to think, but to think justly. That is, in the words of aging David to his son Solomon, to "acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever" (1 Chronicles 28:9).

With both hearts and minds, we can follow the God of creation. After all, it is not that I think, therefore, I am, but rather, the great *I Am* has asked us to think, and therefore, we must.

Introducing

Solitude & Silence

By: Jan Johnson

Have you ever wondered how God changes people? Maybe it seems as if old habits never change no matter how hard you try. Maybe you've become discouraged with your lack of growth into Christ likeness. You know that you are forgiven through Jesus' suffering on the cross, and you realize that you are totally accepted by God on that basis. This is wonderful. And yet your desire to live in a way that pleases God somehow constantly falls short of the mark.

God desires to transform our souls. This transformation occurs as we recognize that God created us to live in an interactive relationship with the Trinity. Our task is not to transform ourselves, but to stay connected with God in as much of life as possible. As we pay attention to the nudges of the Holy Spirit, we become disciples of Christ. Our task is to do the connecting, while God does the perfecting.

As we connect with God, we gradually begin acting more like Christ. We become more likely to weep over our enemies instead of discrediting them. We're more likely to give up power instead of taking control. We're more likely to point out another's successes rather than grab the credit. Connection with God changes us on the inside, and we slowly become the tenderhearted, conscientious people our families always wished we'd become. This transformation of our souls through the work of the Holy Spirit results in "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

God does in us what we cannot do by being good. Trying to be good generally makes us obnoxious because it's so obvious that we're only trying. The goodness doesn't come from within ourselves. When we do succeed at being good, we subtly look down on those who don't do as well. When we don't succeed, we beat ourselves up and despair

over our lack of spirituality. Either way, we remain focused on self instead of on setting our hearts on things above.

Connecting with God, then, is important. But what does connection with God look like? Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we copy Jesus in behind-the-scenes, everyday activities he did to connect with God. As we let these activities become habits, we slowly become “trained” to have the heart of Christ and behave as he did. These activities are spiritual disciplines, also called spiritual exercises or strategies.

How Spiritual Disciplines Work

We connect with God through spiritual disciplines or exercises. Solitude and silence, the topics of these Bible studies, are two of them. Other disciplines include community, submission, Bible study, Scripture meditation, worship, celebration, prayer, listening, service, secrecy, reflection, confession, fasting and simplicity. These exercises are studied in the other Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies. Still other disciplines can be used, some of which are written about in the classics of the faith and others God will show you. Henri Nouwen said that a spiritual discipline is anything that helps us practice “how to become attentive to that small voice and willing to respond when we hear it.”

How do Spiritual Disciplines help us connect with God?

- They build our relationship with God as we acquaint ourselves with the ways of God. (It's possible, of course, to do these disciplines in a legalistic way and never bond with Christ.)
- They build our trust in Christ. Some of the disciplines are uncomfortable. You have to go out on a limb. You try fasting, and you don't die. you serve someone, and it turns out to be fun and enriching.
- They force us to make “little decisions” that multiply. Your little decision to abstain from watching a television show helps you to deny yourself and love others in all sorts of ways.
- They reorganize our impulses so that obedience is more natural. For example, if you have a spiritual discipline of practicing the presence of God, you may learn to automatically pray the breath prayer “into thy hands” when someone opposes you. Without your realizing it, your opponent is no longer an adversary, but a person God is dealing with or perhaps even speaking through in some way.
- They help us eventually behave like Christ—but this is by God's miraculous work, not our direct effort.
- They teach us to trust that God will do the work in our inner being through the power of the Spirit (Ephesians 3:16). Your spirituality is not about you; it's the work of God in you. You get to cooperate in God's “family business of transforming the world.

How We Get Spiritual Disciplines Wrong

Spiritual exercises must be done with the goal of connection, not for any sake of their own or any desire to check them off a list of “to do” items. If you read your Bible just to get it done, or because you've heard this will help you have a better day, you'll be anxious to complete the Bible study questions or to get to the bottom of the page of today's reading. But if your goal in Bible reading is to connect with God, you may pause whenever you sense God speaking to you. You'll stop and meditate on it. You may pray certain phrases back to God, indicating your needs or

your wishes or your questions. You may choose to read that passage day after day for a month because God keeps using it to speak to you.

After such a session, you will have a stronger desire to connect with God. That “little choice” you make to connect will leave you slightly different for life.

The exercise or discipline is beneficial because it helps you practice connecting with God. If you want to play the piano well or swing a tennis racket well, you have to practice certain exercises over and over. Good baseball players train behind the scenes by practicing their batting day after day, with no crowds watching.. That’s what spiritual disciplines or exercises are about. If you can hear God in fasting and simplicity, you’ll more likely hear God in a board meeting or an altercation with a recalcitrant teen when passions run high. In life with God, we get good at connecting on an everyday basis by devoting time to developing the skills needed.

The Disciplines of Solitude and Silence

Solitude and silence are disciplines of abstinence. We abstain from accomplishing the things that make us feel worthwhile (especially completing that to-do list), and we rest in the fact that we are of great worth to God, even when we do nothing. We surrender the need to talk, to fill the empty air with clever thoughts. In the absence of all this puzzling and planning, wheeling and dealing, we meet our true selves. Often this is not pretty. Thoughts we never knew we had come to the surface.

To take time for silence and solitude means we assume that God wants to speak to us and relate to us in a personal way. This is such a stretch for those of us who think of prayer as an exercise in nonstop talking. Instead, we learn to converse with God and hear God—first in the solitude, then in all of life.

*From the “Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies” series by Jan Johnson
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Notes

