

# SOLITUDE

Solitude - The creation of an open, empty space in our lives by purposefully abstaining from interaction with other human beings, so that, freed from competing loyalties, we can be found by God.

*He [Jesus] said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." (Mark 6:31).*

The Gospels tell us that Jesus' very public ministry was interspersed with periods of solitude during which he, either completely by himself or with the disciples, left the crowds behind to pray. These times of solitude appeared to nourish Jesus for those times when he was in the public eye. He began his ministry with forty days in the desert, just after he was baptized. And he continued the practice of going off alone to pray, often just at the times when his ministry seemed to demand the most from him.

Solitude is not about becoming a hermit or misanthrope. Indeed, times of solitude can enhance our times of fellowship with others. Neither is solitude loneliness. It is time spent with God. Put this way, it sounds so natural, yet for most of us this time does not just happen.

One of the keys to the definition above is the phrase "the creation of an open, empty space." We must work to create this space, to "purposefully" withdraw even when — especially when — it seems that we have no time to do so. We can all learn from Jesus' example and take time to focus on our relationship with God, replenishing and nourishing ourselves for busy lives.

\*These devotionals were taken from *A Year with God: Living Out the Spiritual Disciplines*, edited by Richard Foster and Julia Roller, Harper Collins Publisher, 2009. Used with permission.

DAY 1 / MARCH 31

## THE TENT OF MEETING

*Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend (Exodus 33:7-11).*

With Moses God chose to be present and not distant, to show his glory, to get up close and personal as when one speaks with a friend. Moses was able to meet “face-to-face” with God in the tent of meeting. The Israelites too could come daily to God — approach God, learn God’s name, and call upon that name. The major formational advantage of this individual communion with God is the good effect of God’s direct presence.

Our lives find their direction when God is present with us, and we are directionless without him. Intimate, individual communication with God is something that cannot be overlooked in spiritual formation. We must constantly seek it out. We need the full assurance of God’s greatness and goodness that comes only from his direct presence. This, frankly, cannot be derived from any other source.

Do you have a favorite location that serves as your “tent of meeting,” where you go to seek communion with God? If so, how do you find that prayer in this place differs from prayer elsewhere? If not, try to practice your time of solitude today in a spot that would serve as such a place to regularly seek God in solitude.

DAY 2 / APRIL 1

## SPENDING THE NIGHT IN PRAYER

*Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor (Luke 6:12-16).*

Two significant emphases in Luke are prayer and solitude. All the gospel writers mention prayer, of course, but Luke takes care to show how Jesus' prayer practice was often linked to solitude: "[Jesus] would withdraw to deserted places and pray" (Luke 5:16); "At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place" (Luke 4:42).

Other Gospel writers mention his calling of the twelve apostles, but they don't tell us Jesus prayed all night about it, as we see here. And they relate his challenge to the disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" but not that he was praying by himself before he put the question: "Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him" (Luke 9:18).

When have you spent time in solitude and prayer before making a big decision? What was the result?

## RISING EARLY TO PRAY

*That evening, at sunset, they brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons (Mark 1:32-39).*

Jesus' fame had spread to the point that "the whole city" was gathered to watch him heal. Yet in the midst of this hectic time Jesus rises early to go pray in a deserted place; so intent is he on solitude that even the disciples do not know where he has gone. When they find him: Jesus is ready, refreshed enough from his time alone with God to continue his work in the neighboring towns. This instance is one of several in which Mark mentions that Jesus and the disciples go to a deserted place to rest and pray.

Our own spiritual formation will be strengthened if, in our busy, crowded, and noisy lives, we find regular times and places for quiet, for prayer, for listening to God. Time alone with God gives us renewed energy to live fully engaged with the world again.

Do you neglect your need to be alone to recharge? As Madeleine L'Engle states, "Every so often I need OUT; something will throw me into total disproportion, and I have to get away from everybody — away from all those people I love most in the world — in order to regain a sense of proportion." (*A Circle of Quiet*, page 4)

DAY 4 / APRIL 3

## GIVING TO EVERYONE

*At daybreak [Jesus] departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea (Luke 4:42-44).*

Luke takes great pains to make Christ's life of prayer an example to us. He also highlights the interludes of quiet and solitude that Christ secures in the middle of a strenuous preaching and healing ministry.

Sometimes we think that practicing solitude is selfish or denies the value of community, but Jesus shows us how to successfully integrate time alone with God with time spent in active ministry to others.

Reflect for a few minutes on this quote about how solitude can show us the worth of our fellow human beings. How does this correlate with your own experience?

In his work, *Clowning in Rome*, Henri J.M. Nouwen states: "In solitude we can come to the realization that we are not driven together but brought together. In solitude we come to know our fellow human beings not as partners who can satisfy our deepest needs, but as brothers and sisters with whom we are called to give visibility to God's all-embracing love. In solitude we discover the community is not a common ideology, but a response to a common call. In solitude we indeed realize that community is not made but given." (Page 341).

## I WENT AWAY AT ONCE

*But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me (Galatians 1:15-24).*

The elements in Paul's story are common to every spiritual journey toward freedom in Christ: life without Christ; encounter with Christ; formation through solitude; sharing the story; mission in the world; and transformed relationship with friends and enemies. After his conversion Paul "at once" retreated to Arabia to begin the process of learning from Jesus how to live this new life of grace and freedom.

Through intentional withdrawal into silence and solitude we process and assimilate what God is doing in our lives. Solitude is both a "vacation with God" and a "furnace of transformation."

In his work, *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis writes, "The further the soul is from the noise of the world, the closer it may be to its Creator, for God, with his holy angels, will draw close to a person who seeks solitude and silence. It is better to remain alone and to care for your soul than to neglect yourself and work miracles." (Page 50)

## PREPARATION TIME

*When [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus (Acts 9:26-30).*

Soon after Paul had his vision and conversion experience, his bold preaching about Jesus put his life in danger. In the previous reading, we learn that Paul spent three years in Arabia, and here we learn that he fled to his old hometown of Tarsus for a number of years. It was approximately thirteen years from the time of Paul's conversion until he reappeared at Antioch (Acts 13:1). This is the hidden preparation through which God puts his ministers.

When Paul withdrew from public ministry God used this time to prepare him for the challenges and glories ahead. The record of Paul's work we have in his Letters amply demonstrates the fruits of that preparation.

When you undertake your time of solitude, consider using some of the time to reevaluate your life goals and directions. What new projects or goals would you like to undertake? These can range from reading all the works of an author you enjoy, taking up a new hobby, to something as life-changing as trying a new vocation or ministry. You might want to try to undertake a retreat of this nature several times a year. But if this type of a retreat does not appeal to you now, do not hesitate to make your time of solitude just about solitude, with no particular agenda.

DAY 7 / APRIL 6

## DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead (Mark 9:2-9).*

Jesus and his inner circle, Peter, James, and John, have a "mountaintop experience" in which everything seems so clear and perfect and close to God. They cannot stay up there forever, however. Jesus leads them down to the challenges and opportunities of the daily life of faith.

We can be grateful when we have such soaring experiences of closeness to God too. Yet our lives are lived in the daily pains and pleasures of this world.

*Father God, help me to parlay my experiences with you into strength and encouragement for doing your kingdom work in my daily life. Remind me to continue to find moments of solitude in the middle of life and to have the courage to take time out when my soul needs refreshing. In your name I pray. Amen.*