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SOLITUDE

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WHAT IS SOLITUDE?

“Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude . . . Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment.”

Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline

You’ve probably heard Christians talk about their “quiet time.” You may even use that term yourself. Even though the term suggests solitude, “Christian quiet times” aren’t usually about quiet at all. The practice of solitude is meant to give believers freedom from the noise of the world or the sense that they can’t control their own thoughts. If you’ve ever said to yourself, “I can’t hear God. I’m not sure he’s here,” you need to add solitude to your spiritual life.

Solitude was an essential practice for Jesus. In fact, with the exception of prayer, the Gospels mention him pursuing solitude more than they mention any other spiritual practice:

- He retreated to the wilderness for forty days and nights before beginning his ministry (Matthew 4:1–11).
- He went off alone on a mountain before calling his twelve disciples (Luke 6:12).
- After hearing the news of John the Baptists’ (his cousin) death, he got away from the crowds so he could be alone with God (Matthew 14:13).
- He went off by himself to pray after feeding five thousand people who had come to hear him speak (Matthew 14:23), as well as after healing a leper (Luke 5:16).
- On the night he was arrested before his crucifixion, he spent time with his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane but also went off alone to pray (Matthew 26:36–46).

We live in a noisy world. We’re inundated with the sounds and energy of people, media, and the thoughts in our own heads. And we can use that constant din to distract us from what’s going on in our souls.

Solitude brings us into contact with ourselves and quiets the world and our minds enough that we can hear God—not as an audible voice, but as his Spirit moving within us. In those moments of solitude, the Spirit reveals our dependence on our heavenly Father. That’s not always comfortable. Sometimes it’s scary because it shatters our illusions of independence. But it’s good for us. It helps us grow, because the truth is, we *are* dependent on God. Solitude doesn’t create that truth. It only reveals it and allows us to see ourselves as we really are.

As you can tell from the Scriptures documenting Jesus’ solitude, it’s a practice best paired with prayer. Jesus never goes off alone without an intense focus on connecting with God through prayer. But prayer in solitude should be focused on discerning and submitting to God’s will. That’s because the true power of solitude is that as it reveals our dependence on God—it prepares us to open all aspects of our lives to him.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

If you're in a group, use these questions to have a conversation about how you can support and encourage one another as you explore solitude. If you're not in a group, reflect on these questions to help you consider what it would look like for you to connect with God through solitude.

1. Do you tend to enjoy time alone or would you rather be around other people most of the time?
2. If you began to practice solitude, how do you think it might help you build more authentic community with other believers?
3. What hesitations, if any, do you have about practicing solitude?
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you currently rate your prayer life? Do you think practicing solitude might improve the quality of your communication with God? Why or why not?
5. Get out your calendar. When can you begin to practice solitude? Start thinking about where you'll go and what you'll do during your time alone with God. Use the tips on the following page to make a plan. Write the details in the space below.

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TIPS FOR PRACTICING SOLITUDE

Be warned that practicing solitude may stir feelings of helplessness. This is normal. Pray to your heavenly Father that he will enter into your distress and begin to take control. This shift toward dependence on God won't happen instantly. It will gradually take place as your trust in God grows over time and through a consistent practice of solitude.

Be patient. Be persistent. Don't be hard on yourself if you feel like progress is coming too slowly. It will pick up speed as you continue to engage in this countercultural spiritual practice.

Here are some recommendations for ways to begin practicing solitude:

1. Pick a time and a frequency.

Try to identify a time when there's opportunity for you practice solitude. If there's currently no time in your schedule, make time. That'll be hard. It may even require time away from people you love. But it will be worth it—both for you and for them.

Once you have a set time, decide how often you'll practice solitude. If you can, retreat to a quiet place for 30 minutes to an hour at least once each week.

2. Pick a place.

Choose a quiet place where you can be alone. Make sure it really is quiet—an isolated room in your house won't work if you can still hear the buzz of your family's activity.

3. Pray.

Plan to spend the bulk of your time praying. This will probably be difficult at first. Most of us aren't used to praying for extended periods of time. Give yourself some grace. You'll improve over time. But as you start, focus on expressing your gratitude to God for the love he's demonstrated by giving his only Son so that you can be in relationship with him.

Praying through Psalm 33, 63, 86, or 118 is a great way to begin to learn how to express your dependence on God. This doesn't come naturally for most of us, so it's okay to use the Scriptures as a road map to teach you how to pray.

4. Pay attention to what you feel.

Solitude is almost guaranteed to stir deep emotions in you—some of them dark. That can be scary and uncomfortable. But don't run from them. They are the spiritual equivalent of sore muscles after you've lifted weights: they're a sign that your capacity for deep connection with God is growing.

When you practice solitude, God may guide you into the darkest parts of yourself. He doesn't do so to punish you, but to lead you to the freedom that is found in greater trust in him. A regular practice of solitude will put you in touch with your own soul, and it will supercharge the other spiritual practices in your life—especially prayer.