

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOLITUDE: GETTING ALONE WITH GOD

JOHN LOFTNESS

“Elijah was a man just like us” (Jas 5:17). I find this statement one of the more difficult in the Bible to accept. Elijah was anything but normal. We know little of his background except for his hometown, Tishbe, an obscure place in biblical geography. He arrives suddenly on the scene during a time of national apostasy in Israel’s history and announces a three-year drought that will only end when he says so.

Though lots of people even in our day have announced the end of the world, none have been accurate to date. Such people usually make their announcement to a select few believers who are promised they will escape the calamities to come. That wasn’t Elijah’s style. He spoke directly to his king, a man named Ahab. In effect he prophesied economic disaster and claimed that it was under his control. The prophecy proved true and Elijah, along with all of Israel, suffered through the drought. For this the prophet became nationally infamous and was given the nickname “The Troubler of Israel.”

At the end of three years Elijah received word from God to announce to Ahab the end of the drought. At the time, Ahab’s wife Jezebel, a Baal worshiper and daughter of the king of Sidon, was committing genocide against the prophets of the Lord. Ahab was out looking for him when Elijah reappeared. Rather than fleeing for his life, Elijah

tells Ahab to gather Jezebel’s pagan prophets and meet him on Mount Carmel for a showdown. Ahab complies, probably because he was desperate for rain.

The story is familiar. Four hundred and fifty

““ The one who doesn’t know how or when to be silent doesn’t know how or when to speak.¹

”

— Donald Whitney

prophets of Baal spend half the day screaming, chanting, dancing, and finally slashing themselves with swords and spears in a desperate attempt to get their god to consume a sacrificed bull with fire from heaven. In the end, it doesn't work. Elijah, who had a flair for making his point, has gallons of water poured on the dead bull and his pyre, prays a simple prayer, and watches as the Lord of heaven and earth incinerates the bull, the wood, the stone altar, the water, and the earth beneath it. The audience decides that if anybody deserves their support at this time it is Elijah and his God. The prophets of Baal are thus summarily slain. Elijah then proceeds to tell Ahab that rain is on its way.

Not bad for a day's work.

Following events like these, one would expect Elijah to command Ahab to repent of his apostasy, execute or at least banish his queen, and cleanse the land of idols and their worship. Then Ahab could live and rule happily-ever-after with Elijah as his trusted adviser.

The opposite happens. A drenched Ahab crawls back to Samaria to report the day's events. In a fit of rage, Jezebel invokes the curse of her gods on herself if she hasn't killed Elijah in the coming 24 hours. So what does this commander of rain and fire, this slayer of apostates do? He runs to the desert for his life. Why? Because he was a man just like us. He could only take so much. After three years of drought, hiding, and infamy—followed by a day of tense confrontation and massive bloodshed—he'd had it. He could take no more. He was terrified of this venomous queen, despite the fact that he had seen her prophets decisively defeated only the day before.

This kind of collapse can happen to anyone who seeks to serve God. We end up drained and can give no more. The slightest pressure, let alone a death threat, causes us to fall apart. Elijah was so overwhelmed that he sat in the desert and prayed a suicide prayer: "I have had enough, Lord," he said, "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." So what did God do? First he met Elijah's need for food, then he sent him to a mountain where he could be refreshed alone with his Lord. God gave him food, God gave him rest, and God gave him solitude. In solitude Elijah was able to regain the strength and the vision to once again serve his God.

Meditate on Psalm

43. What positive effect does persecution or disaster have on our relationship with God?

God Doesn't Shout

I don't know of any "how to" books that recommend hibernating in a mountaintop cave as a way to beat depression. Modern-day counselors probably would have urged Elijah to try anti-depression medication, join a recovery group, or perhaps build up his weakened self-esteem through positive mental images. But God had a simpler and more effective plan: get away, get alone, and get quiet.

Before speaking to Elijah on the mountaintop, God sent a violent wind, an earthquake, and then a fire. As awesome as these were—not to mention noisy—God wasn't in them. Elijah didn't even come out of his cave until he heard the sound of a gentle whisper. That was his cue. And that's when the Lord began speaking.

“ It is important that we get still to wait on God. And it is best that we get alone, preferably with our Bible outspread before us. Then if we will we may draw near to God and begin to hear Him speak to us in our hearts.²

— A.W. Tozer

We don't hear God in the earthquake, in the fire, in the violent rushing wind—we hear him in a whisper. That's tough for us living in the noisiest era of world history. With television, radio, telephones, email, newspapers, billboards, and more

clamoring for our attention, we would certainly find it a lot easier to hear God if he cranked heaven's loudspeakers up to full volume. But that's not his style. He won't yank away the headphones of your personal stereo system or turn down your car radio to get your attention. He whispers. And we can't hear his whisper unless we're quiet inside.

When we find ourselves in Elijah's shoes, needing a fresh perspective on life or new hope for what the future holds, it's time to seek out a quiet place where we can be alone with God.

I seem to feel a greater need for solitude than most people. There's a path along the Potomac River where I enjoy walking. More often than not the noisiest thing I hear is a woodpecker. Sometimes I pray; sometimes I'm just quiet. I don't always hear anything unique from God. Yet my goal is to create opportunities where I would be able to hear him if he had something to say. Unless I routinely break out of my noisy, busy lifestyle, I'm not sure God would be able to get a word in edgewise. So I've made solitude a discipline.

For Further Study:

Silence is a mark of wisdom, as Solomon states in Proverbs 10:19, 17:28, and Ecclesiastes 9:17.

At times we just need to be by ourselves. Jesus felt that need when he got news John the Baptist had been beheaded. Matthew writes, “When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place” (Mt 14:13). Imagine our Lord’s emotions. John was his cousin. This was his forerunner, the man who understood his messianic mission better than anyone else. And what an ugly reminder that his own death was imminent! It’s my guess that after such discouraging news Jesus needed to get refocused on his ministry and gain fresh strength from his Father.

Maybe you’re confused about God’s purpose for your life. Maybe you’re grieving over the death of a loved one,

““ The normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God. Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviors that hinder our integration into God’s order.”³

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— Dallas Willard

or are stressed out by the demands at work. Perhaps you have young children and your brain is fried from a million and one questions like, “Why does the toaster make the toast brown?” It’s time to get alone with God. Find a quiet time and place to wait for his words.

Scripture doesn’t command solitude. You can be a

Christian without taking long walks by the river or holing up in a mountaintop cave. But if you hope to hear God’s voice and have your spirit replenished, you will definitely

want to explore the benefits of spending extended time alone with God.

Learn what makes your life noisy, then block out seasons of solitude when you can silence those things and focus on your Father.

1 Because we often depend on noise to block out turmoil in our hearts, solitude can be scary. Briefly describe your thoughts on the following quote by Louis Bouyer: “Solitude...serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities.”⁴

Personal Retreats

Soon after submitting my life to God as a teenager, I discovered the value of spending extended time with God on “personal retreats.” It’s never easy to set aside a day or several days for this purpose, but these large chunks of solitude have been such a benefit that I can no longer live without them. They restore my spirit, they

Meditate on Proverbs

16:3. What is involved in committing our plans to the Lord? Do you submit decisions to him for his “rubber stamp” approval or do you let him lead you to a decision?

deepen my intercession, and I frequently receive specific direction from God for problems or decisions I’m facing.

Now even if you agree with me in theory, you probably have lots of questions—the what, where, when, and why questions that are essential in order to fully understand how personal retreats work. I’ll do my best to answer those questions over the next few pages.

It would be great if the Bible recorded the specifics of our Lord’s retreats. We know he spent a good deal of time in solitude, and that those times contributed to his phenomenal spiritual strength. But he apparently didn’t publish an agenda or itinerary. So the most I can offer are my own experiences and suggestions. They will be practical, but they’ll also be mine, and so obviously not Scripture. If other techniques make your solitude more fruitful, please don’t feel there’s anything sacred about mine.

Choosing a time. If an urgent need emerges, there’s no time like the present for taking a retreat. Yet by making retreats a routine part of our schedule, we can potentially

“ Some are greatly affected when in company; but have nothing that bears any manner of proportion to it in secret, in close meditation, prayer and conversing with God when alone and separated from the world. A true Christian doubtless delights in religious fellowship and Christian conversation, and finds much to affect his heart in it; but he also delights at times to retire from all mankind, to converse with God in solitude. And this also has peculiar advantages for fixing his heart, and engaging his affections. True religion disposes persons to be much alone in solitary places for holy meditation and prayer.⁵ ”

— Jonathan Edwards

catch some problems before they turn into crises. One model would be to set aside three or four hours each month; one day every three months; and two or three days once a year. Maybe you can’t commit this much time. Maybe you’re in a season where you need to commit more. Whatever the case, I would encourage you to see retreats as a preemptive strike rather than an emergency escape.

Picking the place.

Atmosphere is critical for an effective time with God.

Here are some important criteria for choosing the best location:

A quiet place with few distractions. I wouldn’t recommend going to the local shopping mall. Also, make sure you get away from the pressures of your daily routine. Rather than taking retreats at home, my wife will use the home of a friend who is on vacation. That way she isn’t tempted to clean the closets or reorganize the bookcase.

A safe place. Women especially should find a place

where their efforts to seek God won't be hindered by fear or danger. If being alone in a strange place makes you nervous, consider taking your retreats with a friend.

A place with adequate heat. Once your teeth start chattering, your brain will have a hard time focusing on God. Fasting makes you especially susceptible to the cold. Unless it's the middle of the summer, take along extra clothes and blankets—a space heater is great in the winter—just to insure that you stay warm.

A place with adequate space. I enjoy doing a lot of walking during my personal retreats. I'd probably get cabin fever if I were shut up in a hotel room for more than a few hours. So I've gone to a nearby retreat center that has over 200 acres of land, including a path that goes all around the property. This lets me enjoy God's creation and get a little exercise as I think and pray.

A place where I can be loud without disturbing anyone. I have difficulty focusing on God for long stretches of time. If on my retreat I find a National Geographic magazine that someone left on a shelf, I can easily waste a couple of hours. Sometimes what began as a time of prayer ends with me mentally planning our next vacation. One of my most effective weapons against distraction is to sing and pray out loud. But that's hard to do when you're worrying that any moment someone is going to bang on your door or wall.

A place that has minimal temptations. By using a little common sense we can spare ourselves some needless temptation—and potentially, shame. Men should take extra precautions. A condo overlooking a beach full of sunbathers will be problematic. I personally don't like hotel rooms because the television is so prominent, and in-room pornographic movies are common fare, let alone the other junk that comes over the cable.

Now maybe you have Christlike levels of self-control. That's great. But a personal retreat is no time to test your immunity to temptation. When we are alone our flesh and the Devil can seem to work especially hard to undermine this time with God.

A place that is inexpensive. A friend's house or retreat center may not have all the amenities of a hotel, but they are much easier on the budget. If you are the outdoors type, consider camping. On one retreat, I paid just five dollars for a site at a nearby campground. Equipped with my tent, card table, chair, and all the water I could drink, I had a great time with God.

Plan in advance. Before leaving for your retreat, you

For Further Study:

Use a concordance to find the passages in Psalms where shouting is an expression of worship. You can begin with Psalms 20:5, 33:3, and 35:27.

Meditate on 1 Peter 5:8-9.

Though the enemy is no match for our King, we must not underestimate his ability to harm and distract us.

2 Write down one or two places where you could take an effective personal retreat.

Meditate on James

1:5-8. What promise motivates us to seek God's wisdom? What is the prerequisite?

“ Let him who cannot be alone beware of community....Let him who is not in community beware of being alone....Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.⁶ ”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

should have a clear idea of what you hope to accomplish. Otherwise, you will find yourself drifting aimlessly through the time and wondering at the end whether it was worthwhile.

What are your reasons for taking a retreat: getting God's guidance about a job offer? studying a book on personal finances? breaking out of a spiritual rut? Put your goals in writing. Make them as specific as possible. Also, break them down into categories:

- Situations/people requiring prayer
- Decisions requiring an answer
- Issues requiring study

You may need to do some preliminary research in order to accomplish certain goals during your retreat. For example, if you will be seeking biblical guidelines for more effective time management, do a two-week time study before you take your retreat. This way you can work with something concrete.

Give some real thought to the items you will need during your retreat. It's frustrating to arrive and find that you forgot a blanket or the book you had planned to study. I often bring a lot more study materials than I expect to cover, and then try to discipline myself so that I only look at the things that truly meet my needs.

If you are going on a retreat with another person, sit down and discuss your expectations in advance. Plan the times you will spend together and alone. Do everything you can to prevent misunderstandings from occurring during your retreat.

Schedule your time. If you've never taken a personal retreat, 24 hours may seem like eternity. But the time passes quickly, so keep your expectations realistic. If you go away hoping to read five books on parenting, you will come back totally discouraged because you only got through the first half of the first one.

Also, set up a schedule that includes variety.

Sometimes I spend my time in prayer and studying the Bible; sometimes I concentrate on planning or seeking God for direction. Sometimes I fast while on retreat; other times I don't. I try to tailor my retreats to best address my current situation.

God doesn't expect you to enter your room, drop to your knees in fervent intercession, and emerge two days later. Rotate your activities to keep things interesting. Allow time for breaks. Scatter your prayer, worship, waiting, planning, and study throughout the day.

An ideal schedule would include sufficient detail but remain flexible. The Holy Spirit may have plans for your retreat that totally surprise you. Once I brought along a book on child training that I had expected to scan briefly. As I got into it, though, God began opening my eyes to how I should be raising my own children and serving the students at the school where I worked. I devoted a significant chunk of that retreat to reading the whole book. Leave God the option of rescheduling your priorities.

Recording your insights. Before ending your retreat, write down the things you have learned. What seemed so vivid and clear during your time of solitude fades quickly once you are again surrounded by noise. Capture it on paper before it escapes.

Don't be surprised if your retreat ends without any significant new insights from God. You might not come away *feeling* great, but if you're like me, you will come away *satisfied*. There have been times when I don't sense any dramatic direction or insights from God. Time alone with him is enough.

We can be confident, however, that our investment of time will be worthwhile in the long run. The Lord often chooses to speak to me at a later time

when I least expect it, reminding me that it is grace—not my spiritual disciplines—that moves him to communicate. If I got answers based on the intensity of my prayers, I'm sure I wouldn't get as many answers as I do!

For Further Study:

Read Acts 10:9-48. If Peter had known the surprise God had in store for him, he might not have been motivated to pray that day!

3 Are you 100% confident of God's eagerness to answer your questions and guide your steps? He is more responsive and open than the best teacher you ever had. By way of meditation, use the space below to write out Proverbs 2:1-6.

Rest

The discipline of solitude helps us accomplish one of God's strongest commands: the command to rest. He gave

“ Technology is increasing the heart-beat. We are inundated with information. The mind can't handle it all. The pace is so fast now, I sometimes feel like a gunfighter dodging bullets.⁷

— James Trunzo

the Fourth Commandment (resting on the Sabbath) more ink than any of the other nine (Ex 20:8-11). Why? Look at the pace of life in the average American household. We act as if our worth is a function of our busyness. Rest—at least in

the United States—is almost a dirty word.

Jesus made it clear the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27). From the epistle to the Colossians we can deduce that the New Testament Church felt no obligation to uphold the Old Testament Sabbath laws (Col 2:16). The Law was fulfilled in Christ. We're not expected to practice Sabbath rest the way the Jews did.

But though their practice had become legalistic, the principle remains. Rest was God's idea. He spent six days creating the world, then rested on the seventh, and that before he gave any laws. That rhythm of work and rest is still God's ideal for us today. The Soviet Communist Party learned the hard way. They tried to increase productivity by switching from a seven-day week to a ten-day week: nine days at work, one day of rest. Instead of generating more output, though, the workers became far less productive. We work most effectively when we imitate the weekly

schedule that God began at creation.

“What requires more faith,” asks Bible teacher Derek Prince, “to work or to rest?” Surprisingly, the latter is usually true. Resting—especially when there's lots of work to do—forces us to depend on God. It reminds us that all our energy and effort are ultimately insufficient. It makes us lean on the invisible rather than relying on the concrete.

It is easy to confuse rest with leisure, but they are not necessarily the same. For example, I enjoy a good football game on TV, but it's not a restful activity for me. I can get tense watching the ever-shifting drama of a close game. Now there's nothing wrong with watching football, but in order to rest I need to do something recreational—something that “recre-

For Further Study:

Read Matthew 12:1-14. How did the Jewish religious leaders distort God's original purpose for the Sabbath?

4 Which of the following quotes most clearly indicates America's need for rest?⁸

- “I do things in a lot of 3-1/2-minute segments. Experience just sort of rolls by me.”
—Anthropologist Peter Hammond
- “Time may have become the most precious commodity in the land.”
—Pollster Louis Harris
- “I gave up pressure for Lent.”
—Manhattan theater director
- “My wife and I were sitting on the beach in Anguilla on one of our rare vacations, and even there my staff was able to reach me.”
—Architect James Trunzo
- “Tired is my middle name.”
—Single mother Carol Rohder

“ [I]f we would so take heed to our ways that we sin not with our tongue, we must accustom ourselves much to solitude and silence, and sometimes with the Psalmist, ‘Hold our peace even from good,’ till once we have gotten some command over that unruly member.⁹

— Henry Scougal

ates” me. A long nap, a good book, a hike in the woods, or an afternoon with my wife and children are far more effective than the Washington Redskins when it comes to rejuvenating and refreshing my mind and body. Other spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, and fasting also help

me to slow down and refuel.

Remember when you were a kid and hated taking naps? You may still find it hard to rest. But you will live a healthier and more productive life if you set aside one day in seven to break the hurried pace of the week and rest. ■

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. If you were locked up in solitary confinement for a month, what would you do to maintain sanity?
2. Does the thought of taking a personal retreat intimidate you?
3. What are the main sources of “noise”—both external and internal—in your life?
4. How do you recognize God’s voice when he speaks?
5. The author says we are “living in the noisiest era of world history” (Page 71). What do you think he means by that? Give examples.
6. What training or encouragement would you need in order to feel ready to take a personal retreat?
7. Describe the difference between rest and leisure and give one personal example of each.
8. Where in your weekly schedule could you include a time for solitude? (Start small and work your way up.)

NOTES

1. Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), p.185.
2. A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1982), p.80.
3. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), p.160.
4. Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers, vol. 1 of A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury, 1982), p.313.
5. Quoted in Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, p.193.
6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1954), p.77.
7. Nancy Gibbs, "How America Has Run Out of Time" (*Time* magazine, April 24, 1989).
8. Ibid.
9. Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications), p.107.