How Can I find Time?

When my children started school, I told the Lord, *Now I can carve out more time to spend with You*. I wanted to get off the spiritual starvation diet that had characterized my life in a busy household with three small children.

For years now I've been working on keeping that promise. It's always a fight. There are always things—good things; needful things; loud demanding things—that squawk for my attention. I think that's why I'm challenged by Jesus' commendation of Mary of Bethany when she sat at His feet. He said, "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her" (Lk.10:42).

I don't believe for a minute that life was less complicated for Mary than it is for you or me. A hundred options must have called to her. Yet, Jesus said two things that help me set aside time with Him instead of picking up the iron or the telephone.

The phrase "Mary has chosen" does not mean that Mary was blessed with a more contemplative nature or a greater spiritual sensitivity than her sister, Martha. Rather, she *chose* to set aside pressing demands to spend time with Jesus.

The second phrase, "what is better," means that Mary chose based on her discernment of what was more valuable. The Greek word used communicates the idea of choosing the best dish on the table. The demands in Mary's life presented themselves in a variable smorgasbord of choices. Yet, she chooses what would nourish and satisfy the most, and Jesus commended her for it.

Why Don't We Give God More Time?

In addition to not choosing the "best dish on the table," we sometimes lack inner direction and the will to decide how to use our time. So we just drift. Other times our appetite for God is too small, and we choose to watch television, read a book, or any number of other things.

Perhaps the most common reason we don't spend time with God is that we mistakenly believe our worth and the advancement of the gospel is measured by activity. We wonder if our believing friends, our pastor, or even the Lord will think we're uncommitted and self-indulgent if we aren't busy. To spend time beyond our regular devotions seems like doing nothing when we could be doing something more "productive."

At the center of the onion, if we keep peeling, is the vague idea of spending large blocks of time alone with God is not only lazy but callous to the world's needs. Yet the opposite is true. Scripture is filled with accounts of God directing people to leave their work and give their time to Him. Twice God directed Moses to the mountain for forty days away from the needy people he was leading (Exodus 24,24). Before Jesus began His public ministry the Spirit led Him into the wilderness for forty days (Mt.4:1-2).

What Happens When We Spend Time with God

When Moses met with God on Mt. Sinai, God gave him deep and specific insight into His will. His thinking and values, and His instructions for healthy living—the Law. God proclaimed His name to Moses: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). He also made a covenant with Moses and the people (Ex.34:10). Moses was transformed by those days in God's presence. The test says his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord (Ex. 34:29-35). Because Moses saw God's person—His character—and grasped more fully God's heart and values, he was better able to do the job God had given him.

Even the Lord Jesus spent forty days alone in the wilderness, where He won spiritual battles that laid the foundation for His public ministry (Mt. 4:1-2). Before He chose the twelve disciples, Jesus spent a night in prayer (Lk 6:12-15). One of my favorite examples of benefiting from time in God's presence comes from an agonizing period of David's life (2 Samuel 12). After Nathan confronted David's adultery, he announced that the son born to David and Bathsheba would die. For seven days David lay prone, fasting and praying,

asking God to spare the child's life. David's behavior caused his servants such concern that when the child finally died they were afraid to tell him. They thought, *If he mourned this deeply while the child was alive, what will he do when he knows the child is dead?* But they had not factored in what happens when a person spends time in God's presence.

David mourned, but he also received a measure of healing. As he prayed that God would spare his son, his heart was enabled to accept the child's death. But something else happened. David gained an eternal perspective reflected in these words: "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? (2 Sam. 12:22-23).

When David knew that his son was dead, Scripture says that he worshiped God (v. 20) and comforted Bathsheba (v. 24). Time with God develops our perception and receptivity to His will. It also increases our love for Him and fortifies us to minister to others.

My friend Phyllis spends two mornings a week poring over her Bible in a hotel coffee shop. Although she leads Bible studies, has a steady flow of visitors in her home, and the telephone seems to ring nonstop, there's nothing frenzied about her life. She's one of the most fruitful women I know. People are drawn to her because her faith is vibrant, her insights are fresh and her direction is clear. Phyllis says, "I think of the coffee shop as my Mount of Olives, a place of periodic withdrawal. If I don't receive, I have nothing to give." During these morning retreats Phyllis often writes out her prayers, which gives her a record of God's answers. She works on her Bible studies, thinks about her family and her own life, and makes course corrections. Phyllis says this time releases her creativity to lead Bible studies, meet with others, and minister to her family. And it keeps her flesh in tow. Most of all, it is unhurried time just to enjoy God.

How to Carve Out Extra Time with God

Not everyone can get away to the mountain for forty days or to a coffee shop twice a week. How does a parent of young children come up with extra time to spend with God? If you're a mother, look for another mother who wants time alone with God as much as you do, and arrange to watch each other's children one morning a week. On your morning without children, take you Bible and notebook to a place you can sit awhile—perhaps the library or a coffee shop. It helps me to take along a time-tested book like *Practicing the Presence of God* to bridge the gap between the scurry of getting the children to my friend's house and sitting quietly with God. I read the devotional book only until my heart is focused; then I begin reading God's Word.

Once children start school, you can block out a morning a week at home. It helped me to scratch that morning off the calendar for the entire year. Sometimes circumstances overrode my morning with God, but as a rule I guarded the time as I would any other previously scheduled event.

Choosing the Best

God does not think we are wasting time when we examine our lives in His presence by giving serious thought to our sins, the direction of our lives, our values, and how we can make the most of the years left to us. He does not think we are lazy when we put aside work to sit at His feet with expectant hearts, nor derelict when we occupy our thoughts with the great themes of Scripture. He does not think we are trifling away our time when we praise Him for His inestimable goodness. On the contrary, He prods us to choose the best dish at the banquet—extended time alone with Him.

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