

The Surprising Rewards of Silence

Ever stop to think why nothing is so loud as silence? When the board meeting goes quiet we play with our pens, shuffle paper—anything to disturb the silence. When there is a long pause during testimony time, we shift in our pews or flip the pages of our Bible. Rarely does our Day Timer have an entry that reads “time to be still.” Even our time alone with God is filled with the noise of activity, reading, and talking to God about our daily schedule. Church is noisy, work is noisy, our personal lives are noisy.

“Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). If you are like me, you have heard this verse many times. But take a closer look at it; God is speaking—so we ought to listen. Being still and knowing Him go together. We cannot have an intimate knowledge of God without being still.

So why isn’t quietness a regular part of our daily living? Why are we afraid of silence? Why are we afraid to stand at our watch, like Habakkuk, and wait until God decides to speak (Hab. 2:1)? A.W. Tozer summarized things well when he said, “Very few of us know the secret of bathing our souls in silence.”

What do we really fear?

If most of us were honest, we would admit to thinking that being silent isn’t a very productive thing to do. We feel we are wasting time. We often react like King Saul did when Samuel failed to show up on time. “When I saw . . . that you did not come at the set time, . . . I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering” (1 Sam. 13:8-14). We tend to take things into our own hands rather than wait for God to speak. Our busy schedules show that we don’t really believe that the way to true spirituality is through quiet meditation and silence before God. It doesn’t seem profitable. We can’t chart the results. Being still has no place on our résumé. We have become like our culture—performance based and outcome oriented.

A deeper reason we avoid silence is that we are afraid of what God will say if we do listen. For if we wait, if we listen, He will speak. And when He

does, He will show us ourselves as we really are. We will see our shortcomings, our selfishness, our self-protective behaviors, our wrong motives. God’s presence clarifies things. If we sit in that presence we see that we are small, weak, depraved, and full of self. The very thought of seeing all this frightens most of us away from Him. In *Daring to Draw Near*, John White writes: “We confuse intimacy with its counterfeit, familiarity. . . . Intimacy is what we want but familiarity is all we achieve. . . . Intimacy is dangerous, a knowing and being known deeply and profoundly. . . . It involves being humble enough to share the secrets of your heart.”

So what is to be gained by sitting quietly before a God we cannot see? The answer is simple: the very things we try to get elsewhere but cannot.

Our heads are full of facts about God. Job knew about God. He also knew what it was like to move from knowing about God to intimacy with God. His response? “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. . . . I have no answer— . . . I will say no more” (Job 40:4-5). Our depravity is deep. We are afraid to see its ugliness still present within our lives. We hear much of grace these days, but we fail to mention the depravity that makes God’s grace so absolutely necessary. We don’t want to have an encounter with Jesus’ words “apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). We are desperately afraid to see ourselves openly and without pretense.

Even deeper is the fear we encounter when



confronted with the truth that we are not the ones in control. We fool ourselves into thinking that we control life. We have climate control, cruise control, birth control, quality control—the list goes on and one. The truth is, we are not the controllers.

Jesus' story of the rich man in Lk. 12:16-21 makes this point clear. All his barns, grain, and goods did him no good at all. God called him a fool, then took his life without even consulting him first. We cannot make our hearts beat. We cannot make ourselves grow an inch. If we dare sit silently, we come face to face with the truth that fuels our biggest fears: our lives are not in our own hands. This is the soil of our souls' deepest battles. Our pride, our plans, our defenses, our accomplishments all fall by the wayside if we sit helplessly before an awesome Being. We refuse to accept our helpless state. We will not relinquish control to another. We don't want to feel out of control. And though we may deny it openly, we are afraid of what will happen to us when we are at the total mercy of someone outside ourselves. After the fall, Adam and Eve were afraid of God's face. They knew their own sinfulness. We, too, are afraid to see our own sinfulness. Our solution is to avoid the silence altogether, and what it will uncover.

What do we really want?

Is Christianity just words on onionskin paper? Or do we want something more, something real and living? As long as our fears go unchallenged, we will never attain the spiritual things we so desperately long for. True Christianity stems from knowing God personally. But most of us are like Job in that we have heard about God but have not come face to face with Him (Job 42:5). God exists and has a very real presence about Him that cannot be contained on paper. It is meant to be understood experientially. "I am not talking about a theological union only," Tozer writes, "I am speaking also of a conscious union, a union that is felt and experienced." This union grows out of hearts and minds that are still before God. Many of us don't know how to quiet our minds even if we wanted to. So what is to be gained by sitting quietly before a God we cannot see? The answer

is simple: the very things we try to get elsewhere but cannot.

Wisdom

In silence we see Him who calls Himself a "consuming fire" (Dt. 4:24) and we fear Him. We see His power, not our own. We see His might and authority as the One over all the universe. It is this genuine fear that becomes the foundation for what Proverbs calls wisdom. We gain knowledge through our study of the Scriptures. We gain wisdom by sitting at the feet of the Master and listening.

Humility

No man can be arrogant when bowing before a holy God. We see His greatness and we are humbled. We see our smallness and we are humbled again. Humility is not a feeling of worthlessness. It is a natural outcome of fear and an honest appraisal of who we are in relation to who He is. Artificiality drops away the moment we kneel at Jesus' feet. We are more genuine, more honest, more compassionate, and less anxious. When we are humble we are ready to accept God's grace, mercy, and blessings—blessings that can only be received by a humble heart and an uplifted hand.

Faith

This, too, grows out of silence. Much of what passes for trust in God depends on the fact that things have never really gone wrong for us. We have never been unable to help ourselves. In silence we see our helplessness, but if we stay silent, we begin to see God's help beyond ourselves. "People who have found God have been those who have come to the end of themselves. Recognizing their hopelessness, they have been ready to throw themselves on the mercy and grace of a forgiving God," wrote Tozer. Our action of sitting makes a statement that we believe God is. Our waiting in silence confirms that He, not ourselves, is the one in sole command. We don't need to work up feelings in order to prove to God we have faith. By placing our physical presence at God's disposal, our hearts become sure of things we hope for, and our actions live out things we

believe but cannot see with our physical eyes.

Peace

Something begins to happen as we sit silently, away from the activities of our busy lives. As we keep our minds quiet, a sense of peace grows. Time and activities cease to exist for the moment. A sense of calm washes over us. It is more than a feeling. It is an awareness of something really happening. True peace comes from within as God slowly becomes our focal point. In our helpless silence He becomes our Supply-giver. His presence satisfies our souls. And our hearts become satisfied with God Himself, we are less dependent on the things of this world. We become at peace.

Intimacy

Being still brings intimacy. Intimacy means "into-me-you-see." It is dangerous. It is costly. Yet if we risk racing our fears, we will not die. We will, however, see God and ourselves like we never thought possible. Will we be like Martha and get distracted by all the preparations that have to be made? Or will we be like Mary, who chose to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen? We must choose what is best. We must choose what will never be taken away from us. "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:7).

How can I learn to be still?

Sitting quietly with God is a discipline we need to cultivate. It does not take the place of Bible study, Scripture memory, or prayer. Rather, quiet time deepens our walk with the One who seeks our friendship the most. Here are seven steps that may help you in learning to be still. They are adapted from a book entitled *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* by Madame Guyon.

1. Find a quiet time and place to meet with God.

This is not a whenever-it-will-fit-into-my-schedule time. It needs to be a non-distracting place and a time when you can let your mind slow down.

2. Select a passage of Scripture to meditate on.

A chapter or even a single verse will do. Begin reading it piece by piece, word by word. Slowly taste and digest it as you read. Refrain from "studying" the passage, just let it soak in. The purpose of reading is to allow your thoughts to slow down and let God do the talking.

3. Focus on listening.

Forget technique and steps. Forget yourself and whether you are doing things right or not. Stop your self-talk and listen. This is a time God wants to speak to you, not through you, for the sake of others.

4. Ask God to come closer to you.

Ask Him to teach you how to slow your thinking down so you can hear His voice better.

5. Be careful not to try to imagine what God is like, what the experience will be like, or what He will do.

There is no way God will ever fit into your concept or expectations.

6. Never become discouraged.

Your mind will tend to wander. When it does, slowly and gently bring it back to the passage and to listening. Some days may be easier than others.

7. When you're finished, allow time to "settle in" and get refocused on what you need to do next.

It's helpful to have a somewhat open-ended time frame. If you have a time constraint you will be more easily distracted by the clock.

The steps themselves are not important. Change them to work for you. The important thing is to become quiet so you can hear God's still, small voice. Remember, it is something that you learn, and it will take longer than you want it to. Intimacy, like oak trees, grows slowly. God is calling, "Be still, and know that I am God."

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