

Silence, Solitude and the Christian

When I was saved at the age of nine or ten, I began sometimes doing something at school which my friends did not understand. At break time, I would occasionally find a spot on the playground, usually behind a large tree, and spend the time with God. They were some of the sweetest times, praying, speaking to God as my Father. However, my schoolmates did not take kindly to it. They believed I was snubbing them, and avoiding them on purpose.

They did not understand it then, as children, and being an adult, I now know that the world will never understand the need for a believer to come apart for solitude and silence before God. In fact, our culture hates silence. They may pay lip service to the 'joy of peace and quiet' – but in truth our world wants almost constant noise. From the moment we wake, we often check our messages right away or scroll through social media. As we get ready for the day, the TV is often on in the background.

When we get in the car, we switch on music or podcasts till we get to work or school. There the noise of the office, of the classroom continues, until we break for lunch, when the noisy chatter gets even louder. Some offices even play music continually in the background. When we get home, the TV goes on, and stays on even when no one is watching, just to make sure there is some noise in the background.

Often teens go to their room and put on their music, and listen to it for hours, before coming back to watch some more TV, or play some computer games or console games. Go to the mall or the shops, and there is music playing in the background. Go to gym and the music is blaring. Today, even when people go jogging or take walks, they have to take their headphones or earpods with them, to keep the noise going.

Our culture is afraid of silence. I have noticed how uncomfortable people get with silence. I remember standing at God's Window, with other people, and the grandeur ought to leave you speechless. And it does...until someone quickly has to make a remark, usually a silly one, to break the silence.

Our culture is suspicious of silence. Probably because in the silence is when we begin to hear our conscience speak, and we can't drown it out with noise. It is in the silence that we are alone with our thoughts. Silence reveals what we are angry about, what we worry about, what we are depending on, what we are hoping for. We must face ourselves and the only other One present – God.

Silence and solitude are related. Our culture despises solitude as well. There are all kinds of words that are thrown at people who retreat for some silence and solitude – and these words betray what our world thinks of solitude: 'recluse', 'hermit', 'anti-social', 'withdrawn', 'loner', 'unsociable', 'outsider.' People who deliberately seek to be alone for a time are seen to be strange. When I would be at Christian camps and walk off by myself, inevitably, someone would come up and say, "What's wrong? Why are you by yourself?"

You see something of this mentality in our culture's aversion to singleness. Paul, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote of the great spiritual advantages of being single. But our culture says – 'No, there is no advantage to be single – you must be with someone, always!' Certainly, God made us to be social people, He made us to interact and enjoy fellowship. And it is wrong to avoid interaction with other people as a way of life. But our culture, and sadly, even our Christian culture is suspicious of solitude altogether.

We fear solitude because solitude usually brings silence – so we want the accompaniment of someone singing or talking. We fear solitude because it means we are alone and must face ourselves without noisy, funny or foolish people to keep us distracted. Solitude removes the superficial comfort of noisy friends and causes us to think.

But I want to show you that solitude and silence are absolutely crucial to your growth in the knowledge of God. God does not teach His people about Himself when His people continually avoid solitude and silence. I wish to show you this by turning to the example of our Lord Jesus. It's safe to say that 1st century Jewish culture was nowhere nearly as noisy as ours is. And yet, take note of our Lord's example from a number of passages.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Matthew 4:1

When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities.

Matthew 14:13

Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.

Matthew 14:22-23

Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.

Mark 1:35

And He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.

Mark 6:31

So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

Luke 5:16

Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.

Luke 6:12

Notice some clear things about our Lord's example:

1. He deliberately withdrew.

Whether on foot, or by boat, or by climbing a mountain, He deliberately sought solitude and silence. He did not wait for silence and solitude to happen; He sought it out. Why didn't Jesus just ask to be left alone? Why didn't He just ask the people around Him to give Him some quiet time? Because life's not like that. People's problems are not like that. When you're in a place where interruptions are possible – interruptions are inevitable.

2. He chose rather desolate places.

The Greek word *'eramos'* used here means solitary, lonely, uninhabited, wilderness, deserted. Why did Jesus choose desolate places? These were places where few or no one else would be. He was likely to find solitude and silence in such places. They were also places in which the fewest distractions could take place. A desolate place would be very simple, and not much in the way of sounds or interesting sights that would distract Him from being alone with God.

3. He often chose times when other people would be sleeping.

Sometimes, He knew the silence and solitude He needed would only happen when others were asleep. So He would wait for then, or wake earlier than them to meet with God.

4. He used these times to meditate and pray.

After John the Baptist's death, Jesus withdrew to meditate and pray. After a hard day's work of healing and teaching, He would go apart to have His soul refreshed in God. Before selecting the twelve apostles, He spent time in meditation and prayer so that His Father could guide him perfectly.

Jesus was not a hermit, but it's clear that silence and solitude were important parts of His ministry to great crowds of people. Why? Because in silence, we have the necessary quiet to focus on God. There is nothing else to look at, listen to, think about or do. It is simply you and God. You can think clearly and deeply. You can be uninterrupted. Silence is necessary for meditation. As **Psalm 4:4** says, *"Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still."*

Mediation is thinking God's thoughts about God, and thinking God's thoughts about you. You get God's thoughts from the Word. So as you read the Word, and think on it, reasoning, analysing, considering, pondering – you seek to arrive at God's thoughts about God. And God is often pleased to make Himself known to our understanding during the silence. When you think God's thoughts about God, your heart will leap in praise. And when you think God's thoughts about you – you will both rejoice and be sorrowful.

In the silence, real self-examination can take place. You are there before God, you appear alone, and there is no one else to compare yourself with or hide behind. In real solitude you are alone with yourself in God's presence. You are quiet enough to hear. Your thoughts can be concentrated; your meditations can be focused. There is inward attentiveness that makes possible, for example, what **James 1:19** speaks of: *"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath..."*

Silence is also important for illumination:

Then He said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

1 Kings 19:11-12

In God's revelation to Elijah, God's presence was not in the noisy wind, the rumbling earthquake or the crackling fire – it was in the still small voice. God so often makes Himself known to us as we pray and meditate on His Word in uninterrupted solitude. In addition, silence is often said to be an appropriate reaction to the presence of God:

- *Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD, for He is aroused from His holy habitation! (Zechariah 2:13)*
- *Be silent in the presence of the Lord GOD... (Zephaniah 1:7)*
- *But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him. (Habakkuk 2:20)*
- *Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! (Psalm 46:10)*

When you are in the presence of someone in great authority or power – you quiet down. Silence is one of the ways you display your reverence and awe for Him. And when we behold the glory of God, the best environment for that is silence. When you stand at the edge of a mountain and look at the vista – do you want silence or the constant humdrum of chatter? When you look up on a starry night and see innumerable stars on a velvet black sky, do you want silence, or do you want a driving beat?

Sometimes our churches would be greatly enhanced if we would stop and be silent for a minute – or even two or three – out of sixty to ninety – to just be absolutely still and allow what we have sung or heard to sink deep into our souls. Because solitude and silence allow for serious meditation, they allow for God's illumination of Himself, His ways, His purposes, His will.

What should one seek in pursuing this kind of silence?

It is not merely having a lack of noise. It is not merely being alone. You can do this and still not profit. You can be alone, and be surrounded with quiet, and waste that time by thinking on things other than God, thinking about your responsibilities, your problems or your fantasies. It's also not merely reading by yourself – because that can be another form of chasing away the silence.

I think A.W. Tozer put it best when he said, "Retire from the world each day to some private spot, even if it be only the bedroom (for a while I retreated to the furnace room for want of a better place). Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelops you."

Deliberately tune out unpleasant sounds and determine not to hear them. Listen for the inward Voice till you learn to recognize it. Learn to pray inwardly every moment. After a while you can do this even while you work. Never let your mind remain scattered for very long. Call home your roving thoughts. Gaze on Christ with the eyes of your soul. Practice spiritual concentration.

Here are some suggestions:

1. **Deliberately seek some solitude every day.**
2. **Seek places where the distractions are minimised.** Find a room in your house or an outdoor place like the garden or a shed. In your car at work. Behind a locked door over lunch. The school library, the public library. If such a place does not exist – make such a place.

The influential John Wesley and Charles Wesley were just two of their mother Susannah's children. In fact, she had 19 children over the course of 21 years. Unfortunately, because of the times and brevity of life, nine of them died before even reaching two years of age. She educated all of her children at home, spending six hours a day as their instructor. She even wrote her own curricula, including "A Manual of Doctrine," "An Exposition of the

Apostle's Creed," and "An Exposition of the 10 Commandments." She used these to train her children in reading and writing.

Susannah also understood the importance of one-on-one training. In spite of such a large family, she purposely set aside one hour a week to spend with each child. This was in addition to the regular educational sessions. She spent that hour mentoring and encouraging each of her children. But, in addition to her attentiveness to mothering and raising her children, she also valued and prioritised personal spiritual growth and "alone time" with her Saviour.

Since getting "alone" in such a large family was no simple task, she would sit in her rocking chair, pull her apron over her head and pray. Her children understood that mother was not to be bothered at this time and so they sat at her feet and waited until she was finished with her personal devotions. To her, this time was what provided the needed motivation to raise her family as God intended. Secluded beneath her apron she would pray for each child saying their name out loud and asking God to use them for His service.

If you have children, you can teach them to have their own quiet time – 15 minutes of listening to Bible stories on an audio device, perhaps. Later when they can read, 15 or so minutes of reading. Teach them to have times of the day when if they don't nap – they lie quietly.

3. **Seek times when the interruptions are minimised.** This can be morning times, later evening times, lunch break. Stay later at office. Use a whole Saturday, and go to a place.
4. **Use the time to truly be before God.** Begin by confessing sin, asking for opened eyes, an inclination, a united heart. Sing a hymn. Read the Word slowly, carefully. Stop to think and pray about what you read. Write down if it causes you to think more. Pray your meditations to God. Confess and surrender and He shows you. Praise and thank. Return to prayer – speaking to God about God, speaking to God about you. Sing again. Involve others by praying for them.
5. **Leave determined to tune out the distracting thoughts.** Learn to pray inwardly. Learn to exist without continual background noise. Switch off the smartphone or TV or device, and use those times to instead think on God and His Word. Use times of traffic, of travelling, or queuing to cultivate thinking on God.
6. **Finish your day with some silence and solitude with God** – a devotional, a Psalm, perhaps a song, a prayer of thanksgiving.

You may say, "Solitude and silence is all very well for some people, but I just don't have the time. There is no way I have time to just sit somewhere alone and in silence before God."

Joseph Carroll, in his book, *How to Worship Jesus Christ*, speaks of a woman who showed him hospitality during a conference. She was the mother of seven children, a helper in the family business, and a wife to a very unsympathetic husband. On top of that, she was being hospitable to him, a travelling preacher. One morning, around five 'o clock, he saw light filtering through the door. He opened it very quietly, and saw the woman kneeling by her piano. He quietly closed the door.

The next morning the same thing happened, and the next morning the same thing. So, he asked her. "What time do you rise to seek the Lord?" She replied, "Oh, that is not my decision. I made a choice long ago that when He wanted to have fellowship with me, I was available. There are times when He calls me at five; there are times

when He calls at six. And on occasion, He will call about two o' clock in the morning, I think, just to test me." Always, she would get up, go to her piano stool, and worship her Lord.

I asked, "How long do you stay?"

"Oh, that is up to Him. When He tells me to go back to bed, I go back. If He doesn't want me to sleep, I simply stay up."

She was the epitome of serenity. With seven children, she was busy – but not troubled. She had made a choice. She had allowed God to remove her idols, and was wholly His. She was therefore determined and surrendered to be before God in solitude and silence every day.

Just like silence and solitude won't happen to you in a noisy world, so the time to be alone with God won't happen to you in a busy world. You have to carve out the time. You have to re-order things, cut some things out, change priorities, and sometimes, as this lady did – deny yourself, so as to get this time. But what waits for you in those moments of silence and solitude are the best moments of your life – illumination – God showing you Himself.

Jesus said this:

"If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also."

John 12:26

Where was Jesus often found? In solitude and in silence. If the Son of God did that in a far less noisy culture than ours, what should we be doing, if we wish to truly know Him and love Him?