
There's a time in the gospel of Mark when Jesus sends his disciples out on a short-term missions trip

He sends them out, two by two, to proclaim the kingdom of God

And they go! They preach the gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons - that's is pretty much your typical short-term missions trip, right?

And then they return to tell Jesus all about it

Mark 6.30–31 NIV The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place..."

Come away with me to a quiet place

Come away with me to a quiet place, out of the busyness of life, away even from good and wonderful kingdom work

Come away with me, says Jesus

That's the practice of SOLITUDE, in a nutshell

We leave it all behind, to get away with Jesus, alone

To wait on the Lord, in the wonderful words of the OT...

Psalms 37.7 NIV Be still before the LORD & wait patiently for him

Jesus himself was centered in this practice of SOLITUDE

Mark 1.32–35 ESV That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons...

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

Let me give you a few more examples of what solitude looks like

The psalmists understand well that it is only when we have put everything aside ... and are focused on God, and wait on him... It is only then that our fears and anxieties truly begin to melt away... and we begin to taste real life and complete joy

Psalm 16.8–11 I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken... Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure.

You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

So solitude is not just about being alone - it's about being alone with God... with him as our sole focus

And so they are utterly serious about it

The language they use to describe their pursuit of God are words like hungering... thirsting...

Psalm 63.1-8 NIV ...earnestly I seek you;

I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water...

On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.

Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you...

And they are confident that as they seek him, God will come to them

Hosea 6.3 NASB "So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; And He will come to us like the rain, Like the spring rain watering the earth."

So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD...

Psalm 62 contain the words of a man who is getting beat up by life, hammered by those around him

Psalm 62.3–4 ESV How long will all of you attack a man to batter him, like a leaning wall, a tottering fence? They only plan to thrust [me] down... They take pleasure in falsehood.

And in response, this man is centering himself in God, **waiting on God** in silence, waiting on God to save him, rescue him, deliver him

Psalm 62.1–2 ESV For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.

Psalm 62.5–7 ESV For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

Here is a man who is struggling with the reality that life simply isn't fair...

The evil are winning, and those who do wrong are flourishing

Psalm 37.1–8 NIV Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong... Trust in the LORD and do good... Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him

And then there's the man who has given up trying, and has fallen into sin

But then he remembers the unfailing love and the mercy of God

Psalm 130.1–7 NIV Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness...

I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning... put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

Here is the witness of a man going through an impossibly hard situation

Lamentations 3.17–26 ESV ...my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD."

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness...

The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

In all these circumstances, those who have walked this way before us are confident that as they wait on God, they will experience his goodness

Psalms 27.13–14 ESV I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Isaiah 40.28–31 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth... and they who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Come away with me to a quiet place, says Jesus

Wait on the Lord, say those who have gone before us

This is the discipline and the practice of Solitude...

So how does it really work? How does solitude accomplish transformation within us?

Consider two of the most complex and difficult issues facing us today

Identity & Connection

Identity has to do with questions like - Who am I? What is it that defines me, explains me? How do I make sense of myself? Am I comfortable with myself? Do I like who I am?

How do I fit into the world around me? What if those around me doesn't understand me, or value me?

What if my sense of who I am is in conflict with how those around me see me?

This matter of IDENTITY is a very complex issue

And IDENTITY is intertwined with this second complex issue: CONNECTION

Every one of us longs to be relationally connected - truly known, understood, accepted, welcomed, loved... by those around us

And in the ideal world, in the perfect world, you and I would be completely free to be who God made us to be

In all our glorious and unique quirkiness

And we would be fully known, understood, accepted, welcomed, loved - for precisely who we are

But we don't live in that perfect world

And so we are never truly known, understood, accepted, welcomed, loved... even by ourselves

And our longing for connection is so deep and intense that we instinctively begin shape our identity around those things that other people seem to like

And we hide those bits of us that don't seem to be accepted

We twist ourselves into becoming someone we think will be loved

And this creates two deep fractures within us

First, we become **fragmented** beings - we lose a sense of coherent identity - we become different people in different contexts

And our sense of simple integrity dissolves into a range of persona and masks that we put on depending on who we're around

And sometimes this manifests in a torrent of words - we are constantly explaining ourselves, constantly using words to construct the mask or persona that we think will be received, welcomed

Or this fragmentation drives us deeper into isolation - we withdraw from others because it is simply too tiring to maintain these persona

And the fragmentation creates profound **loneliness** in us - even when our lives are filled with social activity

Loneliness is the inevitable result of our fragmented souls

I am merely grazing the surface of deep and complex issues here...

Listen to how a very well-known comedian describes it

"Underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty—forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and you're alone. It's down there. And sometimes when things clear away and you're not watching and you're in your car and you start going, 'Ooh, here it comes, that I'm alone,' like it starts to visit on you, just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it..."

That's why we text and drive.... People are willing to risk taking a life and ruining their own because they don't want to be alone for a second because it's so hard."

So what are we to do with this fragmentation and this loneliness that touches every one of us?

Well... this is precisely where the practice of solitude and silence - this lifestyle of waiting on the Lord - comes in

As we wait on him, he begins putting the fragmented bits of our soul back together...

And we begin to see ourselves as he sees us... and how he sees us is reality, and starts becoming our reality

And we begin to gain confidence in who God made us to be, and then those masks and personas that we've accumulated seem silly

We are beautifully and wonderfully made, and we are loved by him

And as we wait on him, we begin to realize that we are never alone - we are always with him... he is always with us

And in silence and solitude we learn to discern the voice of God, the presence of God, the overflowing love of God for us

And in that place, those voices and forces and compulsions and addictions that fragment you, that pull you in every direction ...

They begin to lose their power over you

Because you've been waiting on God

And you've heard his voice telling you that you are his beloved... that he delights in you... you read these familiar words...

John 3.16-17 NIV For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

And in solitude, these words become personal... and you hear the voice of God your Father say to you

I love you so much that I gave you my Son Jesus... and now if you will simply let go of all those other things that you think make you worthy of love, and accept that I already love you, and trust me... then you will begin to live, really live, in freedom... I do not condemn you... I see you, and I love you, and I sent my own Son into your world not to condemn you but to save you

In solitude we set aside every other voice, and listen to the voice of God...

And in listening to him, and what he says about us, and how he loves us... our fragmented souls begin to be re-integrated...

The masks and personas that we've accumulated are seen to be silly and destructive, and we find strength to set them aside

We discover - in solitude and silence - that we are fully and perfectly accepted, welcomed, loved - by God himself

And we begin to surrender to the wonderful reality that we are his beloved...

And because we are loved, the loneliness begins to fade away - we are forever with the One who loves us with a forever love

Listen to what he says to you, right now, because you are in Jesus

Isaiah 43.1-5 NIV "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... you are precious and honored in my sight, and ... I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you"

Listen to Henri Nouwen reflect on these things

Nouwen "Listening to that voice with great inner attentiveness, I hear at my center words that say: "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you... You belong to me..."

And as these words enter deep into our heart and mind and soul

...we begin to know deep down inside that we are perfectly loved,
just the way we are

And we find confidence to simply be ourselves, without needing to
put on masks to earn love

And we discover the freedom to not be pulled this way and that by
the acceptance or rejection that we encounter from others

And we discover the freedom to move toward others with love to
give, rather than be trapped in our hunger for it

This is what the discipline of solitude and silence does to us

It heals us, restores us, integrates us, grounds us in the deep, deep
love of God for us, and sets us free to walk in the Spirit for real

And in the strength and confidence that comes from having been
alone with God... from having heard his voice tell us who we are
and how he sees us... we are then set free to love, to live, to be

There's a very familiar story from the life of Jesus which pulls this all together for us

Right when Jesus begins his public ministry, the Father and the Spirit
hatch a plan to anchor the fully human Jesus in his Father's love

Luke 3.21–22 When Jesus had been baptized and was praying,
the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him
in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You
are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

The Holy Spirit comes upon him...

And he hears his Father's voice saying to him: You are my beloved
Son; and you delight my heart!

And Jesus must hang on to that word spoken to him from his Father

For right afterwards, Satan comes at him

Matthew 4.1–3 NIV Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

If you are the Son of God...

Are you sure you are who you think you are?

Are you sure you are the Beloved, the Son of God?

Because if you are, I'm not sure why God isn't taking care of you right now... you've been fasting 40 days, and he still hasn't shown up to satisfy your hunger

You've been trusting your Father, and waiting on him, but he hasn't come through for you...

So why don't you take care of yourself? do a little miracle, why don't you? You're hungry - so feed yourself

We, too, have heard that voice so often, haven't we?

Are you really the Beloved? Does God really care about you?

Why then are things so impossibly hard for you? Why don't you experience all those good things that others seem to? Why isn't life working out better for you?

Maybe you need to stop waiting on him... stop trusting him to take care of you, and start taking care of yourself

Matthew 4.4 NIV Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

And Jesus' response is simple and direct

My hunger for bread is nothing compared to my need for the words that my Father speaks to me...

And I have heard from him, and know without doubt, that I am his beloved... and because I know he loves me, my hunger for bread doesn't control me... I trust him to care for me as he thinks best

Matthew 4.5-6 NIV Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.

"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Can you trust God's word? Can you really trust him?

Matthew 4.7 NIV Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

My Father loves me, and I trust him... I do not need to test him... I'd rather trust his Word, and entrust myself to him

Matthew 4.8-9 NIV Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Matthew 4.10-11 NIV Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Away with you, Satan...

So this is the practical outcome of the discipline of solitude

Come away with me, says Jesus

And we get away with him, and in solitude he puts the fragmented bits of our soul back together

And we remember once again that we are his beloved

And we remember once again that we are never alone

And we find strength to resist the temptations that life throws at us

So... how do we practice this discipline? Let me give you a simple framework

RETREAT : This week, set aside an hour, sometime, when you can be absolutely alone and quiet, and undistracted

The goal is to be silent, and alone, and wait on God

So taking your phone with you is probably not a good idea

Quiet your heart down, and simply say to God, Here I am... Come to me

You REMEMBER who he says you are, how he feels about you

Perhaps you let these words slowly sink into your heart

Isaiah 43.1–5 NIV “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... you are precious and honored in my sight, and ... I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you”

And then you allow him to RESTORE your soul in his love for you

And then you REVIEW your life, your relationships and your priorities in the light of being fully accepted, fully loved by God

And then you RETURN from solitude to community, having been filled up and strengthened and equipped to be free, to live, to love, to give

So let me close with this prayer that Paul prayed over his friends

Ephesians 3.14–21 NIV For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.
