

An aerial photograph of a canyon, likely the Grand Canyon, with a color palette of deep reds, oranges, and greens. The lighting creates a dramatic, almost ethereal atmosphere. The canyon's intricate patterns and textures are highlighted by the contrasting colors.

EXODUS

LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

INTRODUCTION

When I first started to practice the spiritual discipline of solitude a few years ago, it was sparked by an overwhelming sense of desperation. I knew I needed to hear from God, and this sense to hear from Him today, right now, was urgent. I wish I could say a desire for spiritual maturity or an intimate relationship with God was what propelled me to seek God's presence, but it was driven by pain and loneliness. There were some significant things happening in my life, and I had this strong sense God was calling me to "exit" from my present way of living. I had deep longings that were unmet, questions that seemed to have no answers, and hurts that couldn't be healed by anything on this earth.

I barricaded myself in my bedroom one day, threw myself before God, and told Him that I wasn't leaving until I heard from Him. Looking back, I realize this may have been a bit manipulative, but I was desperate—desperate to know God loved me and was fighting for me. Desperate to know God was preparing a way out of what I was experiencing. During my time of silence, God's words came gently and quietly. In fact, I was surprised by how much God had to say to me—I only had to be still.

Since then, I have learned the importance of regularly going before God in silence and solitude. Sometimes, it is inner longings that drive me to His presence; other times, it is the comfort of simply knowing God is here with me and enjoys my company. Desperation need not be the catalyst that moves us into time with God's presence.

Sometimes, God calls us to move away from an old, broken way of living so we can embrace the freedom He has for us. But if we aren't actively listening to God, if we aren't taking time to escape from the busyness and the noise in our lives, we just might miss out on what God is doing. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, the Israelites were desperate to hear from God. They needed to know God was still with them, that He was leading them to a place where they could thrive again according to God's purposes. This month, we will be journeying through the first part of the book of Exodus and considering the ways God may be leading us into new directions. Each week, there is a devotional piece to incorporate into your daily time with God and prompts to guide you into a time of solitude and silence. As we move into this space with God, may we become people of God's presence who wait, listen, and move toward God's freedom and abundance.

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HOW TO LISTEN

Silence is not always as easy as it sounds. Spending time listening reveals the dilemma many of us face: we want to be close to God...but we also often resist it. Listening is a discipline that takes time. It can be discouraging and frustrating when we don't feel some sort of connection. It can illicit feelings of shame, particularly if we haven't prayed in a while. And let's be honest: silence is just downright awkward! If you are new to the practices of silence and solitude, be gracious with yourself and set modest goals—such as listening for 5-10 minutes. Here are some steps to guide you during your times of silence:

1. Find a place.

The position of our bodies can direct the attitude of our minds. Find a specific space free from distractions to meet with God. It could be a particular chair in your living room or at your kitchen table. Wherever it is, there is something about having designated space that helps put you in an expectant state of mind.

As you regularly meet with God in this space and become accustomed to hearing His voice, you'll gradually be able to meet with Him on your walk, in the checkout line, or in a busy airport terminal. But don't start with these highly distracting spaces! While we can certainly listen to God wherever we are, "anywhere" may not be the best place to start. There are too many voices vying for attention in the "anywhere;" and until you know God's voice well, it will easily be drowned out. Learning to hear God's voice in the quiet helps you recognize His voice in the noise.

2. Spend time in silence.

This is probably the hardest part about listening. The good news is you get it over with first! Let your brain wander—and when thoughts, particularly concerns or anxieties, emerge, briefly reflect on them and surrender them to God. Listen to what God has to say about them. Then let God direct your thoughts to His presence. Don't ignore your joys and pains, but set them aside for a little while so you can enjoy uninterrupted union with God.

3. Reflect on Scripture.

Read through the Scripture passage with God. There's a time to study Scripture, but this is the time to simply meditate on God's Word. Keep the passage brief. Slower is better. Less is more. This isn't a race to read the entire Bible in a year—it's an opportunity for God to speak to you right now. As you read, notice what words or phrases stick out to you. Re-read the passage, maybe even several times.

4. Listen.

Quiet your heart and listen to what God has to say through the Scripture passage you just read. Present the key parts that stood out to you and allow God to guide your thoughts. Think about how God can use His Word to align you with His will.

5. Give yourself lots of grace.

The bad news: you will not be perfect at listening. Your mind might wander. You might get restless. You might even hate it at first. But the good news is God will give you plenty of grace. Since God gives you grace, you can definitely give yourself grace, too.

The fact that you're even showing up and trying is "winning." So don't give up. Be persistent. Keep showing up, no matter how difficult it might seem. In the words of the monastic father Brother Lawrence, "For many years I was bothered by the thought that I was a failure at prayer. Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer; and I've gotten along much better ever since."

More resources on listening:

Hearing God by Dallas Willard

Invitation to Solitude and Silence by Ruth Haley Barton

God is Closer Than You Think by John Ortberg

Bridgetown Church's resources: practictheway.org/practices/silence-solitude

WEEK ONE

EXODUS 1:1-2:10

WEEKLY REFLECTION

From the very beginning pages of the Old Testament book of Exodus, it's clear that God's people were in dire circumstances. An angry pharaoh, ruthless legislation, cruel slave masters... This new setting is a stark contrast to the prosperous times we saw under the leadership of Joseph just a few chapters back in Genesis 37:1-12. In Genesis, Joseph's father, Jacob blessed the pharaoh of his time for his gracious hospitality. Now, under the rule of this new king, Egypt is far from hospitable for the Israelites.

And yet, the authors of Exodus clue us into a deeper reality below the surface: God was present and at work. God heard the cries of His people and "came down" (Exodus 3:7-8). Deliverance was on the way.

We may not be able to relate to the burden of slavery that the Israelites faced, but all of us go through painful experiences. We are lonely and empty. There's a deep weariness in our souls. We are in the throes of an abusive or unhealthy relationship. There is unresolved conflict that depletes our energy. For some of us, there may be an immediate action step that we need to take. When the two midwives were faced with a horrific ultimatum, they responded according to the will of God. But other times, there may not seem to be anything we can do. We're stuck—our backs are against a wall. We're the Israelites crying out in pain with no clear deliverer in sight. What do we do with this pain?

Pain must drive us first and foremost to God, because there is no one else who can answer the deepest cries of our hearts. Often, we try to distract ourselves, to sedate ourselves, or to overwork ourselves in order to escape our painful longings. Instead of trying to escape our hurt, we must sit quietly before God's presence. It takes courage to lay our pain before God and to ask God for what we need. It's even more courageous to wait for an answer. But we must trust God is the God who hears our cries and chooses to come down.

PRACTICE

Spend 5-10 minutes in silence before God. Settle into a comfortable space and take a few deep, slow breaths to center yourself. Become aware of God's presence. Notice any inner points of tension, anxiety, or pain and name them before God. Hold them not as experiences to be avoided but invitations to open yourself to God in new ways. Ask God to bring comfort and liberation. Then, when your time of silence is over, thank God for His presence with you.

WEEK ONE

EXODUS 1:1-2:10

GROUP GUIDE

Opening question: Tell the group about a dramatic shift that occurred in your life—such as becoming parents, starting your first job, or transitioning into retirement. Were you prepared for these changes?

Read Exodus 1:1-2:10.

- Are there any words or phrases in this Scripture passage that caught your attention? Why do you think that is?
- Throughout the book of Exodus, the pharaoh—or king—is never mentioned by name. This is significant. Exodus is not just a critique against this particular ruler; Exodus is a critique against all powers—past, present, and future—that threaten the wellbeing of God’s people. What “powers” do you see at work today that rob us of the best life God has for us (consumerism, addiction, habitual sin, apathy, etc.)?
- Although the pharaoh is never mentioned by name, the two midwives are (Shiprah and Puah – 1:15). God’s values are so different than ours. It is not the powerful and wealthy whose names last but the ordinary people who take care of those in pain. When was a time that God raised up help for one of your broken circumstances?
- Our pain can either move us toward God or away from God. Why do you think we tend to rely on things or people other than God to alleviate our discomfort? What are some specific ways you’ve done this?
- Has there ever been a time when you sensed God was moving you toward an “exodus”? What were some of the signs God’s Spirit was moving you in a different direction?
- What are some ways we can become attentive and responsive to God’s movement?
- **Optional:** If your group practiced the weekly reflection this week, share about your experiences. What pains, concerns, or distractions did you find you need to entrust more deeply to God’s care?

CLOSING

Close your time with a brief moment of silence. Then, as the Spirit leads the group, make space for a time of spontaneous prayer before closing.

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WEEK TWO

EXODUS 2:11-25

WEEKLY REFLECTION

To say Moses was overwhelmed by his anger is an understatement. Anger must fester for a while before it manifests as physical violence, let alone premeditated murder. Moses must have been suppressing his anger for a long time, and he tried to hide it. Moses was afraid of being found out. Even though he covered his tracks, others took notice. The sin that had been hidden under the surface was now on full display for all to see.

Sometimes our fear of being found out alerts us to the destructive and unhealthy behavioral patterns we have deep down. When we're stressed or stuck in hostile situations, our true nature comes out. Like Moses, we may have the correct logic or right motivations and still explode emotionally. When we are used up and stressed out, we often react instead of responding. Our emotions, especially if we've been suppressing them, float to the surface. We thought we had them well-hidden, but a catalyst finally sends us over the edge.

These volatile reactions are an indication something needs to change—whether that be our circumstances, our choices, or even something residing within ourselves. We need God to lead us from our current, broken reality into new, life-giving rhythms.

God wants to liberate us from the “sin that so easily entangles” so we can find freedom in Christ (Hebrews 12:1-2).

PRACTICE

Thankfully, our encounter with our “dark side” does not need to be as traumatic as it was for Moses. Perhaps you have an awareness of a sin pattern or a subtle sense of insecurity. Maybe it's manifesting in patterns of inferiority or shame, the constant need for approval, anger at a loss of control, an unhealthy state of tiredness, or the tendency to remain aloof or detached from those close to you. These unexamined patterns may be a lifetime in the making. Right now, it may not seem all that bad—but left undetected and unchallenged, this “shadow self” can morph into something very powerful. Sit with this awareness before God. Don't try to justify or defend yourself; simply identify what may be lurking below the surface and ask God to speak life and truth into it.

WEEK TWO

EXODUS 2:11-25

GROUP GUIDE

Opening Question: What are some things you need to be at your “best” (a good night’s sleep, close friends, exercise, etc.)?

Read Exodus 2:11-25.

- Think about Moses’ circumstances as a Hebrew who was socially an Egyptian. What kinds of tensions and frustrations do you think this strange identity would have caused him?
- Compare Moses’ reaction to the Egyptian beating the slave with the rescue at the well. What comparisons do you notice? What are some differences? How has Moses’ “exodus” out of Egypt changed him?
- Even though Moses had a strong sense of justice, it manifested itself in different ways. How can we know we are doing something for the right reason –and in the right way?
- Moses’ outburst was most likely the result of a deep-seated pattern of festering anger. Have you ever had a reaction burst out of you that surprised you?
- How can we become aware of the destructive patterns that may be lurking below our surface?
- **Optional:** If your group practiced the weekly reflection this week, share about your experiences. How have you experienced God with you in the midst of what you are noticing?

CLOSING

Close your time by sharing prayer requests. Ask for volunteers to pray for each person, as the group is comfortable.

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WEEK THREE

EXODUS 3:1-4:17

WEEKLY REFLECTION

Up until this point in the Exodus narrative, God's presence has only been implied—no direct actions or words have yet been attributed to God. Now, finally, God speaks...and Moses is ready to hear from Him. Notice Moses is only ready to hear from God because he has "turned aside" from his tasks. Because of the scorching desert heat, it would not have been all that strange for a dry, brittle bush to catch fire. The strange thing wasn't that the shrub was on fire, but that the shrub wasn't burning up. Moses notices something out of the ordinary—and instead of continuing on his way, he pauses to get a better look.

Moses was paying attention, and only after he turns aside does God speak. There is a direct cause and effect that happens in the text: "When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush" (3:4).

Are we too busy to turn aside—to notice the ways God is at work in our lives? God will not force Himself into our lives; we must make the space for Him. In *Centered Living*, M. Basil Pennington writes, "[God] knows that the greatest thing he has given us is our freedom. If we want habitually, even exclusively, to operate from the level of our own reason, he will respectfully remain silent. We can fill ourselves with our own thoughts, ideas, images, and feelings. He will not interfere. But if we invite him with attention, opening the inner spaces with silence, he will speak to our souls, not in words or concepts, but in the mysterious way that Love expresses itself—by presence."

God invites each one of us into His presence, but He waits for us to respond. We are standing on holy ground more often than we realize.

PRACTICE

Begin your time in solitude by repeating what Moses said to God in Exodus 3:4—"Here I am." Spend a moment becoming aware of God's presence. Then reflect on some "burning bushes," no matter how ordinary, that were present in your life in the last few days or weeks. List the ways God has been with you. Thank the "I AM" for the ways He is present in your life.

WEEK THREE

EXODUS 3:1-4:17

GROUP GUIDE

Opening Question: What was one way you sensed God was at work last week?

Read Exodus 3:1-4:17.

- Using a fiery bush was a strange way to get Moses' attention! Why do you think God did it this way? What might this mean for ways God gets our attention today?
- The space where Moses was standing wasn't "holy" a few minutes ago—it was simply sand. It is God's presence that makes a place "holy." What does this indicate to us today? What are some ways we can become attuned to "holy places"?
- As part of His reassurance He would be with Moses, God revealed His divine name: "Yahweh," as we transliterate the Hebrew into English. This Hebrew word is a verb that, as best as we can discern, simply means "to be." Another way of saying this is "I exist" or "I am who I am." What would this gift of a personal name have signaled to Moses? To the Israelites? To us today?
- Creating space is a necessary component of hearing from God. What are some ways you have created space for God? What are some ways you have failed to make space for God (busyness, distractions, any resistance, etc.)? How can you as a group be supportive to one another in this pursuit?
- **Optional:** If your group practiced the weekly reflection this week, share about your experiences. How did you experience God with you (or not with you) in your times of solitude and silence?

CLOSING

Close your time together in silence for 2-3 minutes. Invite the group into silence by using Moses' answer to God from Exodus 3:4—"Here I am." Close your time of silence with either a short prayer or "thank you."

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WEEK FOUR

EXODUS 5:1-6:1

WEEKLY REFLECTION

After all Moses has been through, God calls Moses to return to Egypt to rescue God's people from their bondage. Think about how this would have made Moses feel—he barely escaped Egypt with his life and found a new life, complete with a family, in a place of safety. God had delivered him from that place of fear and insecurity, and now God was just sending Him back to the wolves.

God chose Moses because he was qualified to lead others. God had delivered Moses into the freedom that is necessary for following God. Because Moses had braved the wrath of pharaoh and had escaped into God's loving care, he was the best person to lead others into God's presence.

Henri Nouwen writes in *The Wounded Healer* that "the great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there." God often calls and equips those who have braved the wilderness to guide others out because they are familiar with the way. They understand the struggle, they understand the pain, and they understand the need for others to follow the path toward freedom.

How can we guide others on their journeys toward God's freedom? As you reflect on the ways God has delivered you, who comes to mind? Who are some people who are experiencing the bondage you have experienced in the past, and how might God be calling you to help?

As we gently mentor and guide others, there will be opposition. The kings and pharaohs of this world will tell us and others we are not worthy of God's liberation from our bondage—that there are more important tasks to do than to work toward wholeness. Are we willing to fight for those who need God's rescue? Are we willing to make our voices louder than the voice of slavery? Are we willing to pray for God to intervene with His "mighty hand" (6:1)?

PRACTICE

Reflect on your own journey (or journey in process) through the lens of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Where have you seen God's deliverance? Then, ask God to bring a person's name to mind who needs God's rescue. Pray for them, asking God to intervene in their life. Open yourself up to ways God may be calling you to mentor and guide this person.

WEEK FOUR

EXODUS 5:1-6:1

GROUP GUIDE

Opening Question: Who is someone who has been a mentor to you, and what made them a good leader? If you have never had a mentor before, name some qualities you would like in a mentor.

Read Exodus 5:1-6:1.

- Picture Moses' and Aaron's standoff with Pharaoh. What kinds of reactions and emotions do you think they were experiencing?
- Notice Moses and Aaron ask for Pharaoh not to completely liberate the Israelites, but to permit them to leave for three days. Why do you think they make this negotiation?
- After they challenge Pharaoh, the work only gets more difficult for the Israelites. Has there ever been a time when you spoke up or challenged something and it became worse before it became better?
- Instead of giving up, Moses goes before God's presence (5:22). What does this reveal about his character?
- Sometimes, God calls us to lead and guide others out of bondage—especially if we have experienced that same bondage ourselves. What are some personal ways God may be preparing you to lead others into His wholeness?
- **Optional:** If your group practiced the weekly reflection this week, share about your experiences. What did you discover about your own personal journey so far, especially in light of this exodus story?

CLOSING

Ask the group to name people (general situations or specific persons) who need God to lead them away from brokenness and into wholeness. Pray for these people as a group.

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