

# The Spiritual Practice of Silence & Solitude

## A Necessary Practice

Have you ever had a friend who just seemed blind to their dysfunction? You and others ignore the small stuff as much as you can. But eventually? Enough is enough. They might even agree. 'I'm so sorry I didn't realise I was hurting you!' But days or weeks pass, and... there it is again. Like trimming the leaves on a weed might clear the garden, you actually won't see any real change until you pull it by the roots.

We are all that dysfunctional friend to some extent, even if we're good at hiding it from ourselves. Unaware of how deeply sin and brokenness runs within us, we treat our symptoms, cover our coughs, and assume we're getting healthy. Without even knowing, we often leave the underlying sickness untreated.

We all share sin in common, but sin marks each of us differently. We all share humanity in common, but we're all profoundly different. The point? Every Christian story is unique. God, grace and the gospel are the same. But each of us needs to learn how to dwell in grace for ourselves, under the sinful condition of our own hearts, learn the deeper parts of how God has made us, and what sanctification means specifically for us.

The ancient church spoke about confronting 'our shadow'. The deeper and darker parts of us are unseen and unnoticed but are made in our shape and follow us wherever we go. Every Christian finds confronting their shadow difficult, because it's hard, painful work. But we have a unique obstacle.

Unlike previous Christians, modern busyness, digital distraction, and the habitual scroll of our smartphones has killed the quiet place. Really, the only place of aloneness in modern life is the toilet and the shower! We need to reclaim the practice of 'Silence and Solitude'.

Some Christians prioritise a daily 'quiet time' of intentional time in Scripture and prayer. This is a fantastic practice that partially scratches the itch but has a different focus to what we mean by silence and solitude. Both are richly complementary and will bless you in spades when integrated, but more on that later.

Silence and solitude is richly drawn from Scripture, and practiced throughout the church across history and theological traditions. It is a unique practice that will help us grow in ourselves as we confront our shadow, and therefore swim into deeper depths of God. Additionally, it forms a context that will then enrich our other spiritual practices.

We'll paint a brief picture of the practice and its deeper formative purpose in Scripture, before moving to develop silence and solitude practically in our lives.

## A Biblical Practice

*"Be still, and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10*

Psalm 46 describes a world full of brokenness: the earth gives way, mountains fall into the sea, nations rage, and kingdoms fall. Yet the tone is entirely triumphant and encouraging: 'God is our refuge and help... God is within her she will not fall...The Lord Almighty is with us...'

This captures our Christian desire beautifully. We desire a wellspring of faith so deep that even when the world is falling apart, we are unshaken from our hope in God. We long for our confidence in the eternal unseen to eclipse the problems of the temporary seen. 'We will not fear, though the earth give way'.

The problem? Often we're full of fear despite our faith. And usually for problems far less than the end of the world. We want Psalm 46 confidence, but we regularly experience a gap between our beliefs and experiences.

The Sons of Korah aren't spiritual superheroes, looking down on us with their superior faith. The idyllic Psalm 46 life is carefully cultivated in an intentional practice. We build and build to the final stanza with our famous verse: 'Be still, and know that I am God' (Ps 46:10).

'Knowing' in Scripture is more than an intellectual exercise but captures a deep relational dynamic. We come to know God with the kind of knowing that alters the way we move through the world when we come to him in a place of inner stillness. We cease our relentless attempts to control the world and stop our reflexive striving in a place of quiet where God becomes God.

Ps 46:10 is an influential verse that punches beyond its weight, because it (1) captures the heart of Scriptural spirituality (to know God), (2) draws together many of the Psalms' exhortations/desires into a single practice (be still), and (3) finds example in the spiritual life of Old Testament figures like Moses and Elijah.

More importantly though, is how Ps 46:10 finds expression in Jesus' regular practice of silence and solitude.

### The Example of Jesus

Luke 5:15-16 summarises the constant pattern of Jesus: 'yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.'

You're likely unsurprised that Jesus was committed to prayer. But Jesus physically withdrew from whatever context he was in so frequently that the disciples must have felt like they were playing a never ending game of hide and seek. 'Hey, do you know where Jesus is? No, I thought you had him! Not again...'. Why does Jesus focus on lonely places?

This word is *eremos*, translated a few ways depending on context (solitary place, quiet place, desert, wilderness), but simply referring to somewhere uninhabited or deserted. Jesus made it his practice to actively venture so far from civilization that it was defined by this term 'eremos'. Why? Jesus considered a physical context of complete quiet and aloneness an essential part of how he needed to spend time with God.

This is Ps 46:10 embedded in the regular rhythms of Jesus' life. A quiet part of the village won't cut it if Jesus is going to find the outer and inner silence required for unhurried and undistracted prayer of stillness. This is why Christians have historically called this practice silence and solitude.

If you were feeling some existential angst thinking I might ask you to take a temporary vow of silence? Breathe easy. Jesus withdraws to pray. This is active engagement and relational communion with God. I do want to be clear on a couple of points that might be unfamiliar:

1. Prayer can and should involve spaces of not talking. Prayer is unique from other relationships, for we commune with the One who knows our hearts better than we do. We relate to the One we have become one with. We commune with the God who presently dwells within us.

Turning wordlessly toward God with what lies under the surface within our inner life is part of prayer. Beautifully, God alone understands the depths of our soul better than any words we struggle to form.

2. Stillness can and should involve inner silence. On the one hand, we cannot hope to find stillness when our inner monologue is racing through countless distractions, or our inner critic is pointing to our present anxieties and failures. Part of seeking outer silence is to seek inner silence.

On the other hand, when we come to stillness and know God is God, there is a silent reverence in the reality of his presence. Journeying the steep incline of a treacherous hike? Words flee at the first glimpse of majesty over the crest. Hopefully stillness creates wordless awe as the present reality of God eclipses our world.

Now, let's return to the example of Jesus. Inviting disciples to come and receive his rest? He tells us to take his 'yoke' upon us (Matt 11:28-30). Two obvious implications:

1. Literal analogy. He wants us to stop living from our own strength and striving, but come and bind ourselves to him like oxen. He wants to share and shoulder our burdens.
2. Religious metaphor. as disciples we would leave our previous life behind (in the manner of the early disciples), 'sit at Jesus' feet' to learn his teaching (like Mary & co), and 'take his yoke' to learn the entire way of life he embodied.

Jesus came to live the perfect human life on our behalf, but equally to teach and model the way of life for us to imitate (hence early Christians were followers of the way). Disciples learn to abide (John 15) from the example of their Rabbi. And more than any other spiritual practice, silence and solitude was a spiritual necessity of Jesus' life.

He begins his ministry with a Spirit-led period alone in the wilderness, and finishes his ministry alone with God in the garden. Between a choice of physical food and spiritual food, he comes to the Father again and again. When the pressure of his ministry, and the demands of people increased? He demonstrated even greater resolve to retreat with God, even if the only way was (God forbid!) to cut into his sleep (Mark 1:32-35).

If Jesus ruthlessly prioritised silence and solitude with his Father, even as the pressures of life increased, how can his disciples think otherwise? We need to reclaim this practice in the modern world.

## A Formative Practice

*'Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.'* John Calvin

What is the deeper theological and practical why of silence and solitude? Knowing ourselves and knowing God are intertwined realities where one flourishes from the other and vice versa. Silence and solitude plays a unique role where the two simultaneously flourish.

### Contemplation

'And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.' (2 Cor 3:18).

Silence and solitude is the context in which our contemplation of God moves beyond theoretical to experiential. The stillness of Ps 46:10 moves us from 'knowing God' to 'knowing' God. Moses' life was changed and his faith developed through many revelations and moments, but he was transformed when he met God uniquely on the Mount. The (1) greater knowing of God produces (2) spiritual transformation in us.

### Deeper Roots in Christ

'So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.' (Col 2:6-7).

The way we begin is the way we continue. Heartfelt conviction, repentance, and worship. We never move onto new spiritual ground, we merely send deeper roots down in the same place we started: Christ.

A plant does not grow by accident, but through careful attention and nourishment. We are the same, with many practices spiritually watering, fertilising and weeding our souls.

Silence and solitude uniquely (1) allows the deep desires, patterns, sins, fears, and anxieties of our hearts, to rise to the surface in order that we may (2) interpret them through the greater reality of Christ. We practice repentance and drink from grace in the specifics of our life:

1. We grasp more of God's holiness as the depth of our real sinfulness casts greater clarity on his perfection.
2. We grasp more of God's love as we experience his grace afresh for our real sins as real sinners.
3. We grasp more of God's power as we make sense of the seemingly immense realities of our life in the context of his presence.

### Practical Sanctification

We often think of sanctification theologically (walk by the Spirit not the flesh, Gal 5), generally (grow in general qualities, the fruit of the Spirit, Gal 5), and eschatologically (towards being formed into the image of Christ, Rom 8). In silence and solitude we experience these emphases and grow practically:

We learn to walk in the Spirit. Just as the Old Testament and Psalms especially had Israel continually rehearse the Exodus and enjoy the fruit of the Promised Land to remember and rest in the salvation of God, we are rehearsing our Exodus in Christ as we enjoy the freedom from slavery. But we do it specifically. We rejoice in 'everydayness' of the gospel, repenting from the sin of today to delight in the grace of today.

We put off the specific old for the specific new. We're able to 'put off the old' and 'put on the new' (Col 3) in the specific realities of who we are. Instead of vaguely knowing pride is bad and I can be prideful, our actual pride is brought forth in the presence of God, so we can cultivate specific humility by his grace.

We deal with the root, not the fruit of sin. Deeper still? We can know the specific fruit of sin in our life, repent, and genuinely want to change and find ourselves back once more. Rarely do we pay attention to the underlying roots of sin within us. Silence and solitude isn't the only piece of this puzzle, but it affords the essential first step under the shining Light of the World to pause long enough to make sense of our shadow.

### Transformative Community

Dealing with deep roots and overcoming the contours of our shadow is a long difficult journey. that is not simply overcome alone. Silence and solitude is the unavoidable first step of this journey. For we will unknowingly be followed by our shadow until we stop long enough. Of course, this leads us back to community for wisdom, insight, prayer.

Simply, but maybe most profoundly, the Christian life is journeying into a deeper knowing God (Eph 1:15-19). We are spiritually united in Christ, and we are turning our attention to that oneness. We are delighting in that closeness, and all the certainty and beauty of the 'yes and amen' of his promises.

Silence and solitude is a joyful practice where we filter out all the noise to turn our attention to joyfully rest and rejoice in our relationship with the Father.

### Unpacking the Practice

So, here's an attempt to draw some of these threads together into a single sentence definition:

*'Silence and solitude is the practice of intentionally retreating from the world into prayer, seeking to come as we are, to cultivate stillness with God for a deeper knowing of God.'*

Great. Now, to put flesh on the skeleton and bring clarity for the practical. We'll break the practice down under three practical steps each with three distinct aspects.

### Find your Desert - Solitude

*"We have to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing presence of the Lord. Without such a desert we will lose our own soul while preaching to others" Henri Nouwen*

Solitude isn't just being alone. Sitting by yourself in a cafe with noise- cancelling headphones isn't solitude, nor is a corner of the lounge room while people in your house come and go through the room. Jesus didn't settle for a quiet room or corner of the village; he exerted effort to find the eremos. Early Christians followed suit and would often seek the literal desert.

We can learn from their wisdom as we find our own places of solitude. There isn't anything mystical or extra-spiritual about any location. A bench at your local park, a patch of sand at the beach, a local lookout, or a space around your home all could work! Just take into account that the visible bustle can create distractions. Where can you find that place that allows for greater solitude?

It's important that we equally consider our devices. You might be in the absolute middle of nowhere and find your attempt for solitude completely hamstrung by an unexpected notification that immediately pulls you back to the demands of life. We're so habitually conditioned to check our phone or glance at our watch, that even 'do not disturb' might not keep a physical reminder from distracting us.

The goal is to find a regular place to find your desert. Over time you come to associate the space with silence, as well as the joy and beauty of God. There becomes a sacredness to our desert.

For me? I decided my front deck would be my desert. The balcony is high enough that the outside world can't see me, and I can't see it. And the quiet is enough for me when I commit to the early morning. It's not perfect but that's okay.

Given our distracted age, be more ruthless in seeking solitude than you might think you need to be, for that forms the context for silence. Silence is broken down into two distinctions: outer and inner silence.

### Seek Silence - Outer and Inner Quiet

Outer silence is the absence of visible, physical, and audible noise.

Solitude reduces this outer noise as much as possible, but in reality, there will always be something. Whether birds, wind, or planes, these aren't bad. Simple solitude bears benefits. But for our practice? We try to notice when we become distracted by noise, so we can turn our attention within and upward. Our outer silence has a goal.

Ultimately the endpoint we are moving towards in silence and solitude is what we've mentioned many times, the place of stillness where we rest in the tangible presence of our Gracious God. But it's so important that we journey through many valuable realities to get there, that aren't just steps on the ladder but are valuable parts of the practice in itself.

The temptation is to give up quickly. 'So, I found a place of solitude. I frequently got distracted. I tried to turn my attention towards inner silence... and failed epically. My mind was racing more than usual from big to small: deadlines at work, to-do lists at home, anxiety for the future'.

We touched on this previously, but what lies below often rises to the surface. We're more likely to experience inner tumult than inner silence, and that's good. We are seeking the presence of God – including times of silent stillness to enjoy that presence – but the pathway is through reality. We experience God as he meets us in the reality of our life and enjoy his presence and grace as we process that with him.

You haven't failed when stuff comes up, you've just begun. A few thoughts on what might come to the surface:

**Distractions.** When the 'ordinary stuff' floats to the surface we simply notice thoughts. If there's not much deeper, simply turn back to the presence of God. Everyone is different, but I offer a simple 'thank you God' to be thankful for that part of my life, but tangibly turn back to his presence.

**Worries.** Am I worried, stressed, or anxious about this? Name it and talk about it with God. Ask God for his perspective and peace and seek to leave it with him.

**Experiences.** Like the moment in bed as you're trying to drift off to sleep, and you remember something stupid you did/said from the day, our mind often turns to big and small realities like this. Unimportant memories? Turn back to the grace of God, let him silence your inner critic, and tell you who you are. Bigger memories? Talk with God, ask for clarity and wisdom and revelation. Rest in him.

**Sin.** We may remember past sin, current sin, sinful thoughts. We might even ask God to reveal these things to us so we might (1) Confront where we've fallen and repent in truth, and (2) Silence the lies that try to keep defining us by our past failures.

### Pray in the Depths - Stillness

Don't be confused when we talk about stillness. We're not cultivating mental distance, but relational closeness. Stillness is an inner reality where the noise outside and inside has gotten so quiet that God himself is the clearest, and greatest reality before you.

Hopefully this clarifies the above – we will only find stillness and peace in the presence of the Lord when we tackle the deeper parts of our life! He meets us in that place and cares about us in that place. And in

that place, those problems and issues start to grow dim. Less important. All because they take on their true lack of importance before the Living God.

So please don't be tempted to think you've failed, or this is a waste of time. If you are hoping for a spiritual life-hack, you have come to the wrong place. Think of a headland's jagged edges and majestic beauty. These are formed by millions of waves and centuries of wind.

Give yourself time with God. Take your boredom again and again and ask God to meet you. Refuse to be put off by distraction. Seek that place of inner silence and presence of God in different ways. Ask God to meet you.

Stillness is simply a context for prayer. It is, however, the deepest place for prayer that we can cultivate. Prayer is communing with God, and stillness has moved everything out of the way to focus on God. This is not some Zen-Buddhist-Eastern detachment. We are not seeking absence, but presence. We can and should speak audibly with God in this time. The place of silence gives birth to our truest words!

But... we can and should also enjoy prayer without words. As articulated previously, God is present in the depths of our soul and our wordless delighting, beholding, and turning toward him is a beautiful reality of prayer. Like our deepest friendships or relationships, there is unique joy sitting quietly in someone beloved's presence.

The internal quiet is the context for delight and contemplation in God. Rest in the presence of Love himself. Walk beside the quiet waters as a sheep beside their shepherd. Enjoy the deep prayer of a soul undistractedly gazing upon the One who loves them unwaveringly.

Silence and solitude is cultivating stillness as best we can to know God. He is always present, but we are inviting him to meet us tangibly, just as we are. Many times, we'll be awash with distraction. But more and more over time, there is a quiet beauty of simply being with God. Occasionally there are tangible moments with God.

### Final Thoughts

Here are some final thoughts to practically help you integrate silence and solitude into your regular rhythms.

1. Make a very manageable plan and be ruthlessly consistent.

Like anything new, learning takes time and takes a plan. My encouragement? Commit to trying the practice every single day for four weeks. Before you begin, find your desert and know loosely how you are going to put this into practice. Start very small and add a little more at the end of each week. Do what is comfortable. But I'd suggest starting with 3-5 minutes, moving to 10 minutes then 15 minutes then 20 minutes for the final week.

2. Don't judge the process, just reflect at the end.

As we spoke about above, it gets hard before it gets easy. What you think is happening might not be happening and vice versa. Set your plan, and follow it without judgement, then get to the end and take some good time to reflect.

3. Integrate your other practices into this context.

We have many other essential spiritual practices that help us walk with God. This isn't a replacement or substitute.



A helpful pattern would be to have a 'time with God' (the morning is neat to start the day with God but choose what works) which you begin with silence and solitude for whatever period you set. Seek God in that unique way. When the allocated time is up, turn to Scripture or your prayer list, or whatever other practices you enjoy.

4. Learn the practice in community.

You will learn much from the struggles of others that are entirely different from yours, and from those who are struggling in the exact same way. You will gain wisdom and encouragement from each other that will help astronomically.

5. Find occasional longer periods for silence and solitude.

There is much you can only experience through a longer time of silence and solitude. There are many ways to integrate this. Once a month you could set a morning aside to retreat. Or you could book into a spiritual retreat facilitated by others.

Remember, whatever God chooses to do, God chooses to do. We are simply seeking inner silence and inviting God to meet us.