

# Why Retreat to Spend Time being Silent and Alone?

by Luann Budd

We retreat because when we are running all day, it's hard to feel connected to God and nearly impossible to hear him. Solitude and silence have an amazing ability to usher us into the presence of the Lord. It's in the quiet that we'll sense he's near and hear his voice.

David Wolpe writes: "The soul seeking solitude, seeking quiet, searches out a place where the sounds of the world recede. Once that place is found, the spirit can stand single before its Creator. Free from distraction, the soul finds through the surrounding silence an avenue back to God."<sup>1</sup>

Often we see Jesus seeking solitude: sometimes an early morning walk, sometimes forty days in the desert, sometimes leaving his closest disciples to watch while he went off a few yards to pray. Throughout his ministry the gospel writers record Jesus slipping away to be with his Father. It wasn't just at the beginning of his public ministry when critical decisions had to be made about whom to call into the inner circle of disciples, it wasn't just during the times when thousands of people were following him and wanting to forcibly make him their king—no, Jesus sought solitude throughout his earthly ministry. He was compelled to get away from the noisy crowds to stay connected with his Father.

S i l e n . . . c . . . . . e .

No words spoken.

No words spoken or h e a . . . r . . . . . d .

Pause for a moment, close your eyes—do you hear words in your head? Most of us have snippets of conversations replaying in our minds. It's relatively easy for us to find a quiet spot and stop talking, thereby silencing all of the external noise, compared to how difficult it is to silence the inner noise. That's the challenge we face as we begin our retreat. We've come away to be silent and alone so we can enter into his presence and be ready to hear the Lord. Our first challenge is to quiet the inner noise so that we can truly enter into silence.

Ken Gire beautifully writes of intimacy with the Almighty:

"We have all had moments when we've experienced something of that intimacy. Moments we can't quite explain, yet can't explain away. Moments when God has touched our lives like a soft hand of morning sun reaching through our bedroom window, brushing over our eyes, and waking us to something eternal. At some of these windows, what we see offers simply a moment of insight, making us slower to judge and quicker to show understanding. At a few of them, though, what we see offers a word spoken to the very depths of who we are. It may be a word to rouse us from sleep and ready us for our life's journey. It may be a word to warn us of a precipice or guide us to a place of rest. It

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Wolpe, *In Speech and in Silence: The Jewish Quest for God* (New York: H. Holt, 1992), p. 191 quoted in Tricia McCary Rhodes' *Soul at Rest*, p. 157-58.

may be a word telling us who we are and why we are here and what is required of us at this particular juncture of our journey.

“Or, in a startling sun-drenched moment of grace, it may be a word telling us something we have longed all of our lives to hear—a word from God—a word so precious it would be worth the most arduous of climbs to hear the least audible of its echoes.”<sup>2</sup>

We come away to spend time being silent and alone in order to hear these echoes.

Sometimes our life circumstances are very painful or emotionally disturbing and we find it extremely difficult to turn off the mental rehearsing of our worries or doubts. Last week my boss burst into my office, angry over an email I sent. I hadn't meant any harm but she took it as malicious. The unpredictable nature of her outbursts and her accusations deeply disturbed me. I found my mind going around the topic almost against my will for the rest of the day. I wanted to forget it and move on, but only moments after I refocused, I'd find my mind marching around the matter once again.

Jeanne Guyon spent twenty years in prison. She could have experienced her exile as God's rejection, as evidence that he didn't care about her or hear her prayers. But she didn't. Instead, in the solitary cell, she quieted the words of bitterness, doubt, anger and asking *Why?* and allowed God to speak love into the core of her being. She writes:

“In silence, God pours into you a deep, inward love. This experience of love is one that will fill and permeate your whole being. It is the beginning of an indescribable blessedness.”<sup>3</sup>

It's a choice that we make: we can either let the voices of doubt loop over and over, or we can work to silence their noise so that we can intentionally focus on the truth of who God is and begin to experience the indescribable blessedness of his love. Depending on our circumstances, this work of quieting the inner voices can be a major challenge.

Elisabeth Elliot (her husband was senselessly murdered on the mission field) exhorts us to embrace those times in our lives when we are intensely aware of how alone we are: “Turn your loneliness into solitude and your solitude into prayer.”<sup>4</sup> Our spiritual growth, the depth of our relationship with our heavenly Father deepens as we “seek solitude and silence and to listen for the whisper of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Elisabeth and Jeanne teach us that it is possible to come to know the blessedness of his love in the most difficult of circumstances. The disappointments and tragedies of our lives can become prison cells, isolating us in dark places. But they don't have to. In the depths of our pain, we can focus on the truth of God's character and open a window in our heart to let in his love. There is a

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<sup>2</sup> Ken Gire, *Windows of the Soul-Experience God in New Ways*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), p. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Madame Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (Beaumont, Tex.: SeedSowers, 1975), p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, “Turning Solitude into Prayer,” *Cross Point*, Summer 1997, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Elliot quoted in Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1984), p. 149.

gift we can receive as we draw close to God during times of undeserved suffering. Keller says it well: “For the man or woman who has come to know and love the Lord God in the depths of such intimacy, the times of solitude are the most precious in all of life. They are a rendezvous with the Beloved. They are anticipated with eagerness...Gentle interludes with God alone are highlights of life.”<sup>6</sup> These interludes were precious to Jesus—especially during those hours before his betrayal. As he pours out his heart in prayer, hour after hour, I imagine he heard his father speak to him precious words of love that carried him through the next fifteen hours. We don’t wake up one day and have this kind of an intimate relationship with the Almighty. We teach ourselves by entering into silence and solitude, silent internally, alone externally, so that we can nurture intimacy with our Father, hear him speak to us, and know his love before our foundations are shaken. And then, when our world is shaken, we have a depth of relationship that will carry us through.

Oswald Chambers writes, “If I have not developed and nurtured this devotion of hearing (as Samuel had when he said, “Speak for your servant hears”), I can only hear God’s voice at certain times. At other times I become deaf to him because my attention is to other things—things which I think I must do. This is not living the life of a child of God.”<sup>7</sup> Use this opportunity of being on retreat to train yourself to enter into sacred silence, in order to listen well.

Dallas Willard writes that it was an important day in his life when at last he understood that if Jesus needed forty days in the wilderness at one point, he very likely could use three or four.<sup>8</sup> Couldn’t we all use three or four? That’s why we retreat. And having come away to hear the voice of God, be sure to pay attention to what he says to you (Luke 8). We need to take in his words. As Jeanne Guyon and Elisabeth Elliot demonstrate, we need to let God transform our thinking and how we view our circumstances.

We don’t seek solitude simply for the purpose of being alone. The goal is to love God and be loved by him. That’s our purpose. We retreat into silence and solitude to love God and let ourselves be loved by him. Henri Nouwen reminds us:

“In solitude, we can listen to the voice of him who spoke to us before we could speak a word, who healed us before we could make any gesture for help...who loved us long before we could give love to anyone. It is in this solitude that we discover that being is more important than having, and that we are worth more than the result of our efforts.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the amazing outcomes for me of spending extended time alone with the Lord has been the knowledge of his love (most obviously demonstrated at Gethsemane and Calvary) and being drawn into silent worship.

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<sup>6</sup>W. Phillip Keller “Solitude for Serenity and Strength.” *Decision*, August/September 1981, p. 8, quoted in Joyce Huggett, *The Joy of Listening to God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, rev. ed (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House, 1992), February 13 entry.

<sup>8</sup> Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 355.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1990), p. 22.

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