

Finding a Quiet Place

Many years ago I spoke at a conference in a Beverly Hills church. While taking a walk between sessions, I noticed three churches on nicely landscaped grounds in the space of two blocks on one side of Santa Monica Boulevard. On the other side of Santa Monica Boulevard was Rodeo Drive and the business district. This seemed strange to me, and I asked about it.

I was told that the developers who laid out Beverly Hills in the early 1900s didn't want to allot any land to churches because they didn't generate profits or tax revenues. When movie star Will Rogers objected, the developers reconsidered. They squeezed in the churches on a strip of land that had been set aside as a public park. Creating space for God was a grudging afterthought!

Church buildings were once welcome in the heart of business sections. Small towns built in the nineteenth century typically feature a town square with a courthouse. Near the courthouse are often a number of church buildings. The word *city* originally referred to a town in medieval Europe that had a cathedral. Skyscrapers have replaced cathedrals as the heart of the modern city.

Meeting Places in Scripture

Christians in other times built cathedrals not merely for religious extravagance, but because they understood the importance of creating a well-defined, protected place in which to meet with God. We too need structures in our lives that provide a safe, protected place in which we can meet with God. Our busyness in the pursuit of money, recreation and education tends to displace any space for quietness before God.

In the Old Testament when God appeared at a certain place, it was marked as holy—a place set apart for God. Shortly after Abraham entered Canaan, God appeared to him with the promise, “**The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him**” ([Genesis 12:7 \(NASB\)](#)). In response Abraham built an altar. After Abraham separated from Lot, the Lord appeared again with the promises of countless children and the land to live in. Again Abraham built an altar ([Genesis 13:18](#)). After Jacob's night of wrestling with the Lord, he built an altar: “**He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”**” ([Genesis 28:17 \(NASB\)](#)).

Holy places were also marked with ebenezers (stone markers) which commemorated God's help. Joshua set up pillars of stones when the Israelites crossed through the Jordan River. The stones were reminders that God had stopped the Jordan.

Joshua 4:7 (NASB)

⁷“Then you shall say to them, ‘Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.’ So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever.”

The Ark of the Covenant, located in the temple in Jerusalem, presided over the most holy place. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he acknowledged that even the highest heaven could not contain God, much less the temple that he built. Yet, he prayed:

1 Kings 8:27-29 (NASB)

²⁷“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!

²⁸ Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O LORD my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You today;

²⁹ that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, toward the place of which You have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ to listen to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place.”

In **John 4:21–24**, Jesus affirms Solomon’s insight that God is not localized in a specific place.

John 4:21-24 (NASB)

²¹“Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.”

²²“You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.”

²³“But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.”

²⁴“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

He says that God is not to be limited to a mountain or to Jerusalem. More important than the place of worship is the manner—“**in spirit and in truth.**” Even so, places have their significance in the Gospels. Jesus frequently ministered near the Sea of Galilee and frequently prayed in the desert. His ministry began after forty days in the desert (**Luke 4:1–2**). He retired into desolate places to pray (**Luke 5:16**).

Luke 4:1-2 (NASB)

¹“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness

² for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry.”

Luke 5:16 (NASB)

¹⁶“But Jesus Himself would *often* slip away to the wilderness and pray.”

The end of history includes a place: the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and earth. A whole chapter in [Revelation](#) describes it. In our final state we will not float about disembodied up among the clouds. The holy city is to be a real place: our place and the dwelling of God. In that place our fears, hurts, needs and desires will be satisfied. In the center of the city will be the throne of God, not a skyscraper or cathedral.

Meeting Places in Christian History

The priorities of earlier eras are reflected in the church buildings and cathedrals that dominate town and country. The major tourist attraction in any major European city is a massive cathedral.

Until I visited England, cathedrals were something I had only read about in history books. I found myself deeply affected by my initial visits to cathedrals. I was overwhelmed by the size of the buildings and the beauty of the artwork. I also felt a striking sense of history—worship had taken place here for eight hundred years or more. And finally, there was a sense of holiness. God was honored in these places. These were places set aside to God. They were holy.

In earlier times, monastic houses were set up to allow entire communities to pursue God. St. Benedict established the first enduring religious community in the sixth century. Over the centuries the Benedictines, Augustinians, Franciscans and other orders provided a focused and ordered environment in which God could be sought.

Finding Meeting Places

We can worship God anywhere, but the pursuit of God benefits from a sense of place. **C. S. Lewis** once observed that God always seemed less real to him in a motel room. My own experience confirms Lewis’s strange observation. A familiar place creates a context for spiritual focus. When we change the place of quiet time, there is a period of transition before we can settle into the familiarity of being with God.

The spiritual and the physical are interconnected in ways that we may not completely understand. When we meet with God regularly in one place, the physical surroundings take on a special significance. The surroundings become friends that invite us into the presence of God and remind us that he has met with us there before. They also foster a sense of anticipation that our holy encounters will continue.

A *Holy Seat*. My places of study and reflection have varied over the years. Whether I am in my office, a small room in the back of a church, a cubicle in a local retreat center or a booth in a restaurant, I need a table on which I can spread out my journal. There have been periods when my favorite place was a corner booth in the local restaurant. Some of

my best insights about God, life, writing and myself occurred to me there. Wherever we sit down with the Lord, it is important only that it be a place where we can relax and spend leisurely time.

A *Holy Path*. I find that a well-defined prayer list that is fixed in my mind is essential for effective prayer walks. I keep in mind family, friends, ministry issues, political issues and a variety of other things. Frequently I use the Lord's Prayer as a pattern for my prayers on my walks. I take it one phrase at a time. As I pray through it, I spend time in praise toward God and petition for every essential need.

We need *special* places for spiritual nourishment. I use my desk for business, making calls and writing letters. Consequently, I find it difficult there to make the transition to the sense of quiet necessary to seeking the Lord. Sitting in cafés or going on walks breaks the routine and help me physically and mentally to seek the Lord.

Sometimes my desk is the only appropriate place. Then I try to clear it off, stuffing unfinished work in drawers so I won't see it. The clear desk and the open journal and Bible then become the ebenezers that remind me that I am preparing to meet with God.

We also need *protected* places. If we know that interruptions are impending, it is hard to cultivate the focused heart that seeking the Lord requires. If I know that the phone is going to ring, or that someone is going to knock at the door, or the mail is going to arrive, then I find myself waiting on other people or things instead of the Lord. One way to protect my desk is to get to it before the day starts "officially," being there before the mail arrives and the phone rings.

Finally, we need *familiar* places that carry a sense that God has met us there before. As my feet hit the path of my normal prayer walk, I have a sense that my whole body as well as my mind knows that it is time to pray. When I sit down in the chair that I use for meditation and reflection, I find myself being drawn into worship as my heart reaches out to the Lord.

Discipline is the operative word. We need patterns of thought and behavior that draw us away from any improper focus so that we can be open to God and his Word. We must give thought to when and where we do actually sit down and spend time with the Lord. Because our culture does not provide any patterns that help us order our time and place with God, we must seek to establish our own.

Guided Quiet Time

***The Beginning of the Gospel* ([Mark 1:1-8](#))**

New things are exciting. "Bigger," "better," "newer" always catch our attention. New cars shine, smell fresh and drive with zip. But new things get old. Today's new clothes will be out of style next year. New cars lose their shine, and upkeep costs increase relentlessly.

But what if there were something new and fresh that never got old? What if the excitement of new ideas and fresh opportunities continued forever? That is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is like. It began two thousand years ago with the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus. It never gets old because it is about the eternal God who is the source of new life. Jesus' ministry began two thousand years ago, but because he rose from the dead, it will continue forever. This means that you and I can get in on the action. We too can be a part of this world-changing, life-changing good news ministry of Jesus Christ.

Approach

When you enter a movie theater, your sense of enjoyment is enhanced because you are in a dark room with no windows. Outside distractions are cut off. The movie screen is large, and you are surrounded by sound. Similarly, your sense of encounter with the Lord will be enhanced if you put yourself physically and emotionally in a place where you can focus on the Lord. Seek to focus on God. Write down every distraction that comes your way for the next five or ten minutes. After you have written down your distractions, ask him to prepare you and empower you spiritually to enter into the Gospel of Mark. Write out your prayer.

Study

1. Read [Mark 1:1–8](#). In [verse 1](#), Mark writes about the beginning of the gospel. Describe what is going on in these verses, noting such things as the people, places and times mentioned.

2. In Israel sin was atoned through sacrifices offered by the priests at the temple in Jerusalem. Why then were people coming out to John?

3. The term *sin* isn't used much in our culture. What is sin? How does a sense of sinfulness affect people?

4. John is in the desert, calling people to get ready for the Coming One. How would the desert setting help people in Israel get ready to return to God?

Reflect

1. Place yourself in this crowd gathering to hear John's message. What feelings do you have?

2. John called people to turn away from their sins in order to get ready for the coming of the Messiah. What things should you turn away from to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?

3. Some people think [verse 1](#) is the title for the whole book of Mark, not just the opening verses. Read it again and write out what it says in your own words.

4. Because the gospel that began in Mark is still continuing, you and I can participate in it! Consider how you would like to experience the spiritual truth of these verses in your life.

Pray

Pray through your personal prayer list. Pray for our world, that the message of Jesus Christ will bring a turning from sinfulness to the forgiveness that he offers. Pray that the church will continually prepare itself to welcome Jesus.