

## Getting Alone with God

If you are like me, getting up in the morning to have a quiet time is difficult. I found it easier to get up for a class when I was in college or, these days, an early-morning breakfast meeting than getting out of bed for a quiet time. We may tell ourselves that we struggle with a consistent morning quiet time because we don't want to get out of bed. However, I believe that the real issue is that we avoid being alone—whether its morning, afternoon or evening. When I get up for a class or a breakfast meeting, I am spending time with people. When I get up to have a quiet time, I am spending time alone.

For most of us, being alone and loneliness go hand in hand, and loneliness is painful. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists speak about it as the most frequently expressed complaint. Listening to the radio, I sometimes think that most of the songs could be summarized by the phrase “Please don't leave me alone.” Generation X is described as “a generation alone.” They have had to face the consequences of baby boomer parents' struggles to stay together in a culture of marital turbulence and two-income consumerism. The experience of growing up for them has brought a sense of growing up alone.

From the root of loneliness comes destructive fruit. On one extreme, there is the loneliness of the addict who seeks to kill the pain with drugs. On the other, there is the loneliness of a TV watcher who stares at a screen and makes no real personal contacts. In an attempt to cope with the pain of loneliness we may work harder, play harder, perhaps drink or take drugs, and rush into relationships that offer the potential of intimacy, but in the end fail to deliver.

Despite what we may think, loneliness and being alone are not synonymous. Loneliness is being alone and experiencing an inner emptiness. The other side of loneliness is solitude. Solitude is being alone with an inner fullness. If we are to have regular quiet times, we must learn to move from loneliness to solitude.

### What Is Solitude?

*Solitude is being alone on purpose.* Loneliness happens to you. A child who can't find friends to play with, a rejected lover, a new person in town—these are lonely situations. In contrast, solitude is something you choose. When I put on my running shoes and head out the door, I am choosing to be alone. I am looking forward to the benefits that come from the exercise and the opportunity to let my mind roam free as I pass by a lake, glimpse the squirrels and duck under tree branches. I am alone, but I am not lonely.

For introverted people the choice for solitude is fairly easy. Their temperament inclines them to get away from people. For extroverts being alone is almost unthinkable, because they draw energy from being with people. Solitude is important for extroverts, but it comes at a greater cost and must be managed in small doses.

***Solitude is being alone for personal growth and accomplishment.*** As a high-school student, I hated to spend time in my room doing homework. My grades suffered. When I got to college, it was study or perish. I found time to get to the library. Alone, away from my friends and other distractions, I actually began to get passable grades and learn a few things.

Those who are successful learn how to be alone. Whether it is an artist with a canvas, an author staring at a page, a teacher making out a lesson plan or a businessperson reviewing accounts, they know that certain things must be done alone. From that time alone a painting can be put on public display, a book may be published that many will read, a teacher can stand in front of a class, or an accounting can be given to the stockholders and the board of directors.

***Solitude is being alone for personal renewal and refreshment.*** Being mildly extroverted, I like being with people. But after a day of counseling and meetings I am exhausted. I need time in the evening alone before I am ready to face another day.

One of the problems with our world is that it is difficult to be alone. We have phones in our cars so that we can talk while we drive. And then there is the radio. When we come home, there is the television. This continual exposure to voices talking or singing at us creates an emotional deficit. In the end we have nothing to give and we seek to take from others who, like us, have little to give.

The soul has power to replenish if given relational space. Going for a walk alone, taking time by yourself on the back patio in the summer twilight, lying under the stars—these things bring inner renewal. Of course, if we spend time alone while we restlessly wait for others to call or come over, there is no refreshment. We only feel deprived and our energies are further depleted. The benefits come when we choose to be by ourselves.

***Solitude is being alone in order to enhance our relationships.*** Someone has described marriage as two ticks without a dog. Facing each other with a sense of need, marriage partners bring to their marriage a sense of loneliness with the expectation that the other will take it away. We feel this frustration in all of our relationships. The closer the friendship, the greater the expectation and, consequently, the burden. In our loneliness our relationships become greedy and needy, clinging and dependent.

When we are able to choose solitude, something happens to our relationships. Instead of expecting others to give, we have something to give. Our hearts are open to receive however much or little others can give. There is a sense of open freedom and relaxing peace in being together without demands.

***Solitude is being alone in order to be with God.*** Imagine being in a room with a loved one and watching television while other people carry on conversations. If you want to enjoy being together and have a personal conversation of any depth, you have to get up and leave the room. When we choose solitude for quiet time, we are choosing to leave the room to be with our loved One.

When we are alone, we can discern God's presence. **Martin Luther** wrote, "I do not know it and do not understand it, but sounding from above ringing in my ears I hear what is beyond the thought of Man." As I sit in solitude, I frequently find that inner fullness that wells up from inside and pulls me into a deep sense of communion with God.

In solitude with God, all the other benefits of being alone come together as well. We find a sense of purpose that stimulates our creativity while bringing personal renewal and enhanced relationships. When we add solitude to efforts to set aside a time and place to be with God, we have the necessary framework for a quiet time.

## **Biblical Basis of Solitude**

In both the Old Testament and New Testament, those who grew in the knowledge of God were called to times of solitude. Abraham's experience of solitude began when he was called from his home in the region of Babylon. God says, "**Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you**" ([Genesis 12:1 NASB](#)). Although Abraham left with his wife and a few servants, he was going into a life of solitude, choosing to follow God and leaving his home. The night God gave Abraham the covenant promise of a child and countless offspring and the time years later, when Abraham walked up the mount to sacrifice his promised son, these too were experiences of solitude.

Solitude was a constant part of Moses' life. His first encounter with God at the burning bush was one of solitude. He alone saw the bush and heard the voice. When he received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, he spent forty days alone with God. The tent of presence in which he met daily with God was also a place set apart to be alone with God. In the end of his life, he ascended alone to a mountain to get a glimpse of the Promised Land and then to pass on to the other side of death.

How much of David's life was spent in solitude? As a shepherd boy, he learned to trust God as his shepherd while watching the sheep on the fields of Judah. His skill with the sling that would eventually slay Goliath came from this time with no one but the sheep. Later, when he was king, his life continued to demonstrate the fruits of solitude as he wrote psalms of intense feeling and deep thought and faith.

Jesus' ministry began with a call to solitude as the Holy Spirit took him into the wilderness for forty days. He emerged from that time alone with God having faced down Satan, ready to proclaim the kingdom of God. Throughout his ministry he would go off alone to pray. Luke writes that "**But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray**" ([Luke 5:16 NASB](#)). When he taught the disciples about prayer, he emphasized solitude: "**But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you**" ([Matthew 6:6 NASB](#))

Following Jesus, the disciples were led into the experience of solitude. It began for them in a way similar to that of Abraham. They were called from their family fishing business to a life of dependence ([Mark 1:17–18](#)).

In the apostle Paul we see even more clearly the way of solitude. He writes that shortly after his conversion, he was led into a period of solitude in Arabia in which he was instructed by the Lord ([Galatians 1:15–17](#)). On several occasions he was put in prison. Although his isolation was imposed upon him, he turned it from a time of loneliness into a fruitful solitude. In [Ephesians](#) he refers to himself as “**a prisoner of the Lord,**” trusting that the Lord himself was working through his jailers. By his exercise of faith Paul escaped being a victim. From those prison experiences he wrote letters that have spiritually nourished millions of Christians for almost two thousand years.

The last book of the Bible, the book of [Revelation](#), was given in solitude. John was confined on the island of Patmos. While he was worshiping the Lord, he heard a voice, saw a vision and was given a glimpse of the end of history.

## **Choosing to be Alone**

Just as we must seize the time in order to have a quiet time, so we must seize ourselves and our relationships if we are to grow in solitude.

*First, we must get away from people*—at least those who want to talk to us. You may be able to go into a room and close the door at home. Or you may have to get out of the house.

It helps to let family members know that you want some time alone. Initially, this may be greeted with puzzled looks, but most families will adjust. Roommates will as well. One high-school student I know puts a small cross on his door when he doesn't want to be disturbed. His parents know to leave him alone and that he will come out when his quiet time is over. Perhaps if you are a college student your roommates can get the message you want to be alone when you sit on your bed or at your desk with your Bible and journal open.

With some determination and creativity you can find a way. I can be alone nicely in a shopping mall or a coffee shop. No one talks to me, and I can pray or ponder.

*We must also get away from entertainment.* Our time and space to be alone with God is aggressively consumed by our entertainment devices. We spend time watching or listening when we could be by ourselves. If we merely got up and turned them off, our excuse of too little time to be with God would vanish immediately.

Television also creates difficulties for solitude because, for most of us, it is in a room where the family gathers. It seems almost disloyal to get up and walk out of the room to be alone. Additionally, the TV's sound goes through walls, around corners and up through ceilings.

*We must get away from responsibilities.* Parents, children, students, teachers, employees or executives—we all have things to do. At times our responsibilities are burdens that weigh us down. At other times they provide satisfying projects that we look forward to. Either way, when we choose to be alone, we need to set them aside. They can wait. If we allow them to preoccupy us, then we are pulled away from being with God. They become ghosts and noisy companions that distract us from the rest and refreshment of solitude. I find that the way to put them down for a while is not to deny or suppress them, but to give them over to the Lord.

## **Keep Trying**

My own experience of solitude is varied. I can be quiet and content for a week or so. Sometimes even longer. But then it changes, and I can't let go of the distractions inside of me or ignore the demands surrounding me. Then there are times when being alone with God is threatening and painful. In those times I bring my loneliness to God and try to learn from it.

Solitude is about relationships. It is also a matter of the heart. We learn to be content to be by ourselves in order to be with God. As we grow in the practice of solitude, our quiet times become quiet. There will be a peace inside. If you have the courage to bring your loneliness to God, he will change it for you too.

## **Guided Quiet Time**

### **Getting Alone with God ([Psalm 16:1–11](#))**

#### **Psalm 42:2 (NASB)**

**<sup>2</sup>“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God?”**

There is something deep within us that longs for God. It is the inner work of God's Spirit that all God's children have. But that inner hunger can grow weak unless it is nourished. Preoccupation with day-to-day living can choke it out. If you are a student, it may be a concern about grades or finding the right partner. If you are earning a living or raising a family, it may be balancing the budget or moving up the corporate ladder. Whatever it is that fills your mind and your activities, you must learn to put it aside from time to time so that you can focus on God.

### ***Approach***

Emotionally and mentally step out of all your personal connections, not because they aren't important, but because you want to come back to them strengthened and refreshed from your time alone with God. Make a list of every person you are connected with. Allow yourself plenty of time. After you have written down every name you can think of, give the list over to the keeping of the Lord.

In your mind's eye turn now from them to Him.

***Study***

1. Read [Psalm 16:1–11](#). David begins by asking God to make him safe. In what ways does David acknowledge that God has been answering this prayer?
2. What does it mean to take refuge in God?
3. Read [verses 5–6](#). How do an “assigned” portion and clear boundary lines contribute to a sense of security?
4. How does David’s focus in [verses 7–8](#) create a sense of safety?
5. How does David’s knowledge of God affect his attitude concerning the end of his life ([vv. 9–11](#))?

***Reflect***

1. Spend some time picturing God as a strong fortress surrounding you, providing boundary lines of security. As you do this, consider what he is protecting you from and what he is freeing you to do.
2. David has chosen for God and against other gods. What issues, people and/or concerns compete for your attention and allegiance?
3. David has set the Lord before him. Do that now. Spend time directing your thoughts, emotions, desires, activities and plans toward him. After you have done so, write down how this affects you.
4. David refers to eternal pleasures at God’s right hand. Although this looks to life on the other side of death, there are certainly many delightful pleasures from God that we taste now. Consider, how do you experience “**pleasure in the Lord**”?

***Pray***

Ask God to teach you how to enjoy him more and find pleasure in his presence.

Ask God to guide you in ordering your day so that you can find time on a regular basis to enjoy being with him. Pray that those you love would find pleasure in the Lord.