

Following a Quiet Time Pattern

Now that you have created a quiet time and place, what do you do during your quiet time?

Prayer and Bible study are the mainstays of quiet times. In Bible study we seek to hear what God has to say to us. In prayer we speak back to him. In other words, Bible study and prayer are the essential forms of a good spiritual conversation. But we must be careful, because the mindset of our age predisposes us to turn almost everything into a technique. While we are doing our Bible study we may somehow lose the conversation, the realization that God is speaking to us, and merely take in information. Or we may look up a verse or two that give us a nice thought for the day. We may not use the Bible at all. It is often tempting to do too much too fast and in the wrong way when we approach God, and that's not good. Our approach robs God of his glory and leaves us in spiritual darkness.

To meet with God, we need to slow down inwardly so that we can relax and open our spiritual eyes and ears. Having done that, we can open the Scriptures and feed our souls on God's Word. Like spiritual glasses, Scripture brings our lives into focus so that we can discern the Lord's presence. After we settle into our meeting with God, we are in a position to pray with spiritual power for ourselves and others.

Warming Up and Slowing Down

At the beginning of a quiet time the task is to get quiet. Being quiet is essential to knowing God. David, king of Israel, wrote, **“O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; Nor do I involve myself in great matters, Or in things too difficult for me. Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; Like a weaned child *rests* against his mother, My soul is like a weaned child within me.”** ([Psalm 131:1-2 \(NASB\)](#))

As we seek to become inwardly still, we may become aware of inner tumult. We must not ignore these interior demands and voices. We treat our hearts like big, old-fashioned closets. For years, we dump, store and suppress there pains and emotions that we want to avoid. As soon as we become quiet, we sense all those emotions and concerns clamoring for attention. They may seem overwhelming.

The first task in getting quiet is to acknowledge these concerns and give them over to the Lord. Sometimes I write out pressing issues on a “to do” list and then hand it to the Lord. Some people find it very difficult to let go of the list. They have become so attached to their pressing concerns that they are threatened to the core when they consider letting them go.

We need to be quiet so that we can listen for God when we meet with him. For a couple of years church members had small portable radios or ipods with headphones that they carried around with them. They would sometimes attempt to carry on a conversation with me while the headphones were on. My voice was competing with some rock group pounding away in their ears. So I set a policy that I wouldn't talk until the headphones came off.

In our culture it is as if we have headphones strapped on at birth. The music of the world is always blaring in our ears. The voice of God's Spirit gets drowned out. If we are going to be able to hear with our souls, then we need to get those headphones off! **John White** writes:

“Listening to God is not just something for the mystic who lives in the desert or just for those in Bible times. God is always speaking. To hear his voice is not usually a mystical experience

To hear him involves no exercise in “tuning into the right frequency” so much as a humble recognition that it is his prerogative to speak and our responsibility to respond.”

After we have stopped being busy inwardly, after we have stopped telling God how to run our lives—and the world—there is a full quiet that we can enter into. When you reach this stage, you can just sit back and enjoy being with the Lord.

Reading and Study of Scripture

Once you are quiet, you are ready to meet with God in his Word. We can't be casual about Scripture study. Proper understanding of Scripture requires effort, time and skill. We need to soak in each passage: read, study and meditate on it until it becomes a part of us.

Reading

Step one is to read. Pick a book of Scripture and read through it from beginning to end. For most epistles in the New Testament, a complete reading takes less than fifteen minutes. The Gospels, Acts or historical books of the Old Testament take longer. Once you obtain an overview of an entire book, you can reread favorite passages. They will make more sense because you understand the context.

Studying

Step two is to study. I suggest that you read Scripture like a letter that was written several generations ago. If you are going to make sense of such a letter, you need to know something about who wrote it and the person to whom it was written. This requires a bit of investigation. Detective Sherlock Holmes provides a good model. His ability to pick up clues is marvelous. He walks around asking questions and looking at seemingly insignificant details. Then he wanders off to think about it. Finally, of course, he solves the crime.

Holmes's method involves a principle of observation. We must look closely at details in our search for clues to the meaning of a book or letter. After looking up close, we need to stand back and take it all in. Not only do we have to read a passage several times looking for clues, we have to think about it—a lot. Then we can put the pieces together. When we do that, we will see the meaning of the book in a way we didn't before. "Of course, now I see what that means!"

It's wise to keep a reference book handy that provides background information about what you have read. This information will deepen your insight and perhaps correct any erroneous conclusions you may have reached.

Meditating

Step three is to meditate. **J. I. Packer** describes meditation as "an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communication with God. Its purpose is to clear one's mental and spiritual vision of God and let his truth make its full and proper impact on one's mind and heart."

In contrast to Eastern meditation, which seeks to empty the mind, Christian meditation seeks to focus and fill the mind with the truth of God. While Eastern meditation puts aside reason, Christian meditation develops the skillful use of reason, considering the works of God and seeking to understand what they mean. Christian meditation also includes the emotions. We focus on God and his Word so much that we feel glad about God's truth, humbled by his law, thrilled with his creation. Christian meditation combines reflection with emotion in such a way as to produce poetry such as the psalms.

Psalms is the book of biblical meditation. [Psalm 1:2](#) describes a godly person as one who meditates: "**But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.**" The psalms are meditations by David and other godly Israelites. Subjects of meditation include the law ([Psalm 119](#)), God's unfailing love ([Psalm 48:9](#)) and his works ([Psalm 77:12](#)).

[Psalm 48:9 \(NASB\)](#)

⁹"**We have thought on Your lovingkindness, O God, In the midst of Your temple.**"

[Psalm 77:12 \(NASB\)](#)

¹²"**I will meditate on all Your work And muse on Your deeds.**"

[Colossians 3:2 \(NASB\)](#)

"Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth."

When I meditate on Scripture, the love of God or the works of God, I put myself in a quiet, secluded place where I can become immersed in the things of God. Right now I am studying and meditating in Colossians. Paul describes the glorious benefits that we have in Jesus Christ, our supreme ascended Lord. In [Colossians 3:2](#) Paul calls us to "**Set**

[y/our] mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.” As I meditate on this, I ponder on what “things above” and “earthly things” mean. I consider what life will be like when Jesus comes back and what values of heaven I should be living by in light of his return. I long to be rescued from my selfishness, sinfulness and the circumstances of life that I struggle with while I am waiting.

One method of meditation is called *lectio divina*, or “**divine reading**.” It means reading Scripture with a heart of devotion in order to be with the Lord. **Basil Pennington** describes it this way: “It is not a question of reading a paragraph, a page or a chapter. It is, rather, sitting down with a friend, the Lord, and letting him speak to us. We listen. And if what he says in the first word of the sentence strikes us, we stop and let it sink in. We relish it. We respond from our heart. We enjoy it to the full before we move on. There is no hurry. We are sitting with our friend ... We let him speak. We really listen.”

As you read, you gain a sense of being nourished in your heart. The disciples on the road to Emmaus experienced that on the resurrection day. After listening to Jesus speak they commented, “**Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?**” ([Luke 24:32](#)). This experience is wonderful, but it doesn’t happen during every quiet time. Sometimes you just gain information. That’s OK.

Some people find the use of the imagination helpful in biblical meditation. Once I was having a quiet time with a new friend who was very active in our church. We were studying [Psalm 1](#), which is about the value of meditating on Scripture. He pictured himself as a tree growing his roots by a river. He was shocked, however, when his tree fell over and into the river. We discussed what this might mean. It seemed to suggest that he was so busy doing things for the Lord that he had not taken time to become rooted in Scripture.

There is a spiritual exercise for reflection that I use myself and in guiding others. I make three columns on a page and label them “**Experiences**,” “**Emotions**” and “**Perceptions**.” In the first column, “**Experiences**,” list events, experiences or major issues. These can be things that happened yesterday, last week or in the past year. Your list doesn’t have to be in any special order. Nor do you need to write complete sentences. Just use one or two words that remind you of things you recall.

The middle column, “**Emotions**,” contains your emotional responses to each event listed in the first column. In just a word or two write down your emotions as you can recall them (satisfied, disappointed, pleased, upset and so on). It’s important that you pay attention to your emotions. They help you discern what is going on in your heart.

The third column, “**Perceptions**,” is to help you ponder what God is doing in your life. Look over what you have written in the first two columns to find ways that God has been working. Do you see any common themes or patterns? Is there an inner conviction that God has been working in you or through you?

| Experiences | Emotions | Perceptions |
|-------------|----------|-------------|
| | | |

Prayer

Having spent time with God in quiet and in Scripture, you are in a position to pray with spiritual wisdom and power. Biblical prayer comes from hearts that are shaped by the Scriptures and enriched by meditation.

Prayer is very simple but amazingly difficult. It is something a newborn believer in Christ can do from the very first. Yet it requires lifelong effort. The greatest saints struggle with it. How should we approach God? What should we say? How should we say it? What right do we have to ask God for anything? How do we know that he will answer?

Prayer can be thought of broadly as communion with God, and more narrowly as asking God for help. Telling God what you need is simple in concept but not necessarily in practice. When I pray, I admit that I face problems that are beyond me. I need God's help. The prayers of the Bible include many petitions for help—Abraham seeking a son, David crying out for deliverance from his enemies, Nehemiah asking for help in rebuilding Jerusalem.

We are to pray in Jesus' name. Jesus told the disciples, **“If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.”** ([John 14:14 \(NASB\)](#)). This means much more than slapping the liturgical formula **“In Jesus' name, Amen”** onto the end of our prayers. To understand the meaning of this, we need to put Jesus' teaching in context. It was the night before the crucifixion, and the disciples were overwhelmed with the weight of the moment. How could they carry on without Jesus? The answer was prayer. Jesus assured them that they could ask for help to do the work that He gave them. They were to ask in Jesus' name, meaning that they were committed to doing Jesus' work and fulfilling his commission.

When you and I pray in Jesus' name, we join in the mission. We are making a commitment to do what He wants Christians to do until He returns. Before we pray we must ask ourselves, do our motives align with His kingdom? This way of praying turns us away from self-centeredness. We can ask for our personal needs, but we must remember that the focus of our lives is obedience to the will of our Lord, not personal gratification.

“Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42 (NASB)).

It is helpful to use a list when we pray. **“Aim at nothing and you are sure to hit it,”** the old saying goes. If we don’t have a list, our prayers will probably be wandering, unfocused and haphazard. A prayer list can be as sophisticated as index cards with pictures of people you pray for, or it can be jottings on a sheet of paper. The first couple of pages in the front of my journal contain the names of people I am praying for or issues I am concerned about. As my prayers are answered, I put a mark and a date by my request. God answers prayer all the time, but we often miss this because we aren’t looking. When you pray daily and keep a list, you will be able to recognize answers when they come.

There are two extremes to avoid in making a list—being too general or too specific. We can take a cue from the Lord’s Prayer. Your specific requests need not be detailed. Tell God what you want. Don’t say it repeatedly. Don’t elaborate. Just tell him. Pray for one entry on your list, then move on to the next. Jesus cautions against praying like the pagans who think they will be heard because of their many words ([Matthew 6:7–8](#)). God knows what we need before we even ask. Our prayers are to seek his help, not to inform him or manipulate him.

Matthew 6:7-8 (NASB)

⁷**“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.**

⁸**So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”**

Our need for daily bread may be expressed as balancing our bank account or seeking a raise. Forgiveness of sins may mean seeking forgiveness for harboring anger toward your spouse or friend. Deliverance from temptation may require keeping a chaste attitude toward someone at work or not fudging on the expense account.

Praying also requires persistence. We must pray repeatedly until we sense that God answers our prayer in one way or another. Those who pray must learn to wait—sometimes for months, sometimes for years. I wonder what Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, felt when the angel showed up in the temple and announced that a prayer of his had been answered. **“But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John” (Luke 1:13 NASB).** By that time Zechariah and Elizabeth were far beyond childbearing age.

Waiting on the Lord takes us to the heart of prayer. God works according to his time, not our convenience. We are humbled. But God meets our needs as we wait, giving us refreshment for body and soul. Isaiah writes, **“Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength; They will mount up *with* wings like eagles, They will run and not**

get tired, They will walk and not become weary” ([Isaiah 40:31 \(NASB\)](#))

A great spiritual exercise is to restrict your prayers to questions for a week or so. Don't ask God to *do* anything. Just ask him questions. This exercise reminds us that God knows what needs to be done. Our requests can be short and to the point, as Jesus teaches us to pray ([Matthew 6:5-13](#)).

Putting It All Together

How long does such a quiet time last? As long as an hour or more, or as little as twenty-five minutes. The goal is balance. You probably won't include all four elements every day. You may spend most of your quiet time settling in and reading Scripture on one day and meditating through a passage and praying on the next.

Keep in mind as well that to focus on one element for an extended period is not healthy. It shouldn't be all Bible study or all prayer or all getting settled. Imagine eating only steak for two months—or only fruit. Although your quiet time will occasionally seem like a duty, that should not be the norm. Meeting with God should include expectation, excitement and desire.

Guided Quiet Time

Security in the Lord ([Psalm 30:6-12](#))

Occasionally I experience what I call the “jerked rug” phenomenon. It happens when I am feeling pretty good about myself, a bit too good. When the rug gets pulled and I stumble, I find that I am not quite as clever or as wise as I thought. As I am forced to face my limitations, I experience anew the wonderful grace of a God who is there to give security far beyond my own capacity.

Approach

Ever have a closet so full of clutter that you were afraid to open it? Often our hearts are like closets into which we throw unwanted feelings and unsatisfied desires. We avoid opening the door because everything will come tumbling out. If our hearts are similarly cluttered, the spiritual and emotional dimension of life is lost. Take some time now to open up your heart. Allow things to fall out. Over the course of this study you will be asking God to help you clean them up. Write down what desires, hurts and concerns you may find. After you have done that, sit in quiet anticipation of what God will do.

Study

1. Read [Psalm 30:6-12](#). How do [verses 6](#) and [7](#) describe David's sense of dependence on God?
2. What reasons does David present to God in favor of his deliverance ([vv. 9-10](#))?
3. Look over the entire psalm. How would you describe David's relationship with God?

Reflect

1. Difficult circumstances can cause us to reflect on the character of God. How have the circumstances of your life affected your relationship with God?

2. David expresses some of the ups and downs of his life. Consider the last six to twelve months of your life and then chart your ups and downs.

3. Meditate through the ups and downs, picturing the Lord with you through each phase. Once you have done that, write down your insights and emotions.

Pray

Ask God to give you the courage to face the unpleasant experiences of life that may be important but unresolved.

Ask God to give the members of your church the courage to face unresolved conflicts.

Ask God to bring the nations to face the unpleasant experiences of life that produce conflict.