

Quiet Time Dynamics

I once went eight months without a quiet time. It was not a good time in my life, but it was a spiritually powerful time. During this period, I was spiritually nurtured by worship services and Christian friends. I struggled with feelings of guilt but just couldn't bring myself around.

For several months before this dry spell I had set aside several hours a day to seek the Lord. Repeatedly, I had called out to Him to change me. When He began to answer my prayers, it was not what I was expecting. Not only my quiet times but all of my life was shaken and transformed by God's work. It was a confusing period, and I coped by avoiding quiet times altogether. God didn't reject me during that time. When I was able to begin again, He was there with a warm welcome.

Quiet times go through phases. Sometimes they are rich and sweet, other times dry and boring. This diversity of experience no longer surprises me. My quiet times vary widely because the work of God's Spirit in my life varies widely. I used to feel guilty about these ebbs and flows. I don't anymore. Knowing God is an ever-changing experience.

Using Your Emotions

When we sit down to be with God in our quiet times, our emotions are involved. God is a person, and a relationship with God, just like any other personal relationship, involves emotions. With my emotions I sense His affection for me, embrace His Word and react to His commands.

I realize that mentioning emotions invites controversy. Talking about emotions among Christians can be, well, emotional. Some pride themselves on their emotional restraint. Let me say that I am not advocating great outward displays of emotion. Others take pride in their ability to display emotion. They should keep in mind that emotions are natural responses that vary from time to time and should not be forced or manipulated.

Scripture tells of godly people whose emotions were central to their encounters with God. David experienced tremendous heights and depths in the course of his life, as described in the Psalms. Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah and Habakkuk, to mention a few, experienced their own ups and downs.

Are emotions useful indicators of our spiritual life? Could our down times signal spiritual need rather than mere depression? **Jonathan Edwards** used the term "**religious affections**" to describe our emotional response to God. He too valued emotions as means of spiritual insight. **Edwards** wrote of "a sense of heart wherein the mind not only speculates and beholds, but relishes and feels."

When critics dismissed the First Great Awakening in New England as merely excessive emotion, **Edwards** defended it by saying that God was not interested in mildly affected worshippers. God desires those whose hearts burn with a desire for Him.

Edwards also pointed out that spiritual affections are not merely emotional highs. True spiritual affection is manifested in our love for God. Are we growing in appreciation of God's might, majesty and beauty?

When I was a new believer, I experienced great swings in emotion. I was told that these would level out as I approached spiritual maturity. But though I was a Christian leader and then spent four years at seminary and a good number of years in ministry, my swings didn't level out. If anything, my feelings became more intense. But as time went on, they became less unsettling; I stopped fearing that God had left me. Eventually I learned that because my relationship with God is a personal encounter, I must give myself permission to feel both the ups and the downs.

Quiet Time Phases

I have discerned five different phases in my quiet times: **occasional quiet time**, **determined quiet time**, **study quiet time**, **desert quiet time** and **devotional quiet time**. Each phase has its own characteristics, its own strengths and weaknesses, its own dangers and delights. The first two, occasional and determined quiet times, deal with frequency—*how often* we have a quiet time. The study quiet time focuses on *what we do* in a quiet time. The last two phases, desert and devotional quiet times, are distinguished by *how we feel* during a quiet time.

We should not expect to move through the phases in a particular order. I will discuss each phase in terms of Scripture, prayer, our emotions, frequency, our sense of the Lord's presence and our reasons for practicing quiet time as a spiritual discipline.

Occasional Quiet Time

The occasional quiet time is not disciplined. Scripture reading tends to be the "skip and dip" method. I pick up the Bible whenever I feel the need and read wherever it falls open. (My tendency is to end up in the Psalms when I slip into this phase.) This quiet time is like eating on the run; I grab a sandwich, an apple or a candy bar as I rush through the kitchen and out the front door.

Prayer in the occasional phase tends to be haphazard and task-oriented. I pray only when there is a need: "**Lord, help me with this**" or "**Lord, please do that.**" Even when I do sit down to be with the Lord, there is little sense of worship. I am usually so busy inside that I can't hear (much less join) the Spirit as he cries "**Abba, Father**" within me.

Emotionally, my response to the Lord is on again/off again. Sometimes I am excited about Him; other times I am not. Most of the time, things other than God are on my mind and heart.

Most of us go through the occasional phase, but it is not a good place to remain. God is moved to the edge of our lives. Spending time with Him is not a priority. There is always one more phone call to make, one more page to read or one more urgent meeting to attend.

Determined Quiet Time

A determined quiet time is the opposite of the occasional quiet time. It is practiced every day without fail. Whereas the occasional quiet time comes and goes depending on our feelings, we practice the determined quiet time regardless of our feelings. Time is set aside each day, and nothing is allowed to get in the way.

A formal reading plan, possibly reading through the Bible in a year, replaces the “skip and dip” method. (I have found the *One Year Bible* a great help.) Or you may use a devotional guide that picks up a thought from selected Scripture texts and then tells a related story with a moral.

Like Scripture reading, prayer in the determined phase tends to follow a predetermined pattern on a daily basis. One friend has a set of prayer cards with people’s pictures stapled to them and concerns listed beside the pictures. He prays through them each day. My practice is not so elaborate. I have a list on a piece of notebook paper that I keep current, scratching through names or issues as the prayers are answered while adding new names to the bottom of the list. The advantage of having a daily, set pattern is that certain people and issues receive the benefit of our consistent prayers.

The determined quiet time is a necessary phase of our spiritual walk. We need to meet with the Lord in a disciplined way to counter the influence of our modern world as well as our natural spiritual resistance. Some of us are more disciplined than others. The determined quiet time is important for me because I am not naturally disciplined. As I set aside time to be with the Lord, read Scripture and go through a set pattern of prayer, I am spiritually strengthened.

While a daily quiet time has great benefits, it can also become a snare. We may worry about skipping a day because we fear that God will be displeased with us. Or we can slip into a self-satisfied attitude about doing our daily religious duty. It is easy to place a check on the calendar, thinking, *So much for God today; now on with other things.*

If your determined quiet time has become a mere habit, it might be good to skip a few quiet times. A couple of years ago, my prayer partner mentioned that his quiet times were drying up. At one point in our discussion I made a shocking suggestion: “Stop praying so much.” I knew he was seeking the Lord and could handle my seemingly heretical suggestion. I was not surprised when a month or so later he reported a freshness in his times with the Lord.

Study Quiet Time

The key distinctive of a study quiet time is the serious study of Scripture. If a half-hour is set aside for a quiet time, at least twenty minutes of it is Scripture study. An in-depth study of a passage using commentaries and a Bible dictionary is not unusual.

The study quiet time sinks our roots deep in Scripture. We lay up a rich store of spiritual truth that we can draw on throughout our lives. As we see how God works in the pages of Scripture, we learn to recognize His hand in our own lives. As we see how people responded to God, we are inspired—perhaps to seek God as David did, or to be more obedient than Saul was.

All that time in study leaves less time for prayer. Leisurely devotional worship gets crowded out. Prayer time is cramped: short, intense and task-oriented. It easily turns into a shopping list of things for God to do and problems for him to solve.

In a study quiet time, it is possible to learn all kinds of information about God but not encounter God. Our study of Scripture may become a purely mental experience. We tend to assume that because we are studying Scripture, we are in touch with God. **Remember the issue for our quiet time: “Am I meeting with God?”**

Desert Quiet Time

Good quiet times promote spiritual growth. Surprisingly, this deeper growth can lead to unexpected dryness. When we move into a desert quiet time, there is a temptation to think that we have done something wrong. The desert quiet time is not a pleasant experience. It's like living alone in a desert. There is a sense of empty loneliness. Our quiet times seem to dry up. If we feel anything at all, it is a sense of desolation. God seems absent.

A longing for God accompanied by an aching sense of his absence is common in Scripture. The psalmist writes in [Psalm 42](#), “**My tears have been my food day and night, While *they* say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”**” ([Psalm 42:3 \(NASB\)](#)). David cries out, “**O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, In a dry and weary land where there is no water.**” ([Psalm 63:1 \(NASB\)](#)). In another place he cries, “**I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; My eyes fail while I wait for my God.**” ([Psalm 69:3 \(NASB\)](#)).

Nothing seems right in our quiet time or any other area of life. Reading or study of Scripture has a sawdust-dry quality. The pleasure in study that we have known before is gone. Now the words on the page are nothing more than words.

Prayer is also flat. Our prayers for others seem to rise no higher than the ceiling. Worship and adoration seem mere formalities; songs that we might sing are heavy and laborious.

Emotionally, there seems to be nothing inside except an aching sense of emptiness. All religious affections seem gone.

Because a desert quiet time requires great effort, I find that it is practiced irregularly. (My eight-month lapse of quiet time referred to at the beginning of this teaching was due to a desert period.) There is a gnawing need to meet with God along with a frustration in His absence. This desire and frustration lead to an on-again/off-again cycle. It seems to make no difference whether we have a quiet time or not. If we don't have a quiet time, God seems absent. If we do have a quiet time, God still seems absent.

Outwardly the desert quiet time and the occasional quiet time look similar. Both are erratic and inconsistent. But the two are different in nature. The occasional quiet time is erratic because God is not a priority. The desert quiet time is erratic because of an aching thirst for God that we can't seem to satisfy.

Maintaining a regular meeting with the Lord is important during this time, despite the difficulty. When this phase is over, we will discover wonderful benefits. Many things that I know and teach about the Lord have come from desert times.

David was blessed by God in the desert. He spent ten years in the desert running from Saul after God had promised him the throne. During this period David learned to trust God for his promises. He also developed political skills as he led the outcasts and soldiers who came to his side in the desert.

This desert time can last a week or a year. When I was in seminary, I went through a period of four years during which God seemed absent. I believe that God wanted my theological learning to be more than an academic experience. In the midst of this time I began to understand why St. John of the Cross called it "**the dark night of the soul.**" Don't be discouraged if it lasts a long time; others have endured even longer times of dryness. Modern believers, surrounded by physical abundance and recreational distractions, need the ministry of the desert.

The temptation of a desert experience is to conclude that there is something wrong with us; perhaps we have sinned or are drifting away from the Lord. (Sin and apathy do separate us from the Lord, but that is not what I am writing about.) Or perhaps we need to read more Scripture, or pray longer, or pray differently.

We become overwhelmed with a sense of God's holiness and our sinfulness. This experience feels like a purifying fire. The aching dryness of the desert continues until a work of the Spirit is completed in our hearts, and we are moved into the pleasure of God's presence.

We should not be in a hurry to get out of a desert time. God will lead us out when he is ready. **Richard Foster** writes, "Be grateful that God is lovingly drawing you away from every distraction so that you can see Him. Rather than chafing and fighting, become still and wait."

Devotional Quiet Time

Spending time with God is more than a duty or a struggle; it is a great pleasure. In the devotional quiet time we enter into this pleasure in a special way. In the beginning of his *Confessions*, **Augustine** writes, “You stimulate [us] to take pleasure in praising You, because You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in You.” In a devotional quiet time we are invited by God to enter and enjoy this satisfying rest.

I turn to Scripture passages that I have already studied in some depth. I spend time chewing over a passage until, with Paul in Ephesians, I marvel at the spiritual blessings that have been given to us through Jesus. Or I experience with Peter the unspeakable joy of receiving the goal of my faith, the salvation of my soul.

Sometimes it is helpful to use your imagination to enter into the passage—feeling, smelling and hearing what is happening. I know that many people are not comfortable with using the imagination in this way. If so, ignore the next paragraph. I use this sort of approach because Scripture is full of images. I believe that I am honoring the Lord’s intent when I take them so seriously that I give all my senses to understand and experience them.

Psalm 23 is a favorite of mine. I imagine myself in a restful green pasture. The sun is shining warmly on me, and the blue sky has a few drifting white clouds. A couple of large trees provide just the right shade. I find myself alone with the Lord, away from the pressures that burden me. As I settle, I find a living faith inside me that the Lord is indeed present. Along with David, I know the reality of the Lord who is restoring my soul.

Prayer in the devotional quiet time is woven into meditation on the Scriptures. It is rich and varied with fewer lists. Less than half of my prayer time is taken up with petitions and intercession during such devotional times.

Words are not always necessary in this devotional time. I have been delighted to read of **Joyce Huggett’s** experience in *The Joy of Listening to God*. “What I heard in those times of listening was more than a voice. It was a presence. Yes. I heard the Lord call my name. But I also ‘heard’ his tenderness. I soaked up his love I had never delighted in God in this way before. And it had never occurred to me that God wanted me to linger in his presence so that he could show me that he delighted in me.”

The devotional quiet time is filled with emotion. A hunger for the Lord exists along with a sense of being filled. You may feel a pulling on your heart that draws you to the Lord, a calling out that increases at his touch. Often there is a sense of warmth, love and joy. Anger, even fear may be present. Always there is a strong sense of God’s presence. You know that He is with you.

The devotional quiet time generally lasts longer than other types and requires some leisure. Five minutes fade into fifteen and then an hour. This sense of unhurried leisure may be uncomfortable as you first enter into a devotional quiet time. You wonder if you are merely wasting time and should be doing something more productive. If these thoughts occur, stop to remind yourself of the eternal value of being with God.

Our busy lifestyles don't lend themselves to the leisure that a devotional quiet time requires. The devotional quiet time is practiced on a regular basis—perhaps not every day, but several times during the week. You may take an hour or two one day and then only brief times for the next couple of days.

While the devotional quiet time is most delightful, I have discovered that I don't stay there. Sometimes God gives us that delightful and deep sense of worship; sometimes he doesn't. God doesn't show up on cue, nor does he come to us in ways that we demand. The enduring reality of such pleasure in worship won't come until we see the Lord in heaven.

Temperament

Our temperaments have a great deal to do with what happens in our quiet times. People who are methodical and detail-oriented may gravitate toward the determined quiet time that focuses rigorously on doing one's spiritual duty. Those who tend to be spontaneous may skip the determined phase altogether, perhaps settling in a study quiet time for a while and then slipping back into an occasional quiet time.

I have a spontaneous temperament. I don't like to settle into one way of doing things for very long. I have a natural inclination to avoid set routines. Sometimes I find it necessary to be very determined on a daily basis. At other times, I make it a goal to have four or five quiet times during the week and feel good about it if I have three or four.

Whatever our quiet time experience, there is no place for self-condemnation or pride. When we do well, it is surely a gift of his grace to us. When we do poorly, being either irregular or legalistic, we shouldn't be surprised. God isn't. The goal in having a quiet time is to live in the presence of God, not to rack up impressive spiritual achievements.

Conclusion

Spiritual growth is a combination of God's initiative and our response. We can choose to ignore the voice of the Spirit. We can banish God to the edges of our busy lives, to the borders of consciousness. We can limit our practice to the occasional quiet time, thinking of God now and then and rattling off prayers in a haphazard way. Our spiritual lives will remain shallow.

Or we can respond to his inner workings and be drawn to him. As God works, we will sense a pull and call inviting us deeper. As the psalmist wrote in [Psalm 42](#), **“Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me” (Psalm 42:7 NASB)**. As we sense this pull, it is up to us to follow.

Guided Quiet Time

Listening to God

“This is My Beloved Son, Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7 NASB) “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd” (John 10:16 NASB).

If we want a personal encounter with God, we must not only stop being so busy but also stop talking so much at God when we pray. Prayer easily becomes a monologue: “God, please do this, please take care of that.” A monologue is boring to the person who is forced to listen and exhausting to the person who has to keep up the unceasing flow of words.

Today you are going to take a different approach. Resist telling God to do anything. Spend your quiet time asking God questions and then sit in expectation to hear what He will say. Speak, Lord, for I, Your servant am ready to hear You The children of Israel said to Moses: Speak to us and we will hear you, but let the Lord not speak to us, lest perhaps we die for dread. Not so, Lord, not so, I beseech You. Rather I ask humbly with Samuel the prophet that you speak to me Yourself.

Approach

Turn your “to do” list over to the Lord. Write down how you feel after you have done it.

Study

1. Read [Habakkuk 2:1–3](#). What does Habakkuk say to God and how does God respond?
2. Read [Psalm 32:8](#). Ponder God’s promise of instruction. Do you expect him to instruct you?

Reflect

1. To help you listen, make a list of questions and concerns you would like God to address.
2. Ask God what he thinks about your problem with _____. Ask God what he wants you to do about _____ .

Sit back and wait quietly to see what God will say.

Does it seem strange to actually listen for God to talk back?

John Powell writes:

“The Lord ... puts his ideas into my mind and especially his perspectives. He widens my vision, helps me to see what is really important in life, and to distinguish the really important from the unimportant He comes to me in the listening, receptive moments of prayer, and he transfuses his power into me.”

What did you learn from this experience?

Pray

Tell God that you want to grow in the ability to discern his voice. Pray the prayer of Thomas à Kempis at the beginning of this study.