



Encounter with Our Enemy

WEEK 03

“Silence and solitude are the most radical of the spiritual disciplines because they most directly attack the sources of human misery and wrongdoing. To be in solitude is to choose to do nothing. For extensive periods of time. All accomplishment is given up. Silence is required to complete solitude, for until we enter quietness, the world still lays hold of us. When we go into solitude and silence, we stop making demands on God. It is enough that God is God and we are his. We learn we have a soul, that God is here, that this world is ‘my Father’s world.’”

—DALLAS WILLARD, FORWARD TO
INVITATION TO SOLITUDE AND SILENCE
BY RUTH HALEY BARTON

Overview

In the fourth century A.D., when the Way of Jesus was legalized in the Roman Empire and the community of Jesus morphed from a persecuted minority to a political majority, *thousands* of serious disciples left the corruption and compromise of the church behind. Rather than pursue a “normal life” in an absurd world, they fled into the quiet of the desert to seek God in solitude. We now call them “the desert fathers and mothers,” and they offer us some of the oldest wisdom there is on the interior life.

One of their major contributions is this: Their paradigm for solitude was not sabbath rest, but spiritual war. They based their entire lives off the story of Jesus’ 40 days in the desert. They pointed out that Jesus went out into the *eremos* to fight, not to flee; to engage, not to escape; to win victory, not to give up.

They also developed a theological construct they called “the three enemies of the soul” — the world, the flesh, and the devil. They saw discipleship as a kind of spiritual war against this unholy trinity.

In the desert, not only do we encounter our self and all our feelings, we also encounter a battle with our enemies

— the world, the flesh, and the devil. All three test and tempt our faith in the quiet. Usually this comes, as it did for Jesus, in the form of thoughts that assault our minds — lies, deception, and temptation.

When we go into the desert, we get a little distance from the world, and we can see clearly all the ways we’ve been caught up in the world; all the ways we’ve been compromised by a social order run by the three enemies.

But whenever we choose to go into solitude, we feel the resistance of all three enemies — the world is a vast conspiracy against quiet and solitude, our own flesh comes up with all sorts of emotionally loaded reasons not to go away, and the devil himself is always there to draw us away from Jesus’ call to the *eremos*. As Ruth Haley Barton put it, “All the forces of evil band together to prevent our knowing God in this way, because it brings to an end the dominion of those powers in our lives.”

But if we are willing to fight the resistance and go into solitude, it may be hard at first, but long term, it yields dividends of *freedom*.

Practice

WEEK 03: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR ENEMY

For the last two weeks, we've been starting each day with a few minutes in silence before we touch our phones or rush out the door. We encourage you to continue this practice of beginning your day in quiet prayer, not only for the next two weeks, but for the rest of your life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "We are silent in the early hours of each day, because God is supposed to have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep, because to God also belongs the last word."

But this week, we want to invite you to go further in your practice of solitude. The goal of being alone with God in the silence is, ultimately, to hear God's voice over all the other voices in our head — especially from the three enemies of our soul. And the ultimate litmus test of the truth of God over the lies of the three enemies is found in Scripture. Which is why, in solitude, when Jesus was confronted with lies from the enemy, he calmly quoted Scripture to anchor himself in God's truth.

To that end, our exercise for this coming week is called *Lectio Divina*, which is a Latin phrase meaning "spiritual reading." It's an ancient way of reading Scripture slowly and prayerfully, listening for God's voice over your life.



There are four simple movements.

- 01 **Read** a passage from Scripture very slowly and prayerfully, and pay special attention to any words, phrases, or thoughts that seem to stand out to you or touch you emotionally in any way. Look for what “shimmers.” You can pick any passage of Scripture, but we recommend you start with a psalm or a selection from the Gospels or a New Testament letter.
- 02 **Reflect.** Re-read the passage again, this time lingering over the words or phrases that feel highlighted to you, just turning them over slowly in your mind, thinking about what God may be saying to you.
- 03 **Respond** by praying those impressions back to God. Then to end,
- 04 **Rest** in God’s loving word to you. Let your whole body slow down and sink into God’s presence and peace.

You can do this exercise each morning after your breath prayer or on your Sabbath or anytime you like. But we recommend you practice it several times this coming week.



Reach Exercise

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Reading

Read Chapters 7-9 of *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton.

Podcast

Listen to episode 3 of the Solitude series from the Rule of Life podcast by Practicing the Way.

Exercise: A digital Sabbath

One of the reasons solitude is more important now than it's ever been is that we are the first generation to apprentice under Jesus in the digital age. We are still learning how to pray and have a rich inner life with God inside a wider culture of distraction, noise, hurry, and superficiality.

Many people have found that one of the most helpful disciplines for our era is a digital Sabbath — one full day a week when *all* your devices, including your smartphone, are either powered fully off or drastically limited. Even doctors are beginning to recommend this practice, simply for the health of your central nervous system. How much more so for us who desire to experience God's nearness in our everyday life?

If a full day is too much for you, you may want to start with a half day or even a few hours on your Sabbath or Sunday afternoon. And if you need to be available by phone, you may consider getting a landline for your home or turning off all alerts and only briefly checking your phone at set times during the day.

If you're interested in learning more about the practice of Sabbath, you can run the Sabbath Practice at practicingtheway.org/sabbath.

Solitude Reflection

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Before your next time together with the group for Week 4, take five to ten minutes to journal out your answers to the following three questions.

01 How did your practice of solitude go this week?

02 Where did you experience resistance in solitude?

03 In what ways did you encounter God in solitude?

Note: As you write, be as specific as possible. While bullet points are just fine, if you write it out in narrative form, your brain will be able to process your insights in a more lasting way.