



Encounter with Our God

WEEK 04

“The desire to see God is what urges us to love solitude and silence. For silence is where God dwells. He drapes himself in silence. In every era, this experience of an interior life and an intimate loving relationship with God has remained indispensable for those who seek true happiness. ... Followers of Jesus have been running off into the desert for thousands of years, ultimately, to find happiness in God.”

—ROBERT CARDINAL SARAH, *THE POWER OF SILENCE*

Overview

Solitude is the place of encounter. We go into “the desert” to encounter our self and all the emotions that live below the surface of our lives.

And we go to encounter our enemy and get free of our heart’s entanglement with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But ultimately, we go into the quiet to encounter God. We go because we ache for God in the deepest place in our being. We go because there is *nothing* like God’s presence. We go to listen for his voice, to hear him speak over us our identity and calling.

This is why most of our time in solitude is just spent quietly listening. In a world of noise and distraction, it comes as no surprise that quiet is the primary medium in which we hear God’s voice to us.

This back and forth of speaking and listening to God is the heart not only of communication, but of *communion* with God. As important as it is to receive our identity and calling as a gift from God’s hand, ultimately, the most important thing that happens in solitude is that we love and are loved by God.

Practice

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Our final week's spiritual exercise is listening prayer. We encourage you to continue beginning your day in the quiet before your turn to your phone. We recommend you add this exercise to your new morning rhythm, but you may choose another time.

Whenever you choose, this exercise is built on the theological truth that your body is the “temple of the Holy Spirit”¹; the Spirit of God has direct access to your mind and imagination. He can interject his thoughts into your thoughts and his desires into your desires. Learning to make space for this to happen, and to discern his voice from *all the other voices* in our head, is a key task of discipleship to Jesus.

The exercise itself is very simple.

- 01 Find a quiet, distraction-free time and place, put away your phone, and get comfortable.
- 02 Take a few minutes to just breathe deeply, in and out. You may want to simply say “Father” or “Come, Holy Spirit” as you inhale each breath. Let yourself slow down.
- 03 When you're ready to begin, ask God to silence the voice of the enemy, to clear out of your mind and the air around you any voices that are not the voice of God.
- 04 Then, ask God to speak to you. This can be as simple as praying, “God, please speak to me.” or “God, is there anything you want to say to me?”
- 05 Finally, open your mind and heart to God's Spirit and *listen*.
 - What comes to mind may be ...

¹ 1 Corinthians 6:19

- A line or passage of Scripture
 - A word or phrase
 - A thought or feeling
 - A picture in your mind
 - A sequence of pictures that “play” like a short film in your imagination
 - A memory
 - Something you have recently thought about, read, heard or seen
- Don't feel like you have to strain. Just wait quietly.
 - Often, the very first thought that comes to mind is from God.
 - Something may come, or it may not, either way is fine. Our job is just to listen, not to make God speak.

06 Discern. It's very important that you test everything you “hear” against Scripture and in community. Don't be afraid to check it against the Bible, talk to your pastor, or share it with other followers of Jesus. This is the practice of discernment, and it's something we do *together*.

07 Reflect and rest. If something comes to mind, spend a little time reflecting on it, asking the Spirit to clarify in your mind the meaning of his word to you. Write it down so you can remember it and spend more time in reflection on it in the coming days. And if nothing comes to mind, that's okay. Our job is to listen, not make God speak. Just rest in trust in the Father's love for you in Christ and by the Spirit.

Our recommendation is that you do this exercise daily, but you might just want to practice it once or twice this week. The goal is to begin really listening deeply for God's voice in your life and learning to live off his words to you.

Reach Exercise

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Reading

Read Chapters 10-12 of *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton.

Podcast

Listen to episode 4 of the Solitude series from the Rule of Life podcast by Practicing the Way.

Exercise: Retreat

We've been dipping our toes in the water of solitude for the last three weeks; now it's time to dive all the way in. Ten minutes of silence is a great way to begin your day, but there are some things that can only happen in longer periods of solitude. The spiritual life has its own pace, and it's *slow*, not hurried. We invite you to go away, slow down, and enter into this experience of God through the practice of retreat.

Any quiet place will do — a retreat center, monastery, cabin, guest house, campground, park, or even your own home if no one is around and all your devices are powered off. Find your “desert.”

There's no “right” length of time to go away. You may choose to go overnight or even for a few days. Many cities have a monastery within driving distance, and they usually offer silent retreats for anyone who is interested. Or you may just want to go away for a few hours.

There's no “right” way to spend your time on retreat. In fact, be careful not to overfill it with spiritual busyness.

Here's what a day on retreat could look like.

- **8-9 a.m.:** Prepare your mind and heart to hear from God. Take a walk, spend time breathing, or do whatever will help you set aside the worry and distraction of your current life. Try to arrange your morning so you can remain in silence from the time you wake up until after your retreat.
- **9-11 a.m.:** Read and meditate on Scripture through *Lectio Divina*, taking time to stop and reflect when God seems to be speaking to you through the text. Spend time in listening prayer.
- **11 a.m.-12 p.m.:** Journal or write down your heart's response to what you have read or heard. Pray your heart back to God.
- **12-1 p.m.:** Eat lunch and take a walk, reflecting on the morning.
- **1-2 p.m.:** Take a nap or rest.
- **2-3 p.m.:** Clarify any direction you sense from the Spirit of God over the coming season of your life.
- **3-4 p.m.:** Write down any direction and any other thoughts in a journal. Thank God for your time together and ask if there is anything else he wants to say. Prayerfully prepare to enter back into the flow of life.

Again, this is just one possible schedule. There's no "right" way to be with God on retreat. The key is to make space for rest, for quiet, and for listening, reflection, and prayer.

You may feel close to God, you may not. You may "hear" a word from God, you may not. You may feel happy, or you may feel sad, anxious, or weary. That's okay. Just let the experience be what it is and offer it up to God for your healing and in loving trust.

The more you practice retreat, the more you will come to relax into it, enjoy it, and look forward to it. But this may take time. Just stay with it and wait for God in the quiet.

Solitude Reflection

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As you come to the end of this Practice, 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.



Keep Going

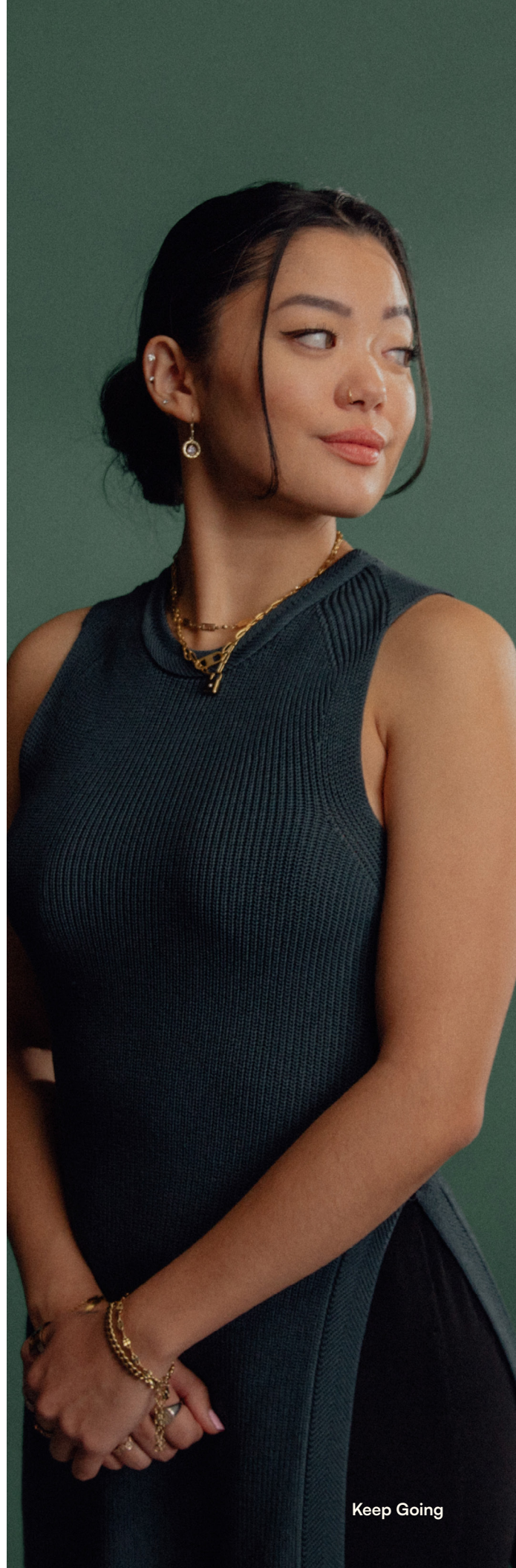
Keep Going

This short Practice is only designed to get you moving on a lifelong journey. The practice of solitude is meant to be integrated into your Rule of Life on a daily, weekly, and regular basis. But the spiritual journey is one in which we never “arrive,” and there is always more.

Where you go from here is entirely up to you, but if you decide to integrate solitude into your life, here’s a list of next steps to continue your Practice.

Recommend Reading

- 01 ***Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God’s Transforming Presence*** by Ruth Haley Barton
- 02 ***The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise*** by Robert Cardinal Sarah
- 03 ***The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God Through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence*** by Henri Nouwen
- 04 ***The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World*** by John Mark Comer
- 05 ***Poustinia: Encountering God in Silence, Solitude, and Prayer*** by Catherine Doherty



Recommended Exercises

01 Practice Sabbath

Most of us are simply too busy to have a meaningful spiritual life. The beginning point for many of us on the spiritual journey is learning to slow down and even stop. For this reason, Sabbath is one of the most important disciplines for the spiritual life in our day because it opens up time and space in our overcrowded lives to find our life in God. The practice of Sabbath is like a container for so many other practices, *especially* solitude. While much of Sabbath is spent in celebration with our community — eating meals, signing, and doing life together — it's also an ideal day to give time to quiet reflection, listening, and prayer.

The Sabbath Practice is available at practicingtheway.org/sabbath, but here are a few small steps to get started.

- Choose a day to Sabbath (or if a full 24 hours is too much, start with a half day or a few hours after church).
- Begin your Sabbath with some kind of small ritual to transition into Sabbath time, like lighting a candle, reading a psalm, and eating a meal with family or friends.
- Spend your Sabbath ceasing from all work, chores, buying, selling, and entertainment. In their place, give yourself to rest, delight, and worship.
- At some point in your day, spend time alone in the quiet with God.
- Run the Sabbath Practice, listen to the Rule of Life podcast series Sabbath, and/or read a book about the Sabbath to continue to learn more about this ancient discipline for emotional health and spiritual life.

02 Go on retreat

If you did not get the chance to go on retreat after week 4, it's never too late. Follow the instructions above and go away for an extended time with God.

03 Go on a longer retreat

4-8 hours on retreat is a great place to start. Overnight is even better, as it gives your body more time to decompress. But when you are ready, multiple days can be even more impactful and worth working your way up to over the course of 2-3 retreats.

There's no "right" way to spend this time. The key is to normalize boredom, waiting, and rest, and avoid carrying too many props into solitude to distract us. Rather, just spend long stretches of time offering yourself to God and waiting on his voice.

Remember: You're not a "bad" disciple of Jesus if you don't do this, and you may be in a season of life or situation where this is very hard. But the more time we give to solitude, silence, and stillness, the more space it opens up in us for healing and transformation. Many find that an annual practice of a longer retreat — 2-3 days or even a week — can become a vital part of their yearly rhythm and Rule of Life.

