

Quiet Time

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[0 : 00] We begin a series this week which is based on this book called Christian Disciplines. The series is on Christian Disciplines and we're going to be following this over these next few weeks and today we start by thinking about quiet times in communion with God.

I want to paint three pictures, three scenarios and I want you to kind of try and think yourself into each of these scenarios.

The first scenario is a way to imagine that you've woken up and you've got to get out to meet people and you for some reason go without breakfast.

It might be that you've been so much of a rush you haven't had time to have it. It might be that perhaps you just haven't got the appetite for breakfast, you don't feel like it, perhaps you're a bit nervous about what's ahead of you and so you can't face eating it.

But you leave the house without having had breakfast. It gets to about 11 o'clock and you're sat in the presence of two or three others that you're meeting with and your stomach begins to remind you and them of what didn't happen a couple of hours earlier.

[1 : 23] At a volume that is slightly out of decibelling a pneumatic drill. That's the first scenario.

Second one is this. Imagine that you've got a car journey to make and you've done this journey quite a lot before such that you know the precise mileage. It's 120 miles.

You've got to be there by a certain time because you've got an important meeting there.

Unfortunately, you are running late and so you get in the car and there isn't really that much margin for extra time.

About a couple of minutes into your journey, say it's 120 miles, you know that, you glance down and you remember that you haven't refuelled and the gauge is telling you you've got 98 miles in the tank.

Do you chance it? Do you just keep going and carry on with that journey thinking it might happen?

Third scenario is you, again, it's first thing in the morning, you're in a bit of a hurry and you grab your phone.

[2 : 39] It's plugged into the charger and you're going out and you know that you're going to need that phone. For a start, it's got your diary on it. But you've got a lot of calls and texts and emails to make.

And then as you're walking down the path, you check your phone for your first appointment and then you realise that for some reason, though it was plugged into the charger, that charger had been switched off on the wall overnight and you've got 9%.

Now having hopefully taken you to each of those three scenarios, I want you to imagine that they're all happening at the same time.

That's what happens when you don't pray. You run in on empty.

And all the time you can't relax because there's this sense that something's not quite there that should be there, that could be there, but it's not. C.S. Lewis wrote this.

[3 : 48] The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back.

In listening to that other voice. Taking that other point of view. Letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.

We can't, we shouldn't try to reduce things to formula. But experience, wide experience of lots of people will say to us that if we don't grab that time at the beginning of the day to pray, to get that recharge, then we will be more vulnerable.

Our vulnerability to anxiety, our sensitivity to sin, and our ability and power to resist sin is directly proportional to the nearness of our communion with Christ.

We need to pray. Now, of course, let's be really clear about this. When we talk about prayer and being a Christian and setting aside a time, whether we call that a quiet time or whatever we want to call it, there's a big danger that we can think that it's about compartmentalising.

[5 : 41] Even if we don't register, that's the danger, that's where we can go with it if we're not careful. You know, I do my God bit there and then get on with life. That would be a distortion of how things are.

Why? Because the reason why that is so important is not because that's the bit that we do, that's the prayer for the day and then we get on with the rest of it. No, it's because prayer, as John Wesley said, it was the breathing of the soul.

It's something that needs to happen, but you need to drink that draw breath at the beginning of the day because it sustains you for that whole ongoing conversation with God throughout the whole of the rest of the day.

It sets the scene. It's immersing in his presence at the start of the day. I had somebody say years ago, when we look at the life of Jesus, we see two things.

We see his miracles, his teachings, his public ministry, in other words. All the stuff, the amazing stuff, people healed, people that were fed, water turned into wine, and the amazing things he said, the proclamation of forgiveness, all the stuff that is recorded that might be broadly described as his public ministry.

[6 : 52] That's the first thing. The second thing we see is those moments when he withdrew to pray. The mistake we make is when we think of Jesus' life as a life of public ministry punctuated with moments of withdrawal to prayer.

Because the truth is, it's the other way around. Jesus' life was a life of communion with his Father with such intimacy, depth, and power that what we see recorded in the Gospels is a life of that punctuated with moments of public ministry, of healing, miracles, signs, and wonders.

So, let's be really clear about this. When we're talking about a quiet time, we're not talking about compartmentalising our lives. So we've got our spiritual bit, and we do that at one point in the day, and then we get on with everything else.

The point of setting that side of time is the recharge that we carry with us and through us for the rest of the day. The fundamental thing here is presence.

Now, let's come back to Moses, who we saw in that reading. Moses, we join Moses' story in Exodus 33. The Ten Commandments have been given. They've been announced, and the people of Israel have messed up.

[8 : 28] And Moses finds himself in this position where he's leading in a state of complete and utter chaos. And he knows that, given the enormity of what he has to do, he has to spend that time with God in prayer.

He has to. And so what we see is he goes into that place, that tent of meeting. It's a place of tremendous holiness where the presence of God is to be found.

You know, I can't help but think back to that really old film, The Ten Commandments, which I might point out was quite a few years before I was born. But do you remember that film with Charlton Heston?

He comes down from the mountain, having kind of met with God, and he's kind of glowing like he's overdosed on ready brick. I'm old enough to remember those adverts. The point is he spends that time in communion with God's holiness.

And at that point in history, that was where the holiness of God was to be found, in that very focused, designated space. And such was that holiness, such was the holy otherness of God, that you could not look upon God and live.

[9 : 44] Elsewhere in the Old Testament, we see in Isaiah, Isaiah in the temple where he's called, and he has this vision of the glory of God. Even then, he cannot look on God because God is so holy and holy other.

Even, he says, that the presence of God, the bright shining light, and surrounded, we're told, by heavenly beings whose wings are having to cover their eyes because even they cannot behold the holiness of God.

Otherwise, they will simply... In Jesus Christ, to whom all of these events point, God is supremely revealed.

God comes to us and among us. Through his life, his death, and his resurrection, we have that access that is unique. That the Holy Spirit is now come, and therefore, wherever we are, and we don't need to be in a particular place, in a particular temple, at a particular time, or we don't need to be a particularly special person, any one of us can commune with that holy otherness.

And that is something that we take all too casually and too lightly, too often. Who wouldn't want to do that? And so it is that we have that opportunity to know that presence of God throughout the whole day.

[11 : 08] But the rationale of having that quiet time is to have that space that is set aside at the beginning of the day. And incidentally, I don't think there's anywhere in Scripture that I'm aware of that says that it must be at the beginning of the day.

It's just that logically it makes sense, if we can, at the beginning of the day to grab that time. Even if it's just a very short time, because it sets us up for the rest of the day.

So why is it such a struggle? Well, I want to suggest to you three reasons, practical reasons, why I think very often, so many of us, will struggle with the discipline of grabbing that time.

The first is this, and it's busyness. We have so much stuff, we live busy lives, at any stage in life, that there are so many other things that can be done.

First thing. And in response to that, we need to be reminded that the busier we are, the more manic life becomes, the more important that time is.

[12 : 13] Martin Luther apparently once said, I have so much to do that I shall have to spend the first three hours in prayer.

Susanna Wesley, often regarded as the mother of Methodism, she was the mother of John and Charles Wesley, plus 17 others. She had 19 children.

19 children. And this was in the days before nappies and washing machines and mum's neck and all the other stuff. Yeah, she was there for 19 children and she had a way of praying.

She would take her apron and she would lift it over her head to do two things. One, to signify to all of these 19 children that was her time when she was in prayer.

And two, to withdraw and to create that space she knew she needed to pray. Who knows what impact that determination of that woman had on the spiritual life of this nation and indeed the whole world.

[13 : 25] So busyness is one thing. Secondly, very closely connected is the sense that we can feel, is the way we feel about it. We can feel spiritually rubbish.

And the reason why we feel spiritually rubbish is because we've convinced ourselves we're too busy and we haven't got around to it and therefore we've missed it and then we feel rubbish and we feel we're lousy Christians because we haven't prayed and we haven't done that and we carry around in our head this sense of all the stuff we haven't done and we say to ourselves I'm so worthy, I'm unworthy, I'm a rubbish Christian because I never pray and I never do this and I never do that and I know I should and a proper Christian would be far more spiritual and would have a really, really highly disciplined spiritual life and would read their Bible and they would pray and they would spend time listening to God and they would see all this, that and the other and that's not me. Get over it. Christian faith isn't and never has been although tragically we try to make it into ritual rules and religion.

It's not. It's relationship. That's what it is. And the third reason why I think we struggle is simply we make it more complicated than it is or we think it's more complicated than it is.

Now there is no formula but it makes sense that in that time to read the Bible, to listen to God and to talk to God.

[14 : 47] That's it. It's as simple as. There's no special sort of spiritual thing you have to do. There's all sorts of tools out there. There's Bible reading programs, there's notes, there's all different things.

There are different approaches to prayer, there's centering prayer, there's meditation, there's loads of different things that are marvellous, marvellous tools in the toolbox. But we don't need to make it more complicated than it needs to be.

It boils down to one simple truth. That isn't any human relationship, whether you're talking marriage, whether you're talking friendship, whether you're talking neighbours, whether you're talking family, that if you're going to grow in a relationship with another human being, it ain't going to happen if you don't spend time with them.

It won't. Why should it? We need that time to pray, to talk, to listen, to read God's word.

In an old song that was written in the late 60s, 1970s, by Ralph Carmichael, said this, Far from the rapid pace where God can soothe my troubled mind, sheltered by tree and flower, there in my quiet hour, with him my cares are left behind.

[16 : 11] Whether a garden small or on a mountain tall, new strength and courage there I find. then from this quiet place I go to prepare to face a new day with love for all mankind.

I want to leave you with one last image. I'm going to grab a glass for this. It's not a magic trick by the way so don't get excited.

I'm going to pour some water. The purposes of this illustration, that that glass is you and me and the water is whatever we fill our lives with.

we set out the beginning of the day. Susie, could you just give my hand a gentle nudge? A bit harder. A bit harder still.

Go on. There we go. Thank you. What fills out just then? It's not a trick question. Water. Because that's what's in the glass.

[17 : 30] If it was full of milk, milk would flow out. If it was a cup of tea, it would be tea. The point is, and forgive me, it seems like it's screamingly obvious, but the thing that the vessel is filled with is what we'll fill out.

Now get this, every single day of our lives we face knocks. We do. I've never known, never known anything such as a perfect day, literally. Something will go wrong.

Might be tiny, might be massive, but we have knocks. The question is, is what flows out? when those knocks come.

Because whatever our lives are filled with will be the very stuff that flows out. Christ gives us that gift, that opportunity to be filled and to go on being filled with his presence, with his power, with his Holy Spirit.

my prayer is, is that we will do that just now and every day. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.