

Becoming Nothing: A practice in Silence and Solitude

In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me – naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken – nothing. It is this nothingness that I have to face in my solitude, a nothingness so dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness and make myself believe that I am worth something.

The wisdom of the desert is that the confrontation with our own frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ.

H. Nouwen

Centering Down

Take some time to find a quiet and secluded place to be alone with God. This could be on your bed in your room, in a nearby coffee shop, a big comfy chair, a patch of shade in a park somewhere.

Once you have found your space, begin your time by becoming aware of your breath. Don't manipulate the breath, but begin to take notice of breathing in and breathing out.

As you continue to breathe, connect a simple prayer to your breath.

Jesus, I need you (in)...reveal yourself to me (out)

God, I want to know you (in)...meet me in this place (out)

God, I need your help (in)...make your word alive to me (out)

Search me and know me (in)...help me to delight in you (out)

Take at least 10-15 minutes to sit silently and use your breath to connect with the Lord. This may seem like a long time to some. If other thoughts start to creep into your mind... don't worry. Use your breath to surrender those thoughts to God.

Lord, I'm worried about _____ (in)...remind me it belongs to you (out)

God, I'm feeling overwhelmed (in)...thank you that you are with me (out)

Father, I need this time with you (in)...help me to protect it (out)

Take the next 20 minutes to be still and silent before God. If you get distracted...welcome God into the distraction. Ask Him to show himself to you in it. Relax, allow his spirit to deal with your burdens. Begin to actively listen before God.

Use this space to write down any distractions and/or burdens you are carrying.

Silent Worship

Begin to move your thoughts toward the attributes of God. Focus on him, contemplating his majesty and wonder, reflecting on His greatness, what He has done for you and continues to do, and allowing his spirit to minister to yours. Invite him to show himself more and more to you as you think about his goodness and power.

If you'd like, you may use Psalm 145 (on next page) to guide your time.

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
his greatness no one can fathom.

One generation commends your works to another;
they tell of your mighty acts.

They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty—
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.

They tell of the power of your awesome works—
and I will proclaim your great deeds.

They celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.

The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises
and faithful in all he does.

The Lord upholds all who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.

The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food at the proper time.

You open your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

The Lord is righteous in all his ways
and faithful in all he does.

The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.

He fulfills the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.

The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.

My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.
Let every creature praise his holy name
for ever and ever.

Psalm 145

Contemplative Meditation

In this time, you will work through Psalm 23 three times...asking God to reveal himself more and more with each time. This is a psalm we can often take for granted, so embrace the opportunity to dig deep and learn more of what communion with God can look like in solitude and silence.

Directions to help guide your time are located on the following page.

God, my shepherd!
I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

Psalm 23 (The Message)

Steps of Guided Prayer/Contemplation

1. Read the text silently, slowly, and reverently. Linger on any words The Spirit points out. If there is a particular phrase that grabs hold of you or promises to have special meaning, stay there for a moment. Breathe the phrase in and out...ask the Lord to reveal himself to you there. It's better to dwell profoundly on one word than to skim the surface on multiple chapters.

Record the word(s)/phrase(s) that stood out to you most here:

2. As you complete the passage, go back a second time. Traveling through the scene of the psalm, be intentional about placing yourself in the text. What do you see? What do you feel? Where is Jesus as you walk through this passage? Don't rush through...give yourself the space to imagine yourself in the midst of the text and seek the Lord in it as well. Register sights, sounds, smells, etc.

When you are finished, take a moment to write down your response to this exercise. What did the spirit reveal to you? What was different from the first time? What images, feelings, smells, etc made you aware of God's presence in a new way? In what moments/phrases did you feel special closeness with God?

3. The third time through the passage, return to the word or phrase that grabbed hold of you initially. Begin a dialogue with God using that word or phrase as your jumping-off point. How might this word or phrase be an answer to the burden heaviest on your heart this season?

Use the space on the next page to express in your own way, how God has shown himself to you through the text. You might choose to do this by writing a poem, a letter to God, a prayer, or drawing a picture. Once you are finished...read it back...pray your poem or letter back to God...look at your picture and consider what it speaks of him and his power. Don't just rush on to the next thing. Sit, ponder, and consider what he's revealed to you.

Response/Application

In light of your time in the scripture, take a moment to answer the following questions:

1. What was your experience of the time of silence/solitude? Was it easy? Difficult? Were there some aspects that were more comfortable than others?

2. What did God have to say to you about who He is through this time? You can choose to focus mostly on the centering/breathing exercise, the silent worship, or the contemplative meditation.

3. Based on your time alone with God today, how would you finish this sentence: "God is my _____." How about "God can _____."

4. How can you cling to this truth in the midst of one/some of the "hard things" you wrote down during last night's session? Call it by name and consider how what God has shown of himself here might be a direct response to this hard thing.

5. Can you narrow down what you learned in your time today to one word or phrase? Perhaps it is straight from the scripture. How will you remind yourself of this phrase in the weeks to come?

Why is it so important that you are with God and God alone on the mountain top? It's important because it's the place in which you can listen to the voice of the One who calls you the beloved. To pray is to listen to the One who calls you "my beloved daughter." To pray is to let that voice speak to the center of your being, to your guts, and let that voice resound in your whole being.

H. Nouwen