

BE040608

The D-word

## 2. Prayer to Solitude

It was almost 15 years ago: my wife noticed it before I did. I was irritable, impatient and anxious. I had been for weeks, and when she could finally take no more she said, “you need to get out of here!” Go fishing or something!” It was at least partially self-preservation on her part, but she also recognized a need in me that was going un-met. Solitude. Silence. Stillness. Oh, I prayed daily. I read my Bible regularly. I was part of a small group. We gave money to God’s work...I had Disciplines...but I almost never slowed down, stopped and got quiet enough to let God accomplish certain things inside me. Things that can be accomplished only when I sit down and shut up long enough to let it happen.

Over the next few years, I began to see the value in the disciplines of solitude and silence as I put them into regular practice. I began scheduling at least two days every three months to get away by myself, often on a backpacking excursion. A few years back, I didn’t speak for a week. It was precipitated by a throat ailment, but God turned it into an eye-opening discipline...think of it..ME silent for a week!

Right around that time, I planned a BIG hike. I was inspired by the idea of a pilgrimage: the El Camino De Santiago Compastella or “Way to St. James” in Spain.

400 miles/1month/1500 years.

Once again my wife proved to be a very practical inspiration...

So I came up with the “El Camino De Quinault”

55 miles/6 days/once a year

In just a couple of weeks, I’ll be heading out for another big solo hike, but this time a little further West...up the coast...

If I can I’ll go from LaPush all the way to Cape Flattery...

But back in ’03 when I took that big 6 day trip, some really life changing things occurred. Here’s an entry from my journal on the first day of that trip:

*I feel ridiculous now – looking at the title of this ill-conceived charade...“El Camino De Quinault”. I’m scared to be out here alone and I’m ashamed of it. It’s Day One, 4 hours in, and I’m sitting on the trail crying like a baby cause I’m scared.*

Later that night I wrote:

*I sit here now on the bank of the Elwah, across from Mary Falls, and again, I weep like a baby. Actually I sound just like my 11 year old daughter. I want very much to be at home right now. I’m afraid of being alone. I can’t stop the weeping – something is being pulled from me – something with the tears and the snot – something is crawling out – being vomited.*

*Perhaps it is to be still that scares me. Yes, bears and pain and other “wilderness nasties” scare me as well, but perhaps it is ALL THINGS scary.*

*I remember my last trip – and I recall the urge I had then to “go back”. Of course I had the urge to go back – that’s the way home. But just now, the thought of going BACK seems too wearying. I feel like I couldn’t make it.*

*But to go forward...terrifying...but it seems like the way to...safety? I have the urge to rush! I think my first question to you, God, is: What am I so afraid of EXACTLY? Please show me.*

Contrast that with part of my entry from the last day:

*Began the day with prayer. Wow. A bald eagle soared up-stream and now sits in the top of a dead-head, surveying his domain.*

*Looks like another beautiful day. Did I mention that I miss Brenda and the girls? It’s a little different now, though. It doesn’t “hurt” when I miss them. Is that me drawing my strength from God? Is this me, bringing strength to them? To others?*

*God says it works that way. He’s been blindingly faithful for the last six days...why would He stop now?*

Sounds like a different person, doesn’t it? Well, in many ways, it was.

Getting alone and being quiet for the express purpose of seeking God’s voice, his presence, his guidance can result in changes of the most profound kind. Remember Rick taught last week that all Disciplines are TRAINING for change rather than just TRYING TO change. Solitude is training.

Solitude and silence are disciplines that in our D Word series, grow out of prayer. If we look at prayer in the broadest possible sense: Communication with God, then by simple comparison, solitude and silence represent a deeper level of intentionality, of intensity, and intimacy. Everything gets cleared out of the way to make room for God.

Now before we jump into our text, let me offer a couple of practical thoughts about the practice of solitude:

- 1) While the basic definition of solitude remains pretty obvious, the format of solitude does not. You should not leave today thinking I have called every Christ follower to become REI members and begin regular trips to the mountains. That’s not for everyone. For some of you, finding a few contiguous hours at home with no one else around and no distractions might be what’s required. Maybe a cabin or motel room somewhere for a weekend. Seriously – I heard some teacher recommend sitting in your car in the driveway for 90 minutes alone!
- 2) Let your solitude time un-fold. Many of my times of solitude begin like the one I described earlier: with a big emotional release. I don’t try hold those back, or over-analyze them. I just see them as God gifting me with some relief. And

sometimes...I sleep for the first ½ day...because that's what my body needs. So don't force too many monastic super-natural expectations on solitude.

- 3) If this concept is new to you, start small. It's a bit like working out, you have to start where you're at, or you'll hurt yourself and then have to stop all together. If you run off and try to be alone for 7 days straight, odds are it's going to be SO un-pleasant, you'll be very reluctant to try it again. The truth is, I feel like I consistently run the ragged edge with this, and sometimes push myself too far, so that the next time an opportunity for extended solitude arrives, I'm feeling like I don't want it.
- 4) The reason it's so hard in the first place is that 99% of us are so conditioned to be stimulated every waking moment that it's literally a sensory, emotional even physical SHOCK to be still, AND conscience, for any time longer than it takes to load a web page. I can't tell you how many times I've looked into the face of someone to whom I just suggested they simply sit in their own skin for ONE HOUR, and I've seen real fear. In our culture of short attention spans, and constant stimulation...this particular D word is not only unusual...it's hard, so get your expectations set.

It's hard, BUT it's also important. Why? Because the Master did it. If you have a Bible with you I'd like you to turn to the Gospel of Mark. We'll be using this Gospel as our guide today. If you don't have a Bible you can often find one laying around near the ends of the aisles. Mark is the Second book in the New Testament..Matthew, then Mark.

In the book of Matthew chapter 6 verse 6, Jesus gives us one of the only PRESCRIPTIONS for solitude you will find in the Bible: But when you **pray**, go into your room, close the door and **pray** to your Father, who is unseen.

We find another in Psalm 46:10 "Be **still**, and know that I am God.

But in Mark we find a Gold mine of DESCRIPTIONS of solitude.

SIDE NOTE: Do you get the difference between PREscription and Description? It's important in practicing the discipline of Bible Study...

You see, the gospel of Mark is The Action Gospel. Mark is concerned that his readers understand the person of Jesus and the work he accomplished. It's not primarily a gospel of doctrine like John, or of teachings like Matthew – it's concerned with telling the story of the life and the work of Jesus, in fast-paced, clipped and vivid segments. And when you look at it his way, a pattern quickly emerges: look at this:

# The Rhythm of the Master

Reason	Retirement	Result
1. Baptism 1:9	Desert 1:12	Disciples 1:16 – 1:19
2. Healing Day 1:21	Early morning 1:35	Healing Ministry 1:36 – 2:12
3. Opposition 2:6	The Lake 2:13	Matthew 2:14
4. Opposition 2:15-3:6	The Lake 3:7	Apostles 3:13-19
5. Opposition 3:20-4:34	The Lake (alone) 4:10	Kingdom 4:33
6. Ridicule 5:40, 6:3 John murdered 6:14-29	Retreat 6:31	Feeds 5000 6:32-44
7. Interruption 6:32-44	Mountainside 6:46	Crowds 6:54-7:20
8. Interruption 6:54-7:20	House in Tyre 7:24	Gentile ministry 7:25-30
9. Interruption 7:25-30	Decapolis 7:31	Feeds 4000 8:1-9
10. Messiah-ship 8:27- 38	Transfiguration 9:2	March to the cross...

DESCRIBED in the life of Jesus is a clear rhythm. It's like breathing. There were times that he was so busy, he and the disciples couldn't even stop to eat! But it was followed by a time of solitude. Breathing in and breathing out. If all you ever do is exhale...well. Now I've got to ask...if first century Palestine was busy enough that solitude was critical, how important is it in 21<sup>st</sup> century America?

Not enough, I would have to say. In addition to personally witnessing people squirm at the suggestion of extended time alone, I have some preliminary information from our AC3 survey that shows we don't value it enough:

Of those reporting that they engage in at least SOME spiritual disciplines,

93% of AC3'rs say they are comfortable with Prayer as a discipline, but only 43% report the same comfort with solitude..and that's only those who say they engage in spiritual disciplines AT ALL.

AC3, Jesus valued time alone to reflect, recover and focus on His father. So we must as well. So let's look at 3 principles of solitude as DESCRIBED in Mark.

## 1. SPIRIT DRIVEN

Mark 1:12 reads, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness..." I use the word DRIVEN for a reason. SENT is a gentle translation of what the original text described. DRIVETH is what the King James says the Spirit did. The Message says the Spirit PUSHED Jesus. The Greek word used here can be translated as ejected. In other words Jesus was highly motivated by the Holy Spirit to find solitude!

I was talking about solitude with an Allen Creeker just the other day, and he confessed that the spirit has been “pushing” him in this direction for years! It seems that this is pretty important to God that he would persistently PUSH on my friend for YEARS to get away by himself. He’s just now making plans to follow through on that push, and I can’t wait to hear how God’s persistent pushing will pay-off.

As I said...I frequently resist solitude like many of us resist exercise or balancing the check book. But God seems to COMPELL me to it. There have also been times I’ve gotten out in front of God and I’ve tried to make something happen with solitude. I kind of got in the driver’s seat and pushed GOD...I expected him to show up in my solitude at a time he wasn’t interested in it...and guess what? Those were frustrating times defined mostly by loneliness and disappointment, because the Spirit was not driving this discipline, I was. Friends you need to listen CAREFULLY to the Holy Spirit’s promptings on this, and you need to commit in advance that you will obey those promptings. Be ready. He may call you to a time of solitude and silence when you don’t expect it. Or just when you think you can’t go another day at this busy pace, and you start planning to get away, just like Jesus in mark 6, you may be confronted with so-called “interruptions”. Your time alone with God will be on His terms...not yours.

## 2. CONDUIT FOR GOD’S POWER

We see this in many places in Mark, but I want to focus in on one distinctive episode, beginning at Mark 1:21, Jesus’ ministry career is just getting started. He has just called the first group of disciples, they traveled to Capernaum and the text then reads: 21- 34

So on this one single Sabbath day, Jesus inaugurates his ministry by preaching in the synagogue, casting out a demon, healing Peter’s mother-in-law, and then a huge crowd oftowns people. The very next morning, he withdraws into solitude (verse 35), then begins his healing and deliverance ministry in earnest. (36-39)

Recalling that Jesus was simultaneously human AND divine, can you imagine the turmoil going on inside of him after the that first day of directly encountering evil, and suffering? I can only imagine the tug-of war between feelings of fear and turmoil, of confusion and pain, mixed with feelings of joy and purpose and praise and anticipation. Being divine, as he sat in the early morning dark of that solitary place, he also knew what that day and ALL subsequent days of this life would bring...this was it. Can you imagine a time when the Father’s presence, His steady calm, His guiding Spirit would be more essential to Jesus than that morning? He needed POWER for the days to come and he retreated to solitude to connect with it.

As Rick and I chatted about this subject earlier in the week, he opened a desk drawer and tossed me a sheaf of yellow legal papers covered in his hand written notes from a solitude retreat in august 2004. Rick described to me how the Spirit drove him into solitude with a strong sense that he wanted to get something done...and after his retreat, Rick came back with a solid command for new work: All In. that’s how our building expansion program started..almost 4 years ago: with a retreat in solitude, where God’s voice could be heard and his power accessed.

Friend, what kind of a call are you facing? What adventure lies before you waiting to be picked up? Are you missing it because you’re moving so fast you can’t grab hold of it. Is

there a nagging “something” in the back of your mind...a something that SHOULD be getting done, a something that needs to be let go of, a fight that’s going to require all of God’s power, a surrender that will need all of the courage that comes from intimacy with Him? Then you must walk in the way of the master. You must get away, alone with Him to access His power which is available to you.

3. Perhaps Jesus’ most well known retreat into solitude hasn’t been mentioned yet. Mark 14: 32They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." 33He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 34"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

35Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36"Abba,[e] Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Mark bookends his story of Jesus ministry with two solitude experiences – the first was His withdraw into the wilderness to be tempted, and the last is his experience in the garden of Gethsemane, an experience I would say was no less a temptation. “Overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” Asking his father to let this cup pass, Luke said Jesus sweat blood! This is a man in the throes of battle.

AC3, in times of crisis solitude is the soul’s method of insuring your survival. When a human being begins to experience hypothermia, when their core body temperature begins to drop, the brain tells blood to stop flowing to secondary systems like reproduction and digestion, even extremities...these things are essentially sacrificed, “put aside during a crisis”, so that all resources can be re-allocated to what’s critical. In the case of a person in hypothermia: protecting their heart. Sometimes, when faced with spiritual hypothermia (spiritual crisis) we need to shut down our social life, shut down our economic life, shut down our activity, and focus in our hearts, and Christian where is your heart? With the Father I hope!

You see I think solitude can be so hard for us because when we start flipping the switches, turning off our non-essential systems, we begin to find the truth...God is listed among the non-essentials. We find ourselves saying, “ I can’t leave work to be alone with God!” “I can’t risk my family being without me for 2 days so I can focus on God...I can’t say “no” that ministry opportunity just because God wants me to get away with him more often...what will everyone think?”

We don’t want to be faced with sorting through our actual priorities, when we can just give them lip service. Crisis won’t let us do that. It will force us to show our true colors: we will either shutdown all the non-essential stuff and turn to God, or we will shut-down God and try to preserve the non-essentials.

Think of your favorite romantic movie ending. When at the last minute, he comes racing through the airport, having quit his job, told off the woman he was supposed to marry, and made himself look like a fool, all because SHE was the most important thing to him. Why does that resonate so profoundly with us (admit it...it does!) Because he let everything else go just to be with her, that means she’s the most important thing. She

knows it, and so does everyone in the airport watching them embrace as the orchestra swells and the credits roll.

Will you take sometime this week to embrace God like that? Put aside everything else...I mean EVERYTHING and chase him through the airport? If you will, He has promised something sweeter than any Hollywood ending.