

Alone With The One Who Knows Your Name



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The scenery turned from concrete to cornfields as I reluctantly made my way to a retreat center 30 miles from home. “Is this really going to be worth it?” I questioned the value of taking a day of personal retreat when my calendar boasted little breathing room and my desk resembled the haystacks I was passing on these lonely country roads.

I was working at a church on the outskirts of Chicago. The senior pastor had recently mandated a series of monthly personal retreats for all staff members. My hungry heart eyed the potential of a few quiet hours. The idea of a personal retreat intrigued the adventurous side of my soul. I was acutely aware of the gaps

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forming in my own spiritual growth, but I was strangely anxious, fearful of my inability to attend to the quiet things of God for that length of time. I let out a fair share of frustrated sighs as I overloaded other days to carve out this day of rest. I was doubtful the benefits would outweigh the stress it added to the rest of my week.

Pastor Ficken shared three words of encouragement with me on the morning of my departure.

Rest well.

Listen closely.

Produce nothing.

Twelve years later I cannot recall what specifically happened that day—except that I wanted to return. And I did, again and again. My desire for occasional personal retreats devel-

oped into an insatiable appetite. Nourished from these face-to-face encounters with the Almighty, I have been able to weather lengthy seasons riddled with crisis and fatigue through the challenges of a growing ministry, the loss of two children, the birth of a child with Spina Bifida, and the long goodbye to my mom who died of Alzheimer’s.

Over time I began to take note of two specific gifts that emerge from private encounters with the Lord: stillness and rest. *Stillness* offers me the distinct beauty of hearing God whisper my name, as only he can do it. *Rest* is a gift we seek to defiantly live without and our empty hearts and threadbare joy bares testimony of this glaring reality.

Stillness

The words *quiet*, *alone*, and *undistracted* do not describe the vast majority of my waking hours. It is in this mixture, however, that God often makes himself known. God shouts to us through the glories of his creation, but when calling our name, he speaks with a quiet, still voice.

Living in a world of CDs, cell phones and CNN, going away to a quiet place is a routine 21st century Christians would do well to cultivate if we are committed to aligning our lives with the personalized marching orders of the One who knows our name. It has become clear to me that the Lord treasures the undistracted hours he spends alone with his children.

Alone, Moses heard God call his name through a burning bush. Alone, the young boy Samuel responded to the voice of God. Alone, Mary said yes to the career-changing announcement of all time.

While away on a personal retreat I have not experienced dramatic career-changing encounters like that of Moses or Mary. I have, however, been



released into new ministry adventures—leading a small group Bible study, embracing a season of foster parenting and mentoring college students—all while meeting with God in the stillness of an unhurried afternoon.

Our Lord makes himself known to his people at any time and through many means, but it often happens during private encounters with the Almighty. Our apparent addiction to a life of chaos and confusion causes Jesus’ words from Mark 6 to echo in my heart,

“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place ...”

I long to hear his voice. I want to hear him call my name. I want to be ready for the mundane *and* miraculous plans he has for me and my life.

Rest

Rest is a gift that refuels, renews and refreshes.

Everyday life batters my soul. Throw in some weighty responsibilities at work, a frazzled relationship, a cartload of mommy guilt and waves of weariness descend upon me at an alarming rate. I am convinced that today's modern mayhem is not a life-style that orients us to the things of God. The missing ingredient to this puzzling way of life is simply and profoundly—rest.

A rested soul alters my attitude. It alters my attitude about *everything* from purpose and pleasure to pressures and problems. Because of this, I attempt to carve out regular extended get-a-ways to be alone with my Father. At times I am able to make room for a full day get-a-way. Occasionally it's an overnight adventure. I no longer work at a church and taking a full day away is even more challenging. Thankfully, I have discovered that two-three hours alone on a Sunday afternoon is enough time for me to meet the Lord face-to-face in a way that centers my soul and redirects my gaze—off of me, onto him.

These are precious hours for me. I am off the hook. I do not have to do anything. I do not have to accomplish anything. I do not have to produce, poke, prod, or provide anything for anyone. I can just be. I exist to receive from God's extravagant warehouse of love. I listen. I rest. I read. I journal. I hike. I go into each hour with no expectations. I follow no agenda, yet each time he tenderly and passionately renews my

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mind and refreshes my soul. Sometimes he offers an explosion of insight, other times his presence is like a quiet, gentle rain. Each day away has a unique, refreshing, gift and no two are ever alike.

But still, we resist! We wait for a quieter season to arrive, a season that will never transpire. We drag our feet, forfeiting this gift and making it a burden—another item to add to our overloaded *to do* list. We are not alone, however, and there is hope and good news ahead.

Over the years I've made three discoveries about extended time alone with God. These discoveries have removed many self-imposed roadblocks—for me and a few others along the way.

“These are precious hours for me, I am off the hook.”

Removing the Roadblocks

First, a get-a-way with God does not have to be a solo experience. A personal retreat can take place in tandem with another who also desires to experience extended time away with the Lord. Going away by ourselves often puts up unnecessary roadblocks: I don't like being alone. Will I feel safe? What will I do all day? Satan celebrates as we detour away from that which renews and recharges us. Traveling to a retreat center, city park or quiet corner with a friend creates an event that is not easily rescheduled. Fellowship around a meal is a refreshing way to enhance what God is doing in our hearts during the time we spend alone. When committed to a few hours of solitude, a personal retreat taken

with a friend offers the best of both worlds.

Secondly, I've learned to take the pressure off. I have to remind myself that there is no single, right way to meet with the Lord during extended get-a-ways with God. Gary Thomas explodes this myth in his book *Sacred Pathways*. He challenges us to embrace the reality that some believers meet best with God when surrounded by trees or when traipsing through a grassy meadow. Others recognize the Father's voice through liturgical prayers and predetermined Bible readings. Some sing and feast. Others are nourished through fasting and complete solitude. Celebrating this freedom while jumping in with both feet and an open heart allows me to recognize the creative genius of God's handiwork when fashioning my soul, and the unique pathway he travels to meet with me, his beloved. Personal retreats are not about me, and what I'm going to do to experience God. Personal retreats are about the Lord, and what he wants to do in me through the context of quiet and rest.

Finally, personal retreats are not a luxury for the elite, but a necessity for all who live in modern times. Technological advances rob us of rest, allowing believers to fall victim to frenzied life in the fast lane. Satan knows we hear the voice of God most easily when we are quiet and still—obsolete words in today's dictionary of life. Nurturing the gifts of stillness and rest fan into existence the abundant life Christ offers all believers in every generation.

Whether once a month or once a year, I encourage you, I challenge you, to set a date, find a place and go—go away to be alone with the One who knows your name.

*Additional resources are available on personal retreats, as well as information on how to introduce believers to the blessings of extended time alone with God through **Vantage Point Retreats** for small groups.*

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