

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Exercises



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*Spiritual Formation is our response
to God's loving initiative
to transform us into the image of Christ
that we may abide in him with joy
and join him in the works of his kingdom.*



BEING RECEPTIVE TO GOD'S VOICE

Preparing Ourselves to Listen:
The Prayer of Recollection
Listening to God's Word: Lectio Divina
A Very Simple Way to Enjoy God's Word
Receiving and Responding



*God did not write a book and send it by messenger
to be read at a distance by unaided minds.
He spoke a Book and lives in His spoken words,
constantly speaking His words
and causing the power of them
to persist across the years.*

A. W. Tozer

Preparing Ourselves to Listen:

The Prayer of Recollection

In the prayer of recollection we *prepare ourselves to receive* God's word. To *recollect* literally means to recall. God says, 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10).

We recall who God is and who we are in relation to him. There are two parts to the prayer of recollection: coming to stillness and coming to attention. In stillness we let go of our distractions and any false sense of our identity. In attention we acknowledge who God is and thus who we are in relation to him. It is so much easier to receive from the Lord when we are both honest and humble.

It is helpful to do this before we hear a sermon or before we spend time in the Word or before we listen to someone confront or challenge us.

Ways to be still:

Come to a quiet place.

Close your eyes and ears to all distracting images and noises. You can also breathe slowly and deeply and concentrate on getting your muscles to relax, starting with your feet and working up to your shoulders and neck. By this we seek to obey the commands to 'offer our bodies' (Romans 12:1), to be a 'holy temple' (1 Corinthians 3:16) and to 'quiet our anxieties' (Matthew 6:31).

Gather your scattered thoughts.

Lift them up to the Lord and give him your will by praying a prayer of intent, such as this one: 'Lord, I get so easily distracted. But my deepest desire is for you, to depend upon you, to be filled with your Spirit and to abide in you. Help me to hear you speak.'

Ways to know the Lord and to affirm your identity in him:

1. Come to him.

See Jesus. You can do this by visualising yourself going to the cross or by picturing Jesus sitting in the chair next to you.

2. Confess to him.

Say, 'At the core of me, Jesus, I am not ... [for example: a church planter, a mother/father, Team Leader/Team Member, a victim, a failure ... or all the other identities that I cling to in order to give me satisfaction and meaning.] I am also not any of the defeating labels that others have given me or that I have given myself.'

Say, 'I give you anything that would hinder my ability to hear from you today...[for example: my addiction for the approval of others, my fears, my shame, my need to blame others, my drivenness, my need to be perfect, my successes that make me feel so good about myself...]

3. Celebrate with him.

Say, 'This is my identity: That I am deeply loved, totally accepted, completely forgiven, fully pleasing and absolutely complete in Christ. Now Lord, enable me to hear you speak.'

Listening to God's Word: Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a phrase that simply means "divine reading." It is a way to slowly read God's Word. The goal is not to *read* the Word, but to *listen* to God speak through it. We listen to God speak and we respond. We approach God's Word to be transformed, not just informed.

A. W. Tozer wrote, 'God did not write a book and send it by messenger to be read at a distance by unaided minds. He spoke a Book and lives in His spoken words, constantly speaking His words and causing the power of them to persist across the years.'

1. Read.

Choose a short passage of scripture and read it slowly three times. Many people choose to read it out loud.

2. Meditate.

As you read, certain phrases or words will be brought to your attention by the Holy Spirit. This is a sign that he is speaking to you, so pay attention to these thoughts and to your feelings. Take time to think about these things. In other words, meditate on what God is saying to you through the scripture AND your response to it.

3. Pray.

Now talk with God about what you are thinking and feeling. If you start to feel confused or guilty or anxious, realize this is not from God, and move on. If you are distracted — even by some wonderful idea that has little to do with what you are meditating on — gently turn away from it and leave it for another time. Sometimes God births dreams in us during this time. If they are from him, he will cause us to remember them. So there is no need to spend time now writing them down.

4. Rest.

Some call this 'contemplation,' which really means to gaze. This is a difficult time for many because we are not accustomed to being still in the presence of our Lord. We keep thinking that surely we have to do or say something. But we have already done those things.

Now, be there with God. Sometimes it helps to think of this as a 'Psalm 139:23-24 time' — time for God to search us and reveal anything more to us. Sometimes it helps to picture ourselves standing or sitting in the courts of our Lord, all our focus on him, waiting for him to speak if he wants to. Don't try to make anything happen. If nothing does, then fine. This is not about an emotional experience. But it is about developing our faith in things unseen.

A Very Simple Way to Enjoy God's Word

Here is a simple approach to Scripture using our imagination, our reasoning, and our emotions.

Read slowly a short passage of Scripture.

Imagine yourself in that passage: see it, hear it, smell it, taste it.

Read it again.

Meditate on it: study a word or a concept, understand its context, puzzle over it.

Read it again.

Focus on your feelings: what emotions does God stir up in you, both sad and happy ones.

STOP wherever God is working with no anxiety to move on.

Receiving and Responding: Meditation and Prayer

Prayer flows from one stage to another. Below are four stages that contribute to our ability to be with God in prayer. At the end of each stage listed below is a personal example.

The first stage: Preparing for God (preparatory)

It is important to come to our time with God with a prepared mind and heart.

Here are some helpful ways to shift our attention from our environment to God:

- Come to stillness
- Practice God's presence
- Pray a brief prayer describing your desires for your time with God
- Review quickly the portion of Scripture on which you will meditate
- Ask God for the grace to hear what He wants to say to you

Personal example:

- To come to stillness, as soon as I get out of bed I say, "Good morning, God." Then I quietly make my coffee and sit for a few minutes while I focus on God. Some find it difficult to come to stillness, for they fear falling asleep! I encourage them to do whatever helps them focus on God.
- I practice his presence by looking at him looking at me. I tell him, "It is good to be here with you again," or "Thank you for loving me."
- I usually pray this prayer: "Lord, may all that I do with my mind, my heart, my will and my body be done for your glory and my good. Where there is a wound, heal me; a sin, forgive me; an oppression, deliver me; a dream, nurture it.
- I review the Scripture passage quickly just to get an idea of what it is about. Usually I stick to short passages because I find it easier to hear from God when I don't have too much information running through my brain.
- I ask for the grace to hear what he is saying through Scripture. If the passage is on love, I may ask, "Give me the grace to receive your love and to give your love."

The Second Stage: Meditation and Contemplation

There are two helpful ways to approach Scripture and prayer: meditation and contemplation. Meditation is a way of using our *reason* to understand what God is saying through the truths of Scripture. This method works well with the Psalms and Epistles. Contemplation is a way of using our *imagination* to feel or hear or experience what God is saying through the truths of Scripture. This method works well with narratives, especially the Gospels.

Meditation

- Slowly read a short passage of Scripture several times
- Ponder with love the truths that God is showing you
- Embrace with love the truths as God's will for you

Personal example:

- I read a passage through about 3 times. I read it silently and out loud. I may even write down several lines that stand out to me. Sometimes I outline the text. Other times I try to put the text in my own words, in a poem style. Occasionally I will try to memorize one verse or even a phrase.
- I ponder the truth of what God is saying to me. I do this by reviewing other similar passages or by doing a word study on a particular word that stands out to me. Often I “preach” a sermon in my head about that truth – I let it just flow out in my own words. Sometimes I read other literature that emphasizes the truth and beauty of that passage, a bible dictionary, for example, or a poem.
- I embrace with love the truth as God’s will for me. If I note any resistance, I speak with God about it. I may prostrate myself as a sign of my submission. I may listen to worship music and stand with my hands outstretched, waiting for him to break through to my will.

Contemplation

As you read the Scripture:

- See the people in the story
- Hear their words
- Observe their actions
- Note where you are in the story

Personal example using Mark 4: 36-41

I see and hear the fierceness of the storm. I feel the water wash over me. I watch how the disciples shake Jesus to wake him from his sleep. I hear them cry out to Jesus, “Don’t you care? We are going to die.” Suddenly I feel a lump in my throat. I too want to shake Jesus awake, “Don’t you care? Don’t you care about this problem of mine?” Then I listen to Jesus speak to his disciples, quieting them with his challenge, “Why are you afraid? Where is your faith?” I see Jesus turn to me and ask me that question. With tears I reply, “Yes, I am afraid. Please take my fear and transform it to faith.”

The third stage: Continued Prayer (colloquy)

Share with the Lord whatever is on your heart. You have listened to him speak through your time of preparation and Scripture. Now speak with him about any desires or concerns that have come up as a result of your time with him.

The fourth stage: Review and Rest

- Review the time. What, if anything, did God show you? Did he give you what you desired from him this time? If not, why?
- Journal your thoughts if you want.
- Rest a few brief minutes before you go on to your daily tasks.

A word of loving encouragement ...

First, pray as you can, not as you can't.

Second, don't push through all stages if you feel the Lord wants to linger with you at a particular point. If at any point you sense the grace of God, stop there for a while with no anxiety to move on.

Frequently asked Questions

1. How long or how often should I do this?

Unless you are on a special retreat or going through an intense time, thirty minutes is probably sufficient. It is best to spend no more than one hour a day.

2. How can I do this when I have small children?

Ask your spouse to take care of the children while you pray. If he or she can't, due to a job situation, then do this on a weekend, spending as much time as you can or think is good. On the other days, steal a few moments a day just to be with Jesus. He understands for it is he who gently leads those who are with young (Isaiah 40:11). Remember, the object is not how much time you are with him, but that you are with him.

3. When I use my imagination am I not reading into Scripture things that are not true, and isn't this dangerous?

There is always the possibility that we can get things wrong, even when we use our reason to think deeply about scriptural truths. Both our reason and our imaginations need to be under the lordship of Christ. Our reason helps us to understand and our imagination helps us to experience. God will protect both of these when we submit them to his perfect will.

4. Why is it important to review?

In prayer we ask God for many things. When we review we recognize how he answered those prayers. Our hearts are filled with gratitude and humility.

5. What is the purpose of the rest at the end of the prayer time?

We must not think that God hears us because of our many words. It is not our words that drew his presence to us. He is with us because he wants to be with us. When we rest for a while, we simply acknowledge his sovereignty and our dependence on him. The rest quiets us and helps us move into the next task for that day.

6. Can I do this with others?

Yes! In fact, we encourage it. As you go through these stages with others, take time to share with one another what God is doing in you.

7. I fall asleep when I pray like this. Are there ways to help me stay awake and focus?

Don't worry, you are like many of us. You can listen to scriptures put to music and pray as you listen to them. You can prepare your heart, read a passage or write it out, and then go on a walk, praying as you meditate and contemplate through the passage. Find a rhythm and pace that works well for you. Ask others what helps them.

8. Why do I need a "method" to pray? You don't. There is nothing special about this method. Nevertheless, it is helpful for at least three reasons: First, it disciplines us to focus. Second, it is reproducible. It helps us to disciple others in prayer. Third, a method of praying is beneficial when we pray with others.

9. Can I journal throughout my prayer time instead of waiting until the end?

Yes. However, the reason we wait until the end is to give God enough time to speak and us enough time to listen. Jumping too quickly to write down our thoughts can distract us from other things God may want to speak to us about. It is easy to mistake our own thoughts for God's, so try holding off until you believe you have experienced God's grace.

GROWING IN PRAYER

Practicing the Presence of God
Paying Attention to God's Presence:
The Prayer of Examen



*God is a Person and can be known
in increasing degrees
of intimate acquaintance as we prepare
our heart for the wonder.*

A.W. Tozer

Practicing the Presence of God

God is with us always. It is our delight to be aware of his presence. Yet this is hard to do in lives that are full of distractions. We can go through a day without once thinking about God. Brother Lawrence said, 'I do nothing else but abide in his holy presence, and I do this by simple attentiveness and an habitual, loving turning of my eyes on him.'

How can we cultivate a habit of turning our eyes to our Lord? Below are a few simple suggestions for 'practicing the presence' of God. Before you start these exercises it is good to remember: 'Don't grit your teeth and clench your fists and say, "I will! I will!" Relax. Take your hands off. Submit yourself to God. Learn to live in the passive voice, and let life be willed through you.'

Arrow Prayers

These are short and can be prayed in one breath anywhere and anytime. Find a name for God that is particularly significant for you at this time, and then find the phrase that best suits what you are expecting from God. For example, 'Father, help me to know your love.' Or 'Almighty God, give me strength.' Or 'Living Water, refresh me.' Or 'Bread of Life, feed me.' Use this prayer constantly throughout your day and for as many days as it takes until you know and experience what it is you are seeking from God.

Flash Prayers

These are a type of intercession. For everybody that you see or pass by or interact with in your day, send up a flash prayer of blessing. Ask Jesus to touch them, reveal himself to them, prosper them, remove deception from them, overcome the works of the evil one and so on. Frank Laubach, a worker among Muslims in the Philippines, wrote, 'This morning, as I came from the train and prayed for all the people on the street, I felt new energy surge into me. What it does to all of them to receive that instant prayer I may never know. What it does for me is electric. It drives out fatigue and thrills one with eager power.'

The Language of God

God is constantly revealing himself to us. His creation and his works speak to us of his glory (Psalm 19). Everything you see contains a message from God about who he is. Look around and ask, 'God, what are you saying to me about yourself?' For example, you see a woman carrying a large burden. You are reminded of Psalm 68:19 (NIV), 'Blessed be the Lord who daily bears our burdens.' So God uses the picture and the idea of 'burden' to speak to us about his care. Or you see a child cry, and you are reminded of a time when all tears will be wiped away (Isaiah 25:8) or that though you sow in tears you will reap with joy (Psalm 126:5-6). So God uses tears to speak to us of eternity and joy.

Frank Laubach wrote, '*I shall try to learn your language as it was taught by Jesus and all others through whom you speak – in beauty and singing birds and cool breezes, in radiant Christ-like faces, in sacrifices and in tears.*'

Remember God on Your Bed

David wrote, 'On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night' (Psalm 63:6). There are at least three ways to do this. First, before you fall asleep, go back over your day, recalling what you did in the morning and then all through the rest of the day. In every scene that passes before you, place Jesus there. Then thank him for never leaving you nor forsaking you (Hebrews 13:5). Second, give your dreams to the Lord, asking him to reveal anything he wants while you sleep. Third, for those who wake up throughout the night, let your first thought upon waking be of him. Then ask him if there are any people or situations that you can pray about. If you are too drowsy to articulate words, just hold that person before the Lord, sometimes simply by holding up your hands as a symbol of holding him or her before the Lord. Picture that person before Jesus, and hold them there until you either fall asleep or until you move on to prayer for another person.

Live Concurrently

All this means is that you are living in two dimensions at the same time. On the physical level you may be listening to someone or performing a task or running an errand. On the spiritual level you are turning towards God by listening to him or by surrendering yourself to him. Joyce Huggett discovered this after major surgery when her brain was not functioning properly. She found that none of her normal prayer practices worked. But she found that she could be mindful of God at whatever chore she did. She writes, 'Make a deliberate decision to do the chore and that alone. Do the task slowly, carefully and in silence. Concentrate on the physical feeling of what you are doing. Gradually you will find your silence becoming inner stillness, a state of peace in which you will be more aware of God's encircling presence. In doing ordinary things with extraordinary concentration and attention, you can encounter God.' Some people, while doing tasks, surrender their body to God: 'use my hands, my feet, my mouth' (Romans 6:13, 19). Others, while listening or thinking, simultaneously pray, 'God, give me wisdom. What are you doing here? Saying here? Show me your will about this person or situation.'

Be still

Simply stop whatever you are doing and rest quietly (Psalm 46:10). For some this is a symbol, a way of reminding themselves that God is in control of life and their lives. For others, this is a time of silent waiting, a time to pray, 'Search me, oh God, and know my heart and see if there is any wicked way in me' (Psalm 139:23-24). Give God time to search your heart. If he reveals something to you, thank him for it. If not, still thank him for his love for you. If your mind is distracted during this time, don't get upset. Gently let the distractions go, let them float away like debris on water. And then turn your focus again to waiting silently before the Lord.

Practice the attitude of gratitude

'Give thanks in all things, for this is God's will for you' (I Thessalonians 5:18). So often we ask things from God and forget to thank him for all things. Practice giving him thanks for everything throughout the day. Another way to practice this discipline is to thank others for

how you see God working in them and through them. This can be powerfully effective when speaking to non-believers. A man who was not a believer, though married to one, challenged family members to have regular family reunions. One of those family members turned to him and said, 'Your concern for our family reminds me of how important family is. You are showing a part of God's concern and his love. Thank you for reflecting God's image in this way.'

A Word of Encouragement

It will take time before these exercises become habitual. Don't despair. Thomas Kelly, a Quaker who lived in the twentieth century, wrote, 'If you slip and stumble and forget God, and assert your old proud self, and rely upon your own clever wisdom, don't spend too much time in anguished regrets and self-accusations but begin again, just where you are.'

Paying Attention to God's Presence in Our Lives

The Prayer of Examen

All prayer is rooted in one thing: desire -- God's desire for us and our desire for God.

Prayer releases our longing and directs it to the One in whom we move and live and have our being. It finds expression in the Psalmist's desire, "O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting" (Psalm 63:1).

Many forms of prayer feed this desire -- such as praying with Scriptures, liturgical prayers, intercessory prayers, spiritual readings and other forms of prayer. But

... the prayer of examen is the specific searching *every day* to find where God's love is active this day, where God's love is *leading* today, to discern what within me may be resisting that leading, and to discover the growth to which God is calling me tomorrow so that this deepest desire can be increasingly fulfilled. Nothing in the spiritual life can replace a prayer that seeks this awareness of God's daily leading in our lives.¹

The Prayer of Examen is our way of being regularly available to God by paying attention to what he is doing in our lives and in the lives of others. Examen can be done individually and as community. We encourage you to try this in your family, with your team or with your spouse.

As we practice this prayer two things will happen. First, we will *grow in gratitude*. We can't help but be grateful when we recognize that God is indeed present in our lives. And second, we will *grow in discernment*. As we become aware of his leading in the smaller matters of our lives, we will be better prepared to discern his leading in those truly big and important matters.

In its simplest form, the Prayer of Examen goes like this:

Ask God to show you that day's *consolations* (joy) and *desolations* (pain). Review your day and relive the moments when you felt consolation or desolation. Ask God to speak to you about it.

The Steps of Examen

Transition into the Examen: Practice God's presence

Because prayer is our response to God's desire for us, it is important that we begin examen by becoming aware of the love with which God looks upon us. How? By simply noting the gifts that God's love has given us this day, and giving thanks to God for them.

Step One: Consolations²

Ask God to help you remember *the moment today when you felt most grateful, most alive, most energized, most joyful and so on*. It helps to quickly review the day's events from the time you woke up. If more than one consolation comes to mind, *focus on only one*.

Step back into that moment and experience it again.

Ask God to show you why that moment caused you consolation and what he is saying to you through it. Note how you chose to respond. Is this consolation drawing you closer to God and his will? Consolation that is God-given will draw you closer to him, and it will give you peace and the desire to obey him more fully.

Step Two: Desolations

Ask God to help you remember *the moment today for which you felt least grateful, least alive*, where you experienced sadness, shame, anger, frustration, hopelessness and so on. It helps to quickly review the day's events from the time you woke up. If more than one desolation comes to mind, focus on only one.

Step back into that moment and experience it again.

Ask God to show you why that moment caused you desolation and what he is saying to you through it. Note how you chose to respond. Is it pulling you away from God? The Holy Spirit uses pain to awaken us to God and to bring us closer to him. Satan uses pain to tempt us away from God.

It is important that you are honest about your thoughts and feelings. God already knows, so there is little good in trying to hide it from him or even from yourself, thinking "I shouldn't be feeling/thinking this."

Step Three: Concluding the Examen

Ask God to forgive you for choices you made that pulled you away from him. And ask him for strength to live tomorrow in the light of what he showed you today in your examen.

Transition out of Examen: Rest in God's presence

Thank God for being with you this day and throughout the prayer. Be quiet for a while and soak in God's love for you. Examen can be a difficult experience, so it is important to conclude the examen by reaffirming God's love for you.³ How? Through a worship song, a particular favourite scripture, recalling a specific word he gave you, something someone else said that encouraged you, picturing Jesus with you, or praying the Lord's Prayer. So many ways, really, so be free and be blessed.

Further considerations

This prayer can be: Done at the end of the day or multiple times throughout the day when you feel the need to stop to reflect and discern what God is doing. Not all the steps need to be done during each examen. Done quickly or it can take up an entire quiet time. Done over your entire life: go through your life, discovering those times of consolation and desolation, how you responded, what God was doing, asking for healing and forgiveness, and prayerfully looking forward to the future. Taught and done with children. Done with others.

¹ The Examen Prayer, by Timothy M. Gallagher. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006, p. 36.

² See Charles Bellow's Prayer as a Place. HGM Publishing, 3720 S. Hiwassee Rd. Choctaw, TX 73020

³ Another book that describes the process of Examen is Sleeping with Bread by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995.

EXPERIENCING GOD'S REST

Learning to Be Still
An Awareness Walk
Presenting Our Bodies
How to Make a Personal Retreat
The Dark Night of the Soul



A Prayer of St. Anselm, 11th Century

*O little man, escape from your everyday
business for a short while.*

Hide for a moment from your restless thoughts.

*Break off from your cares and troubles and be less con-
cerned about your tasks and labours.*

Make a little time for God and rest a while in Him.

Enter into your mind's inner chamber.

*Shut out everything but God and whatever
helps you to look for Him.*

And when you have shut the door, look for Him.

Speak now to God and say with your whole heart:

*I seek your face,
Your face, Lord,
I desire.*

Learning to Be Still

*But I have stilled and quietened my soul:
Like a weaned child with its mother,
Like a weaned child is my soul within me.
Psalm 131:2*

Relax yourself. Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. Be at ease physically. Breathe slowly and deeply.

Let your mind also relax. Gently but firmly let go of words and thoughts (even those about God), also of cares, concerns, and anxieties (at least for this brief period of time). Hand things over to God on the basis of 1 Peter 5:7, 'Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.'

Let your emotions settle too. Think about God's love for you (not your love for God) — unconditional, unchanging and undeserved. Allow yourself to bask in this love as if you were sunbathing. Let God's love cover your whole being.

Allow yourself just to be quiet, knowing by faith that you are already in the presence of God, which means being in the presence of Love. Relax in the silence of that Presence. Just be there. Do not feel as if there is anything you have to do or achieve.

Perhaps listen to some instrumental music or a reflective song that leads you to be more aware of God. Maybe focus on the stillness of a lighted candle. Picture yourself as the child in Psalm 131. Repeat a prayer word or phrase in tune with your breathing, such as 'Abba, Father.'

If you are distracted (as you surely will be), don't worry about it or fight against it. Simply re-focus yourself on your prayer word until you return to inner quiet.

As you feel yourself enter into stillness, **remain as still and quiet as you can.** Allow God to do whatever He chooses to do or not to do – let Him be in control. He may speak; He may not. You may feel God's love; you may not. It is enough simply to give God your attention and to be quiet before Him. It is the communion of friends we seek

Slowly let yourself come out of the quietness perhaps by singing softly to yourself or praying a short prayer of thanks.

Remember:

Silent prayer is an act of faith.

It takes time, and it takes practice.

Sometimes it is easier than others, but always it is worthwhile.

There doesn't have to be an 'outcome' or 'result.'

It isn't doing nothing or wasting time.

By Tony Horsfall. A recommended resource by Tony: *Rhythms of Grace: Finding Intimacy with God in a Busy Life*. Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway, 2004. www.kingsway.co.uk

An Awareness Walk

Go for a very leisurely walk outside or just sit.

Use your five senses to engage with the world which God the Creator has made

*Remember Psalm 8: 'When I consider your heavenswhat is man...?'
and the words of Jesus: 'Look at the birds... look at the lilies' (Matthew 6)*

Now look ...

- What can you **see**? A bird, a beetle, a worm, a spider's web?
- Look at the grasses, many different kinds ... **touch** them ...look carefully at them
So with the leaves and twigs and bark
- Look at the flowers ... touch them gently so that you do not harm them Look at the
stamens, sepals, the leaves, the blossoms ... **Smell** their fragrance.
- Now **listen** ... No doubt you may hear cars, but what else can you hear – a bird?
The rustling of leaves? The chirrup of an insect?

Perhaps there is something you can **taste**?

Now look at the larger scene, the great trees ... the patterns in the clouds ... the colours in
the sky...

What is it saying to you? Can you recognise some of the parables in nature that speak to you
today, in your present situation?

Be alert to those things which grab your attention, which 'accidentally' come across your
path. Recognise that God is in such happenings.

And all this – made by God ...

And not a sparrow falls without

Worship Him who made all this

What is man?

Who am I?

And yet I am loved and 'every hair of my head' ...

Allow your heart to rise to God in worship and praise.

Perhaps collect a few things which will not spoil the garden or the countryside to take back
to make a small display.

By Tony Horsfall.

Presenting Our Bodies

Below are activities you can do to present your bodies as living sacrifices, to remind yourself that you move and live in God, and to use all things that he has given us richly for our enjoyment (Romans 12:1-2; Acts 17:28; 1 Timothy 6:17). Remember that the disciples 'heard, saw, looked at and touched' the Lord (1 John 1:1). We cannot physically touch the Lord, but we can do this indirectly through other means that God gives us.

Allow yourself to get out of your normal box with God. You may find these activities do nothing for you. Try again later. After each exercise you may want to journal.

Important! Please Note: *Before each exercise, present yourself and the time to the Lord. Then meditate on a portion of Scripture God has given you.*

1. Sensory Interaction: Using artistic medium

Select your medium of choice: clay, coloured paper, blank paper, pens, crayons, paints, whatever. Now that God has spoken to you, start to create something. You may not know what to do. Just start. Allow what you've read – insights, words, pictures, colours, etc to flow to the page or clay.

2. Object Interaction: Understanding God through his created world

As with Sensory Interaction, objects may stir emotional responses or provide insights with the Lord. Gather a selection of objects: a candle, a flower, a cross, a key, a child's toy, a piece of chocolate, anything that comes to hand. After reading your text, select an object. You may wish to continue your reflections on the biblical text as you gaze at the object. Or you may wish to stop at a word or a phrase and savour it, digest it, ponder it – all while holding the object. Ask the Lord to show you if there is anything about this object and the text that He wants to share with you.

3. Visual Art: Contemplating the Lord through word and art

After reading your text, move to one work of religious art (something on your walls, in a museum, on the internet — www.mobia.org, www.wga.hu). Ask the Lord to reveal Himself to you and encourage the full meaning of the text as you dwell on the art. If you find art difficult to understand, find an explanation of what the artist worked to convey. Is there anything in the art for you to ponder for your own spiritual life? Talk with Him about what you feel and think as you view the art.

4. Mime, Dance, Expressive Movement: Attending to God with our bodies

The Bible talks about coming, drinking, kneeling, bowing, dancing – all physical acts of worship. Read your biblical text. Sitting or standing, act out (mime), dance or move in ways that take the text to a deeper level. You may get a sense of God's power – move with power. Or you may want to dance to a Christian song with abandon and joy. Act out the text to a piece of wordless music.

Adapted from Divine Encounters by Renee S.

How to Make a Personal Retreat

A retreat is simply taking time and creating the space and quiet in which to reflect. It is possible to do this even in “less than ideal” environments. Retreats provide time to unwind; to think, to feel, to listen, to be creative; time to look back and plan ahead, to lay things down and to take up new challenges; time to pray, and to deepen our relationship with God and our awareness of His presence and activity in our lives.

There are various types of retreats ranging from one to thirty days, preached or individually guided, silent or companionable. Check with other expatriates living in your country for suggestions. There are organised retreats or you might simply like to spend time by yourself with the Lord. If you are unused to extended periods of silence, it may be helpful to start with a quiet day. (Below is a possible schedule for a quiet day retreat.) Writing a journal may assist your retreat, enabling you to go back to things later.

Where would I go?

Try to find someplace with a peaceful atmosphere and good accommodation such as:

- Retreat houses
- Conferences centres
- A hotel in another city where you won't likely run into acquaintances
- Your own favourite place where you can be and do just what you want
- The home of a friend or team member who is out (a one-day house swap).

It is generally not a good idea to stay at home as there are too many distractions.

However, it is possible to make a retreat at home. You just need to be very disciplined.

What can I do on retreat?

- Relax! Don't feel guilty if you simply want to rest and sleep.
 - Read your Bible or books. If you bring books, though, read only a little and then ponder the meaning of what you read, your reaction to it, and its significance for you.
 - Pray – in private or out walking. Words may be helpful or you may prefer simply to be inwardly still and quiet, receptive to the Spirit.
 - Go for walks – use your senses and enjoy the sights, sounds and smells.
 - Be creative: express your thoughts, feelings or insights in words (prose or verse) or images (such as drawing, painting or clay) or movement.
- Activity is good if it deepens your retreat: if it starts to take over, set it aside.

Preparing for a retreat

Make sure all your regular activities are covered for the duration of your retreat so that you are free to relax. If you are making a retreat on your own over a meal time, get your food ready beforehand so that no time is taken out of your day to prepare food – unless you find food preparation a relaxing way to be with God.

Turn your mobile phone off or put it on silent and commit not to check messages until the end of the retreat. If you are staying at home, take the phone off the hook or put the answering machine on with the volume turned off.

Have a programme

Something like the following might help – adjust the times according to your needs. (For example, you may know that you need more than 15 minutes at the start to relax and enter into a time of stillness – that's OK allow yourself longer.)

10:00am – Relaxation. During this time focus your thoughts on the Lord. Pray and ask God to open your heart and mind to His word and His Spirit ministering to you.

10:15am – Meditate on a particular word or phrase in Scripture. (This can be in thought, words, contemplation or creative expression.)

10:45am – Break. Have a cup of coffee, stretch, go outside and enjoy the scenery. Step away from the place you've been, physically and mentally, trusting God to bring you back.

11:00am – Continue meditation.

12:30pm – Lunch and break. You might want to take the time after lunch to take a walk or nap.

2:30pm – Return to whatever is your focus for the day.

3:30pm – Review the day. Ask the Lord to highlight things for you; consider where He has been with you and thank Him. If things come to mind that you are not happy with, ask Him for the willingness and grace to change these, but the end of the day is not the time to dwell on such things, make time for that the next day.

4:00pm – Finish the day with a time of prayer and thanksgiving.

4:30pm – Slowly return to the normal routine of life.

Silence

Retreats can be largely, or entirely, in silence. Silence allows us to grow more attentive and receptive to the Spirit speaking within. In our busy, noisy world this can be a relief and a joy. Sometimes, though, it can also be uncomfortable: you may become aware of matters or feelings that you have been too busy to attend to. If at any time on a retreat you feel weighed down by your reflections, recall God's love for you.

Worship

Juxtaposed with silence, worship can bring to a group a great sense of unity. On an individual retreat you might like to bring a written liturgy, worship CDs, a musical instrument or song sheets. Just be aware that sometimes even worship music can be a place to hide from the voice of God.

Ending the retreat

Before you leave look back over your retreat:

- What have you experienced?
- Have you received or resolved anything?
- Have you become newly aware of anything?
- Is there anything you need to do now?

After the retreat

Daily life will quickly impose itself. You will need to find ways to integrate insights and commitments from the retreat into your ordinary living. You might like to put a reminder in your diary to reread your journal in a couple of weeks' time.

*Adapted from www.livingreflectively.com/retreats.php,
www.retreats.org.uk/general/publicat.htm,
and www.stantonhouse.org.uk/retreat.html*

The Dark Night of the Soul

A time to find rest in God's love

Could this be you?

"I find that Scripture doesn't mean what it used to; my prayers don't go anywhere. I am praying more, reading more, doing more, and yet I find less of God. It finally comes to a point when I can't pray any more because I don't know the words. I have run out of words to say to God."

God seems absent, yet you desire him more than ever. In fact, you are desperate for him. All you want is God. You may not believe you want God – in fact, you might blame God for this dryness. But it is this very longing for God – even though hidden or unknown to you – that is causing you such anguish over your dryness.

Spontaneously you are drawn to prayer numerous times in a day, simple prayers from the heart because it is hard to concentrate or focus on anything that is not from your heart.

You wonder if you are backsliding

- You don't want to go to church, people are telling you to try harder, yet all you want to do is learn how to rest in God's love.
- Your priorities shift from wanting to do the spectacular and "big" to the smaller and more relational.
- You realize God is HUGE, and you can't manage or control him.
- You question your faith, your hope and your love.
- You become tentative and less sure of yourself and your calling.

You may be in the dark night

If you are a mature believer and this is happening to you, you may be in the dark night of the soul. Some think it is caused by a sin, still others by depression. It is caused by neither. It is true that during the dark night we experience the cleansing of our sins at very deep levels, and it is also true that we can feel depressed during the process.

What is happening to me?

The dark night of the soul is caused by God himself as he transforms us into the image of Christ. He draws us into our innermost being where he desires truth. It is there, with him, that we look at our egos, our motives, our drivenness, our loneliness, our temptations. We learn to be honest and face the truth. It requires great humility.

You are experiencing natural spiritual growth which seems to come through three major stages.

- First there is **orientation**, when God teaches his people his ways and we learn how to respond to him. In this stage all of life is as it should be.
- Next comes **disorientation**, a time of confusion, questioning and even despair precipitated by a crisis or severe trial. There is dissonance between our confession of God and our experience of God and life.
- Finally, **re-orientation**. In the midst of this disorientation or this dark night of the soul, God gives a revelation or breakthrough that helps us reinterpret our present pain, respond with genuine humility, and renew our hope in God. Now we are able to see the hand of God in our circumstances. It is a Romans 8:28 experience.

Practices of resting, waiting and abiding

- Pray the prayers of lament in the Psalms: express your suffering, your fears, your misery.
- Keep your end of the deal with God by directing your attention to him with simple expressions of longing love (breath prayers, arrow prayers).
- Wait on God. When you are unable to put your spiritual life into drive, do not put it in reverse; put it into neutral.
- Stop listening to those voices that say you are a spiritual failure. Those voices are not from God.
- Develop **“being”** rather than **“doing”** spiritual disciplines. Such as:
 - Solitude and silence – your soul is probably telling you this is what you need.
 - Rest – your body is probably telling you this is what you need.
 - Reflection – your mind is probably urging you to stop learning more and to focus more deeply. Part of reflection might require that you learn to journal effectively. Also, the prayer of examen is a vital discipline you can cultivate during this time.

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