

The Solitude Practice

Practicing the Way

Welcome

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once said that “solitude is not a private, therapeutic place ... it is the place of encounter.”

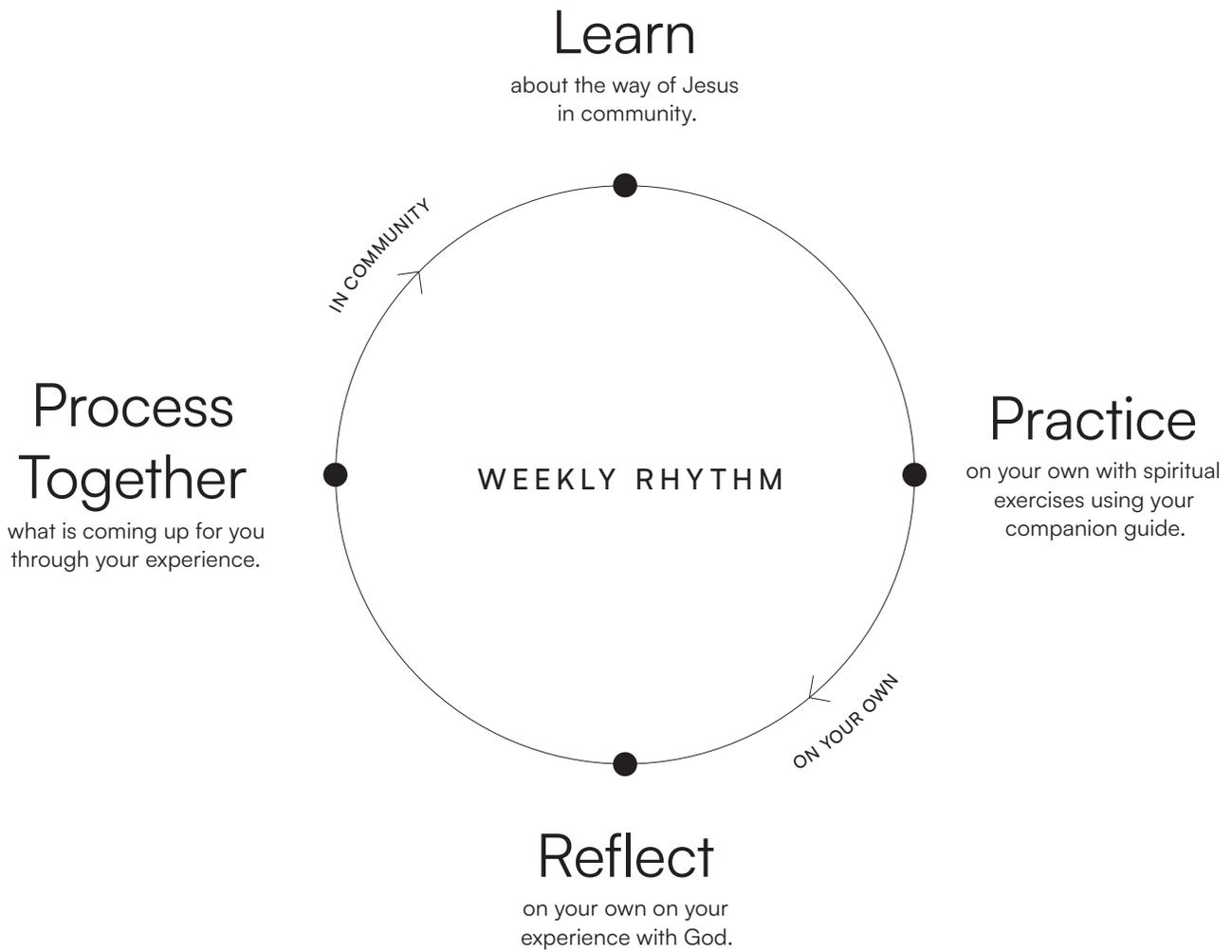
We live in a therapeutic culture, where far more emphasis is put on *feeling* good than *being* good. Inside a culture focused on wellness spirituality, it's easy to view practices like solitude, silence, and stillness as no more than spiritual disciplines for introverts who like that sort of thing.

But this is not the solitude of Jesus or John the Baptist or Elijah the prophet or any of the great ones of the Way. For them, solitude wasn't a day spa for the soul. They may have spent time in the quiet resting, but ultimately, the goal wasn't to run away from the world but to run to God. And then come back to the world to love and serve.

You see solitude *all over* the life of Jesus. As the Gospel writer Luke put it, “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”

And yet: In the digital age, it is now possible to go your entire life without ever being truly alone with God. Our devices keep us tethered to the world of noise and regularly drown out the voice of God in our heart. We are starved for solitude, living through a global famine of quiet; noise refugees, seeking a new home where we can find rest in God.

Solitude is not an easy path, but it is the ancient path — the Jesus path — to a strong, deep, joyful, vibrant life with God.

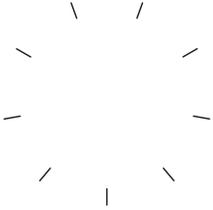


How to use the Companion Guide:

- 01 **Learn:** Gather together as a community for an interactive experience of learning about the Way of Jesus through teaching, storytelling, and discussion. Bring your Guide to the Session and follow along.
- 02 **Practice:** On your own, before the next session, go and “put it into practice,” as Jesus himself said. We will provide weekly spiritual disciplines and spiritual exercises, as well as recommended resources to go deeper.
- 03 **Reflect:** Reflection is key to spiritual formation. After your practice and before the next session, set aside 10-15 minutes to reflect on your experience. Reflection questions are included in this Guide at the end of each session.
- 04 **Process together:** When you come back together, begin by sharing your reflections with your group. This moment is crucial, because we need each other to process our life before God and make sense of our stories. If you are meeting in a larger group, you will need to break into smaller sub-groups for this conversation so everything has a chance to share.

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O God, gather me now to be with you as you are with me.

Soothe my tiredness;
quiet my fretfulness;
curb my aimlessness;
relieve my compulsiveness;
let me be easy for a moment.

O Lord, release me
from the fears and guilts which grip me so tightly;
from the expectations and opinions which I so tightly grip,
that I may be open
to receiving what you give,
to risking something genuinely new,
to learning something refreshingly different.

Forgive me
for claiming so much for myself
that I leave no room for gratitude;
for confusing exercises in self-importance
with acceptance of self-worth;
for complaining so much of my burdens
that I become a burden;
for competing against others so insidiously
that I stifle celebrating them
and receiving your blessing through their gifts.

O God, gather me to be with you as you are with me.
Amen.

—TED LODER, *GUERRILLAS OF GRACE*

Tips

This Guide is full of spiritual exercises, best practices, and good advice on the spiritual discipline of solitude.

But it's important to note that the Practices are not formulaic. We can't use them to control our spiritual formation or our relationship with God. Sometimes they don't even feel like they work very well. Sometimes we go into solitude and experience God's presence like never before, but other times we just feel bored and distracted. That's okay. Our goal isn't to control our spiritual formation, but to *surrender to Jesus*. To give more and more of our deepest selves to him, to rescue and save and heal and transform, in his time, his way, by his power and peace and presence.

The key with the spiritual disciplines is to let go of outcomes and just offer them up to Jesus in love.

Because it's so easy to lose sight of the ultimate aim of a Practice, here are a few tips to keep in mind as you enter solitude.

01 Start small

Start where you are, not where you "should" be. It's counterintuitive, but the smaller the start, the better chance you have of really sticking to it and growing over time.

02 Think subtraction, not addition

Please do not "add" solitude into your already overbusy, overfull life. You are likely already stressed and tired. Instead, think: What can I cut out of my daily schedule? How can I slow my life down? Where can I find a little breathing room to rest and pray? Formation is about less, not more. About slowing down and simplifying your life around what matters most: life with Jesus.

03 You get out what you put in

The more fully you give yourself to this Practice, the more life-changing it will be. The more you just dabble with it and the more shortcuts you take, the less transformation you will experience.

04 Remember the J-curve

Experts on learning tell us that whenever we set out to master a new skill, it tends to follow a J-shaped curve; we tend to get worse before we get better. You may enjoy a quiet morning before work or a lazy Sunday afternoon, but when you go into solitude, you may feel itchy or anxious or emotional. That's okay. Expect it to be a bit awkward at first; it will get easier in time. Just stay with the Practice.

05 There is no formation without repetition

Spiritual formation is slow, deep, cumulative work that happens over years, not weeks. The goal of this four-session experience is just to get you *started* on a journey of a lifetime. Upon completion of this Practice, you will have a map for the journey ahead, and hopefully some possible companions for the Way. But what you do next, is up to you.

A note about the Reach Practice

St. Benedict wrote that spiritual leaders should organize a community in such a way that “the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.”

We recognize that we’re all at different places in our stage of discipleship and season of life. To that end, we’ve added a Reach Practice to each of the four sessions for those of you who have the time, energy, and desire to go further in solitude.

Additionally, we have reading and corresponding episodes from the Rule of Life podcast to enhance all four sessions. Enjoy!

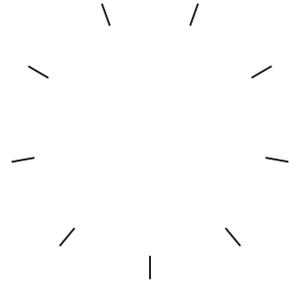
A note about the recommended reading

Solitude is a radical discipline in the modern world and can have a steep learning curve for many of us.

Reading a book alongside the Practice can greatly help your understanding and enjoyment of solitude. You may love to read, or you may not. For that reason, it’s recommended, but certainly not required.

Our companion book for the Solitude Practice is *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton. It’s full of wisdom, insight, and scriptural truth, as well as practical advice.

May the peace of
Christ be with you.



The Quiet Place

SESSION 01

“The invitation to solitude and silence is just that. It is an invitation to enter more deeply into the intimacy of relationship with the One who waits just outside the noise and busyness of our lives. It is an invitation to communication and communion with the One who is always present even when our awareness has been dulled by distraction. It is an invitation to the adventure of spiritual transformation in the deepest places of our being, an adventure that will result in greater freedom and authenticity and surrender to God than we have yet experienced.”

—RUTH HALEY BARTON, *INVITATION TO SOLITUDE AND SILENCE*

Overview

Smartphones, alerts, Wi-Fi, email, social media, streaming services, and the endless queue of entertainment — the noise of the digital age is with us 24/7.

On top of that, we hear daily the “noise” of opinion, political polarization, outrage over the culture wars, and more.

Not to mention the literal noise of modern life: automobiles, delivery trucks, freeway traffic, airplanes overhead, construction all around. The world is louder and louder with each passing year.

This poses a major problem for those of us who apprentice under Jesus. As Mother Teresa once said, “We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.” She was re-voicing what all the saints and sages have said for millennia: The two primary places we discover God are in community — in deep, long-term, loving relationships with other apprentices of Jesus in the family of God — and in solitude, silence, and stillness.

You see this pattern in the life of Jesus himself. Jesus would regularly slip away into the *eremos*, a Greek word that can be translated “the desert” or “the deserted place” or “the solitary place” or even “the quiet place.” There he would

pray; he would open to his Father and draw on the Holy Spirit for strength, wisdom, direction, and joy. Then he would come back to the world of people to love and serve.

This back-and-forth rhythm of community and solitude is one we desperately need to reclaim for the modern age. Most of us get intuitively that we *need* relationships with other followers of Jesus to flourish, but many of us are less in touch with our need for intentional times in the quiet to be alone with ourselves and our God. As Henri Nouwen put it, “Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life.” All close friendships require dedicated time alone together.

How do we befriend God, let God befriend us, amid all the noise, distraction, and busyness of modern life?

We follow Jesus’ example, and we go into solitude.

As we’ll explore over the coming four sessions, solitude is both a *place* and a *practice*. As we take small steps forward together, may you discover new layers of possibility with God as you follow him day by day.

Practice

SESSION 01: THE QUIET PLACE

Information alone does not produce transformation. To grow, let's put this teaching into practice. Consider how the Spirit wants to transform your life in response to what you've learned.

The exercise for Session 01 is very simple; it's to begin your day with a few minutes of solitude, silence, and stillness.

You may find this exercise works better for you at night before bed, midmorning when your toddler is napping, or on your lunch break; that's great. But for the vast majority of people, we recommend first thing in the morning, when your body is rested, your heart open, and the day is new.

Here's a step-by-step exercise to try.

- 01 Find a quiet place in your home or outside in nature that is as *distraction-free as possible*. Make sure your phone is in another room and settle into a comfortable position.
- 02 Begin to take long, slow breaths from your belly all the way up through your lungs. Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth. If you want, count up 5 seconds on the inhale and down 5 seconds on the exhale.
- 03 With each inhale, prayerfully welcome the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit into the deepest place within you. You may want to repeat a simple prayer like "Come Holy Spirit" or "Lord, have mercy on me" or just "Jesus." Something to keep your mind focused and to let this be more than just breathing, but prayer.
 - Your mind *will* seize this opportunity to run wild with thoughts, feelings, memories, to-dos, and distractions. That's okay. Don't judge yourself, feel bad, give up, or worry. Distraction doesn't mean you're "bad" at prayer; it means you're *human*. When you notice your mind starting to wander, just come back to your breathing or your prayer word.

- In the beginning, just 1-2 minutes of this type of prayer is a win. Ten minutes is a home run.

04 Now that you are centered in your body and in God, spend a few minutes just resting in God's love for you. Let the Holy Spirit make his presence known to your whole body. Just soak in his love and peace and joy. Let God love you.

- You may want to visualize the love of the Father being poured out in Christ and into the depth of your being by the Holy Spirit.
- Or you may want to listen for God's voice and see what comes to mind.
- Or you may want to worship and express your love to God in your own way.
- But don't try to fill up this time. And don't try to make anything happen or control the experience — just *be* with God.

05 After a few minutes, you may want to continue your time in solitude by praying a psalm or reading a story from the Gospels or a passage from Scripture. Or by praying over your life. Or by journaling to God. Follow your heart.

06 Whenever you're done, close your time with a simple prayer of gratitude to God for his presence, love, and goodness in your life.

Please note: Our strong recommendation is that you do this *every single day* this coming week and, if you can, for a little longer on the Sabbath. If you only get to do it once or twice, that's still great, but there is something about the practice of beginning every day in the quiet with God that is very basic, yet ancient and powerful.

This practice of beginning your day in silent prayer is not for everybody; it may not work best for your personality or stage of life. But so many of the great followers of Jesus throughout history tell us that the way to begin to be with Jesus *all* the time is to set aside our first moments upon waking to intentionally be with him for *some* of the time.

Reach Practice

SESSION 01: THE QUIET PLACE

We all learn differently. Some of us prefer reading, others listening, and others doing. If you'd like to go deeper, choose what resonates with you and give it a try! Even if you don't try a Reach Practice, remember to journal in the Solitude Reflection section before your next session as a group.

Reading

Read chapters 1-3 of *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton.

Podcast

Listen to episode 1 of the Solitude series from the Rule of Life podcast by Practicing the Way.

Exercise: A full hour of quiet prayer daily

When Henri Nouwen asked Mother Teresa for spiritual counsel, she told him to “spend one hour each day in adoration of your Lord.” Life is busy for all of us, but many people find that a full hour gives the necessary space to really slow down and experience God's presence and voice.

Our Reach Practice for Session 01 is to spend a full hour in the quiet each morning *before* you touch your phone.

Begin with the above exercise, but then spend the rest of your time as you feel moved — reading Scripture, listening for God's voice, offering petition and intercession, journaling, or whatever you feel a stirring in your heart toward. Follow your desire for God wherever it leads.

Remember: Following Jesus in the modern era is less about adding new activities into our already overbusy, tiring lives. It's more about taking activities out, about slowing down to rest and delight in Jesus as he rests and delights in us.

Special note: Retreat

With spiritual exercises, it's always best to start very small and slowly work your way up. Don't try to be heroic; be gentle with yourself, as God is gentle. That said, for the final session of our Solitude Practice, we're going to invite you to go on retreat. A daily quiet time is an essential practice, but there are some things that can only happen in longer periods of solitude.

You may choose to begin with just a few hours of retreat, or you may want to go away for a half day or full day. But you may choose to go away overnight, or even for a few days. If so, you will need to begin planning now.

Look for retreat centers near you, or monasteries — they usually have guest rooms available for people who want to go pray in the quiet. You may have access to a family cabin or empty guest house, or you may choose to rent a cabin or quiet place to be alone. And if you don't have access to a place to go on retreat, just follow Jesus' example and go outside. Go on a long hike or camping by yourself, or just find a place in nature to be alone.

Those of you with children may want to alternate days away with your spouse or call on your community and/or family for help at home. This practice of retreat can be a time for your community to come together. One of the best gifts we can give each other is the gift of time away to rest and be with God. Communities can share the gift of solitude and sabbath with those members who don't have easy access to it.

Solitude Reflection

SESSION 01: THE QUIET PLACE

Reflection is a key component in our spiritual formation.

Millenia ago, King David prayed in Psalm 139v23-24:

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Trevor Hudson, a scholar on Ignatian spirituality, has said, “We don’t change from our experience, we change when we reflect on our experience.”

If you want to get the most out of this Practice, you need to do it, and then *reflect* on it.

Solitude Reflection

SESSION 01: THE QUIET PLACE

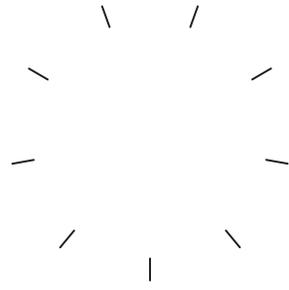
Before your next time together with the group for Session 02, take five to ten minutes to journal out your answers to the following three questions.

01 How did your practice of solitude go this week?

02 Where did you experience resistance in solitude?

03 In what ways did you encounter God in solitude?

Note: As you write, be as specific as possible. While bullet points are just fine, if you write it out in narrative form, your brain will be able to process your insights in a more lasting way.



Encounter with Our Self

“At the heart of man there is an innate silence, for God abides in the innermost part of every person. God is silence, and this divine silence dwells in man. In God we are inseparably bound up with silence ... God carries us, and we live with him at every moment by keeping silence. Nothing will make us discover God better than his silence inscribed in the center of our being. If we do not cultivate this silence, how can we find God? Man likes to travel, create, make great discoveries. But he remains outside of himself, far from God, who is silently in his soul ... There is no place on earth where God is more present than in the human heart. This heart truly is God’s abode, the temple of silence. ... The Father waits for his children in their own hearts.”

—ROBERT CARDINAL SARAH, *THE POWER OF SILENCE*

Overview

We often go into solitude tired and worn down by the stress and strain of life in the modern world, and we expect our time in solitude to be like a kind of day spa for the soul. And sometimes it is. We come to quiet and sense God's love and gentle compassion come near to our heart. We resonate with Psalm 23: "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul."

But just as often, solitude can feel less like a day spa and more like a harrowing emotional surgery. Because we can get away from people, but we can't get away from our *self*. And often what we carry into solitude is our pain.

As Henri Nouwen put it:

"Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman occurs. ... In solitude, I get rid of my scaffolding. I have 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, my distractions ..."

When we get free of our distractions, we quickly come to realize all that we've been distracting ourselves from.

Every emotion we've been outrunning through noise, hurry, and activity finally catches up with us, and we begin to *feel* our pain. Feelings of exhaustion, worry, sadness, anger, and shame all come up.

Yet from Jesus we learn that to get free of our pain, we have to face our pain. On the evening before his crucifixion, in the garden of Gethsemane, we see Jesus go to the place of pain and meet God there. He gives God his feelings, his desires, and his trust.

In solitude, we follow Jesus' example. We find a quiet place, in a garden, park, or just in the quiet of our home; we go to the place of pain; and we meet God there. It is through this simple but difficult practice of noticing and naming our emotions before God in prayer, and offering them up to God in raw honesty, that we are deeply formed into the people God has always desired for us to become.

Practice

SESSION 02: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR SELF

To grow, we need more than content, we need real, embodied practice. As you read the practice, consider how the Spirit wants to transform your life in response to what you've learned.

This session's exercise is very similar to last session. It's to begin your day with a few minutes of solitude, silence, and stillness before you touch your phone. But we've made just one addition: This session, we're also calling you to an exercise of noticing and naming your emotions and then praying Jesus' Gethsemane Prayer.

Again, we recommend you do this first thing in the morning, but you may find it works better for you after work or late at night or at a pause in your day. Just find a time when you are at peace and attentive, and attempt to stick with the same time each day.

Here's a step-by-step exercise to try.

- 01 Find a quiet place in your home or outside in nature that is as *distraction-free as possible*. Make sure your phone is in another room and settle into a comfortable position.
- 02 Begin to take long, slow breaths from your belly all the way up through your lungs. Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth. If you want, count up 5 seconds on the inhale and down 5 seconds on the exhale.
- 03 With each inhale, prayerfully welcome the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit into the deepest place within you. You may want to repeat a simple prayer like "Come Holy Spirit" or "Lord, have mercy on me" or just "Jesus." Something to keep your mind focused and to let this be more than just breathing, but prayer.
 - Your mind *will* seize this opportunity to run wild with thoughts, feelings, memories, to-dos, and distractions. That's okay.

Don't judge yourself, feel bad, give up, or worry. Distraction doesn't mean you're "bad" at prayer; it means you're *human*. When you notice your mind starting to wander, just come back to your breathing or your prayer word.

- In the beginning, just 1-2 minutes of this type of prayer is a win. Ten minutes is a home run.

04 Now that you are centered in your body and in God, begin to let yourself feel ... let whatever is in you come up. Just notice it. Don't fight it or run away from it or feel guilty about it or judge it — just

Happy	Sad	Angry	Scared	Confused
Admired	Alienated	Abused	Afraid	Ambivalent
Alive	Ashamed	Aggravated	Alarmed	Awkward
Appreciated	Burdened	Agitated	Anxious	Baffled
Assured	Condemned	Anguished	Appalled	Bewildered
Cheerful	Crushed	Annoyed	Apprehensive	Bothered
Confident	Defeated	Betrayed	Awed	Constricted
Content	Dejected	Cheated	Concerned	Directionless
Delighted	Demoralized	Coerced	Defensive	Disorganized
Determined	Depressed	Controlled	Desperate	Distracted
Estatic	Deserted	Deceived	Doubtful	Doubtful
Elated	Despised	Disgusted	Fearful	Flustered
Encouraged	Devastated	Dismayed	Frantic	Foggy
Energized	Disappointed	Displeased	Full of Dread	Hesitant
Enthusiastic	Discarded	Dominated	Guarded	Immobilized
Excited	Discouraged	Enraged	Horrified	Misunderstood
Exuberant	Disgraced	Exasperated	Impatient	Perplexed
Flattered	Disheartened	Exploited	Insecure	Puzzled
Fortunate	Disillusioned	Frustrated	Intimidated	Stagnant
Fulfilled	Dismal	Fuming	Nervous	Surprised

<https://www.ndapandas.org/wp-content/uploads/archive/Documents/News/FeelingsWordList.pdf>

notice it. Let the feeling be. Then name the emotion and be as specific as possible. You may want to utilize the following list of emotions. Just pick out 1-3 feeling words that put language to what you're experiencing in your body.

05 Just sit in those feelings. Sink into them. Normally, we turn away from them and run in the opposite direction. Instead, turn and face them, like you would an ocean wave, and let it wash over you and then pass you by.

06 Then, pray Jesus' Gethsemane Prayer.

- Give God your feelings — Tell him what you are feeling, with no filter.
- Give God your desires — Tell him what you really want, good or bad.
- Give God your trust — Surrender your heart again to him. Stop grasping for control and yield yourself to God and his will for your life. You may want to pray Jesus' own prayer, "Not my will, but yours be done."

07 Whenever you're done, close your time with a simple prayer of gratitude to God for his presence, love, and goodness in your life.

Please note: Our strong recommendation is that you do this *every single day* this coming week, but the exercise of noticing and naming your emotions may take a bit longer. You may want to save that for a place in your week where you have unhurried time to sit with God in prayer, like your Sabbath or day off.

Take a moment to reflect on what the Spirit might be inviting you into. What days and what time of day do you feel is best? What place or space do you have in mind?

Reach Practice

SESSION 02: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR SELF

We all learn differently. Some of us prefer reading, others listening, and others doing. If you'd like to go deeper, choose what resonates with you and give it a try! Even if you don't try a Reach Practice, remember to journal in the Solitude Reflection section before your next session as a group.

Reading

Read chapters 4-6 of *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton.

Podcast

Listen to episode 2 of the Solitude series from the Rule of Life podcast by Practicing the Way.

Exercise: Go for a solitude walk in creation

Most of Jesus' solitude time was spent outdoors, in the beauty of his Father's world. He was in the quiet, but also surrounded by the gentle sound of birds and animals and wind and rivers and rocks and trees. Try doing a solitary walk this week, ideally somewhere beautiful if you have access to a state park or hiking trail. If not, just find a park near your house and be with God in creation. Try to really notice the beauty all around you. Receive it as a gift from God. As you walk, let yourself feel whatever comes up and let God work deep within you as you offer your time to him.

Special note: Retreat

Just a reminder that our final session's exercise is to go on retreat. We recommend you schedule a time and place now, so you can experience this special gift of an extended time in solitude.

Solitude Reflection

SESSION 02: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR SELF

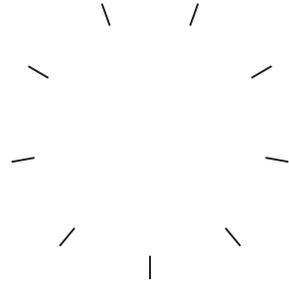
Before your next time together with the group for Session 03, take five to ten minutes to journal out your answers to the following three questions.

01 How did your practice of solitude go this session?

02 Where did you experience resistance in solitude, whether external or internal?

03 In what ways did you encounter God in solitude?

Note: As you write, be as specific as possible. While bullet points are just fine, if you write it out in narrative form, your brain will be able to process your insights in a more lasting way.



Encounter with Our Enemy

“Silence and solitude are the most radical of the spiritual disciplines because they most directly attack the sources of human misery and wrongdoing. To be in solitude is to choose to do nothing. For extensive periods of time. All accomplishment is given up. Silence is required to complete solitude, for until we enter quietness, the world still lays hold of us. When we go into solitude and silence, we stop making demands on God. It is enough that God is God and we are his. We learn we have a soul, that God is here, that this world is ‘my Father’s world.’”

—DALLAS WILLARD, FORWARD TO
INVITATION TO SOLITUDE AND SILENCE
BY RUTH HALEY BARTON

Overview

In the fourth century A.D., when the Way of Jesus was legalized in the Roman Empire and the community of Jesus morphed from a persecuted minority to a political majority, *thousands* of serious disciples left the corruption and compromise of the church behind. Rather than pursue a “normal life” in an absurd world, they fled into the quiet of the desert to seek God in solitude. We now call them “the desert fathers and mothers,” and they offer us some of the oldest wisdom there is on the interior life.

One of their major contributions is this: Their paradigm for solitude was not sabbath rest, but spiritual war. They based their entire lives off the story of Jesus’ 40 days in the desert. They pointed out that Jesus went out into the *eremos* to fight, not to flee; to engage, not to escape; to win victory, not to give up.

They also developed a theological construct they called “the three enemies of the soul” — the world, the flesh, and the devil. They saw discipleship as a kind of spiritual war against this unholy trinity.

In the desert, not only do we encounter our self and all our feelings, we also encounter a battle with our enemies

— the world, the flesh, and the devil. All three test and tempt our faith in the quiet. Usually this comes, as it did for Jesus, in the form of thoughts that assault our minds — lies, deception, and temptation.

When we go into the desert, we get a little distance from the world, and we can see clearly all the ways we’ve been caught up in the world; all the ways we’ve been compromised by a social order run by the three enemies.

But whenever we choose to go into solitude, we feel the resistance of all three enemies — the world is a vast conspiracy against quiet and solitude, our own flesh comes up with all sorts of emotionally loaded reasons not to go away, and the devil himself is always there to draw us away from Jesus’ call to the *eremos*. As Ruth Haley Barton put it, “All the forces of evil band together to prevent our knowing God in this way, because it brings to an end the dominion of those powers in our lives.”

But if we are willing to fight the resistance and go into solitude, it may be hard at first, but long term, it yields dividends of *freedom*.

Practice

SESSION 03: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR ENEMY

For the last two sessions, we've been starting each day with a few minutes in silence before we touch our phones or rush out the door. We encourage you to continue this practice of beginning your day in quiet prayer, not only for the next two sessions, but for the rest of your life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "We are silent in the early hours of each day, because God is supposed to have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep, because to God also belongs the last word."

But this session, we want to invite you to go further in your practice of solitude. The goal of being alone with God in the silence is, ultimately, to hear God's voice over all the other voices in our head — especially from the three enemies of our soul. And the ultimate litmus test of the truth of God over the lies of the three enemies is found in Scripture. Which is why, in solitude, when Jesus was confronted with lies from the enemy, he calmly quoted Scripture to anchor himself in God's truth.

To that end, our exercise for this coming session is called *Lectio Divina*, which is a Latin phrase meaning "spiritual reading." It's an ancient way of reading Scripture slowly and prayerfully, listening for God's voice over your life.

There are four simple movements.

- 01 **Read** a passage from Scripture very slowly and prayerfully, and pay special attention to any words, phrases, or thoughts that seem to stand out to you or touch you emotionally in any way. Look for what "shimmers." You can pick any passage of Scripture, but we recommend you start with a psalm or a selection from the Gospels or a New Testament letter.
- 02 **Reflect.** Re-read the passage again, this time lingering over the words or phrases that feel highlighted to you, just turning them over slowly in your mind, thinking about what God may be saying to you.
- 03 **Respond** by praying those impressions back to God. Then to end,
- 04 **Rest** in God's loving word to you. Let your whole body slow down and sink into God's presence and peace.

You can do this exercise each morning after your breath prayer or on your Sabbath or anytime you like. But we recommend you practice it several times this coming week.

Reach Practice

SESSION 03: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR ENEMY

Reading

Read Chapters 7-9 of *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton.

Podcast

Listen to episode 3 of the Solitude series from the Rule of Life podcast by Practicing the Way.

Exercise: A digital Sabbath

One of the reasons solitude is more important now than it's ever been is that we are the first generation to apprentice under Jesus in the digital age. We are still learning how to pray and have a rich inner life with God inside a wider culture of distraction, noise, hurry, and superficiality.

Many people have found that one of the most helpful disciplines for our era is a digital Sabbath — one full day a week when *all* your devices, including your smartphone, are either powered fully off or drastically limited. Even doctors are beginning to recommend this practice, simply for the health of your central nervous system. How much more so for us who desire to experience God's nearness in our everyday life?

If a full day is too much for you, you may want to start with a half day or even a few hours on your Sabbath or Sunday afternoon. And if you need to be available by phone, you may consider getting a landline for your home or turning off all alerts and only briefly checking your phone at set times during the day.

If you're interested in learning more about the practice of Sabbath, you can run the Sabbath Practice at practicingtheway.org/sabbath.

We all learn differently. Some of us prefer reading, others listening, and others doing. If you'd like to go deeper, choose what resonates with you and give it a try! Even if you don't try a Reach Practice, remember to journal in the Solitude Reflection section before your next session as a group.

Solitude Reflection

SESSION 03: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR ENEMY

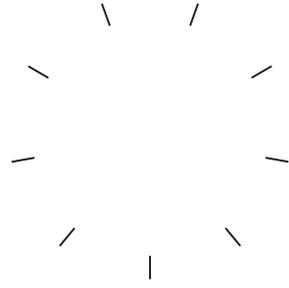
Before your next time together with the group for Session 04, take five to ten minutes to journal out your answers to the following three questions.

01 How did your practice of solitude go this session?

02 Where did you experience resistance in solitude?

03 In what ways did you encounter God in solitude?

Note: As you write, be as specific as possible. While bullet points are just fine, if you write it out in narrative form, your brain will be able to process your insights in a more lasting way.



Encounter with Our God

“The desire to see God is what urges us to love solitude and silence. For silence is where God dwells. He drapes himself in silence. In every era, this experience of an interior life and an intimate loving relationship with God has remained indispensable for those who seek true happiness. ... Followers of Jesus have been running off into the desert for thousands of years, ultimately, to find happiness in God.”

—ROBERT CARDINAL SARAH, *THE POWER OF SILENCE*

Overview

Solitude is the place of encounter. We go into “the desert” to encounter our self and all the emotions that live below the surface of our lives.

And we go to encounter our enemy and get free of our heart’s entanglement with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But ultimately, we go into the quiet to encounter God. We go because we ache for God in the deepest place in our being. We go because there is *nothing* like God’s presence. We go to listen for his voice, to hear him speak over us our identity and calling.

This is why most of our time in solitude is just spent quietly listening. In a world of noise and distraction, it comes as no surprise that quiet is the primary medium in which we hear God’s voice to us.

This back and forth of speaking and listening to God is the heart not only of communication, but of *communion* with God. As important as it is to receive our identity and calling as a gift from God’s hand, ultimately, the most important thing that happens in solitude is that we love and are loved by God.

Practice

SESSION 04: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR GOD

True transformation involves both content and practice. Take a moment to invite the Spirit to show you how to incorporate this practice into your life.

Our final session's spiritual exercise is listening prayer. We encourage you to continue beginning your day in the quiet before you turn to your phone. We recommend you add this exercise to your new morning rhythm, but you may choose another time.

Whenever you choose, this exercise is built on the theological truth that your body is the “temple of the Holy Spirit”¹; the Spirit of God has direct access to your mind and imagination. He can interject his thoughts into your thoughts and his desires into your desires. Learning to make space for this to happen, and to discern his voice from *all the other voices* in our head, is a key task of discipleship to Jesus.

The exercise itself is very simple.

- 01 Find a quiet, distraction-free time and place, put away your phone, and get comfortable.
- 02 Take a few minutes to just breathe deeply, in and out. You may want to simply say “Father” or “Come, Holy Spirit” as you inhale each breath. Let yourself slow down.
- 03 When you're ready to begin, ask God to silence the voice of the enemy, to clear out of your mind and the air around you any voices that are not the voice of God.
- 04 Then, ask God to speak to you. This can be as simple as praying, “God, please speak to me.” or “God, is there anything you want to say to me?”

¹ 1 Corinthians 6:19

05 Finally, open your mind and heart to God’s Spirit and *listen*.

- What comes to mind may be ...
 - A line or passage of Scripture
 - A word or phrase
 - A thought or feeling
 - A picture in your mind
 - A sequence of pictures that “play” like a short film in your imagination
 - A memory
 - Something you have recently thought about, read, heard or seen
- Don’t feel like you have to strain. Just wait quietly.
- Often, the very first thought that comes to mind is from God.
- Something may come, or it may not, either way is fine. Our job is just to listen, not to make God speak.

06 Discern. It’s very important that you test everything you “hear” against Scripture and in community. Don’t be afraid to check it against the Bible, talk to your pastor, or share it with other followers of Jesus. This is the practice of discernment, and it’s something we do *together*.

07 Reflect and rest. If something comes to mind, spend a little time reflecting on it, asking the Spirit to clarify in your mind the meaning of his word to you. Write it down so you can remember it and spend more time in reflection on it in the coming days. And if nothing comes to mind, that’s okay. Our job is to listen, not make God speak. Just rest in trust in the Father’s love for you in Christ and by the Spirit.

Our recommendation is that you do this exercise daily, but you might just want to practice it once or twice this week. The goal is to begin really listening deeply for God’s voice in your life and learning to live off his words to you.

As you think about this coming week, when would you like to engage in this practice?

Reach Practice

SESSION 04: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR GOD

Reading

Read Chapters 10-12 of *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton.

Podcast

Listen to episode 4 of the Solitude series from the Rule of Life podcast by Practicing the Way.

Exercise: Retreat

We've been dipping our toes in the water of solitude for the last three sessions; now it's time to dive all the way in. Ten minutes of silence is a great way to begin your day, but there are some things that can only happen in longer periods of solitude. The spiritual life has its own pace, and it's *slow*, not hurried. We invite you to go away, slow down, and enter into this experience of God through the practice of retreat.

Any quiet place will do — a retreat center, monastery, cabin, guest house, campground, park, or even your own home if no one is around and all your devices are powered off. Find your “desert.”

There's no “right” length of time to go away. You may choose to go overnight or even for a few days. Many cities have a monastery within driving distance, and they usually offer silent retreats for anyone who is interested. Or you may just want to go away for a few hours.

There's no “right” way to spend your time on retreat. In fact, be careful not to overfill it with spiritual busyness.

We all learn differently. Some of us prefer reading, others listening, and others doing. If you'd like to go deeper, choose what resonates with you and give it a try! Even if you don't try a Reach Practice, remember to journal in the Solitude Reflection section before your next session as a group.

Here's what a day on retreat could look like.

- **8-9 a.m.:** Prepare your mind and heart to hear from God. Take a walk, spend time breathing, or do whatever will help you set aside the worry and distraction of your current life. Try to arrange your morning so you can remain in silence from the time you wake up until after your retreat.
- **9-11 a.m.:** Read and meditate on Scripture through *Lectio Divina*, taking time to stop and reflect when God seems to be speaking to you through the text. Spend time in listening prayer.
- **11 a.m.-12 p.m.:** Journal or write down your heart's response to what you have read or heard. Pray your heart back to God.
- **12-1 p.m.:** Eat lunch and take a walk, reflecting on the morning.
- **1-2 p.m.:** Take a nap or rest.
- **2-3 p.m.:** Clarify any direction you sense from the Spirit of God over the coming season of your life.
- **3-4 p.m.:** Write down any direction and any other thoughts in a journal. Thank God for your time together and ask if there is anything else he wants to say. Prayerfully prepare to enter back into the flow of life.

Again, this is just one possible schedule. There's no "right" way to be with God on retreat. The key is to make space for rest, for quiet, and for listening, reflection, and prayer.

You may feel close to God, you may not. You may "hear" a word from God, you may not. You may feel happy, or you may feel sad, anxious, or weary. That's okay. Just let the experience be what it is and offer it up to God for your healing and in loving trust.

The more you practice retreat, the more you will come to relax into it, enjoy it, and look forward to it. But this may take time. Just stay with it and wait for God in the quiet.

Solitude Reflection

SESSION 04: ENCOUNTER WITH OUR GOD

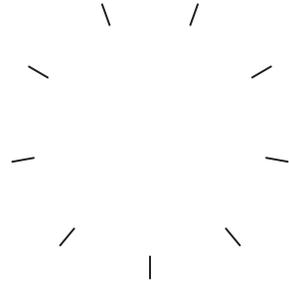
As you come to the end of this Practice, take five to ten minutes to journal out your answers to the following three questions.

01 How did your practice of solitude go this session?

02 Where did you experience resistance in solitude?

03 In what ways did you encounter God in solitude?

Note: As you write, be as specific as possible. While bullet points are just fine, if you write it out in narrative form, your brain will be able to process your insights in a more lasting way.



Keep Going

Keep Going

This short Practice is just an invitation to get you moving on a lifelong journey. The invitation is to integrate this practice of solitude into your Rule of Life on a daily, weekly, and regular basis. This is something we will continue to grow in throughout our lives, since the spiritual journey is one in which we never “arrive,” and there is always more.

Where you go from here is entirely up to you, but if you decide to integrate solitude into your life, here’s a list of next steps to continue your Practice.

Recommend Reading

- 01 ***Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God’s Transforming Presence*** by Ruth Haley Barton
- 02 ***The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise*** by Robert Cardinal Sarah
- 03 ***The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God Through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence***
by Henri Nouwen
- 04 ***The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World*** by John Mark Comer
- 05 ***Poustinia: Encountering God in Silence, Solitude, and Prayer*** by Catherine Doherty

Recommended Exercises

01 Practice Sabbath

Most of us are simply too busy to have a meaningful spiritual life. The beginning point for many of us on the spiritual journey is learning to slow down and even stop. For this reason, Sabbath is one of the most important disciplines for the spiritual life in our day because it opens up time and space in our overcrowded lives to find our life in God. The practice of Sabbath is like a container for so many other practices, *especially* solitude. While much of Sabbath is spent in celebration with our community — eating meals, signing, and doing life together — it’s also an ideal day to give time to quiet reflection, listening, and prayer.

The Sabbath Practice is available at practicngtheway.org/sabbath, but here are a few small steps to get started.

- Choose a day to Sabbath (or if a full 24 hours is too much, start with a half day or a few hours after church).
- Begin your Sabbath with some kind of small ritual to transition into Sabbath time, like lighting a candle, reading a psalm, and eating a meal with family or friends.
- Spend your Sabbath ceasing from all work, chores, buying, selling, and entertainment. In their place, give yourself to rest, delight, and worship.
- At some point in your day, spend time alone in the quiet with God.
- Run the Sabbath Practice, listen to the Rule of Life podcast series Sabbath, and/or read a book about the Sabbath to continue to learn more about this ancient discipline for emotional health and spiritual life.

02 Go on retreat

If you did not get the chance to go on retreat after Session 04, it’s never too late. Follow the instructions above and go away for an extended time with God.

03 Go on a longer retreat

4-8 hours on retreat is a great place to start. Overnight is even better, as it gives your body more time to decompress. But when you are ready, multiple days can be even more impactful and worth working your way up to over the course of 2-3 retreats.

There’s no “right” way to spend this time. The key is to normalize boredom, waiting, and rest, and avoid carrying too many props into solitude to distract us. Rather, just spend long stretches of time offering yourself to God and waiting on his voice.

Remember: You’re not a “bad” disciple of Jesus if you don’t do this, and you may be in a season of life or situation where this is very hard. But the more time we give to solitude, silence, and stillness, the more space it opens up in us for healing and transformation. Many find that an annual practice of a longer retreat — 2-3 days or even a week — can become a vital part of their yearly rhythm and Rule of Life.

The Circle

Practicing the Way is a nonprofit that develops spiritual formation resources for churches and small groups learning how to become apprentices in the Way of Jesus. We make beautifully designed courses and practices for creating a Rule of Life in the modern age, like this Solitude Practice.

All of our resources are available at no cost, thanks to the generosity of The Circle, a group of monthly givers from around the world who partner with us to see formation integrated into the church at large. To all our givers who funded the Solitude Practice, thank you!

To keep exploring our resources, visit practicingtheway.org.

May the peace of
Christ be with you.