

Take a Breath

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Breathe in.

Out.

In.

Out.

Silence.

Have you breathed today?

By now, you have taken hundreds of breaths, thousands even. But have you *noticed* any of them? Have you taken a moment to breathe deeply – feeling your chest and your stomach expand, feeling the cavity of your lungs filling, filling, filling – and then letting it all go? How often do you take a step back from the busyness of life and dwell in the quiet?

When we actually stop, put everything down and experience the simplicity – the intricacy – of a quiet breath, what might we find?

If you are anything like me, you spend most of your days on the go, rushing to get from one place to the next. Maybe you feel like you're always running late, and, well, if you really are like me, then you probably *are* running a bit late. All of us get caught in this mode of continually moving, doing, going. Our culture of “efficiency” pushes us to focus our attention ever forward, ever on to something that we must do, or see, or plan for. This perpetual need to be on the go is encouraged in the workplace, in academia, and even in how we spend our time off. The more someone *does*, the more “successful” we view them to be, whether that's manifested in how many hours they've spent studying, or in how many places they've traveled to. It's a work hard, play hard world after all, isn't it?

But when we're moving at lightning speed, I think perhaps we lose something.

Sometimes, we go so far as to actively *avoid* sitting in moments of stillness or quiet. *Why?* Perhaps with that stillness comes something we fear. Is it a fear of being bored, of being considered lazy? Or does that fear sit a little deeper within us than that?

Even in moments when we have no choice but to wait, we still try to use our time on something “productive”. Anything works, really, as long as it involves *doing* something. Waiting on a friend? Scan through emails. Going on a run or a walk? Queue up a podcast or a playlist. Sitting on the bus into work? Reply to those unread texts.

In a world where we idolize productivity and efficiency, it can feel wrong to us when we aren’t filling every waking moment with something. When we do this, I have to wonder – what do we *miss*? If God is speaking to us, will we even hear him over all the noise?

Becoming Unsettled

I’m going to take a second to share a bit about myself with you. I am currently in my third year as an undergrad in college, which means that every day I’m surrounded by talk of internships, medical school, law school, summer research, LinkedIn profiles. If it’s about securing future “success” – you name it – I’ve probably heard it. Today.

Throughout high school and the majority of my freshman year, I bought into this narrative about securing your own personal success, one hundred percent. I applied to the best-ranked colleges I thought I might have a shot at, and I believed it was necessary to attend the most selective school that I got into, as long as it was feasible.

I arrived on campus for my freshman year in the fall of 2020 – and with that came all the uncertainties of the pandemic. This complete lack of control over my circumstances deeply unsettled me. For the first time, I felt that I truly had no idea what my life was going to look like for the foreseeable future.

To compensate for this feeling of helplessness I began to hyper-focus on the two things I thought I could control: school and running. I lost myself in schoolwork – and failed to nurture relationships with long-distance friends and family. I took to running longer and longer distances and developed an interest in nutrition and strength training, which at first was lovely and healthy – but when I began to restrict my food intake and ignore my body’s calls for rest and recovery, I became obsessive. My life revolved around doing anything and everything I could to make myself

the most “impressive” person I could be. More is better – because the more I do, the more I control the outcomes. Right?

That February, I had what can only be described as the most humiliating race of my life. I came dead last – and when I say dead last, I mean *dead last*. Not pretty. Following some testing, we learned that my body had been running on adrenaline without adequate fuel and rest for too long, and I had to take that track season off from racing and competition to heal. Suddenly, things were not going according to my plan, and to be quite frank, I absolutely hated it.

We are conditioned to seek full control over our lives, and to plan out everything in pursuit of being the most profitable, successful people we can be. The irony? *We don't have the kind of control we think we do*. And when the fragile world we have created for ourselves comes crashing down around us, it catches us off guard and terrifies us.

In my quest for control, I lost sight of what was important. In seeking my own elevation, I turned away from the essential parts of life that sustain us: rest, relationships, and a lived experience with God.

Over the course of the past year or so, I have been focusing my energy on letting go of my own success story. This is about being present, about intentionally *choosing* to give up that illusion of control. The idea of having complete control over our lives is a construct that we create in our minds. And the good part about this is that it means we can make a conscious choice about whether we should cling to or give up that idea. If we let them, delusions of control *separate* us from the love and guidance of our Father. In trying to control every waking moment, we close ourselves off from being receptive to hearing God's voice and experiencing his power in our lives.

Choosing Rest

Perhaps this is conjecture, but I believe that Jesus had no such delusions. He knew he was going to die a painful death and suffer greatly at the hands of others. He knew that Judas would betray him and that there were many who would turn against him. And yet he did not let that distract him from experiencing the love of his Father. Instead of pursuing his own glory and control over his life – all of which he could have done infinitely better than any of us – he chose instead to spend time in prayer with God, and to share the love he received from his Father with those around him.

If we look to the example set by Christ, we see that having deep, grounded relationships – with God and others – was what he focused on above all else. He spent much of his time sharing intentional moments with people – entering their homes, eating meals with them, and spending hours teaching and telling parables.

In Luke 10, Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha. Martha becomes flustered and frustrated with preparations for dinner – understandably. I mean, she is serving the Messiah, the King of the world, after all. Seeking a hand from her sister, she looks over to see that instead of helping her, Mary is just sitting there at Jesus’ feet. When she brings her distress to Christ, he says to her,

Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; but only one thing is necessary; for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.
(Luke 10:41-42)

Jesus wanted Martha to understand that worry and occupation with the temporary things of this world were *not* what he wanted from her, nor were they going to give her fulfillment or peace. These anxieties were distracting her from what really mattered: spending time with him and listening as Mary did. In that moment, there was nothing that needed to be accomplished, planned for, or controlled. Nothing that mattered *more* than sitting in – and experiencing – the presence of Christ.

Jesus himself often went off alone to pray and to be still with God. We love to talk about how Jesus was always doing the most for people, constantly *traveling* and *healing* and *preaching*. We talk about how, after receiving the news of John’s death, and in the depths of raw, gutting grief, he saw the people in need and had compassion on them. But we must not forget that he also took time away from others to pray, to speak to God, and to *receive*.

The Gospel provides examples of several instances in which Jesus separated himself off to pray. In Matthew: *After he had sent the crowds away, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray; and when it was evening, he was there alone.*¹ In Mark: *And in the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and prayed there for a time.*² In Luke: *But*

¹ Matthew 14:23

² Mark 1:35

*Jesus himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.*³ And before choosing the twelve disciples: *Now it was at this time that he went off to the mountain to pray, and he spent the whole night in prayer with God.*⁴

These short verses provide us with just a bit of insight into how Jesus operated while he was here on Earth. Christ needed strength from God to keep himself going. And he *knew* that. What a lesson for our own work. *How can we give of ourselves to others if we don't allow ourselves any time to receive from God?* Can a person who is themselves drowning help their friend out of the water?

In providing us with the Lord's prayer, Jesus sets us up to pray in a way that develops a relationship with God that will sustain us and keep us afloat. He says,

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matt 6:6-8)

Our relationship with God is meant to be personal, to be strengthened by quiet moments spent in prayer. It isn't about filling the time with many words. It's not even about communicating *to* God what you need. He already knows. Instead, it's about being in that still, private space with our Father.

If we read just a bit further down in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is encouraging his disciples not to worry over the things of this life and instead to put trust in God that he will provide.⁵

While the proximity of these two sections – on having that personal relationship with God and on not getting caught up in the anxieties of the world – *could* be pure coincidence, I choose to believe it was intentional. Might Jesus be suggesting a connection between dwelling with God and dealing with the anxiety of life? If we take the time to be quiet and rest in God's presence, might we find our worries just a bit less pressing? If we turn our focus from pretending we have

³ Luke 5:16

⁴ Luke 6:12

⁵ Matthew 5:25-34

complete control over our lives – and the anxiety that comes with this mentality – might it become just a bit easier to be still with God?

Dwelling with Jesus and our Father is not a novel New Testament idea. One of the psalms says,

One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. (Psalm 27:4)

Why is that the *one thing* – out of all the things they could ask for – that the psalmist wants? The verse goes on: *To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to meditate in his temple.* The author desires the very thing that Jesus tells Martha to seek: the chance to *rest* in the presence of the Lord.

To see what it looks like to find ourselves *outside* of God’s dwelling place, and to call for him to bring us there, we can turn to Psalm 18, which reads,

In my distress, I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God for help; he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry for help before him came into his ears... He sent from on high, he took me; he drew me out of many waters. (Psalm 18:6,16)⁶

Our Father desires that we come to him for rest. And when we call on him to bring us peace, he delivers. But we have to desire his peace – his rest – and acknowledge that we cannot always control the circumstances we find ourselves in. The only true rest there is can be found when we stop pretending we can swim through the waters of life alone and allow ourselves to take hold of the outstretched hand of our savior, the one that can bring us safely to shore.

Becoming Still

To be still and listen to God sounds wonderful. But if you think like I do, then you’re thinking that it may not be as simple as it sounds.

First of all, we have been conditioned to judge moments when we aren’t *doing* anything as a waste of time. And secondly, allowing ourselves to slow down and be still is an act of vulnerability in our faith journey because it gives us time to actually think. Terrifyingly, it even allows for the possibility that we might open our hearts and minds and hear either nothing or something we didn’t want to hear. What if I truly open myself to hearing from God and discover that there’s nothing there, or that what he has to say is going to overturn my whole world?

⁶ See also the Song of David in 2 Samuel 22

Both of these are legitimate fears. And if you've felt one or both, you're not alone. Hebrews tells us that faith is *the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*⁷ We pursue a hope that is literally grounded in this nebulous thing we call "faith". In a world where everything we seek is concrete, the lack of tangible *evidence* is terrifying. But I don't think our God is ignorant of our fears. Our faith is about trusting God to be present with us. We must learn to lean into this. To strengthen our faith, we must be willing to engage with it. It cannot be static. It also cannot be purely academic. Instead, we must open ourselves up to it, up to what God has to say to us.

When we take a look at the instructions laid out for us, faith is non-negotiable. Hiding from developing our trust in God and choosing to lean on our own understanding is not an option if we are pursuing a path towards salvation. In Hebrews, it is written,

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him. (Heb 11:6)

We are told in Proverbs,

...lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your path. (Prov 3:5-6)

So how do we *practically* go about finding the inner peace that allows us to open our hearts and minds to receive God? How do we give up control and lean into the valuable relationships with our Father, Jesus, and others? I wish I had a perfect answer to those questions. Wouldn't it be nice if it was simple? I can't truthfully say that it is, but as a starting point, I find myself turning to the words of the psalmists. David says,

Tremble, and do not sin. Meditate in your heart upon your bed and be still. Selah. Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and trust in the Lord. (Psalm 4:4)

Perhaps allocating a few minutes a day to spend in meditation is one way we can start opening ourselves up to God.

In Psalm 77, meditation allows the psalmist to remember times they have seen the hand of God at work, helping them reflect on his power and the redemption of Israel. Purposefully setting time aside where we do nothing but sit in quiet meditation allows us to find that space in which we might experience God.

⁷ Hebrews 11:1

Then, once again, I am drawn to the example of Jesus. Perhaps we need to find our own Garden of Gethsemane or our own mountain on which to pray.

Taking time to be alone with God – and I mean *actual, intentional time* set aside to be alone – might just be a crucial part of that relationship that so many of us are missing. Maybe it doesn't need to always take the form of this Westernized image of meditation as sitting cross-legged on the floor with our eyes closed and palms up. For some, this simply isn't practical. For others it isn't possible. And for many, it may just not really be all that helpful. Meditation, as it is expressed in the Bible and in other traditional practices, doesn't always look like this anyway. In Psalm 1, the psalmist writes,

Blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on his Law he meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1-2)

This form of meditation relies on focusing attention on God and his word in all that we do. It is about intentionally placing God at the forefront of our minds, about giving space in our thoughts for his words to reach us, no matter where we are or what we are doing.

Similarly, God tells Joshua:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will achieve success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not be terrified nor dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Josh 1:8-9)

Meditation in this sense can be actively recognizing that God is with us, and that he is present in every moment. Every moment can be an opportunity to connect with him and to hear him. Realizing and tapping into this can give us the strength and inner peace to press on in our lives.

In our hurried culture, it seems out of the ordinary to go for a walk without headphones in, or to sit outside without a book or our phone in hand. But perhaps moments like these provide wonderful opportunities to connect with God in daily life. Anyone who has had a close relationship with a friend, a partner, or a parent knows that quality time is absolutely critical to the fostering and maintenance of a healthy human relationship. So why shouldn't it be the same

with our Father and our Savior? We are called to approach our Lord and ask for that rest, that space to be with him. Christ calls us, saying, *Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.*⁸ Our God and Christ want us to find rest in them, so why do we so often resist? Perhaps it's time to let down our walls of control.

Letting Go

God *is* in the stillness – if we listen enough and enter the quiet spaces to hear him. And it's not about *finding* God. It's about finding the *peace within ourselves* that allows us to see that he is, and will always be, there. It's about letting go. Letting go of our need to control our lives. Letting go of the “productivity” mindset that has been ingrained in us for as long as we can remember. Letting go and learning that it's okay to... breathe.

Think back to Elijah's encounter with God after fleeing from Jezebel.⁹ God was not in the mighty shows of power, in the fire and the earthquake. Instead, he revealed himself to Elijah in the quiet whisper of the wind. Elijah had to *calm down* from the terror of his flight and the anxieties of what was truly an extremely stressful part of his life. He had to wait through earthquake, wind, and fire before hearing God in the still, small voice of the gentle blowing.

Hearing God may not come immediately. The first time we sit down and wait quietly, we may not feel like God is there. Conceptually, perhaps, we *know* that he is. But we might not *feel* it. And that can be scary. It can feel like maybe he isn't really there, like maybe nothing is there after all. And yet if we persist, if we continue to put our faith in him, taking the time to slow down and let go, we might just find that he is there, waiting for us to listen.

Take a breath. Your God is waiting for you.

⁸ Matt 11:28

⁹ 1 Kings 19