

and imagination.

We can jog along with God, nodding to him every morning and last thing at night. We can attend church for worship and enjoy the services, but in order to get to know him well, we must be prepared to pause and actively seek that place within us where he may be understood.

When we choose to avoid being quiet enough to allow God to speak to the sin, the pain and the aches within us, we deny his love the power over us which would otherwise transform us to be more like him. Praying by being quiet gives God access to our innermost thoughts. It is in our still, quiet moments that we take God deeper into our hearts and gather His strength for our new decision.

Praying in the quietness of our hearts and inviting God deeper into our lives is an ancient form of prayer. It may be a prayer that we resist with great effort, in order that we may run around in our lives, making a virtue out of our unceasing activity. In the long run, this proves to be bad for us because the resource of real strength for each day becomes ever smaller as we ignore God's call which would draw us near to him.

This is something we all struggle with, and maybe our secret shame around it stops us from admitting our failure. Finding the still space in which to be quiet in God's presence is one of the biggest battles in our quest for a properly nourished spirit. Phil, who is a Church Leader and Minister, talks about his own way through this. Admitting that he needs to come to God first thing in order to get his day off to a properly focussed start, he goes on to say;

One of the battles is to stop still long enough to wait in God's presence and not to let your mind wander off onto all sorts of other things and you just think; 'Oh! I need to do this and I need to do that' and actually to find a way of handling that, either just by saying; 'No. I'm not thinking about that at the moment!' Or perhaps even writing it down and then being able to put it on one side and know that it's not going to be forgotten. You have to clear your mind just to be with God for a bit.¹⁵

In the Psalms, we read about the importance of developing a stillness within us, in which we are able to hear from God, to know his presence and discover his will for a purpose and situation. Psalm 46 shows a picture of the turmoil of the world contrasted with the serenity of the stilled spirit which has the knowledge of God. When basking in this knowledge of who God is, we are confident and made courageous by the awesome nature of his power and strength.

Psalm 46 is a picture of God at work in the world. God is actively there in our personal sphere of life, work, love and future. God is the bringer of power and the place of peace. He is the strength and security of our need as well as the passion and authority in our lives. We are called to be still in his presence and to absorb the fact that he alone is God and he indeed reigns supremely over all things. Including *me* and *my* things.

God is Lord over your life.

What human activity can change or challenge this? Mainly, we resist God's supremacy over our lives through our persistent being busy. If we move quickly enough and fill our minds with many other thoughts and lists of things that we must do, people we must see, jobs that must be completed, then the still small voice becomes smaller and our view of the world becomes contracted to only encompass our immediate concerns and surroundings. The longer we look at our own needs, the bigger they become and the Lord Almighty is reduced to a size whereby he can be put on a high shelf until a later date.

¹⁵ Phil Snelson: Learning to Listen

There are many seemingly good reasons given for putting God on the shelf in this way which seem to make sense through the lens of my needs. These are statements that have been made to me by various parents as they have given good reason for their child's or their own absence from worship:

My children need me to be at football with them on a Sunday, don't you think? Sunday is the only day I get a lie-in, that's only reasonable isn't it? Work is so hectic at the moment, I can't give up any time to anything else, can I? Her dance/music class has to take priority over the Bible study, because I've paid a lot of money to do it and God would want her to have a good career, wouldn't he?

When you look at these good reasons, you will notice how each one attempts to draw you into the emotion or assertion, so that you are forced to collude with them. There is a right answer to each question, but in the polite society of which we are part, it seems rude to say, 'you're wrong!' The person asking is not really looking for a challenge to the decisions that they are already living by, but they are looking for unqualified approval. One problem is that in protecting our decisions in this way, we throw off any lines of accountability for our choices and we also evade any responsibility on us to properly assess their quality by taking the easy way out of such potentially alienating conversations. God doesn't win and as a result his kingdom is weakened. Because your question was asked rhetorically, 'Don't you agree?' Permission is tacitly granted for you to turn away from God and to spend your time of worship in isolation from his presence. Neither is this simply about being present at the church building. It is about forming bad habits, both of thought and behaviour. If there is a wish to remove yourself or find good reason for family members to be consistently absent from the church fellowship, it fractures the relationship between yourself and the body. So it is that as we become ever more focussed on the things of our own small world, so they move to eclipse the splendour of the Lord and his sovereignty over the whole of life. It is adding another thing into your schedule which works against finding God in the stillness of worship or prayer, or even a peace among the body of Christ. Recently, I met a beautiful Christian lady who radiated the love of Jesus. She told me that to spend time with members of God's family gave her a deep sense of peace. "You belong to that family, you are peaceful to be around."

Our greater understanding of him comes through waiting, watching and being still under this knowledge of his supremacy. Being with God is not a passive stillness; it engages our mind and stirs our spirit. We wait for God and he strips away our resistance to his love, our sinful tendencies, our addictive or destructive behaviours and we are left without resistance to his love as we are *still and know that he is God*, Psalm 46:10. Our stillness not only acknowledges who God is, it also reminds us of our value to the awesome and powerful Lord of Creation.

In the tradition of Abraham and confirmed by Jesus in John 15, he has called us 'friend'. He knows our thoughts. He is aware of our struggles. He is with us in our sickness. He upholds us in our sorrow. He galvanises us in our fear. He rejoices in our triumphs and supports us when we step faithfully into the unknown. As friends of God, we delight to spend time with him. We discover how deep his faithfulness is for all situations. We learn trust and how to listen properly to what he says, to really hear him speak to us. We become confident in his character and his purposes for our lives.

But, if we put him on a high shelf until 'life calms down' or 'until I'm older', we not only demonstrate our active rebellion from his Lordship over our lives but we also deprive ourselves of the strength, love and inspiration which he longs to give us.

The people of Israel were sent off into exile for this same attitude: their hands had long been held up in resistance to God's authority over them, so that at in time they no longer

knew him. Leave God on that high shelf of your life and the chasm of emptiness that you will later ascribe to God not being with you will disappoint and upset you as you count the cost of that absence.

God has not abandoned you: you have rejected him, cast him off, held up a hand and said 'later!'

Psalm 46

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.*
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.*
- ⁵ God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.*
- ⁶ Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*
- ⁷ The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*
- ⁸ Come and see what the LORD has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.*
- ⁹ He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.*
- ¹⁰ He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."*
- ¹¹ The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (NIV)*

Does being silent mean that you can't use words to pray?

Finding a way to be silent and still doesn't mean that communication with God comes to a sudden halt!

If you think about language and ask yourself; 'Who created the words I use?' you may conclude that it was Shakespeare or Dickens or the journalistic press or even that our fluctuating language that is today's English is a product of everyday use, adapting to popular culture, technology and art to make sense of the world in which we live.

Do we *need* these words in which to pray to and praise God? This is a more interesting question and ultimately, the answer is 'No!'

God creates words and we as his created beings use them to define our world. Where words run out, there is still room for worship, praise, adoration and in this place there is great scope for finding yourself more fully known by God. Our prayers can be words or not words as we feel led. For some people, words are not a natural way of seeing things, and so prayer being limited to words would limit their knowledge of and relationship with God. James describes it for me like this:

Prayer allows me to be in relationship with God on a really deep level. It goes beyond just saying things and goes onto connecting with God and being with him in his presence which has helped, because sometimes I'm not the best at saying lots of stuff and being able to rattle off a list of things that need prayer. It starts with me being in an attitude

where I want to pray and then at different points I stop saying stuff ... I stay there for a while, just being open to him. I've never timed it but it could last a few minutes or quarter of an hour, half an hour, or it depends on if I get distracted or not or depends on where I am with God or where I am during that time. ... Being in this place and then coming out of it affects my spirit. It seems to alter the way I look at things a lot, for a while and puts me in a really positive place in my mind and helps me to get things into perspective a bit more.¹⁶

James' prayers may begin with words, but they end with transformation. The prayer takes place inside him as he allows God to meet with him. It is in this time of quiet that the relational aspect of our prayer-life can be developed. We understand that our quietness may begin with the closing of our mouths, but that this is just the beginning. We wait for God.

The more we practise being quiet, we discover that in the quiet, we are able to be quiet in deeper ways than just not speaking; our spirit finds rest and our souls find peace as they are united with God in our spiritual act of worship, as Paul describes it in Romans 12:1 & 2. There is a deep quality to this stillness which James described wherein God is able to make a proper impact on our lives. Transformative thinking and understanding emanates from our waiting heart and sends its ripples out into our lives and through us into the church in which we worship and the community in which we serve:

I remain confident of this:

I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord;

Be strong and take heart

And wait for the Lord. Psalm 27:13 & 14 NIV

This kind of prayer means letting God set the agenda for your quiet time¹⁷ and to trust that his Sovereign will is sufficient to discover and meet your needs! I am a person who quite likes words, and can really struggle with switching them off. In these times, God will usually fill my mind with a tangible assurance of his presence or with pictures that teach me about Him or my place within his love.

When Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, he doesn't ban speaking to God! There is certainly the sense of him calming things down, in order that God may be heard during our time of prayer. Jesus discourages 'babbling' like pagans in our prayers, which should be simple and honouring of God. In Matthew 6:5-15, this is his main instruction in response to the request to 'teach us to pray'. It is in these verses that Jesus marks out the way that prayer's simplicity should begin with recognising God's Holy Divinity and conclude with the response of us emulating his grace through offering our forgiveness to those who have wronged us. Being in God's presence should always effect a change within us. If, in the quietness of our being with God, we are able to lose ourselves in him then as we conclude our designated prayer-time and get on with the activity of the day, we should respond to the day's challenges and opportunities with a Godly heart and will.

Life doesn't always allow for much stillness.

Imagine you have a job and a family that cause sleepless nights and early waking every morning. The day is peppered with tasks that must be completed, demanding children or others who clamour for care and exhaustion sets in at the end of a day of the giving out of yourself to other people. It is not as simple to find a solution to this as 'get up earlier' and

¹⁶ James Hollins: Connecting with God

¹⁷ See Chapter _____

nor should the busy mum or carer be made to feel substandard or unholy in their faith when this is their experience. Rather, the often longed-for quiet time must be reinvented for the stage of life we are at.

There is no point in waiting until life gets back to normal - going back is not often helpful. It becomes an unrealistic mirage of false hope. After all, we change over the years, growing in maturity as life changes us and our experience and hopes that we have in God and our desires for the time we spend with God develop. I know that Shelley whom we met in the previous chapter talks of spending time talking with God all day, and I do that too! It is the precious moments of stillness with God that are centred on reading the Bible and actively listening for his voice in prayer that lend ease to spending every moment with Jesus as she describes. We may not have the cell-like opportunity for solitary hours to immerse ourselves in God's Word each day, but there are opportunities to discover God in waiting on him.

Changing our attitude to prayer changes us on the inside. The stillness of our body and the willingness to be with God in the whole of our selves places us, as a whole person, under the Lordship of Jesus. We do not pray with our minds alone, we pray with every fibre of our being. Remember that nervous feeling in your stomach? It was a bodily reminder to give the situation to God. Is the taste within your mouth not very nice? It's a reminder to hand over the bitterness of the moment or anxiety to God. Our bodies are constant reminders of our needs and our response to the world. Cold hands often indicate fear or discomfort, shakiness of body and mind seems to point to needing God's strength. We may use our body to pray in demonstration of prayer, lying face down or gazing upwards; kneeling with hands raised or bowing low before the throne of God. We may write or draw as we pray, illustrating the prayers of our inmost being by the overflow of words or pictures.

Achieving the place of prayer that meets this depth of relationship can be easier for some people than it is for others.

God knows your needs, says Jesus in Matthew 6:8.

He knows our family who make demands on our time, he knows our need to revise for important exams, that we must complete assignments, that we have work projects to execute and how we have to do extra hours at the office to pay the bills or to keep the company in business.

He knows when we lose sleep and are having trouble staying awake during the day.

He knows when our worlds are having trouble remaining emotionally intact and he knows our inner desire to flee from the pressure to hide in the wilderness place, away from the world until the crisis has passed. He knows all this and still declares that;

Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10 (NIV)

Jesus is the way by which our lives must be lived in order that we may have the life of completeness that is possible. To approach each day through him and his love makes the world look different. We are nourished and vibrant in our living rather than jaded and world-weary. We do not always find it easy to come to God and wait in quietness of our choosing. Jesus gives a vivid picture about the necessity of living through him and yet, this life giving path is often the first to be disregarded in times of stress. We resist because we

find it hard to hear his voice in the turmoil of our minds. We are full of busyness, of activity and problems that need to be addressed and these need to fall from our consciousness before we are able to devote our minds to stillness and to receiving God's guidance through words, prophecy, visions or pictures. There should be a period of stillness as we approach God and allow him to meet with us, to touch our spirit and refresh our soul. Sometimes, the quietness will fall on us during a time of worship and a deep sense of awe will envelop the gathered people. A sense of holiness and the presence of God will pervade the place where we are and in those moments, the knowledge of God is so much more readily discerned. It is useful, to practise an accompanying stillness of the whole person.

Learning to recognise what is God's voice is also key to the disciples' education. Later in Mark's gospel (13:5&6) Jesus warns of false messiahs who will come to trick the faithful. In 1 John 4, there are clues given for discovering whether the things we hear are Godly or otherwise:

¹ Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. ⁴ You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. 1 John 4 (NIV)

We need to learn how to pray when we are on our own and we need to learn to pray as a member of a fellowship or group. There is great encouragement for our spirit as we take steps away from our tight grasp on the world and start seeing a God's eye-view of the culture we live in; whether it is that of gossip and fashion magazines, TV trends or high business or educational ideals, even distorted views of what it means to be family. When we allow God to take authority over our mind and will, a new set of priorities emerge. Our sense and reason remain part of who we are, at all times and we weigh the thoughts that come to us accordingly, 'testing everything'. John's warnings are important for every Christian and we must be sure that we are wilfully focussed on God.

The 'false word' can accuse the believer and then set out to destroy their faith or well-being. This is more easily seen in the lives of others than in your own. The focus on a word of condemnation can rob the believer of their life in Christ. Words of failure, of discontent, of fear or of hatred behave as a curse over a person's heart if they are to take that word and dwell on it. The Word of God speaks Life and Truth into people. He brings healing and grace, encouragement and rebuke. The rebuke is never one that destroys a person, but through such words a believer may be brought into a fuller relationship with God.

Learning to pray means learning to work out what is God's voice and what that sounds like in your life. The disciples ask for Jesus to teach them. We too should seek a teacher who can guide us through some of the more complicated areas of praying!

It can become easy to let go of our prayer-times as the day fills up with demanding and exhausting routine and necessities. It can even seem like an indulgence to seek out space for ourselves to pray when there is so much to be done. Seeking out our space to be with God may come under attack by demands of a busy life, but it is interesting that the faux-rest of 'me time' is deemed more and more a necessity for daily survival. 'Me time' has become a popular ideal in contemporary culture, the notion of carving out space for recovery through having a spa treatment, facial or a bottle of wine, or a beer after work. Society has accepted this readily enough, yet we still work the guilt when carving out space to be with God. Maybe it seems somewhat selfish to read and pray when the dishwasher needs loading, the washing hung and the vacuuming attended to. Maybe you have to be at work or in class by a certain time which will dominate the bulk of your day and your thoughts must necessarily be there too in order to honour your activity. In all of these things there are spaces which may be found in order to find the source of your life's fullness.

Jesus refers to thieves and robbers who do not care for the sheep. These references are to false gods and idols which would lead the people astray. Today, there are many distractions which can stop us from getting close to God: from work overload to martyring yourself for the promotion of your family (extra classes, extra money, extra hobbies, extra holidays) We easily become obsessed with the things of the world that appear to be of great worth at the expense of feeding our spirit and discovering the Life that will bring fulfilment to us by giving God priority. Let Jesus be the gate through which we pass to enter each day, and we cut through the world's junk to gain the eternal perspective on our own life and our values which we would like to pass on to our family and friends

Living in and through Jesus will fuel our day. Seeking him out in the ordinary and routine activities of our life is crucial for our survival. I have heard suggested that the time spent in the shower, or general bathroom activities can provide space in which to devote the day to God's glory and to listen to him. I have often argued that the time and focus I spend in applying make-up at the beginning of the day is time I also spend being still within my spirit and that it has become sacred space during which I make sure that I am fully connected with God. On the drive to work, the commute, the walk to the bus stop, quiet time with God can be used to infuse his Life into your day; to pray and bless God for his goodness and to listen to his voice. Bibles are available for Ipods and smartphones in both written and audio format, magazines of devotional material can be slipped into bag or briefcase.

There is no need to have to heft a huge black Bible on the 93A bus to town in order to engage with scripture. Copy a verse or passage for the week onto your phone's notes facility and allow God to speak as you lose yourself in the truth of his words.

Often, even the passages of scripture that we've loved for years take on fresh meaning for us as we are still in God's presence and allow him to show us more about them and in consequence, about Him. All this quietness and being still equips us for our busy lives, our anxious moments and fuels our decision making abilities.

Walk the dog. Go down the street to buy a paper and use this time to devote to God. Don't iron the entire contents of the laundry basket, but be selective and spend the extra time focussing in on a passage of scripture. Tell your friends, 'give me half an hour' before they visit. Make space. Sit down with a cup of tea for twenty minutes or half an hour before the afternoon school run. Insist that the Lord of Heaven and Earth is worth devoting some time to being with and let his love, his inspiration, his power feed your spirit and strengthen you within. Find time to be with God and you will be a better boss, a

better parent, a better friend, a better student and a better follower of Jesus ever more able to view the world from the angle of the one in whose image you are created.

It is only through dedicating oneself to practising this stillness of our spirit and mind that we learn to hear God and to put away our other thoughts. Remember back to when you couldn't read? Or when you couldn't speak? Or do you remember not being able to drive and the effort and determination that you put into learning, because it was something that you really wanted to do? The same effort needs to be applied to learning how to be still and to hear from God. It sounds as if it should be easy because Adam and Eve just got on with chatting conversationally with God in the Garden (Genesis 2), so we may conclude that 'something must be dysfunctional within me personally if I can't hear God straight away.'

It is not that straightforward. The effort you need to put in so that you are able to hear God is one which requires denying earthly calls on your mind. Those who have a lot going on in their life or are prone to worrying over details of every day can find this tough, and let's face it, the devil doesn't want God's people being readily available vessels for God's love and word.

Those who have personalities which are more contemplative and can manage a single-focus on one thought to the exclusion of all else will have a head-start! Those who tackle the rest of life at a million miles an hour will probably find that this is quite a challenge!

Being still has its rewards. In the stillness, I have felt the amazing holiness of the presence of God in a prayer meeting as the wing-tip of the Angel of the Lord has gently brushed our faces. Unforgettable! I have felt the resting of God's hand upon my head in blessing and upon my shoulder as support during times of stillness and quiet.

In these times, God directs us to scripture, speaks to us through words of prophecy and through pictures. In times of waiting, I have watched as he has unleashed his gifts of tongues, of healing and of forgiveness into the hearts and lives of those in fellowship with me. We give space to God, and in that stillness, he fills us with good things. It is in these moments of time surrendered wholly to God's disposal that the kingdom is revealed to us and through us.

There are some wonderful young disciples whom I have the privilege of sharing in discipleship. At our annual weekend away, we were wrestling with the thorny topic of understanding that the truth of how God sees us is that we are beautiful, purposeful and worthwhile sons and daughters of God and members of his royal family. This met with a certain amount of resistance as it began to touch our hearts, and the leaders too were struggling under the weight of this assertion. In the stillness, we asked God to make it real in our lives as we summed it up in the simple statement, 'You're Gorgeous!' As we waited on God, I was reminded of my small son who will not look me in the eye when I try to direct his behaviour to more acceptable activities. As he avoids my eye, he also avoids my word of authority! Each of us in that room needed to look at God as he spoke to us rather than pretending that the word was for everyone else and to our exclusion. God encouraged us to make eye contact with him and to accept that the word was truly for us. At least one person was freed from significant feelings of being substandard that evening. These understandings do not come and make an impact upon us until we allow space to wait on him. It is often in the stillness that the adventure with God truly has the opportunity to be birthed into a living reality.

Chapter 6 There's a Time to Speak it Aloud

As part of a church leaders' tour of the Holy Land, we were called upon in turn to participate in the worship at the significant sites in Jerusalem and around Galilee. We had read the scriptures that accompanied the events around Jesus' arrest and death. We had sung resurrection hymns around the Garden Tomb. It was the last day of the tour and we were to share communion at a beautiful, peaceful site by Galilee, not far from Capernaum. The tour leader had asked if I would pray and bring the different strands of the tour together through the prayers and, unscripted, I agreed.

When the time came, with the lake in front of me, I stood on the seat for a better view, then after a deep breath and a silent prayer for guidance, I gathered the thoughts and blessings that we had gathered and experienced together and gave them to God on behalf of the group.

I thanked God for the beauty and wonder of his love and that he chose to come into the world as a person. I confessed sorrow and confusion over the building of the partition wall that divided the people of the land and the indelible image of the chaos in Bethany.

I praised God for the faith which binds us together and the grace that heals. I asked that this experience would become part of each of our hearts and that we would be transformed by a fresh understanding of Him.

As I drew to a close, I knew that this prayer had changed me. That it had made sense of many of my thoughts which had been floating around without any real structure to them. I knew that through the prayer, I had been shown a love that was growing for the place. Although I prayed on behalf of the group, it was also thoroughly for my own edification. My speaking that prayer affected many within the group who were touched by its honesty and relevance as it helped to make sense of their own experience of God during the week. I could have got it wrong. I could have written it down so that I didn't mess it up, but instead I chose to take full advantage of the stunning location and amazing revelation of God's love for us in Jesus and to use this as a canvas for a prayer of faith.

To pray out loud is both dangerous and very beautiful!

Unspoken, our praying has no risk and arguably less faith and understanding than the prayers which are declared, in full hearing of yourself, your company and the creation in which you stand. Your spoken prayers show understanding and insight, often gifted to you by God in that moment in which you open your mouth and, in faith, allow the prayer to fall as words into the world.

This is dangerous, because it leads to growth of your faith and spirit as you openly profess the truth of your love for God and with it, an obedience to listen and respond to his command for your life and work.

It is beautiful because it leads to a picture of God's love and grace which is vast and immeasurable being woven in beautiful threads of hope into not only your own heart of faith, but also the hearts of those who hear your words and are blessed in their faith by them.

For many people, prayer is marked by their inability to pray aloud. As an expression of our faith, it can be threatening or isolating, fraught with fear of what other people might think when they hear what our faith boils down to. It can be as if we believe that, in the soundproof sanctuary of our mind, God will know what we mean by our inarticulate prayer, whereas if we say the words out loud, we are going to look stupid to everyone around as well as in front of God. Many people do not test this theory as they pass the opportunity to pray on to the person next to them. It is heartbreaking because praying out loud is one of the most wonderful opportunities for declaring God's love for you and his