

CONTEMPLATIVE *Prayer*

“HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD”
COLOSSIANS 3



The Springs 

Be still and know that I am God.
Psalm 46:10

*Within your temple, O God,
we meditate on your unfailing love.*
Psalm 48:9

I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.
Psalm 119:15

*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ,
set your hearts on things above,
where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.
Set your minds on things above,
not on earthly things. For you died,
and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*

Colossians 3:1-3



*Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.
Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

Psalm 1

Session 1

Contemplative Prayer

This is the stillness of simply being with God in love.

Taking time to sit open and present to God, wanting nothing but what he wants to give, doing nothing so he can do everything he wants, using no words, manipulating nothing... this is our act of love. It is a natural outpouring of trust and true friendship. Contemplative prayer is one special way we can love our Precious Savior. He created us to spend time with him, to be friends walking in the garden. Through contemplative prayer we tell God we want nothing more than to just be with him—present and open to him alone.

“The goal of contemplative prayer is not the elimination of thoughts or words. The goal is openness to God, being with God. But thoughts and words cannot bring us to God or God to us. Only faith can do that. Our part is simply... leaning toward God in faith with longing, openness and love. It is by God’s grace that we enter into relationship with the divine, not by means of anything we do or don’t do. Our part is simply openness in faith. Contemplative prayer is not the suspension of action or the elimination of thoughts or words, but turning towards God in faith and openness. The rest is up to God. Being with God in wordless, trusting openness cannot be reduced to a set of techniques.”¹

¹David G. Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*, 135.



1. Have you come to the place in your relationship with God where you no longer need to control the agenda or conversation; you no longer need to control the experience or outcome?

2. Are you ready to trust God with this present moment?

3. Do you want to be vulnerable and intimate—come what may? Yes, you fear pain, emptiness, void, the revelation of the depth of your failings, but perhaps your longing for knowing God, and being known by God, outweighs this fear.

When we are tired of talking, tired of making God what we think we need him to be, tired of pretending to be whom we think God wants us to be, then we are ready for a new kind of prayer. We are ready to move beyond the worded prayers we have been taught—move beyond the prayers where we tell God what to do—move beyond wanting an outcome. We want relationship. We want companionship. We want to love and be loved. Now we are ready for contemplative prayer—for wordless intimacy.

Can you picture John reclining against Jesus' chest after eating a meal with him? Can you imagine Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, listening attentively, maybe even putting her head on his knees?

Can you see yourself so in love that words won't do, so you pour perfume mixed with the tears of overwhelming love on his feet and use your hair to rub the offering into his skin? These are examples of the relationship Jesus may be calling us to have with him. They are vulnerable, humble, and free. When we respond to the call to be so in love—so out of control... A new level of prayer is born.

What are you resistant to—what feels uncomfortable to you? Or, if you practice this, what hesitations have you overcome—what do you still struggle with?

What are your questions about this practice?



Session 2

“There are many terms that seek to capture this dynamic—silent prayer, centering prayer, contemplative prayer, interior prayer, prayer of the heart. Each one carries a slightly different nuance, but they all are attempts to capture the same thing: the movement beyond words to an intimacy that requires no words. This intimacy is the kind that lovers know when they give themselves over to the act of lovemaking, the kind a mother experiences with a nursing baby, the kind that intimate friends know when they have said all there is to say and settle into a comfortable silence, content to just be in each other’s presence. If you have had the joy of any of these experiences, you know that this is much more intimate than the noisy chatter that usually fills our social interactions. This silent “being with” is full and satisfying. The reason this kind of prayer is so satisfying is that it is about knowing God experientially rather than just knowing a lot about God... Be still before the Lord and wait. Be still and know that I am God. In silence my soul waits for you and you alone, oh God... This is a prayer of self-emptying that enables us to receive whatever it is that God wants to give. We come to him with empty hands and empty heart, having no agenda.”³

³ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*, 68.



But wait! I'm a control freak who can't stay silent to save my life. I am as vulnerable as the offspring of a prickly cactus and an oyster AND I have mastered the art of intimacy-avoidance through extreme busyness.

1. How do I even approach silent "just being intimate" with God?

2. How can contemplative prayer be for me?

We learn from the saints who have gone before us. Two particularly useful spiritual practices can help make contemplative prayer more approachable for us. And of course, we know in our core that God can do all things for us, in us, and through us. We love because he first loved us. If we long for intimacy with God, it is because he is calling us to it and will provide it for us. We can be intimate and vulnerable through the power and protection of the Holy Spirit. The Lord will guide us always (Isaiah 58:11).



Two Practices for Contemplative Prayer

Breath Prayer

Breath prayer is a simple way to submit yourself to the truth of God's love and promises and ground yourself in the realization that God is present with you. Match a short prayer to the rhythm of your breathing. You can choose a verse, phrase, promise, or truth and divide it into two parts. One part you recite as you inhale. The second part you recite as you exhale.

Examples:

- The Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God (inhale) Have mercy upon me, a sinner (exhale)”
- Psalm 46:10: “Be still (inhale), and know that I am God (exhale).”
- Psalm 136: “The everlasting love of God (inhale), lasts forever (exhale).”
- Name God: “Emmanuel (inhale), You are with me (exhale).” Or “Yahweh (inhale), You Are (exhale)”
- Breathe in God's love, and breathe out any resistance to his love.
- “I am God's Beloved (inhale) and he is mine (exhale).”

Practice so often it becomes subconscious—make it the rhythm of your day.

Ask God for your own personal breath prayer and see what he gives you (without analysis or judgment).



Centering Prayer

Centering prayer is another spiritual discipline where we set aside time to be completely submitted to God. It is an offering of silence and solitude in which we deliberately give our WHOLE selves over to God with the help of the Holy Spirit. We humbly trust God by taking time to die to self so we can be filled with Christ. We have no agenda, no words, no goal besides simply being with God so he can do whatever he wants in that time and space. Centering prayer is our opportunity to give ALL control to God, for him to do what he will with our gift of time. It takes “ruthless trust” and practice, and of course it requires the Holy Spirit to do all the important work.

A few tools that practitioners of centering prayer have found useful:

- A peaceful, quiet, consistent space
- Slow purposeful breathing
- Opening with a prayer of surrender, asking the Holy Spirit to guide the time
- Using one word that the Holy Spirit gives you to focus your attention

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:9

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Romans 8:26b

At first, this word may need to be thought with each in and out of breath, as you become better at calming your mind, it may only be needed with the exhale, then only when the mind wanders...be patient with your practice.

- Imagine a place
 - Sitting at the feet of Jesus with your head in his lap
 - Sitting next to Jesus or in his lap
 - Kneeling before the throne
 - Floating in the River of Life
- Gently return to surrender when you notice your mind wandering—no judgment—no analysis
- Set a timer if you have time limitations
 - It may be good to start with five minutes and work your way up to twenty minutes as you become more disciplined

Centering prayer grounds everything in God's love. You will only want to spend time sitting in silence, completely open to God's agenda, if you are drawn by his Love. You will experience his love in a new way when you submit to him alone. Out of that experience of his love, your love for him will blossom in new ways. Love for God always leads to love for his world. When your love for the world grows, your service will be motivated by, and performed in, love. Glory to God!

1. What did you find challenging during this time?

2. What encourages you to practice contemplative prayer on your own?

My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mothers like a weaned child I am content. Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore.

Psalm 131

Session 3
Contemplative Prayer —
An Act of Surrender

What amazing love the Father has lavished on us! His love for us knows no bounds. Out of gratitude for his grace, we desire to live a life that is worthy of the Lord and to please him in every way. His love frees us to open our hearts before him. His grace gives us the courage to open our hearts before him and ask him to make us aware of ways we are hanging on to our old earthly nature.

Sadly, we rarely make time to silently submit our whole selves to God through the Holy Spirit. We keep hectically busy and fill every free moment of our day with some form of diversion—work, computers, television, movies, social media, magazines. Perhaps we distract ourselves because we do not trust that the Lord really loves us. We know he loves the whole world. It's hard, sometimes, to really believe that he loves me.

I will not surrender, if I do not trust his love for me. Trust that leads to surrender is a life-long journey.

Where am I in this journey?

1. Is my heart on the journey to know more deeply that God loves me completely, just as I am? Does my heart long to trust that God loves me in spite of, and through, the tragic circumstances of life?

2. If yes, could God be calling me into contemplative prayer as part of my journey with him?

3. What practical steps do I need to take to make a place for prayer at home?

4. How much time can I give to this practice daily?

“We often presume that trust will dispel the confusion, illuminate the darkness, vanquish the uncertainty, and redeem the times... but it doesn’t. We trust though confused and left in the dark... trust him to be loving, even when every shred of evidence that we see around us cries out that a loving God would not allow this horrible experience to happen. This kind of faith transforms us.

In order to grow in trust, we must allow God to see us and love us precisely as we are. The best way to do that is through prayer. As we pray, the unrestricted love of God gradually transforms us...

The Spirit opens our eyes to see what really is, to pierce through illusions so that we can discover we are seen by God with a gaze of love.”⁴

⁴Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust; The Ragamuffin’s Path to God*, 6, 16.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13: 1–3

Of course we long to love God and have a deeply personal relationship with him. Of course it makes sense that a relationship will grow deeper when we spend time present only to the other person, distracted by nothing, with no agenda of our own. However, contemplative prayer is difficult because it requires genuine trust and submission which relies on death to self—usually a slow, life-long process.

Be easy on yourself as you enter this discipline. Allow yourself to fail again and again without harsh judgment. Think of a child wanting to sit in her parent’s lap for twenty minutes—sometimes the child will be able to just be present with the parent, but usually the child is chattering away, distracted by this or that—the parent still loves the fact that the child came to sit in her lap!

Embrace your “failings” as motivation to deepen your trust. Thank God for loving you right where you are, and keep trying to offer the gift of your whole self.

Peace in the Storm

And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:7

“When used consistently, spiritual practices open us to the presence of the holy in our midst. Being in a relationship with the divine mystery that sustains and transforms our very existence requires something of us. It requires among other things honesty, love, support, openness, vulnerability, forgiveness, and trust.

“Spiritual practices provide the framework for our relationship with God. The Spirit cannot be manipulated. Waiting for God in the quietness of prayer... involves opening ourselves to the Spirit, knowing that God responds not always according to our wishes but according to our need.”⁵

Peace is a fruit of the Spirit, a gift from God. It cannot be earned. It is the natural result of time surrendered to the God of Love. Surrendering to God’s love through practices such as contemplative prayer, can be the antidote to our problems and longings, because the gift of the Spirit transforms anxiety to peace, hate to love, anger to gentleness, control to patience, pride to kindness.

⁵Joseph D. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology History and Practice*, 42,43.

If God is calling you to wordless intimacy with him, dive in!

What contemplative prayer is not:

- It is not a charismatic gift but a path of transformation.
- It is not a form of self-hypnosis but a way to quiet the mind while maintaining its alertness.
- It is not a para-psychological experience but an exercise of faith, hope, and selfless love.
- It is not a relaxation exercise but it may be quite refreshing.
- It is not a technique but a way of cultivating a deeper relationship with God.
- It is not limited to the “felt” presence of God but is rather a deepening of faith in God’s abiding presence.
- It is not reflective or spontaneous prayer, but simply resting in God beyond thoughts, words, and emotions.



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