

TODAY

The Family Altar

January 2008

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“Hearing God’s
Word Again”
Dr. Arie C. Leder



“Spiritual Disciplines
of God’s People”
Rev. James and Rose Dekker

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French, Chinese, Japanese, and Indonesian.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OF GOD'S PEOPLE

REV. JAMES C. AND ROSE DEKKER

ST. CATHARINES, ONTARIO

Spiritual disciplines reach back through the history of Christianity and even earlier to some of the spiritual habits of God's people in ancient Israel. They serve as a form of spiritual hygiene that intimately links our belief in God with our daily living. Practicing spiritual disciplines helps clean us up to be able to hear God's voice, experience God's presence, and teach us to live more like Christ.

Sometimes spiritual disciplines ask us to do without things. At other times they urge us to practice silence or solitude, but not to serve ourselves. Spiritual disciplines help individuals experience God alone *and* in community. There are no fixed rules for learning these disciplines. Yet the Bible gives us examples that can help us learn them, to strengthen our love for God and our neighbors.

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FROM SINNING TO TRANSFORMING

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Rom. 3:23; 12:2

There's a huge gap between recognizing you are helpless before God and knowing how to serve God perfectly. It's the difference between fatal spiritual illness and the life you've always wanted to live.

All of us live daily somewhere within that gap. We know we fall short of God's glory, and yet, by the mercies and power of God, we can take steps to be transformed in our very being. We are on a journey that is changing our lives gradually, steadily.

For example, maybe once you had an uncontrollable temper. Now you manage mostly not to blow up at your spouse, children, parents, boss, or employee. When you do get angry, you immediately apologize and go for several days or even weeks before flaring up again.

If you experience things like that, you are following Christ. Some days you see him clearly. Other days you trip, stumble, and fall—but you know Christ lifts you up and cleans you off again.

You are being spiritually transformed, gradually transforming like a caterpillar into a butterfly. You're becoming a disciple of Jesus.

Disciples need *disciplines*. This month we will focus on transforming by learning how Jesus lived a disciplined life so that his people—individuals and communities—can live that way also.

PRAYER

Lead us, guide us, along the way, for if you lead us, we cannot stray. Lord, let us walk each day with you; lead us our whole life through. In the grace of Christ, Amen.

PRACTICE AND REPETITION

Offer your bodies as living sacrifices Be transformed
by the renewing of your mind. Romans 12:1-2

Maybe you've noticed that we're using a Bible verse we used yesterday. *Repetition* is part of spiritual discipline. If we desire that our bodies and minds be renewed, we need practice and repetition. Then we'll grow to live by God's "good, pleasing and perfect will."

Offering and sacrificing do not come easily. The apostle Paul knew this. Only because "God's mercy" renewed him could he morph from a persecutor to a missionary of the church of Jesus Christ (see Acts 9). First, though, Paul waited in blindness for three days. Then he spent three *years* in Arabia and Damascus (Galatians 1:17-18). I'm sure Paul was unlearning persecution and practicing how to live for Christ and tell others about him. God's discipling mercies were transforming him day by day.

As a believer in Christ, you want God's mercies to change you—whether you have been a Christian all your life or you are just beginning to follow Jesus. Maybe one thing you'll change this month is the way you read the Bible. Do you open your Bible once in a while and read a little bit? Or do you read it daily?

Read Romans 12:1-2 again and again today. Mull over each word. How does God's mercy work in you? Have you offered yourself voluntarily and totally to God? If so, how often did you have to repeat that until you could do it well, as God wants you to?

PRAYER

"Spirit of the living God, move among us all; make us one in heart and mind." Fall afresh on us. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us—by God's mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

"Be still and know that I am God"

Psalm 46:10

Contemplative praying is not something we *do*; it is simply *being* in God's presence. One stills all actions and thoughts, resting the soul in silence and patient waiting. Contemplative praying does not involve reading or analysis. Rather, it involves a stilling of our active thoughts.

To begin to practice contemplative praying, find a quiet place to be alone for 15 to 20 uninterrupted minutes. Some people find it helpful to set a timer so that thinking about how much time has elapsed does not become a distraction. Sit silently. When thoughts occur about events of the day or anything else, acknowledge them and let them go. Sit quietly in the presence of God; your only expectation is that God is with you. As you practice contemplative praying, God may reveal a special meaning to you—but that would be an extraordinary gift, not a result of your struggling for it.

Since the stilling of our thoughts is very difficult in our hectic world, you may want to begin by choosing a sacred word (such as "Jesus" or "mercy") as a sign that you are consenting to God's presence and to whatever action God wants to take within you. When you find your thoughts wandering, return to attentiveness to God by repeating the word you have chosen. At the end of the time you have set apart, quietly thank God.

PRAYER

God of all words and silence, thank you for hearing us clearly through our stumbling words and thoughts. Teach us to listen to you in silence, trust, and hope. Amen.

THE GROANINGS OF PRAYER

The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans
that words cannot express. Romans 8:26

Do you remember when you first learned to pray? I can still say the prayer my mother taught me when I was three years old. We knelt together next to my bed: "Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me. Bless thy little lamb tonight. Through the darkness be thou near me, keep me safe till morning light." That prayer comforted me because I was afraid of the dark and felt unsafe unless I prayed—and unless Mom left the hall light on until my older sisters came to bed.

Some time later I said my first very own prayer. I prayed it for months after a Sunday school lesson when my teacher told us about our "forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." I was perplexed and worried. I knew the names of only three of our "four fathers"—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So after Mom or Dad went downstairs, I prayed earnestly, "Dear God, please help me learn who the fourth of our forefathers is. Amen."

Maybe I didn't have words to express my thoughts well, but the Spirit of God understood and perfected my prayers before the Father. A few years later I learned that God had given us thousands of forefathers and fore-mothers. They're that "great cloud of witnesses" from Hebrews 12:1, people who have prayed over the span of thousands of years all over God's world, in times and places of fear or suffering, hope or joy.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for your Spirit, who makes our prayed mistakes into meaningful conversation with you. Thank you for the Spirit's assurance that you always hear us. Amen.

MEDITATION WITH A DISCIPLINED SCHEDULE

I will meditate on all your works and consider all
your mighty deeds. Psalm 77:12

I am 59 years old, and for 45 of those years I could not keep a regular schedule for prayer and meditation on Scripture. Every September since I entered seminary, I resolved to read Scripture and pray alone daily—as many speakers at pastors' conferences recommended. Once I lasted till mid-November. Then church life took over with five breakfast or lunch appointments weekly.

Fourteen years ago one more speaker emphasized the need to read Scripture, use a journal, and pray regularly. But this one knew my problem; it had been his too. He asked, "How many of you rely on your day-planner to get you where you have to go?" At least 400 of the 500 participants raised their hands. We were slaves to our schedules; we'd do whatever our planners demanded. He had us! "Now, write 'GOD' in your day-planner at the same time six days a week. You may take a rest from meditation once a week. But do you know what? God will show up every day. Will *you* show up to meditate on God's works and Word six days?"

It seemed too simple. But after several months of showing up at the same time six days a week, I no longer had to write "GOD" in my planner. God always showed up, and so did I. One of God's minor mighty deeds has been to discipline me to spend quality time with him six days a week. And he is always there.

PRAYER

God of all times and places, you know that I find time to do what is important to me. Help me be with you where you are every day of my life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SILENCE: THE SOUND OF THE BEGINNING

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
God saw that the light was good . . . Genesis 1:3-4

We believe that all 66 books of the Bible are God's written Word—39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. That's a lot of words.

But have you ever noticed that this written Word of God begins with a great deal of silence?

"The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." Hovering silently, perhaps like a hawk looking down for a mouse or gopher.

Later, in Acts 2, the same Spirit came roaring like a mighty wind to fill Jesus' disciples—and God's people spoke in many languages.

In the beginning, though, there was silence, as if to prepare for the work of creation. Then God spoke a few well-chosen words full of power: "'Let there be . . . ' . . . and there was'"

At the end of each of those work days, when there was evening and there was morning each day, there were no more words until the next day.

There was silence.

How do you start off your day? Your week of work or study? Do you talk from morning till night and then half the night too? Or do you take time for silence?

Maybe if we take more time for silence, we will hear a few well-chosen words of God. Later we can learn to talk with God, but first we must listen in silence.

PRAYER

God of all words, forgive us when we talk too much or use words carelessly. Silence us with your presence so that we can hear you. (*Be silent for one minute.*)

In Jesus' name, Amen.

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations”
Psalm 46:10

We live in noisy times. Streets echo with the roar of traffic. Construction projects boom and bang in downtowns, neighborhoods, suburbs. We fill our ears and elevators with playlists from iPods, our homes and cars with surround sound. Sports events blast out marches, cheers, and taunts.

Many farm and factory workers in earlier generations lost much hearing from the din of clanking machinery. Young people damage their ears at rock concerts and with earphones as they shop. Even at worship services some sound-control people seem to lock the volume on “freight train” level.

The damage caused by noise is not a new discovery. It reaches far deeper than our ears. Centuries ago English poet John Milton portrayed hell as a place of unending noise—of “howling and roaring and screeching and yelling.” If we bathe ourselves in noise, we might never soak in the silence of God. We may never exalt or “lift up” the name of God even above ourselves—to say nothing of exalting God among the nations.

Take a survey of your daily activities. How many are filled with sound? Are you letting noise drown out or make you forget things you should hear? Do you forget your family? Your job? God? How can you turn down the volume in your life and find some silence for God?

PRAYER

God of silence and sound, as you fill the earth, help us quiet down to hear your voice in silence, to soak in your words and enrich our lives with you. (*Be silent for one minute.*) Amen.

CONFESSION: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS

Jesus replied, “. . . It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Matthew 3:15

As we think about confession in connection with Jesus, we might wonder, “What would Jesus ever have to confess?” He didn’t commit any sin. But *confession* can have two meanings.

One way of confessing is to say publicly something important that others must know. We confess like that when we publicly state that we believe in Jesus. Before we can confess in that way, though, Jesus had to make it possible. He did that when he said publicly—or confessed—in John’s presence that his baptism was “proper . . . to fulfill all righteousness.”

Because Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life, he “fulfilled all righteousness.” When John baptized him, Jesus took the first step in the hard process of enabling us to confess our sins, be forgiven, and then confess our faith in him publicly.

Paul puts it this way: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Once and for all on the cross, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. And because of that we can confess our sins, be forgiven, and become righteous.

Confessing sins to God—and to another person—is a necessary spiritual discipline for people who need forgiveness.

PRAYER

Dearest Lord Jesus, thank you for opening up our hearts and taking our sinful thoughts, words, and actions upon yourself so that we can come close to you. Amen.

DAVID'S CONFESSION FOR NEW LIFE

Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

2 Samuel 12:7

King David had the power and wealth to do whatever he wanted. One evening while watching Bathsheba bathing, he wanted her. Bathsheba was the wife of his faithful soldier Uriah. David then broke at least four of God's Ten Commandments in the seamy process of getting Bathsheba. He coveted Uriah's wife, stole her as a kid shoplifts candy, committed adultery with her, and ordered Uriah killed in battle.

For a while David thought he got away with it. But when his friend Nathan told David a story about a rich man stealing a poor man's lamb, David became outraged. Then Nathan told him, "You are the man!" And David confessed, "I have sinned against the LORD"; Nathan responded, "The Lord has taken away your sin" (2 Samuel 12:13).

But that wasn't the end of David's confession. He poured out his heart to God in Psalm 51. God moved David to use his poetic gifts to confess his sin. He asked God to build a new life for him so that he could teach others to turn back to God.

Would David have confessed his sin unless Nathan had challenged him and held him accountable to God? Did David ever dream his relationship with Nathan would cause such agony and yet lead to forgiveness and renewed life? God often uses friends in just that way.

PRAYER

"Comfort your servant now, while at your throne I bow and call to you. Your pardoning grace is free; sinners who raise their plea your love and mercy see; they are made new." Amen.

THE PRACTICE OF *LECTIO DIVINA*

The power of the Lord was present . . .

Luke 5:17

Lectio divina literally means “divine reading.” This ancient method of spiritual devotion may be done alone or in a group. You prayerfully read a passage several times in one sitting and/or several days in a row, expecting God’s presence. We’ll focus on today’s passage four more times in the coming week. As the words soak in, listen for God to speak to you through the Scriptures.

Today we’ll begin *lectio divina* as follows: If you are reading these devotions as a family or small group, choose one person to read the passage slowly and clearly. If you’re alone, read aloud. Listen prayerfully to the words; respond silently or aloud by repeating words that strike you as most important in this moment.

Read the passage again. Respond by saying what the full text is telling you. What questions does it suggest? What details speak to you? What memories does it bring to mind? What do you find in your heart when you hear these words?

Read the passage again. Is God giving you a particular message? Is God calling you to a certain action? Offer yourself to God in prayer, if you feel called to do so.

Read the passage once more. Sit in silence for a few minutes, reflecting on the words God has spoken to you. Conclude with a prayer of thanks. You may also wish to write your responses in a journal.

PRAYER

Lord, when we read your Word, let us not treat it like it has magic powers. Teach us instead to read your Word often, slowly, deeply, trusting in you.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

FORGIVENESS: A GIFT FROM JESUS

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."
Luke 5:20

Forgiveness does not always make the list of spiritual disciplines. Yet for four days we will see forgiveness as a disciplined process in which we can participate. As you read and re-read this story in the coming days, be aware that you are practicing the discipline of *lectio divina* while you are also learning to practice another discipline. A disciplined Christian life is demanding, full, and rewarding because it helps lead one closer to God.

How does forgiveness start? We become aware of a need for something that only God can give. The paralyzed man and his friends knew they needed something that only Jesus could give, but they thought it was "only" healing. So they worked hard to give Jesus the opportunity to heal.

Meanwhile, as the roof tiles came off and the man dropped into the room, Jesus saw a deeper human need. When Jesus forgave the paralytic, he was not singling him out as a greater sinner than anyone else. Rather, he was declaring to everyone that all human need is rooted in our need for God to forgive our sin. Here it may look as if forgiveness was easier for Jesus. But later he paid with his life so that we could be forgiven.

Through Jesus we learn how much we need to be forgiven and how we need to forgive others—as we'll continue to see in this episode from Luke.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, give us the faith to see your forgiving power. Thank you for giving your life for us. As forgiven sinners, may we show our faith in all we do and say. Amen.

FORGIVENESS: RECEIVING IT

Immediately he stood up . . . took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Luke 5:25

Yesterday we met the paralyzed man and his friends who lowered him into a house full of surprised people. Jesus healed the man in a rather complicated process. First, Jesus saw the faith of the man and his friends because of the effort they made. (Imagine being rewarded for tearing apart your neighbor's house!) Because of their faith, he forgave the paralyzed man's sins. That is probably not what they thought they needed, but Jesus knew best. Next, after a brief argument with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, he told the man, "Get up, take your mat and go home."

Now it was the man's turn to respond to Jesus' words. His first chance to show that he believed was to try to obey after Jesus forgave him. Jesus gave three clear instructions: "Get up, take your mat and go home." If the man said, "I can't. That's why my friends lowered me," his faith would be useless (see James 2:20). But this man did all three things and went home praising God.

The first important part of the discipline of forgiveness is having the faith to accept forgiveness from Jesus. Then we begin learning to forgive others by doing what Jesus tells us to do.

Do you believe Jesus has forgiven you? What does Jesus want you to do to show him you accept his gift of forgiveness?

PRAYER

Eternal forgiver and healer, thank you for showing us the people you forgave and healed, who received your Word in faith. Lead us in new life daily, we pray. Amen.

FORGIVENESS: REJECTING IT

“Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Luke 5:21

Having a healthy spiritual life includes being able to recognize and receive the good things God gives believers in any circumstance. Sometimes God gives us things that are very surprising. Yesterday we saw that the man whom Jesus healed received forgiveness of sins in a surprising way. He had come to Jesus to be healed of paralysis, but when Jesus saw his faith, the man received forgiveness first. This man learned quickly how to receive and respond to Jesus' forgiveness.

In that same room were Pharisees and teachers of the law. They were sophisticated, highly educated people. They knew the Hebrew Scriptures backwards and forwards. In fact, they were right when they asked their second question: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

They were in the presence of God as they heard and saw Jesus. In just a few moments they would see the clear evidence of Jesus' divine power as he healed the paralyzed man. But they had already decided that this was not a setting where sin could be forgiven. They certainly wouldn't think about trusting that Jesus was himself God in human flesh. They had quit being ready for God to surprise them. Because of that, they rejected the very God who could forgive.

Have you ever thought you were at a place where God could not forgive or heal you?

PRAYER

God of all people, may we believe that your Son, Jesus Christ, came to save us and can forgive whatever wrong we do or think. In his name we pray. Amen.

FORGIVENESS: JESUS' PEOPLE GIVING IT

Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God.

Luke 5:26

This story shows that forgiveness is both costly and demanding. It cost God's Son his life to forgive the man's sins and tell him to walk. But the demands of forgiveness elicit different responses. The lame man accepted Jesus' forgiveness by obeying his command to walk and by praising God. The religious leaders, however, disbelieved in Jesus' authority to forgive and thus rejected Jesus, increasing their own debt of sin.

Another response to Jesus' forgiveness came from the crowd to whom Jesus often preached. In contrast with the religious leaders, everyone in this crowd "was amazed and gave praise to God."

People accept Jesus with differing degrees of obedience. Unlike the leaders who rejected Jesus, "everyone" believed that Jesus forgave and healed the paralyzed man. All those people were in a healthy spiritual condition to continue developing their own relationship with Jesus. Others in that crowd may have met Jesus again, and he might have forgiven or healed them. Had they not believed when they saw Jesus forgive another person, they would have missed an opportunity to praise God or be open to Jesus' potential work in their lives.

How have you seen God's forgiveness work in another person? Did it open you to other ways God might work in you? Are you ready to forgive another?

PRAYER

Dear God, may your forgiving Word soak into our hearts and grow out of our lives, no matter how profoundly we sin or how we have sinned against you or others. Amen.

GIVING THANKS: THANKING GOD FOREVER

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.

Psalm 136:1

I remember hearing this psalm as a child, and it seemed to go on forever. As I grew older, though, I realized the writer of Psalm 136 wished to show readers repeatedly that God's "love endures forever."

Read and re-read this psalm as a truly attentive child of God who is daily growing to know God better. Practice *lectio divina* (see Feb. 10) by carefully reading aloud the first part of every verse, reflecting on every phrase. The verses of Psalm 136 recall concrete examples from history in which the Lord showed his enduring love.

If you wish, look up the full report of each of those examples in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, and Judges. Then try to identify personally with as many of the instances of the Lord's enduring love that the verses suggest to you.

Can you identify any of the Lord's "great wonders" that awed you? That comforted you?

Can you name a time in your life when the Lord led you "through the desert"?

As you mull over each verse and each example of God's love, repeat the psalm's refrain again and again. What do you think is the most fitting response to God for his enduring love in all its instances?

How can you, your family, and your community thank God for his enduring love?

PRAYER

Eternal God, I offer my heart thankfully for your enduring love in my life. Forgive my faulty memory. Bless me with better memories of your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THANKING GOD IN ALL YOU DO

Whatever you do . . . do it all in the name of the Lord
Jesus, giving thanks to God . . . Colossians 3:17

I've just returned from visiting a boy undergoing chemotherapy; it makes him horribly sick. Every February I am reminded of my father, who would have been 95 years old in February. He died at age 71.

How can we thank God for *whatever* we do? For visiting a very sick boy? For losing a father? Why does Paul urge Christians to thank God for whatever they do?

Recently a committed teenage girl confided to me, "So much seems to be going well. I get good grades; I like to study. I pray and read Scripture regularly. People see me as a leader in school and youth groups. But I often feel empty and alone. What should I do?"

I suggested that we read Acts 16 and Colossians 3:17. I asked her questions, based on these Scriptures: Where was the apostle Paul when he wrote these words? (*In prison—again, just as in Acts 16.*) Did he feel alone or empty? (*Probably.*) How could Paul still tell us to thank God for whatever we do?

I let her mull that last one over. But I believe that whatever Paul felt, he also remembered that God was with him *in* his emptiness and aloneness.

Don't thank God *for* emptiness and loneliness. But *do* thank God for being with you wherever you are, whatever you do—just as God is with the suffering boy *in* his cancer.

PRAYER

Faithful God, when we feel empty, remind us that you are God over emptiness too, so that feeling empty is OK at times. Fill our emptiness with your fullness, we pray. Amen.

JOURNALING

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Deuteronomy 6:6

Have you ever tried journaling? As a spiritual discipline, journaling involves writing down your thoughts and responses as you sit in God's presence and read or reflect on Scripture, on how God is working in your life, or on anything else that is affecting you.

Keep an empty spiral notebook and a pen handy as you practice *lectio divina* or as you sit quietly in an attitude of receptivity to God. Remember: the disciplines often combine.

With your notebook open, write down all the thoughts that come to you. These thoughts do not have to be planned out or organized. They are for no one's eyes but your own—unless you choose otherwise. You may want to share them in confidence with a spiritual mentor or a friend who is walking closely with you in your spiritual journey. Write as much or as little as you can each day, and date the entries.

It's not necessary to go back and read what you have written, but after a time it can help to look back on some pages. Note how you have changed. Has God written his commands in your heart as you have written them on paper? Perhaps some of the things you wrote will surprise you with their depth of perception in hearing God's voice or experiencing his presence. You can listen to God even when you're the one doing the writing.

PRAYER

O God, author of every good word, thank you for your Word. Help us experience your living presence from your Word as you write that Word into our hearts and lives. Amen.

John 2:1-11

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 18

CELEBRATION: JESUS CELEBRATES A WEDDING

This [sign] . . . Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee.
He thus revealed his glory John 2:11

For the next several days we'll focus on a less intentionally practiced discipline: celebration. God's people should celebrate when they recognize God's work and presence in their lives. Jesus is the best person to teach us to celebrate.

In the book of John, Jesus celebrates several meals with differing groups of people. Each meal uniquely reveals Jesus, "the bread of life," nourishing his followers with his words and actions. That is worth celebrating.

In John 2 Jesus prevents a potential social disaster. I'm sure the families of the bride and groom in Cana thanked Jesus for making ordinary water into extraordinary wine to rescue their children's wedding party.

Yet there is much more to celebrate. John says this first miraculous sign "revealed his glory." What is glorious about this? Not the wine, but the identity of the Wine-maker. John 1:14 tells us that Jesus, the Word of God in human flesh, literally "pitched his tent" among us and that we have witnessed his glory. It is glorious that Jesus moves in human circles, blessing human activity and relationships with his divine presence.

At every wedding or birthday party you attend, celebrate Jesus' presence and blessing among you. Thank God that in the events of daily life Christ's glory lives and works among us.

PRAYER

Mighty God, your glory seems so far out of reach. Yet you love us so much that you send your glory among us. May we witness and praise your presence in Christ. Amen.

CELEBRATION: ENOUGH TO GIVE AWAY

Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry." John 6:35

Why do you follow Jesus? It seems Philip thought that the five thousand people following Jesus were at best a bother and at worst ill-prepared freeloaders. Before Jesus gave all those people a truly free picnic lunch, he questioned Philip: "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip worried: "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

Well, maybe not eight months of disciples' wages. But Jesus and one generous boy lived on a different economic scale.

Why did that lad follow Jesus? Maybe he liked to hear Jesus talk and watch him work. Maybe he wanted to learn to live like Jesus. The Lord Jesus, who soon called himself the "bread of life," accepted the gift of the boy's lunch and turned it into a huge all-you-can-eat buffet with twelve baskets of leftovers.

Why twelve? Twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel. This meant Jesus could supply more than enough food for all of God's people. The Lord of heaven and earth can abundantly care for *all* of his people anytime, anywhere. All who follow Jesus receive enough of his endless supply of blessing and glory to absorb and enjoy—and to hand out freely. Celebrate Jesus' gift of himself with everyone around you today.

PRAYER

You, Lord Jesus, give us so much of yourself every day. Help us learn to share you with the people you place in our pathways every day. In your name we pray. Amen.

CELEBRATION: JESUS' LAST SUPPER

He now showed them the full extent of his love.

John 13:1

What is the most important meal you celebrate every year? Christmas? Easter? Your birthday? Passover is still the most important annual meal for Jewish people. It recalls God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt more than 3,500 years ago.

The Bible mentions at least four Passover meals that Jesus celebrated. In Luke 2 we read of the 12-year-old Jesus teaching religious leaders at the temple in Jerusalem during a Passover feast. And the book of John mentions two other Passover occasions (see John 2:13; 6:4) in addition to the last supper Jesus celebrated with his disciples on the night before he was crucified (13:1).

During this final Passover celebration Jesus showed his followers "the full extent of his love." He knelt in front of his disciples and washed each one's feet. He even washed the feet of Judas, who would betray him. Then he told his followers to "wash one another's feet."

How do you prepare to celebrate your most important meal of the year, month, or week?

Do you serve others joyfully? Do you live like the Creator of the universe who knelt even at the feet of his betrayer?

Jesus gave himself for people like us who are capable of betrayal.

Praise God!

PRAYER

Jesus, "fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you." Teach us to kneel at the feet of our friends, to live like the Master who acts as a slave. Amen.

CELEBRATION: BREAKFAST WITH THE LORD

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."
... They knew it was the Lord. John 21:12

After three years of following Jesus, his disciples didn't have to ask who that man on the beach was. Were they speechless because the one who was dead was alive again? Or were they afraid that Jesus would give them the tongue-lashing they deserved after running away from him in his hour of need?

But Jesus didn't lash anyone with his words. He had endured the cruel lashing by Roman soldiers and had been nailed to a cross so that any disciple who ever abandoned him could be fed by the living bread of Christ's continuing presence. Jesus had given his disciples bread and wine to celebrate his last meal with them (John 13). And now here on this beach he gave them bread and fish to share a breakfast with them.

Note how Jesus gives of himself to people at meal-times—a wedding party, lunch on a mountainside, Passover, breakfast by the sea. Why? Because God made people in his own image to celebrate special occasions over food and fellowship.

Every time you eat, remember and believe that every day is a special occasion. Jesus still invites himself into our lives. He still feeds and forgives us so that we can invite others to the world's finest celebration ever—the wedding party of the Lamb of God "who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; see Rev. 19:5-9).

PRAYER

Lord of all time, Giver of all food, help us see you at the start, in all hours, and at the end of every day. You are the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of all things. Amen.

FASTING: BECAUSE JESUS LIVES IN YOU

Daniel . . . said . . . "Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink." Daniel 1:11-12

For centuries fasting was a significant discipline for many Christians. In today's "me generation," fasting could deteriorate into a cheap weight-control method. Although fasting can be abused, it can also be practiced to develop good spiritual health.

Most basically, fasting reminds us that it is good to be moderate and restrained in all our physical drives and indulgences. More important, our bodies are "members of Christ himself" and "temple[s] of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:15, 19). So we should take care of our bodies; they belong to the Lord.

Fasting can also help God's people develop the self-control needed to deal wisely with daily stress or deep crises. At best it reminds us that we are not our own, but belong to God.

Near the start of their training for service in Babylon, Daniel and his three friends ate simply and healthfully, but not just because their mothers raised them that way. Rather, it helped them remember they were God's people in a land far from home.

Jesus himself fasted for 40 days before Satan tempted him (Matthew 4:2). He withstood temptation not only then but forever after. On a regular basis, try making more room for the Lord in your life by eating less of certain things and focusing on him.

PRAYER

O Christ, the Head of your body, the church, help us feed on you, the bread of life. May we eat in ways that show that food was made for the body—not the body for food. Amen.

CONFESSION: WE CONFESS TO LIVE

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. James 5:16

Tomorrow is Sunday, the customary day of Christian worship.

How do you prepare for Sunday worship?

Have you ever thought of preparing for worship by using the discipline of confession?

Whether you're young or old, a Saturday-night party-goer or a stay-at-homer, think seriously about confessing your sin.

In earlier meditations we learned that the discipline of silence helps us focus on God. But in Psalm 32:3-4 David shows that silence can work against the discipline of confession.

Silence in the presence of sin can bring our guilt to weigh heavily on us, sapping our strength and aching our bones.

As James urges, one of the Christian faith's most powerful and effective disciplines is to confess sin to a trusted friend.

God is always there, of course, but God often prefers to relate to us through our friends and others in the Christian community. We need other people to keep us honest with ourselves, with each other, and with the Lord our God.

If you want to *learn* the discipline of confession, you have to *practice* it.

PRAYER

"LORD, my petition heed, now help me in my need, or else I die. I am your servant, LORD; my trust is in your word. Mercy to me accord; to you I cry." In Jesus' name, Amen.

RECEIVING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Proverbs 18:24

A spiritual director friend of ours calls spiritual direction “the help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of this relationship.”

Many of us grow in our relationship with God through prayer and Scripture reading, by attending worship or by participating in Bible study or a Christian discussion group. And yet no one knows our deepest thoughts except God himself. We have no one to hold us accountable, challenge us, or affirm that we are on the right track. Timothy learned to walk with God through the apostle Paul, his spiritual mentor.

A spiritual director does not tell you what to do; nor is she or he necessarily wiser or more experienced than you. Rather, your director will remind you that you live in God’s presence and urge you to see how God is working in your life. In some Christian traditions receiving spiritual direction is a common and expected practice for growing in relationship with God. In other traditions this ancient practice is almost unknown.

In your practice of spiritual disciplines, have you considered finding a spiritual director to accompany you on your spiritual journey?

PRAYER

God of all people, forgive us for trying to find our way with you in our own strength. Give us trusted people who can walk with us alongside you in our journeys. Amen.

JESUS RETREATS

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Matthew 14:13

When an army retreats, it gives up its ground in a battle in hopes of regrouping to fight again. When a person retreats, she or he takes a deliberate break from daily routines or stress to regroup spiritually, physically, or mentally. Sometimes the ordinary routine of the day feels like a battle. Some people may surely have gone *on* retreat feeling at least temporarily defeated.

Why did Jesus retreat in this episode? His cousin John had been imprisoned and recently beheaded. "When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew." He was undoubtedly filled with grief, mourning John's death just as he later mourned the death of Lazarus (John 11:32-35). Jesus may also have felt temporarily defeated. He and John had given themselves to a shared ministry in which John had prepared the way for Jesus, the promised deliverer of God's people.

Remember and thank God that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are" (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus retreated because he was human, "just as we are." He used solitude to find his bearings. We don't know exactly what he did on this retreat, but we do know that afterward he continued his ministry of compassion and healing.

If Jesus needed to retreat at times, so do we.

PRAYER

Faithful God of unruly peoples and nations and weary Christians, give us space and time to see our need to retreat to you. Then return us in strength to your work again. Amen.

JESUS RETREATS TO PRAY

After he had dismissed [the crowd], he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Matthew 14:23

It seems Jesus retreated as a spiritual discipline. At the beginning of his ministry, he fasted for 40 days and was tempted by Satan in the desert (Matthew 4). That too was a solitary place, as in today's Scripture. We noted before that spiritual disciplines frequently gain strength in combination: one discipline makes another possible or complements another. In today's passage Jesus combines solitude, retreat, and prayer.

Why does Jesus take *two* mini-retreats in one day? The tragic news of the death of his cousin John urged him to his first retreat. After that he worked hard all day, healing the sick and feeding 5,000 people. He was weary. So he retreated again, going "up on a mountainside by himself to pray."

It is good to imitate Jesus by starting and finishing each day in a mini-retreat, in prayer. Of course, you may pray alone, with friends, or with your spouse.

By the way, whenever Jesus is on a mountain in Matthew, pay close attention. Look what happens on mountains: he is tempted; he preaches, he prays, he is transfigured, he speaks his last words to his disciples. In each instance, Jesus comes and remains close to God by retreating, by praying. So can you.

Tomorrow we look at *what* Jesus prays on his last retreat. Until then, let's keep praying.

PRAYER

Dear God of solitude and community, teach us to retreat to you in prayer—with others or only with you. Keep us close to you. Thank you that we are never alone. Amen.

JESUS RETREATS BEFORE HIS LAST BATTLE

“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Matthew 26:39

Jesus developed the spiritual health to face crises and normal days by practicing spiritual disciplines.

His last retreat took place as he prepared for his last battle with Satan’s forces, just as he had done before his first battle with Satan (Matthew 4:1-2). In this last retreat Jesus combined community, solitude, and prayer. He went to Gethsemane with his disciples and then retreated in solitude to pray. He returned three times for community support from his friends, who slept instead of praying with him.

What if Jesus had not retreated to pray on the night of his arrest? Perhaps he could have escaped and fled to Galilee. But he intentionally walked with friends to the Mount of Olives, where they often had gone together. That’s how Judas knew where to find him so that he could be arrested.

Jesus did not flee. He prepared to battle the last enemy, death, by praying in retreat to discern his Father’s will. That was after he had celebrated the last supper, the Lord’s Supper, with his friends.

Before Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged in a Nazi prison camp just days before World War II ended, he celebrated the Lord’s Supper with his friends. He prepared to die as Jesus had prepared. Jesus conquered that last enemy by celebrating, retreating, and praying.

PRAYER

Giver of food, community, and solitude; Lord of good over evil—thank you for Jesus, who heard your will in retreat and prayer. May we live as he did till we see him face to face. Amen.

SILENCE: TO PREPARE FOR THE END

“The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”
Habakkuk 2:20

The prophet Habakkuk lived in a time of great hopelessness and danger in Judah, about 20 years before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. Except for a brief period of faithfulness to God under King Josiah, the past 200 years of Judah’s national life were marked by disobedience, idolatry, and injustice.

Habakkuk asked, “‘How long, O Lord,’ will things go on like this?” (see 1:2). The Lord’s reply, in our reading for today, warns about the foolishness of idolatry: “Woe to him to says to wood, ‘Come to life!’” Yet despite the people’s disobedience, God majestically finishes, “But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.” No matter how people live, all creatures and nations one day will fall silent before God’s rule—and worship. Worship begins in awe-filled silence.

Perhaps you live in a place of dreadful violence and social disintegration. It might seem that the Lord does not care what goes on. You might be fearful, worried, even cynical. Or maybe you live in a calm, prosperous land, experiencing no shortages or threats. Yet you experience life as flat, bland. That can be as bad! Remember Habakkuk’s concern. Believe God’s awe-inspiring response: No matter what happens, our God reigns.

How can you experience that presence? Return to Scripture and earlier meditations. Wait silently.

PRAYER

God of all, you began creation with silence.
Help us find hints of new creation in our
lives by listening in silence for you to speak.
(*Keep silent for a minute.*) Amen.

WAITING FOR JESUS

“I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.” Revelation 22:7

One of the hardest spiritual disciplines is to wait eagerly for Jesus to return. Some believers complain that every day that passes makes the wait harder. Others happily claim that every passing day brings us one day closer to Jesus’ return. It takes the double discipline of patience and trust to live and wait every day in anticipation of Jesus’ coming.

Our daughter Erika and son-in-law Tim learned some of that discipline from their young daughter. One Sunday not long ago they took their twins Lucas and Ella to worship for the first time. The children stayed in the sanctuary for the opening of the worship service. Then they moved downstairs to children’s worship.

Later that afternoon Ella was crying about something. After she began calming down, she said to Erika, “No cryin’, Mom.” Erika replied, “I know, Ella; you’ve been crying for quite a while, but you’re almost done.”

“No, Mom. No more cryin’ when the *King*.”

Erika was puzzled for a moment; then it dawned on her: In morning worship they had sung, “Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King. . . . No more cryin’ there—we are goin’ to see the King. . . .”

Regardless of age, when do we start learning the discipline of waiting for Jesus? Maybe when we’re crying. That’s when we need to know that the King is near.

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, it’s hard for us to wait eagerly yet patiently for you to return. When we cry or laugh, play or work, help us believe like children that you’re coming soon. Amen.