

Copyright © 2012 Christina Press and BRF  
The Bible Reading Fellowship,  
15 The Chambers, Vineyard, Abingdon OX14 3FE

First published in Great Britain 2012

ISBN 978 1 84101 668 9

Distributed in Australia by:  
Willow Connection, PO Box 288, Brookvale, NSW 2100.  
Tel: 02 9948 3957; Fax: 02 9948 8153;  
E-mail: info@willowconnection.com.au

Distributed in New Zealand by:  
Scripture Union Wholesale, PO Box 760, Wellington  
Tel: 04 385 0421; Fax: 04 384 3990;  
E-mail: suwholesale@clear.net.nz

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Printed in Singapore by Craft Print International Ltd.

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# Contributors

**Diana Archer** works as a freelance writer, editor and theologian. She lives in Southampton with her vicar husband; she runs courses for eating disorder sufferers and carers, and is the author of *Who'd Plant a Church?*

**Wendy Bray** is a freelance writer. She particularly enjoys surprising those who are tired, discouraged and sceptical with glimpses of the limitless grace and love of God through her writing and speaking.

**Catherine Butcher** has edited *Day by Day with God* since 2003. She loves using words to help Christians grow spiritually and put faith into practice. She and her husband Adrian have two teenage children and live in Sussex.

**Lyndall Bywater** lives in Canterbury with her husband, her housemate, her assorted guide dogs and a cat. She is passionate about prayer: writing about it, promoting it and training people in it.

**Elaine Pountney** coaches leaders in spiritual formation and facilitates workshops on 'Reclaiming the wonder of sexuality'. She offers inspiration to a church plant on Vancouver Island, specialising in 'Parables in the pub'.

**Christina Rees** is a writer and broadcaster. Her books include *The Divine Embrace* and *Feast + Fast*. She is a member of the General Synod and the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England.

**Abidemi Sanusi** is a writer and editor of [www.readywritermag.com](http://www.readywritermag.com), an online magazine for Christians who enjoy reading and writing. Her last book, *Eyo*, was shortlisted for the 2010 Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

**Alie Stibbe** works in Business Support in a College of Further Education. She is also a freelance writer and mother of four. She is married to Mark Stibbe, Director of The Father's House Trust: [www.thefathershousetrust.com](http://www.thefathershousetrust.com)

**Jean Watson** is a writer, a spiritual director and a director of a local counselling service. Her work has included teaching, editing and writing for different age groups and media—books, magazines, radio and TV.

**Sandra Wheatley** remains as active as possible, despite the constraints of MS and a wheelchair. She enjoys an extensive prayer ministry and has mastered swimming and praying at the same time!

**Tracy Williamson** is an author and speaker—part of Marilyn Baker Ministries, bringing a message of hope and assurance of God's love through Marilyn's music and Tracy's testimony, insights and teaching seminars.

## A call to silence

'But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.' ... Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.

Through the prophet Habakkuk, the Lord is calling for silence—for the whole earth to cease its noise and tumult to stand in awe before a mighty God. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, in the Old Testament a call for silence or solitude is rare. Hebrew scripture generally suggests that silence and solitude are negative things for a community. Silence means an absence of words, in a culture where to be alive was to be speaking and to be human was to be relating one to another; a culture which believed that only the dead are silent and only the outcast is alone. Hebrew scripture tells us that God is known not through silence and solitude but through his word. Only occasionally is silence mentioned, alongside a sense of expectancy or in reverence in the moments before God acts or speaks.

In today's noisy world, silence is still often associated with absence—usually the absence of voices or music. We might imagine a warning sign in an examination room or the caustic tones of an elderly schoolmistress before a lively class. Our tendency is to fill silence instead of letting silence fill us. But silence, almost indescribable as it is, is not absence but 'other'; not empty but filled with meaning, even with unspoken words. Solitude, the practice of being alone, has a similar character and a particular relationship with silence. Too often equated with loneliness, solitude may even be feared by those who wonder what they will find within it.

Yet God waits for us in places of silence and solitude. He is already there. We are not asked to walk into an empty place, but a place already filled with his omnipresent self. Entering solitude and silence is not to shut an isolating door behind us, but to edge along God's hallway in order to meet him.

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*Lord God, draw me to you through the silent, solitary places you show me in the world, and in my heart. Amen*

WENDY BRAY

## Silence and solitude discovered

It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'—'a voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."'

The Bible illustrates desert areas as places of wandering (for God's people, Israel) and sometimes of commissioning (for example, Moses at the burning bush) and preparation (Jesus being tempted in the wilderness), but rarely as places for personal solitude or silence in search of God. Although Mark 1 tells us that 'the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out' to John the Baptist (v. 5) they went to hear his words, not to find quiet. It is likely, however, that John may have found, in the desert's silence and solitude, a place to be with God.

It was only in the middle of the third century that Christians started going into the desert for silence and solitude—initially around Egypt and east of Jerusalem—and in surprising numbers. Many of them became known as the Desert Fathers, and Anthony is perhaps the most recognised of them. Was this flight to solitude and silence a move of the Holy Spirit? Perhaps the end of martyrdom around this time meant that there was a need for another way of showing rigorous asceticism and devotion to God. Was it a time of highly experimental spirituality—a time when people tried sitting on pillars and in trees in order to feel close to God and, in so doing, discovered him in solitude and silence?

We'll never know. What we do know is that the practice of seeking a quiet place became established in the Christian faith as what we now call 'contemplative spirituality'. For some of us, seeking silence and solitude can feel just as 'experimental' today. It may seem odd or uncomfortable to think of drawing away from people, noise and routine. However, a little like John, we may find that places of silence and solitude not only bring us face to face with ourselves before God but also offer us something of God to bring to the world.

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*Prayerfully consider your own personal response to the words 'silence' and 'solitude'.*

WENDY BRAY

## Silence and the world

'For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

John's vision in Revelation suggests a breathtaking sight. Yet even the magnitude and scale of what he experiences demands silence for emphasis, like an interval in a play. The silence itself is full of meaning: it is 'a dramatic pause' (*NIV Study Bible*). In a noisy world, we can find the idea of silence difficult, even frightening. Yet for many ancient civilisations—the Greeks, Romans and Aztecs especially—silence was observed, valued and incorporated into ceremonial occasions. It was recognised as a meaningful contrast to the everyday cacophony of voice and activity.

Today's world is finding ever more ingenious ways to make itself and its occupants noisy, so it follows that our society has become more uncomfortable with silence. To enter silence, to request or to share it, is rare. But when we do, on Remembrance Day or as a mark of respect, it is often welcomed, grasped thirstily and valued as a time of respite. Lucy Winkett tells how, when she was Canon of St Paul's Cathedral in the City of London, she witnessed a remarkable event. On the day of the first commemoration of the London 7/7 bombings, the cathedral bell tolled at twelve noon for two minutes of silence. Office workers, tourists and passers-by walked towards St Paul's. Then they stood quietly together before the dome, alone with their thoughts but united in silence.

Perhaps, Lucy suggests, the church has a role in this noisy society to call people into silence in such a way. Those among the crowd who responded might agree. They might also agree that there is something healing in silence: it draws us in, offering us heightened awareness, away from distraction, enabling us not only to live in the present moment but also to find its deepest meaning, solace and significance.

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*When was the last time you stood in silence with others? What effect did it have upon you?*

WENDY BRAY

# Silence before God

'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.' The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Silence in a crowd may be one thing, but how good are we at being silent before God or encountering his silence? Are we relieved when the reflective bit of the Sunday service is over and we can get singing and chatting again? Or do we suspect that God would prefer us to take more time to be quiet and still?

Thomas Merton often spoke about 'listening to the silence of God' because God speaks to us through that silence, while Psalm 46 asks us to be still and silent in order to know who God is. There are two things to think about here—our silence before God and our encounter with God's silence. Together, they lead to 'God-knowledge' and 'self-knowledge'.

We often use verse 10 in isolation for meditation ('Be still and know that I am God'), and that's a useful and important exercise, but we also need to consider the context of the verse. Stillness and silence help us to know who God is even in the midst of trouble (v. 1) and fear (vv. 2, 11). That might be a tough call at times, but these verses suggest that it can and must be done.

In knowing who God is, we will also begin to know who we really are in relation to him, to ourselves and to others. In the silence before God, our foolish assumptions about ourselves melt away; we become our true, honest selves. That's a scary thought, perhaps, until we remember that God loves and accepts us that way and desires intimacy with us.

Rowan Williams writes, 'Our words help to strengthen the illusions with which we surround, protect and comfort ourselves; without silence, we shan't get any closer to knowing who we are before God' (*Silence and Honey Cakes*, Lion, 2003, p. 45).

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*Whether you are sitting in a quiet or a noisy place, ask God to meet you in the silent place of your heart and to still your mind as you meet him there.*

## Solitude and silence as escape

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert.

Marlene Dietrich famously said, 'I want to be alone.' Don't we all at times? Usually because the world (and the demands of the people within it) have just become too much. We think that running away and being by ourselves will provide the escape we need to sort things out.

Elijah certainly thought so, and, while God allowed him a bit of a pity party, fed him and let him sleep (all good for those who feel as burnt-out as Elijah did), in the end God said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' (v. 9). As far as God was concerned, escaping wasn't the answer. Elijah had to face up to his enemies and his disappointments and 'go back the way he came' (v. 15).

The trouble with solitude and silence is that they often give us too much space and quiet in which to pick over the bones of our lives. Silence hones all our senses and we become more, not less, aware of all we hoped to escape from. Then we find that we will only truly 'escape' when we turn again, go back the way we came and face all that we were running from.

You may have watched the BBC2 programme *The Big Silence*. In it, a group of people, most with no claim to faith other than an interest to explore it in the context of silence, spent time on a silent retreat in Wales. They all struggled with silence to varying degrees and all went on a personal journey, ultimately discovering that silence and solitude often force us to face up to the things from which we are trying to escape: they meet us in the solitude and shout in the silence.

We may find some answers in silence and solitude, but we will not always escape our toughest questions.

---

*Lord God, comforter and intimate friend, help me not to escape into silence but draw into your presence in stillness, that I might meet you in quietness and trust.*

WENDY BRAY

## Without words

There is... a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak.

We saw yesterday that silence and solitude hone our senses. We certainly pay more attention when we stop talking, as any school teacher will tell us! But choosing a time to be silent is different from obeying an order to keep quiet. In making a deliberate choice either to speak or remain silent, we sometimes discover that we miss something by filling a silent space with our chatter.

There is a special joy in a companionable silence and in taking time to appreciate the world with our senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch—and without having to add a verbal commentary. In so doing, we continue to fine-tune our senses; we develop curiosity and understand what it means to live in the present moment.

I once took part in a silent group walk through the countryside, designed to encourage participants to do just that. It was much harder than I expected it to be—not just because I love talking and listening to others, but because, at first, it seemed unnatural, even rude, not to be conversing with them. As we got into our stride, though, we discovered that we were walking together but also alone. We shared the sights and sounds both as a group and in the silent places of our individual hearts and minds. We walked much more slowly than we would normally have done as a group; we looked up, strained to listen, stopped on the pathway more often and looked—really looked—at our surroundings. Afterwards we shared our experiences, so we were soon busy talking once again, but the walk made us realise that there is a time to choose to speak and a time to choose silence, not just for the sake of etiquette or a sense of place, but because we need to experience the world without words. Otherwise we often miss what it has to ‘say’ to us.

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*Today, choose to stay silent when you would normally chatter or fill the space with noise. Take time to reflect on what you discover.*

WENDY BRAY

## Solitude and prayer

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

I might have begun our reflection on solitude and silence with these verses, but it was important for us to begin by considering the place of both in the wider context of our everyday lives. Why? Because we are told that Jesus ‘often’ withdrew to lonely places place to pray. Solitude and silence were his habit, part of his daily timetable. His withdrawal to pray wasn’t an occasional event. Jesus didn’t just take advantage of quieter days and the disciples’ shopping trips of the disciples (John 4:8) to find silence and solitude. Rather, silence and solitude were built into the wider context of his daily life. He withdrew from the crowd, not just because of the pressure it put him under, but despite it.

Look closer. Mention of the ‘crowds of people’ (v. 15) is followed in verse 16 by the word ‘but’, not the word ‘so’. His search for silence and solitude wasn’t so much cause-and-effect as an established routine. Yes, of course the crowds must have got to Jesus after a while, and of course he needed space to think, to pray and to plan, especially in the midst of busy ministry. Look at all he is doing here: he has just commissioned a group of co-workers; he has been healing and he has been teaching. ‘Time out’ was necessary—but here and elsewhere in the Gospels we are told that Jesus often withdrew anyway. Silence and solitude in which to seek his Father’s face and rest in his company were a priority for him. If frequent times of silence and solitude were an essential for Jesus, how much more must they be for us?

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*Loving Father, draw me into a silent and solitary place, in my heart as well as in your world, where I can meet and rest with you.*

WENDY BRAY

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