Redefining the QUIET TIME

by Sheri Dacon
Redefining the Quiet Time

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Preface

I never thought I would be one to write a blog series on the Christian ‘quiet time.’ Truth is, I’ve always struggled with it. When I was a teenager, the youth minister at our church introduced me to the idea. Being the good student and good Christian girl I was, I made the effort to incorporate ‘quiet time’ into my days, but life always seemed to get in the way. I didn’t know what I was doing, I didn’t really know how to pray, and it didn’t seem to make a difference in my daily life.

Things continued this way for years, except as I got older the guilt about ‘not having a quiet time’ started to plague me. Other Christians I knew would talk about how meaningful their quiet times were, about what God was teaching them. They threw around catchy religious phrases like confetti and I couldn’t relate. But I was and still am an excellent actress. I learned how to pretend with the best of them.

In my heart of hearts, though, I felt I was missing out.
During all this time I kept journals. I paid attention in church and took notes. I read and studied my Bible often.

And yet I believed I was failing at ‘quiet time.’ It wasn’t the regimented daily practice I thought I needed in order to be a ‘good Christian.’

In her book, *Sacred Chaos*, Tricia McCary Rhodes discusses our fixation with ‘quiet time’ and why it’s led us down a road of shame instead of intimacy with God. She says, “Many people, bound by some presumed standard of what quiet time is supposed to look like, give up before they get started, certain they’ll never make the grade. Others get so bogged down with feelings of guilt and self-recrimination about their weakness and inconsistency that they end up avoiding God altogether, certain that he must be disappointed in them. Even those who do manage to master having a quiet time can easily get into the habit of saying amen and then going their way each morning, oblivious to the fact that God wants to speak into the rest of their day, to stay closely connected with them in all they do.”

I experienced all of these scenarios. At times I simply gave up because I knew I’d never have the perfect ‘quiet time.’ More often, I would be overcome by guilt and shame because of my own inadequacies and my lack of consistency and self-discipline. And at times I would have a good
streak of quiet times and pat myself on the back, the same way I would if I remembered to floss.

I was wishy-washy at best, prideful and legalistic at my worst.

When I got married and had a baby, though, I decided it was time to grow up. Now I possessed not only the drive to be a good Christian, but tremendous pressure to be a good wife and mother as well. I knew I had to buckle down and get to work becoming the Proverbs 31 woman I had always wanted to be.

Having a strict daily quiet time was no longer an option. **It was a requirement.**

I started carrying the mandate of quiet time on my back like a heavy burden. Somehow I convinced myself that God would be disappointed in me if I did not check my quiet time off every single day. I bought prayer guides and calendars. I journaled and prayed daily so God would be pleased with me.

And still I felt empty.

Don’t get me wrong, God was there in those moments. He was present
and He was teaching me. I need only to reread my journals from those
times to see just how present he was and how he was teaching me along
the way.

But the problem was me.

I had turned the privilege of going to God daily in prayer and worship
into a task to be checked off my never-ending to-do list. It was a chore.
And if I failed to do it, I honestly believed I was failing God. He would
be upset with me.

Even worse, others might take notice. They might see my spiritual
immaturity and find me unworthy. Eventually the truth would come out
that I was a fraud. Nothing more than a ‘bad Christian’ in ‘good
Christian’ clothing.

This eddy of confusion, doubt, and negative self-talk has a name. It’s
called legalism.

Legalism is ugly. It’s the nasty nagging voice of the serpent that whispers
in our ear. It tells us we’re no good, that we’re failures, that God won’t
love us if we don’t complete our ‘good Christian’ tasks.
It also feeds our pride. When we doing something well, it tells us we’re better than others. It looks down its nose at people who are in different places than we are and judges harshly. It keeps a long list of what we’ve done right and others have done wrong. And the sad truth is this: I fell prey to legalism for far too long.

It wasn’t until my spiritual world fell apart that I began my escape.

Shortly after my son was diagnosed with autism, the pretty church world I had built for myself began to crumble. People disappointed me. The church my family attended, served, and loved disappointed me. What I thought was rock solid started to crumble.

Here I was, doing everything I thought I was ‘supposed’ to do. Checking all the ‘good Christian’ tasks off my list. Engaging in an intricate game of ‘sin management’ and religious behavior.

And when I was betrayed by members of the church I considered home, I went into full blown crisis mode. Anxiety hit, I forgot how to breathe, and I questioned everything I’d ever done or believed in the name of my religion. It was a bottoming out and I lay there in the emotional muck of a deep, dark pit, wondering if I would ever see the spiritual light of day again.
It was a an excruciating, agonizing place.

And yet God, in his mercy, had no plans of leaving me there. In truth, it wasn’t until I hit rock bottom that He began leading me to new places, new avenues I hadn’t explored. The scales fell off my eyes. The legalism I’d bound myself to for so long began to melt away and I could see spiritual truths I’d never noticed or cared about before.

One day, after seeing the ‘prayer room’ my mother-in-law had created in a spare closet, I came home, moved all my clothes to one side of my own closet, and made a space of my own. I started going in there to pray and to read devotional books and the Bible. I journaled. I explored new (to me) kinds of prayer. I meditated. I napped. I cried. I sang.

My closet became my safe place. And every time I entered, I could feel God’s presence there beside me. He comforted me. He loved me. He surrounded me.

I followed no specific regimen. Some days I would spend hours, other days only a few minutes. Some days I wrote pages in my journal, other days nothing. Some days I fell asleep. Some days I read lots of scripture and some days I didn’t have time or the energy to read anything. Some days I listen to guided meditations or merely practiced breathing.
During all that time though, God was healing me. And teaching me as well.

- He taught me that I can’t follow a formula for having a quiet time. Especially not one that someone else dreamed up.

- He taught me that spending time with Him is precious, a gift to be enjoyed and savored. It’s not a drudgery, a chore that ranks only right above doing the dishes and cleaning the toilet.

- He taught me that He is not a task. He is a person.

- He taught me that there is tremendous joy in simply soaking up His presence.

- He taught me that He is a safe place, a refuge, a shield from the pain and the heartache of the world.

And friends, I have never been the same.

I no longer think of my quiet time as something I need to accomplish. It’s not a self-help tool or a requirement for admission into the ‘good Christian’ club. It’s not, as Tricia McCary Rhodes says, a “measuring
stick for Christian maturity.” It’s not a formula or a specific equation that must be followed to the letter.

Quiet time is none of those things.

It’s a gift. It’s a respite. It’s a privilege.

And the purpose of this series is to share the gift with you.

There are tons of resources available out there for ‘how to have a quiet time.’ Most of them will give you steps to take, rules to follow, and tasks to implement in order to have a successful time with God. They will try to define for you what a meaningful quiet time should look like.

I’m not going to do that. Because I’ve learned the hard way: what works for me might not work for you. In fact, what worked for me last week might not work for me tomorrow. And it’s totally okay. We’re all different and we all experience God in different ways during different seasons of our lives. But the beauty of our differences is that God knows each of us intimately. He knows what will speak to our hearts. He knows what we need and what will draw us closer to him.
If you will trust Him to lead your quiet times, He will do it. He will help you redefine quiet time into something that fills you up with more abundant life, rather than something that drags you down.

In the pages that follow, you will find suggestions and tools to help you create—or re-create—your own private quiet time with God. I’ll also provide a list of resources where you can find more information or more ideas about how to make your quiet time unique to you.

We’re going to redefine the Christian ‘quiet time,’ and my hope is that your life and heart will open up to God in ways you never imagined.

I’m so glad you’re here. I’m thrilled you’ve decided to redefine your quiet time. You won’t be disappointed.
Chapter 1

Finding a Place
Finding a Place

All the ‘experts’ seem to agree that it helps to have an established place set aside for prayer and quiet contemplation. This was a difficult hurdle for me for years. I tried the kitchen table, the couch by the fireplace, my office upstairs, all perfectly acceptable places. But even though I was usually the only one awake, I felt like I didn’t have enough privacy. And I was easily distracted by surroundings. As a result, my prayers were hindered.

So I did what Kat Lee of Inspired to Action suggests. I built a 'mom cave.' I have to give Kat most of the credit for this, because it simply never dawned on me. Shortly after I read about the ‘mom cave’ concept, my mother-in-law showed me her special place for prayer and I knew I needed one, too.

I pray in my closet.

And I do not have a huge closet.
So I followed Kat's suggestions. I cleared the clothes from one whole side of the closet. I installed a rod up high for out of season clothes, moved my in-season clothes to the other side and to the back, and then got rid of anything else that wouldn’t fit. So as an added bonus, making the ‘mom cave’ was a great motivator for decluttering my closet and paring down my wardrobe.

The next thing I added was a short table with a little quilt top over it and a small lamp. I have an old seat cushion in the corner, but a beanbag would work as well. My mother-in-law actually has a desk and chair in her closet, but hers is not in the same space where she keeps her clothes. I didn't really have room for that so I had to make do.

Next came a bulletin board, some inspirational posters and scripture printouts, a box of kleenex and plenty of pens, pencils, and highlighters. Then I stacked my devotional books on a rack I found at Goodwill for a couple of dollars. I keep my Bible and my journals in a basket beneath the table. A pillow and an afghan crocheted by my grandmother were the final pieces to transforming my space into a bonafide prayer closet.

Having this place set up makes a tremendous difference for my quiet time. As soon as I took this step, my prayer time improved immediately
because I had privacy. That’s not to say the kids don’t ever interrupt me, but everyone knows when Mom is in her closet, she’s spending time with God and they are supposed to stay out until she’s done.

This is the single-handed most important thing I ever did for my prayer life.

I believe it was the catalyst for turning my quiet time into a personalized, meaningful meeting time with God. It changed my life.

Perhaps you don’t have a closet space like mine. That doesn’t mean creating a ‘prayer room’ is impossible. It only means you might need to be more creative.

Your personal prayer space might be a special chair, or a corner of a quiet room. It could simply be a basket containing your Bible and journal, that you could carry to a confined place. It could be in your car.

The most important aspect of your prayer space is that it needs to be private and safe. This may be more difficult depending on the size of your home and how many people you share it with, but it is possible.
There is an old Jewish custom of using a ‘tallit’ or a ‘prayer shawl’ when praying to God. The idea is the same as that of a private closet or a prayer room. So if you can’t find anything else that works, get a flashlight and pull a blanket over your head.

Make it a priority to find a special place for your quiet time and use it every time you pray. You will be amazed at how your quiet times will take on new life once you have a dedicated space for them.

**Suggested Materials:**

- Bible
- Devotional books
- Notebook or journal
- Pens, pencils, highlighters
- Small lamp or light source
- Comfortable chair, cushion or pillows
- Inspirational materials (posters, photos, etc.)
- Throw blanket or shawl
- Candle (do not use open flames in small areas such as a closet!)
- Incense or essential oils
- Recorded music, white noise or guided meditations
Chapter 2

Prayer
Once you’ve found a safe and quiet place for spending time with God, it’s time to dive right in.

Where to start? **Well, with prayer.** And here I must confess something. While Bible study comes naturally to me because I am a student at heart and I have the spiritual gift of teaching, prayer is something I have had to practice.

**Prayer means letting your guard down, expressing yourself, having an intimate conversation.**

All of these facets of prayer are difficult and intimidating for an introvert like me.

For years I was plagued with the question: “What do I say?”

I am a recovering perfectionist, and my take on prayer was that if I couldn’t do it right, I didn’t want to do it at all. When I finally did venture out, I struggled to say all the right, holy-sounding words. Even though my prayers were sincere, they were exhausting.
Truth be told, some days I didn’t have the energy to work so hard at it.

So I looked for tools and resources to help a more list-oriented girl like me engage in more meaningful prayer.

**Prayer Methods**

I began with some of the more regimented methods of prayer such as

- **The ACTS method**: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication
- The pattern we use in BSF leadership consisting of 1.) worship, 2.) thanksgiving, 3.) presenting our requests
- Lisa Whelchel’s book, *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Prayer*, a fantastic daily resource that I used for several years
- Prayer calendars — I have several of these collected from my BSF classes, but Kat Lee of Inspired to Action has some great ones on her blog as well. These give you ideas on how to pray for your husband and kids on different days.

All of these methods of prayer are good jumping-off points and will get you started when you don’t know what or how to pray.

In the last couple of years, though, I’ve started exploring different kinds of prayer which are not necessarily taught within the evangelical church,
including contemplative prayer, praying the examen, and Lectio Divina. Growing up evangelical, I was completely oblivious to these types of prayer until just recently. **They have been a treasure trove worth exploring.**

**Contemplative Prayer**

Contemplative prayer is the idea of meditating on a particular phrase or scripture. My favorite is Psalm 46:10, **“Cease striving, and know that I am God.”** I try to practice this by breathing in as I meditate on the first part of the verse, then exhaling during the second. I highly recommend Tricia McCary Rhodes’s book *The Soul at Rest* for exploring contemplative prayer. The book is formatted to lead you through daily exercises in exploring this method of praying.

**The Examen**

Another type of prayer that’s new to me is the **examen.** This is a method of prayer familiar to many in the Catholic tradition. The examen is typically prayed in the evening, while mentally revisiting the events of the day and searching for moments when God’s presence was clear. After reflection, there is a time for thanksgiving, then asking forgiveness for the shortcomings of the day. The [Ignatian Spirituality website](http://www.ignatianspirituality.org) has a good basic overview of the examen. Also, see my [resources page](#) for even more helpful learning tools.
Written and Memorized Prayers

Also somewhat new to me is the idea of praying written or memorized prayers. The most famous example of this, of course, is *The Lord’s Prayer.*

The evangelical tradition seems to steer clear of memorized prayer, presumably for the reason that such prayer can become rote and meaningless. After spending a lifetime in the evangelical church, though, I’m convinced that worship in an evangelical church service can become just as rote as worship in liturgical churches. After a while, all the prayers start sounding the same, the same words and catch-phrases are used, and we sing hymns with words like “Here I raise mine Ebenezer,” without paying attention to what those words actually mean. **All that to say that ANY kind of worship can become rote and uninspiring if we allow it.**

One of my favorite resources for written prayers is *Thirty-One Days of Prayer* by Ruth and Warren Myers. This book walks you through a month of pre-written, scripture-based prayers, and includes extra helps in the back of the book to enhance the experience. All scripture references are given for each day’s prayer, so it’s easy to use as a devotional reading as well. In addition, there are two more books, *Thirty-One Days of Praise,* and *The Satisfied Heart,* with the same format. I’ve read all three and highly recommend them, especially if you are stuck in your prayer life and need a jumpstart.
I picked up a copy of *The Valley of Vision* after reading about it on Ann Voskamp’s website. The first time I read one of these prayers, I broke down and cried. It was so beautifully written, so expressive, exactly what I wanted to say to God but didn’t know how. I always read these prayers aloud, even if just in a whisper, because the words are powerful.

Another favorite resource is *The Power of a Praying Parent*, by Stormie Omartian. When a child is dealing with a particular issue, I will speak the prayer written in the book, substituting that child’s name, then write the child’s name and the date next to that prayer.

Of course I would be remiss if I did not mention the *Book of Common Prayer*. I stumbled across a copy in a used bookstore for one dollar and brought it home. It has prayers for dates throughout the church calendar, as well as daily readings.

Other recommended books include *Prayers for Today: A Yearlong Journey of Contemplative Prayer* by Kurt Bjorklund, and *Praying God’s Word* by Beth Moore.
Guided Prayer

I recently discovered the joy of guided prayer through an internet app called Pray as You Go. It provides a new guided prayer meditation and scripture for every day. I like to listen on my phone as I travel in my car. There are chimes and music, as well as prompts for meditation. The whole experience is soothing and wonderful. It’s my favorite new way to pray!

Another similar app can be found on DivineOffice.org, or you can listen to prayers throughout the day on the website. The app is expensive so I haven’t plunked down the money for it, but I’m considering it.

Both of these are Catholic resources. I’m not Catholic, but I find the prayers beautiful, meaningful and delightfully different than what I’m used to.

Prayer Journaling

All of the types of prayer I’ve mentioned above are tools that have helped me tremendously as my prayer life has evolved. There are days when I use a combination of all the above, or days when I may only have time for one. The most freeing thing I have discovered is that all of it is good.

Prayer is how I live out my relationship with Jesus. I liken it to my marriage. Some days Eric and I will have long conversations, other days we may hardly see each other, and some days we just sit and do other things while in each other’s presence. That’s how it is with God for me.
I used to feel guilty for not praying aloud more, but I got over it. Almost all of my prayers are written. I express myself better in writing, because I am not under as much pressure to get the words right. I like to journal in plain black marble composition books that you find on the school supply aisles. I stock up during the back-to-school sales, and then when I’m feeling creative, I make pretty printed covers to glue to the front.
Favorite Books on Prayer

Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home
by Richard Foster

Clinging: The Experience of Prayer
by Emilie Griffin

A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World
by Paul Miller

For a full list of books and links to all my recommendations, see my Quiet Time Resources page.
Chapter 3

Bible Reading
For years I looked to the Bible as an instruction guide, a manual of sorts, on how to live my life. I tried to study and learn all I could about how to follow Jesus and please God, assuming that if I just learned more scripture and worked rigorously to do what it said, I would eventually become a ‘good Christian.’

The plan didn’t go so well. I broke down at 40-something when I had tried achingly hard and I just couldn’t try anymore. My body rebelled. I was plunged into a deep pit of anxiety and doubt, with real physical symptoms.

It was then that the Holy Spirit gently convicted me that the Bible isn’t a manual or a self-help guide.

**The Bible is a lens.**

It’s a lens through which we see **who God is** and **who we are**. If you can learn to peer into scripture to see God’s story and how you fit into it, then the Bible will open up to you in remarkable ways.
My favorite children’s Bible is the *Jesus Storybook Bible*, and it’s not just for children.

In my ever so humble opinion, every human being on the planet needs to read it, because it clearly and plainly—in words that even a child can understand—tells the story of the Bible. **It’s the story of a baby sent from God to rescue the ones He so desperately loves.**

The subtitle captures it perfectly: every story whispers His name.

Because I try to meet with God early in the morning, I usually don’t have time to delve deep into scripture. I reserve my more in-depth Bible study for other times during the day. However, it is necessary for me to incorporate scripture into my early morning prayer time, because it is through His Word that I most clearly hear what He has to say.

**Before You Begin**

I like to start my Bible reading by simply asking God for help. I ask him to show me what He wants me to see in the scriptures, to point me to the truth He wants me to learn.

There are specific scriptures you can pray to get you started, if that’s something that inspires you.
Some of my favorites are:

**Deuteronomy 32:1-2**

Listen, you heavens, and I will speak;
hear, you earth, the words of my mouth.
Let my teaching fall like rain
and my words descend like dew,
like showers on new grass,
like abundant rain on tender plants.

**Psalm 119:18**

Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.

**Isaiah 55:10-11**

As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
Understanding what you read

A word about Bible translations: it is of utmost importance to read a version of the Bible that makes sense to you. Some people insist on older versions such as the King James Bible, and if it speaks to you and you can understand it, fine. But there are more accessible modern versions available that can completely transform your experience and make reading enjoyable rather than a chore.

I personally read from the NIV, the NLT, and The Message most frequently. I read from the NASB for many years, then switched over to the the NIV when it became more popular. All of these versions are written in modern, easy-to-read English. I especially like reading The Message. It gives me a different perspective that I may not have seen from reading the more familiar translations.

In addition to all the translations available, there is a vast array of technology to help you in your Bible study endeavors.
Bible Study Resources

1. **YouVersion Bible app and website**

YouVersion is a fantastic resource because you can switch back and forth between different translations, AND because there are hundreds of different reading plans you can follow. These plans make devotional Bible reading (or even more in-depth Bible reading) a no-brainer. You just click on the app and up pops your reading for the day. When you’re done, it lets you know.

2. **Blue Letter Bible**

I use this app and website mostly for looking up Greek and Hebrew meanings of words. I love to dig deep into certain scriptures to find out the original meaning, and Blue Letter Bible helps me do that.

3. **Short Devotional Books**

These are perfect when I only have a few minutes. My personal favorites are *Streams in the Desert*, by L.B. Cowman, and *God Calling*, edited by A.J. Russell. I am on my second copies of both these books, having worn the first ones out completely over the years.

4. **Longer Devotional Books**

I mentioned the *Book of Common Prayer* previously. It is perfect for daily Bible reading, since each day offers a psalm, as well as an Old and New Testament passage.
My absolute, hands-down favorite devotional book of all time though, is *Disciplines for the Inner Life*, by Bob and Michael Benson. It is hard to find, but so worth it. The book consists of 52 weeks of scripture and devotional readings, with each week focusing on a different spiritual discipline. This one was a life-changer for me. I’ve worked my way through it once already, and plan to start on it again soon.

5. **Lectio Divina**

Lectio Divina is a method of Bible reading and prayer which literally means ‘divine reading.’ It was originated by St. Benedict in the 6th century and is still practiced by many Christians today, although not often in the evangelical community. Once I first learned of it and then tried it out, I was hooked.

Lectio Divina consists of four parts: read, meditate, pray, and contemplate.

**Here is how I do Lectio Divina:**

- **(Lectio)** Read the passage out loud and slowly. Pay careful attention and notice any word or phrase the “jumps off the page.”

- **(Meditatio)** Meditate on the key phrase or word. Write it down. Breathe deeply and mull the words over for a few minutes.

- **(Oratio)** Read the passage again. Then respond to God. Speak or write a prayer to God based upon your key phrase. This can be as short or as long as you want it to be.
• (Contemplatio) Read the passage a third time. Spend a few moments in quiet rest. Listen for any truth God may wish to speak within your mind about what you have read and prayed. Write these truths in your journal or meditate on them carefully.

All of the resources I’ve mentioned are fantastic for helping you develop a personal Bible reading time.

But I would be remiss if I did not mention the importance of studying the Bible within a group setting.

For thousands of years, God’s people did not have access to the written word of God within their homes. They passed on scripture through oral tradition and community worship.

The Bible is designed to be shared. There is nothing quite like learning the Bible together within a community of like-minded believers.

I’m a huge proponent of group Bible studies. I have been involved with Bible Study Fellowship International for most of my adult life and I can honestly say it has changed me in the most incredible ways. I owe the majority of my Bible knowledge to BSF and the in-depth method of studying the Bible I learned there.
I’ve also done group Bible studies through church and online. A friend of mine started a neighborhood Bible study in her home and had an overwhelming response. Studying the Bible with others will open your eyes and enrich your spiritual life in ways that studying alone cannot.

I encourage you to step outside of your personal Bible reading time and get involved in a group Bible study. You will get so much more out of it than just going it alone, and the accountability factor will help keep you on track.

Start by searching locally. Perhaps your church or another nearby church has a Bible study you could join. You can also look for a local BSF class, or a Precepts ministry class.

There are also numerous online communities devoted to Bible study. I’ve been involved in several of these and have benefited from them, especially when my schedule didn’t allow time for an outside Bible study. Here are a few I can recommend:

Hello Mornings
Proverbs 31 Ministries - Online Bible Studies
She Reads Truth
Good Morning Girls
Chapter 4

The Habit
The Habit

“Habits eat willpower for breakfast”—John Ortberg

Here’s the ugly truth: the only way to be faithfully consistent with a quiet time is to make it a habit.

The dictionary defines habit as an acquired behavior pattern regularly followed until it becomes almost involuntary. Like brushing your teeth before bed. Or driving the same route to work or school every day.

We frequently talk about the desire to kick bad habits, but it’s important not to underestimate the power of good habits.

Our highly evolved brains are required to make hundreds of decisions every single day. Anything we can do out of habit is one less decision our brains have to make, freeing us from the stress and indecision that comes from always having to choose.

When was the last time you went to the drugstore for cold medicine?

The enormous assortment of products available can make your head spin. It’s overwhelming and just plain stressful. If your brain has to stay in that critical
decision-making mode for too long, it can lead to full-blown emotional breakdown. Like that time I bawled my eyes out in Target because I was tired and I couldn’t choose a toothpaste. **True story.**

Habits are necessary. And good habits are crucial to us living the life we want to live instead of a life of default and mediocrity.

### The Quiet Time Habit

**Just Do It**

Supposedly it takes 21 days, or three weeks, to turn a behavior pattern into a habit. To make quiet time with God a habit, you have to make it a daily routine. Challenge yourself to establish the habit until it seems weird NOT to do it.

The easiest way to do this is to start small. Create a ‘mini-habit’ that’s so easy it’s stupid. Like reading one Bible verse. Or saying The Lord’s Prayer. Once it’s a habit, build on it and add more depth.

**The earlier the better**

For me to be successful in the quiet time habit, I have to do it first thing in the morning. I’m not an early riser by nature. But I learned from experience if I didn’t take care of quiet time first thing, it wouldn’t get done. So I made it my habit.
Again, I’ll refer you to Kat Lee’s blog, Inspired to Action. She has a great free e-book available and lots of tips to help making morning quiet time a vital part of your day.

Here’s her best and biggest tip and it’s pure genius:

If you want to consistently get up early... go to bed early.

Sorry I had to rain on your parade. I feel your pain. I know how glorious it is to have that time to yourself after the kids go to bed. I understand. But if you want to train your body to get up earlier, going to bed earlier is a must.

Going to bed early does not come instinctively to me, so I have to plan for it. I have to say “no” to things I might want to do that can wait until tomorrow. If I want to spend 30 minutes reading in bed, I have to wash my face and brush my teeth and get into bed 30 minutes earlier.

In general, I need between 7-1/2 and 8 hours of sleep each night, so if I’m going to get up at 5:30, that means I need to go to sleep regularly at 9:30 or 10:00.

Nobody’s telling you to get up at 5:30 a.m. to have quiet time. That’s just what works for me. But I would recommend having a set time every day to spend with God. Doing it at the same time each day is what will make it stick. It’s part of what makes it a habit.
Reward yourself

Work in a reward to trigger your lizard brain to keep going.

Since I started drinking coffee, it’s become a huge reward for me. Every morning I get up and make a cup of coffee to enjoy during my quiet time. **It works.** I find myself looking forward enough to that one little cup, that it gets me motivated and moving. It truly is a habit now. I don’t even think about it anymore.

Do not make the mistake of thinking you are spiritual enough that just the reward of spending time with God will be enough to motivate you. I don’t mean to sound harsh, and my whole purpose in writing this series is to help you make your quiet time more meaningful and rewarding. But the spiritual reward is not an immediate one and your body will know the difference. **Your lizard brain will take over when it’s 5:30 in the morning, no matter how much of a spiritual giant you are.** So you need to factor in a basic, simple reward that excites your body more than it does your mind or your spirit.

A warm fire, a scented candle, a cozy blanket, a comfortable chair, a hot beverage, a few minutes of quiet before the kids get up, a sticker on a chart, or a bowl of cereal.

We’re talking Pavlov’s dogs here. You’ve got to figure out what makes you drool and add it to the habit you want to create.
This really is the key to making good habits stick. There’s got to be some instant gratification.

Find Your Sweet Spot

Just as I mentioned in chapter one, try to have your prayer time in the same place every day. This will get your brain on track for making the routine a habit. Eventually, sitting down in your personal prayer space will trigger your brain to start your quiet time, even if you’re still half asleep.

Practice, practice, practice

As a final disclaimer, I will promise you this: making quiet time a habit does not diminish the quality of quiet time. The habit ensures that it happens at all.

As the saying attributed to Aristotle goes, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Learning to do anything well requires practice. And the best way to ensure practice happens is to make it habitual. Over time, we will not only improve, but we will begin to increasingly enjoy what we do.

Trust God to make quiet time worth your while, even though it may not seem like much in the beginning. He will help you. Every day won’t be earth shattering, no matter how much you grow in your faith. But the habit will change your life. And every now and again, you’ll have a quiet time that will blow you away.
In order for it to happen, though, you need to show up. Showing up is the hardest part. Making it a habit will turn it into something that sticks.

If you’re interested in learning more about habits, both good and bad, and how to get more accomplished by taking advantage of how your brain works, check out these books:

*The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg

*Eat that Frog* by Brian Tracy

*Better than Before* by Gretchen Rubin

*Mini-Habits* by Stephen Guise

*Essentialism* by Greg McKeown
Chapter 5

Beyond the Quiet Time
Beyond the Quiet Time

“There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God; those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.”

–Brother Lawrence

John Ortberg, in his book *Soulkeeping*, quotes his late friend Dallas Willard as saying “You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God.”

When told this, Ortberg says he responded by recalling his valiant efforts at having a daily quiet time every morning. His friend then spoke words of wisdom that we would do well to heed also:

“‘I didn’t say anything about having a quiet time,’ he gently corrected. . .

People in churches—including pastors—have been crushed with guilt over their failure at having a regular quiet time or daily devotions. And then, even when they do, they find it does not actually lead to a healthy soul. Your problem is not the first fifteen minutes of the day. It’s the next twenty-three hours and forty-five minutes. You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing total contentment and confidence in your everyday life with God.”
It’s vital in our Christian journey that we move beyond the ‘quiet time’ and into what Ortberg calls ‘soul keeping.’

All the tips and ideas and motivations I’ve mentioned in the previous chapters of this book will be meaningless if they don’t translate into a deeper soul walk with Jesus.

Our souls are designed to be with God. This was the original intent at creation, when man and woman walked with God in the cool of the day, enjoying His constant presence. The introduction of sin changed everything, separating the souls of humankind from the heart of God.

God wasn’t content to keep it that way, though, so he sent a savior. A savior who broke down barriers and offered his own humanness as the ultimate sacrifice, so we could enjoy deep communion with God once again. Jesus talked of being the vine, telling us that if we remain in him we will bear much fruit. He is the vine and we are the branches.

In a nutshell he was saying: **be with God. Abide.** Make your heart’s home where God is. Right here in the seat of your soul. Live intimately with God in every moment. This is what you were created to do.

But the heavy yoke of legalism leaves us feeling wearier and emptier than when we started.

Our try-hard, be-good, do-better to-do lists are making our souls sick and slowly killing us. Legalism keeps us from being the people God made us to be, living the way God made us to live.

As Ortberg states, “The soul thrives not through our accomplishments but through simply being with God.”

*The Practice of the Presence of God* is a well known and much loved classic Christian text. Written by Brother Lawrence, a 17th century Carmelite monk, its theme is the idea of the believer being in continual conversation with God.

Brother Lawrence found God everywhere and disciplined himself to keep his thoughts attuned in such a way as to constantly be aware of God’s nearness.

Submitting oneself to the consciousness of God’s presence is, as Lawrence wrote, a practice, a discipline, *something we have to learn because it does not come naturally.* What comes naturally is thinking of ourselves, our plans, our desires, our agendas. But practicing the presence is a way of being in tune with God, not just during our quiet prayer times in the closet, but throughout our daily activities.
It sounds simple, but it’s easy to forget.

It’s like imagining that Jesus Himself is always right there beside you — as you peel potatoes, as you fold the laundry, as you drive to and from work, as you change diapers. . . as you go about even the most mundane of daily tasks. He is there. God with us.

Moving Beyond the Quiet Time

There are many habits, disciplines, and ideas to get you started with practicing the presence of God throughout your day. Here are some that have worked for me.

1. Intentional Gratitude

A few years ago, the book *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp changed my life. Ann’s writing is lyrical and artistic and flows more like poetry than prose.

Just the kind of writing that makes my heart skip a beat.

The premise of her book is simple and yet profound, because it’s human nature to trudge through life without looking up. Without waking up to the simplicity and the beauty of thanksgiving.
In the book of Colossians, Paul says,

“So if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don’t shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that’s where the action is. See things from his perspective. . . cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. . . And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.” Colossians 3:1-2 & 15b-17, MSG

Gratitude is the topic of Ann’s book, too, and it’s really what practicing the presence of God is about. Being aware of God’s presence, recognizing his goodness, and beginning to notice the gifts upon gifts upon gifts that he lavishes on us every moment.

Ann suggests making a list. Write down what you’re thankful for. List the gifts in your life one by one. When I started my list of 1000 gifts, the wonders of nature captured me first. To stop and notice the miracles of the creation—and the ongoing essence of creation—is to marvel at the amazing artistry of God.

God is all around us in His creation, if we open our eyes to look. And we, as human beings, are the crowning glory of His creation.
So to look into the eyes of people, to hear our children laugh, to observe lovers holding hands, to witness everyday kindnesses, to know the universal language of a smile, to smell a fire burning and food cooking and experience the warmth of a hug or the tenderness of a kiss — these are all, every one, gifts. Along with a thousand, million more.

2. Find the sacred in the ordinary.

On my blog, I wrote a short series called Marvelous in the Mundane about finding the sacred in the ordinary, mundane details of life. There are evidences of God all around us, both tangible realities and the hard-to-grasp but equally authentic moments that take our breath away.

Earth’s crammed with heaven. But we must open our spiritual eyes to notice.

God appeared to Moses in a burning bush. We like to picture the familiar scene with a giant, crackling bonfire, but what if it was actually a smolder? What if it was small enough that it could have gone unnoticed, but Moses saw it anyway? What if that’s exactly how God planned it? What if Moses was already searching and then God showed up because, well, God had been there all along?

Every bush is burning if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.
Make a point to be intentional as you go about your daily life. Cultivate awareness. The saying is trite and cliche, but it still rings true: “stop and smell the roses.” And notice the creativity and wonder of God as you do.

3. Praying the Hours

Another way to practice awareness of God’s presence is through praying the hours. There are online resources, smartphone apps, and books designed to help with this discipline. It simply means to make a hard stop within the course of your day for a set time to pray.

The liturgy of the hours is practiced in the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran traditions, but it is becoming more common with mainline Protestants as well, and is sometimes referred to as ‘fixed-hour prayer.’ It’s not anything new or modern. The Bible says of the prophet Daniel: “Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.” Daniel 6:10, NIV

Clearly, the idea of fixed-hour prayer is an ancient one, and is one that can help us — even in the 21st century — cultivate a more meaningful relationship with God as well.

Typically, there are set times for prayer in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, but when you are using fixed-hour prayer to develop your own personal walk with God, you can of course tailor the times to what works best for you.
These prayers don’t have to be long or drawn-out. Simply praying a short one-sentence prayer, reading a prayer from a devotional book, or reciting a memorized prayer will suffice. The prayer only needs to turn your attention from the world toward God in that moment.

Some resources to help get you started praying the hours:

*The Divine Hours, Pocket Edition* by Phyllis Tickle

DivineOffice.org

Pray as You Go

Pray the Liturgy of the Hours in Three Easy Steps by Pam Barnhill

4. Music

“One ought, every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.” —Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Worship music is much-beloved among evangelicals and it’s an enjoyable, meaningful way to keep God in the forefront of your mind all day long.

A friend once told me how she would sing hymns at the top of her lungs when her twin babies were crying, just to remind herself that God was with her in the exhaustion and the chaos. Everyone ought to sing at least one song a day!

But listening to music can work as well. Music affects different areas of the brain and can be like immersing yourself in prayer. Contemporary worship
music is popular, but don’t overlook traditional hymns, choral music, and classical. There is even a genre of Christian music called ‘soaking’ music and I am so drawn to the imagery of it. The right kind of music can allow you to soak in God’s nearness and presence.

Just a warning though: a Christian radio station might not be the best avenue if you are truly trying to tune in to God. Our local Christian radio station plays more ambiguous music than worshipful music, and more ads than anything else. The beauty of the technological world we live in, however, means that you can have worshipful music available instantly and almost anywhere.

5. Scripture Memorization
Memorizing portions of scripture is an important way of not only learning God’s truth, but of practicing God’s presence. Especially when memorizing longer sections, you will find yourself reciting and practicing throughout the day, turning over the verses in your head. This is what it means to meditate on scripture and it will permanently embed God’s word within your thoughts.

At different times in my life, I’ve memorized large sections of scripture, including the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Romans 8, and Psalm 27. I would work on my memorization any time I had a few spare moments and it made a huge difference in the direction of my thoughts and emotions.
While I can’t recite any of these completely from memory right now, they are still familiar and dear to my heart. Memorizing scripture changes you. The **exact words may not stick forever, but the truth always will.**

There are tons of great resources for helping you memorize scripture, but I recommend doing it the old-fashioned way. Just grab a Bible, pick a passage, and start memorizing.

**6. Service**

I tend to think of service in terms of projects. You know—going out to feed the homeless, helping rebuild a damaged home or church, clearing the brush and leaves from an elderly person’s yard. Things like that. Big things. Service *projects.*

But what if we thought of service differently?

**What if we noticed the spiritual act of service in the small, daily things?**

- Washing dishes, taking out the trash, driving carpool, mopping floors and mowing grass?
- Changing diapers, raking leaves, waving to neighbors, holding the door for a stranger?
- Pumping gas, offering a drink of water, making sandwiches, smiling, letting someone else go first?
All these ‘small’ things—these ordinary, daily tasks—are the boring and necessary parts of life. We slog through them on auto-pilot most of the time, thinking of them as chores or ‘must-dos.’ They are what author Kathleen Norris refers to as *The Quotidian Mysteries.*

**But small acts of service are what help us to practice the presence of God.**

Mother Teresa said, “In this life we cannot do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

In the book *Celebration of Discipline,* Richard Foster includes such small acts of service as:

- The service of guarding the reputation of others.
- The service of being served and receiving gifts and blessing from others.
- The service of common courtesy.
- The service of hospitality.
- The service of listening to others.
- The service of bearing burdens and sorrows of others.
- The service of beginning to care and becoming sensitive to the needs of others.
- The service of being available to others.

**Small things. Simple things.**
When we incorporate the idea of small acts of service into our daily lives, we are practicing the presence of God. “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” *Colossians 3:17*

I had a teacher friend years ago who told me how she actually loved to iron clothes, because she would pray for the family member whose garment she was ironing as she worked. *Apparently I’m not this spiritually mature yet, because I still hate to iron!*

But the idea is appealing, isn’t it? Turning the things we’re already doing, the normal, everyday, quotidian chores into acts of service.

This is the example Jesus sets for us when he washes the feet of his disciples.

The night before his death, Jesus doesn’t perform some great and noble act. He doesn’t rally the troops to fight for victory. He doesn’t stand up and give an impassioned pep talk before the big championship game.

Instead, he grabs two everyday items — a towel and a basin of water — and he turns the whole world upside down. Jesus, the one they call ‘Master,’ turns this last supper into a game changer. He does the menial servant’s job, lowering himself to wipe away the grime.
The beauty that strikes me most is the routine familiarity of it. **It’s a daily, necessary chore.** But this time the King of Kings takes it upon himself to perform the lowly task.

After washing their feet, Jesus challenges the disciples:

> “Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as ‘Teacher’ and ‘Master,’ and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other’s feet. I’ve laid down a pattern for you. What I’ve done, you do. I’m only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn’t give orders to the employer. If you understand what I’m telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.” —*John 13:12-17, MSG*

Jesus in effect says, “I’ve shown you what to do. Now, you go and do it. And this is how you’ll fulfill your purpose in life.”

Service is one of the most Christlike things we can do. And it brings us directly into God’s presence. It’s the most practical way to move beyond our quiet time and into the abundance of the life Jesus intends for us.
Conclusion

It is my sincerest hope that this short guide will help you start fresh with a ‘quiet time’ that’s meaningful, fulfilling, and life-altering. I truly believe God wants you to experience intimacy and closeness with him like never before. He’s not so interested in how many ‘good Christian’ tasks you mark off on your checklist. But he is interested in your heart. And he is smittenly interested in you.

He will change your life if you let him. He will fill you up and satisfy your needs like nothing else can or could ever hope to.

Blessings and love to you, dear reader.

May you hear God’s voice and feel his pleasure as he sings over you today and every day.

Sheri
Resources

For a complete list of books and resources, check out the exclusive content on the Quiet Time Resources subscriber freebie page.

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Thank you for reading!