

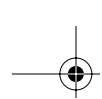
## Foreword

Blaise Pascal, the remarkable scientist, theologian and Christian of the seventeenth century, remarked in his *Pensees* (section 136) that “all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room.” The reason for this inability, he found, is “the natural poverty of our feeble and mortal condition, so miserable that nothing can comfort us when we think of it closely.” In order not to “think of it closely,” we turn to what Pascal calls “diversion” to distract us from ourselves:

Hence it comes people so much love noise and stir; hence it comes that the prison is so horrible a punishment; hence it comes that the pleasure of solitude is a thing incomprehensible.

Pascal also observes that we have “another secret instinct, a remnant of the greatness of our original nature, which teaches that happiness in reality consists only in rest, and not in being stirred up.” This instinct conflicts with the drive to diversion, and we develop the confused idea that leads people to aim at rest through excitement, “and always to fancy that the satisfaction which they do not have will come to them if, by surmounting whatever difficulties confront them, they can thereby open the door to rest.”





Of course it is a fallacy to think that one just needs more time. Unless a deeper solution is found, “more time” will just fill up in the same way as the time we already have. The way to liberation and rest lies through a decision and a practice.

The decision is to release the world and your fate, including your reputation and “success,” into the hands of God. This is not a decision to not act at all, though in some situations it may come to that. It is, rather, a decision concerning *how* you will act: you will act in dependence on God. You will not take charge of outcomes. You will do your part, of course, but your part will always be chastened by a sense of who is God—not you!

A decision to release the world and our fate to God runs contrary to everything within and around us. We have been had by a system of behavior that was here before we were and seeps into every pore of our being. “Sin,” Paul tells us, “was in the world,” even before the law came. It forms us internally and pressures us externally. Hence we must learn to choose things that meet with God’s actions of grace to break us out of the system. These things are the disciplines of life in the Spirit, well known from Christian history but much avoided and misunderstood. For those who do not understand our desperate situation, these disciplines look strange or even harmful. But they are absolutely necessary for those who would find rest for their soul in God and not live the distracted existence Pascal so accurately portrays.

Solitude and silence are the most radical of the spiritual disciplines because they most directly attack the sources of human misery and wrongdoing. To be in solitude is to choose to do nothing. For extensive periods of time. All accomplishment is given up. Silence is required to complete solitude, for until we enter quietness, the world still lays hold of us. When we go into solitude and silence we stop making demands on God. It is enough that God is God and we are





his. We learn we have a soul, that God is here, that this world is “my Father’s world.”

This knowledge of God progressively replaces the rabid busyness and self-importance that drives most human beings, including the religious ones. It comes to possess us no matter where we are. Now, “Whatever we do, in word or deed, we do in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17). Solitude and silence are not another job. They are not, really, something we have to think to do. They are whom we have become. We still need to cultivate solitude and silence, from time to time going alone and being quiet. But we carry them with us wherever we go.

In the contemporary context (especially the religious context) someone needs to tell us about solitude and silence—just to let us know there are such things. Someone then needs to tell us it’s okay to enter them. Someone needs to tell us how to do it, what will happen when we do, and how we go on from there. For Ruth Barton that someone was her spiritual director. Now Ruth tells you.

If you would really like to know the “rest appropriate for the people of God” (Heb 4:9), then make the decision to leave all outcomes to God and enter the practice of solitude and silence with Ruth Barton as your guide. As you do so, call upon Jesus to be with you, and trust him. Eventually you will come to know the “rest unto your souls” promised by him who is meek and lowly of heart. It will become the easy and unshakeable foundation for your life and your death.

*Dallas Willard*

