

Meeting  
Your Need for

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# Solitude

I clearly remember the day that “the mother load” overwhelmed me, and I sought refuge in our walk-in closet. I was sleep-deprived, exhausted, and surrounded by crying, needy children. My four-year-old had missed the toilet, wetting herself and the floor. My two-year-old had dumped his cereal, complete with milk. The kitchen was strewn with undone dishes from breakfast, the family room was littered with toys from the toy box, the phone was ringing, our pet birds were chirping, and the dryer was buzzing. My mind was swirling with sound, and I couldn’t hear myself think. What I needed was a moment of solitude before I exploded into a thousand pieces.

And so I did the only thing I could think of: I hid in the closet.

On that particular day, it was just what I needed. Three minutes to calm my nerves, take a deep breath, reassure myself that I was a good mother (even though I *was*, at the moment, hiding from my children), and gain my composure so that I could face the rest of the day. The bad thing was that it was only 9:00 AM when I took cover.

If you’re the mother of young children (or even the mother of ones now grown!), I know that you, too, have sought refuge from

your children. It's okay. You can admit it. You may not have actually shut yourself in a closet, but I'm sure there have been times you've wanted to. Or maybe you've coped by imagining yourself somewhere on a sun-dappled beach, reading a book uninterrupted, a gentle breeze blowing. Or even had fantasies about returning to earlier times, known at my house as "B.C."—Before Children. Trust me, I've indulged in these same fantasies myself, sometimes simultaneously. I used to feel guilty about it, but the more I mother, the more I realize that one of a mother's greatest needs is time to rest and refuel in order to be able to keep on giving of herself.

Mothering is an intense, around-the-clock job. Being physically and emotionally available to other humans—often with no concern for your own needs—is tough work. But the tough work is made easier when we can find, or make, small pockets of time in order to reconnect with ourselves, organize our daily work, plan for the future, and communicate intimately with the God who created us.

When mothering gets difficult, my first instinct is to run and hide. I guess that's the "fight or flight" response that all humans have. My desire to flee gets greater as the noise level increases in my house, the discontent of my children heightens, or grumpiness spills from one child to the next. It kicks into high gear in the midst of a child's tantrum, when I have PMS, or when everything seems to be going wrong at the same time. It practically overwhelms me when all of the aforementioned things begin to happen at once. At my house, they often seem to.

Do you need solitude? Here are some possible indicators:

- ☞ You lose your temper more quickly and are more frustrated with your children than usual.
- ☞ You cannot think clearly.

- ☞ You're disorganized and forgetful.
- ☞ You feel disconnected from yourself, your family, and your Creator.
- ☞ You feel overwhelmed.

Although I've craved solitude almost every day since becoming a mother, I didn't discover its true power until lately. One night my kids asked me to join them in a game of Hide and Seek. I told my daughter to cover her eyes and count to ten while my son and I hid. He went to my room, and I went to his and hid in the closet. (I seem to spend a lot of time in closets, don't I?) Minutes passed. Then more minutes passed. I relaxed and started enjoying the quietness in the closet. As I sat amid the clothes and the shoes, I marveled that in my hiding spot there were no clothes to fold, no sandwiches to prepare, no school parties to organize, no appointments to keep, and no groceries to put away.

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the smooth closet wall. More minutes passed, and I used the time to reassess how I had spent my day and to make a mental "to do" list for the next day. When that was done, I began to pray, thanking God for kids and closets and the unexpected solitude I'd found.

More time passed. I couldn't imagine why my kids hadn't found me yet. Then I heard my husband's voice. "Honey, are you up here?" I whispered back, "Are the kids still looking for me?" My husband followed the sound of my voice to my son's room and entered just as I slid the closet door open a crack. When he saw me, he doubled over with laughter. "What's so funny?" I asked, feeling a bit foolish staring at him from the depths of the closet. He was laughing so hard he couldn't answer. Finally, when the laughter subsided, he confided that the kids had stopped looking for me long ago and were now involved in a game of Farm Families in our bedroom. I started to laugh, too.

But as I climbed out of my hiding spot, I realized that I had just experienced solitude in the truest sense. The dictionary defines it as “the state of being alone or remote from others; isolation.” In the closet, I was truly isolated. The moments alone gave me the opportunity to be a human “being” rather than a human “doing,” as I usually am. Instead of furiously working, I was “busy” sitting still.

So often in the past, my idea of solitude was simply the ability to work alone, without the “help” of a two-year-old. My “solitude” usually consisted of a long list of things I needed to accomplish, and my time alone was filled with movement and perspiration.

My minutes in the closet helped me discover that solitude is meant to be so much more than an opportunity to get things done. It is really about the beauty of silence and how it touches our soul. It is in our quiet times that we are most able to concentrate on what’s important. In so doing, we are able to simplify life, regain our focus, and gather the energy necessary to continue along life’s path. Now I try to practice the art of simply existing for at least five minutes a day. It’s difficult. But spending time doing nothing often produces great results: ideas flow, thanksgiving wells up in my soul, peace settles in, energy is restored. And more than anything, I reconnect with the deep sense of purpose that encouraged me to become a mother in the first place.

Although my moments in the closet led me to a new understanding of the value of solitude, they weren’t enough to reverse my lifelong feeling that doing means accomplishing, and accomplishing is why we’re put on earth. So I’m continually relearning the value of solitude. But the lesson doesn’t come easy. I feel guilty and selfish when I set aside time for myself rather than understanding that I need to rest and refuel so that I have the energy to continue to mother my kids. When I’m depleted, it’s difficult to find the means to assist and respond to my children and their varied needs. But when I’m well-rested and rejuvenated, I find it

much easier to embrace the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

In her insightful book *God’s Whisper in a Mother’s Chaos*, Keri Wyatt Kent also acknowledges the benefits of solitude. She writes, “If I intentionally withdraw from the chaos on a regular basis, I am a more patient mother, a more loving wife and a gentler person. By spending time alone with God, I allow him to care for my soul so that I can better care for those he has entrusted to me.”<sup>1</sup>

Jim Wallis writes in *The Soul of Politics*, “Action without reflection can easily become barren and even bitter. Without the space for self-examination and the capacity for rejuvenation, the danger of exhaustion and despair is too great.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus also placed importance on solitude. Several times in the New Testament we read about him “withdrawing” to a lonely place. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster shows us that solitude often accompanied Jesus’ work:

He inaugurated His ministry by spending forty days alone in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11). Before He chose the twelve, He spent the entire night alone in the desert hills (Luke 6:12)...When the twelve had returned from a preaching and healing mission, Jesus instructed them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place...” (Mark 6:31). Following the healing of a leper Jesus “withdrew to the wilderness and prayed” (Luke 5:16). With three disciples He sought out the silence of a lonely mountain as the stage for the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9). As He prepared for His highest and most holy work, Jesus sought the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). One could go on, but perhaps this is sufficient to show that the

seeking out of a solitary place was a regular practice with Jesus. So it should be for us.<sup>3</sup>

*So it should be for us.* But what of those of us who equate solitude with selfishness instead of recognizing its importance as preparation for the tasks we have been called to do? If Jesus, who was both God and man, needed rest, doesn't it make sense that mothers, who are neither God nor man (but really important women!) need rest, too? Jesus knew he needed to refuel before he could meet the needs of the masses. As a mother, I need to rest and refuel before I can meet the needs of *my* "mass." But how many of us put ourselves last on the list of our "Things to Do" and are willing to cross ourselves off the list *without* meeting our needs when it appears we'll never make it to the end anyway?

The more we're willing to forego our own needs, including the need for solitude, the more we're shortchanging ourselves and our families. Solitude isn't just about being alone. It's so much more than that.

## The Benefits of Solitude

Solitude *is* about refueling. But it also provides the opportunity for us to communicate—not only with ourselves, but with the God who created us. Not surprisingly, when we set aside time to connect with our Creator, the Master blesses us not only by listening, but also by responding, helping us...

### *Gain Insight*

Some of my best mothering insights have come in the midst of solitude. And if I hadn't been quietly listening for the whisper of God's voice, I believe I would have missed the guidance altogether.

Shortly after my daughter was born, I was up in the middle of the night for the umpteenth time to feed and change her. Like all