



Come away

Discovering your identity
and calling in the **quiet**

**John Mark
Comer**

Moretto da Brescia's depiction of Jesus blessing
Saint John the Baptist before he goes into the quiet.

“Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”

They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?”

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

—John 1:19-23

1.

I woke up this morning *tired*.

Incredibly, *tired*.

I work really hard to live a slower, simpler life than the insanity of what's considered "normal" in our time; to eliminate hurry as best I can; to walk at the pace of love, which is to say, to walk *slowly*.

But this last month just got away from me.

My calendar was already in the red zone, with this month's schedule set to be the busiest of my year (you know how it goes), but then we hit an unexpected crisis with one of our kids, then a tragedy struck a member of our extended family, about whom we care deeply, then a few last-minute work demands got piled onto my already-maxed-out load, all of which conspired to totally stress me out, then I started waking up at 3am, heart beating, mind racing, then I got even *more* stressed, and *more* tired ...

In other words: *life happened*.

As it always does.

Every age has a spirit or mood, a kind of emotional atmosphere: ours is the age of exhaustion. The Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls it “the burnout society,”¹ and it’s incredibly hard not to get sucked into the maelstrom.

But the problem isn’t just that we get sucked into hurry; it’s *so* much deeper. As the writer John Ortberg has said, “Hurry is not just a disordered schedule. Hurry is a disordered *heart*.”² The problem isn’t just that I did too much, too fast; it’s that I forgot who I *was*, my identity. And I lost sight of who God created me to *be*, my calling.

Has this ever happened to you?

Have you ever found yourself lying in bed after a fitful night’s sleep, hitting the snooze button, *again*, eyes bleary, heart weary, thinking to yourself: *How am I here? Why do I always overschedule my time? I know better than this. How is it I’m totally maxed out — again?*

If so, you are not alone. I’m with you, with the added caveat that I am *literally* the guy who wrote the book on hurry, which adds no small dose of shame to the psychic pile.

The truth is: I *am* growing in this, just slower than I’d like to admit.³

For many years, waking up tired was normal. My default setting, followed by a twelve-hour IV drip of caffeine and herculean feats of willpower.

Then it became regular or recurring, but not constant; the stretches of healthy tired (as opposed to toxic tired) got longer and longer.

Now it's sporadic. It still happens, but it's no longer my baseline.

Spiritual growth is like this, right? Slow. Iterative. Three steps forward, two back; learning by failure as much as (or far more than) success.

Humbling, on the best of days. "The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound."⁴

So: what do I do?

What Jesus did when the pressures of life hit a tipping point: *disappear* ...

2.

Mark 1: the chapter begins with Mark's version of Jesus' well-known foray into the quiet.

The Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.

Mark's version of this story is short, staccato: We don't get the in-depth color we have in Matthew or Luke, but still, Mark wants us to know Jesus' story *begins* in the quiet. In fact, Mark's biography skips right over the virgin birth, the choirs of angels, the Magi, the dreams and prophecies come true; Jesus' entire childhood is cut out.

Mark goes straight to the forty days of solitude and silence.

From there, Jesus emerges out of the desert and goes "into Galilee,

proclaiming the good news of God.”

The rest of the chapter is fascinating. It’s essentially one long “day in the life” of Jesus, beginning with Jesus preaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, exorcising an evil spirit, healing Peter’s mother-in-law, then healing the sick and casting out demons late into the night.

He must have been *exhausted*.

Yet here’s Mark’s next line:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.¹

You would think the story would then have Jesus sleeping in and taking the following morning off. But, no: Jesus is up before the sun. While everyone else is still in bed, he goes off to a solitary place to pray.

That phrase, “solitary place,” is one word in Greek — *eremos*: It means a quiet, deserted place, out in nature, where you can be alone. It’s the same word translated “wilderness” earlier in the chapter.

Do you see what Mark is saying?

Mark frames the story like this:

Jesus goes into the quiet for forty days.

Then he comes back for a single day.

Then he gets up early, *and goes straight back into the quiet*.

Translation: the *eremos* wasn't a one-time rite of passage for Jesus. "Whew, glad I got *that* over with." It wasn't a box on a life to-do list that he checked off and moved on. It was a practice that was woven into the fabric of his daily life, part of the cadence of his body, his way of being in time and space.

But the story still isn't over.

Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

Notice: they have to go *searching* for Jesus. I love that. Like he's hiding. As the Quaker professor Elton Trueblood once said, the more public a person's life, the more they "must learn to hide."² I could not agree more.

Learning to hide is an essential discipline of an apprentice of Jesus.

I imagine the disciples out hiking in the *eremos*. Splitting into small groups like a search party, peeking their heads into caves, climbing down into wadis, shouting Jesus' name, growing more annoyed as the day's heat rises.

When the disciples finally find him, they are exasperated: "Everyone is looking for you!" The town is calling for an encore: Come back! Teach, heal, deliver, dazzle us! — demanding *more* from Jesus. But, no ...

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else — to the nearby villages — so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Don't miss what's happening here — it's insightful. The disciples come with a list of pressing demands on Jesus' time, which, presumably, are all really good opportunities, and Jesus says, "Let us go somewhere else." That's Jesus for *no*.

"No" is one of the shortest, most powerful words we can ever say, yet it's also one of the most difficult. It's profoundly human to find yourself thinking, *Why did I say yes to this? How did I get sucked into this? Why do I so easily give in to pressure? How is it I so often long to escape my own life?*

It's incredibly hard to say no, especially to good opportunities, and *especially* when they come freighted with social pressure or moralized opinions from other people.

Yet somehow, Jesus' time in the *eremos* gave him the power that so many of us lack: the power of *no*.

No, I don't do that.

Even more ...

No, I'm not that.

Did you catch Jesus' line? "That is why I have come." He's not saying no to a good opportunity in the name of work/life balance or a better offer or just because he was a bit stressed out that day, but in light of his identity and calling; his sense of who he *was*, and what the Father was (and was not) calling him to *do*.

Jesus' power of no wasn't inspired by watching a narcissistic self-help trope on TikTok: "Sorry guys, this Capernaum thing just isn't 'serving

me' anymore." Not at all; it was deeply rooted in his discernment of his Father's will. This is Jesus, who said, "I always do what pleases the Father." It wasn't just others' desires that Jesus found the power to say *no* to, but, arguably, his own.

Referring to this story, the Dutch priest and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen pointed out:

"In the lonely place, Jesus finds the courage to follow God's will and not his own; to speak God's words and not his own; to do God's work and not his own ..."

And drawing this story to bear on our own apprenticeship to Jesus, he said ...

"Without a lonely place our lives are in danger ... In solitude we discover that our life is not a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared."³

It comes as no surprise that Jesus regularly used two key verbs with his apprentices: "Come," and "go."

"*Come away* to a deserted place [*eremos*] all by yourselves and rest a while ..."⁴

And: "*Go* and make disciples of all nations."⁵

"*Come* to me, all you who are weary and burdened ..."⁶

And: "*Go* ... to the lost sheep of Israel ..."⁷

"*Come*, follow me ..."⁸

And: “*Go!* I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.”⁹

He regularly called his disciples to step away from the world, *and* he always sent them back out into it, to “learn to hide,” and to courageously venture back into the fray.

Retreat, and return.

This is the way of Jesus.

It is also the life architecture of all those who seriously apprentice under him, who intentionally model their lives on his own.

Of course, it goes without saying: This pattern has to be adapted and augmented for each person individually, based on their particular life — it’s going to look wildly different for an introverted writer like myself than a fun-loving college student living in a dorm or a young parent, just trying to sneak in a psalm during naptime. And it’s a template, not a straitjacket; an example to follow, not a slavish rule.

But whatever expression of this practice works for your personality, in your stage, in your particular life, I simply cannot overemphasize how important it is to follow Jesus’ pattern; to hear his call to “come away” (and also to “go”), because when we *don’t* come away, we lose our spiritual equilibrium, just as when we don’t go, we lose our spiritual fervor.

We become trapped in our own life; lost in a maze of our own making. Sucked into the tyranny of the urgent, not the important. “Distracted from distraction by distraction,” as T.S. Eliot put it.¹⁰ Drowning under the crippling weight of overcommitment, and feeling the exhaustion

accumulate in our bodies, like lactic acid in our blood.

Henri Nouwen went on to playfully call solitude “wasting time on God.”¹¹ When we refuse Nouwen’s call to “waste” time on God, we usually end up wasting time on a thousand *other* things: TV, entertainment, online shopping, our phones, our inboxes, our jobs. Exhaustion, burnout, and ennui — what Jesus called “the cares of this world”¹² — choke out our soul.

But in Jesus we see a genuine alternative: he emerges from the *eremos* with a clarion sense of his *identity* and *calling*.

With a clear *yes* to power a long list of *nos*.

Could this be possible? Could we learn how to do this from Jesus? Could we, too, discover our identity and calling in the quiet?

Leading questions: naturally, the answer is *yes*. Let’s look at each in turn
...

3.

First, identity. By “identity,” I just mean who we experience ourselves to be. We all live from an identity or a sense of self, an interior perception of what makes us, *us*.

Christian identity formation is absolutely unique in the panoply of options on offer. In a globalized, multicultural world, there are all sorts of strategies by which people form an identity, but not all identities are created equal.

Let me simplify the various options into two buckets: modern and traditional, or individualist and collectivist.

Modern, Western identities are usually *chosen* by the individual based on their “authentic desires,” or who their inner feelings are telling them they *really* are (even if their inner self disagrees with their *outer* self, such as their body or family or duty). At its most crass, a person’s desires are

unquestioned and unfiltered; they are assumed to be good, more: to be “the god within,” the most true and trustworthy guide to a happy life. In this religion (and it *is* a religion), the creed is simple: “Follow your heart.”

This is a starkly different take on desire than the Christian view, which sees our desires as incredibly important, but, at best, a mixed bag, if not dangerously misleading.

The Christian tradition has a highly sophisticated view of desire: We certainly believe that our desires matter, even more: that the Spirit himself is often desiring *through* our desire, as Paul writes, “it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”¹ Yet we also believe our desires are horribly warped by sin, and poisoned by the world around us. Left unchecked to guide our lives, they are apt to lead us treacherously off the path to happiness, and certainly away from love, which almost always demands that we *deny* our desires, to put the good of another ahead of our own.

To clarify, the self-constructed modern identities of Western culture aren’t all bad. They often free up great creativity, unlock an individual’s unique essence, and spark genius. “Think Different” was Apple’s slogan for years, and there’s a reason it’s the number one company in the world.

But self-constructed identities are incredibly fragile. They need constant emotional scaffolding, which is why they petulantly demand so much affirmation in the public sphere. Think of the way sexual orientation and “gender identity” have both become valid categories of personhood in the postmodern West. Note how it’s not enough for these self-chosen identities to be legalized, or even lauded by celebrity after celebrity; they have to be celebrated by *all*. Even a whiff of disapproval from others, no matter how gracious, undermines many people’s deepest sense of self —

and that can feel soul-crushing to the individual.² Self-chosen identities simply can't cope.

But the other major alternative the world offers us isn't much better.

In more traditional, collectivist cultures (which still make up the vast majority of the human population³), identities are still chosen, but they are often chosen *for* you, not based on your “authentic desires,” but usually on the “authentic desires” and needs of the larger group — your family or tribe or clan. You're expected to defer to the generation ahead of you, who need you, in good Confucian manner, to honor your elders, wait your turn, and pay your dues.

The beauty of this more traditional model of identity formation is: it's low on anxiety (which is at an epidemic level in the West), and it's much less fragile than the postmodern approach. You know your role, and you have a clear path to happiness — Play your role well in the community: be a good mother or father or husband or wife or son or daughter or employee or citizen or _____, and you'll be a good *person*.

Honestly, this works fairly well for some people, maybe even a lot of people.

But when someone doesn't fit easily into the preordained role, it can be suffocating, especially for women, the poor, or bell-curve outliers who don't fit into the traditional archetypes.

But the way we do identity-formation as Christians is totally different from either option. Unlike in Western culture, identity for Christ followers isn't something we *choose*, like what style of clothing we wear or car we drive or political party we “identify” with, or, increasingly, even

what gender we identify as; nor is it something that is chosen *for* us, as it is in traditional cultures, by our family or tribe or station of birth. In many cases, we are forced to *renounce* the identities of our family or tribe — to rise above or *go below* the norms of our station.⁴ Jesus was speaking to a *collectivist* culture when he said, “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”⁵ No one ever accused Jesus of mincing words.

For followers of Jesus, identity is something that we *discover*.

It’s a *gift* we *receive* from a loving Father.

It’s less architecture and more archeology; less something we design or build off a whiteboard, and more something we unearth from the ground of our being in God.⁶

We hear a lot of talk about becoming your “true self” in popular culture, and often that language is appropriated by Christians, with varying results,⁷ but as followers of Jesus, we don’t discover our true self by seeking *it*, but by seeking *God*.⁸ In seeking God, we encounter what Nouwen called “the inner voice of love”⁹ — the voice of God himself, speaking our true identity over us, with all our flaws and failings. Naming who we are, and who we aren’t. Offering us insight into our identity that we could never possibly get from an Enneagram diagram or a four-letter Myers-Briggs handle that lumps eight billion infinitely unique human souls into sixteen personality types.¹⁰

God’s voice is “an inner voice of *love*,” not shame or social pressure. God, who knows us better than our parents, better than our best friend or spouse or lover, *better than we even know ourselves*, knows us exactly as we actually are, and still utterly, completely pours his love into our

hearts, and seems to genuinely *delight* in us as his children. *This* is sheer, audacious, unmerited grace.¹¹ “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”¹²

When we go into the quiet, we begin to hear God’s voice speak our true identity over us. Simultaneously, we get a little distance from *other* people’s voices over our (often false) identity — their love, or disdain, or disapproval, their expectations, or demands. We get a little mental/emotional buffer between us and all the other voices; we realize *we are not what other people think or say about us; we are simply a child under the love of God.*

The silly thing is, even the loudest voices in our heads are rarely thinking about us nearly as much as we think! The psychologist Thomas Gilovich at Cornell University conducted a hilarious study where he had young students walk around campus wearing a T-shirt with a large picture of Barry Manilow’s face on it (this was a while ago, when poor Barry was still well-known but *not* cool ...). Most students overestimated by about *double* the number of people who would notice their quirky attire. Meaning, they were walking around campus feeling horribly embarrassed by their shirt, but hardly anybody even noticed. The research summary concluded, “People tend to believe that they stand out in the eyes of others, both positively and negatively, more than they actually do.”¹³

Or to quote a well-known proverb: *Don’t worry about what the world thinks of you. Because it doesn’t.*

As funny as this is, this deep, primal social dynamic causes us to perform a “false self” — to project a curated image to the world, often an image of who we genuinely *want* to be, or *wish we were*, or even are *trying* to be, but, in actuality, are not. Or worse: a completely fabricated self, designed

for one reason: to get ahead. All of it, our attempt to be loved.

Yet research studies usually conclude what most of us naturally intuit: this morphing of the self into a kind of “brand”¹⁴ inevitably leads to stress, burnout, and even feelings of intense shame. (“Imposter syndrome,” anyone?)

Why? Because our “brand” self is not a *real* self. It’s not who we actually *are*. It’s why we’re both revolted by and can’t-help-but-look-at the paparazzi’s unflattering celebrity photos online. Tom Cruise on a beach, a bit overweight, his latest girlfriend glowering at him. Margo Robbie leaving Whole Foods on a bad hair day, her body swollen from her monthly cycle. It turns out, *none* of us are as cool or beautiful or toned or happy or confident as the (false) image we project to the world. Take away the lights and makeup and advanced filters and forty-eight-hour fasts before the photoshoot, and guess what? We’re all — even the most glamorous of us — just *us*.

When you look closely at the saints of church history — the most luminous of disciples of Jesus — you quickly realize an odd juxtaposition: those who were the most committed to death to self and surrender to God are *not* boring, dull automatons, just another cog in the machine; they are some of the most creative minds in human history. They are *not* slavish, Handmaid’s Tale-esque religious clones (which seems to be a generational fear-bordering-on-paranoia). Instead, they are some of the most unique, daring people to ever grace the earth.

Of course, there’s a reason a disproportionate number of the saints were martyrs. Many of them *died for it*. The world does not take lightly to those whose very lives violate the status quo. As Chesterton said, “The Saint ... is mistaken for a poison because he is an antidote.”¹⁵

It turns out, sin makes us all the *same*; we devolve back to the same base, animalistic impulses — fear, greed, ambition, ego. I'm convinced one of the reasons there's such an obsession with fashion in our era is because people are trying desperately to stand out externally, for fear they will be found out to be painfully common internally.

But no one is more original than a saint.

The saints live from this deep sense of God-given identity, which often emerges from their time in the desert.

John the Baptizer (or *Saint* John the Baptist, as we now call him, who was later *martyred*) was a head-scratching conundrum to the religious leaders of the day. Wearing their matching phylacteries and performing their religious zeal, they could not make sense of this prophet, living out in the desert, wearing camel's hair, eating wild honey and locusts, and preaching the imminent arrival of God's Kingdom.

So, they sent a delegation to find out more ...

"Who are you?" they ask.

He immediately replies, "I am not the Messiah," likely cutting off their false expectations at first beat.

"Okay, then, who are you? Are you Elijah?" (Another theory, as many first-century Hebrews were expecting the return of Elijah to usher in the Kingdom.)

But, again, John is blunt: "I am not."

“Are you the Prophet?”

“No.”

“Finally they said, ‘Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’”

Then John replied with a prophecy from Isaiah: “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”¹⁶

Do you see how incredibly clear and firm and at peace John is with his identity? Unswayable, unmovable. His identity is grounded in something far older and larger than himself. It’s not something he chose, or that was chosen for him by his parents or clan. It’s who God created him to be, a unique light that lived in God’s mind and heart, centuries before John drew his first breath.

And it’s not just John, with his funky uniform and spartan diet. In story after story, the holy ones emerge from the desert with a new, God-given identity.

Jesus, too, comes out of the desert only to quote a different prophecy from Isaiah for his identity: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me.”¹⁷

Paul came out of his time in the Arabian desert saying, “I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.”¹⁸

John was in exile on Patmos, a bare rock in the Aegean Sea, when he found the words to claim, “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and Kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.”¹⁹

This is what happens to those who spend time with God in the *eremos* — they discover *who they truly are*.

As God reveals to us our true identity, we realize there are many things that are true about us — our successes and failures, our desires and dreams and aversions and attractions and wounds and traumas and triggers — but those are not the *truest* thing about us.²⁰ The *truest* thing about us — what *really* makes us, *us* — is that we are “in Christ,” and our “life is hidden with Christ in God,” we are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” our days “ordained for us before any of them came to be,” we have been “called according to his purpose” and we were “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,” our destiny is glorious because we are incredibly well loved.²¹

And to be really clear: this is about God’s glory, *his* beauty and honor and love, not ours. As Saint Irenaeus of Lyons said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”²²

When we discover who we are in Christ, we come “fully alive”; we reflect and refract the radiant light of Christ’s face to the world. In fact, the *second* half of that sentence from Irenaeus is key: “And human life consists in beholding God.”²³ For Irenaeus, who was a disciple of the martyr Polycarp, who himself was a direct disciple of the Apostle John (yes, *that* Apostle John), the way we become a radiant, glowing “human being fully alive” is by gazing at the radiant person of Jesus, who is already gazing at *us*, in love. By “beholding.”

This is not “self-actualization,” not even close. This is Paul’s magisterial claim, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”²⁴ It’s “Christ-in-you-actualization.” This is Christ being formed in your inner person until you radiate out his love.

But we will not get this sense of self from an Enneagram number, or by reading a book, and certainly not by doomscrolling on Instagram or donning a killer fit to impress our friends or pulling out a credit card to buy another *thing* we don't need or Facetuning a selfie to look better online than we are in real life or by giving our body away sexually in hopes of being loved or working eighty hours a week in pursuit of "success;" we don't need to earn this identity or work for it or pay for it or merit it. It's sheer grace — a gift.

To claim it, all we have to do is "behold," just sit quietly, look at God, looking at us, and let him love us into who we really, truly are. Let the Spirit midwife our new self into being in God.

But for that to happen, we, like Jesus, must disappear into the *eremos* ...

4.

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” asks the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver.¹ A question worthy of lifelong reflection.

In the language of Genesis, we humans were created to “rule over the earth.” To make something of the world. Each of us must find our place in the tapestry of humanity, the role we play, our little corner of the earth to love and tend.

Hence, our second need: *calling*.

If identity is our sense of who we are, what makes us, *us*, calling is an equally important and intuitive sense of *what we are meant to do*. After all, we do who we are; what we *do* flows from who we believe we *are* in our inner being.

And yet calling, too, is often fraught with paralyzing anxiety for modern people. My last name is “Comer,” likely from “Comber,” or “Comb-maker.” A thousand years ago, my ancestors in Scotland were comb makers. Had I been born in 980, rather than 1980, I would likely have grown up to be a — wait for it — comb maker. But today, I can choose from a dizzying array of options: I could be a barista or a journalist or a chef or a middle school teacher or an action movie star (obviously) or try my hand at literary fiction or attempt a small-business venture — the list of options is endless.

We no longer have to do what our father or mother before us did; we get to *choose*. But freedom isn’t free; it rises in tandem with anxiety, and seeing as we have more freedom than any generation in human history, it’s no surprise that Gen Z is the most anxious generation of all time.

How are we to know what path to walk in a world of limitless choice?

Even if “limitless choice” is an illusion, sold to us by politicians and the corporations that paid for their elections (we can’t *actually* walk any path we want; obviously, my odds of becoming an action movie star are basically nil), still, the illusion is real enough to paralyze us at every fork in the road. To become a journalist is *not* to become a lawyer; to become a small business owner is *not* to become a hairstylist. When the world (or even our well-meaning parents) tells us, “You can do anything you put your mind to,” we can easily feel overwhelmed.

“FOMO” is an overused trope, but to choose one path is to *not* choose countless others, and that’s more than a little terrifying. How do we know if we chose wisely? When pain comes, as it inevitably does, how do we know if it’s our cross to bear, or the consequences of a foolish decision?

We need something more than *choice* to set our face like flint toward our Jerusalem; we need a *calling*.

In the desert, God often strips us of our plans and purposes, and reveals to us his own. The wilderness has long been where God forms his prophets. It is the birthplace of dreams and destiny.

When we go into the quiet and encounter God's love, it is then — and only then — that we feel safe enough to surrender *to* God and his direction over our life. To truly *yield*. To say with Mary, "I am the Lord's servant,"² with the Apostle Paul, "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me,"³ with Jesus himself, "I always do what pleases him."⁴

This is where the way of Jesus is fundamentally at odds with the "true self" movement, at least, as it's typically understood.

We go into the desert, not to *decide* on a path, but to *discern* one.

What we Christians call "discernment" is, put simply, the ability and willingness to know and do the will of God.

This tectonic shift, from decision-making to discernment, is a crucial step in the spiritual journey.

From: *What decision should I make to maximize pleasure and minimize pain? To stay in control of my life and engineer my desired outcomes?*

To: *How is God's voice of direction coming to me, and how do I say yes and joyfully yield to his wisdom and will in loving trust?*

This deep, fissural shift in our life orientation — from decision-making to discernment — often comes after a long, protracted internal battle of the heart: Part of us wants to surrender to God and his calling on us, but another part of us wants to cling to control. To go our own way, thank you very much. The spiritual director Gerald May called this the shift from “willfulness” to “willingness,” but on the other side of this battle is a deep peace of heart and clarity of purpose.

It’s why we often return from the quiet with a renewed sense of calling:

This is what I’m meant to do, and not do.

This is what I’m meant to give my time to, and not to.

This is what I’m meant to give my best energies to, and not to.

The writer Thomas Kelly called this “the joyous burdens of love.”⁵ He noted that God’s heart is *universal* — it’s for the whole cosmos — every problem, every evil, every injustice, every need, God cares about *all* of it. The problem is: we are *not* universal; we are very much finite, mortal, weak, limited. So: God particularizes his *universal* heart in each one of our *individual* hearts; he places a small piece of the whole, deep into our desires, and says, “Go, work on *that*.”

“That” may be discovering a cure for cancer or getting solar power into space or running a tire shop or raising three kids and caring for your aging parents. It may be glamorous work, but it likely isn’t. But it’s *our* work. Our joyous burden. God’s heart, in our heart.

Our calling.

And when we say *yes* to God's call on our lives, we can more easily say *no* to all the *other* calls on our lives, including the deranged voices in our own heads. When we take up *our* cross, we no longer have to carry everyone *else's* crosses.

But as long as we just stand in the marketplace of public opinion, every entity with an agenda will just keep piling on extra crosses, extra burdens, extra "ought to's," that will leave our souls weary and depleted.

But. If we are willing to "come away" with Jesus, to go into the quiet, and listen for the inner voice of love, then we, too, may just emerge, as Jesus did, with an unshakable sense of who we are (and aren't), and what we're called (and not called) to do next.

Now, spoiler: there's no formula here. We can't control the *eremos*. In fact, a key function of the desert is to strip us of our *need* for control. To finally bring us to a true surrender, and with it, freedom. Honestly, there have been seasons when I've spent countless hours in the quiet and still felt deeply confused about what I should do next in my life.⁶ But each time I've stayed with it, the voice has eventually come, even if after a long period of waiting.

The key is, as the Desert Father Abba Moses used to say, "Sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything."

But this much I know to be true: if you go away into the quiet, the same Spirit of Jesus that called you away from the world, will eventually send you back *out* into the world — freshly armed with a sense of who you truly are, and what you offer to the world: not as "a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared."⁷

5.

I just booked myself into Saint Michael's Abbey for next week. Three days. I'll bring my Bible, my journal, my pen, a good pair of hiking shoes, but that's about it. My phone I will leave behind, along with its steady stream of noisy demands on my time and attention, and its many (mostly illegitimate) claims on my life.

I won't miss it, at all.

Sadly, the monastery is hard to get into now, squeezed out by the law of supply and demand. Their website no longer advertises private retreats, but a friend of a friend connected me to the Abbot. I'm in, thank God. I need to re-center, to re-set.

To begin again.

Three days of quiet is a luxury, and that is not lost on me. It really isn't. I'm painfully aware that many people don't have access to a quiet place, surrounded by natural beauty, and saturated in prayer and peace. Others simply can't get away — there's a two-year-old that needs to be, you know, kept alive, or a struggling business that's never more than a few days away from self-implosion, or a teenager on suicide watch, or a cruel and demanding boss, lording-it-Pharoah-esq over a job you can't afford to lose.

So, maybe you can't "come away to a quiet place" for three days at a monastery.

But what *can* you do?

Do what you can, not what you can't.

Can you shut off the TV tonight, go to bed early, and rise early to sit before God and listen?

Could you take a day this weekend to keep a digital Sabbath, as well as a Sabbath-Sabbath; a whole day to just stop and rest and delight and worship? Too much? What about a half day? What about a few hours?

What *can* you do?

Excuses are never far away, always within easy reach.

But the *eremos* is never far away, either ...

And God is waiting for you there. Yes, yes, I know, he's with you *everywhere*: "I am with you always."¹ And thank God for that.

But just as there is a special quality to God's voice that we hear in community, that really can be found nowhere else, so too with solitude. Just as we learn who we *are*, and what God's call upon us is, by living a deeply relational life in close proximity to others, who mirror back to us our true selves, who occasionally see us better than we see ourselves, and call forth the essence of Christ-in-us; so too, we learn our identity and calling by following Jesus into the desert, stripping ourselves down to the bare essentials of a soul before its Maker, and there, in the quiet, in the stillness, listening to the voice of love.

Go, my friends, into the quiet, and listen ...

Notes

1.

1. Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015).
2. Italics added. John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Zondervan, 2009), 79.
3. No pun intended.
4. Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (Paulist Press, 1999), 38.

2.

1. See Mark 1 for this story.
2. The exact quote from his autobiography is “A public man, though he is necessarily available at many times, must learn to hide. If he is always available, he is not worth enough when he is available.” Elton Trueblood, *While It Is Day* (Harper & Row, 1974), 67.
3. I love Nouwen’s framing of the spiritual trajectory as solitude to community to ministry. All three matter. To borrow a slightly overused metaphor, I’m writing (right now) about one leg of a three-legged stool. Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* (Ave Maria Press, 2004), 17–18, 26.
4. Mark 6:31 (NRSV).
5. Matthew 28:19.
6. Matthew 11:28.
7. Matthew 10:6.
8. Matthew 4:19.
9. Luke 10:3; and these are just a sampling, see also: Mark 1:17,

- John 1:46, Matthew 14:29, Matthew 19:21, Matthew 25:34, Mark 10:14, John 7:37, Revelation 22:17 (come) and Mark 16:15, Mark 2:11, Luke 7:50, Luke 8:48, Mark 19:52, Matthew 8:4, Matthew 17:27, Matthew 19:21, John 8:11, and more (go).
10. T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” III, in *Four Quartets* (Harcourt, 1943), 6.
 11. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (Seabury Press, 1977).
 12. Mark 4:19 (NRSV).

3.

1. Philippians 2:13.
2. I’m deeply indebted to Tim Keller’s cultural analysis here, for more of his work on identity, read *Making Sense of God*.
3. 70–80% is the rough estimate. See Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020)
4. See Jesus words in Matthew 10:34–39 and consider reading Joseph Hellerman’s work on the “anti-family teachings of Jesus” in his excellent work *When the Church Was a Family*.
5. Matthew 10:37.
6. If you’re interested in Christian identity, I would recommend reading *The Gift of Being Yourself* by David Benner.
7. The Spiritual Formation movement more broadly (of which I’m gratefully a part) tends to follow Thomas Merton in using this framework, first developed by the (very) secular psychologist

Donald Winnicott, but I intentionally shy away from it. I think it was helpful in speaking to Baby Boomers and those from more traditional cultures (such as immigrants to the West), but for my age and below, who were raised on a steady diet of “be true to yourself” dogma, I think Paul’s original language of “old self” and “new self” (Ephesians 4:22–24), which is similar, but actually fairly different, is a better path forward. Just my two cents.

8. This is not to say that self-awareness is not important, it is, vitally so, in my view. See my teaching on Discovering Your Identity and Calling at <https://practicethewayarchives.org/practices/identity-and-calling>.

9. See his book by the same name: Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom* (Doubleday, 1996).

10. For the record, I really like personality tests, as long as you understand they are not “True.” They reveal things about us, and they conceal things about us. My advice: use them as one data point among many, but don’t lean too heavily on them.

11. Of course, grace, biblically, is more than just this love, it’s also this love manifesting itself in our bodies and lives by the Spirit empowering us to be and do what we could not be or do on our own.

12. 1 John 3:1.

13. Gilovich, Thomas, Victoria Husted Medvec, and Kenneth Savitsky. “The Spotlight Effect in Social Judgment: An Egocentric Bias in Estimates of the Salience of One’s Own Actions and Appearance.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 2 (2000): 211–222.

14. Says the guy with both a “.com” and “LLC” after his name.

15. G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox* (Image Books, 1956), 5.

16. This is John 1:19–23 and is a favorite story of mine.

17. See Luke 4:14–21.

18. 2 Timothy 1:11 and Galatians 1:17–18.

19. Revelation 1:9.

20. I’m indebted here to the language of my friend Dave Lomas in his book *The Truest Thing About You*.

21. See 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 3:3; Psalm 139:14, 16; Romans 8:28; Ephesians 2:10. Just to cite a few.

22. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* (Adversus Haereses), Book IV, Chapter 20, Section 7 (ca. 180 AD).

23. Ibid.

24. Colossians 1:27.

4.

1. Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” in *New and Selected Poems, vol. 1* (Beacon Press, 2004), 94.

2. Luke 1:38.

3. Acts 20:24.

4. John 8:29.

5. Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (Harper & Brothers, 1941), 109.

6. This is especially true after experiences of trauma or relational breach, as they fragment our sense of self and often sabotage God’s healthy design for identity-formation. In these cases, our path to healing is often less through time in solitude, and more through community, through rebuilding trust with others who can speak God’s words of love and identity and calling over us. But that’s another book ...

7. Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* (Ave Maria Press, 2004), 26.

5.

1. Matthew 28:20.



About the author

John Mark Comer is the New York Times bestselling author of eight books, including *Practicing the Way*, which was named the 2025 Christian Book of the Year by the ECPA, and *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, which has sold more than a million copies and been translated into over twenty languages.

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