

How to be alone with Jesus

A guide for practicing quiet

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“Find in the busy city the desert of the monks.”

—Saint Jerome

I'm walking along a knife-edged ridge on the *Tour de L'Argentine*, a nine-mile hiking loop in the Swiss Alps. My soul is soaring with ebullient joy at the beauty of creation, and the goodness of my life in our Father's world. Far, far below me, I can see the Rhône valley stretched out in verdant green. The pristine expanse is dotted by a few tiny chalets, but they feel a world away. Here, at seven thousand feet, I am alone with God.

I only started backpacking a few years ago and, every time I'm out, I kick myself for not getting on the trail sooner. What took me so long? I missed *decades* of this joy. When I was eighteen, I did three nights on the Rogue River Trail in southern Oregon, and loved it, but I never did anything to pursue it further. Why? Simple: it was just too intimidating. Backpacking is the kind of thing you *can* do by yourself, sure, but really, you need a guide — a teacher.

There are real dangers in the wilderness — predators, inclement weather, the high chance of injury with no cell reception, etc. You need someone

who's spent time in the backcountry, who knows the route, who knows every possibility and pitfall along the way. Someone who has mastered the necessary skills and can teach you to do the same. So, for years, I would think wistfully about backpacking, even dream of solo-backpacking as a spiritual practice, only to shrink back in fear.

Enter my friend Ger, who, a few years ago, invited me to join him on the trail. It was an easy and instantaneous *yes*. For the last several summers, we've been making as many trips as we can, and I'm hooked. I will do this until my legs give out or my heart fails. This summer, we hiked the Alps and the High Sierras; next up, Zion in Utah and the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Then, well, the world is a large place.

All it took was a guide to show me the way.

This little book is designed to be exactly that — a guide, to map out a bit of the terrain in the quiet, and show you how to be alone with Jesus. I've designed it as a digital companion to my book *Into the quiet*, in which I lay out a vision for a quieter spirituality in an incredibly noisy age. Noise, like hurry, has a devastating effect on our bodies and souls, and, most notably, our capacity to give (and receive) love. Pulling away from the stimulation of the modern world, to rest and pray and come to quiet before God, is an absolutely indispensable practice for discipleship in our time.

I open *Into the quiet* with a story of going on a twenty-one-day solitude retreat; that's the equivalent of backpacking the Andes Mountains of Peru, or climbing Mt. Everest in Tibet. You may get there eventually, but you don't start there. You start by just going hiking. Then, you do an overnight, something easy, a few miles out and back. Then you slowly

work your way up — higher elevations, more challenging trails, longer trips. A little at a time.

You start any endeavor, including solitude, the same way — with small, easy steps. You begin moving in the right direction, and eventually, over time, work your way up. First, start your day sans your phone. You can do a silent retreat later.

In keeping with that spirit, this guide is just designed to get you started on your journey into the quiet. To take the *idea* of a quieter life and begin to habituate it into your body and everyday reality.

How to use this guide

Below you will find my recommendations for being alone with God, ranging from “if you have a few minutes,” to “if you have a few days.”

Everything I offer is invitational. To quote my Peloton instructor, “I make recommendations, you make decisions,” and that’s how it should be. Take my recommendations as flexible advice, not hard and fast rules. Wisdom, not commands. And remember: The Spirit is a far better guide than the best spiritual director in the world, so always, *always* follow whatever he is pressing upon your heart.

That said, depending on how much time you have, here’s a few ideas to get you started ...

To begin

First, find a good place to be alone with Jesus.

As I point out in *Into the quiet*, when Jesus is asked by his disciples to teach them to pray, the first thing he says is about *where* to pray, not *what* to pray: “When you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen.¹” This is the origin of the term “prayer closet,” by which people mean a private place, set aside for prayer.

Your first task is to find your quiet place. A place where you can really sink into God’s presence, a place conducive to rest, peace, focus, natural beauty, and communion with God.

It could be as simple as a chair in your living room by the window, or a particular bench at a park near your home, or an attic in your barn. Or you could have access to a family cabin or retreat center or even a monastery. You know your life.

Ideally, I would recommend you find 2-3 places you frequently retreat to: one in your home (just a little nook or chair), a second outside your home, but within an hour or so drive, for shorter day retreats (say a local retreat center), and a third option that’s more remote and secluded, for longer retreats (like a cabin or monastery).

Why repeat the same places? Why not mix it up? Because your body is a walking memory organ; it can’t possibly process the volume of sensory data coming at it all day long (especially if you live in a city), so it makes generalizations based on past experiences. This is why, if you have a place you’ve gone on vacation for years, the moment you arrive, you will

immediately feel your body unwind, your heart slow, your neck muscles soften. Your body *knows* — this is a place for rest.

Same with prayer: If you can find a quiet place and teach your body, “This is where we go to rest and pray,” it will be an invaluable retreat to return to, again and again, in your journey through life.

For me, this is a mat I sit on in my living room every morning as the sun rises; it’s a retreat center nearby I visit regularly for one-day retreats, and it’s a monastery up in Big Sur where I go for longer times away.

What could it be for you?

It doesn’t have to be flashy or perfect or photo-worthy; it just needs to be quiet.

Then, once you identify a place to go, here’s what I would recommend to set yourself before God.

1. Put away your devices — ideally in another room.
2. Settle into a comfortable position, but make sure your breathing is unobstructed. Avoid slouching on a couch or lying in bed. Because we pray *in a body, not just in a mind*, posture matters in prayer far more than most people realize. I prefer to sit cross-legged on the floor, on a little cushion. You could also stand, kneel, or sit upright on a good chair, or if you prefer movement, go for a walk.
3. Begin by just breathing — take at least three long, slow, deep breaths. Don’t worry about thinking or praying yet; just be there, in God’s presence, receiving the gift of his life and love.

4. Open your heart and mind to God in a prayer of invocation, such as ...

- “Our Father, who is in heaven ...”
- “From the rising of the sun, to the place where it goes down, the name of the LORD is to be praised.”
- “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”
- “Come, Holy Spirit.”
- “God, here I am.”
- “Thank you.”

5. Direct the inner gaze of your heart to the person of Jesus; as Hebrews says, “Fixing your eyes on Jesus.²” Look upon him, who is already looking upon you, in love.

You may find it helpful to utilize your imagination, as inspired by the Holy Spirit, picturing the face of Jesus, or a biblical story or metaphor, such as Jesus shining in white on the Mount of Transfiguration³, or as the Good Shepherd⁴, ahead of you, or (in keeping with the imagery of Scripture) as liquid love and light pouring over and into your inner being from heaven. But take a moment to just connect to the person and love of Jesus flowing into the core of your heart, just as you are.

6. Then, offer him your love and your life. This can be as simple as repeating, “I love you, with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength.”

Now that your heart, mind, and body are attuned to God, spend time in communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, entering their inner life and sharing in their love.

Here's a few ideas for how to do that, depending on how much time you have.

If you only have a few minutes ...

1. Go to a place that is as quiet and distraction-free as possible, and begin with steps 1-6 above.
2. Once your heart, mind, and body are attuned to God, spend time in communion with the Trinity. Not sure how? Try one of these time-tested ideas that have been used by lovers of God for generations.
 - Pray a psalm.
 - Meditate on a passage from the Gospels.
 - Listen for any words from God for the day ahead, opening your heart and mind to his speaking voice.
 - “Consider the birds” — if you are proximate to birdsong, look at and listen to the birds, as Jesus commanded us to, and let their care-free worship of God minister to your heart. Join them in praise to God, letting your love flow upward to him.
 - Write out a list of gratitudes and offer them to God.

There's no "right" way to pray. Every morning, I just try to stay seated on my little mat until three things are true:

- I've "calmed and quieted my soul" before God and come to stillness;
 - I've *connected* to God — not just thought about him, or *at* him, but connected and communed with him; and
 - I've spent time listening for his voice, in Scripture and prayer.
3. When you're done, close in a prayer of gratitude and commit your day and life to God.

If you have a few hours ...

1. Go to a place that is as quiet and distraction-free as possible. Then, work through steps 1-6 from the "to begin" section.
2. You may want to take a short walk to clear your head and regulate your emotions before you begin.
3. Begin by praying a few psalms.
4. Then, meditate on a few passages from the Gospels and Scripture.
5. Then, spend time in "two-way journaling."

I learned this practice from my friend Strahan, a spiritual director from New Zealand. Part of this practice requires writing out God's words to you in the first person. If you're like me, that may feel uncomfortable at first, like you are making up God's voice. In truth, it's simply a written form of a listening prayer, which is the heart of solitude. And there's lots of evidence that writing out our thoughts and feelings has a cascade of good effects on our mind and body. Here's the basic flow:

Pray: Silence the voice of the enemy. Pray, "In the name of Jesus and by his atoning blood, I silence any and all voices of the evil one and ban you from this place and time." And then ask for the Holy Spirit to come and speak with you.

Write: Begin with this prompt: "God, thank you for . . ." and write out your gratuities to him on the page. Then, transition to: "God, I'm feeling . . ." and articulate your heart to God. (If this is hard for you, just offer up whatever you can.)

Listen: Open your heart to God's voice and *write what you hear in your mind on paper*. Put what you hear in quotes, and write it in the first person, just as you hear it in your mind. This will feel odd at first, but one of the primary ways God's voice comes is as spontaneous thoughts in our Spirit-indwelled mind and sanctified imagination. Write intuitively and quickly. Don't judge or analyze it. You can come back later and "test" what you wrote. For now, just keep your pen moving as spontaneous thoughts come.

Repeat: Go back and forth. After you hear a few sentences from God, write your response back to him. Then listen for any reply. If nothing comes, ask God follow-up questions. It can even be as

simple as, “God, is there anything else you want to say?” Quickly write whatever comes.

Test: Go back over your journal entry and test it against Scripture, the teachings of the Church, and your inner witness. Does it sound like something the Jesus of the New Testament would say? If you’re not sure, reach out to a trusted friend, mentor, or pastor and ask them to vet your journal entry.

6. You may want to spend some time reading spiritual or devotional literature, keeping your heart in a posture of openness and listening. I’ve put a list of recommendations at the bottom of this guide.
7. When you’re done, close in a prayer of gratitude and commit your day and life to God.

If you have a day ...

1. Find a place that is as quiet and distraction-free as possible. Ideally, *away* from your home and, if possible, proximate to natural beauty.
2. Leave your devices at home or in your car.
3. The night before, pack a small bag with anything you need, let your loved ones know you’ll be out of contact for a day, and go to bed as early as you can. Avoid screens, TV, and movies entirely; your mind begins to clear and your spirit calms before you go.
4. Get up as early as you can and go immediately to your place.

5. Before you begin, take a short walk to clear your head and regulate your emotions.
6. Follow the same instructions as in the “to begin” section — getting seated comfortably, breathing, directing your gaze at Jesus, inviting his Spirit to come, and offering yourself wholly to him.
7. From there, spend the day however you feel led.

The following schedule is just a rough frame. Make your own, but don't let it constrict you. Go with the flow of your heart. Let God lead you. Don't try to control the day. Let it be whatever it is.

7 A.M. — Get up, make yourself coffee (or tea), and drive to your quiet place for a retreat day.

8 A.M. — Start with a walk, then begin your day in prayer and two-way journaling (see above).

10 A.M. — Spiritual reading: scripture and/or devotional books. Keep your journal at your side. Whenever thoughts or ideas come that feel as if they are from the Spirit, write them down.

12 P.M. — Take another walk. Have lunch if you are hungry. Just be.

1 P.M. — Take a nap or rest.

2 P.M. — Spend more time listening for God's voice. You may want to continue two-way journaling or go for a long walk. Take your time. Be patient with the process.

3 P.M. — Begin to summarize what you sense God is saying to you, ideally in writing. Look for themes, key scriptures, and ideas or insights you sense are from God.

4 P.M. — Take a long prayer walk. Turn all you've heard from God into prayers of petition, intercession, and love.

5 P.M. — Return to your home and life with a renewed sense of gratitude, hope, and communion with God.

Two final reminders for your first day retreat: (1) Be patient. Let your body and central nervous system decompress. This usually takes much longer than we anticipate, especially if it's been a stressful season of life. Stay with the process. (2) Be grateful for whatever comes. You may clearly hear God's voice; you may not. You may feel closer to God, you may not. You may have overflowing joy, or pain may be what comes up in your heart; either is a gift. Resist the temptation to judge your experience as "good" or "bad." There's no "success" or "failure" in solitude. We're not responsible for outcomes; that's God's part. Just offer the time up to God and thank him for whatever comes.

If you have more than a day ...

1. Find a place *away from your home* to go and seek God. The more solitary and quiet and far removed from people and crowds and noise and hurry, the better. Look for a monastery or retreat center, or a cabin or Airbnb. Or if you have capacity, go solo-backpacking or solo-camping. Aim for a place outside of the city and surrounded by natural beauty.
2. Three days before you leave, begin to prepare your heart and body.

Avoid screens as much as you can, especially at night and first thing in the mornings. Sleep as much as you can. Refrain from any alcohol. And stay away from your television. If you *don't* taper off your normal dopamine addictions, much of your retreat will be spent “crashing” and calming a troubled mind, cutting short your experience of union with God.

3. Make whatever preparations necessary to leave your phone completely behind. Most monasteries or retreat centers have an emergency phone number you can give to your family and friends, just in case. If you need to stay in touch with anyone, you can make a plan to check your phone once a day, at a set time. Be creative, but do all you can to banish all devices.
4. Once you arrive, begin with rest. Sit for a while. Take a nap. Go to bed early. Let your body relax into God's loving presence. At the beginning of your retreat, I would put slightly more emphasis on bodily rest than on spiritually seeking God. That will come, but first you may need some time to decompress.
5. Spend your day(s) following your heart with God — listening to him as deeply as you can. Feel free to follow the day retreat schedule above.
6. Before you leave, write up a summary of God's invitations to you, and if possible, share it with a trusted friend upon your return to the world.
7. Let “re-entry” be what it is. Stay as peaceful as you can but accept whatever comes. There's no “success” or “failure,” only offering our surrender.

How to build retreat into your Rule of Life

How do you work time alone with God in the quiet into your ongoing life? Not just as a one-off, but as a *way*, a regular rhythm, a pattern of living? Life is chock full of cross-pressures and an endless queue of distractions and rolling waves of minor (and *not* so minor) crises. Jesus himself warned of “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things,” and how anxiety and money and pleasure all “choke the word, making it unfruitful.”⁵

How do we keep that from happening?

One time-tested way from church history is to adopt a Rule of Life⁶ and work the quiet into your Rule. Let it make its way onto your schedule, into your daily routine and seasonal rhythm.

Here’s my basic approach:

An hour a day, first thing in the morning, to center myself in God. This is my baseline. My daily bread. Without it, I feel lost. A full hour may be undoable for you, for any number of reasons (kids, work, stage of life, etc.); that's fine: just do what you can, not what you *can't*. But my mind is fairly distractible and intense, so I need at least an hour, partially just to give my brain time to come to stillness.

Then, a few hours every Sabbath. My kids are a bit older now (they're teenagers, they can sleep in professionally), so it's easy for me to get up early and pull away for a time, but even when they were really little, we would break the Sabbath into thirds: a third all together as a family doing fun, family-Sabbath stuff like walking to the park or reading Scripture or riding bikes or eating ice cream; a third for my wife to go out with a friend or take a nap, while I played with the kids; and a third for me to go into solitude to read and reflect and pray, while she stayed with our rambunctious younglings.

Then, a day a month. Not usually overnight, unless I can swing it. But just one day, usually a Friday, when work is a bit quieter, where I just get up early, drive about thirty minutes to a nearby retreat center, and spend the day on the grounds, alone with Jesus. Walking. Reading. Praying. Journaling. Mostly, just listening. It's living water for my soul.

A few times a year, I'll go overnight or, if I can, sneak away for two nights. I'll go camping by myself or hide away in a friend's guest house. This is especially helpful at key inflection points in my annual rhythm — in January as I begin the year, before or after a big work push, during vacation, etc.

Finally, I do one long solo trip a year. As I write this, I'm a few weeks away from my summer vacation, which, after quality time with my family,

will end with me driving about five hours north to a remote monastery in Big Sur for a four-day retreat. No phone, no devices, no books, just my Bible, journal, some hiking shoes, and my soul. What will happen? I have no clue. Maybe very little, but perhaps quite a lot.

This is *my* Rule, and I love it. I offer it as a reference point, but it's what works for *me*. The question is: What works for *you*? Do that. And remember, as with all spiritual disciplines, start small. Embrace patience. Be gentle with yourself. Remember: you're not in control, and everything is grace. Let God love you into a person of love.

Just offer him your heart, one quiet moment at a time.

Recommended Reading for Devotional Literature

Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ by Jeanne Guyon

Christian Perfection by François Fénelon

The Pursuit of God by A.W. Tozer

Meditations of the Heart by Howard Thurman

Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life by John Calvin

The Spiritual Life by Evelyn Underhill

A Testament of Devotion by Thomas R. Kelly

The Inner Voice of Love by Henri Nouwen

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Life Without Lack by Dallas Willard

Interior Freedom by Jacques Philippe

One Thousand Gifts by Ann Voskamp

Three Mile an Hour God by Kosuke Koyama

Prayer in the Night by Tish Harrison Warren

Selected Writings by Meister Eckhart

Abide In Christ by Andrew Murray

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral by Phillis Wheatley

Notes

1. Matthew 6:6
2. Hebrews 12:2
3. Matthew 17:2
4. John 10:11
5. Mark 4:19
6. To learn more about a Rule of Life, see my book *Practicing the Way*.



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.

He is a pastor and the founder of Practicing the Way, an organization working to see the renewal of apprenticeship to Jesus in our time.

The Comers live in the Santa Monica Mountains just outside Los Angeles.



About Practicing the Way

Practicing the Way helps churches form lifelong apprentices of Jesus. Our free resources are used by thousands of communities and pastors worldwide to help people be with Jesus, become like him, and do as he did. Our work is possible thanks to a group of monthly givers called The Circle and other generous givers.

Learn more at practicingtheway.org

The Solitude Practice

Over four sessions, begin practicing Jesus' pattern of retreat into the quiet, and discover how stillness and solitude opens us to encounters with God, the enemy, and our own souls — and ultimately forms us into people of growing love and peace.

Get started at practicingtheway.org/solitude