

# CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

From SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES HANDBOOK by ADELE AHLBERG CALHOUN

**WE OFTEN ASSOCIATE PRAYER** with the words we say. Contemplative prayer is a way of being with God that does not depend on giving the Holy One information about what we would like done in the world. Just as friends can enjoy one another without conversing, contemplative prayer is a way of being with God without wordiness. In contemplative prayer we rest and wait. Keeping our hearts alert and awake to the presence of God and his Word, we listen. Psalm 131 contains a wonderful image of a weaned child stilled and quieted in its mother's arms. A weaned child isn't looking to nurse. A weaned child comes to the mother for love and communion. The psalmist writes: "I have stilled and quieted my soul; / like a weaned child with its mother, / like a weaned child is my soul within me."

In contemplative prayer we rest in God, depending on him to initiate communion and communication. We don't ask for things, we simply open ourselves to the Trinity, trusting we will be received into restful arms. It can be helpful to use the imagination to put yourself in a receptive frame of mind. Use a Scriptural image. Imagine you are a weaned child sitting in your mother's lap. Lean your head against her and rest. Or imagine that the good Shepherd has led you beside the still waters (Psalm 23). Lie down and rest there with God.

Contemplative prayer requires patience, but it is not the heavy work that intercession can sometimes be. It can even be light, playful, tender and joyful. In a world given to activity and work, contemplative prayer is a way we join God in a place of divine rest and love.

Contemplative prayer is a response to God's invitation to "abide in Christ." In Colossians 1:26-27, Paul writes of (1) the saving gospel to those without Christ, and (2) the "mystery of the gospel" to the saints, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Contemplative prayer puts us in a place to become more receptive to the mystery of the gospel, "Christ in you." Contemplative prayer is a container discipline that includes a number of ways of being with Jesus in prayer: centering prayer, prayer of recollection, breath prayer and labyrinth prayer. Contemplative prayer need not be a mystical experience; it is far more likely to be a restful experience of Christ in me.

Life makes it evident that what we contemplate shapes us. Saints down through the ages have trusted that contemplating the truth, beauty and goodness of the Trinity could ultimately shape and change their souls. The interior transformation that the saints call "divine union" is a fruit of this contemplation.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Is your prayer mostly a one-sided monologue with God? Do your prayers tend to dictate God what you would like to see happen? Are your prayers a response to God's initiative in your life? What does this tell you about your understanding of prayer?
- What does it mean to remain in Christ (John 15:4)?
- How would you describe the "mystery" of "Christ in you" that Paul speaks of in Colossians 1:27?
- Do you feel that being in the presence of God is not the same thing as prayer? Does it seem like wasting time?

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- What does God think of you wasting time with him?

## SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Settle into a time of quietness with God (if it is hard for you to sit still in God's presence, go for a walk). Say to God, "Here I am. I am with you." Be with God. Welcome him with open arms. Be in the moment without controlling or influencing it. Give God the gift of your love and presence. Do not strive. There is nothing to achieve. Be with God in loving attentiveness. Leave his presence gently when you sense you must go.
2. One way to quiet our minds is to quiet our bodies. Spend five minutes intentionally relaxing your body and breathing deeply. Afterward, spend five minutes noticing where your mind wants to go. Offer your noticing to God. Then let go and open yourself to God's love. Be receptive to a prayer God may be giving you to say. (Remember, contemplative prayer is more receptive than active.) End your prayer by breathing in God's love. Go with the awareness that your every breath is God's gift.
3. Light a candle and become quiet before the creator of light. Allow the candlelight to center your heart in the Light of the world. Offer yourself and all your darkness to Jesus. Remain in his light. Be comforted; all the darkness in the world cannot put out the light of one match. How much greater is the Light in you.
4. *Sacred word.* Choose a prayer word as the symbol of your desire to let Jesus' action and presence form you. The word could reflect a deep desire of your heart (e.g., love, grace, peace), or the word might be a name or title of God (e.g., Jesus, great Shepherd, Counselor, Healer of my soul, Defender). Become still and offer yourself and your love to God. Let this word or phrase draw you into the presence of Christ. When you are distracted, return gently to your word and to the Lord. At the end of the prayer, remain still for several minutes. Throughout your day return to your word and remind the Lord of your love for him.

## RESOURCES ON CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

*Armchair Mystic: Easing into Contemplative Prayer* by Mark Thibodeaux *The Awakened Heart* by Gerald May *The Interior Castle* by Teresa of Ávila *When the Soul Listens: Finding Rest and Direction in Contemplative Prayer* by Jan Johnson

*"We tend to think of prayer as something we do in order to produce the results we believe are needed or, rather, to get God to produce the results.... As a result, our prayer tends to be a shopping list of things to be accomplished, an attempt to manipulate the symptoms of our lives without really entering into a deep, vital, transforming relationship with God."*

M. ROBERT MULHOLLAND