

When the Church Isn't Gathered: Staying Connected to the Father

It has been 47 days since I filled my car up with gas. And I still have half a tank! During these days of working from home and isolating we are simply not driving. And as a result, it's not hard to keep my fuel tank full. I'm guessing that many of you are having the same experience.

Well, there is another tank that this pandemic is having the opposite effect upon for some and that is our spiritual tank. For some of us, this pandemic has been disruptive to our spiritual practices. Our schedules have been rearranged. Space and time to connect with God has become different or harder. And then you add the various stressors that some of us are facing during this time and it all adds up to depletion.

And for many, even though we can still gather online, it has been disruptive to our spiritual lives that we cannot gather in the same room for worship. There is something missed in not being together. The renewal in our spirits when we join our voices to sing to God. The words of encouragement in the hallways and even prayers that are prayed for each other. There is a reason that the writer of Hebrews tells us not to forsake gathering together (10:24-25). It is part of how we keep our spiritual tanks full.

How is your spiritual tank this morning? How is your connection to Jesus?

Some of you are doing fine. In the midst of all of this craziness you are seeking God like never before. We heard that from a number of you in the little survey we asked you to fill out last week. But others would say that you are struggling at some level - that your spiritual tank is depleted.

Doug Fields in his little book, *Refuel*, that I referenced a few days ago in a Daily Encouragement on Facebook, lists some possible warning signs that might indicate our spiritual tanks are empty:

- I'm more selfish with my time
- I'm impatient
- I lack compassion for those who are hurting
- I'm more vulnerable to temptation
- I'm short with people
- I'm disobedient
- I feel distant from God
- I'm cynical
- I find it more difficult to make good decisions
- My insecurities are more prevalent
- I'm critical – in speech as well as in thought

And of course, that is just a partial list. Like me, you probably have a few other things you'd add to that list when your spiritual tank is running low, right?

And so the question I want to consider today is how do we stay connected to Jesus when the church isn't gathered. How can we stay connect to the source of life in such disruptive times?

This morning I want to look at some examples from Jesus' life that illustrate how he maintained his connection to the Father. Obviously, time doesn't allow us to consider every passage, but I think these will give us a good picture. And so let's look at . . .

I. Jesus' Example of Staying Connected to the Father

Example One (Mark 1:32-35)

Early in Jesus ministry we read this account in Mark 1 (cr. Luke 4:42)

³² That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered together at the door. ³⁴ And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

This was an intense night! The "whole city was gathered." Jesus healed many people. He cast out demons. All this started at sundown and so it was likely a late night. Who could have blamed Jesus if he slept in a bit? But what did Jesus do the next morning?

³⁵ And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

Jesus rose very early. It was still dark. And he goes out to a desolate place where he can pray. And there He met with the Father. When the disciples come and find him, they let him know that everyone back in the city was looking for Jesus. Of course they were! They wanted more of what Jesus could do for them. But Jesus, staying well connected to the Father, understands that he needs to move on to other towns and so he did (v. 38).

Example Two (Luke 5:15-16)

This too happened early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus heals a leper and we read this in Luke 5:15-16:

¹⁵ But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.

Jesus' fame is growing. And as a result, greater and greater crowds are coming to hear him and to be healed by him. And in the midst of all of this we read this:

¹⁶ But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

The NASB says that he would “often” slip away. Growing fame. Powerful ministry. People being helped. But the pattern of Jesus’ life that the gospel writer wants us to understand is that Jesus would often slip away to desolate places to pray. He stayed connected to the Father by maintaining this rhythm even in the busiest of times.

Example Three (Mark 6:45-47)

In Mark 6, there is a lot going on in Jesus’ life. He is rejected in his hometown. He sends out the 12 in ministry teams for the first time to preach and to heal. During this time Jesus finds out that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by King Herod. It is an intense time. In verse 30 we are told that the disciples return to Jesus from their season of ministry and report all that they had done and taught. And then in verse 31 we read this:

³¹ And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.

I love that Jesus says this don’t you? Getting away for rest. So, they head off for some down time. They take a boat to the other side of the lake to get away from the crowds. But here’s what happens:

³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.

Imagine you are nearing your condo at the beach or your cabin in the mountains so ready for a little down time, and as you pull around the final turn you find a crowd of people there who want you to meet their needs. How do you feel? I know how I’d feel. Frustrated. Angry. But not Jesus. What rose up out of Jesus’ heart was *compassion*. His spiritual tank is full; his connection to the Father is so close, he doesn’t get angry. He feels compassion. And he begins to teach them (v. 34) and heal their sick (Matt. 14:14). And then later he will feed that 5000.

I’m so struck by Jesus’ emotional response, because our emotional responses often reveal what is going on in our hearts. His spiritual tank was clearly not empty; it was so full that even in this situation what comes out of his heart is compassion.

Now, at the end of this day we read this:

⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

At the end of this long, intense day that was supposed to be a day of rest, Jesus gets alone on a mountain to pray.

Now, there are other passages we could look. But these three examples let us make a couple of simple observations from Jesus' life.

II. Observations from Jesus' Life

First, **Jesus' regular practice was to get away to be with the Father.** He would *often slip away*. Jesus would get away from the crowds to spend time with the Father. It was in these times that Jesus maintained his vital connection to the Father. This was his regular practice. And if Jesus needed this kind of time, how much more do we?

Second, **Jesus was able to seek God amid busyness, disruption and demands.** I can't imagine any of us who experience a busier or more disruptive life than Jesus did. He didn't have a home. At times he was so busy teaching and healing that they didn't have time to eat. Crowds were constantly seeking something from Him. He faced constant opposition from the religious leaders and intense spiritual battle.

Jesus' life was busy and full of disruption and demands. And yet, He was able to stay connected to the Father. He would rise early or stay up late. He would go out to a desolate place or to the mountain. He did whatever he needed to find these times with the Father. And because of this none of the warning signs of a depleted heart were ever manifested in Jesus' life. In fact, it was just the opposite. He was full of love and compassion and kindness and grace.

Jesus is our model. And so, I want us think about what it might look like for us to make it our regular practice to get away to be with the Father even amid busyness, disruption and demands.

Application: The first thing I'd encourage you to do is to **set aside some intentional time to evaluate and plan.** For most of us this pandemic swept into our lives like a storm turning everything upside down. And we've spent the past 6 or 7 weeks just trying to navigate all the disruption. Working from home. Kids schooling from home. Isolation. Not gathering as a church. For many this has disrupted our spiritual practices as well and so there is a need to set aside some time to evaluate and plan for how you are going to seek God in this season.

As you do this, I'd encourage you to **evaluate the state of your heart.** Maybe your spiritual tank is full. You are doing well and there is little need to change your practice. That's fantastic! But it may be that your heart is empty or trending that way and you need to make some adjustments.

How is your heart? Do you know?

Ask yourself some questions like:

- How am I doing . . . really (spiritually, relationally, emotionally)?

- Is my relationship with God growing more or less intimate during this time?
- Am I spending unhurried time with God?
- Has technology been affecting my ability to be quiet and focus on God?
- How are the people closest to me experiencing me?
- Am I becoming a more loving person?

These kinds of questions are not focused on how many times you read your Bible in a week, but rather on the condition of your heart and that is what is important.

Now, in doing this some of you will be encouraged, because you are connecting to Jesus in life-giving ways. Thank God for that. But **if you see ugly things in your heart, be kind to yourself.** For some of us, as we think about our true condition, we realize that we are not exhibiting the love and compassion and grace that Jesus did. Sometimes we see ugly stuff. COVID-19 didn't cause the ugly stuff that we see in our hearts; rather the stress and disruption of this time has simply revealed what was already there. And seeing the truth about these things is a good thing. It is the first step to growth. And so be kind to yourself knowing that God wants to use this time of stress to do a good work in you.

Before I go on, I want to make one specific point about mental health during this time. It may be that this time of social distancing, and isolation, and all of the unknowns about the future have created fear and anxiety in your heart and mind and you are really struggling with your mental health. You may be dealing with depression. I want you to know that you are not alone. There is help. I want you to know that I think it is important for you to seek God through reading the Bible and praying, but you might need to reach out for some extra help as well. Please do that. You can use the online connection card to communicate with us. You can use the help@faithmanhattan.org email. You can call the church office and we will help you find the help that you need. At least call a friend.

Okay, so, intentionally take some time to evaluate and plan, and as you do **think about how you can follow Jesus' model** of staying connected with the Father. What must you do to keep your spiritual tank full? Think about the "when", the "where", and the "what" of how you will seek God.

When can you make space to focus on God? Do you need to get up a little earlier? Or maybe stay up a little later. Maybe you will decide that what you need to do is to go to bed earlier so you can get up earlier and have some time before that first Zoom meeting or class.

Where can you go? Jesus went out to desolate places. He went up the mountain. Where can you go that would help you find quietness and the ability to focus on God?

And then **what** will you actually do in this time? Reading God's Word and prayer are so vital in connecting to God. Make a plan for these things. In addition to these two core disciplines are there any other spiritual disciplines like fasting or serving or something else that would be helpful for you in this season?

Here's a great question to ask as you think about what you will do: *What one thing, if done regularly, would make a world of difference in my relationship with God?*

The goal is not to come up with 10 things that you need to start doing, but rather the one or two practices that you can pursue that would really make all the difference spiritually. For some it might be a commitment to read the Bible daily. Maybe it is writing in a journal a couple of times a week. For others it might be taking 5 minutes every morning to just sit quietly and listen to God. If you are married and have kids maybe you could plan to trade off days where one of your watches the kids while the other gets some time with Jesus and then the next day it is the other's turn.

It may be that the "what" is not something that needs to be added, but something that needs to be stopped. Maybe you need to unplug from the constant news cycle. Or maybe you decide that though watching some TV is fun the amount needs to be cut back because it is sucking the life out of you.

A couple of weeks ago I realized that I needed to do exactly what I'm encouraging you to do this morning. The disruption of COVID-19 had affected my heart. I've experienced stress and anxiety at times. I've paid way too much attention to the news. And because I'm working from home the place where I used to have my quiet time is now my work desk as well. Without realizing it all of this had affected me. I wasn't connecting to Jesus like I needed to.

And so last week, I took some time to simply think about the question, "How am I going to seek God during this time?" I didn't make any huge changes, but one thing I did was decide that in the mornings the first thing I would do after getting up and showering was to go out for a prayer walk, early while it is still dark. I've done this for about a week now and I've found it so helpful. I hear the birds and remember that God is taking care of them. I see the stars and I'm reminded of the greatness of God. I'm able to quiet my heart out there. During this season it is a way to get out to a desolate place to meet with God. It is a little change, but it has been so helpful to me.

How about you? What do you need to do?

The final think I'd encourage you to do is to **write down what you plan to do**. If you can't articulate it in writing, it may not actually be clear what you plan to do. And if the plan isn't clear, it is pretty hard to do. And so write it down. Get clear about your plan.

Now, to help you with all of this, we've created a resource that lists 7 pages of ideas on how you can connect with God. This list will be attached to the end of sermon manuscript that you will find posted on our website tomorrow. We will also share a link in the FB comments as well.

RESOURCES FOR CONNECTING WITH GOD

Ideas for Personal Bible Reading, Study, Reflection

- Read one Psalm and one chapter of Proverbs each day
- Read a one chapter from one of the Gospels each day
- Read one Old Testament chapter and one New Testament chapter each day
- Read Scripture with your spouse or a friend
- We will be returning to the book of James sermon series starting on May 10. Read and reflect on the weekly passage as we teach through it.
- Download the weekly sermon study guide that is prepared for Life Groups each week. You can access it here: <https://www.faithmanhattan.org/listen>. Use that to go deeper in the passage that was preached.

Ideas to help you reflect and meditate on Scripture:

- Pray the Scriptures (e.g. the Lord's Prayer)
- Memorize Scripture
- Read out loud
- Read slowly
- Read over and over, emphasizing a different word each time (e.g. **THE** Lord is my shepherd; The **LORD** is my shepherd; The Lord **IS** my shepherd; etc.)
- Spend half of your Bible reading time in meditation
- Journal your thoughts
- Ask questions of the passage you are reading:
 - What do I learn about God/Jesus?
 - What do I learn about me/mankind?
 - Is there something to believe, confess, do, etc?
 - With whom can I share this?

Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual disciplines are things that a believer can do to help open his or her life up to God's transforming work. We do not do any of these to earn God's favor for we can never merit any favor on our own. These are simply ways that we cooperate with God's Spirit in growing in Christ.

The follow categorization is from Dallas Willard's book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

Disciplines of Abstinence - These are ways of denying ourselves something we want or need in order to make space to focus on and connect with God. They tend to counteract our sins of commission.

- **Solitude** - Withdrawing for a time from interacting with other people in order to be alone with God.
- **Silence** - Withdrawing from conversation, media, technology, etc. and entering into a quiet place in order to quiet our minds and whole self and attend to God's presence.
- **Fasting** - Going without food (or something else) for a period of time that we might focus more intently on God in prayer.
- **Frugality** - Refraining from using money or goods that are available to us in ways that merely gratify our desires for status or luxury.
- **Sabbath** - Doing no work to rest in God's person and provision; praying and playing with God and others.
- **Secrecy** - Not making our good deeds or qualities known to let God or others receive attention and to find our sufficiency in God alone.

Disciplines of Engagement - These are ways of engaging in certain activities to interact with God and others. They tend to counteract our sins of omission.

- **Study** - Focusing the mind upon the written and spoken Word of God.
- **Prayer** - Conversing and communicating with God.
- **Worship** - Dwelling upon and praising God's greatness, goodness, and beauty in words and music.
- **Celebration** - Intentionally enjoying the blessings of food, drink, art, friendship, etc. that we might be reminded of God's greatness and goodness to us.
- **Service** - Actively using our goods and strength to lovingly serve others.
- **Fellowship** - Engaging in the common activities of worship, study, prayer, celebration, service, etc. with other followers of Christ.
- **Confession** - Letting trusted others (maybe one friend or a group) know our deepest weaknesses and failures.

Books

Devotionals/Daily Office

- *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence*, Sarah Young
- *Daily Office: Remembering God's Presence throughout the Day*, Peter Scazzero
- *The Divine Hours: A Manual for Prayer*, Phyllis Tickel
- *A Diary of Private Prayer*, John Baillie

Books about the Practice of Spiritual Disciplines

- *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard
- *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster
- *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg
- *When the Soul Listens: Finding Rest and Direction in Contemplative Prayer*, Jan Johnson
- *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, Robert Mulholland
- *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*, Ruth Haley Barton
- *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, Dallas Willard
- *Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer*, Richard Foster

Poetry

- *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, Ted Loder

Others

- *Gratitude Journals* (<https://promptlyjournals.com/>)
- *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Peter Scazzero
- *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Timothy Keller
- *Shattered Dreams: God's Unexpected Path to Joy*, Larry Crabb
- *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery*, Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile

Apps

- **You Version Bible App** (<https://www.youversion.com/the-bible-app/>)

Read or listen to Scripture. Loaded with devotionals and Bible reading plans on many topics.

- **One Minute Pause** (<https://www.pauseapp.com/>)

Reminders throughout the day to pause and connect with Jesus. Each pause has a guided meditation.

- **PrayerMate** (<https://www.prayermate.net/>)

Organize your prayer life. Simulates prayer cards. Also, comes with many devotional guides. Even has one on how to pray during COVID-19.

Media

- **The Bible Project** (<https://bibleproject.com/>)

BibleProject is a nonprofit animation studio that produces short-form, fully animated [Bible videos](#) and other [Bible resources](#) to make the biblical story accessible to everyone, everywhere. They create 100% [free Bible videos](#), [podcasts](#), and [Bible resources](#) to help people experience the story of the Bible.

Poetry

We all have different ways we connect with God. Some people find that reading good poetry helps them reflect on what is going on in their heart. Here are a couple of examples.

The Guest House

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the
malice.
meet them at the door laughing and
invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

~ by Coleman Barks

Guide Me into an Unclenched Moment

*Gentle me,
Holy One,
Into an unclenched moment,
a deep breath,
a letting go
of heavy expectancies,
of shriveling anxieties,
of dead certainties,
that, softened by the silence,
surrounded by the light,
and open to the mystery,
I may be found by wholeness,
upheld by the unfathomable,
entranced by the simple,
and filled with the joy
that is you.*

~ Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace*

Ideas Shared by our NextGen Team for High Schoolers (good ideas for all!)

Connecting with God and Self:

- Spend one whole day without complaining . . . maybe make it everyday
- Go for a walk in nature
- Create something purely for God. Ideas: Painting, writing, dancing, sculpting, crocheting, baking, drawing, etc.
- Make a list of your passions. If you are not currently volunteering, figure out where you could plug in your passion to make a difference. It could have to wait until after COVID-19.
- Go to your favorite spot outdoors.
- Stay off your phone for one day.
- Pray specifically for one of our pastors: Steve, Brian, Sam, Chris, or Logan
- Write down 5 things you are thankful for.
- Pray directly related to COVID (these suggestions were given by Pastor Steve):
 - Decision-makers who affect large numbers of people
 - Pray for a vaccine and effective treatments
 - Pray for healthcare workers who are caring for infected people.
 - Pray for protection from the virus
 - Financial issues of people in your world
 - The supply chain, etc.

Connect with Others:

- Call a friend and pray for them for their specific needs over the phone
- Call or text someone one thing God has done for you or is doing for you
- Call/FaceTime/Skype an older relative. Ask them something about their life that you know makes them smile and then let them talk.
- Spend time with a sibling doing what they want to do. If they are unwilling, do something nice for them.
- Tell a joke and make someone laugh. You could do this via video as well.
- Write thoughtful sticky notes all over your house.
- Go on a walk with one of your family members
- Hug your parent/caregiver at least twice today
- Ask an older person you know about their past. Senior citizens have a lifetime of experience to reflect on. Listen and learn.
- Make a list of people you know in your family, in the church, in your workplace, in your neighborhood who might be struggling due to the coronavirus.
- Reach out by call to text to someone without many friends.
- Text/email someone who has helped you out, lifted you up, or inspired you
- Tell your parents your favorite childhood memories.

Encourage others:

- Pray for your friend and type it out in a text. Send it to them.
- Text one your small group leaders something encouraging
- Tweet at our public servants: fire fighters, police, doctors
- Text someone good morning or good night.
- Send a friend a video of what you actually think about them and how much you love them.
- Text someone their best qualities
- Text all your friends an encouraging scripture. If you need a suggestion 1 Peter 5:7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.
- Reach out to a doctor, nurse or other health professional. Let them know you are thinking about them and praying for them, even if it is just shooting them a text.
- Email an encouraging note or prayer to a missionary.