

KNOWING & DOING

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Waiting on the Lord While Unemployed

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The Doer's Lists

It seems as if I've always been a doer. Getting things done, reaching goals, and achieving results is a very real part of my wiring diagram. That "performance" paradigm caused me to always maintain four lists: office, home, hobbies, and church.

One day a significant change came to one of my lists. It was August 22, 1989. At 11:00 a.m. the president of our company walked into my office and quickly closed the door (always an ominous sign!). He matter-of-factly explained to me that not only was business soft (which I knew) but that the sudden loss of a significant government defense contract meant that the company had to make major cutbacks. "Nothing personal," he said, "but we can no longer afford a director of corporate development."

The Challenge

With unexpected time freed up, our family decided to take a week to visit family and friends in Grand Rapids, Michigan. On the way we stopped by to see longtime friends in Ann Arbor and East Lansing.

In Ann Arbor my first spiritual mentor, Bill, suggested that we get up early the next morning to pray over my new situation. Bill started that time by asking, "Tell me what you're thinking." I launched into a soliloquy of possibilities. When my monologue was over, I asked Bill for his reactions. His response surprised me.

Bill observed that he had been around businessmen for thirty years. To him they all seemed to be cut from the same cloth; wired to be doers preferring to function with plates overflowing with commitments and demands. Take one plate away, he observed, and they would quickly try to find a new plate and fill it up as fast as possible. "Doug," he went on to observe, "if I could desire one thing for you right now, it would be this, take sixty days and do nothing but sit at the feet of Jesus." Bill's observations caught me by surprise. I couldn't argue with it. But I wasn't convinced.

The Challenge Echo

Arriving in East Lansing the next day was "instant replay." Shortly after arriving, Mark, a longtime brother in Christ, said, "Tell me what you've been thinking." I responded by repeating my Ann Arbor monologue, to which Mark observed, "Doug, if I could push the buttons for you right now, I would love to have you spend the next two months just sitting at the foot of the Cross."

Hearing the same desire twice within twenty-four hours forced me to accept this as coming from the Lord. But there was a slight problem. I had no idea what it meant to "just be before the Lord"! What was my task? More important, what was the goal? And what would I *do*?

I knew I couldn't duck this sixty-days-before-the-Lord challenge; the leading from the Spirit was too clear. But how would it be perceived by others? I had been given four months of severance pay. Could I take half of that time and literally do "nothing"? Would my wife think I had lost my marbles? Would my friends and neighbors think I was being irresponsible? Would anyone at church even understand? More fundamentally, could I even do it?

A few weeks later, I was at an evening church service. It started with a trio of praise choruses. Unbeknownst to me, the third one, "This One Thing Is Needful," was going to speak to me. What did the prayer express as most needful? "That I sit at your feet and pour out my love."¹

There was the challenge again, this time in song. But it was what you *do* when you sit at the Master's feet that hit me hardest! "Pour out my love"? How do you do that? I can imagine how a woman might respond, the nature of the man-woman relationship being what it is. But a man "pouring out his love" to the Father and His Son—this might require significant breaking of new ground!

Can't Get Away from Doing Something!

At least now the objective was clear. But I still wasn't sure how to go about the process. Mark suggested using a workbook called *Space for God* that was subtitled *Study and Practice of Spirituality and Prayer*. That did seem like what I needed! Mark said the workbook was the culmination of the author having spent a year's sabbatical with Henri Nouwen at Yale studying a Reformed perspective on meditation and contemplation. So I ordered a copy. One week later it arrived. At least now I had something to do!

The thesis of *Space for God* is self-evident. Many of us are so busy "doing," becoming so preoccupied with the externals of our lives, that we neglect the interior. So absorbed with frenetic activity that we end up coasting through life with an "empty tank," while deluding ourselves that we are mostly full. And the one thing that is absolutely "needful" becomes the one thing that we (almost) never do—sitting at the feet of the Father and pouring out our love.

Creating New Space

Having no prior concept of what one does when sitting "at the foot of the Cross," I started with what I knew. I set aside several hours a day to read and study the Scriptures, as well as ponder spiritual and devotional books. After a couple of hours of meditating on the Scriptures, I would spend time in *Space for God*, taking a leisurely stroll through each of the pages exploring what meditating on God's Word and contemplating the Lord meant. I discovered it takes time for transformational truth apprehended by the mind to travel fifteen inches south to where it can (start to) marinate the heart.

Since the book contained many marvelous quotations from numerous classic devotional sources, I began to "follow the footnotes." This led to reading other devotional classics, discovering the Desert Fathers, the Russian Orthodox mystics, revisiting the Reformers, etc. Basically I tried to emulate "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:7).²

At first, setting aside that much time each day was not easy. My mind often wandered and "being still" was hard—at times seemingly impossible. But having at least gotten underway, I found the iceberg of habitual "doing" beginning to melt and the essential spiritual truths of "being" slowly beginning to sink in. The steady stream of "2 x 4s" filled with ideas and



truth that hit me over the head prompted me to document the many meaningful quotes I was encountering.

The Unemployment Journal

The urge to write was the catalyst to begin a new unemployment journal. Before long I not only felt the desire to journal but also the urge to create reflections, essays, poems, and prayer meditations. These became opportunities to respond to God in written worship. They served as a reminder of what was being revealed to me and allowed me to chronicle the spiritual discoveries that accompanied the ups and downs of the unemployment journey as well as the stops and starts of the job-search process. Little did I appreciate the role this journaling and writing would later play during future periods of unemployment. Here are some journal vignettes on *Remembering, Belonging, Beloved, and Dealing with Discouragement* from that “sabbatical” experience:



From “Remembering”

As part of trying to “be before the Lord,” I devoted hours each day to reading and pondering Scripture. One day I realized that a recurring central theme throughout the sweep of the Old Testament was “remember Me” (e.g., Exod. 13:3; Deut. 7:18, 8:2; 1 Chron. 16:12, 15; Pss. 77:11–12, 78:35, 137:6, 143:5–6). The Lord seems to be saying remember who I am, what I care about, and what I do (and have done) because of who I am. Unemployment offers much more time to look through the rearview mirror of your life to recount and remember the faithfulness of God. So I wrote:

Strong faith is built on constantly remembering both God’s nature and His deeds. Those revealed truths are crucial, for without faith rooted in retrospective fact, there is no prospective hope. Consequently, we need to become ever better historians of our own lives so as to see God continually at work within us and around us. As contemporary Israelites, we need to repeatedly recount how God has delivered, redeemed, sustained, and cared for us in the past Egypts, Red Seas, and deserts of our lives. —Always remember never to forget Him.

After weeks of doing my best to be before the Lord, I came to realize yet again that God is indeed sovereign over all things, including my present situation; that He deeply cares about me, I truly am His Beloved; and His ways (and timing) are not my ways. Those realizations manifested themselves in various ways at different times and began to change my perspective. Am I just unfortunate with my sudden job loss, or have I been truly blessed with a special sabbatical experience with the Lord? I embraced the latter!

From “Belonging”

It doesn’t take long to discover that being unemployed quickly changes the (perceived) nature of many of your relationships. It quickly becomes evident that where once you “belonged,” now you don’t. Suddenly there is no office to go to where someone is “expecting” you. How quickly your old department and work place seems more like a foreign land than a “home.” You go to a neighborhood function where most people talk about their jobs and careers, and you feel like a conversational misfit. Suddenly, it seems as if there are a myriad of ways that all deliver the same unsettling message—you just don’t “belong” like you used to. There is a very real sense in which self-esteem, feelings of rejec-

tion, and unworthiness accompany that realization. As a result, you can easily and profoundly feel very different and very much alone.

The need to “belong” is deeply impregnated in every human soul. Roots, family, and friends (and the desire for) are all indicators of our need to “belong.” But there is another level of “belonging” that no person or organization can ever fill. One of the positive outcomes of the unemployment experience (that is, if you are open to “seeing” it that way) is the opportunity to profoundly realize at our deepest levels of consciousness that “I belong to God” (Rom. 14:7–8). That ultimately we belong to a Person, not an organization. That we have a permanent “home” apart from any workplace, and that nothing can change that relationship one iota, certainly not unemployment.

That realization rekindled a renewed awareness that, not only did I, as a follower of Jesus Christ, belong to someone else, but I belonged to my heavenly Father, who also happened to be the sovereign Lord of all creation. And not only did I “belong,” but I am “known,” totally and completely, by my Father (Ps. 139:2–4).

In the midst of being unemployed, my mind began to be inspired anew, my heart began to again beat more intensely, and my soul began to stir again with joy.

From “Beloved beyond Belief”

At first blush, it strikes us as so implausible that we, as children of the King, are loved with the same perfect love that the Father has for His own Son. That we are His beloved and the apple of His eye (Ps. 17:8). It is a huge thought, maybe the most important thought of all. It is a thought that can never be revisited enough. C.S. Lewis underscores this point when he observed that the most important thing about a person is their understanding of how God sees them. Everything about a person’s life is shaped by that perception.



In taking a moment to ponder God’s perfect nature, it should dawn on us that this incredible reality has to be true! God’s perfection does not allow for degrees of love. The only issue is whether you are a child of His or not. And if you are His adopted child through Jesus Christ, then you are loved with all the fullness of His love. In Him there is no second-class love, no leftover love, or no occasional love permissible in God’s perfected nature. Think about that again! God’s extravagant love for me is no less than that which Jesus experiences. And God our Father, always the great Initiator, is constantly desirous of showing and expressing the reality of that love to me—in my heart, mind, and soul. That reality is foundational to any period of life, but especially when unemployed!

From “Dealing with Discouragement”

Discouragement is very real and frequent during the job-search process. Like loneliness and anxiety, discouragement can suddenly arrive on the scene day or night, in quiet or active moments, and often when you

least expect it. Sometimes it's understandable when it arrives. Other times it seems unrelated to where "you're at" mentally and emotionally. Sometimes it's like a gnawing feeling at the fringes of your consciousness; other times it can seem more like an ever-present cloud of gloom. One thing is certain; discouragement is definitely not something you deal with once and for all during the job-search journey. It was this "diverse" nature of discouragement that caused frequent journal entries, such as the following:

It may seem contradictory, but discouragement can be used by God for our benefit! It is one way He gets our attention. Discouragement can also be one of the ways God uses to protect us from heading in a direction that is not in our best interest. In Hosea 2 God says to the nation of Israel that He will "block her path" and "wall her in so that she cannot find her way" (v. 6) when she starts to "chase" (v. 7) the wrong things in life. The psalmist expresses the same idea in 139:5, "You hem me in behind and before." Discouragement can be used by God to "hem" and "wall" us in for our own best interests.

Discouragement can also be used by God to get us moving again, albeit in another direction. It can be the first stage of new growth "which yields its fruit in season" (Ps. 1:3). An old friend repeatedly says that "there are ditches on both sides of every road." We are people who so easily lose our sense of balance in life, constantly careening toward a ditch on one side or another! And when we are veering too close to a ditch in some aspect of our life, God can steer (restore) us back to life in the "balanced" middle by using discouragement to lead us back (to Himself). Seeing beneficial outcomes of discouragement in this way can free us up to "appreciate" the positive side of discouragement as we are reminded again of our need to look to Him for guidance, that is, "Lord, what are You trying to tell me?"

Back to Work

After eight months of this wonderful sabbatical with the Lord, I was offered a marketing position with a life science company. It was a bittersweet moment as I knew a very special time was ending. However, three years later I was suddenly unemployed again and one of my first thoughts was "is this *déjà vu* all over again?" A few days later, I woke up with this thought on my pillow: Spend more time with Me and write up the eight-month experience you had three years ago. So that is what I set out to do.

The Manuscript!

This time the sabbatical was seven months in duration. That allowed me to develop a manuscript with six chapters chronicling my first unemployment sabbatical experience, polish up those prayer meditations (*Contentment, Brokenness, Anxiety, Competition and the Kingdom, Solitude and Silence*) and the reflections I had drafted on aspects of the unemployment and job-search process (*Joseph's Career Ladder; Reacting Negatively to Networking; Dryness, Distance, and Waiting*), and assemble the book. I also reviewed my Unemployment Journal and the books I had read for appropriate quotes and thoughts that spoke to me during that time, "gems" I wanted to share with others.

Eventually I was able to sit down with the editor-in-chief of one of the largest Christian publishers and review the manuscript with him. After politely listening to what I had assembled, he gently informed me that the majority of Christian books are bought by women over 50 years of age, and no newly unemployed man is ever going to accept that kind of book as a "gift" from his wife. Thus, zero market potential! That was fine with me. I was obedient to the Call. Then it occurred to me, maybe there is a "remnant" out there (good biblical concept) who might benefit from this material.

So I created ten photo copies of that manuscript, titled *Waiting on the Lord: Spiritual and Emotional Reflections on Unemployment and the Job-Search Process*, and offered it as part of my lending library whenever I heard about someone being newly unemployed. Over the past twenty years, those manuscripts have been circulated to hundreds of unemployed people. And now I have the chance to share some of that experience with you.

Lasting Lesson

In this journey of faith, the way you perceive things—perspective—is crucial. Furthermore, the kind of glasses you wear will influence how your eyes choose to “see” things—as an unfortunate outcome (job loss, sudden illness) or an opportunity for a rich and sweet sabbatical time with the Lord. Will it be a time for panic or an opportunity to rediscover Shalom (Peace)? Is it a disappointing delay or a pause that refreshes? It is, after all, how you choose to view and experience the realities of life that matters. Not limited with the eyes of your mind (factually I know I am His beloved), but engaging the eyes of your heart (I’ve experienced the intimate reality of His love), because the eyes of faith are often the eyes of the heart. And for that to happen, the psalmist (37:7) prescribes “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him” no matter in which of life’s unexpected circumstances you suddenly find yourself.

Shalom, Shalom.



I am sure that God keeps no one waiting unless He sees that it is good for him to wait. When you do get into your room you will find that the long wait has done you some kind of good which you would not have had otherwise.

C.S. Lewis

Notes:

1. Kirk Dearman, *Maranatha Music Praise Chorus Book*.
2. Scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version*.

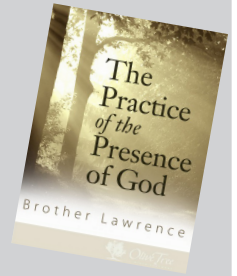


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RECOMMENDED READING

The Practice of the Presence of God, by Brother Lawrence
Publisher: Whitaker House; New Abridged edition
(June 1, 1982)

Brother Lawrence was a man of humble beginnings who discovered the greatest secret of living in the Kingdom of God here on earth. It is the art of “practicing the presence of God in one single act that does not end.” He often stated that it is God who paints Himself in the depths of our soul. We must merely open our hearts to receive Him and His loving presence. For nearly 300 years this unparalleled classic has given both blessing and instruction to those who can be content with nothing less than knowing God in all His majesty and feeling His loving presence throughout each simple day.



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