



A Time Away

It was alongside the hospital bed of a dying loved one that the extraordinary statements were made.

The speaker was a relatively young pastor of a small-town church in the Midwest, come to offer his best to the one lying in the bed, one of his parishioners. During the course of the bedside conversation the pastor mentioned that he was about to leave for his vacation, to sit on a porch and read mystery novels, to take a vacation from God. When asked how one does such a thing—how one does ‘take a vacation from God’—the pastor replied, “I don’t know, but I’m gonna try.”

Our standard vacation when I was a boy was for the family to go camping. Our exotic destination was most often Pine Lake, in Eldora, Iowa—less than an hour from home. Back in the Fifties, and early Sixties, this was *real* camping: we pitched a tent, slept on the ground in sleeping bags on air mattresses (one of which always seemed to leak), lit the darkness with a gas lantern, and cooked and ate all our meals outside.

These vacations were important times of relaxation—especially for my dad, who worked hard throughout the rest of the year to support his family. It was a time to remove himself, for even a little while, from the responsibilities of his job, to clear his lungs with fresh air, to lie back and listen to the nature that was so distant when he was at work.

Our packing for these trips included the standard shorts and swimsuits, t-shirts and jeans. But if we were to remain at Pine Lake over the weekend, we always included our Sunday best, for we never took a vacation from God. Come Sunday morning, we’d dress for the occasion, and pile into the car to attend Sunday School and worship services at the Baptist Church in Eldora.

At the time, of course, this eight-year-old boy was thinking “Aw, come on. What would it hurt? It’s just *one* Sunday—why do I have to get into that scratchy old white shirt?” But my parents were teaching me a valuable lesson: Sometimes it’s necessary to take a vacation from the things of this world, but it’s never necessary to take a vacation from God.

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A.W. Tozer

God formed us for His pleasure, and so formed us that we as well as He can in divine communion enjoy the sweet and mysterious mingling of kindred personalities. He meant us to see Him and live with Him and draw our life from His smile.

It seems a little odd that in His word God speaks of His relationship with earth-bound people in affectionate, even intimate terms, yet many of those same people look for ways to keep Him at arm's length. God speaks to us as a loving Father who cares deeply about our lives, yet many Christians want so little of Him to be there. But the Christian living at arm's length from the Father is as unnatural as the unbeliever seeking to know Him better.

People often use a vacation to break away from the steady, unrelenting rigors of their occupation—something to break the monotony, or bring physical or mental relief. People sometimes need a break from troublesome people, but God isn't troublesome. He's not a weight upon our shoulders; He's not someone who drags us down, but someone who lifts us up.

Psalm 103:13-17

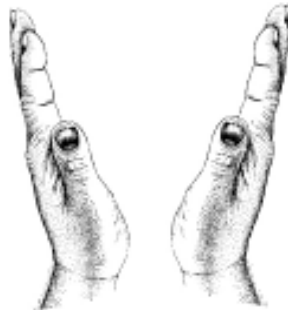
As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD'S love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children.



*Lord, I have shut the door,
Speak now the word
Which in the din and throng
Could not be heard;
Hushed now in my inner heart,
Whisper Thy will,
While I have come apart,
While all is still.*

*In this blest quietness
Clamorings cease;
Here in Thy presence dwells
Infinite peace;
Yonder, the strife and cry,
Yonder, the sin:
Lord, I have shut the door,
Thou art within!*

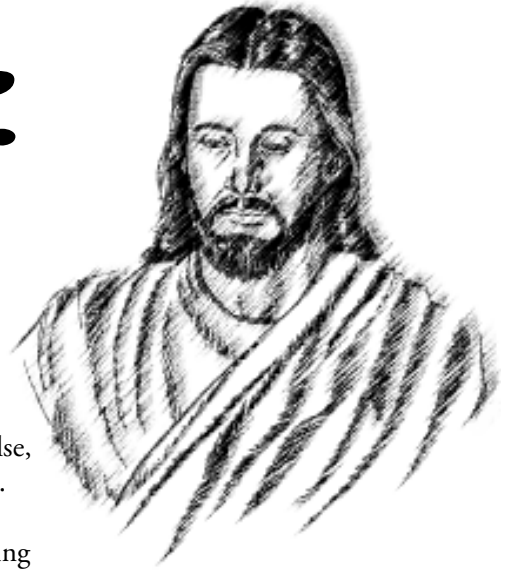
*Lord, I have shut the door,
Here do I bow;
Speak for my soul attent
Turns to Thee now.
Rebuke Thou what is vain,
Counsel my soul,
Thy holy will reveal,
My will control.*



*Lord, I have shut the door,
Strengthen my heart;
Yonder awaits the task—
I share a part.
Only through grace bestowed
May I be true;
Here, while alone with Thee,
My strength renew.*

William M. Runyan

Abba, Father



When Jesus “went on vacation,” He ran *to* God the Father, not away from Him.

Part of the burden for Christ in taking on the flesh of His brethren was that from time to time He, like anyone else, would need to take a break from the demands of His work. More than that, His deep soul was touched by the sorrow around Him—as well as the price some were paying by being associated with His ministry.

John the Baptist, Jesus’ relative, was being kept in King Herod’s prison because of his inconvenient proclamations regarding Herod’s family life. A licentious, weak-willed man, Herod was both fearful of and fascinated by this prophet who had taken such a keen interest in his morals. But, as a gift for His nubile stepdaughter during a birthday banquet he had thrown for himself, the king ordered John put to death.

Matthew 14:9-12

The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

The news hit
Jesus hard . . .

Matthew 14:13

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

Because He always placed the needs of others first, Jesus still ministered to the people who swarmed about Him. But at the first chance He sent His disciples off across the Sea of Galilee, then he sent the people back to their homes.

Jesus had had a pretty rough day; the physical and emotional demands on Him had surely left Him exhausted.

After comforting others, He now needed to be comforted Himself. After healing others, He needed His broken heart healed. After flowing so much life-giving energy into others, He now needed to have some of His own energy restored. So for a few hours Jesus took a break from the physical and emotional demands of ministry—and the break He needed was time spent *with* the Father.

When our bodies need rest from the demands of daily life; when our minds need clearing from the details and minutia of our jobs; when our hearts are breaking, and we need solace and healing, we will have all of these needs met at the feet of our heavenly Father.

Matthew 14:23a

After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

G. H. Knight

It was no exceptional thing for Jesus to withdraw Himself “into the wilderness to pray.” He was never for one moment of any day out of touch with God. He was speaking and listening to the Father all day long; and yet He, who was in such constant touch with God, felt the need, as well as the joy, of more prolonged and more quiet communion with Him . . . Most of the reasons that drive us to pray for strength and forgiveness could never have driven Him; and yet He needed prayer.

Jonathan Edwards

But this is all that I aim at by what has been said, to show that it is the nature of true grace, that however it loves Christian society in its place, yet it in a peculiar manner delights in retirement, and secret converse with God. So that if persons appear greatly engaged in social religion, and but little in the religion of the closet, and are often highly affected when with others, and but little moved when they have none but God and Christ to converse with, it looks very darkly upon their religion.

For many in the body of Christ, the only thing worse than being alone, is being alone with God. For them, the “communion of the saints” has taken priority over communion with God.

Our mortal composition—the aggregate of body, mind, heart, spirit—is like a fleshly tuning fork vibrating, from birth, at a certain pitch. That pitch, which may be different from one person to another, vibrates at a frequency in opposition to the crystalline pure, perfect pitch of God.

So there we are, vibrating away somewhere between G and G-sharp, and Christ comes along, sets His Spirit within this mortal mass of dissonance, and starts to nudge us up to A—A:440, perfectly in tune with Him. But our spirit is in discord with His. The Spirit vibrates smoothly at 440 MHz, a clean, resonating sound representing something to which everyone else can come into harmony. We try, but in our own efforts we keep screeching out *G-sharp! G-sharp! G-sharp!*

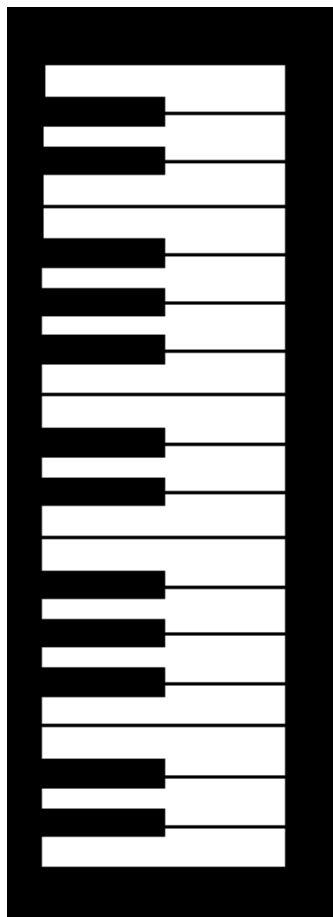
Ever compared the sound coming from a junior high orchestra to the sound of the New York Philharmonic? The difference is maturity, talent—and long hours of solitary woodshedding in the practice room. The ear-pleasing sound created by the Philharmonic does not begin in the collection of the whole, but in the solitary sweatshop of the tiny practice chamber. It is there that the individual musician works out the kinks, develops his technique, and gains a more intimate relationship with his instrument.

We will never get our discordant *G-sharp!* tuned to perfect A by staying in the concert hall. We must spend time in the practice room. We will never get our mortal tuning forks tuned to the perfect vibration of God’s indwelling Spirit by staying with the crowd in the church sanctuary. We must spend time alone with Him, listening and learning.

For some this will begin as an awkward, unnatural process; from birth they have been tuned to a different pitch. But for all it is necessary if we are to mature and grow into His likeness.

2 Cor. 3:16-18

But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.



Finding Our Rest

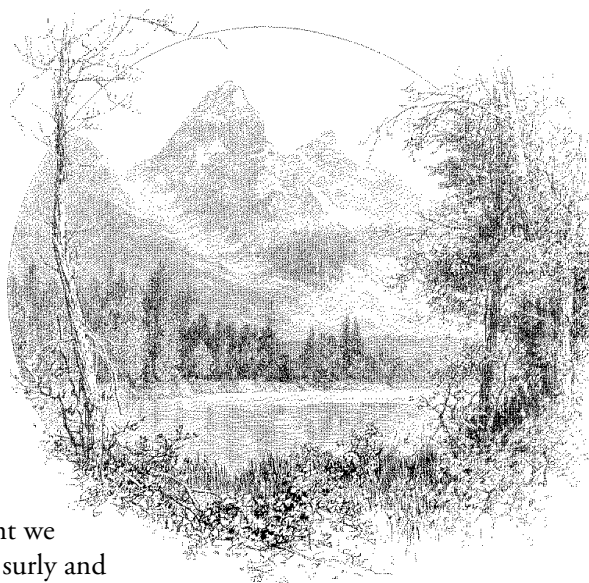
In many ways we've lost the spark of expectation that comes from a relationship with the living Christ. People seem to go on vacation for one of two reasons: to get away from the challenges of daily life and relax, or to break out of the mundane to discover something new and exciting. Somewhere along the way we've lost the expectation to have either of those pursuits realized with God.

Jesus Christ - Matthew 11:27-30

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Any time we try to find our rest in the things of this world the results will be varied. The last camping trip Linda and I had with my Mom and Dad was to Wyoming, to camp near the Grand Tetons. Everyone has seen pictures of these majestic pinnacles shooting skyward, and the beautiful, tranquil valley that blankets their feet. Images of forests, and meadows of wildflowers, painted before the backdrop of those granite spears angled toward the clouds, beckoned us from California and Iowa to meet at a campground in that valley.

The scenery was exquisite. The experience, however, was less than inspiring. From the moment we checked in the managers of the campground were surly and rude. In the dead of one night, cattle were herded through the campground, just a few feet from our tent. And, because it was near the end of the season, we were kept awake most of one night by the loud, drunken revelry coming from the employees of a nearby lodge.



In a recent interview with Sean Penn televised on the CBS program *60 Minutes*, after being regaled with a laundry list of his less than exemplary exploits—in and out of marriage, in and out of drugs, in and out of fistfights and jail—the actor was asked if he'll ever “get it together,” meaning have order in his life. He quickly answered in the negative, saying that this was not only *his* natural condition, but that his experience had shown that it was also the best that could be expected of anyone else in the world. In other words: “I’m totally screwed up—and the rest of the world is too.”

He's right. Here is the picture of life without Christ. Here is the picture of arrogant hopelessness, anger, contentiousness, strife and self-centered frustration that represents a world system spiraling away from God's grace. And try as we might, we will never find escape from that system anywhere *within* this world. True rest, true spirit-soothing peace will only be found in the arms of the one who already lives within.

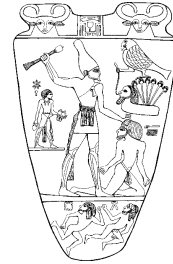
Jesus Christ - John 14:23

"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

Stepping Into His Presence

The second reason people go on vacation is to experience something different, something or someone not part of their typical daily life.

Since grade school days, I had nurtured a fascination with ancient Egypt. In my young adult years this fanciful preoccupation had grown into a scholarly pursuit. My bookshelves were lined with volumes such as *Ancient Egyptian Architectural Design, Civilization Before Greece and Rome*, as well as the more obscure, such as *Excavations at Deir el Bahri, 1911-1931*, and *Medinet Habu Studies, 1928/29*. Many hours were spent researching, poring over the dusty volumes. It was all very fascinating, but still too far removed from the places being described on those yellowed pages.



Then in the winter of 1980/81, Linda and I traveled to Africa, where we divided five weeks between Kenya and Egypt. Now, at last, instead of pursuing my passion for antiquities within books alone, I could actually walk through the rooms I had for so long walked through only in my mind. Instead of just imagining the grit of the sand beneath my feet, the dusty subterranean burial chambers, the ancient paintings glimpsed in dim light, I could actually experience it all firsthand. No longer were the fascinating sights only being described; now they were *real*.

Thomas A. Kempis

Christ will come to you offering His consolation, if you prepare a fit dwelling for Him in your heart, whose beauty and glory, wherein He takes delight, are all from within. His visits with the inward man are frequent, His communion sweet and full of consolation, His peace great, and His intimacy wonderful indeed. Therefore, faithful soul, prepare your heart for this Bridegroom that He may come and dwell within you; He Himself says: "If any one love Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and will make Our abode with him."

We live in a busy, scatterbrained world. Many people have determined that it is necessary for their lives to be filled to overflowing with appointments and meetings, schedules crammed full of one activity after another. Days begin with jogging, or an early round of golf; proceed to work, a business lunch, followed by overtime; and evenings are scheduled as tightly as the rest of the day. The pattern is set even in the young lives of our children: if there is an empty slot in the calendar, then it must be filled with some activity. Competing with school are soccer and Little League, piano and violin lessons. We spend our days rushing from one worthwhile pursuit to the next.

Sadly, this pattern has spilled over into our relationship with God—a relationship now defined by classes and committee meetings, seminars and Work Days, rehearsals for this and that, and church calendars so tightly packed with hustle and bustle as to put to shame the corporate calendar of IBM. So now religion and faith are thought of as *activities*, rather than as a condition of the heart.



Psalm 43:3-5

Send forth your light and your truth,
let them guide me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.
Then will I go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God.
Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

As a result, the Bible has become simply another encyclopedic volume of well-organized facts, spirituality is only an intriguing new paradigm, and God has become someone we just read about. We talk about the Bible, but do we actually etch its wisdom onto our heart? We speak of leading a Spirit-filled life, but is that really how we live and breathe and think? We spend hours upon hours talking *about* God, but have we taken the time to really know Him?

Just as my scholarly passions were not fully realized until I stepped onto the sands of Egypt, our bond with the living God will not be fully realized until we step out of the rat race of this world, and step into the quiet stillness of His sanctuary. Reading about God is not the same as actually spending time *with* Him.

Let's be clear: We've all been called to different lives of God's choosing. His children have been placed by Him into inner-city slums and mountain top communities. They've been assigned to upwardly mobile suburbs, as well as tiny country burghs. They've been given vast responsibilities over huge corporations, with employees numbered in the thousands, as well as responsibility over one small child on her way to kindergarten. But no matter our calling, if we've taken the name of His Son, then we owe *God* quality time. He desires an intimate, hands-on relationship with us. He wants each of us to step away from all the idle chatter *about* Him, to come away, sit at His feet, and listen to the gentle nourishment of His voice.

I fear that young pastor had it all wrong. It may be that he needed time away from the constant emotional pressures of ministering to his flock. It may be that he was physically in need of rest and relaxation, or a few days filling his mind with new and varied discoveries. It may be that he was feeling a little bit discordant, a little grumbly or short-tempered. But the last thing he needed was a "vacation from God." The Lord is the only one truly able to heal our wounds, to restore our energy and determination. When Jesus Himself was in need of relief from the pressures of ministry, He didn't pack his bag and go fishing with the boys, but went away to a quiet, lonely place, to spend quality time with His Father.

Hebrews 4:16

Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.

A.W. Tozer

Strive to get beyond mere pensive longing. Get Christ Himself in the focus of your heart and keep Him there continually. Only in Christ will you find complete fulfillment. Throw your heart open to the Holy Spirit and invite Him to fill you. He will do it. Let no one interpret the Scriptures for you in such a way as to rule out the Father's gift of the Spirit. Every man is as full of the Spirit as he wants to be. Make your heart a vacuum and the Spirit will rush in to fill it. Begin to practice the presence of God.

Gentle Reader:

If there is one predominate reason people give for canceling or deciding not to renew their Aspects subscription, it is that they haven't time to read it. In our ongoing effort to have this journal meet the needs of its readers, we've recently made a few changes that are reflected in this issue.

Aspects will now be published as a collection of shorter articles in support of a central theme. Most articles will be kept to one page in length. This will make it easier for the reader to consume each issue in smaller bites.

In addition, an editorial decision has been made to preface each quotation or Scripture passage with its reference, so that the reader knows the source at the outset. This (for those who are interested in knowing the source) will also reduce page-turning, since the number of endnotes will be reduced.

As always, your comments on the format or content of Aspects are always welcome.

David S. Lampel



Aspects

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