

Be Still

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In 2014, researchers from the University of Virginia and Harvard asked volunteers to sit alone in an empty room for 6 to 15 minutes. Participants were instructed to simply sit and think. No phone, no books, no magazines, no television, just an empty room. The goal was simply to stay entertained by their own thoughts.

The twist? A button in the room could be pressed at any time to give a mild but unpleasant shock. All the participants had experienced the shock before, all agreed it was negative, and some even agreed they would pay money not to experience the shock again.

Yet 67% of men and 25% of women chose to shock themselves rather than be alone with their own thoughts. The study concluded that most people find it difficult to entertain themselves, noting that "*the untutored mind does not enjoy being alone with itself.*" Most participants found physical pain preferable to boredom.

Scientists call the part of our brain that activates when we are bored the Default Mode Network. It is used for self-reflection, emotional processing, and mental exploration. And most of us don't like it.

The modern remedy for boredom is to reach for a smartphone to fill empty moments. We reach for our phones in line, at children's sporting events, stopped at traffic lights, and during commercial breaks. At the merest hint that we're going to be alone with our own thoughts, we try to cut off the boredom before it starts.

Americans pick up their phone between 100 and 200 times a day. Most people check something on their phone within ten minutes of waking up. We've invented the perfect device to eliminate boredom and avoid self-reflection, emotional processing, and mental exploration.

But studies show that boredom is good for us! Boredom is associated with creativity and altruism. Bored brains start planning for the future. And boredom is essential for goal setting and long-term planning.

And this is what we find in Scripture. The Bible speaks to us on the virtue of being still, waiting, meditating, finding desolate places, taking a break, and finding thinking time.

When David was in the Wilderness of Judea, he wrote, "*when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night*" (**Psalms 63:6**). David was awake at night and thinking of the Lord. Either he couldn't sleep, or he was intentionally staying awake to think and to meditate on the Lord.

The life of a shepherd comes with long periods of inactivity. From David's writing, we get a sense that he used this time to think on the Lord. In **Psalms 19**, "*the heavens declare the glory of God.*" In **Psalms 8**, "*when I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers.*" In **Psalms 4**, "*ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.*"

We read that Jesus often withdrew to a desolate place. The benefit of a desolate place is the lack of distractions. Jesus actively sought opportunities to be alone with his own thoughts. "*But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray*" (**Luke 5:16**). Create a desolate place for yourself by putting your phone in the other room so you can spend time reading, praying, or meditating.

Our connected culture has given us the benefit and the curse of taking the world with us everywhere. We walk in the park with headphones, browse the web on airplanes, take laptops into coffee shops, and use satellite internet to stay connected when hunting and fishing. Disconnect for a bit and enjoy a desolate place.

The worst part about trying to avoid boredom by distracting ourselves is that it doesn't work. Constantly pulling out a phone to eliminate boredom decreases our tolerance for boredom. This makes previously interesting tasks feel boring by comparison, which drives us back to the phone.

From the journal *Addictive Behaviors*: “When college students feel unfocused, they often reach for their phones for relief, which actually tends to leave them feeling even more detached the following day. These findings suggest that breaking this loop requires actively replacing screen time with meaningful offline activities.”

A summary from the Cleveland Clinic concludes that digital Sabbaths (putting the phone away for one day a week) are linked to deeper thinking, better sleep, better mental health, and stronger relationships.

The psalmist writes, “*Be still, and know that I am God*” (**Psalm 46:10**). The Hebrew word here means to relax your grip. It means to put down whatever is in your hand, to relax, to stop. It means not doing anything. The stillness is first, and then we know God.

It's possible that Satan is encouraging distraction culture because he knows that we need stillness to know God. If we keep distracting ourselves, trying to eliminate any hint of boredom, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to be still and know God.

Find a way to spend time being still and meditating on the Lord. Make a desolate place for yourself, free from distractions, and think about the Lord like David did when he was working as a shepherd.

The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, To the soul who seeks Him. 26 It is good that one should hope and wait quietly For the salvation of the Lord. (Lamentations 3:25-26).