

JOURNEY INTO
SILENCE

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH
CONTEMPLATION, WONDER, AND WORSHIP



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WHITAKER
HOUSE

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Photos of the Abbey of Gethsemani and statues by Br. Paul Quenon. Photo of white tree by Chaim Bentorah.

JOURNEY INTO SILENCE:

Transformation Through Contemplation, Wonder, and Worship

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“Be still, and know that I am God.”
—Psalm 46:10



CONTENTS

Preface: Entering a World of Contemplation, Wonder, and Worship 11
Author’s Note: A Unique Approach to Silent Retreats 15

PART ONE: CALLED TO SILENCE

Prologue: The Silent Speaking of God 21

1. Rest 24
2. Correction 28
3. Purging Away the Dross..... 31
4. The Mighty Tree...and the Things That Last 33
5. Trembling with Sorrow 34
6. Give Thanks to the Lord 36
7. The Calvary Road..... 38
8. Still Waters 41
9. Reflections on Clouds 42
10. A Clean Heart 44
11. Innermost Heart 46
12. An Empty Heart 49
13. In the Wilderness..... 52
14. Preparing Our Heart..... 54
15. A Handful of Quietness..... 57
16. In His Likeness..... 59
17. Still Shining Brightly..... 61

18. Our Spirit Is Listening	63
19. A Birthday <i>Devek</i>	66
20. Worship.....	68
21. God’s Delight and Desire	71
22. Our Heart’s Desire.....	74

PART TWO: LESSONS FROM CREATION

Prologue: Learning from God’s Master Teachers	79
23. You Are Never Lost	83
24. Five Smooth Stones	87
25. In the Cool of the Day	91
26. Mountains and Streams	95
27. Enjoy the Moment.....	98
28. Healing for a Sick Heart	102
29. Unspeakable Joy	106
30. The Joy of Hospitality.....	109
31. Surprises at the Café.....	113
32. Ooh and Aah	116
33. “You’re a Better Man, Gunga Din”	120
34. There Is a River.....	123

PART THREE: NEW SPIRITUAL DEPTHS

Prologue: A Renewed Relationship with God	129
35. Train Up.....	133
36. No Diversions	137
37. The Least	141
38. Jesus Wept.....	144
39. Ask	147
40. The Weeping Tree.....	150

41. The World of Silence	153
42. Attachment	156
43. Dance to the Lord	159
44. Delight	162
45. Green Pastures	165
46. Prayer	168
47. Rocks Cry Out.....	172
48. All His Heart	174
49. Who Is the King of Glory?	177
50. The Cloud.....	181
51. God’s Heart	185
52. Hollowed Out.....	188
53. Beseech	191
54. Upright	195
55. Heart of Compassion.....	198
Epilogue: God Is Always with Us	204
Exploring the World of Silence	208
Index of Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic Terms.....	211
About the Author	223

PREFACE

ENTERING A WORLD OF CONTEMPLATION, WONDER, AND WORSHIP

Many years ago, when I was teaching Hebrew at World Harvest Bible College, I met a Catholic priest who was passing through South Bend, Indiana, to attend a retreat sponsored by Notre Dame University. As a good evangelical Christian, I asked who the retreat speakers would be and what workshops were planned. He looked at me rather confused and said, “This is a silent retreat.” He went on to explain that he was going to stay in a cabin in the woods and spend one full week living in complete solitude, having no interaction with anyone except God and His creation. He would focus on communing with God as he fasted, prayed, and studied the Bible. For seven days, 24/7, he would be alone with the Lord in silence.

The priest’s comments fascinated me because I had previously heard many rabbis talk about the beauty of silence. In fact, one rabbi told me that in silence, you can hear the world weep. The rabbis had indicated that when we take time to be quiet, we connect with God and with people who are hurting in a way we would never do otherwise.

Through these contacts, the concept of taking a silent retreat myself began to form in my mind. Another major thread contributing to my interest in silent retreats came from my study of the Scriptures, where I found that many of the great men of God, such as Moses, Elijah, David, John the Baptist, and Jesus Himself, spent time in solitude, communing with the Lord and receiving spiritual strength. Although silence is practiced in various forms, and is applied by people of different world religions, it is deeply rooted in the Bible. But while I saw the exercise of solitude incorporated within Judaism and Catholicism, I found no real avenues within my own Protestant evangelical world for those who wished to spend some time in

silence in order to devote themselves to listening to God, learning from Him, and growing spiritually.

In Protestant Christianity, we do hold various types of retreats, but these are normally filled with speakers and fellowship, and silence is not often encouraged. Similarly, our conferences and conventions are usually crowded and noisy, with little opportunity for attendees to go off alone and meditate on God and the Scriptures. Yet C. S. Lewis expressed that one of the devil's greatest tools is noise—he hates silence, because in silence you start to think, and when you think, God begins to reveal Himself to you.

Still, I think the longing for silence seems to be embedded in us as Christians, because I do find little hints of it within evangelical churches, even though it is somewhat downplayed. We call it “getting ourselves in the mood for worship,” “moments of meditation,” or “having our morning quiet time.” I have even experienced a movement called “soaking.” I visited a Canadian church where soaking had its origins, and I found people lying on the floor with their eyes closed, some quietly praying, some with uplifted hands, and some apparently sleeping or caught up in the spiritual realm. Each one seemed to be longing for intimacy with God and seeking silence before Him.

I think all believers in Jesus Christ who have a relationship with a personal God will sense a yearning to spend uninterrupted time with the Lord—to get to know Him, to experience His presence, and to see His glory. Regardless of whether we attend a denominational or nondenominational church, we have a hunger for deep fellowship with Him.

And that is how it was—and is—for me. For many years after I began to note the practice of solitude in the Bible and encountered the Catholic priest en route to his silent retreat, the idea of spending extended time in silence kept coming back to me and filling my thoughts, until I realized God was calling me to do the same thing. I searched the Internet and found the Abbey of Gethsemani, a monastery outside Louisville, Kentucky, that was open to hosting individuals for weeklong silent retreats. I contacted them, and even though I was not Catholic, they welcomed me to come and stay for a retreat of silence among the Trappist monks who devote themselves to solitude and contemplative prayer. It was a transformational experience.

The following year, I rented a small cabin in the Catskill Mountains of New York and spent a week in silence again. The third year, I felt the call of God to return to the abbey for another week of solitude. And I plan to continue to go on silent retreats every year.

My journeys to the Abbey of Gethsemani and to the Catskills were deliberate acts of setting aside focused time to seek God. I was putting myself in a situation where I would have no distractions, nothing else to demand my attention, for an extended period of time. Like Moses, I sought only the glory of God so I could know Him better. (See Exodus 33:18.)

Living in silence tends to mimic fasting. By the third day, the supernatural is apt to become more natural than the natural. God becomes so real during a time of solitude that you weep out of pure joy as you are caught up in His presence. The depths of God's heart of compassion open up to you as never before. It becomes both a spiritual and an emotional journey that brings healing, release, and renewed ministry to others.

Throughout my silent retreats, I kept journals of my ongoing journey into silence. Writing a journal is my way of meditation. In keeping with my daily practice, I wrote Hebrew word study devotionals of the Scripture passages that God led me to. As a Hebrew teacher with a knowledge of ancient languages and Jewish literature, I was able to peer into the very depths of the words I studied. As my journey into silence progressed, so did the reach of my understanding of each word.

After I returned from these retreats, whenever I shared my experiences with others, it seemed as if a light would click on inside them, and you could tell they were thinking something such as, *What would it be like to spend one week in an environment where I did nothing but live a contemplative life with no contact with the outside world? Just me and God, with nothing to distract me?* They had never before considered such a thing. From time to time, they might have participated in the discipline of spending up to a full week in fasting, but the idea of withdrawing from the world for a week of silent communion with God was remote to them.

It was because of the interest people expressed, as well as the lack of emphasis on solitude I have seen in the evangelical community, that I decided to adapt the journals from my first three silent retreats into one

book with a devotional format, hoping that others would see how silence could enable them to experience the presence of God in a new way. I do not include the entirety of my journals here, because many of the things I experienced are too personal and are meant for my heart and God's alone. However, I have included those portions that I feel open and led to share.

I want to emphasize that you don't have to be a super-spiritual saint to go on a silent retreat. Even though I am a Hebrew teacher, I am an "average Joe," no different from most people. I have no great or exciting testimony of having had a dramatic healing or a deliverance from addiction, or of being saved out of a life of crime and prison. I grew up in a Christian home, with godly parents who raised me to know and love Jesus. I merely hungered and thirsted for God and drank of His living waters, which made me even hungrier and thirstier for more.

I now invite you to join me on this *Journey into Silence*, where we will primarily interact only with God and His creation. Let me share with you some of the amazing and joyful experiences of what it is like to have your mind stayed on Jesus 24/7. Perhaps you, too, will be encouraged to enter this silent world of contemplation, wonder, and worship.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A UNIQUE APPROACH TO SILENT RETREATS

I have discovered that people go on silent retreats for various reasons. They may be looking for direction and guidance for their lives. They may want to work through pain or grief. They may be seeking rest and peace after a turbulent period of life. They may simply want to draw closer to God.

I have received many spiritual and emotional benefits while seeking the heart of God in silence. However, I approached my silent retreats in a somewhat different way from most who take such journeys, due to my particular background, and this has had a strong influence on the reflections in these pages. I have spent forty years studying various ancient languages, including Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, along with the teachings of Jewish sages and rabbis. As a result, this book is distinct not only because it depicts the uncommon practice of living in solitude, but also because it examines the deeper meanings of words and phrases in the Scriptures in light of my experiences with God in silence.

For those who have not previously read my Hebrew Word Study books or blog, I write daily devotional studies in which I incorporate my background in ancient languages and cultures with my personal experiences in an endeavor to find the best English translations for Hebrew words in select scriptural passages. I take this approach because Biblical, or Classical, Hebrew has only seventy-five hundred words, compared with Modern Hebrew, which has a quarter of a million words. Since the ancient language is very nuanced, each word of Classical Hebrew can have multiple meanings. Much of the Bible translation process involves a close examination of the context, the culture of the day, and the idioms in order to determine which of the many possible English words to apply to a given Hebrew word in a specific verse. Additionally, I have learned from Jewish rabbis that we must put a Hebrew word into its emotional context. Hebrew is an

emotional language, a language of poets, and thus there is an emotional context involved in many passages of Scripture. I was even taught through rabbinic literature how to interpret and translate words letter by letter. You will find that I employ these rabbinic approaches in the word studies included in this book.

As with other Semitic languages, the original Hebrew alphabet is consonantal, with no separate letters for vowels. Nevertheless, vowel sounds were used in the Hebrew language, because it is impossible to pronounce a word without using the sounds represented by *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*. In rabbinic Hebrew, the letters aleph, hei, yod, and vav can be used to denote a vowel. However, the proper pronunciation of Classical Hebrew was lost about twenty-five hundred years ago when it became a “dead” language and was no longer spoken. Around the seventh century AD, the Masoretic text introduced the *niqqud*, which are a series of dots and dashes placed near a consonantal letter to indicate a vowel. (This is not considered part of the inspired text.) The normal pattern is: consonant, vowel, consonant, vowel.

Even though many people who learn Hebrew words like to speak the terms aloud, pronouncing a particular word adds little to no value to the process of seeking to arrive at an appropriate rendering of its meaning; thus, in this book, I have not placed any emphasis on the actual pronunciation of the words. My main concern is to drill down to the very core of a Hebrew word using its trilateral, or three-consonant, root. I use the *abajab*, or the consonantal alphabet, and follow a rabbinic tradition of defaulting to using the letter *a* whenever any vowel is needed, except in cases where I explain a certain word usage or grammatical expression. Occasionally, when I feel it is necessary, I will use the Masoretic text’s version of the vowels. Furthermore, while many academic texts use left-handed apostrophes for the letter aleph and right-handed apostrophes for the letter ayin, I have streamlined the practice for this book, using right-handed apostrophes for both.

In all my word studies, my goal is to explore the secondary and optional meanings of biblical words in order to better understand them, to seek the origins of terms, and to plug them into the context of verses or passages to see if they fit, and if so, if they might provide a deeper spiritual message to apply to our lives. Please note that I offer these reflections on Scripture

not as an academic exercise or to propose a separate Bible translation but solely as a devotional tool. The ultimate purpose is to open up the depths of God's Word in order to draw us into an intimate relationship with the Lord, while at the same time refreshing and challenging us in our spiritual lives. Thus, the silent retreats that I describe in *Journey into Silence* have been an extension of my ongoing desire to seek the compassionate heart of God through His multifaceted, inspired Word.

PART ONE
CALLED TO SILENCE



PROLOGUE: THE SILENT SPEAKING OF GOD

“I looked and there was a whirlwind coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing back and forth and brilliant light all around it. In the center of the fire, there was a gleam like amber.”

—Ezekiel 1:4 (HCSB)

Is the idea of listening to God in silence a new concept for you? Before we begin part one of *Journey into Silence*, let’s explore a fascinating Hebrew term and what I believe it teaches us about our opportunity to listen to God with our hearts and hear what He wants to speak to us.

In the above verse, the Hebrew term that the prophet Ezekiel used for the concept translated “*a gleam like amber*” is *chashmal*. This word is used only three times in the Old Testament—all in Ezekiel (1:4, 27; and 8:2), all in the same context, and all describing what Ezekiel saw as the center of the manifestation of God Himself.

Scholars consider the word *chasmal* to be of unknown origin. That is, they don’t know the root word from which it was derived. Since we don’t really know what the root word of *chashmal* is, we have to do the best we can at interpreting what the term signifies. Most scholars believe *chashmal* refers to a bright shining object. The majority of translators simply follow tradition and render the word as either a shining or gleaming amber or metal. But let’s explore some other ideas.

The Septuagint, a Koine Greek translation of the Old Testament, uses the word *elektron* when translating *chashmal*. Interestingly, *elektron* is the word from which our terms *electric* and *electricity* are derived. Perhaps in

his vision, Ezekiel saw God manifested in the form of lightning, especially as Ezekiel 1:4 includes this description: “*fire flashing back and forth and brilliant light all around it.*”

Chashmal has also been translated as *electrum*, a Latin term derived from *elektron*. *Electrum* is a naturally occurring alloy of gold and silver, whose colors range from pale yellow to bright yellow like the sun. In ancient times, it was a precious metal used in coinage. Today, it is used as an excellent conductor of electricity. The Hebrews considered gold to represent the light or glory of God, and silver to represent His holiness. The two are combined in one element in *electrum*.

Furthermore, the Talmud teaches that *chashmal* might be a compound word meaning “silence” (*chash*) and “speaking” (*milel*). This makes me think of how electricity is silent, yet “speaks” to us in its flashes. (Thunder is only the *effect* of lightning on the air in its path, not its “voice.”) Perhaps the sages recognized the energy in lightning and felt it was a silent witness of God.

For myself, I agree with the Talmud’s interpretation. I have come to believe that the *chashmal* of God refers to silence and speaking in silence, so that what Ezekiel saw in the center of the fire was *the silent speaking of God*. And that is what we seek in times of solitude with God—we seek all that He desires to communicate to us in His silent speaking.

How can we learn to hear this silent speaking? I read something very interesting in the Talmud in Chagiga 13b regarding the mystery of prayer: “For one to connect to the *chashmal* of God, one first must be silent to cut away the *kelipos*. One then can hear the *milel* [speaking] of God.” We must be silent before we can perceive God’s silent speaking, because our silence cuts away the *kelipos* that hinders us from hearing Him.

Kelipos literally means “a shell,” and as Rabbi Yaacov Yosef characterized, *kelipos* are fleshly thoughts that come during prayer. How often our prayers are filled with fleshly thoughts so that we cannot hear God. In my most recent silent retreat, it took me almost three days before I started to really pray. Up until that time, my prayers were filled with *kelipos*, fleshly thoughts and desires. But after a period of silence, after a time of joining with creation in worship of the Creator, I began to pray prayers that were not filled with fleshly desires, but only spiritual ones. I grew hungry for the

Word of God, and I would stay up late at night continuing to read God's Word, which was burning away all the *kelipos* in my mind and heart.

When silence before God cracks the shell of our fleshly thoughts, it ushers in the presence or pleasure of God—and when we are in His presence, He speaks to us in silence. During all of my silent retreats, I have heard the cry of the world; I have heard the world weep in sorrow and despair. I believe this was the *chashmal*, or silent speaking, of God, sharing with me the burdens of His heart for this lost world.

There are perhaps many Christians who have not yet entered into true prayer, or *chashmal*. If you find it difficult to pray, perhaps you just need to sit in silence for a while—maybe for a long while. During that time, think about God, fill your mind with His Word, meditate on His attributes, and before long you will break through the *kelipos* and enter into authentic prayer. And you will hear God speaking in silence.

When you break through, you will be amazed at how easy it is to hear Him, and how you can spend hours in prayer without even realizing it. In fact, you will grow to desire the *chashmal* of God more than food and sleep. I know—I have experienced this, just as I believe Ezekiel did and attempted to describe. Until you experience that *chashmal*, Ezekiel's vision may mean nothing more to you than an abstract description of a lightning storm. But if you experience the *chashmal* of God, this vision will be a beautiful depiction of the love and passion of God, who speaks to us powerfully in His silence.

1

REST

*“Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto
me? and where is the place of my rest?”*

—Isaiah 66:1

It is my first day in silence at the Abbey of Gethsemani, and I am sitting outside the chapel overlooking a beautiful pasture and watching a mourning dove flutter across the ground. I just opened my Hebrew Bible and pointed my finger to the first verse I came to. We are usually warned against this practice of Bible reading as being too random or “mystic” to be trustworthy, and I agree that we should recognize its hazards. Believe me, I know the joke about the old boy who felt he needed a word from the Lord, so he closed his eyes, opened his Bible, and blindly let his finger fall on the page, so that it just happened to rest on the verse that says, “*And [Judas] went and hanged himself*” (Matthew 27:5). Not happy with that result, the man tried again, and this time his finger fell on the verse that says, “*Go, and do thou likewise*” (Luke 10:37)!

But haven't most Christians, at one time or another, used this “method” of opening up the Bible to a seemingly random verse, only to find genuine comfort or insight from God? I think that if we are discerning about it, we can sometimes recognize Him speaking to us in this way. So now, as I begin my time of solitude, I have opened to Isaiah 66:1, noting especially the last part of the verse, where God asks, “*Where is the place of my rest?*”

The Hebrew word translated “rest” in this verse is *manuchah*, which means quiet or silent. It comes from the root word *nuchah*, meaning a

peaceful abode or a place of quietness. It is a restful environment absent of discord. I haven't considered the context of this verse yet, but I sense God is trying to start me off on the right foot. I need to find His silent or quiet place—His place for resting in silence.

I recognize that even my search for silence has become a selfish thing: *my seeking, my longings, my desires*. Yet what is it that God desires? And why would He seek silence? I think more about this phrase, "*Where is the place of my rest?*" Perhaps God has called me to silence because He wants to spend some time resting in the silence with me. Perhaps He is seeking to commune with me without my mind being distracted by my daily activities or sidetracked by "*the cares of this world*" (Mark 4:19)—to just sit down and chat together in an atmosphere of peace and calm. Times of tension in our lives are not the best time for God to talk over serious matters with us about our future or about major decisions. Those discussions are best held during moments of *nuchah*.

(I've begun to realize that if I receive revelation from God during this silent retreat, there will be no one I can immediately share it with. I cannot access my e-mail, and although I am not required to remain at the abbey and can leave the compound at any time, to do so would seem to violate God's call upon me to spend a week with Him here in solitude. As a teacher, this is hard for me, because I love to share knowledge and insights about the Bible. But I accept the fact that, at least for the present, if I get a revelation or an insight, it is for me, and me alone.)

Checking into this verse further, I find that the word translated "*where*" comes from two words in the original Hebrew, *'ay zeh*, which are used as a single unit. Together, these words have various meanings, such as "where," "what," "why," "how," "when," "behold," and "who." Judging from the context, including the following verse, it appears that a proper rendering would be, "Who is my silence?" or rather, "Who is the one I can find in silence or stillness?" The answer is found in Isaiah 66:2: "*But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.*"

The Hebrew word translated "*poor*" is *'ane*, which indicates someone who is depressed in mind or circumstances. Indeed, my personal circumstances are very depressing to me right now. It is also the person who has

a “*contrite spirit*.” The word “*contrite*” in Hebrew is *nakah*, which means dejected. I claim that part of the verse for myself also. Third, it is someone who has a reverence for God’s Word, which would apply to me as well.

So I come to this place of silence in the midst of my depressed circumstances and dejected spirit. How can this be the place where God will find His rest? I think I understand. I had barely begun this retreat of silence before I began to weep. The Hebrew word for “weep” is *baki*, and the word for “heart” is *lev*. Both of these words have the same numerical value in Hebrew, and the Jewish sages teach that this emphasizes that weeping comes from the heart. My heart weeps because I know that my pride, my unclean thoughts, and my attitudes have wounded God’s heart. Yet by giving my heart room to weep, I also allow God the opportunity to reach into my heart and forgive the wounds I have brought to His heart. And it is in that place that He finds His rest, because He is once more restored to fellowship with one whom He loves.



While I was enjoying my first meal at the abbey today, someone broke the rule of silence. He spoke quietly, and only to ask a brother a question. However, in the silence of the room, it was like a booming voice, and all heads turned toward the sound. Interestingly, I had just read Isaiah 66:6, which can be translated, “Hark, an uproar from the city.” The Hebrew word for “uproar” is *sha’on*, which is a crashing sound, like a wave hitting the rocks on a shore. In the context of this verse, the uproar is a noise from the temple, a sound that does not belong there. It is as if the Lord is reminding me that for this week of silence, I must beware of any “uproar,” or *sha’on*—anything that does not belong in this retreat of silence. I must not let the voice of my health concerns, my ministry concerns, my financial concerns, or any other voice intrude on this time that God and I have together. This is *His* time, not my health concern time, my ministry concern time, or my financial concern time. God cannot find His rest in me—or I in Him—if these voices intrude.

Although I have already wept through my repentance, I still weep. I know now it is not I who weep but God who is weeping in me as I join my heart with His. I feel His pain and sorrow for those who have broken His

heart. But God's heart also weeps for the pain and suffering of this world. To be honest, I fear that I have not risen to this level of weeping. Perhaps, during this time of silence, I will rise to that level. Perhaps, in silence, I will hear the cry of this world with the ears of my heart, I will see the suffering of this world with the eyes of my heart, and maybe, maybe, God will allow me to speak to the suffering with the lips of my heart. Dear precious Father God, my dearest Friend, Companion, and Counselor, please let it be so.