

## **Hearing the Whisper**

### **By David Feddes**

Edward had a long history of petty crime. His latest offense was \$27,000 worth of credit card theft. The judge in charge of the case ordered that Edward serve 10 months of detention in his house in the New Jersey suburbs. During those ten months, Edward could leave the house to work, get groceries, go to the doctor, attend religious activities, do almost anything he wanted. There was only one thing the judge wouldn't allow Edward to do: he couldn't watch television during those ten months. The judge said he wanted "to create a condition of silent introspection ... to induce (the) defendant to change his behavior." Edward had seven televisions, one in every room of his house. The judge thought Edward needed a break from TV and the way it aroused his appetite for getting more stuff that he couldn't afford to pay for. The judge thought Edward needed peace and quiet to think hard and make changes.

How did Edward respond? Was he thankful for such a light sentence after ripping off thousands of dollars? No, he appealed the sentence, saying that the judge's ban was cruel and unusual punishment! Edward was so addicted to TV that he'd rather sit in a jail cell with a TV than be at home without one. The phrase "cruel and unusual punishment" used to mean beating, burning, cutting, mutilating, or inflicting other terrible tortures on someone. But Edward apparently thought that turning off his television was torture too terrible to bear!

### **The #1 Cause of Unhappiness**

Back in the 1600s, long before Edward and his lawyers decided that being deprived of TV for a few months would be cruel and unusual punishment, the brilliant scientist and philosopher Pascal wrote, "The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."

If someone asked you to name the #1 cause of unhappiness in the world, I doubt if you'd say the main problem is that we don't know how to stay quietly in a room. But think about it. Do *you* know how to stay quietly in your room? You might wonder how that could be the main cause of unhappiness, but would you deny that spending time alone in silence is like torture to most of us? Do you ever sit alone in a room with nothing to watch, nothing to listen to, nothing to read, and nothing to do? Try it some time. You probably won't last an hour. You probably won't last ten minutes! Edward isn't the only one who considers it cruel and unusual punishment to sit quietly in a room.

The only time we want absolute stillness and nothing to do is when we sleep—and even then, a lot of us read a book or watch TV or listen to music until we doze off. We'd rather do that than try to fall asleep in complete stillness.

### **The If-Only Syndrome**

Why is it so hard to sit quietly? And how could inability to sit quietly be a cause of unhappiness? Well, the fact that we can't sit quietly means that we're empty and restless. We're not content. We feel bored and upset unless we have a constant stream of activities and distractions to keep us occupied. Author Peter Kreeft talks about "the if-only syndrome." You might say, "If only I could make the varsity team, I'd be happy." Then you make the team, and you say, "If only we could win the championship, I'd be happy." Then you win the championship and you say, "If only I could make the pros, I'd be happy." But if you make the pros, you're unhappy because another player is making even more millions than you are, or getting better

publicity than you are. You think, “If only I could get the pay I deserve and the respect I deserve, I’d be happy.”

Happiness is always one step away. If only you could have an exciting love affair; if only you could have an even more exciting love affair. If only you could have that wonderful car; if only you could have that even more wonderful car. If only you could get a good job; if only you could get a promotion or an even better job. If only you could retire from your work; if only you could afford to go more places and do more things in your retirement. And through it all, if only you could keep a steady stream of things to entertain you and keep you from getting bored, you could be happy.

The if-only syndrome isn’t just a personal thing. It’s the philosophy of an entire culture. Our idea of progress is to get more and more of what we don’t have, rather than learning to enjoy what we do have. Why else are we so eager to keep improving our standard of living when we already have plenty? Our idea of progress is finding more and more kinds of entertainment to keep us from getting bored. Why are we so eager to avoid silence?

With the if-only syndrome, you’re unhappy if you don’t get what you’re after, and if you do get it, you’re still not quite happy, at least not for long. The more you scratch, the more you itch. That’s obvious to anybody who pays the least bit of attention to these things. *But who’s paying attention?*

### **Listen, Listen**

That brings us to the heart of why it makes sense to say that unhappiness comes from our inability to sit quietly in a room. What if life’s most important message comes not through a shout but through a whisper? What would it take to get the message? Well, one thing it would take is to be quiet and pay attention long enough to hear the whisper.

If we can’t be quiet, we can’t pay attention. Without quietness we can’t pay attention to what our own soul is whispering about our spiritual emptiness, and we can’t pay attention to God’s whisper. If we can’t pay attention, we won’t face our restlessness and unhappiness. If we won’t face our restlessness and unhappiness, we’ll never seek to find a better way. If we never seek a better way, we’ll never hear God’s whisper or find peace and contentment in him. God has wonderful things to tell us, but he often says them in a whisper, and we can hear him only in stillness and simplicity.

What does God whisper to us? In Isaiah 55:1-3 God says, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the water; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.”

God invites you to feast on his goodness and love in Jesus Christ. But first you need to feel hungry and thirsty, you need to stop spending yourself on things that can’t satisfy, and you need to listen, give ear, pay attention. But it’s hard to do that. Why? Well, one reason is that we seem to have so much to do and so little time.

### **Busy, Busy, Busy**

Have you ever wondered why, with all the time-saving inventions we have these days, we seem to have less time than ever? From childhood on, we feel like happiness depends on our ability to stay on top of things. We have studies, duties, schedules, people to meet, things to do, places to go. We work to keep family members happy, we work to keep friends happy, we work

to keep ourselves happy, and it takes just one thing to go wrong to make us unhappy. As Pascal put it, “they are given responsibilities and duties which harass them from the first moment of each day. You will say that is an odd way to make them happy: what better means could one devise to make them unhappy?”

But what’s the alternative? Being busy with all sorts of activities and worries might make us unhappy, but what if we didn’t have so much noise and bustle? That might make us even more unhappy. Pascal says,

You would only have to take away all their cares, and then they would see themselves and think about what they are, where they come from, and where they are going. That is why men cannot be too much occupied and distracted, and that is why, when they have been given so many things to do, if they have some time off they are advised to spend it on diversion and sport, and always to keep themselves fully occupied.

Then Pascal exclaims, “How hollow and foul is the heart of man!”

For many of us, the only thing worse than being busy with something is *not* being busy with something. At work and school we’re busy, busy, busy--and as soon as we have some time to ourselves, what do we do? We look for something to keep us occupied. We fill our spare time with sports and TV and computer games. The business world works overtime inventing and producing things that will save time--and then works overtime coming up with diversions to help us kill time. We complain that we never have enough time, but *we don’t want to have enough time*. We complain that we never get a quiet moment, but *we don’t want a quiet moment*. We can’t stand to be still even for an hour to reflect on our destiny.

### **Scary Silence**

What would happen if you just stopped and paid attention? At first, it would be dreadful. Your first feeling might be one of boredom. But why are you so bored? That’s a scary question. Boredom is another word for nothingness. Stop running here and there, stop doing this or that, get rid of all the distractions, and what do you have left? Nothing. Just boredom. And it’s pretty depressing to realize that you’re nothing, that if you subtract all the activities, you don’t have anything left.

Even more painful, once you stop and pay attention, you might get to thinking about where you’re headed. We’re all standing in a line. If we take time to look where the line is headed, we see death cutting down everybody who goes ahead of us. We see it cutting down grandparents, then parents, then friends, and we realize that soon it’s going to be our turn. Pascal says, “Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition.”

You may feel you’ve heard more than enough from Pascal. He’s too depressing. But Pascal’s whole point is that the greatest cause of our unhappiness is that we keep distracting ourselves from how unhappy we really are, and we surround ourselves with so much noise that we never hear God’s whispered invitation to find joy in him. If we could somehow set aside the distractions long enough to face our unhappiness squarely, we might begin to listen to the voice of God and accept his generous offer to replace our unhappiness with eternal joy. Pascal simply drives home the force of God’s question in Isaiah 55, “Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?” Why spend yourself only on things that can’t fill your inner emptiness or help you get beyond your date with death?

## **A Whisper, Not a Shout**

Jesus says, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you...For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...I am the bread of life.He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:27,33,35).

When we set aside all distractions, we can sense our desperate need for God, and we can also begin to hear what God is saying to us in Christ. Maybe that’s why many people come to God when they find themselves in prison. It’s not just that they’re confronted with the reality of their sin (though that’s crucial), but it’s also that, perhaps for the first time in their life, they have a lot of time to really think. Most of us are so afraid of stillness that we think it’s a horrible punishment to be locked up alone in a cell. But sitting still and being quiet can be the best thing that’s ever happened to you. It can prepare you to hear a voice you never heard before and to receive a happiness you never before imagined.

Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn lived without God for many years. It was only when the Soviet dictatorship threw him in prison that he was quiet long enough to hear God’s whisper and encounter the Lord. Solzhenitsyn didn’t enjoy the many awful things about prison life, but he was thankful for the way prison cleared the clutter from his life and provided space and silence in which he at last paid attention to God’s whisper.

The Lord often speaks in a whisper, in a still, small voice. If your life is crowded with all sorts of activities and people, don’t expect God to elbow his way to the front of the crowd to get himself noticed. Don’t expect God to shout over the noise of your TV to make himself heard. The Lord just keeps saying, quietly and persistently, “Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.”

In Isaiah 55 God invites hungry people to a feast of delicious bread and rich wine. During Jesus’ time on earth, he made it clear that he is himself the Source of that eternal feast. The Lord invites us to get a taste of the feast already now through trusting his love and goodness and feasting on the bread and wine of the Holy Supper, by which we participate in Christ and all his benefits. And all this is just the beginning of a feast that goes on and on and that gets better and better until we arrive at the fullness of joy in the kingdom of heaven.

You’re invited to this feast. And it’s completely free. You don’t have to pay for it. Jesus has paid the price already. You can taste God’s goodness without money and without cost.

## **Accept the Invitation**

The question is whether you’ll pay attention to God’s invitation and accept it. In Luke 13 Jesus tells a story.

“A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests.At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

“But they all alike began to make excuses.The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it.Please excuse me.’”

“Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out.Please excuse me.’

“Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

“The servant came back and reported this to his master.Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of

the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

“‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out into the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

That last sentence is terrifying, isn’t it? “I tell you,” says Jesus, “not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.” God is going to make sure that the kingdom of heaven is full, even if it means inviting people we wouldn’t expect. But if your life is too noisy to hear God’s whisper, if you’re too busy to pay attention to God, if you’ve got better things to do than accept his invitation to an eternal feast in the Lord Jesus Christ—if you’re like that, you’re going to miss out. Jesus says not one person like that will get even a taste of his heavenly banquet.

I’m sure you’ve got lots of things in your life that seem important: work to do, business to take care of, people to see, places to go, music to listen to, games to play, shows to watch, and a thousand other things. But be careful. All of that is just a distraction if you’re not walking with God. C. S. Lewis spoke of the realm of demons and hell as “the Kingdom of Noise.” Satan likes noise as a method of drowning out God’s whisper.

### **No Time to Waste**

Silence and freedom from distractions gives us space and time to encounter God. Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, tells of meeting a prisoner on death row. This convicted murderer had become a Christian in prison and was hard at work studying God’s Word in his cell. Colson says, “We had a wonderful conversation. But as we talked, I noticed that he—unlike the other inmates—didn’t have a TV in his cell. I asked him if he’d let me buy him one as a gift. ‘Oh no, sir,’ he said. ‘Thank you. You can waste a lot of time with those things.’ On death row, in a cell twenty-four hours a day,” says Colson, “and he was worried about wasting time?”

What about you? Is there enough quiet time in your life to hear God whisper his Word into your heart? Do you have daily time for Bible reading and prayer? Is your relationship with God the key to everything else in your life? Or is your life crammed fully of busyness and noise? Hearing God’s whisper is vital to receiving salvation in Christ, and it’s also vital for finding out God’s direction for your future.

I remember my second year of college. I was thinking about my studies and about a hard test in honors calculus that was coming up. How would I do? It seemed so important. That weekend I took a little time off. I was driving along and I came to an intersection. Suddenly the person in the back seat shouted, “The light’s red.” Too late. I looked to my left just in time to see a car come smashing into the car I was driving.

Several of us were injured, but I’m grateful that we all recovered without permanent damage. As I walked out of the emergency room with some stitches in my head, I was thinking about more important things than honors calculus.

I was glad to know that because I was already committed to Christ, I would have been in heaven if I had died; but I was also glad to be alive, and I thought more than ever about why God wanted me here on earth. I spent more time alone than usual, in silence and prayer, wondering what God wanted me to make of my life and crying out for God’s leading. It was then that God made it clear that he wanted me to preach the gospel.

Silent, sober searching can help us to hear and accept God’s promises of life after death. Silent, sober searching can also help us hear and accept God’s purposes for us in this life and make the most of our time here on earth.

I'm not saying everybody has to be a preacher. And I'm not saying that school and work and television and other entertainment are always bad. Kept in their place, they can be good parts of the life God gives us. But if you allow them to crowd out thoughts of how short your life is, if you get so wrapped up in them that you ignore your need for God and never listen quietly to his Word, if they are more important to you than God's eternal feast of happiness in Christ, then they are nothing but distractions and destroyers of your soul. "Give ear," says God, "and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live." Don't let anything keep you from hearing God's whisper.