

Week 2 Exercises

Waiting on God: A Lenten Experiment in Attention

[Experiment Homepage](#)

Week 2 - Attending to God Daily Exercises

Exercise for Thursday 3/20 - Hope in the Lord

We invite you to pray with Psalm 130, joining the prayer of your heart to that of the psalmist.

How might we renew our hope in God by letting it become an expectant waiting?

Begin by spending some moments in silence. Read the psalm meditatively out loud, a few times, pausing between each reading.

Psalm 130

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If thou, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

that you may be feared.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the LORD

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is plenteous redemption.

And he will redeem Israel

from all his iniquities.

After your prayer with the whole psalm, return to the third stanza. Consider the central image: a watchman waiting for the morning. Inspired by this figure: *How might we renew our hope in God by letting it become an expectant waiting?*

Exercise for Wednesday (3/19) - The Our Father

Today's reflection will be the first of a few invitations to pray the Our Father contemplatively, with reference to Simone Weil's experience of it.

Read Simone Weil's account of reading the Our Father and beginning to pray for the first time (copied below, p. 71-72 in most editions of *Waiting for God*).

Then, we invite you to pray the Our Father as she did: praying it once out loud with your best attempt at absolute attention. If your mind wanders, begin again until you feel you have prayed it with your closest approximation of "absolute attention."

Before you begin praying, we encourage you to take a few minutes to breathe deeply, recalling yesterday's instruction for making contact with your heart, the place from which you love God and these words can be active within you.

From "Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography" (May 1942) in *Waiting for God*:

Last summer, doing Greek with T_____, I went through the Our Father word for word in Greek. We promised each other to learn it by heart. I do not think he ever did so, but some weeks later, as I was turning over the pages of the Gospel, I said to myself that since I had promised to do this thing and it was good, I ought to do it. I did it. The infinite sweetness of this Greek text so took hold of me that for several days I could not stop myself from saying it over all the time. A week afterward I began the vine harvest. I recited the Our Father in Greek every day before work, and I repeated it very often in the vineyard.

Since that time I have made a practice of saying it through once each morning with absolute attention. If during the recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolutely pure attention. Sometimes it comes about that I say it again out of sheer pleasure, but I only do it if I really feel the impulse.

The effect of this practice is extraordinary and surprises me every time, for, although I experience it each day, it exceeds my expectation at each repetition.

At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree. At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing this silence.

Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me.

Exercise for Tuesday (3/18) - The Prayer of the Heart

This weekend, several of us attended a day-long retreat on the Jesus Prayer. The retreat leader, a former monk at Simonopetra monastery on Mount Athos, gave as his parting note that “It is possible to pray, to live, to listen to your neighbor, and to speak from [the heart, where the Jesus Prayer forms].” Today we will reflect on his counsels, which suit our focus on attention as waiting on God.

Throughout the retreat, he returned to a basic image for the life of prayer: a tree blown by the wind. For today’s exercise, go outside or look out your window and observe a tree as it is blown by the wind. How does it move? Where is there the greatest amount of motion? Where is it still?

Notice the solid trunk, and imagine, even more unmoving, the roots under the earth. This is where we want to live from—the deep, still point within ourselves.

Praying the Jesus prayer helps us to do that.

His advice was this:

- 1) First straighten the room in which you will pray. Bringing order to the chaos outside is a step to ordering the inner chaos. One Orthodox saint is famous for saying “Want to begin to pray? Sweep your room.”
- 2) Find a comfortable seat - comfortable enough that you aren’t distracted by physical discomfort but not so comfortable that you begin to fall asleep. Close your eyes - this is a symbol of letting go of the world around you.
- 3) Empty your mind of thoughts and begin to pray the Jesus prayer. Keep your mind free from images. When thoughts arise, don’t identify with them.
- 4) Find the place from which you love God. Feel the prayer settling from your lips, to your mind, to your heart. Breathe, feeling how your breath compresses your heart, and inviting your attention to remain there.
- 5) If you are having trouble finding your heart, find the place within you where subvocalization occurs - your “inner voice” that “speaks” the prayer, where the words are active in you.

Today, whether your daily practice is the Jesus Prayer or breathing meditation, follow these steps. Pause and breathe, finding your “root,” the “place from which you love God.” Spend a few minutes here, just breathing, before beginning your usual daily practice.

And we close by returning to the monk's parting note: "It is possible to pray, to live, to listen to your neighbor, and to speak from that place."

Exercise for Monday (3/17) - Attending to Christ in the Transfiguration

In our introductory assignment for this week (see below), we asked you to reflect on Weil's descriptions of what occurs in the soul when we turn our attention towards something of "perfect purity." Revisit your reflections, or the relevant passages below from "Forms of the Implicit Love of God":

Perfect purity alone cannot be defiled. If at the moment when the soul is invaded by evil the attention can be turned toward a thing of perfect purity, so that a part of the evil is transferred to it, this thing will be in no way tarnished by it, nor will it send it back. Thus each minute of such attention really destroys a part of the evil...

It is a transmutation rather than a destruction. The contact with perfect purity dissociates the suffering and sin which had been mixed together so indissolubly. The part of evil in the soul is burned by the fire of this contact and becomes only suffering, and the suffering is impregnated with love.

Today, this is our hypothesis. We invite you to pray with [this icon](#) of the Transfiguration (Sunday's Gospel reading for Roman Catholics), attending to God by prayerfully looking at His image.

Print out this image in color (if you can) or otherwise open it up full screen on your computer. Sit or stand in a comfortable position. You may choose to begin your prayer by reading the Gospel account of the Transfiguration ([Matthew 17:1-9](#)). Then allow yourself to pray by gazing at the icon for 10 minutes.

After concluding your prayer, consider the following questions:

- What was this experience like for you? Did you notice resistance? Discomfort? Desire? Curiosity?
 - As you reflect on your experience, recall what Weil writes about the difficulty of looking in "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," especially when we are in a "bad mood": "It is however then that the act of looking is almost impossible. All the mediocre part of the soul, fearing death with a more violent fear than that caused by the approach of the death of the body, revolts and suggests lies to protect itself," especially the lie that "we have to strive after goodness with an effort of our will" rather than opening ourselves in *looking* (193). Does this description resonate with your experience of prayer today, or other similar experiences of prayerful looking (Eucharistic adoration, prayer with icons, etc.)?
- Now, consider the icon itself: How do the apostles respond/attend to the transfigured Christ? How do their postures of response compare with those of Moses and Elijah? Do any of their responses feel familiar to you?

Friday, 3/14 Intro Email

Hi everyone -

Thank you for a good discussion last night, and for joining us for Week 1 of our attention experiment. Below is the 1st week wrap-up reflection, and the reading that will set up next week.

Week 1 Wrap-up Reflection

Let's use the end of the week as a chance to take stock of how our first/introduction week of this experiment. The idea is not to reinforce judgements about ourselves, but to see our obstacles clearly, in a way that calls fourth humility. Please re-read the following passage from School Studies (on the conditions necessary for school studies to bear spiritual fruit).

- Apply the spirit of this passage to how you have fared in attention/patient waiting in life this week, and specifically in the things you are taking on in the experiment, like meditation, fasting, attending practice, daily attention reflection). Consider journaling to aid your reflection.

"The second condition is to take great pains to examine squarely and to contemplate attentively and slowly each school task in which we have failed, seeing how unpleasing and second rate it is, without seeking any excuse or overlooking any mistake or any of our tutor's corrections, trying to get down to the origin of each fault. There is a great temptation to do the opposite, to give a sideways glance at the corrected exercise if it is bad and to hide it forthwith. Most of us do this nearly always. We have to withstand this temptation. Incidentally, moreover, nothing is more necessary for academic success, because, despite all our efforts, we work without making much progress when we refuse to give our attention to the faults we have made and our tutor's corrections.

Above all it is thus that we can acquire the virtue of humility, and that is a far more precious treasure than all academic progress. From this point of view it is perhaps even more useful to contemplate our stupidity than our sin. Consciousness of sin gives us the feeling that we are evil, and a kind of pride sometimes finds a place in it. When we force ourselves to fix the gaze, not only of our eyes but of our souls, upon a school exercise in which we have failed through sheer stupidity, a sense of our mediocrity is borne in upon us with irresistible evidence. No knowledge is more to be desired. If we can arrive at knowing this truth with all our souls we shall be well established on the right foundation."

And some more specific prompts for looking forward, if they are helpful:

- What do I need to do or change or add, so that these practices actually meet my greatest challenges with the spirit of attention?
 - Is there something else, or something more relevant, I should fast from?

- Do I find that my meditation or Jesus Prayer practice needs to be given another place in my day, or needs a second round in the day, to make it feel more real?
- What would best set up my practice of especially attending to something/s in the day? Perhaps a short dedication in the morning and/or a check-in at night.
- Feel free to share your reflections here in the forum!

Next Week: Waiting on God; Weekend Reading Assignment

This coming week we'll turn to our second theme: **Waiting on God**. We'll begin with our weekly reading, [an excerpt from "The Love of Religious Practices"](#) section of Weil's "Forms of the Implicit Love of God." You can find those pages here (p. 190-199 in most editions of *Waiting for God*).

Perhaps these questions will aid your reading or post-reading reflection:

- Re-consider Weil's descriptions, starting at the beginning, of what occurs in the soul when we turn our attention towards something of "perfect purity". What is categorically different between this "look" that "saves us", and say, thinking positive thoughts?
- Why the emphasis on *looking*? What might this have to do with waiting?
- Do you recall an experience of turning towards something with the significance of perfect purity and experiencing the "transference" she writes of?
- Meditate on Weil's metaphor for the relationship between the will and obedience: "The right use of the will is a condition of salvation, necessary no doubt but remote, inferior, very subordinate and purely negative. The weeds are pulled up by the muscular effort of the peasant, but only sun and water can make them grow. The will cannot produce any good in the soul."
 - Why is this so difficult for us to accept? What are the "weeds" we must pull up by muscular effort, to make room for the good we cannot produce for ourselves?

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