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Article

**Isolation Processing—Learning Deep Lessons From God**

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## Abstract

From time to time, I collect all the material I have amassed on a topic and do a position paper, that is, a paper summarizing what I know about the subject. That is what I have done about the shaping activity, called isolation, in this paper. It is an important shaping activity. Ninety per cent of the leaders we have studied experience the shaping activity of isolation.

I begin this paper by defining and describing isolation. What is isolation?

Definition      Isolation processing refers to the setting aside of a leader from normal ministry or leadership involvement due to involuntary causes, partially self-caused or voluntary causes for a period of time sufficient enough to cause and/or allow serious evaluation of life and ministry.

Then, I categorize isolation into three major types:

Type I. Negative Sovereign Intervention (this is the hardest to really experientially learn);  
Type II. Negative Opposition;  
Type III. Positive Self-choice.

I next suggest some results of isolation processing and give some common happenings—of all three types.

And then comes the heart of the paper. I describe four Biblical leaders (Job, Moses, Elijah, and Paul) who went through isolation. I point out their responses to it and the lessons learned.

A proper response to this shaping activity will see a leader examine what God is longing to teach him/her proactively by considering the following prompting labels:

1. **Reflection**—If you are not a thinker or if you are a thinker but are confused in isolation, because you know that reflection is important, you should get with someone in the body of Christ who has either natural abilities of analytical skills, discernment, or spiritual gifts of exhortation, teaching, word of wisdom, word of knowledge and ask for help on getting an overall perspective on what the intent of God is in the isolation. In terms of mentor types, you need to get with a spiritual guide or mentor counselor.
2. **Response Attitude**—Acknowledge that God is in this isolation. By faith accept this and then move with a learning posture through it. I am going to learn great things from God. Others may be to blame but God is in it.
3. **Intense Focus**—Recognize that critical issues will be pointed out in the isolation processing.
4. **Divine Perspective Evaluation**—Do self-evaluation of your life and ministry. Some suggestions as to how to do this: Be alert to values. Expect new revelation. Know that paradigm shifts often occur in isolation.
5. **Deepened Relationship**—Spend time in intimacy disciplines with God; extended times of silence, solitude, prayer, Bible study, fasting.

Finally, I close by giving seven suggestions (think warnings) about isolation. You will need them.

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## **Isolation Processing—Learning Deep Lessons From God**

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### **Introduction**

Leaders get set aside from ministry. Isolation is the term used to describe this process. Sometimes the leader is directly set aside by God, sometimes by others, sometimes by self. Whatever the case, isolation results in deep processing in the life of a leader. More than 90% of leaders will face one or more important isolation times in their lives. Most do not negotiate these times very well. Knowing about them and what God can accomplish in them can be a great help to a leader who then faces isolation.

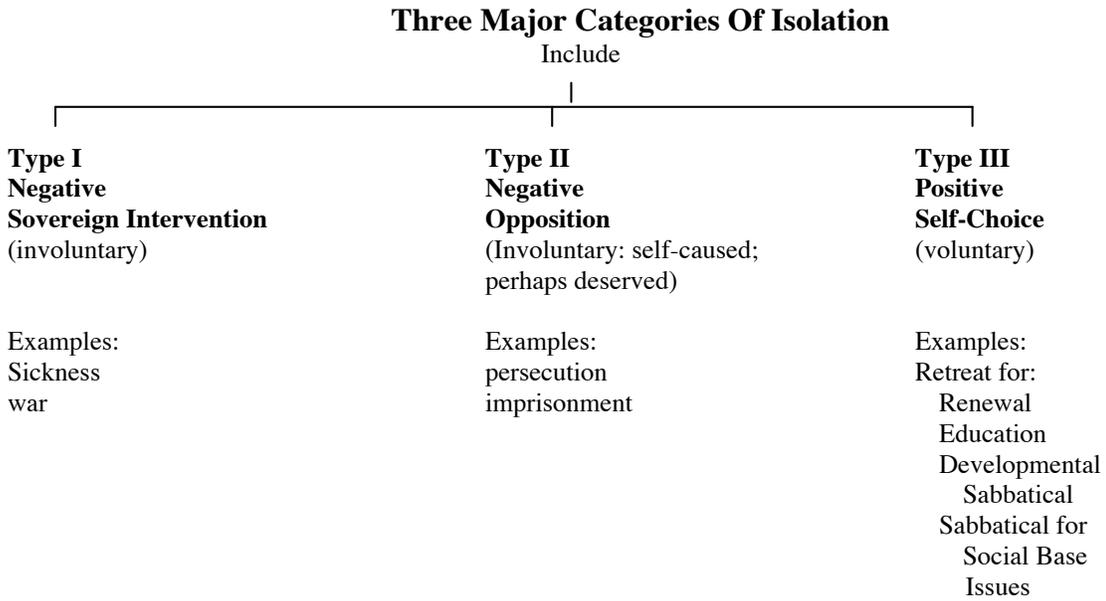
### **Defining and Describing Isolation**

What is isolation?

Definition      Isolation processing refers to the setting aside of a leader from normal ministry or leadership involvement due to involuntary causes, partially self-caused or voluntary causes for a period of time sufficient enough to cause and/or allow serious evaluation of life and ministry.

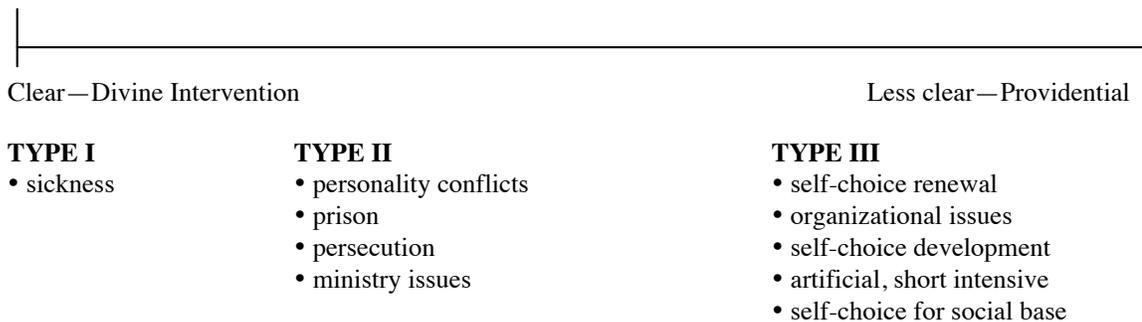
Some notable Biblical examples include Job, Joseph, Moses, Jonah, Elijah, Habakkuk, Jesus, and Paul. Usually this means the leader is away from his/her natural context usually for an extended time in order to experience God in a new or deeper way. Sometimes isolation can occur in the ministry context itself.

Isolation experiences can be short—like intensive time spent away in solitude to meet God. Or it can last up to several months and occasionally more than a year. Figure 1 describes isolation in terms of three major categories.



**Figure 1. Three Types of Isolations**

These isolation experiences can be viewed in terms of perceived intervention of God in them. Figure 2 gives a continuum correlating the isolation experiences to a leader’s understanding of God’s place in them.



**Figure 2. Isolation Sovereignty Continuum**

Table 1 list some results that have been observed in comparative studies of leaders in isolation.

**Table 1. Isolation Results**

Isolation Type	Results or Uses of Isolation
I. Negative/ Sovereign Intervention	lessons of brokenness; learning about supernatural healing; lessons about prayer; deepening of inner life; an intensified sense of urgency to accomplish; developing of mental facilities; submission to God; dependence upon God.
II. Negative/ Opposition	lessons of brokenness; submission to spiritual authority; value of other perspectives; dependence upon God
III. Positive/ Self-choice	new perspective on self and ministry; rekindling of sense of destiny; guidance; oneself to change; upon wider body of Christ

**Overlapping Features in Many Isolation Experiences**

Table 2 lists some common things that happen to leaders in isolation.

**Table 2. Common Happenings in Isolation**

Isolation Type	Some Happenings
I or II	1. Sense of Rejection
I or II	2. Sense of stripping away--getting down to core issues
I, II or III	3. Eventually a deep need for God
I, II or III	4. Searching for God
I, II, or III	5. Submission to God
I, II, or III	6. Dependence upon God
I, II, or III	7. Rekindling of desire to serve God in a deeper way

**Bible Characters and Isolation Lessons From Their Lives**

Job, Moses, Elijah, and Paul provide some important isolation lessons. See the Tables, which follow listing each of these Bible Characters and observations about isolation.

**Job**

Job faced sickness, loss of life, loss of wealth, loss of friends, and loss of status as an important person. Table 3 suggests some things that can be learned from Job’s Type I isolation experience.

**Table 3. Job and Type I Isolation**

Step	Explanation
1.	<b>Begin With The End In Mind</b> (need a framework/ perspective). In isolation, deep-seated ideas are challenged in such a way as to capture our attention and force us to come to essential values. Maybe it is only in isolation that they could be challenged. But know that isolation will end and God will teach lessons even about deep-seated ideas.
2.	<b>Analyze From The Known To The Unknown.</b> Apart from unusual revelation, we can only search out answers in terms of what we know. That is, the first step in the isolation process—search out what is happening in terms of what you do know (e.g. paradigms).
3.	<b>Recognize That The Unknown Can Serve Two Functions.</b> When anomalies arise we must recognize that they may not really be anomalies and will be cleared up in the end (in which case it is a matter of faith and waiting), or they are real and will force us into new paradigms.
4.	Expect God's Intervention. <b>God may give insight if a new paradigm is needed or may require a faith response.</b>
5.	<b>Believe In God's On-Going Answer.</b> The book of Job shows us that God is in charge of our individual processing—no matter how or through whom it may come, even including Satanic origin. We do not have all the answers. He does. We must trust Him in them.

**Moses**

In Ex 2:11-15, there is an incident in which Moses kills an Egyptian and then flees (He 11:23-28 and Ac 7:23 give an interpretation of this). Then in Ex 3:7 and following, God calls Moses to a major task, the very one he had tried on his own and given up. There is a major difference in the Moses of Ex 2 and the Moses of Ex 3. Nu 12:3 describes it. Something happened. I want to suggest that it was a brokenness<sup>1</sup> experience. And that brokenness experience was part of isolation processing for Moses.

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<sup>1</sup> See *brokenness*, **Glossary**.

Moses experienced this Type II isolation processing. It included aspects of geographical and cultural isolation. Three characteristics of geographic and cultural isolation include: 1. It is more powerful in its early effects; wears off with time and as assimilation occurs. (This is seen also in the life of Daniel.) 2. In Geographic/ cultural isolation there is a loss of self-esteem. The things you were and value in the old culture are usually not so respected and valued in the new. There is often a loss of momentum and vision.

**Table 4. Moses and Type II Isolation**

Lesson	Explanation/ Generalized
1	<b>Look for leadership committal processing as a means toward ending isolation.</b> Often isolation involves and may terminate with God's renewal of call. See <i>progressive calling</i> ; <b>Glossary</b> .
2	<b>God has to sometimes take a vision away in order to later accomplish that vision in his way.</b> Keep an open hand to plans, visions, future work.
3	<b>Humility is often the fruit of isolation processing--an unhealthy egotism is broken.</b> God can unleash great power through a broken/ humble leader without fear of that leader abusing the power.

### Elijah

Elijah had two impactful isolation experiences. The first was a Type I, clearly God directed. The second was a Type II. I do not think Elijah ever fully recovered from the second experience. Table 5 gives some observations about the Type I experience. Table 6 gives the Type II isolation experience which arose due to persecution.

**Table 5. Elijah's Type I Isolation Experience, 1Ki 17:1-6—Some Observations**

Observation	Explained
1	Isolation was God-directed (vs 2,3)
2	Success brings problems (vs 7 brook dries up--he prayed for no rain)
3	God will provide in isolation (vs 4, 9, 14)
4	God protects in isolation (I Kings 18:10).

Elijah's Type II isolation experience was the fallout from one of the most successful ministry events recorded in the O. T. He has just seen God move mightily in a power encounter<sup>2</sup> with the prophets of Baal on top of Mount Carmel—a true mountain top experience. When he flees from persecution he moves into an isolation experience—again a mountain top experience—this time, Mount Sinai. Note that again as with the first experience, success brings with it problems.

<sup>2</sup> This is the classic power encounter which defines others. The steps of a *Power Encounter* include:

1. There is a confrontation between God and Evil. 2. The forces are recognized for that--the issues are who is more powerful and thus deserving of allegiance. 3. There is a public demonstration so that both forces can be seen by all as to who is more powerful. 4. God demonstrates publicly His power and defeats the evil forces so that there can be no doubt about to whom allegiance should be given. 5. Aftermath--God is glorified, evil forces are punished; there may be a response toward God. See *power encounter*, **Glossary**.

**Table 6. Elijah’s Type II Isolation Experience, 1Ki 19—Persecution—Running For His Life**

Observation	Explained
1. <b>The Situation</b>	Vs4 Desert Isolation— 1. Hope gone; despair; take my life, (vs 4,5) 2. Angel touches him--provision (vs 5,7) 3. Horeb--Mountain of God--40 days/ 40 nights); cave What are you doing? God shows up.
2. <b>Notice the Steps</b>	Step 1. The feelings: I alone/ stood up for God/ persecution Step 2. Presence of God—the antidote to the feelings. Step 3. God answers--not you alone (vs11), 7000 who have not bowed the knee
3. <b>The Price To Pay</b>	Power encounters can be costly--they drain away energy—After mountain-top experiences expect attacks from Satan, evil forces; you may well crash hard in the valley. Elijah never again has a major ministry success?
4. <b>Rejection/ God’s Affirmation</b>	In isolation there is a sense of personal rejection and a need for divine affirmation. Notice how God does this. <b>Small Still Voice.</b> Not the spectacular like you might expect or hope for.
5. <b>Leadership Selection</b>	Elijah imparted power and authority to Elisha--one who was faithful, tenacious, wanted what Elijah had. He carried on Elijah's ministry with more power than Elijah. Elijah’s isolation experiences brought spiritual authority. Emerging leaders are drawn to leaders with spiritual authority.

One of the most important things to see from Elijah’s isolation experiences is that isolation is frequently accompanied by a sense of personal rejection. It is divine affirmation that we need. God will meet us-- maybe not in the way we expect.

**Paul**

Paul had numerous isolation experiences. It is from his life that the concept of repeated isolation experiences occurring in a leader’s life emerged. Five are worth noting— 1) his short days in Damascus with Ananias, Ac 9; 2; 2) His 2 to 3 years in Arabia mentioned in Gal; 3) His short prison experience in Philippi seen in Ac 16:23; 4) His four years in Rome (during which Eph, Col, Phm, Php were written); 5) His short few months in Rome just before his death. Table 7 suggests nine observations drawn from a comparative study of Paul’s isolation experiences.

**Table 7. Nine Observations from Paul’s Isolation Experiences**

Isolation Experience	Description and Observations
Galatian Isolation 1. <b>Reflection</b>	Paul’s Galatian/Arabia--Pre-Ministry isolation was a Type III self-choice isolation. It was a time of Reflection in which he worked out his Christology. Basic Principle: <b>Reflection is a major goal and means of processing during isolation.</b> Reflection will happen in isolation. Depending on the kind of isolation there will be questions. A seeking after something—time for thinking. (2Ti is especially filled with reflection; a looking back on a lifetime given to the Gospel.)
2. <b>Prison Isolation; Response Attitude</b>	A. In general, the following principle makes the difference in whether the isolation is profitable or not. <b>A sovereign mindset in processing makes the difference in immediate response and in long lasting results.</b> Attitude is everything. Notice Paul's attitude as reflected in: Eph 3:1; 4:1; Col 4:3,9,10; Phm 1; Php 1:12; 4:22. Paul saw a God-ordained purpose behind isolation. What does it mean to have a <i>sovereign mindset</i> in processing? It means to recognize that however the isolation may have come about—unjust determination, terrible circumstances, or whatever—you must recognize that God has an ultimate purposes in it: 1) to demonstrate the sufficiency of the supply of the Spirit of Christ, 2) to do specific things fitting the

	immediate situation, 3) to open up new thinking that could not have been possible, 4) to bring long-range productivity out of it (spiritual authority).
<b>3. Intense Focus</b>	<b>Critical issues come into focus during isolation processing.</b> Isolation forces one to focus usually first on why, causes of it, and then later on the purposes of it. And finally with a powerful concentration that allows for problem solving, new revelation to meet situations, and insights that could only come because of the situation.
<b>4. Evaluation—Divine Perspective</b>	<b>Divine evaluation of character, leadership commitment, and perspective is in focus in isolation processing.</b> Frequently, what happens is a recognition that God is allowing you to search your life and ministry and evaluate it in light of the situation and often with resulting paradigm shifts that will affect your ministry philosophy and the rest of your life.
<b>5. Deepened Relationship</b>	<b>A deepened relationship with god is always a major goal of isolation processing.</b> Philippians, the last of the first set of prison epistles and the most positive upbeat of all of Paul's letter culminates four years of isolation which have been filled with crises. It is filled with the importance of union with Christ. Its message points out what can happen in isolation processing—a grasping of the sufficiency of Christ for life.
<b>6. Basis for Long Range Productivity</b>	<b>Long lasting productivity is often rooted in isolation processing.</b> The prison epistles may never have been written had Paul been on the go. But set aside, reflection time produced thinking in regard to his own personal sanctification intimacy with Christians (Php), church problems (Col), the nature of the church (Eph), the solving of a problematic social institution (Phm). But not just products, attitudes and ideas are born in isolation which may come to fruition down road. 1. Specific things—people touched, saved, advise given, etc. 2. Modeling—an intangible product 3. written achievements—one product of isolation.
<b>7. The importance of praise</b>	<b>Praise is a major weapon in isolation processing.</b> In external isolation you probably feel less like praising than almost anything else, yet it is at that juncture that praise is probably the most important faith challenge. See Php jail experience, Ac 16, and the tone of praise in all the prison epistles--most of the opening prayers carry that note of praise. Praise will release power, new perspective in isolation.
<b>8. Short Isolation</b>	<b>Life changing and ministry changing revelation may come even in a short isolation experience.</b> Moses, 40 days of isolation by self-choice (divine drawing); Paul in two different times (Ac 9, Ananias, Ac 16 Philippian jail experience)
<b>9. Intensified Prayer</b>	<b>Isolation processing often presses a person into intensified prayer burdens and efforts.</b>

Let me summarize what we can see in Paul’s isolation experiences. Such experiences will tell a leader whether or not that leader has a sovereign mindset. They will also force reflection and evaluation of one’s self in relation to: God, truth, a ministry, the past, the future. Critical issues come into focus. Peripheral issues are seen for what they are. In normal times we worry about a lot of things--many peripheral and non-essential. But in isolation times we get down to basic issues: who we are, what we really know, where we are going, who God really is, what He wants from us, etc. A leader will deepen his/her relationship with God—because that is what really matters--more than our ministry, more than the problems around us. A leader may discover the importance of praise or see an intensified outpouring of prayer, or the roots for long range productivity in our lives.

Knowing these things, so what? How can observing these principles in the life of Paul help us as we life schedule or as we work through a present isolation experience? How can we be proactive? Here are some suggestions:

**1. Reflection**—If you are not a thinker or if you are a thinker but are confused in isolation, because you know that reflection is important, you should get with someone in the body of Christ who has either natural abilities of analytical skills, discernment, or spiritual gifts of exhortation, teaching, word of wisdom, word

of knowledge and ask for help on getting an overall perspective on what the intent of God is in the isolation. In terms of mentor types, you need to get with a spiritual guide or mentor counselor.

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5. **Deepened Relationship**—Spend time in intimacy disciplines with God; extended times of silence, solitude, prayer, Bible study, fasting.

## Conclusion

Here are some final warnings and assurances about isolation.

1. **Expect it.** About 90% of leaders go through an isolation experience of Type I or II.
2. **Recognize that there will be a sense of rejection in it.** Because of this it is helpful to keep a log of your divine affirmation and ministry affirmation items. Review them alone with God and feel anew His acceptance.
3. **Determine beforehand to go deep with God.** He will take you into a place of more dependence, perhaps a place of intimacy that you could not have without this kind of processing.
4. **Know that God will indeed meet you in isolation** though at first He may appear remote. Do not try to move out of isolation on your own until God has met you. Otherwise, you may go through a repeated isolation experience.
5. **Know the uses of isolation** and seek to see and sense which of these God is working into your life.
6. For a Type III isolation experience **set goals** for personal growth that include dependence, intimacy, and a deeper walk with God.
7. **Talk to other Christians who have gone through deep processing.** They will give you perspective with a proper empathy.

As a leader you will face isolation. Will you meet God in it and see His purposes in it fulfilled?

Remember, isolation processing comes to almost all leaders. Expect repeated isolation processing. It is needed throughout a lifetime. Don't forget, attitude is crucial. Perspective can make the difference—knowing what isolation does, that it does end, that it will accomplish many important things. If you sense you are plateauing then self-initiate an extended time of isolation—get help from mentor counselors and mentor spiritual guides.

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