

Treasure from the Desert: A Brief Guide to Private Personal Retreats with the Lord

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“Don’t you feel a tug, a yearning to sink down into the silence and solitude of God? Don’t you long for something more? Doesn’t every breath crave a deeper, fuller exposure to His Presence? It is the discipline of solitude that will open the door” (Richard Foster, CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE).

If you want to get to know a friend more deeply, it is common to spend extended periods of time with that someone special. So also in our relationship with God. There is nothing like long periods of time alone with God to cultivate that “something more” in the relationship. It is when we waste time with the Lord that we discover our love for Him and His for us. These times of extended privacy with God are also where we find that we cannot run and hide from ourselves or from God. The personal private retreat is a wonderful vehicle for intensive spiritual formation.

In conservative Protestant churches, the term “retreat” is often associated with large group social gatherings that highlight speakers and group ministry. But by speaking of a PERSONAL, PRIVATE retreat, I am referring to something quite different. It is an extended time of being “away” from the duties, people (and usually the location) of ordinary life – hence the word “retreat.” Instead of being gathered with a group of people for scheduled times of meetings and activities, a personal, private retreat places you alone with the Lord, usually with very few activities scheduled, if any. Private retreats can last anywhere from half a day to weeks. For the purposes of this introduction, I will present the material as if you were going on a half-to-full day retreat.

PREPARATION

Just as group retreats need preparation, so it is helpful to prepare to spend time alone with God. These preparations are both practical and spiritual. Practically, it is a good idea to take good care of your body prior to going on a retreat. Although your body will often respond to the slowing of pace in retreat with deep rest, it is best not to burn yourself out needlessly prior to the retreat. You do not want the refueling of your body’s energy to be the sole focus of the retreat day. In some cases, it may be wise to schedule a day for this prior to the retreat. Good sleeping, exercise and eating patterns prior to the retreat will help you be more “present” when you are actually IN retreat. It is best to choose the general location for your retreat before the day so you are not distracted with decisions as the day of the retreat arrives. Don’t take too much stuff with you, as you want the time to be as uncluttered as possible. Bring only what is necessary for your time with God.

Preparation, spiritually involves a slight turning of the mind and heart to God. Anticipate the presence of the Almighty Friend with you. How might you feel about a day alone with God? Are there some issues you need to attend to in your relationship with God? Are there areas of guidance that you might want to bring before the Lord during this time together? Are there special joys you want to celebrate with the Lord? As you prepare practically for the retreat, consider the dynamics of your relationship with God. It may be that your thoughts on these matters will remind you of the need to bring particular journals, a special book, or to choose a particular location for this retreat.

DISTRACTION

Some of the first things you may notice when you arrive at the chosen location on your day of extended time with the Lord are distractions. Distractions are the “stuff,” external or internal, that are presented in consciousness and tend to draw our attention from the presence of the God. Noises, temperature, hunger, thoughts about tomorrow’s responsibilities, and thoughts of “I wonder if I am doing this retreat right” can all be distractions. Our mind is prone to fade or wander, and at times it needs help to remain attentive to the focus of the day. Here are a few ideas for dealing with distractions:

1. Simply become aware of the distraction and return to your focus. Don't get all worked up about the fact of your distractions. Expect them. Simply acknowledge that you have stopped attending to your primary focus and place your thinking on that focus once again. If you were meditating on a passage of scripture and a cold wind drew your thoughts to the weather, and from there to your need to insulate your home, and from there . . . and then you remember your scripture passage, don't be discouraged. Just say, "Whoops, I got away for a while, Lord. Now where were we?"

2. Write it down and go on. At times the distraction will press you until you deal with it in a temporary kind of way. It is not uncommon, when you find yourself alone and clearheaded for an extended period of time, to find yourself remembering tasks and responsibilities that have been on the periphery of consciousness, but now place themselves forcefully to your mind. Sometimes the reminder of the meeting you have next week or the bill you forgot to pay will not leave your mind with a simple mental turn. At these times it is helpful to have a note pad to record these things. When you get home you can integrate them into your calendar or your checkbook. Now you are in prayer.

3. Some distractions can be gently incorporated into the spirit of your retreat. The sounds of city sirens can trigger prayers for mercy. The craving for a snack can encourage expression of your hunger for God.

4. Finally, some distractions are not really distractions at all, but signs of what the Lord may want to address in you this day. Memories, fears, anticipations that are not easily set aside in prayer may be issues the Lord is bringing to the surface to be part of His ministry during this time of retreat. Be sensitive to the intensity and quality of your thoughts and feelings. They can often serve as guides to the Lord's purpose for you in this day.

PRESENCE AND REST

As your distractions are set aside one by one, you may begin to sense a deeper awareness of the presence of the Spirit of God. You may also feel very restful and calm. In fact, you may feel sleepy. This is not unusual. You have not allowed yourself this kind of mental and physical rest for some time, perhaps. Go ahead, and allow yourself a couple of hours of "retreat sleep." Often after naps of this kind you will find yourself more refreshed and ready to converse with the Lord than you have felt in a long time.

TIME WITH THE LORD

"But," you may ask, "what do I DO in retreat? when I have found the place, when the distractions are set aside, when the sleep is over, what do I DO? Well, simply put, you BE with Him. You waste time with the Lord. Some like to sing, to pray out loud, to read scriptures, to plan priorities in the presence of God. All of this is well and good—but beware! Walking or singing or vocal praying or reading may be a doorway to the presence of God. It may be that you have not gotten a chance to express yourself to God like this in a long time. If so I am glad. But these expressions also may be ways of avoiding simple presence with God, of avoiding the voice of the Spirit. For these reasons, I encourage a great deal of sincere listening in silence whenever possible.

Private, personal retreats fall into two general categories. I call them "agenda" and "non-agenda" retreats. Agenda retreats are those where the primary attention of your time with the Lord is on some "agenda." Perhaps it is some matter of guidance, or repentance, or discovery. Sometimes you bring the issue with you to the retreat; at other times you have no idea of the issue and the Lord brings it to you during the course of the day. Godly men and women of the Church have often noted that it is alone in the desert that we face our enemy in the fiercest battles. Prayer, journal writing, meditation, reflection and more are poured out over "the issue of the day." Often guidance and personal issues are combined in agenda retreats as the Spirit of God moves us from a place of "I want" to "I will." Feel free to work and struggle with the Lord in these times. Agenda retreats can be times of powerful re-creating.

In a non-agenda retreat, there is no sense of pressing issue, no deep conviction for the day. You have brought no

agenda with you (or the agenda you brought ceases to be an agenda), and God does not “blast” you with some revelation for the day. It is simply you and the Lord “being” together. The Lord’s ministry to you can be very subtle in these times; you may not even think anything happened. You may say, “I just spent a day sitting on the beach watching the pelicans.” Yet these retreats can have some of the most significant long-term effects in your relationship with God. Sometimes, in these non-agenda retreats, God will whisper something for you to notice. In any case, isn’t it great just to spend a day alone with Jesus?

CLOSING YOUR TIME WITH GOD

When the time of your private retreat is over, spend a little while re-collecting your thoughts from the time. Around what did the retreat seem to center? Did the Lord give you any specific guidance, or any “words” or “pictures”? What implications might this time with God have for your life after retreat? It is good to enjoy the time with Jesus, but remember, his kindness leads to repentance. Don’t leave his invitation back at the beach. If appropriate, consider specific responses to the Spirit’s call upon your life. Perhaps you want to share the “meat” of the retreat with a sister or brother with whom you can be open, and to allow that one to help you process the work of the Lord in your life. The seed of this alone – together rhythm will blossom forth in a mature life and powerful ministry.

In closing, I repeat, there are few better ways to cultivate a deepening intimacy with the Lord than regular personal private retreats. The impact will not only affect your life but the lives of those around you. As Jesus returned from his time in desert solitude the scripture says of him, “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside” (Luke 4:14).