Personal Retreat

When I worked in Washington, D.C., I often ate my bag lunch as I walked to my favorite art gallery. Then, in silence, I focused my attention on one painting until time to return to work. Only one painting, because I knew that I couldn't gallop through an art gallery and expect to appreciate or understand what I was looking at. Works of art, literature, music; and even the glories of creation seldom yield themselves to the casual observer. Unless we purposely slow our pace and narrow our focus, we will miss the marrow of life.

This is especially true of our relationship with God. If our experience of God is bare boned (perhaps structurally sound, but lacking marrow), we will drudge along, trying to obey, convinced that living the Christian life is a heavy but necessary burden. But when we take time to gaze at God, our experience is transformed.

David understood this truth. He said, "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple" (Ps. 27:4).

David narrowed the lens to sharpen his focus. He sought one thing: to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. As I read the psalms, it is evident that David knew what it was to gaze unhurriedly at God. And the result, David said, was that his soul was satisfied as with marrow (Ps. 63:5, *KJV*).

> *"Retreat - to draw back, withdraw to a safe or private place; a period of retirement or seclusion, especially one devoted to religious contemplation away from the pressures of ordinary life."*

Taking time to focus on God and on our relationship with Him is called personal retreat. The dictionary defines retreat this way: "to draw back, withdraw to a safe or private place; a period of retirement or seclusion, especially one devoted to religious contemplation away from the pressures of ordinary life."

A weekly, monthly, or quarterly date with my husband, as enjoyable as that is, is meaningful because we talk and laugh and kiss every day. The date enriches what we build day by day. Personal retreat is time with God beyond daily quiet time. It isn't meant to replace our daily meeting with the Lord, but to enhance it. Retreat, then, is a special date with God.

Why do we need personal retreat?

When I lug my potted geraniums onto the deck in the morning and the wind dries them too much, I lug them back inside. I spray them with a little water and give them a chance to recover before putting them out again. Eventually, they will be outside plants. I'm in the process of preparing them for a life in a harsh environment.

In personal retreat, I find a more favorable climate for my spiritual health. I temporarily withdraw from the drying winds, baking sun, and freezing nights of a world that by its very nature puts me off course and stunts my spiritual life. Soon I'll be back out in the world, slogging through the mire with everyone else. But personal retreat provides a semi-controlled climate for spiritual growth and development.

Some people tell me they feel uncomfortable with the idea of a personal retreat. After all, the needs around us are so great, the opportunities for service so compelling. How do we reconcile taking time away from the heat of the battle when so much needs to be done?

It is precisely because the needs are so great and life so short that I take personal retreats. Retreat is a great way to advance. I know this is true

because of the way Jesus lived.

Life for Jesus was short and busy, too. He lived on earth fully aware that the clock was ticking away. Jesus had only three-and-a-half years for public ministry, but this didn't keep Him from taking personal retreats.

Jesus modeled and taught regular withdrawal into God's presence. The Gospel of Mark, the most action-packed account of the life of Jesus, shows Him continually pulling back from opportunities to minister so that He could pray and listen to His Father. His life illustrates the perfect life: one of retreat followed by intense involvement in the world.

Jesus summed it up when He said, "He will come in and go out, and find pasture" (Jn. 10:9b). Jesus gives two clarion calls: *Go* and *Come*. He sends us to a needy world in His name, and He calls us to draw near that He might reveal Himself to us and through us.

Busyness saps spiritual vitality and may in fact mask spiritual laziness. Spiritual vitality is possible only when we take the time to let God's presence recharge us.

A fast-paced life can become an opiate. We seemingly thrive on activity and pressure, and think all is well because we fly along on the adrenaline of frenzy. Not until our engine cuts out do we face the sobering realities that inactivity and silence bring. Busyness saps spiritual vitality and may in fact mask spiritual laziness. Spiritual vitality is possible only when we take the time to let God's presence recharge us.

In Hebrews, believers are commanded to enter into the rest prepared for them. Rest signifies a state of spiritual health and well-being, not an escape into nothingness. Retreat is taking time to break the intensity of activity, to slow down, to regroup. Christian retreat is meeting with the living, personal God. It is a time to learn about God and to delight in that revelation, which is the heart of worship.

Benefits of personal retreat

Retreat times are "re-times" – times of refreshment, replenishment, and reflection.

Retreat rekindles our spiritual fervor for God. Scripture admonishes us, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor" (Ro. 12:11). Time set aside to seek the Lord heightens our love for Him, and He promises to reveal Himself to the ardent seeker (Jer. 29:13). Seeking is for our sakes. It prepares us to receive His revelation and provides uninterrupted time to respond in joy and worship to this revelation.

Personal retreat renews a steadfast spirit in us (Ps. 51:10) and restores the joy of our salvation (Ps. 51:12). It also refocuses our vision and refines our perceptions by reshaping our thinking according to God's Word (Ro. 12:2). It allows us to see our tendency to drift so that we can make course corrections.

Taking the time for personal retreat

Personal retreat squeezed into busy times requires commitment and savvy. How ironic that when we need a personal retreat the most, it is most difficult to get. The pressure of a new job, or a move, or a house full of young children, or a time of caring for the ill shrinks our time as well as our personal resources. But with creativity and commitment we can often carve out the needed respite.

When my children were in high school and we juggled the family car between five of us, I found myself behind the steering wheel much of the day. The schedule chopped my days into frustrating segments, often not leaving enough time between runs to return home. I toted my Bible and study folders with me and turned those fleeting forty-five-minute blocks into mini-retreats. A picnic table in the park, a booth in a fast food restaurant, an isolated table at the library, provided a place apart



to nurture my soul. These times recharged my batteries and refreshed me physically.

Personal retreats can be measured in days or minutes. Consider setting aside a lunch hour once a week, or block out time on the weekend. Perhaps a spouse or a friend can cover for you to allow a secluded Saturday morning away. Mothers of young children can trade child care for an interrupted date with the Lord.

When the leap from rushing to get the children delivered to a friend's house to the tranquility of sitting with an open Bible seems too great a chasm for us, we can bridge the gap by a little bit of planning. I lay out a loose plan for my retreat the night before and decide what materials I'll take with me. A time-proven book, one that warms my heart and primes my spirit, helps me transition from bustle to stillness. I read only the amount necessary to move me from my hectic, temporal thoughts to the place of quiet fellowship with Christ. Then I open my Bible and notebook. However you define it, wherever you take it, and whatever length of time you allot, I'm convinced of one thing: personal retreat is not a luxury or indolence. It is a time of renewal so that we can experience flavor and power in our public lives. It is also an active choice we make to know God better. Just wanting to know Him is not enough.

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