

Living in the Companionship of God

A Personal Retreat Guide

Introduction

Why Retreat? Making Space for God

In an age when daily life and even vacations, tours and cruises are characterized by pressure-packed schedules, a day of retreat invites us to soul-nurturing rest. Jesus said, "I will give you rest," and he is eager to do that (Matthew 11:28). A retreat as extended Sabbath renews us as we experience solitude and play at a slower rhythm to allow God more space to interact with us.

Christians throughout the ages have retreated just as Jesus frequently retreated (Matthew 4:1-11; 14:13, 23; 17:1-9; 26:36-46; Mark 6:31; Luke 5:16; 6:12). The format now used of spending the night away from home was begun by very busy Christian workers (those industrious Jesuits) who needed to pause and reflect on their lives. Sometimes their retreats consisted of a day or two; other times, thirty days or more.

Retreat is an attitude as much as a specific event and place. Once you're practiced at it, even a morning in the park can be a retreat. You learn to set aside worries that you'll be bored or lonely. You let yourself be intrigued by the amazing interaction with God in ways you don't expect; you let yourself be calmed by rest that you've needed for a long time.

What a Retreat is *NOT*

A retreat is not work. It is a sacred space for rest and reflection. Your goal is not to *cover* Bible passages. Instead, by entering deeply into just a few of them, you'll interact with God about how they speak into your life. Your goal is not to come home and feel that you have

achieved anything. This retreat is not about what you can *do*. It's about interacting with God gently and knowing more about God's true self. Do you believe God loves you just for your own self . . . or do you have to be *doing* something to be loved?

The point of this retreat is to help you build a relationship with God. A *relationship* involves regular personal interaction, ongoing connection and shared life experiences. You will experience more deeply (yet also gently) what it means to have a life "in God" or "in Christ," as Paul liked to put it.

A retreat is not a non-stop Bible study. Scripture is used as a vital point of contact with God in order to have real conversations with God in each session. This process is based on what is called *lectio divina*, a way that people have prayerfully read the Bible for centuries. Today people often use self-directed effort to apply the Bible to themselves, as if to correct themselves through their own strength. In this retreat, come to the Word to be "taught by the Spirit," which may or may not be correction but just something we need to know (1 Corinthians 2:13). This sort of dialogue is essential to life in Christ.

In these conversations, the Holy Spirit will mentor you by "ask[ing] you questions you hadn't thought of, challenging you to think in new ways, dropping a few gems to capture your imagination, and allowing you to try on a few ideas before guiding you to the true nature of the issue at hand." Expect to be drawn in by the Holy Spirit so that you may not at times be able to "tell where God's words leave off and your intuitive thoughts begin."¹ Now and then, you'll be tempted to launch off onto a tangent, which is *sometimes* a good idea but other times a distraction from your conversation with God. If you're the kind of person who usually goes off on tangents, resist for a moment and continue focusing on what's in front of you and see what happens. If you don't usually go off on tangents but you're drawn to, go with it.

Bring a journal of some kind—a spiral notebook or any booklet will do—in case you need to write beyond the space provided. Writing in this guide or in a journal isn't something for you to *do* or *complete*, but just a way for you to dialog with God in a concrete way. Don't *try* to journal—just write what goes through your mind.

Don't expect to come home “a different person.” You probably will be, but not in the ways you notice at first. In fact, you may notice a shift within yourself only *after* you've been home a few days. But don't look for it. Let God show you what you need to know.

Don't take a retreat because it sounds like a trendy spiritual thing to do. Do it only because you're drawn to do so. Pay attention to the inner nudge. You may be drawn by weariness. You may be drawn by a longing to be with God. You may be drawn for reasons you don't completely understand. If you're doing it only because someone told you that should, that may create resentment and detract from your experience.

A so-called “successful” retreat occurs when we keep our “expectations low and the activities quite simple. When we expect our [retreat] to be highly ‘spiritual,’ it becomes one more thing to do, continuing the addiction to productivity that is so common in our culture.”²

How Long?

If you'd like to take a personal retreat but you're not sure how to do it, begin by spending a morning in the park once a week for several weeks. Get used to that until you love it and long for more. You can use this guide, one session per week. When you're ready for an overnight retreat, plan for it to be too short rather than too long (but at least 24 hours). Leave wishing you could stay longer. Then you'll be ready to come back.

If you want to use this guide for a one-day retreat, you'll need only three sessions at the most. Choose from the seven sessions in the Table of Contents, perhaps the ones with the asterisk (*) by them, but others if you wish. Choose the ones that draw you.

If you're taking a longer retreat, do only two or three sessions a day unless you are refreshed and ready to dig in. You will not interact with God well in the sessions unless you have allowed sufficient space to "be" and are well-rested. So don't rush, but don't become bored. In general, meeting with God in the morning, afternoon, and evening will be about right. But if you are tired, skip the afternoon one and take a nap or skip the evening one and sit on the porch instead.

If you have time to do all seven sessions, feel free to skip some and repeat ones in which you sense God particularly speaking to you. In fact, "repetitions" (repeating a session) are a common retreat practice and the second experience of a session is often better than the first.

The sessions will not be study sessions but times of conversation with God. Feel free to stop and write or think whenever you need to. Try not to let a session last more than 90 minutes. If you're tired, you may find that as little as 30-45 minutes wears you out. See what works best for you.

If you're drawn to a passage other than the ones provided, pause and ask yourself why. Is anything driving you to this passage other than God's possible drawing? (For example, you have to teach on that passage or write an assignment on it.) If you sense it is only God drawing you, go ahead and immerse yourself in it in a meditative way.

As you move through the session, feel free to innovate and do things not suggested in the guide. You'll notice that at times you're asked to read the passage slowly. You're on retreat so you can afford to move slowly and read slowly. Let the words settle within you and soak in them. At times you'll be asked to read the passage aloud. Let the words fall on your ears so that you are hearing them as if for the first time. These are the words of your Beloved to you. Cherish each word. Taste and see that God is good.

Space is provided in this guide for you to write your answers. One reason for this is that you will think more clearly if you write things down instead of just muddling them in your mind. Another reason is that you can then revisit your retreat after you've been home for a while.

In Between Sessions?

Begin your day slowly and move slowly all day. Even if you hike or walk, do that slowly. Eat your breakfast slowly. Live by the clock as little as possible. Breathe deeply and take in every color, sound and texture around you.

After your first session, listen to what's going on inside you. You may need to:

- take a nap
- do something active; if so take a walk or a hike or swim or do relaxing exercises;
- just sit and stare. Try "porch sitting," the kind of sitting and thinking about nothing in particular. Find a spot to view birds and trees, if possible, and supply yourself with something to drink and an empty pad of paper. You don't have to write anything, but if you wish to, be ready. Or you may wish to sit in a jacuzzi.
- do something creative; you may wish to bring art materials (or even a book of art reproductions to look at) or a musical instrument or binoculars to watch birds or materials needed for you to work with your hands (woodworking, needlework, beadwork).

Regarding such work with your hands: You must not try to get anything *accomplished* and you don't want it to be mentally taxing (because your mind must be free to rest and linger on what you may be hearing from God). You are doing it for fun. If you wish, bring worship music but don't try to make it a deep spiritual experience.

- light, meditative reading. You might bring favorite magazine articles that have helped you in the past or books through which God has spoken to you in the past. Read again the underlined parts. Don't bring a detective novel or something that will engage you wholly.
- worship music but remember to enjoy a lot of silence.

Because you are letting your mind rest, these in-between moments will provide space to “connect the dots” between what you lack and what you need. Ideas will coalesce and you'll be surprised what comes to you. It will create space for you to hear God.

Develop a rhythm for your day(s) that includes: rest, prayer periods, time to sit and stare, play (walking, hiking, working with your hands, looking at an art book; avoid video games). Rest a great deal. Look deeply at everything around you. End your day the same way—with a certain prayer or staring at the stars.

Retreating as a Group

Three or four people may want to take their retreat together by staying at the same location (with separate rooms for sleeping and just “being”) and meeting a few times a day. This may be as varied as a few people at a retreat center or a bunch of guys on a fishing trip. All should agree on times to be alone and times to meet and abide by these.

Times together might include one or two of these:

- discussion of what happened during their sessions—how they heard God; this may include reading of what was written in their journals

- meal times
- evenings of being together but being quiet, perhaps each reading or doing artwork or tending a campfire
- saying a pre-bedtime, evening prayer together.

This will work better if participants guard each other's quiet and work hard at not being intrusive, respecting God's ability to speak to each of us.

Preparation for your Retreat

Start gathering what you'll need, especially hiking gear or things for your creative outlets. Pray about how God might want to nurture you on this retreat. Ask someone who cares about you to pray for you while you're on retreat, especially if you're often plagued with worry or regret. Count on God's help to let go of those things.

Choosing a Retreat Site

Two important questions to consider are these:

- Do you want to fix your own food and eat by yourself (a secluded place or a retreat center hermitage) or a retreat center where you will eat with others three times a day?
- What sort of physical activity do you want to participate in (hiking, jacuzzi-sitting, fishing)?

A retreat center is better than a resort getaway because it will promote quiet. It may (or may not) have:

- a worshipping community of monks or nuns who invite you to join in certain short offices (services) throughout the day;
- a fireplace which you might enjoy tending;
- a piano you can play if you wish;

- a spiritual director. If so, make those arrangements ahead and let the director know the topic you have chosen. You may want to meet once a day with a director or even just once.

Can't I Retreat at Home?

Going away takes you away from distractions and gives you a different, more relaxed attitude. If you absolutely cannot do this (even for a morning in the park), then remove all distractions (all media: unplug or turn off telephones; do not turn on a computer or a television; do not answer the door). Find a place to “cocoon” in your house or apartment that does not remind you of work or distractions. Take everything with you that you will need. Keeping a lit candle in that room might help you quiet yourself and focus.

If you don't have much time when you'll be home alone, you may wish to do one session a week. If you do this, try to do it the same day of the week and the at the same time. This then will develop a retreat rhythm in your life.

Re-Entry Into Home, Family, And Community

Before leaving your retreat site, pause. Thank God for this extended time. As you near home, start picturing the people who may be there, what they need from you, and what your tasks will be. Thank God for these people and ask God to help you welcome them. Once you arrive, keep moving as slowly as possible.

As the days pass, continue to journal about the ideas you absorbed during the retreat. Reread your journal.

Make notes on what worked well about your personal retreat (location, setting, timing) so that your next retreat will bring an even more natural tendency to rest in God.

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¹ David Takle *The Truth about Lies and the Lies about Truth* (Pasadena, CA: Shepherd's House, 2008), 174.

² Lynne Baab A Day Off from God Stuff *Leadership Journal* Spring 2007
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2007/002/18.34.html>