

Spiritual Retreats

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him. (Psalm 37:7)

We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2. Cor. 3:18)

What Retreats are About – Some Images



When we “retreat”, we are actively creating a distance. From the demands and business of life.

We do so for a purpose: to create space to be, to be in God's presence, to re-look at our lives.

Are you able to stop? It is a spiritual discipline. It is the stop that keeps us going.



Open hands. Holding out our lives to God. Waiting to receive.

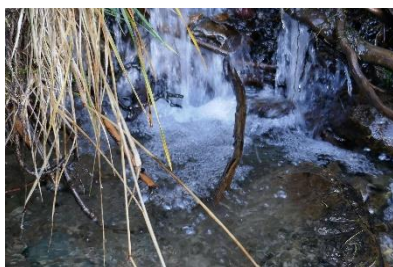
That is the posture we are invited into as we retreat.

We are not trying to be effective or to produce something. We simply come to God and make space for him to work in us.



Retreats always include an element of surrender – letting go of control. We do so trusting that the potter is never closer to the clay pot than when he is forming it.

Retreats are about letting God be God. They are about giving God the space to do whatever he wants to do.



“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters...” Isaiah 55:1

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Matthew 11:28

This is God's invitation to us: to come to the source of life, to the living waters, to himself. We retreat in order to be renewed and refreshed by the Holy Spirit.

Planning and Shaping a Retreat for Myself

_Set aside a time and find a place. If this is a new experience for you, then start small – half a day, a day or two overnights so that you have one full day without travel. Find a place that has little distraction and is inviting. A sense of rest and beauty with the option of going for walks is helpful. You might spend half a day in a park. You might spend time at a Christian retreat centre or guest house.

It can be motivating to plan your retreat with a friend. You can each spend time alone with God but include a time of sharing or a silent walk together.

_Ask yourself: What am I hoping for during this time? What do I want to ask of God? Write this down in the form of a short prayer in preparation for the retreat.

_Think beforehand about how you want to shape the time you have (see below). And then be open to God's leading. It's good to have an idea of how you want to spend the time, but don't force the time into a plan. Let the retreat take on a life of its own.

Shaping the Retreat Time

Allow yourself time to arrive – physically and emotionally. Enter into a posture of listening and being in God's presence. You might find it hard to enter silence. When we are silent, our inner life often gets loud. Notice what comes up, but don't let it distract you. Place it in God's hands. Be patient with yourself.

How can you create space for God to speak to you? This is at the heart of any spiritual retreat. Think about how you want to spend time in prayer and waiting. Think about what Scripture you might reflect on: God's Word helps us see beyond ourselves to God's reality and hear God's life-giving word to us.

What can help you look at your life? Retreats are an opportunity to reflect on what we've been experiencing and allow things to surface that were pushed away by the business of life.

It can be overwhelming to try and look at our whole life. Here are some suggestions on how to focus:

- Limit the time span you look at: 3 months, 6 months, one year.
- Write down your thoughts – it helps to concentrate and be concrete.
- If you are coming with a specific question or burden, then you have a focus. If you want to look more broadly at what has been happening in your life, you can define a few "windows" through which you look at a certain period of your life e.g. pain and burdens; encouragements, relationships, my experience of God.
- Another option is to draw your journey with regard to a defined time span – ups and downs, broad and small paths, etc. You can add key moments, relationships, Bible passages through which God spoke to you, etc.
- None of this is about being complete!! It is about prayerfully asking God what has been meaningful in your life and having space to talk with him about it.

What do you enjoy? What rests your body and soul? Make space for this. Don't think you need to be reading in the Bible, praying or reflecting all the time.

Have a time of closure to your retreat. You might want to ask yourself:

- What do I take from this time? Try capturing this in a few words e.g. by giving a name to this retreat time or by writing a short prayer.
- What follows from this retreat? Don't define more than 2-3 small realistic steps.
- With whom will I talk about this experience? Maybe you realize that you need to clarify something with a counsellor or friend. Or you simply want to share what was significant for you with someone.

You might find that there is no tangible result from your retreat time. That's o.k. Spiritual retreats are not about looking for special spiritual experiences. They are not about achieving anything. They are about spending time with God and trusting in his work – that is always worthwhile.

Therefore, relax. Enjoy! You don't need to make anything happen.

One last thing: Don't make your retreat time too full!! Don't try and do lots of things! Retreats are about changing our pace of life, slowing down, reducing life to the essentials. They are about receiving and not producing. About being, not being effective.

Resources

You might find it helpful to use one of the retreat resources on the IFES Scripture engagement website:

<https://scriptureengagement.ifesworld.org/retreats/>

These testimonies from retreats may inspire you:

<https://scriptureengagement.ifesworld.org/2018/03/having-my-ears-opened/>

<https://scriptureengagement.ifesworld.org/2021/12/refocusing-through-retreats/>