

A Minister's Private Prayer Retreat (part 2)

By Byron Fike

March, 2017

It has been 14 years since I wrote *A Minister's Private Prayer Retreat*. It was written because I believed God called me to put something in writing that would encourage ministers to follow Jesus' example recorded in Luke 5:15-16. When I finished typing the last line of the manuscript I sat back and asked God, "Now what?" I wrote it out of obedience but had no idea what God might want to do with it. I sent a copy to my friend Edward Fudge who mentioned it in an issue of GracEmail, a then weekly email of devotional thoughts and news sent to a wide audience of subscribers. About 100 people wrote and asked me to send them an electronic copy. I had some wonderful follow up conversations with many of them. One person offered to help me get it published for larger distribution but that eventually came to nothing. I have helped a few ministers develop their private prayer retreats and for that I am thankful.

What follows are some additional suggestions for a private prayer retreat as well as some things I've learned along the way. When it comes to prayer I still feel like I'm in grade school. I think it's just the nature of prayer that we never feel like we really know what we're doing. We are, after all, just children dependent upon our Heavenly Father. May I never get so educated in the art and experience of prayer that I forget and think more of myself than I should.

The Length of Your Retreat

One minister encouraged me to give a warning to those attempting such a retreat. He is an extravert and after a couple of days in solitude he felt he was going crazy. My son told me about a minister friend of his who went to a retreat center and after only a few hours packed up his belongings and loaded his car to leave. At that point he changed his mind and returned to his room. My warning would be this: *Expect to think and feel the following:*

- This is a complete waste of time
- There are so many important things I need to be doing
- I wonder if people know I'm working or if they think I'm loafing
- I feel NOTHING; God's not giving me ANYTHING!

On that last item, I must say a few words. On one of my retreats I became verbally agitated at God. I was sacrificing a week of my life to receive his instructions and guidance but he was not doing what he needed to do! I was fulfilling my part; why wasn't he doing his? I remember I was well into the retreat and resigned myself to coming home having completely wasted my time. After ranting to God, I repented. I told God if he didn't want to give me any new insights into his word or my ministry, if he choose not to refresh my spirit or renew my calling, if he just wanted nothing more than for me to give one week of my life and receive nothing in return; then I would be ok with that. I would surrender myself to him whether or not I received any benefit from the surrender.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the

olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

I discovered what Habakkuk realized, *“The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights” (3:19).*

My advice for the extraverts and all others is to make a plan and stick to it. My advice would be the same as what I give to those contemplating their first food fast: Achieve a small goal before setting a larger one. Planning to spend to a long time in seclusion may be setting yourself up for failure. Instead of a week, why not set a goal to spend 3 days and 2 nights? Or, even one night? Make your plans ahead of time and, except for an emergency, stay put.

I have a friend who fasted until he decided whether or not he should ask a specific woman to marry him. He eventually did decide, broke his fast, married her and they are married to this day. This is another type of goal one could set. One could go on a prayer retreat and decide not to return until a specific decision was made. I think this was the reasoning behind Jesus’ all night prayer (Luke 6:12). I once thought he prayed all night because that was a cool way to get God’s favor. In college I was with a group planning to go on a summer campaign and we decided to pray all night in preparation. It was great at first, but finally we became so sleepy we spent the last couple of hours playing volleyball. I didn’t leave that prayer session feeling like a spiritual giant, but I think God must have had a smile on his face since he knew our hearts. The campaign was blessed and so were the campaigners.

I believe Jesus prayed all night because it took that long until he was sure which of his disciples he should select to be designated as apostles (Luke 6:13). I think he began his prayer time knowing that was the decision he must make. Perhaps he thought it would come within the first hour only to discover that clarity would not be revealed until he had persevered through the entire night. There are some decisions that require much more than making a list of pros and cons. Of course, all decisions of consequence need to be brought to God in prayer; however some choices are of such great importance that one must wrestle in prayer (see Colossians 4:12) as Jacob did with the angel of God. He refused to let go until he received God’s blessing (Genesis 32:26). Interestingly, that wrestling match also lasted an entire evening.

How wonderful it would be if all God’s people took their life decisions so seriously that they refused to make them until they received assurance of God’s direction and leading. Decisions such as vocation and marriage have such long lasting ramifications how could a disciple of Jesus not wait for God’s blessing? There are also decisions about where to live and what type of lifestyle one should seek. For ministers there is the question of when to leave a specific ministry and move to another. Surely, one should not make that decision without the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But returning to the thought of pre-planning one’s prayer retreat. Set a time frame, whether it is to go for a specific number of days or to be gone until one has what they need from

God to make an important decision. Set the goal and see it through to the end.

Contemplative Prayer

I have continued the practice of having an annual retreat that I began in 1998. I still follow the guidelines I set for myself years ago but have also gained new insights that I have incorporated. Several years ago I was introduced to the concept of contemplative prayer. I was well acquainted with prayer practices that utilized words, but was unfamiliar with the kind of prayer one author described as “wasting time with God.” Contemplative prayer calls us to a place where we can be in God's presence simply for the sake of relationship. A most helpful resource for beginners (like myself) is *Armchair Mystic: Easing into Contemplative Prayer* by Mark Thibodeaux. The book details a marvelous four-part explanation of how prayer evolves. It provides a useful framework for examining one's prayer life. He also gives a number of very practical "step-by-step" instructions in how to begin to pray contemplatively.

On one of my prayer retreats I was sitting on a secluded beach near Galveston, Texas. I wasn't “trying” to do anything but simply be in the presence of God. I was pondering the mysteries of God's creation in the water, the wind, the sky, the clouds, the sand. I noticed a couple walking down the beach toward where I was sitting. They were so far away I could not discern much about them, but as they came closer I noticed it was an older couple holding hands. They passed where I was and continued on their way. What I noticed was that they never said a word to each other. They didn't need too. Words would have gotten in the way. They were just enjoying being together, walking together, holding hands and experiencing the beach. I told God, “that's what I'm doing here with you.”

Contemplative prayer is “prayer without words” or, at least, very few words. There are a number of exercises one can use to assist them. A helpful resource for these is *Spiritual Discipline's Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. Two that I use quite often in my private retreats as well as group retreats are these:

1. **Centering Prayer** - Focus attention on a single word or phrase such as *Peace*, *Jesus*, or *The Lord is My Shepherd*. Let that word help block out distractions as you seek to simply be in the presence of God. When you feel your mind wandering, repeat the word. Try this for 2-3 minutes and you'll discover it's extremely difficult, yet profitable.
2. **Breath Prayer** - Allow your breathing to become your prayer. Take a sentence and quietly say part of it as you inhale, and the rest as you exhale. For example, inhale while saying, “*The Lord is my Shepherd*”; exhale while completing the verse, “*I shall not want*”. Continue for long as you desire. Some have found the wording to what is known as the Jesus Prayer to be useful: “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God*” (while inhaling) “*have mercy on me a sinner*” (while exhaling). You will recognize this as a combination of the blessed confession made by Peter in Matthew 16:16 and the humble prayer of the penitent sinner in Jesus' parable recorded in Luke 18:13.

Contemplative prayer takes a lot of pressure off the one praying. I once thought that

unless one was speaking (or listening to another speak) they weren't praying. I now believe that prayer is more of an attitude, an awareness of being in the presence of God. While God may choose to speak though loud and obvious means such as a mountain shattering wind, an earthquake, or a fire he revealed himself to the discouraged prophet Elijah in a "gentle whisper" (1 Kings 19:11-12). One cannot hear a gentle whisper until they are quiet and still. One reason we do not hear God speaking to us today is because we are talking too much.

Praying With Nature

The first retreat I took after learning a little about contemplative prayer I became extremely observant. I was camping on that retreat so I was immersed in nature. I learned to listen and watch even the small things. I first wrote in my journal that it was monotonous. I later corrected that by noting that watching a machine is monotonous. It goes through the same repetitive motion over and over and over. You can't watch it for long without being bored out of your mind. At the time I was watching a field. Every time the wind blew the grass moved differently. Slight differences, but different just the same. The clouds above my head kept moving and changing. Wildlife would appear and disappear. Nothing was ever exactly the same.

On another retreat I decided to go further in this exercise. I would seek to see God in nature. I was sitting on a swing and began to look around just to see what was there. I was amazed at the scriptures that came to mind. Here is what I saw and experienced and the verses God gave me:

The Wind

"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

The Grass

If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? (Matthew 6:30)

The Trees

"That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers." (Psalm 1:3)

The Sky

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." (Psalm 19:1)

The Clouds

"At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." (Luke 21:27)

Praying Through Your Life

While contemplative practices have become extremely valuable to me on my retreats, I utilize a number of other means to bring myself to the Lord as a servant ready to do his will. I distinctly remember one retreat where I was sitting outside at night next to a campfire. I decided to do a prayer I had heard about but never attempted. I began by remembering what I knew of my ancestors. My family has a long tradition of being Christians. Long before I was born my paternal grandfather was an elder in his church. Before the surgeon general put warnings on packages of cigarettes my grandfather decided to quit smoking. He would wake up coughing in the morning and told my father the coughing was evidence to him that smoking must be a sin. I thanked God for the grandfather I never knew (he died before I was born) who acted on the courage of his convictions that his body might be a holy temple for God's Spirit.

My prayer continued through reviewing what I knew of other ancestors and especially my parents. I thanked God for their journey of faith. I knew of difficult decisions they had made because they were Christ followers. I went through my life. My childhood. Influential people. Evil people. Good decisions and bad. Consequences I'd suffered. Multitudes of undeserved blessings. I thought of people I had hurt and sinned against and I grieved. I thought of people who had blessed me and I rejoiced. All along the way I saw that God was with me always.

I was in no hurry. I had all the time in the world. I had no agenda except to pray. I don't know how long I sat by that fire but I was alone so I wept freely, I even shouted joyfully, but mostly I just pondered my way through my life with God as my guide.

Using My Body as Prayer

It is interesting to study the various positions of Bible characters when they prayed. They stood, knelt, and lay prostrate. They lifted their hands and their faces. (I've learned from experience that bowing your head and lifting your hands at the same time is unnatural and painful.) There is only one instance I have found of a person sitting while praying Elijah was so discouraged he sat under a broom tree and prayed to die. (See 1 Kings 19:4). Interesting that sitting is the preferred posture for prayer today.

I wrote a little booklet to help people experiment with various prayer positions. I have used it on some retreats as an aid to prayer.

Praying for the Church

Early on in my prayer retreats I would explain to the congregation what I was doing and ask them to pray for me while I was gone. I might describe a little of what I would be doing and why I was doing it. Eventually I began to place index cards in the pews and ask people to write down their prayer requests. I promised to pray for them every day of my retreat. The cards were sometimes heart wrenching. People often struggle in silence until someone they trust gives them a reason to break the silence. I prayed for relationships, cancers, unemployment, depression, faith struggles, children who had left the Lord, on and on. Occasionally, there would be a card with a prayer being offered for me. How I treasured those cards as I would pray through that stack day by day!

I distinctly remember one day while praying through the list of cards imagining God as a white bearded Santa Claus listening to children sitting on his lap reading a list of what they wanted to Christmas. As I read the list of requests God would stroke his beard, nod his head, and say, "I'll see what I can do about that." After that vision I decided to change how I was praying over the cards. Up until that time I would read the card aloud and then verbally petition God concerning the request. Did I think my words would make the difference in whether or not God answered? I remember the first change I made was to read the card aloud and then simply hold it high above my head toward God.

C. S. Lewis described his intercessory prayers like this: he would picture the person in his mind and hold that image up to God. Today, I still pray over every request every day. But I no longer feel it necessary to add my commentary to each prayer request. I don't necessarily hold the cards in the air anymore, but I do "lift up" the request for God to do what is right and what is best according to his will. Of course, if I am so moved to speak, I do. It's just that I no longer believe my words are necessary for God to hear and answer.

Another practice I have developed is to pray through the church directory. I pray for every family and for every family member. My church is large enough that this is very time consuming and I usually divide the directory and pray over only a portion each day. While going through I experience all kinds of emotions. Struggling marriages, disobedient children, and medical issues are always disturbing, however new believers, spiritual victories, and sacrificial living bring joy to my heart. I often make lists of people I may need to visit, non-Christians I need to talk too, etc...

Praying the Psalms

In March, 2005 I read Eugene Peterson's book, "Answering God." Peterson builds a convincing case for praying through the book of Psalms from start to finish. Long ago I had been introduced to praying the Psalms. When I attended the Albert Lemmons prayer seminar in my college years he gave an entire lesson on using the Psalms in prayer. In the notes he provided for seminar participants he had two pages of selected passages from the various Psalms. His "lesson" for that session was to word a prayer from the lectern using those scriptures as a spring board to offer thanksgiving and praise to God. This was an entirely new experience for me. I would later read the book of Psalms and underline passages that I believed would help me in offering such prayers. The problem, of course, with such selection of scripture is one doesn't know what to do with the portions that are not underlined.

Peterson taught me that ALL of the psalms are to be prayed. In my journal on March 14, 2005 I wrote the following:

"I have just finished reading "Answering God" and am committing myself to pray through the Psalms. Although I am not completely certain I know what I am doing I want to take 15-20 minutes each day to read the Psalms aloud and record my

thoughts. May God bless this effort to respond to him and his communication to my heart.”

I have been praying the Psalms since that day. I still don't know what I'm doing. I'm not convinced there is a "right" way to pray the Psalms. One either prays them or they don't. However, to pray the Psalms opens one's heart to say things they might never say otherwise. Every human emotion is expressed including the darkest ones of terror, rage and depression. Things are said to God in the Psalms that don't sound very Christian. As you pray through, you will blame God for problems, express anger that God is not doing what he should, and ask God to do terrible things to enemies.

What I have come to realize is that these are simply words. They are not actions. Asking God to break the teeth of the wicked is completely different than breaking the wicked's teeth yourself! The Psalms give us permission to tell God exactly what we are thinking and feeling without a filter. What one discovers in praying the Psalms is that when you allow yourself to feel and express your negative emotions you open up your heart to give full expression to the positive expressions of praise, thanksgiving and blessing. Further, when you are honest about what is in your heart you thus give God "permission" to do his wonderful work of transformation. How often does a Psalm begin in anger, depression, or doubt and yet end in praise? Through the process of honest prayer, God changes the heart of the one praying.

I am currently writing a book giving a simple way to pray each one of the 150 Psalms. However, you don't need to wait for the book. On your prayer retreat, start at the beginning and slowly pray through each Psalm. I'd recommend journaling your thoughts and feelings as you go. Remember, 65 books of the Bible were written as God's communication to us. Psalms is unique in that it was written so that we would communicate to God.

Lessons Learned and Relearned

As I've mentioned before, I journal through every prayer retreat. I journal at other times as well, but I find it especially important that I do this as a spiritual discipline when on retreat. I now have something of a record of my spiritual journey. Surveying the 19 years I've been doing annual prayer retreats reveals a great deal about my life with God and the church.

For one thing, reviewing what I've written reveals that I don't go on prayer retreats because I am a spiritual giant. Rather, my journal entries are full of expressions of doubt, fear, anxiety, judgement, discouragement, and faith crises. I struggle with the sins of arrogance, pride, lust, and envy. On one occasion my faith was so weak I forced myself to make a list in answer to the question, "Why Do I Believe?". I ended up writing pages and pages seeking the answer to that simple question. (Incidentally, I answered it by asking 20 pointed questions, such as, "Why is there color?", "Why is there beauty?", "What is time?", and "Why is there love?")

I have especially struggled with the church. Why do I often see her as an ugly ogre when Jesus only sees her as his beautiful bride? Why do I struggle so much with her dysfunction when Lord knows my life is not nearly as together as I want people to believe? One lesson God has

taught me over and over is patience. I'd like to place a sign over our church house that reads, "*Be patient with us; God isn't finished yet.*" But, I would do better to place that sign on my office door and change the "*us*" to "*me*".

My journals reveal something else that is far more wonderful than my sins and failures. My journals reveal God's deep love for me. Spending time with him in solitude always seems to bring this message through loud and clear. During one retreat in particular this message came by God affirming me and my calling. God gave me clarity on exactly what my job should be; and what it was not. Once when revealing just how unloving I was; he overwhelmed me with how much he loved me.

He often reminds me just how blessed I am. Not in a way that would shame me. No, in a way that makes me weep with joy that God would show me so much favor. I know God has no favorites, but loves each of his children the same. But, when I slow down and spend time with him he lets me know that I am his beloved child. He loves me, not because of what I do, but because of who I am. I am his creation. I am unique. I am unlike any person who has ever lived or ever will live. God has uniquely gifted me to be who I am. I don't need to compare myself to anyone else. Comparison keeps me from being the one-of-a-kind creation of God. God calls me to accept who I am by his grace, and live my calling.

In one form or another, this is the message I receive on every retreat. Sometimes it is very subtle. A gentle nudge. A word of encouragement. Other times I am simply immersed in God's love. When I begin the retreat I don't what know what the outcome will be. I've learned not to even try to predict. I simply need to show up, to be present, to be honest, to be alert to God's Spirit, and to listen.