



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Meeting God (Again)
in Spiritual Retreat
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 38-46)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 An Evening Walk
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 70-71)
- 📖 Joined by Christ
on the Path
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 72-73)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Meeting God (Again) in Spiritual Retreat

Spiritual retreat equips a serious seeker of God to find God in daily life. We can experience retreat in many ways. We give up grading how it went by our standards of evaluation and simply trust that our efforts will produce the fruit we need, perhaps not from our perspective, but from God's.

Prayer

O Lord, we long for the day when our feet will stand within the gates of the New Jerusalem.
Until then, as we journey toward home, guide and protect your church. Bind us in unity, clothe us in truth, and keep us in peace.
We pray in the strong name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 24:13-35

Meditation†

We *shouldn't* have problems with fatigue or depression or anger or control or abandonment. No dysfunction *should* ripple into our families. Our jobs *should* be advancing or at least stable and preparing us for retirement. We *should* be bursting with love for everyone, be perfectly married or living joyfully though single. We *should* be living a victorious, effortless and powerful life.

Our "shoulds" and their accompanying guilt exhaust us. And I don't know a single person living like that.... A personal retreat allows us room to be honest with God about how imperfect we are, how disillusioned we are about our life and our inability to live holy and wholly this side of heaven.

Jane Rubietta

Reflection

"The idea of going away on a spiritual retreat is at odds with the American culture in which achieving, accomplishing, and acquiring are the rules of the road," Jeanie Miley admits. Yet this form of travel allows us "to draw apart, unplug, disconnect, and pause in order to advance in the personal quest to meet God and deepen the relationship with this Mystery. Taking the time to disengage from routine and participate in retreat provides inner resources that reprioritize the multiple quests of daily life."

Miley describes the richness of three kinds of spiritual retreat.

- ▶ *A silent retreat in solitude* can be "radically transforming and empowering," Miley reports. "It is in the silence that we can hear the chatter in our own heads and sift and sort through the various pulls on our attentions and affections enough to finally be open more fully to the presence of the still, small voice of the Living God. In placing oneself in the atmosphere and attitude of meeting God, it is often possible to get a new perspective on old problems and to see with clearer eyes." She commends meditative walking and repetitive physical activities (she takes her needlepoint), which "free the brain from its attachment to rational, logical ruminations and incessant planning, analyzing, and critiquing, and engage the more intuitive, creative, spontaneous part of the brain."



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“While it is good to have a stated intention of meeting God on retreat, it is important to hold that intention with a light touch,” she notes. “One should not be overly anxious about when God might show up and how, and while an ecstatic experience might be wonderful, putting God to the test of how and when and what he might do boxes God in and reveals our own need to control.” The silence and solitude of retreat overflow with value to others, for “there is a correlation between being comfortable alone with God and yourself and being involved in a healthy way in a community.”

- ▶ *Retreats with peers in one’s church family or gathered from faraway places* may involve planned activities like hearing the wisdom of teachers, processing their presentations in small groups, resting and recreating in nature, and experiencing silence together. Such retreats provide opportunities “to meet God in each other, to see each other with increased understanding and, hopefully, compassion,” she notes. “In a myriad of ways we lend not only our minds out to each other, but our hearts and our hands, our shared quests for God, and the moments when God met us with his love.”
- ▶ *Family retreats* are invaluable for adults and children “to gather at a place where fun is provided in age-appropriate activities, to meet together in large groups for worship, and to see each other in relaxed settings, seeking a more meaningful relationship with God.” Such retreats model how families “can set aside time on vacations to orient children toward the idea of meeting God.”

“It does not matter if I am going away on a retreat to fill my own cup or to facilitate a retreat for others, I return refreshed and restored,” Miley concludes. “Meeting God in retreat with the focused intention and stated purpose of nurturing the daily practice of the presence of God has a way of preparing our minds and hearts to be open to experiencing God in the ordinary, the mundane, and even the difficult and tragic.”

Study Questions

1. Discuss what the three types of spiritual retreat described by Jeanie Miley share in common. Why, according to Miley, is this sort of travel especially valuable for our discipleship?
2. Have you enjoyed one of these types of spiritual retreat? What type of retreat would be most attractive and valuable to you at this point in your discipleship?
3. In *Jesus and His Disciples on Their Way to Bethany*, how does Henry Ossawa Tanner depict Christ’s relationship with his disciples? What is the significance of the biblical theme that they ‘retreated’ each evening from Jerusalem to Bethany?
4. Compare the interpretations of Luke 24:13-35 in Lelio Orsi’s painting, *The Walk to Emmaus*, and David Music’s hymn text, “While on the Long Emmaus Road.” How does this biblical story serve as an emblem of the spiritual retreats commended by Jeanie Miley?

Departing Hymn: “While on the Long Emmaus Road” (vv. 1, 2, 3, and 5)

† Jane Rubietta, *Resting Place: A Personal Guide to Spiritual Retreats* (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 10-11.

Meeting God (Again) in Spiritual Retreat

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To outline the common goals and the various types of Christian spiritual retreat.
2. To consider the value of each type of spiritual retreat for our discipleship.
3. To interpret the Emmaus story in Luke 24:13-35 as an emblem of spiritual retreat.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Traveling Well (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"Often, a retreat is a chance to get away from routine and hear stimulating or inspirational speakers, get better acquainted with others in a relaxed environment, and participate in games and other forms of recreation," Jeanie Miley explains. "Those forms of retreats are still enjoyable and meaningful for me, but it was on a warm spring day at Wellspring, the retreat center sponsored by the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, that a new dimension was added to the spiritual practice of retreat. There, gathered with about thirty other seekers, I experienced my first *silent retreat* for which the stated purpose was to *meet God* in the silence, and in those twenty-four hours, I found a resource and a practice for which I had been searching.

"That particular retreat with its emphasis on the nurturing of the *inward journey* convinced me of the value and necessity of such retreats if I was going to be equipped for the demands and challenges of the *outward journey*. My religious heritage over-emphasized being busy for God and *doing*, and either neglected or minimized the practices of nourishing the kingdom within. That retreat at Wellspring introduced me to the contemplative life, and set me on a path that has been vital to my spiritual life and, in fact, to my general well-being.

"That silent retreat introduced me to the practices that would make it more likely for me to be aware of God's presence. The orientation of the retreat showed me that a person could grow into expecting that meeting God in the everyday ordinary could become a natural part of one's everyday life." (*Traveling Well*, pp. 38-39)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 24:13-35 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Like both the pilgrimage and the short-term mission trip (in the second and fifth studies in this series), the spiritual retreat can be a specifically Christian form of travel experience. If we follow Jeanie Miley in understanding

the spiritual retreat rather broadly, we can use elements of retreat to enrich our family vacations and hiking (as in the first and third studies). Encourage members to share their experiences on various forms of spiritual retreat. Perhaps your group will use this opportunity to plan or join a retreat.

Study Questions

1. Jeanie Miley emphasizes that “we experience retreat in many ways.” The three families of retreat discussed here—silent, specific group-oriented, and family-oriented retreats—share the common goal of “equip[ping] the serious seeker of God to find God in daily life.” Each type requires careful planning and involves withdrawing from one’s usual daily activities for a period. These are special times of intentionally seeking God’s presence, yet they do not “program” or manipulate an appearance by God; they clear time from disciples’ busy lives and provide an opportunity for them to “wait for the Lord.”
2. Encourage members to share their experiences of planned spiritual retreat—perhaps in a youth camp, a church weekend outing, a visit to a retreat center, or so on. How would they categorize the retreat, and what has been its lasting value? Would they repeat that experience, or improve on it?

The three types of retreat have different emphases—quieting one’s heart before God (in what Miley calls the “inward journey”), encouraging one another in spiritual growth, and developing cross-generational family patterns of seeking a deeper relationship with God. Depending on one’s stage in life and discipleship needs, one of these types of retreat might seem more attractive and valuable than the others.

3. In Henry Ossawa Tanner’s *Jesus and His Disciples on Their Way to Bethany*, Jesus walks ahead of the disciples. To emphasize Jesus’ leadership, Tanner inserts the figure of a goat herder bowing in reverence to the Lord. Of course, the herder/shepherd’s task is a biblical emblem of Jesus’ guiding and caring for the disciples. Bethany, a small town just one and a half miles southeast of Jerusalem, was the home of Jesus’ close friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Tanner, following his pastor father’s interpretation, presents the nightly walk to Bethany as entering a quiet retreat from all the bustle, ministry, and confrontation in Jerusalem.
4. Both Lelio Orsi’s painting and David Music’s hymn interpret the disciples’ spiritual condition and quest. Orsi depicts the disciples “in pilgrim’s clothing,” Heidi Hornik notes. The disciple on the left is wringing his hands in anxiety; both appear to be despondent, and they prominently carry swords because they are afraid. By contrast, Christ steps confidently forward, his hand outstretched as if in animated conversation.

David Music describes the disciples as “weighed down with grief and sorrow’s load.” The spiritual refreshment they sought (“in hopes their dreams would be restored”) is available to us as we journey on pilgrimage (stanza 3) and ministry (stanza 4): “our hopes refreshed, our dreams restored, / for as we go, we take the Lord.”

Departing Hymn

“While on the Long Emmaus Road” is on pp. 55-57 of *Traveling Well*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.