

Personal Retreat Assignment

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Introduction

For the assignment, I took advantage of prior international plans I had made to embark on this personal retreat. I arrived two days early to Thailand in the region of Udon Thani, where I spent 24 hours at the Asia Bible Seminary to meet with and hear from God. To prepare, I engaged in a three day fast where I drank only water and abstained from social media and visual forms of entertainment (i.e. movies, TV).

Preparing for the Retreat

Going in to this personal retreat, there had been a lot of spiritual clutter had been accumulating within me, which only became more pronounced as I fasted. First, I was aware of some warning signs that I was choosing to ignore within the past month. I was beginning to ignore and avoid people, especially those associated with my church and the parachurch missions organization I am a part of. Not only was I pushing aside or even ignoring messages they sent to me, but this avoidance was beginning to morph into a neglect of my church and school work. During Mondays, which are my weekly day of rest, I was less inclined to spend time along with God and prone to watching TV shows and movies all while staying at home alone. It hadn't reached a heightened state of severity, but I was definitely getting there. Second, I was finding myself getting more and more short-tempered with others and becoming increasingly critical of those around me.

During my air travel to Thailand, I chose to keep with the parameters of my fast and abstain from the in-flight entertainment that was available to me. During the many hours that remained when I wasn't sleeping, I read Henri Nouwen's Return of the Prodigal Son and journaled to process through my thoughts. It was at this time that God showed me that the behaviors I had been engaging in were all centered on avoidance –

avoiding responsibilities and avoiding people. Even the critical attitude I was displaying was both a projection of my feelings towards self on to others but also a means of pushing people away. When I asked God why this was the case, He simply told me, “You’re afraid.” Going into the retreat, I had found a goal for myself: discover the root of this fear and surrender it to God.

At the Retreat

Being in a foreign country where I didn’t speak the language and had no access to the Internet helped tremendously. My schedule was bound to the eating schedule of the seminary and due to it being during mid-year break, I and only the overseeing pastor’s family were on-campus. Other than a time of personal worship in the student chapel by myself, I largely engaged in the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude. I hiked around the eight acres of the seminary and spent most my time journaling within the surrounding forest.

At first, my thoughts were largely transfixed in a “get-it-done” mentality. At the top of my journal, I wrote the word “FEAR” in all-caps and underlined and wrote three questions underneath: Where does it come from? Why does it persist? How do I surrender it? Coming from this approach proved largely futile. Most of my time in the beginning was met with silence and distracted thoughts. I began to think of all the schoolwork I had to catch up on, wondering if I had sent all the emails I had to send for church. When I realized there were some things I had forgotten to relay, I immediately got up to go send it from my iPad. When I reached the school office and tried to connect to the Wifi, my iPad shut down and wouldn’t turn on. I took this as a sign that I wasn’t doing something right.

So I began again and this time approached God without my journal and from the sanctuary of the small cabin I was staying in. Just a few minutes passed before I began to see a vision of God entering the room. He climbed the bed I was sitting on and instead of sitting in front of me and speaking to me like I thought He would, He sat behind me and began to cradle me in His arms, and for a long time He just embraced me.

I began to weep and stayed that way for much longer than I expected to. In the silence of what felt like an hour or so, I cried all the while seeing God embrace me. After a long while, I heard Him say to me, “Rachel, with me you’re safe.” It was then that I began to see where all these avoidant behaviors started as of late. With the turn of the new year, I had been tasked with more responsibilities both at church and within my parachurch ministry. I was asked to lead a major event this summer and although I said, “Yes”, a seed of insecurity planted itself within me, manifesting in agitation, defensiveness, avoidance, and reluctance. In a way I was self-sabotaging myself before anything really began. I was obeying for the sake of obedience, but faith was not present.

I’ve come to realize so much about myself within the past year and a half at school. Taking courses like ISF and PPTFM and others, God’s been revealing past hurts and woundings and helping me understand much about my present behaviors and inclinations. But with this retreat, I realized that mere acknowledgement is not where the journey ends. God is too good and too faithful to end it there. I was reminded of Genesis 50 where Joseph addresses his brothers: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...” (Gen. 50:20). In the process of transformation and the restoration of evil for good, there’s a real tension that exists with the loss of what is known and a faith

that's demanded to step in to the invitation of God for the better. And it's in this place that I find myself.

Much of the end of the retreat was spent in repentance. One by one, the thoughts and habits I engaged in that was contrary to the reality of God in my life, I walked through with the Lord and repented of. I felt compelled to look at each of these instances and declare "No more" as I walked in hand with the Father. But at the very last, I felt overwhelmed by an enormity of gratitude and hope. It's so hard to die and I am so bad at it, but as I closed my eyes all I could see was the vision of the empty cross before me, promising the power of resurrection life.

Conclusion

I already know that this year will be increasingly busy for me. But all the more, and especially in large part to this retreat, I need to slow down and plant my feet firmly in the Presence of God. I benefitted from this time not only through the revelations God granted to me in the specifics of my current life stage, but in setting an attitude of "plantedness" for the remainder of this year. In light of this, I plan on partaking in personal retreats 3 more times for this year and re-evaluate that rhythm at the year's end.