

CHAPTER 7

RETREAT

“It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silent.” (Lamentations 3: 27,28)

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A) INTRODUCTION

What is the cause of our mistakes and our getting astray from God? What is the cause of our spiritual and intellectual deviations? What is the reason for the many problems we face and our inability to solve them? What is the reason for all that?

The reason is that we do not know ourselves well. But where do I know myself? Where do I know myself naked of all the fake clothes which are covering its mistakes? Where do I know the truth which the Lord spoke of, "And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32) But where do I see God?

Do I know myself amid the noises of this world? Can I see God amid people and tumult and clamor? No, I will never know myself unless I go away from people and see it in the light of God. There I will examine it. **I can never see God in His glory unless I go up on the mountain of transfiguration, after I leave the world, at my back, even temporarily and rise up on the mountain of meditation.**

Since his creation, the human being has not suffered from the whirlpool of life as he has in this present time. There are strong trends trying to pull him downward, toward the materialistic and carnal. This age is the age of speed, in which life is going very fast and everyone is trying to catch up with the trend, and woe is to him who is left behind!

Many wrong principles and incorrect theories, from the spiritual point of view, have penetrated our society and even our private life. We are not aware of them because we are accomodating with the speed of life. Do not think that the strong harmful trends are limited to the world, but rather you can find them also in the field of service. How many blessed personalities have been active at one time, but have perished during their service because they have forgotten themselves!

Poor is God's servant whom the devil of service deceives and keeps him running like a windmill and makes him think that this is acceptable unto God. Do not say that you have served and cast out devils in the name of Christ, lest you hear the fearful voice saying, "Go away, I do not know you."

Many of God's servants are void of grace. They use service and its different activities as a cover to hide their mistakes. They put on the beautiful clothes of Christ but what is most important is to put on Christ Himself, not His clothes. **"But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."** (Romans 13:14)

B) THE BLESSINGS OF RETREAT

We need retreat to examine ourselves and find out how much we have deviated from the truth and to correct what the spirit of this age has spoiled owing to conforming to this world.

If you want to know yourself in its reality, and the amount of fruits you bear being a branch in the true vine our Lord Jesus Christ, enter your room, close your door and sit quietly. Examine your deep self then you will realize how poor you are, "That you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked." (Revelation 3:17) **You will see the branch of your life fruitless. You will see the axe put on the root of the tree and you will hear these divine words, "Every tree that does not bear fruit is cast in the fire."** You will see your sins made clear as you go to be judged. You will discover your hypocrisy and deceit in service, even if unintentionally.

You will be frightened by St. James' words, "Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." (James 3: 1) You will see everything in its reality, you will see yourself naked and your mistakes which you were careful to avoid. It is good that we see ourselves, in our realities. You will see yourself in God's image and you will discover how awful you are and that you do not resemble God at all, though you are created on His image and are called to be conformed to the image of His Son, the firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)

Discovering one's mistakes is a great blessing for it is the only means to get cured. One of the saintly fathers said, "Knowing one's self is the assured means to know God." But what is the significance of knowing myself? And what do I know about myself when I am alone? I know that it is full of sins and weaknesses. "For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, nothing good dwells." (Romans 7:18) What is the significance of knowing my weaknesses? Once I know my weaknesses, I know God. "My strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) "For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12: 10) Once I realize how awful my sins are, then I become worthy of God's grace.

St. Peter said to Jesus, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." (Luke. 5:8) Peter felt how bad his condition was. The Lord Jesus answered him, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men." (Luke 5: 10) When did Peter deserve this great role of discipleship and apostleship and the great honor of service? This was at the moment he knew himself and said, "I am a sinful man." God's answer to his feeling was, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men." Yes, from now, that is, from that moment. Therefore, knowing ourselves is the means to know God and we cannot reach this knowledge unless we get away from noise, in quiet and retreat.

In retreat, you will have a chance to be sorry, supplicate God and weep. How can you have this chance in the midst of the world?

The practice of retreat with the spirit of meditation is the most successful method to discipline one's self and to rebuild its personality according to high ideals. Retreat is a school for virtue, a lighted ladder that leads fast to God. It is the landing place of holy inspiration. The

voices of the trumpets and drums hinder the soft voice of the violin. Therefore, we cannot hear God's voice in the midst of the noises of the world and the wandering of the mind and the deceit of the senses.

If you put some unfiltered water in a container and leave it alone, it will become clean. Likewise, the soul, when it is alone, it gets purified and reaches holiness. The woman with the issue of blood had spent all that she had on doctors and became worse. But when **she went secretly** and touched the hem of Jesus' garment, she was healed at once. (Matthew 9:20-22) **Likewise, a soul suffering from the misery of sin and trying to get cured by any means cannot be cured. It needs to touch the Savior secretly, in a holy retreat, in order to be healed.**

You cannot get figs from thorns. Also, you cannot get true comfort for your soul as long as you are attached to people and concerned with the cares of life. Our Lord Jesus said, "When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut the door..." (Matthew 6:6) Do you want comfort for your troubled soul and quietness for your heart? Do you want tears to cry for your sins? Do you want a pious soul saying, "My heart is stricken like grass, so that I forget to eat my bread. Because of the sound of my groaning, my bones cling to my skin." (Psalms. 102: 4,5) Do you want a pure heart which God witnesses that it is like God's heart? (Acts 13:22). **Do you want all that? Therefore, you have to follow David's advice when he said, "Indeed I would wander far off, and remain in the wilderness." (Psalms. 55:7). Apply this in your life by practicing retreat.**

John the Baptist, who was very holy and deserved the Lord's witness that he was the greatest among them that are born of women, fled to the wilderness since his early childhood and remained there till he appeared to Israel. That is he may not get defiled by the wickedness of this world, although he had been sanctified by the Holy Spirit while he was in his mother's womb!

John the Evangelist did not deserve to see the revelation except when he was alone in the island of Patmos. There he was in the spirit. (Revelation 1:10) **St Paul**, the great missionary of the church, after the Lord appeared to him on the way to Damascus, **went to Arabia** (the desert east of Damascus). He said, "I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia." (Galatians 1: 16,17). There in the wilderness, he lived in a holy retreat with the Lord for a period of time, about three years, where he received from him everything necessary for his life and for building the holy church. He told the believers, later, "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered to you." (1 Corinthians 11:23). Where did Paul receive these matters although he was not one of the disciples who followed the Savior and he did not see Him physically? When did he receive all the principles of faith which he preached, except in the holy retreat with the Lord in Arabia?

When **Elijah, the prophet**, was alone he used to eat the heavenly food. But when he lived with people, he was hardly able to get what to feed on. In the same manner, the soul, when all alone, will receive many gifts, which will be lost among people. **The children of Israel did not eat the Manna, the food of the angels, except in the wilderness! What did Abraham do to become a great nation?** He obeyed God's command to get out of his land and his father's

house. Do the same, my brother, get out of your land and your father's house to a holy retreat so God may bless you and make you a great nation. "Get out of your country, from your kindred, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great (Genesis 12:1,2).

All the saints have followed the path of retreat and loved it . St Arsanius, the tutor of the kings' sons, is one of the greatest who loved that path. It was said that after he had fled from Constantinople and lived in Eskeet, he used to pray and ask God to guide him as what to do. After three years , he heard a voice saying : "Arsanius, be quiet, get away from people; be silent and you will be saved, for these are the veins for not sinning." He heard the voice for the second time so he went to a quiet place. Pope Theophilus 23rd desired to see St. Arsanius. He sent to ask his permission if he could open the door to him and meet him. He answered him, "If you come, I will open to you; and if I open to you, I can not close the door to anyone else. If I open the door to everyone, I cannot live here." Because of his great love to retreat, he used to stand behind a pillar in the church during Divine Liturgy so nobody can see him and he would not see anyone. This pillar is up to this day in the monastery of El-Baramous.

St. Anthony the Great said, "If the mind is away from people and gets in a quiet solitude, the Lord will strengthen it, then it may deserve to see the greatness of God and His power in His creatures."

Is there a better proof of the importance of retreat and its great blessings to the soul than the proof of the Lord Jesus Himself who loved it and honored it and used to retreat in the wilderness and on the mountains! "Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him, and came to him and tried to keep Him from leaving them." (Luke 4:42)

Therefore, you, also go into the wilderness and seek Him and tell Him not to depart from you then sit at His feet in a holy retreat as Mary, Martha's sister, did. "Mary has chosen that good part which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:42)

How great are the blessings when we are in retreat with the Lord. At the beginning of the retreat, you hear a soft voice calling, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you." (John 11:28) At the end of the retreat, you will say in persistence, "It is good for us to be there." These are the feelings of love all dissolved in these words, then the soul will look up and see no man except Jesus only. (Matthew 17:1-8)

C) WHAT IS RETREAT?

Getting away from people is not retreat. A person may be living in the midst of the wilderness, yet still the world is living inside him. This person is not in a retreat! Retreat is emptying the heart and mind from all worldly cares.

Therefore, the correct meaning of retreat is that it is a retreat with God; the mind is void of all cares, the heart is void of every desire and movement except for the desire of the holy love to the Beloved Jesus. The place is empty without people where you can hear the voice of solitude. When the soul is quiet and has all these circumstances, then it cries from inside, “Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus.” (Rev. 22:20) Then it hears the answer, “The Teacher has come and is calling for you.” (John 11:28)

Jesus did that when He retreated with the Father. “Everyone went to his own house. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.” (John 7:53, 8:1) where He used to spend the whole night in prayer. He used to be in retreat with the Father. When His disciples had scattered, every man to his own, He told them, “**I am not alone because the Father is with Me.**” (John 16:32) Henceforth, the Lord Jesus has set for us the correct principle for the holy retreat. It is a unity with the Father. Let us learn how to get away from the hustle and bustle of the world, its noises and problems and be alone in a retreat, singing the beautiful song, "My Beloved is mine and I am his." (Song of Solomon 2:16)

Probably some will object to the idea of retreat saying that the Apostle Paul said, “Love does not seek its own.” (1 Corinthians 13:5) We answer saying, “But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works.” (Psalms 73:28) **It is a retreat for the heart with its Creator,** and a retreat for the soul with its Lover. This matter does not need a place but it needs quietness in the heart and looking inside yourself. People may surround your body not your heart; therefore, your heart can be in unity with God. David, the prophet, has experienced this beautiful exercise, in spite of all his busy schedule as a king. He said in the Psalms, "I have set the Lord always before me, because He is at my fight hand, I shall not be moved." (Psalms 16:8)

D) THE SERVANT'S NEED FOR RETREAT

Today's servants are poor. The word poor is not enough to express their condition. They lose their lives and peace in the middle of service. The secret of their being tired is that they are not quiet with themselves and they do not devote time to be alone with God. One of the fathers said, “Whoever devotes his life a living sacrifice to God, has to devote his time to the top of meditation in retreat.” **The servant needs to struggle spiritually more than others and needs Divine help. If we knew the value of retreat in our lives, we would surely realize its importance in the life of, God's servant.**

God's servant, who leads others, is in dire need to be filled and to correct his principles in the light of God. Mari Isaac said, “**If you do not sit down everyday for one hour with yourself and think what wrong you have done and when you fell, and straighten yourself, then do not count this as one of the days of your life. Love solitude, for therein is life for your soul. Through quietness, you see yourself “outside quietness” you do not see except what is outside. As long as you see others, you do not see yourself.**”

E) HOW TO SPEND THE RETREAT?

The only work you do during retreat is do nothing. The only thing you do is to think of your sins with sorrow and broken heart, your sins which separated you from God. These humble feelings may be the preliminary steps to the retreat. **Do not spend the retreat in preparing topics for service or think of the problems of service.** The devil of service wants you not to think of yourself. Spend the time of the retreat in quietness with yourself, **contemplating with God in prayers of love and eagerness to God, and in re-evaluating your principles in life.**

Put aside all your worldly cares. It is better to be fasting and abstaining from food, under the guidance of your spiritual father.

You may be unhappy at the beginning about the retreat, however, you should force yourself with patience and endurance. You should know that the retreat is not a period to spend then go back to your previous condition. But it is an opportunity for repentance and renewing your promises with God and training yourself with some spiritual exercises.

F) WHERE TO SPEND THE RETREAT?

For individuals, you may arrange for yourself certain times in a special place, suitable for you. It is better that this place be fixed so nothing would distract your attention.

However, for servants of the church as a group, centers for retreat, especially in big cities, should be built. These centers should be located in a quiet place, not away from transportation. Spiritual leaders should be appointed to manage these centers and special rules should be set to govern them.