

How to Get Your Second Wind Following COVID-19

When you think of the past 18 months, what word comes to mind?

Painful. Refining. Crazy. Sifting. Disappointing. Challenging. Frustrating. Lonely. Pruning. Turbulent. Draining. Shaking. Unraveling. Heartbreaking. Surprising. Chaotic. Uncomfortable. Confusing. Revealing. Fatigue. Fatigue. Fatigue. Anyone else exhausted?

Let me ask it another way: Anybody not exhausted?

If at some point last year, you felt like you were swept over Niagara Falls in a barrel, unable to tell which end was up, you weren't alone.

Together, we have experienced a pandemic, political upheaval, racial division, church shutdowns and school closures. We have suffered a crashing economy, devastating grief, violence in the streets, mega spiritual warfare—and the entire world shuttering.

This last season has left an indelible imprint on our lives. Which one of us has come through unscathed?

Consider human-like-us Elijah. In 1 Kings 18-19, mighty Elijah possessed the spiritual strength to confront the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (with their legions of demons) and had the God-given ability to run faster than a horse. And just like that, the wheels fell off Elijah's new Cadillac Escalade. This same (mighty?) Elijah fled in fear from Jezebel and prayed he would die because it all got to be too much.

However, God supernaturally strengthened Elijah, and He wants to do the same for you! God will—notice I didn't say "may" or "can"—give you a second wind as you spend time with Him. He

will breathe His breath into your life to impart strength and hope. God will restore you.

Although this past year is safely in our rearview mirror, its effects linger. Like Elijah, we need to intentionally position ourselves to receive God's powerful strength. While our daily time with the Lord is indispensable to our spiritual well-being (nothing replaces it), I have found this to be true as well:

Recovery from a protracted battle often calls for protracted time set apart with God.

Take center stage ... drum roll please... the personal prayer retreat.

Prepare for a God Encounter

On a personal prayer retreat, you make time and space to give God your full attention and spend unhurried time in His presence. You reflect, refuel and refocus. You pursue God for-God. You lay your heart on His altar, renew your love affair with Him and receive oxygen for your soul.

On a retreat, your soul stands alone with God. You unlearn and relearn. God takes out, puts in and rearranges. Your priorities get reshuffled. It's amazing how God pinpoints the things that really matter and the things that don't. And God soothes your battered heart and wipes tears from your sorrowful eyes.

In the stillness of a personal prayer retreat, you realize your heart has unhealed wounds, and the life of God has drained out of you like the slow leak of a tire. In the quiet of a retreat, these things simply can't go unnoticed.

When you intentionally set yourself apart with God for an extended period of time, your innermost thoughts cascade, and you receive needed assurance of His promises for your life. As

you marinate in His presence and stop “doing” for God (He can raise up a donkey to do the same), you are reminded that the greatest yearning of your heart is this: “I desire You and You alone” (something a donkey can’t do: worship God).

God will accomplish a myriad of things when you slow down, unplug from the noise and enjoy precious hiddenness in Him. Some of what He accomplishes during a retreat, you will be able to articulate; for others, you won’t have words. But like our friend Elijah, you and I need to spend time alone with God, beneath the broom tree (or house plant) of God’s presence to renew our strength.

“But you don’t know my calendar. I can’t afford the time to take a personal prayer retreat.” You can’t afford not to. You may have to juggle or finagle, but it’s there, somewhere. You just have to find it. Let me rephrase like this: If we can find time to binge-watch all nine seasons of our favorite show, we can find extended time to be with Jesus. Please schedule it. Posthaste.

I have taken half-day, full-day, three-day and seven-day retreats. My experience is this: If you don’t have days on end for a personal prayer retreat due to circumstances beyond your control, God will honor the time you can dedicate to Him. But if you can steal away for an extended length of time, do it!

“Where can I go on retreat with the Lord?” Let me answer your question with a question: Where do you best hear from God?

Our relationships with God are all so different. For me, God’s voice is the loudest and I feel His presence most tangibly when I’m away from the familiar. This can be anywhere, as long as it’s unfamiliar. Elijah’s place of refueling was under a solitary broom tree. Where’s yours?

I have taken prayer retreats holed up in a hotel room, a bed-and-breakfast and in my church’s prayer room (air mattress in tow). I have also spent prolonged time with God at a friend’s

home as well as on a park bench staring at a lake (a half-day retreat location). Regardless of where your retreat is conducted—local or distant, expensive or frugal—it will be a sacred space to meet with God.

At the start of my retreat, I anoint myself with oil to consecrate myself to God's purposes during my time with Him. Then I prayerfully determine the type of fast I am undertaking (fasting coupled with prayer is spiritual dynamite!). I pack my Bible, notebook and pen, prophetic words I have received over the years, worship music and Communion elements. I'm not a big fan of taking books other than the Bible. I don't want to spend time reading about the God-encounters of others; I want my own.

I also establish a loose retreat plan. It's "loose" because the Holy Spirit orchestrates the retreat and moves as He wills. But without even a relaxed structure, you can waste precious time as runaway thoughts dictate the course of your retreat experience.

To help you get started, here is a sample retreat schedule, which has proven highly effective for me:

Read Bible.

Pray.

Listen.

Journal.

Give thanks.

Worship.

Pray in the Spirit.

Rest.

Rinse and repeat this rhythm for the duration of the retreat.

Regardless of the retreat length, location or schedule, accept Jesus' irresistible, personal-to-you invitation: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me. For I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Jesus is your rest.

So come away with Jesus for an easy-yoke, burden-light retreat to process the events of the past year.

Ready for Restoration

Here are 10 steps to position yourself to receive God's healing, strength and restoration as you spend extended time with Him:

Get honest with God. Lay your heart on God's altar and pour it out to Him, all of it. Bring to the Lord your questions, loss, anger, bottled-up distress, habitual sin, lurking anxiety and unmet needs. God can take it; His shoulders are broad. Get brutally honest with Him. Bring the contents of your heart into the light of Christ Jesus; light chases darkness.

Surrender your pain to Jesus. If you don't, you'll build a memorial to that traumatic event, pitch a tent at its base and stay stuck. No, give your hurts and disappointments to God and leave them there. God longs to turn your battle scars into beauty marks so you'll reflect the image of your Savior.

Extend grace. Listen, none of us did everything right. The circumstances we experienced were a first for all of us. We made unprecedented decisions that weren't always best. Forgive whoever, whenever, of whatever. Extend grace, let go of resentment and repent of bitterness. While you're at it, extend God's amazing grace to yourself as well.

Intentionally cast your care upon the Lord. Before we could catch our breath from one trial, we were afflicted with another (like a bruise upon a bruise upon a bruise). Therefore, it's vital to ensure you aren't shouldering the weight of anything that transpired. What problems or people from the past year are you still carrying? Picture yourself walking up to the throne of Jesus with all your burdens and placing them in His hands. "Jesus, they are Yours."

Ask God to perform spiritual heart surgery. Our loving heavenly Father wants to reach His healing hand into your spiritual heart to heal wounds, soften scar tissue and tear down walls. Give Him permission to speak to your heart, convict your heart, strengthen your heart and deposit the desires of His heart. Let God do a transforming work in your life by giving Him full access to your heart.

Recalibrate your expectancy. In 2020, you may have had your own spiritual Pearl Harbor when the enemy sucker-punched you. This can deal a blow to your faith. If you aren't careful, your expectations of the future can reflect the hardships you've just experienced. Ask God to recalibrate your expectancy in Him to echo Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans for peace and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

Refocus your vision. Somewhere along the way of being turned upside down, your purpose probably got a little—or a lot—blurry. Prayerfully revisit your personal mission statement, and let the Lord give you laser-focused vision. Ask Him to reignite your passion to continue to run your race with reckless abandon.

Ask the Lord if you need deliverance or counseling. Even though you may be on the other side of a trial, sometimes, as with Lazarus, grave clothes are still dangling. God often uses the body of Christ to free us from the ties that bind. Ask the Lord if deliverance or healing is part of His freedom plan for

your life. If so, give yourself to the process so every chain will be broken and every soul wound healed.

Learn every lesson. Our lives are lived in seasons. There are reasons for every season in our lives. Mine every lesson, revelation and wisdom nugget you can from what you've just experienced. God is a multitasker and uses it all—the good, bad and ugly—to prepare us for His overall plan for our lives. Take everything you've learned into the next season of promise.

Reflect on the goodness of God. One of the enemy's tactics during adversity is to cause you to doubt the goodness of God. This satanic strategy is designed so you will drop your shield of faith. Make a list of every instance where God's goodness has been on display in your life during the past year: miracles, healings, breakthroughs, protection, blessings, valued relationships, sins for which you've been forgiven, God encounters and so on. Spend time in the Lord's presence giving thanks for all He has done in your life.

Will you join me in the following prayer? Lord, I can't go on like this. I'm exhausted and discouraged from the battle. Please help me. Under this broom tree, I find refuge for my weary soul. You provide water to quench my thirst. You place hot bread before me to impart strength. I hear the sound of your gentle whisper. You are here.

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