

“TWO OLD MEN”

BY LEO TOLSTOY

Background on the Selection

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) was a Russian novelist and social reformer, famous for his novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, considered by many the greatest novels ever written. Born to a noble, landed family, his early years were marked by a dissolute life and a violent reaction to the horrors of the Crimean War. In 1862 he married and settled down, producing thirteen children and a burst of literary successes. After writing *Anna Karenina* he experienced a profound spiritual crisis and renounced his literary ambitions, believing them to be incompatible with his deepest convictions. His numerous later works were on religious and moral subjects. “Two Old Men,” written in 1885, is a classic human story that challenges us to examine our assumptions about personalities, perspectives, and priorities in life—including success and failure in business life.

Group Discussion Questions

- 1 Why is a pilgrimage different than tourist travel? What makes it a spiritual discipline?
- 2 How would you describe Efim and Elisha in terms of class, wealth, and status within their community? In terms of virtues and vices? Why do you think Tolstoy emphasized Elisha taking snuff?
- 3 In discussing a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, what are the possible barriers to going for the two men? How are their approaches to the problems and the possibility of the trip different? What does this say about their attitudes toward family, money, and responsibilities?
- 4 How did each man get ready for the pilgrimage? What did they take with them? What were their moods in setting out? What were they thinking of as they left?

5 Part vi is the turning point in Elisha's journey. What is Elisha saying in the paragraph, "There seems to be no end to it . . ."? What does he mean by, "You've slipped your cables and lost your reckoning"?

6 How does Elisha decide what to do about the family? What does he mean by, "or else while I go seek the Lord beyond the sea I may lose Him in myself"? What are the consequences of this decision for him? How would have Efim have handled this situation, do you think? What would you have done and why?

7 Do you think Efim's assessment of the pilgrim's money being stolen is fair or unfair? Why? How did Efim's thoughts affect how he interacted with the pilgrim from then on? What do you think Elisha would have thought and done had he been in Efim's shoes?

8 How would you describe Efim's experience in Jerusalem? What are some of the things that absorbed his attention? What do you make of all the "Elisha sightings"? Later, when Efim is on his way home and has met the family Elisha helped, he says, "So that is how he got ahead of me. . . . God may or may not have accepted my pilgrimage, but He has certainly accepted his!" What does he mean?

9 Why do most people *identify* with one of the two old men but *appreciate* the other? What does that say? Who would you say had the most successful pilgrimage?

10 What lessons and considerations about the journey of life do you take away from this story for your own situation?

Further Reading

- *Entrepreneurs of Life: Faith and the Venture of Purposeful Living*, The Trinity Forum (NavPress 2001)
- "Leaf by Niggle," by J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2004.
- "The White Mare" by Michael McLaverty, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2006.