

Sabbatical Plan

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The goal with this checklist is to help you develop a *Holy Spirit inspired Sabbatical Plan*. It needs to be personalized to your needs, flexible, have space for spontaneity, and be life-giving for you and your family!

Vision Statement

What is your vision or overarching purpose for your Sabbatical? What is God putting on your heart for this Sabbatical? What do you most need personally from this time? What Bible passage(s) could serve as a theme to guide you?

Everything else in your Sabbatical plan flows from the vision you discern from the Lord. Recall the Proverb that without a godly vision we dissipate into distracted living (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). So give careful thought to the beginning of this article that presented Biblical teaching on the purpose and value of a Sabbatical.

Here are some additional Soul Shepherding resources on Sabbaticals:

- [“Ministry Begins With Rest”](#)
- [“Jesus’ Sabbath Days”](#) (Bible study)
- [“Jesus’ Rhythm of Life”](#) (Bible study in the Gospel of Mark)
- [“Jesus Set Boundaries”](#) (Bible study)
- [“Sabbath as Praying and Playing”](#) (features an excerpt from Eugene Peterson’s book *Working the Angles*)
- [“From Sabbath to Sabbatical”](#)
- *Unforsaken: With Jesus on the Stations of the Cross* is my own guide to cultivate a burning heart for Jesus on a prayer walk with Jesus and the ancient stations of his cross

Goals

As you pray, reflect, and talk with your spouse, spiritual mentor, and/or friend what are a few goals for your Sabbatical that emerge? What discoveries or changes do you hope to experience personally? In your marriage and family? Three to five personal goals might be plenty. Ten would probably be too many.

Your goals out to be inspiring and yet measurable — things you can realistically do and would enjoy doing. The categories below include possible goals for your Sabbatical. For instance, “I need to spend quality time with my wife.”

Spiritual Care and Counseling

Who is a spiritual guide or soul friend that you can meet with before, during, and after your Sabbatical?

Don't try to do your Sabbatical without the help of a soul friend! Find a spiritual director, pastor, coach, counselor, or encouraging friend and ask for guidance and prayer. As I said earlier, it's good to connect with this person a few months or more before you begin your Sabbatical so that you can get help discerning God's provision for you. It's also valuable to ask for personal support from one or more soul friends who are emotionally safe, will listen to you with empathy, have godly wisdom, and will pray for you.

These Soul Shepherding articles will help you discern if there's a specific personal change that God may want you to ask him to help you with during your Sabbatical:

- [“How to Become Like Jesus”](#)
- [“A VIM Plan to be More Like Jesus”](#) (a coaching tool for identifying an intelligent selection of key disciplines that are targeted for one specific growth area)

Also here are some of our tools for personal/spiritual assessment:

- [“360 Degree Feedback For Pastors and Leaders”](#)
- [“Inventory of Emotional Wounds From Your Mother or Father”](#)
- [“Secure and Insecure Attachment Styles”](#)
- [“LIFE in CHRIST Questions on Developmental Stages \(Spiritual and Psychological Growth\)”](#)
- [“Sacred Pathways Survey \(9 Ways to Connect With God\)”](#)
- [“Life Events Stress Test”](#)
- [“Stress Overload Inventory”](#)
- [“Self-Esteem Test”](#)
- Or we have other [“Self-Assessment Surveys”](#)

Marriage Needs

If you're married it's important that you talk with your spouse about your Sabbatical. If possible, consider having your spouse also go on Sabbatical at the same time as you. But often it's the case that ministry spouse's cannot do this because they have parenting, household, or job responsibilities that can't be set aside. In that case, perhaps you can help shoulder some of your spouse's load, especially as it relates to your children and the home.

What does your relationship need during this Sabbatical? Can the two of you go on a retreat together or participate in a marital enrichment experience? Do you need intensive counseling as a couple?

Consider these Soul Shepherding tools for marriage assessment and communication:

- [“How Can I Improve My Marriage?”](#)
- [“A and B Conflict Resolution Tool”](#)
- [“Marriage Needs List Survey”](#)
- [“Love Languages Test”](#) (based on Gary Chapman’s best-selling book)
- [“Relationship Satisfaction Test”](#)
- [“Emotional Roller Coaster Test”](#)

Family

How will this Sabbatical effect your family? What concerns does your spouse have for your children or grandchildren? How can you bless your children? What are some activities that your family might enjoy doing together? What special place(s) could you go together?

If you have children in your home consider including them in at least part of your Sabbatical. It’d a blessing for your family to share in fun experiences, relational connection, and spiritual growth.

Here are some Soul Shepherding resources for parents:

- [“A Pastor Was Too Busy to Play With His Children”](#)
- [“My Little Girl Needed Her Father’s Blessing”](#)
- [“Family Map Survey”](#)

Solitude and Silence

I can’t imagine an effective Sabbatical without making use of solitude and silence! The lack of training in extended hours of being quiet and alone is a primary reason why many Christians have great difficulty experiencing soul rest and peace. As Pascal, famously said four centuries ago, “The sole cause of person’s unhappiness is their inability to stay quietly in their own room.”

When you unplug from noise, exciting entertainment, responsibilities, ego gratification, social media, and pleasing people you begin to become more aware of your true, inner self. You calm down your adrenal glands.

What emotions stir in you when you’re in solitude? Who you are apart from your pastoral role and normal daily life? What are the deep longings of your soul? How are you sensing God’s presence (or not)?

When you begin to reflect on questions like these, to feel, to talk with a good listener, and to pray then you’re heading into the spirit of Sabbath rest. (See the section below on “Journaling” for additional Reflection Questions.)

At a minimum consider setting aside some “days” of five hours or more to be quiet and alone in God’s presence. If you have opportunity and readiness consider a longer retreat of a few days or more at a monastery, retreat center, cabin, or another quiet setting. If you’ve never done this kind of thing before then talk with your spiritual director/mentor about this and start out small and slow.

These Soul Shepherding Bible Studies will encourage you with practicing solitude and silence:

- [“Jesus’ Solitude and Silence.”](#)
- [“Bible Verses on Solitude and Silence”](#)
- [“Solitude and Silence”](#)

Reading

Most pastors that I care for have stacks of Christian books to read! Some say to me, “I can’t wait to catch up on my reading during my Sabbatical!”

But if you fill your Sabbatical with reading and study then you’re probably turning it into something productive, rather than *resting in God’s love*. You’ll be staying busy and in your head. I especially discourage pastors from reading on church growth, leadership, or heavy theology because that’s too much like work!

If you believe God is leading you to do some focused study on your Sabbatical consider doing that after beginning with some quieter days of relaxing, playing, relating, feeling, and praying.

Some spiritual reading on your Sabbatical is probably important for you. I suggest that for a Sabbatical you limit yourself to a few books that minister rest to your soul and help you to feel your emotions and relate more intimately with God and your loved ones.

[Praying through a great spiritual book can change your life!](#)

I especially like to suggest people read from the classics of Christian devotion like:

- *A Simple Way to Pray* by Martin Luther (his hand-written letter to his barber; from the 1500’s)
- *Practicing the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence (a classic from the 1600’s)
- *The Way of a Pilgrim* by the Anonymous Russian Pilgrim of the 1900’s (tells his story of walking the countryside barefoot, begging for bread, meeting with his “staretz”, and learning to pray without ceasing by using the Jesus Prayer)
- Or another old spiritual books on my list: [“Reading Classic Devotional Books.”](#)

I’ve also recommend newer books on Christian spiritual formation and soul care like:

- [Your Best Life In Jesus' Easy Yoke: Rhythms of Grace to De-Stress and Live Empowered](#) by Bill Gaultiere
- [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality](#) by Pete Scazzero
- [The Great Omission](#) by Dallas Willard
- [Sabbath-Keeping](#) by Lynne M. Baab
- Any book by Henri Nouwen, Brennan Manning, or Eugene Peterson
- Or another book that we use in our Soul Shepherding TLC program, which is our 18-month retreat-based training for pastors and leaders: [“Reading List For a TLC Certificate”](#)

Bible Reading

Of course, the main book you want to read on Sabbatical is your Bible! But as with reading other books, you need to be careful to engage in *spiritual* reading. As you read pay attention to your feelings and personal insights and bring these into prayer and soul talk conversations. Listen to what the Holy Spirit seems to be saying to you.

What book(s) of the Bible will help you to rest in God? Where in the Scriptures are you drawn to read? Perhaps you want to pray some psalms or read and meditate in the Gospels?

Other Spiritual Disciplines

A Sabbatical is a great time to experiment with a few spiritual disciplines. What way of praying Scripture would help you connect personally with the Lord? What spiritual practice(s) sound exciting to you?

Here are some Soul Shepherding resources on the disciplines for Christian spirituality:

- [“Spiritual Disciplines List”](#) (Dallas Willard’s short list of the classic disciplines of abstinence and engagement, their purposes, and how they work)
- [“Lectio Divina Guides”](#) (an archive over 50 one page guides on Bible texts that emphasize spirituality and soul care)
- [“Ignatian Meditation Guides”](#) (features one page guides for using your imagination to enter into the Gospel readings that Ignatius used in his 30-day *Spiritual Exercises*)
- [“Breath Prayers From the Bible”](#) (favorite Scripture phrases with recommended breathing patterns)
- [“Praying the Psalms”](#) or [“Praying a Psalm in It’s Nature Setting”](#) (features a number of simple meditations on psalms that refer to common nature settings, e.g., you meditate on Psalm 1 by a tree)
- [“Electric Bible Passages to Memorize”](#)
- [“Picture Prayers \(or Vision Divina\)”](#) (uses art and visualization to help you meditate on Bible passages — this is delightful!)

Communicating and Setting Boundaries

What will you say about your Sabbatical and the boundaries that go with it to your family? Friends? Church? Ministry partners and donors?

People need to know that you'll be unavailable to do the things that you normally do. You'll need to have some conversations and write some letters. You'll need to set an "Out of the Office" message on your email with instructions on who is covering your responsibilities while you're away. You may want to put a message on your website or social media outlets.

Without going into too much detail, you'll want to communicate to people the purpose of your Sabbatical, what you'll be doing, what you hope it will accomplish, and your needs for financial and/or prayer support.

Finances

What will your Sabbatical cost? Do you have your own savings to use for your Sabbatical? Or do you need financial support from your church or donors?

Travel, retreat centers, spiritual direction and counseling all cost money! Usually I recommend that pastors put less priority on expensive trips and more priority on personal soul care and quality time with family.

Cautions

Disconnecting from your work and normal responsibilities is likely to be more difficult than you imagine. A Sabbatical is a kind of fast, as are solitude and silence. A main purpose of these disciplines is surface your inner emotions, longings, and conviction of sin.

So don't set your expectations for your Sabbatical too high! Your days may not be filled with warm closeness to God, peace and happiness, and enjoying your spouse and family. At times you may feel bored, lonely, depressed, anxious, fearful, angry, discontent about your life, or far from God. This is a prime reason why you need a spiritual guide and one or more friends who are good listeners and will pray for you.

Prepare an "Off Ramp" and "On Ramp"

If you go from a full work load right into your Sabbatical it's like driving 65 miles per hour on the freeway and slamming on the brakes! Similarly, if you go from resting and doing no work to launching into an eight or twelve hour work day it's like taking your car from a dead stop and flooring the gas pedal! That kind of driving is not good for your engine — your car and your soul!

Specifically, it's best to ease into your Sabbatical by working half days for awhile before you begin. My coach Gary Mayes calls that your freeway "off ramp." It helps you start

to slow down, disengage from your ministry and leadership, relinquish the work to God and the person(s) covering for you, and begin resting.

It's also good to ease into going back to full time work by limiting yourself to half days for awhile. Gary says this is your freeway "on ramp" for slowly picking up your speed and returning back to your work and responsibilities.

The longer your Sabbatical the more important these off and on ramps are. For a six month Sabbatical it'd be helpful to have a couple of weeks or more for each. (See "[Sabbatical On-Ramps and Off-Ramps](#)" by Gary Mayes.)

Journaling Questions

We conclude this Sabbatical Guide with some questions for reflection, prayer, and sharing with your mentor or friend. These are "process questions" for while you're doing your Sabbatical. (I posed some questions above that were for getting started.) This is the last category of this Sabbatical Guide, but it is not the least! I think that responding to reflection questions like these is the heart of your Sabbatical experience.

Keeping a journal is really valuable. It helps you to articulate your thoughts and feelings, to stay focused, and to pray. If you decide not to keep a journal on your Sabbatical that's okay, but I think it's essential that you talk through whichever of these questions relate to your situation and needs.

As I said earlier, don't expect yourself to answer *all* of these questions! Your Sabbatical is a time for purposeful spiritual rest.

Sabbatical reflection questions to consider:

- How is your Sabbatical going for you? What are you feeling right now? What's bothering you? What's blessing you?
- How are you feeling about your Sabbatical conversations with your mentor and/or friend(s)?
- What do you especially enjoy about your work/ministry? What drains you?
- How do you feel when you rest? What are you learning about resting in God's loving presence?
- How are you feeling in your marriage? How is your spouse feeling?
- How are you feeling about your family relationships?
- What is your experience in your relationship with God before your Sabbatical? Now during your Sabbatical? How have you been sensing God's presence (or not)?
- How are you sensing God's presence or not?
- What does God seem to be saying to you?
- How do you feel about your prayer life? What helps you to pray? What distracts you?

- How are you feeling generally in your life? Are you struggling with worry, fear, or anxiety? Discouragement, depression, or shame? Grief or loss? Guilt or conviction of sin? Overworking or another compulsive behavior? Anger, unresolved conflict, or unforgiveness? Loneliness? Hurry?
- What are you learning about yourself and how you bring yourself into relationship with God and people?
- Post Sabbatical, what adjustments do you need to improve your daily rhythm of life with Christ?
- What adjustments do you need to make to improve your marriage? Your family?
- What adjustments do you need to make to your work/ministry in order to be more joyful and fruitful?
- Has God re-affirmed your calling? Do you need to consider letting go of any major responsibilities in your job in order to be fully aligned with God's call? Do you need to completely change your job? Maybe even your career?
- What has been most helpful to you about this Sabbatical? What, if anything, was not helpful?

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- As a Spiritual Formation Pastor, he's served in a mega-church and a church plant. He's also trained over 1,000 lay counselors and taught courses in Christian psychology and spirituality at the graduate school level. He and Kristi train pastors and other men and women in ministry in their [Soul Shepherding Institute](#) and [Spiritual Direction certificate](#) program. Bill has been speaking in churches and conferences since 1987 and especially enjoys speaking with Kristi. You can listen to their weekly [Soul Talks](#) podcast or read their [Soul Shepherding blog](#).