

SABBATICAL GUIDE

By Bill Gaultiere



“If at points your Sabbatical doesn’t feel good it may still be good”

I hope this guide leads you into a refreshing Sabbatical experience in which you rejoice with the Psalmist: “The Lord has brought me into a delightful wide open space!” (Psalm 18:19, paraphrase). That spacious place is called the Kingdom of the Heavens and Jesus teaches us how to bring our whole lives into this overarching and undergirding eternal spiritual reality.

However, as I explain below, be careful about putting high expectations for renewal on your Sabbatical, as you’ll probably encounter some challenges. It’s important to look at Jesus as your Sabbatical Director and abandon all outcomes to God. If at points your Sabbatical doesn’t feel good it may still be good.

Ideally, you’re reading this Sabbatical Guide a few months or even up to a year before starting your Sabbatical. But if you have less time to plan don’t be discouraged, as you can still have a very restorative and meaningful Sabbatical experience!

I created this guide because in recent years more and more pastors have been coming to me for help with their Sabbaticals. Often their initial thoughts are that they'll use their Sabbatical for vacation time. Or they want to work on a project like writing a book or home improvement. Or they want to learn how they can improve their leadership as a pastor. These are good things to do, but they limit the intended effect of a Biblical Sabbatical.

In this Sabbatical Guide I suggest you consider making your Sabbatical a time of *true Sabbath-rest*.

What is Included in This Sabbatical Guide

This Sabbatical Guide will help you to prepare and plan for an extended time of spiritual rest. It will help you in the whole Sabbatical process, start to finish:

- Discerning Christ's personal invitation to you
- Planning your Sabbatical
- Unplugging from your work
- Settling into Sabbath rest personally and with your family
- Reflecting and getting in touch with your emotions, longings, and needs (also those of your spouse and family)
- Soul training
- Listening to the Spirit and re-aligning with God's purposes for you, your family, and your ministry
- Re-engaging with your daily life and work

I hope to inspire you with a great vision and also practical ideas. For instance, this guide will give you examples of Sabbaticals that pastors have done and it will help you know what to communicate about your Sabbatical to your supervisor(s), family, friends, or donors. Also it features Bible references, specific guidelines to plan your Sabbatical, and a variety of soul nourishing resources and reflection questions to help you rest and connect with the Lord.

(Some of the ideas included in this guide were gleaned from the extensive navigators resource called "[Sabbatical Guidelines: A Season of Renewal](#).”)

The Bible's Teaching On Sabbatical

In Western culture today we work hard for forty or more years and then “retire” for a number of years of rest. But rest has its highest value when it’s interspersed with work. The rhythm of rest and work gives sustainable energy, perspective, and joy. We might re-think the modern concept of retirement in light of the Biblical teaching on the “Sabbatical year.”

The Sabbatical year in the Bible is every seventh year (Leviticus 25:1-13 and Exodus 23:10-11). The farmers and their land were called by God to rest that year and God promised a bumper crop the year before. Clearly, the Sabbatical year was a big step of trust in the goodness of the Lord to provide for his people.

The seventh year renewal included generosity for the needy, as the poor in the land were free to glean in the fallow ground during the Sabbatical year. People who had sold themselves into servitude were also given the blessing of a Sabbatical year; they worked for six years, but on the seventh year they were given their freedom without cost (Exodus 21:2-6). Similarly, debts were also canceled in the Sabbatical year (Deuteronomy 15:1-6).

Perhaps it’s not surprising that many of God’s people in ancient times did not exercise their trust in God by honoring the Sabbatical year. It’s the same today for Christian pastors and other ministers.

A Sabbatical is an extended Sabbath so let’s consider an overview of the Biblical teaching on the Sabbath.

The Bible's Teaching On Sabbath

Jesus said God created the weekly Sabbath day to care for us (Genesis 2:3; Mark 2:27). Remembering to keep the Sabbath is the fourth of the Ten Commandments; it’s a day that God especially blessed for us to remind us that we are his creation and that he has delivered us from slavery (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).



**God created the Sabbath
to care for us.**

We’re made to live and *to work* while continually resting in and relying on God. “There remains a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest (Hebrews 4:9-11).

So Sabbath is ultimately a state of being or lifestyle in which we find our enjoyment and empowerment in God.

We live by the Spirit and we keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).

We practice God's presence, learning to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

We dwell in the kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17).

We find that it's "In God we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Through practicing Sabbath we learn to do our work not by the sweat of our brow, but in partnership with the Lord. The curse of the Fall is not the need to work, but working in self-reliance. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Even worked! Work is a gift from God and part of his original plan for human beings.

Jesus is our Sabbath Rest

Jesus Christ is the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8). It is only by putting our total confidence and full weight in the person of the Son of God — through his life, death, and a resurrection — that we experience the true and eternal Sabbath rest of God.



Jesus rested from the work of ministry.

But many 21st Century Christians read the Gospels and mistakenly think that Jesus taught that we don't need to keep the Sabbath anymore. Jesus did repeatedly break the Sabbath rules of the religious leaders by healing people on the Sabbath and walking through the grain fields. In fact, this is a main reason why they crucified him! But on the Sabbath Jesus went to synagogue and rested. The "work" Jesus did on the Sabbath was to respond with compassion to people in need and to minister God's word and healing to them.

Besides this, on other days of the week, Jesus often withdrew from the crowds and went to "lonely places" to rest, pray, and enjoy his love relationship with the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16).

Christ our Lord embodies for us the perfect example of Sabbath: *he always acted in concert with what the Father was doing*. He invites us to come to him and join the "Father and Son intimacies and knowledge." He calls this his "easy yoke" that features "rhythms of grace." (Matthew 11:27, 30; MSG, NIV)

A yoke is an attachment. We can't live without attaching ourselves to persons or things. Religion, workaholism, perfectionism, ambition, hurried living, addictions, and unhealthy relationships are all examples of yokes that harm us. The Lord Jesus is the only Master who offers a Sabbath-yoke. (See my book [*Your Best Life In Jesus' Easy Yoke*](#).)

The Christian Sabbath

Most pastors have a “day off” but that is not the same as a Sabbath day. Typically on a day off you catch up on things or do whatever you want. A Sabbath is devoted to the Lord in a very individualized way that's not legalistic. For one person it's “work” to do some errands or light projects around their house on their Sabbath day, but for another it helps them to relax and rejoice in the Lord.



“Most Christian pastors and leaders know that Sabbath rest is important, but they struggle to experience this peace consistently”

The spirit of Sabbath is that we set aside a full day to do no work in order to rest in God's provision. As we said above, we do nothing and we don't try to make anything happen. As Eugene Peterson says, we “pray and play” with the Lord.

Traditionally the Christian Sabbath is Sunday, “the Lord's Day” or the day that Christ rose from the dead, and it's the first day of the week. The important theological point here is that we're to begin our week resting in God's care and focusing on what God is doing so that we can then join in God's work the rest of the week.

Paul taught that we could celebrate the Sabbath any day (Romans 14:4-6). This is especially important for pastors. Their work is to give other people a Sabbath on Sundays! Many pastors find that Monday is a good day for their Sabbath.

Most Christian pastors and leaders know that Sabbath rest is important, but they struggle to experience this peace consistently.

They've experienced it sometimes and want live in it *all the time*! Even if you just see someone else who is enjoying oneness with God, or you read the life of a great Christian like Brother Lawrence, you want that for yourself! So we try to stay in tune with God and rely on the Holy Spirit in all that we do. We try and try harder, but find that we keep failing!

To make significant improvements in the spiritual life we need to train with Jesus to become a *different kind of person*. This is especially true with learning to live in Sabbath rest. I've discovered that there's a progression to it. To begin to live in daily Sabbath rest we need to learn how to keep a weekly Sabbath. And to benefit significantly from a weekly Sabbath it greatly helps to do some extensive training on a Sabbatical (Chuck's story below especially illustrates this.)

This is the great opportunity of a Sabbatical: to learn how to keep a weekly Sabbath day which in turn helps you to live *and work* in Sabbath rest, relying on God and practicing his presence in all that you do!

At Times Your Sabbatical May Not Feel Restful!

Be careful with your expectations of your Sabbatical. Setting aside your normal work and job responsibilities for Sabbatical rest doesn't automatically mean that you'll feel relaxed, peaceful, and content! In fact, it may be the opposite! Often our work distracts us from how we really feel and what's really going on in our relationships.

On Sabbatical your self-esteem won't be propped up by your pastoral role, accomplishments, and appreciation from people so at times you may feel insignificant or bored. Also, now that you have more time and energy to be present to your spouse and children you may get drawn into some difficult conversations.

Going on Sabbatical is a major discipline of abstinence or self-denial. Like fasting, solitude and silence, frugality, or secrecy these disciplines are meant to evoke emotion. They make a space for you to become more aware of inner distress, relational wounds, sin, unmet needs, and unfulfilled longings. Then you can share your feelings with a soul friend, mentor, or counselor, seeking empathy and guidance from the Lord through your "Christ's ambassador" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

In this way your Sabbatical can be a time of soul training that helps you learn how to truly rest and to make progress in becoming the kind of person who is able to be at peace in the midst of stress. You're practicing living and working in Jesus' easy yoke (Matthew 11:25-30).



“Going on Sabbatical is a major discipline of abstinence or self-denial”

Examples of Pastor Sabbaticals

Our 30-Day Ignatian Retreat

When my wife Kristi and I took a 30-day Sabbatical in the fall of 2015 we unplugged completely from our Soul Shepherding ministry to pastors and leaders and our normal daily duties. We serve the Lord together and wanted to share in a time of rest and refreshment in the Lord.

Kristi and I were refreshed walking the trails in a giant Redwood forest.



“We also emphasized having fun experiences. This is not normally part of the ancient *Spiritual Exercises* but it felt important for us!”

We were drawn to seek an immersion experience in Jesuit spirituality. We wanted to enter into a wholly different way of life and prayer than our normal daily life and ministry. So we completed an Ignatian retreat together. We used a guide of Scripture meditations and prayer exercises that I put together before the retreat that was based on Ignatius’ famous *Spiritual Exercises*.

For one month we unplugged totally from our Soul Shepherding ministry to pastors and leaders and our normal daily duties. We did no work. We had no contact with anyone in our daily lives except our family and friends. We went back into time to the 1600’s in Spain and journeyed with Ignatius and Jesus.

Usually people do Ignatius’ 30-day intensive retreat in a monastery, but we moved around between a monastery, our home, the beaches of Southern California and up the coast, and the redwoods of Northern California. In addition to Ignatius’ exercises we read his spiritual autobiography and watched movies on his life. Each day we had a mix of solitude and soul talk. We each kept a spiritual journal and had two or three conversations a week with our spiritual director (most of these were private but a few were shared).

We also emphasized having *fun experiences*. This is not normally part of the ancient *Spiritual Exercises* but it felt real important for us! We took lots of walks on the beach and in forests. We explored new towns and took scenic roads. We watched inspiring movies. We enjoyed healthy and delicious meals. We slept in. We even got therapeutic massages from a nun!

During our Sabbatical we felt it was important to communicate a few updates for our Board of Directors, donors, friends, and the thousands of people who connect with Soul Shepherding via our blog (weekly devotionals), website, and social media. We found that an easy, non-performance-pressure way of doing this was to periodically share pictures and a few journal entries to our Soul Shepherding Admin Assistant who published them for our constituents.

[“Our First Sabbatical: Why Pastors Need This”](#) tells more of the story of what we experienced on our 30-days of Sabbath rest and Ignatian meditation.

On Chuck’s Sabbatical He Discovered True Sabbath Rest

A few years ago a lead pastor that I’ll call “Chuck” asked me to be his pastoral counselor for his three-month long summer Sabbatical. He started talking with me a few months before his Sabbatical so we could pray and process together and write up a vision and outline for his Board of Elders. During his Sabbatical he scheduled some phone appointments with me.

For three months Chuck attended other churches besides his own and had very little contact with his congregation, other than to report back to them periodically through the chairman of his elder board. The Lord led him to spend a lot of time simply enjoying his wife and family without his normal responsibilities.



“He said to me, ‘I realize now that I’ve never really been at rest. Even when I thought things were going well I was anxious under the surface. Until now I’ve never experienced shalom.’”

In the middle of the summer he spent a month in solitude and silence at a cabin on a Montana ranch. He fasted, prayed, meditated on Scripture, took walks, journaled, and met with a spiritual director. He also talked with me over the phone for counseling. He had lots of emotional junk come up that he needed help with. (That’s what disciplines of self-denial do — they stir up personal issues that need grace. Thankfully, he also experienced a tremendous catharsis with new insights and resolution to pain from his family of origin.)

Near the end of Chuck’s Sabbatical when we were debriefing and preparing him to re-enter his ministry life he said to me, “I realize now that I’ve never really been at rest. Even when I thought things were going well I was *anxious under the surface*. Until now I’ve never experienced shalom.”

We talked about how he could carry his new found soul rest into his work as a pastor. We ended up focusing on renewing his practice of keeping a weekly Sabbath day.

Chuck concluded his Sabbatical by participating in a “Re-Entry Retreat” with his elders and staff and used this as an opportunity to share his experience, pray for one another, and pray for the church.

Then a couple of months later when he was back in his pastorate he told me, “Now I know what Sabbath is! I used to try to keep the Sabbath on Mondays, but I was inconsistent and it didn’t seem to do much for me. But after my Sabbatical I now know how to really rest and enjoy God’s presence!”

An Intimacy With Jesus Sabbatical Plan

I was blessed to guide my friend Michael Risley on a Sabbatical. He’s the Executive Pastor at Voyagers Bible Church where Kristi and I attend. He’s also on our Soul Shepherding Board of Directors. We help each other keep Jesus Christ pre-eminent in our minds, hearts, and lives!



“He asked himself, ‘What do I need from this Sabbatical to help me live with enthusiastic dedication for Christ?’”

Michael and I enjoy walking and sharing on our lives with Jesus.

Michael had six-weeks for his most recent Sabbatical and he focused it on deeply engaging with his personal mission statement: “For me to live is Christ! I want to be all and only for Jesus: to know Him, love Him and obey Him, and to help others live the same.” (Phil 1:21, John 14:21, 17:3, Matt 28:19-20)

He asked himself, “What do I need from this Sabbatical to help me live with enthusiastic dedication for Christ?” He wrote this Sabbatical vision statement:

“To rest and be refreshed in body, mind and spirit; more passionate for Jesus, my wife, and the mission to which He has called us for the next decade.”

For six weeks Michael *disconnected totally* from his church, phone calls, and email. He and his wife got out of town to avoid the temptations of house responsibilities and normal routines. They visited family in the Bay Area, used a ministry retreat cabin for pastors in Yosemite as a launch point to do some hiking, and traveled to England where they stayed in an inexpensive “flat” and enjoyed visiting inspiring churches and museums.

Everywhere he went he made sure to enjoy getting outside and drinking in the beauty of God's creation by taking "prayer hikes." His refrain through his Sabbatical that helped him to walk in cadence with the Spirit of Jesus was "Don't do too much! Slow down!"

Michael met with me for spiritual direction at the start and conclusion of his Sabbatical. Also he read two classics of Christian devotion that I recommended: *Letters By a Modern Mystic* by Frank Laubach and *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* by Jeanne Guyon.

My friend had an evangelistic goal on his Sabbatical too. But it wasn't "work" for him; it was as easy as a branch abiding in the vine and bearing fruit (John 15:5). Resting in and enjoying Jesus with his wife helped Michael to naturally spread the sweet fragrance of Christ everywhere he went (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Do you want Sabbatical coaching?

We can help you experience the soul rest you need,
grow in your intimacy with Christ, and hear God's voice.

To learn more **Contact Soul Shepherding!**

Intensive Counseling for a Pastor and His Wife

A Lead Pastor of a megachurch who lived at a distance from Orange County, CA contacted me a few months before his summer Sabbatical. I had him share his story with me, we prayed together, and then we established a plan for him.

He had been driving real hard for a decade without more than a vacation here and there. He'd been very successful and his church had grown immensely, but he was tired. He paid a price for all that expansion. Also he'd been through some turbulent staff issues.

Worse, his wife felt like giving up on their marriage and their teenage children felt he was disengaged.

One of the years he had drifted into a pattern of working late, often eating dinner without his family, giving his kids orders and principles, and sitting alone in the television room at night.



"He had been driving hard for a decade without more than a vacation here and there"

So we set up him and his wife for intensive counseling during his Sabbatical. He met with me for private therapy sessions and she met with Kristi. Then the four of us met. In between they walked the beach and talked through their feelings. Also we guided them in some times of solitude and silence.

Also they took some extended family vacations to enjoy being together. During his whole Sabbatical he stayed away from pastoring his church and remained focus on personal worship and investing in his personal soul care, marriage, and family.

After his Sabbatical he met with me for some follow up sessions. His Sabbatical work had paid off! He was less hurried, less anxious and driven. He learned to be emotionally present to his family, to listen and not be bossy or give so much advice. He learned to empathize. He led the family in having more fun together.

A year later his wife and children testified that he was still changed man!

Pastor Ryan Themed his Sabbatical on Feedback From a Circle of Friends

I gave Sabbatical coaching to a spiritual growth pastor I'll call "Ryan." On his Sabbatical he also disconnected from his church and ministry and spent quality time with his wife and children. Something unique he did was to assemble a team of friends and mentors, some from his church and some from outside of it, and ask each of them to write him a letter describing how they see God working in his life and what his strengths and weaknesses were as a person and as a pastor. He read these letters during his Sabbatical retreat and used them to guide his personal reflections and prayers.



We enjoyed the path around the lake at St. Andrew's Abbey.

As part of Ryan's Sabbatical he participated in a Sabbatical Retreat for pastors that I led. There were six local pastors who participated and most were on Sabbatical. I took them to St Andrew's Abbey in Valyermo, CA, which is a Benedictine monastery. It was a simple retreat. Each morning I led a spiritual direction group. Then the day was spent in solitude and silence and attending prayer services with the monks. We finished each day with another spiritual direction group. Also I met with each pastor alone to provide individual spiritual direction.

Ryan was happy at his current church and had been there many years, but at the end of his Sabbatical he discerned that God was calling him

to take on a new challenge. He began a process that one year later led him to move to another state to serve in a large and cutting edge church.

Your Sabbatical Plan: Reflection Questions and Resources

You Need a Customized Plan

In this Sabbatical Guide I've featured a variety of stories of pastor Sabbaticals because each one is individualized — there's no cookie cutter! With the leading of the Holy Spirit and wise counsel, you'll want to develop a customized plan for your Sabbatical.



“Ironically a basic ‘To Do List’ can help you do nothing!”

own Sabbatical Plan. To help I've compiled a checklist of aspects to consider. But don't look at this list as a bunch of assignments to complete! I don't intend for you to use all the resources below or to answer all the questions — that wouldn't be very restful! Ironically a basic “To Do List” can help you do nothing!

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

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.

I've tried to demonstrate that you'll miss out on much of the spiritual value that God has for you in your Sabbatical if it's basically just an extended vacation. At the same time I've tried to show that if you try to be too spiritually productive or keep a rigid schedule of Christian disciplines then you may have trouble really resting and hearing God's voice.

So we're looking for an integration of playfulness and purposefulness. Now it's time for you to customize your

- 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?

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

Three to five personal goals might be plenty for your Sabbatical. Ten would probably be too many.

Your goals ought 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.”

- 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?

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"](#)

We also have additional ["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?



Often our spouse gets neglected in the daily grind of ministry. A Sabbatical is a great opportunity for marital enrichment!

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 affect 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 will be 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”](#)

What are some ways the Lord may want to bless your family during your Sabbatical?

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"](#)



Being in the beauty of God's creation and in the Word refreshes your soul!

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!



Meditative, reflective reading may be an important part of your Sabbatical.

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 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
- [Healing Prayer: For Emotional & Physical Wholeness](#) by Bill and Kristi 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 books that we use in our [Soul Shepherdding Institue](#), which is our 18-month retreat-based training for pastors and leaders.

Bible Reading



By getting away from your responsibilities and work to decompress and get lots of rest you're making a space for God to love on you and speak into your life.

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:

[“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)

[“Picture Prayers \(or Vision Divina\)”](#) (uses art and visualization to help you meditate on Bible passages — this is delightful!)

[“Spiritual Disciplines List”](#) (Dallas Willard’s short list of the classic disciplines of abstinence and engagement, their purposes, and how they work)

[“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”](#)

Communicating and Setting Boundaries

It’s important to pray and think through the boundaries around your Sabbatical and then to communicate that to others. What will you say to your

- Family?
- Friends?
- Church?
- Ministry partners and donors?



Sabbatical boundaries protect your time of renewal.

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.)

Soul Care 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.

Writing out some thought and prayers during your Sabbatical will help you to focus and engage with God.

Sabbatical reflection questions to consider:

1. How is your Sabbatical going for you?
 - What are you feeling right now?
 - What's bothering you?
 - What's blessing you?
2. How are you feeling about your Sabbatical conversations with your mentor and/or friend(s)?
3. What do you especially enjoy about your work/ministry?
 - What drains you?
4. How do you feel when you rest?
 - What are you learning about resting in God's loving presence?
5. How are you feeling in your marriage?
 - How is your spouse feeling?
6. How are you feeling about your family relationships?
7. 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)?
8. How are you sensing God's presence or not?
9. What does God seem to be saying to you?
10. How do you feel about your prayer life?
 - What helps you to pray?
 - What distracts you?
11. 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?
12. What are you learning about yourself and how you bring yourself into relationship with God and people?
13. Post Sabbatical, what adjustments do you need to improve your daily rhythm of life with Christ?
14. What adjustments do you need to make to improve your marriage?
 - Your family?

15. What adjustments do you need to make to your work/ministry in order to be more joyful and fruitful?
16. 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?
17. What has been most helpful to you about this Sabbatical?
 - What, if anything, was not helpful?

Want Help Planning Your Sabbatical?

We can provide spiritual direction and soul care for you by customizing a Sabbatical plan for you and helping you experience renewal during your Sabbatical. Our Soul Shepherding Institute is also a great way to experience rhythms that will enrich your Sabbatical and help you in the transitions before and after your Sabbatical.

To learn more [Contact Soul Shepherding!](#)

Listen to Our Soul Talks Podcast Episodes on Sabbatical



Every Saturday morning we release a new 20-minute [Soul Talks Podcast](#) episode for you and your ministry. We have over 190 episodes on various topics such as Sabbatical, rest, leadership, burnout, prayer, and more.

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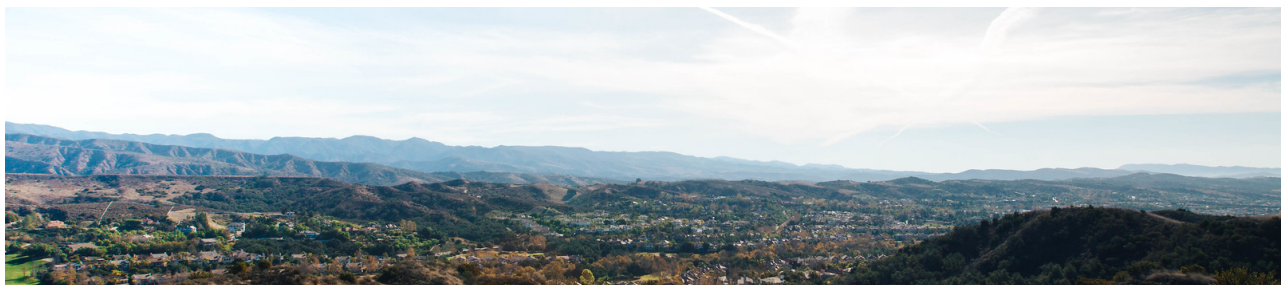
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