

# A Desert Day—to reflect and pray

In times of stress, Jesus often went alone—often to the desert—to pray. A desert is a fitting image for how it can feel when one is pouring out one’s life in ministry...dry, unending, lackluster. And yet, there is often inimitable beauty in a desert, a blooming cactus, a lush pocket of land nourished from a surprising water source, a vast sky. Life truly can spring forth in new ways even in the midst of a desert.

We want to invite you to consider creating a “Desert Day,” a time set apart to lean into what you might be hearing in your own soul when you stop long enough to listen. The objectives are as follows:

- Experience personal **encounter** with the Holy Spirit
- Create a time for **honest assessment** of your soul
- Establish a practice of setting of taking **time away** from your schedule for “soul care”
- Invest in a **place** that invites you to connect more deeply with God

The purpose of your Desert Day is to pay attention to what God is doing in one’s own life and carve out some time on a regular basis for a healthy self-check-in.

## Designing your Desert Day

Designing your **Desert Day** is something that should begin to spark your holy imagination. It’s not a vacation, it’s not a silent retreat, and it’s not a retreat to pound out a bunch of work or planning. It can include elements of play and be in a beautiful place, it can (and probably will be) a largely solitary experience, and it could include a targeted “work” task. However, the intent is that it would be anything from 8 hours to 7 days away with the intent to reflect on two questions:

- 1.) God, how am I doing?
- 2.) What does personal faithfulness look like in the season ahead?

The following are elements for you to consider when creating your proposal.

### The place:

- Outside of your zip code
- Could be a place you already have a connection to or perhaps somewhere you’d like to build a connection
- A place where you can be attentive to your soul and not distracted by activities or people
- Perhaps a monastery, retreat center, or otherwise space dedicated to spiritual encounter.

## The agenda:

- Spend some time on an elongated prayer of Examen—Pray a prayer asking God to search you and show you where you most see God’s presence over the last month/quarter/year? Where do you most feel God’s absence? Note themes, questions, things for which you’re grateful, areas for confession or reflection with trusted voices in your life.
  - “How am I doing, Lord?”
    - “What deepens my life with God?”
    - What destroys my life with God?”
    - If you have a Rule of Life, reflect on how you’re living into it. Does it invite fruitfulness?
- Define what it looks like to be faithful in this season of your life. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in considering what faithfulness looks like related to various parts of your life:
  - Your spirit, body, mind, relationship, home, work, and resources<sup>1</sup>
  - Is there anything specific that you think God is calling you to in these areas in the season ahead? Identify 1-3 intentions you can voice.
  - “What does faithfulness look like in the season ahead?”
- Bring your journal, bible, some things to study or read. But be aware of your natural tendency to hide. You may need to put boundaries around your reading, sleeping, journaling, exercising. All these things are important elements to include, but this time in the “Desert” is an opportunity to connect more deeply with God and carving out times to specifically pay attention will be important.
- You may consider fasting for all or part of this time, depending how long your retreat is. Since fasting brings an intense opportunity for fellowship with the Spirit and also is an act of faithfulness and prayer, the retreat might include a period of this.
- Consider whether it is helpful to include another person—a trusted fellow pastor, a spouse, a colleague—in your “Desert Day.” This is discouraged unless your time apart is multi-days. In that case, if you include another person, we encourage you to have separate sleeping quarters so that you can each carry out your own agenda. Mealtime, a recreational activity, and a daily check-in could be done together, but the primary agenda ought to be individually considered.
- Consider meeting with a Spiritual Director, either someone attached to a place where you may stay or finding (or developing a relationship with) one that you may attend on a semi-regular basis.

## The details:

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<sup>1</sup> These 7 categories are a part of a weekly reflection and also Rule of Life that the Sacred Ordinary Days planner uses. Learn more here: [www.sacredordinarydays.com](http://www.sacredordinarydays.com)

- The details will vary for each person but the hope is that you can plan a rhythm of “Desert Days” in your life in an ongoing manner. Perhaps take a “day trip” outside of your zip code to a context that would create space for reflection.
- Consider a longer retreat that would last from 3-7days. Find a place with which you can joyfully connect and create a rough agenda for prayer, play, rest, reflection, and work (optional). If you choose to work, let it be work that you’ve laid aside for this time, and not a large amount. Disconnect as much as possible from email and ongoing responsibilities.
- You may need to plan a ritual or exercise to lay aside the distractions when you arrive. Likewise, prepare your heart and mind to “return” to your work. Walk a labyrinth, find a finger labyrinth to bring with you, write down or name aloud your distractions and offer them to God for safe-keeping while you’re on retreat.

**Some resources to consider:**

- *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God*, by Ruth Haley Barton
- At the beginning of each retreat, consider using one of the following articles to frame your retreat:
  - “A Cup Running Over,” by Dallas Willard
  - “From Solitude to Community to Ministry,” by Henri Nouwen