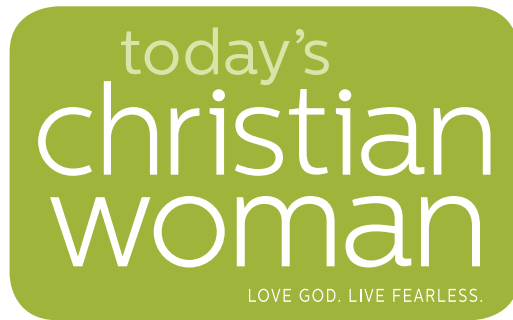


A PERSONAL RETREAT EXPERIENCE *from*



Alone with God



A personal retreat of silence and solitude from Today's Christian Woman



You've made it. You've carved out some space and some time to be alone. Just you . . . and God.

This is your moment to connect—your opportunity to offer God uninterrupted time as you quiet your heart before him and spend time in his presence.

This is your time to **listen.**

How to use this personal retreat:



As busy women, our lives can easily become overwhelming and over-programmed. From work to parenting to marriage to housekeeping to church to volunteering, we can get used to having our lives jam-packed with responsibilities and commitments. Though we long for time alone with God, when we actually get that time, we can flounder. What to do? How do we fill an hour with God? Or two? Or maybe even three?

This Today's Christian Woman download contains 12 different ideas and experiences you can use during a period of time you've set aside to be alone with God and focus on silence and solitude. Each idea can take from 10 to 20 minutes. So flip through these pages and zero in on the experiences that fit you best. If you've got just an hour, plan on doing about 4 experiences; or, alternately, you could take about half of a day to utilize all 12 ideas in this packet.

Alone with God

How to use this personal retreat

You'll need . . .

Supplies: Bible, pen, journal, notepad

Optional: hobby or art supplies, blanket, pillow, string, scissors, modeling clay, an empty cup, a bottle of water, snacks

Find a **space** in which you can be alone and focused on God, such as a peaceful spot in your local park, a corner of your church (get permission), or even your bedroom. If you want, bring a picnic blanket to sit on as well as some snacks and water to help you feel refreshed and energized. Make it a goal to be vocally **silent** during this time with God: express yourself through thoughts, silent prayer, or writing.

DEFEAT DISTRACTIONS!

When you try to spend time focusing on God, countless distractions are bound to pop into your mind. Something you forgot to put on the grocery list. An appointment on the calendar for tomorrow. Worries about your daughter's allergies. A random idea for a project at work.

So be sure to bring a **notepad** and **pen** on your personal retreat. Whenever a distracting thought comes to mind, jot it down on the "distractions notepad" and set it aside. Put the distraction out of your mind and don't let it nag at you while you're trying to focus on God. It's on your notepad—you can deal with it later.

today's
christian
woman
LOVE GOD. LIVE FEARLESS.

Quick Overview



Click on an idea you'd like to explore:

7 IDEA 1:
Explore—
Study what the Bible says about silence and solitude.

11 IDEA 2:
Read & Respond—
Read an article about silence and solitude and respond with prayer.

15 IDEA 3:
Create—
Fashion a visual focal point to help you center on God.

16 IDEA 4:
Journal—
Use journal prompts to help you get real with yourself during this time alone with God.

18 IDEA 5:
Read & Respond—
Read an article and take a moment to rest.

25 IDEA 6:
Pray—
Ponder an ancient hymn and turn your heart toward God in wordless prayer.

27 IDEA 7:
Journal—
Express the challenges you're experiencing in solitude and explore what they reveal about you.

29 IDEA 8:
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30 IDEA 9:
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Pray—
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Do—
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Create—
Make a simple piece of pottery as you invite God to form and shape you.

Sample 1-Hour Schedule	
IDEA 1: Explore	15 minutes
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IDEA 6: Pray	15 minutes

Sample 3-Hour Schedule	
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IDEA 7: Journal	20 minutes
IDEA 12: Create	20 minutes

For Women's Ministry

You can also use these experiences in a women's ministry setting such as during a women's weekend retreat or weekly Bible study. Simply give each participant a copy of this download and send them off to find a space of their own in which to spend an hour with God. Afterward, have women gather together in small groups and share with each other what their time alone with God was like.

IDEA 1:

Explore

Dive into God's Word and explore what it says about silence and solitude.



- Jesus set an example of prioritizing time to be alone with God. Read the following accounts of Jesus practicing solitude; as you do, take a moment to also glance at the events that precede and directly follow each of these times of solitude: **Luke 4:1–13; 4:42; 5:15–6; 6:12**. What strikes you most about these passages? Why?

Alone with God

Idea 1: Explore

- Why do you think Jesus spent this time alone? Go beyond the expected, easy answer—push deeper here. What feelings do you imagine drew him to solitude? What purposes might have motivated him?

- Ultimately, what role did these times of solitude play in Jesus' ministry? What "results" do you observe in Scripture?

Alone with God

Idea 1: Explore

- Read **Mark 6:30–46**. Zero in on Jesus' invitation to the disciples in verse 31. What does this reveal about Jesus' care for them? Can you imagine Jesus issuing this same invitation to you today? What might Jesus see that *you* most need?

- Just as you've probably experienced many times in your own life, Jesus and the disciples' efforts to be alone with God were thwarted. Yet Jesus didn't abandon the goal of time in solitude—he simply postponed it until after the next ministry opportunity (verse 46). When he had a chance to be alone with God, he took it. How can you better take advantage of opportunities to be alone with God? What regular opportunities might you be missing?

Alone with God
Idea 1: Explore

- Read **Matthew 11:28–30** in your Bible. *The Message* renders it this way:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Do you feel like you live a life of "rest" in Christ? Why or why not? What would it look like to really take Jesus up on his offer?

- How do you think intentional times of silence and solitude could help you experience greater rest in Christ?

IDEA 2: READ & RESPOND

The Silent Retreat

By *Lesla Englethaler*



I have a hard time "unplugging." My morning starts with a sleepy-eyed click on email, and most nights I turn in only after checking Facebook. Yet recently it seems God is calling me to spend time plugged in to him—only him.

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, throws down this challenge: "In our crazy world, silence and stillness are two of the true remaining luxuries. You have to work hard to create those sacred pockets of stillness for yourself." The impetus for her yearlong journey of self-discovery was a divorce and ensuing depression: "More than anything, I needed peace. And modern life, for all its conveniences and all its opportunities, doesn't offer that. We almost have too many options."

Last summer some friends and I read Ruth Haley Barton's *Sacred Rhythms*, which echoed Gilbert's findings. Barton invited us to "unplug" using the ancient spiritual practice of solitude. As a self-imposed assignment, we attended a silent weekend at Montserrat Jesuit Retreat House—a bold feat for three women addicted to technology. The retreat center has a "no electronics allowed" policy.

I arrived feeling skeptical with visions of dreary hours spent with monks wearing scratchy robes. Yet I needed to hear from God about a ministry opportunity, so I reasoned, "Surely this—an entire three-day fast from electronics!—will demonstrate my earnestness, and God will acquiesce to my plans." I never got my "yes." That was, as you can imagine, not the point.

Father Boudreaux, who directed our retreat, encouraged journaling throughout the weekend. Here are some slightly scrubbed-up excerpts from my three-day musings. I share them to give you a glimpse of how solitude with God rather than a "yes" to ministry direction was my soul's true need.

Day One: *After the evening session: I cannot sleep. The silence is deafening. What do you want from me, Lord? I thought I was supposed to give up that ministry and move on, but all the doors are shut. Did you want me to step out with no idea where to go? Is that the faith? Or am I just going nowhere?*

Day Two: *Lord, I am lost, and it happened so quickly. I have bought into what Barton describes as "poisoned by the hypnotic belief that good things come only through unceasing determination and tireless effort."*

Afternoon: *I am down by the lake; I can hear the waves ripple and feel the sun's warmth on my face. Abba, thank you for bringing me back—it makes me sick how fast I default to "do" mode. I know that life is not about the next extreme ministry experience, it is about loving well in my neighborhood, with my family, at my job. Forgive my greener-grass ridiculousness.*

Day Three: *Sitting on the dock before breakfast: waves, warmth, seagulls, and quiet. It is perfect. I can feel the newly picked wildflowers pressed between the pages of my journal. Abba, when I am back in the world of too many options, please let their deep violet color shout to me of this sweet time of solitude with you.*

In *Sacred Rhythms*, Barton writes, "It is not easy to create this kind of space for attention to the deeper dynamics of the soul in God's presence." My friend Melody told me, "With all that was going on at work, I was afraid I wouldn't get to go. It even seemed that Satan was putting obstacles [in front of me] as I drove to the retreat—I have never experienced such traffic in my life! Yet, the more I felt deterred, the more resolute I became in attending."

Our friend Rosemary added, "As the date approached, I really didn't want to go. Something that I wanted to do came up that same weekend, so I was torn. Yet I wanted to fulfill my commitment. Then I even had a little fender bender on the way. Apart from the fact that I would be able to hear (hopefully) God's voice a little clearer, I could also rest and be alone with my thoughts. I have realized that if I would practice solitude regularly, I could manage the hectic-ness in my world better."

Once we arrived, we found it took some time to transition. Melody said, "I was physically tired and wanted to sleep. As a Type-A do-er, I fought with myself over the first 24 hours, trying to "maximize" my experience versus just resting. Unfortunately, this led to a feeling of restlessness. When I finally allowed myself to rest, I found I was more open to enjoying my surroundings and actually felt more connected to God."

My friends and I can't wait to go back. You can join us next year as we plan to Twitter about our experience during the weekend away. You know I'm just kidding, right?

Lesla Englethaler is a freelance writer, whose work regularly appears in the Dallas Morning News, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, and Discipleship Journal. This was first published online at www.GiftedforLeadership.com in April 2009.

Respond

- *What do you need to "unplug" in order to enjoy this time with God? Picture worries or concerns that you anticipate might distract you today. Imagine yourself "unplugging" them. If it helps, in at attitude or prayer, literally reach out your hand and pretend you are pulling a plug out of the wall. For each issue you "unplug," ask God to help you set aside that worry or concern. Tell him you trust him to handle it.*

IDEA 3:

Create



Create a focal point for your time of silence and solitude by fashioning a cross for your "sacred space" as you meet with God. If you're outdoors, take time to look around. Use string to tie twigs, weeds, and wildflowers together. Or perhaps use stones and leaves to form a cross on the ground. If you're indoors, cut and color paper, crunch up aluminum foil, or even form a cross-shape with two pencils.

As you find your mind wandering and random thoughts distracting you (which is *certain* to happen), look at your cross. Let this visual reminder draw you back into your focus on Christ's presence.

IDEA 4:

Journal



We often wear masks when we're with others, acting how we're expected to act, hiding feelings of hurt and fear, stifling our own excitement or dreams in order to please others or project a "with it" image of ourselves.

This is your time to take off the mask and be your authentic self. Be real with who you are and what you're feeling. Be *you* in this time with God.

In a **CHRISTIANITY TODAY** article, author Ruth Haley Barton described her experience during a 24-hour retreat of solitude with God:

Alone with God

Idea 4: Journal

In solitude, I was able to be with God and with what was true about me in utter privacy. There was time and space to attend to what was real in my own life—to celebrate the joys, grieve the losses, sit with my questions, attend to my loneliness, shed my tears—and allow God to be with me in those places.

In your journal (or in the space below), write your thoughts in response to these questions:

◦ *In this time and space of utter privacy, what is true about you?*

◦ *What is God prodding you to "attend to" from your life?*



IDEA 5: READ & RESPOND

Getting Away with God

A spiritual retreat can quiet your soul and renew your faith. Here's how . . .

By Brenda Jank

The scenery turned from concrete to cornfields as I reluctantly made my way to a retreat center 30 miles from home. Is this really going to be worth it? I questioned the value of taking a day of personal retreat when my calendar boasted little breathing room and my desk resembled the haystacks I was passing on these lonely country roads.

I was working at a church on the outskirts of Chicago. The senior pastor had recently mandated a series of monthly personal retreats for all staff members. My hungry heart eyed the potential of a few quiet hours. I was acutely aware of the gaps forming in my own spiritual growth, but I was strangely anxious, fearful of my inability to attend to the quiet things of God for that length of time. I let out a fair share of frustrated sighs as I overloaded other days to carve out this day of rest.

Pastor Ficken shared three words of encouragement with me on the morning of my departure.

Rest well.

Listen closely.

Produce nothing.

Twelve years later I cannot recall what specifically happened that day of retreat—except that I wanted to return. And I did, again and again. Nourished from these face-to-face encounters with the Almighty, I have been able to weather the challenges of a growing ministry, the loss of two children, the birth of a child with Spina Bifida, and the long goodbye to my mom, who died of Alzheimer's.

Over time I noticed two specific gifts that regularly emerged from my private encounters with the Lord: stillness and rest. Together, these two gifts can replenish our souls, restore a sense of God's holiness and sovereignty, and strengthen our resolve to serve him.

The importance of stillness

Stillness offers me the distinct beauty of hearing God whisper my name, as only he can do it. The words *quiet*, *alone*, and *undistracted* do not describe the vast majority of my waking hours. It is in this mixture, however, that God often makes himself known. God shouts to us through the glories of his creation, but when calling our name, he speaks with a quiet voice.

Living in a world of iPods, cell phones, and CNN, it's hard to turn down the volume. But going away to a quiet place is a routine 21st-century Christians would do well to cultivate. God treasures these intimate hours with us. Alone, Moses heard the Lord call his name through a burning bush. Alone, the young boy Samuel responded to the voice of God. Alone, Mary said yes to the most world-shattering announcement of all time.

While away on a personal retreat I have not experienced dramatic career-changing encounters like that of Moses or Mary. I have, however, been inspired to pursue new ministry adventures—leading a small group Bible study, embracing a season of foster parenting, and mentoring college students—all while meeting with God in the stillness of an unhurried afternoon.

Jesus' words echo in my ear, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31).

As his disciples, do we respond to Jesus' invitation? Do we long to hear his voice—to hear Christ call us to himself? If our answer is yes, then we need to remind ourselves that it begins with being still and knowing that he is God (Ps. 46:10).

The importance of rest

Rest is something we try defiantly to live without in our daily lives, and our empty hearts and threadbare joy offer testimony to this glaring disparity. Rest is a gift that refuels, renews, refreshes.

Everyday life batters our souls: Weighty responsibilities at work. Frazzled relationships. Looming deadlines. Today's modern pace of life does not orient us to the things of God. The missing ingredient is, simply and profoundly, rest.

A rested soul alters your attitude about everything—from purpose and pleasure to pressures and problems. Because of this, I attempt to carve out regular extended getaways to be alone with the heavenly Father. Sometimes I get away for a full day. Occasionally it's an overnight adventure. I no longer work at a church, and taking a full day is even more challenging now with my responsibilities at home. But I have discovered that two to three hours alone on a Sunday afternoon is enough time for me to meet the Lord, face to face, in a way that centers my soul and redirects my gaze—off me and onto him.

These are precious hours for me. I do not have to do anything. I do not have to accomplish anything. I do not have to produce, poke, prod, or provide anything for anyone. I can just be. I listen. I rest. I read. I journal. I hike. I go into each hour with no expectations. I follow no agenda, yet each time God tenderly and passionately renews my mind and refreshes my soul. Sometimes God offers an explosion of insight, other times his presence is like a gentle breeze. Each time away is unique.

But we resist! We wait for a quieter season to arrive, a season that will never transpire. We drag our feet, forfeiting this gift and making it a burden—another item to add to our overloaded to-do list. There is hope, however. We do not need to be paralyzed by our fears.

Over the years I've made three discoveries about extended time alone with God. These discoveries have removed many self-imposed roadblocks—for me and for others.

Removing the roadblocks

1. *You don't have to go it alone.* A getaway with God does not have to be a solo experience. A personal retreat can take place in tandem with another believer who also desires to experience time away with the Lord. Traveling to a retreat center, city park, or quiet corner with a spouse or friend is an equally valid way to "take a break" with your Creator. Fellowship around a meal is a refreshing way to enhance what God is doing in our hearts during the time we spend alone. When combined with a few hours of solitude, a personal retreat taken with a friend offers the best of both worlds.

2. *Relax, there's freedom in Christ.* I've had to remind myself that there is no single, right way to meet with God. Some believers meet best with God when traipsing through a grassy meadow. Others recognize the Father's voice through liturgical prayers and predetermined Bible readings. Some sing and feast. Others are nourished through fasting and complete solitude. Celebrating this freedom allows me to recognize the creative genius of God's handiwork when he fashioned my soul, and the unique pathway he travels to meet with me, his beloved.

Personal retreats are not about me and what I'm going to do to experience God. Personal retreats are about the Lord and what he wants to do in me when I'm willing to slow down and listen.

3. *Personal retreats are for everyone.* Personal retreats are not a luxury for the elite, but a necessity for all. Technological advances rob us of rest, allowing believers to fall victim to a hurried lifestyle. Nurturing the gifts of stillness and rest fan into flame the abundant life Christ offers all believers. Even those of us who have obligations that might, on the surface, "disqualify" us from doing a retreat (such as financial limitations or a lack of child care) can find ways to spend time alone with God.

Whether once a month or once a year, I encourage you—I challenge you—set a date, find a place, and go—go away to be alone with the one who knows and loves you best.

Brenda Jank, a freelance writer and Christian camping professional based in Albion, Indiana, has been leading retreats for over 20 years. This article was first published in the May/June 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN.

Respond

• *Grab your pillow and take a moment to do something that may seem completely unspiritual: lay down, close your eyes, and rest. Try to quiet your body and mind for at least 15 minutes. Let your thoughts wander: daydream, listen, focus on relaxing your body . . . even let yourself fall completely asleep for a bit. Consider this an opportunity to rest in Christ; he is present with you. Invite him to help you experience the physical and mental refreshment you need. (If you're afraid you'll snooze through the rest of your personal retreat, you may want to set an alarm on your watch—or you may just want to give your body the rest it desperately needs!)*

IDEA 6:

Pray



Read the words of this hymn, originally written by Christians in the fourth century:

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in His hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.*

*King of kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth He stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture,
In the body and the blood;
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food.*

Alone with God

Idea 6: Pray

*Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms of endless day,
That the powers of hell may vanish
As the darkness clears away.*

*At His feet the six winged seraph,
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Alleluia, Lord Most High!*

Sometimes it's difficult to be intentionally silent—but, as this hymn describes, when we truly consider God's amazing, awesome glory, we're left speechless.

Take time now to ponder aspects of God that are awe-inspiring to you. Rather than telling God what you think or feel as you focus on his glory, let your silent, wordless response speak for itself. (You may want to also express yourself by kneeling down, bowing your head, or lying prostrate on the ground.)

IDEA 7:

Journal



“I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact: that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber,” wrote Blaise Pascal. You’ve probably already discovered the truth of this statement as you’ve attempted to set aside this time of solitude and silence. It is not easy being quiet. It is not easy being alone.

Why is it so hard?

Ponder for a moment what the difficulty of silence and solitude reveals about you. Are you restless? Too dependent upon entertainment? Too worried? Do you feel overly self-important, like your family’s life won’t hold together without you for these few hours? Do you find yourself doubting God’s real presence? Have you discovered that your focus muscles are weak and need more exercise?

Alone with God

Idea 7: Journal

Grab your journal and write your thoughts in response to these questions (or write in the space below):

- *What's so hard about being quiet and alone?*

- *What does this challenge reveal about me?*



IDEA 8:

Contemplate

Read **Psalm 131**. Have you ever held a quiet, contented child? Imagine a moment when you snuggled one of your own children, a beloved niece or nephew, or the child of a friend. What did his relaxed and trusting facial expression look like? What did her quiet, contented breathing sound like?

Now imagine yourself like that child, held close in God's arms. Picture that type of trust—of utter rest and safety. Focus on fostering a heart of contentment. In prayer, name those things that hinder contentment and invite God to change your attitude. Read **Psalm 131:2** again to conclude your time of contemplation.

IDEA 9:

Do



Life can get so busy and full of weighty responsibilities that we lose touch with the wonder of this world. We miss out on the delights we experienced as children, before "real life" grabbed hold of us.

Take a moment now to do something entirely childish: (go outside if you're not outdoors already), lie back on the ground, and look up at the sky. Notice clouds floating by. Imagine their shapes form pictures. Or think about the stars and galaxies back beyond that blue sky—the amazing, gigantic universe God made. Or just look for signs of the wind, for birds flying, for lines of cloud left behind by airplanes.

Relish this time of joy, wonder, and relaxation.

IDEA 10:

Pray



In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster makes this distinction: "Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment."

Hold an empty cup in your hand and pray about loneliness; tell God about times recently when you've felt lonely. Invite him to help you understand what's making you feel empty.

Then pour water into your cup. Let it symbolize an inner fullness, an inner contentment. Tell God about your desire to be more fulfilled. Ask God to show you how you can turn away from emptiness and live a life of fullness, centered upon him.

IDEA 11:

Do



Let's face it: sitting still for three hours can be . . . well . . . *mind-numbingly boring!* Adie Johnson writes this about times of solitude with God:

Some people think solitude is only for introverts or the "calm of spirit." Not true. Just because you're going off to be alone, and just because you are choosing to not talk to other people for a period of time, does not mean you can't be moving, active, or expressive. Hike. Snowshoe. Journal. Paint. Draw. Read. Do what you enjoy. It's important to use some of your time to be still, being intentionally open to God and to listen for what dreams he might desire to share with you, but that doesn't have to happen sitting down with your eyes closed.

Alone with God

Idea 11: Do

So take Adie's advice and *move*. Go on a walk or a jog. Or use your hands and eyes to spend time on a hobby or in creative expression (such as knitting, embroidery, sketching, painting, photography). As you do your activity, imagine God with you. (He *is* with you, after all.) Be attentive to his presence; in your mind, speak to him thoughts or questions that come up. Tune your heart to his guidance; listen.

IDEA 12:

Create



Use your hands to shape a small bowl out of clay. Start by forming the stiff clay into a ball; as you do, the clay will warm in your hands and soften. Use your thumbs to push a hole into the middle of the ball. Then begin pinching around the edges of the hole to create a bowl. Shape and smooth it with your fingers. As you do, think of these words from Scripture: "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isaiah 64:8).

As you work, think about how God is molding and shaping you during this time of silence and solitude. How is he changing you? How is he shaping you spiritually?

(Remember, your creation doesn't need to be a masterpiece! You don't need to impress God with your artistic skills—just let this experience represent your thoughts and prayers.)

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