

Your Guide to Personal Retreats

By Rick Lawrence

Over the years, personal retreats have become a major catalyst for a growing intimacy in my relationship with Jesus. During a particularly stressful time in my life, when my soul felt like a bare wire, I had a good friend who pointedly challenged me to take a “day away with the Lord” every month to recalibrate and reconnect. Because I felt a kind of raw desperation in my life at the time, I jumped on that idea. Since then, personal retreats have functioned like an extended “date night” for me, with a narrowed focus on simply enjoying the presence of Jesus. And I’ve extended this experience by taking at least one three-day personal retreat every year—usually at a Trappist monastery in the Colorado mountains, where I can reserve a stone “hermitage” that guarantees freedom from distractions. In the last 10 years, every one of the books I’ve authored have been written, at least in part, at that monastery—including *The Jesus-Centered Life*, my latest.

Because I’ve benefited so deeply from these one- and three-day retreat experiences, I’ve often recommended them to others. But I’ve found that many people love the *idea* of a personal retreat, but have no idea what to *actually do* on one. So, I’ve put together a couple of bullet lists that can help spark your own thinking as you consider either a one-day or more extended personal retreat...

One-Day Personal Retreat

On my one-day personal retreat days, I bring...

- **Something to play music on**—I bring a wide variety of music to choose from, including contemplative instrumental, old-school jazz, indie rock, and what I might call singer/songwriter Christian (Andrew Peterson, for example). I mix long stretches of silence with shorter stretches of music that matches whatever I crave in the moment.

- **An eclectic collection of reading material**—I usually bring a “serious” book about the Christian life by an author I already love, a new book by an author I don’t yet know, at least one devotional book, and a “comfort food” sort of book (I like books that are collections of favorite comic strips, including “Pearls Before Swine,” “Dilbert,” “Calvin & Hobbes,” and “Get Fuzzy”).

- **A Bible**—I’ll bring my *Jesus-Centered Bible* as a primary focus, but I’ll also bring a copy of Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* to change it up.

- **Layered clothing**—It’s important to mix inside experiences with outside experiences, so I make sure I have the clothes and footwear I need to ramble outside. I always take a walk or a hike when I’m on a one-day retreat. I make sure to bring along a small pad of paper that can fit in my back pocket, and a pen—that’s so I can write anything that Jesus says to me as I walk. Mostly, I pray out loud when I’m walking, talking to Him in a conversational way about anything that pops into my head. Because a personal retreat offers more time and space for prayer, I make sure to simply spit out all the things I’m anxious about, or have been chewing on inside.

- **A determination to explore new experiences**—At the retreat center I go to most often, there is an outside labyrinth experience (a kind of maze that’s designed to focus you on prayer), a garden prayer walk, and little nooks and crannies scattered all over the grounds. Every time I go on a personal retreat, I try to experience something new.

- **A willingness to give my soul what it needs, at any particular segment of the day**—I mean, I give myself permission to not perform for Jesus, as if I had to clear a bar to please Him. That means I often take a short nap if I feel like it, or stare out the window if I feel like it, or wander the grounds aimlessly if I feel like it, or write a poem to my wife if I feel like it... This is a day to draw near to the heart of Jesus, and to respect my weary soul.

- **A willingness to embrace and pursue silence**—Silence is a very intimidating thing to most people today—we're absolutely inundated with noise, and we don't know how to settle ourselves without it. So I make sure to pursue silence—this is why staring out the window is so necessary. I listen more than I talk to Jesus.

Three-Day Personal Retreat

In addition to everything I've listed above that I bring to a one-day personal retreat, here's what I bring to a more extended time with Jesus...

- **Food**—Though one-day retreats usually mean I bring a simple lunch with me, a more extended stay elevates the role of food. In the spirit of giving my soul what it needs, I choose my favorite healthy meals to bring—that means my favorite cereal (Kaashi Cinnamon Harvest), coffee blend (French Roast), lunch food (yogurt/granola/fruit mix, with a toasted tortilla and hummus), dinner faves (usually a small steak, fresh vegetable, salad, and sweet potato), snacks (baby carrots, tortilla chips, granola bar), and dessert (Salazon dark chocolate). I drink sparkling water at every meal, as a change of pace. Also, I bring a bottle of red wine, and sometimes I lug my espresso machine with me so I can enjoy a latte.

- **Film**—After a long day of simply pursuing Jesus, both inside and outside my retreat lodging, I like to lay on my bed and watch a good movie on my laptop before I go to sleep. I stay away from intense films or super-serious films and lean toward pure enjoyment (Jane Austen films and movies such as *The Way, Way Back*, *Dan In Real Life*, and the PBS series *Poirot* and *Sherlock*, for example).

- **Hiking Gear**—Because I take these extended retreats in the mountains, I make sure to bring hiking boots, hiking shorts, and layered coats that make it possible to hike in any weather.

- **Laptop for Writing**—Because I'm a writer, and Jesus has called me into the life of an author, writing is a very enjoyable "spiritual discipline" for me, so I always bring my laptop so that I can enjoy stretches of writing on a project. It's a primary means Jesus uses in my life to develop intimacy with Him.

- **Newspaper Sections**—For meal times, I make sure to bring multiple copies of the "Living" section of my local newspaper, which includes human-interest features and the comics section. I read this during my meals as a break from my other reading, which tends to be more intense.

- **Unforgettables**—It's easy to forget bringing a flashlight or alarm clock or corkscrew or... stuff you end up needing but didn't foresee. I don't care about over-packing a little, because I want flexibility in what I do on the retreat.