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Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal

A FIVE-SESSION GUIDE FOR GROUP LEADERS

by

A P R I L Y A M A S A K I



HERALD
P R E S S

Harrisonburg, Virginia

To my first *Sacred Pauses* group:
Alayne, Allen and Elsiana, Art, Barb, Caroline, Ethel,
James and Sylvia, Joan, Kate, Maria, Masako.
Thank you for sharing yourself with me and with one another.

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INTRODUCTION

My first *Sacred Pauses* group included

- both men and women;
- some at home with preschoolers, others employed outside the home, still others retired;
- some relatively new to the church and unfamiliar with small group life;
- some already well established in Scripture and prayer;
- some who had already finished reading *Sacred Pauses* and others who hadn't yet started;
- all willing to explore spiritual practice together.

I thought of going book club style and discussing *Sacred Pauses* in a single evening, but that didn't seem to do justice to the spirit of the book. Yet going through one chapter at a time for 18 weeks seemed too long and too much of a commitment for such a novice group. Instead, I decided to plan a five-part series on *Sacred Pauses* as an overview of spiritual practice that could work well for both beginners and those with more experience.

My first group met weekly for the first three sessions, then we skipped a week so I could keep a previous commitment, and finished off with two weeks back to back. Some really missed the week we took off while others appreciated having the extra time for a change. In any case, our continuity didn't seem to suffer. Meeting weekly or every second week (which allows more time for reading in between sessions) would seem to work well for this series.

In just five sessions, there wasn't time to explore every sacred pause in the book, but we could try some things together, encourage each other to read and experiment on our own, share what we were learning, and lay a foundation for further spiritual growth. I was excited about the possibilities for my new group, and I offer this guide to help you explore *Sacred Pauses* with your own group too.

At our first gathering, I invited people to share their hopes for the time that we would spend together. Some were looking for a sacred pause in their week, for a time where they could set aside their work and family responsibilities to attend to God and to their own spiritual needs. Some were already praying, reading Scripture, or engaging in some other practice on their own, and were looking to share their experience with others. Some were eager for discussion, and others more hesitant. This group guide is based on our experience together.

THE SACRED PAUSES FIVE-PART READING PLAN

The chapters of *Sacred Pauses* have been arranged as a personal retreat beginning with Creating Space, Slowing Down, Becoming Quiet, and ending with Ending Well. In between, the middle chapters offer a variety of spiritual practices that are meant to build on one another, but may also be read in any order. This series follows a five-part reading plan that groups the chapters together as follows:

SESSION 1: INTRODUCING SACRED PAUSES

1. Creating Space
2. Slowing Down
3. Becoming Quiet

SESSION 2: ENGAGING SCRIPTURE

4. Engaging Scripture
7. Being Alone Without Being Lonely
8. Valuing Relationships
16. Praying Scripture

SESSION 3: JOURNALING

6. Getting Outside
9. Giving
11. Making Music
17. Living Simply

SESSION 4: PRAYING

5. Praying It Like It Is
10. Praying the Lord's Prayer
15. Confessing

SESSION 5: PAYING ATTENTION

12. Fasting
13. Having Fun
14. Paying Attention
18. Ending Well

Session 1

INTRODUCING SACRED PAUSES

GETTING READY

- Ask everyone to read the Introduction and chapters 1, 2, 3 of *Sacred Pauses* before the first session. Encourage them to come prepared to share: How have you experienced sacred pauses in your own life? What spiritual practices have already been meaningful to you, and what do you hope for this group?
- Reflect on your own experience and hopes, and be prepared to share your own journey with the group. Choose an everyday icon, and bring it with you to the first session, or if it's too big, consider bringing a photo.
- Bring your book, Bible, and copies of “The *Sacred Pauses* Five-Part Reading Plan” for everyone. Get the equipment ready to show the *Sacred Pauses* video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0lR0ocUMLo>.
- Pray for the members of your group.

My group met in the fireside room of our church with couches and chairs set in a u-shape with the screen completing our circle. Unfortunately we had trouble with the equipment just before our meeting and had to postpone the video, so be sure to leave plenty of time before your meeting to test everything. For the other sessions we met in a circle. For a smaller group, meeting in a home around a table would work well too.

I. INTRODUCE GROUP MEMBERS

Welcome everyone, and review how often you will meet, start and end times, and any other house-keeping details as needed. Share your own interest and experience with sacred pauses—what has been meaningful to you, what you are still learning. Set a relaxed and open tone for the group in your sharing, and then go around the circle to give each person an opportunity to share both their own journey and what they hope for the group.

Not everyone in my group knew one another, so we introduced ourselves by name as we shared our experiences. One woman was using a contemporary version of the Book of Common Prayer every day. Another described how eating a healthier diet had become a spiritual practice that also helped her husband recover from a heart attack. One man shared about deliberately getting to work early so he could have ten minutes of quiet reading time before carrying on with the rest of his day. Another described his love-hate relationship with journaling as something that he didn't particularly enjoy but found so helpful that he kept a journal anyway. Having people think about their experience ahead of time allowed them to share more deeply than they might have otherwise. It was a great way to get to know one another, and even those in the group who knew one another quite well seemed to learn something new.

2. INTRODUCE THE BOOK

Show the 4-minute *Sacred Pauses* video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0lR0ocUMLo>.

3. HAND OUT COPIES OF THE FIVE-PART READING PLAN AND REVIEW

Note how the chapters have been grouped together. Take a few moments of silence and ask each person to mark which of the chapters/topics they feel most drawn to, which ones they have experience with, which ones might be new to them. Invite people to share their responses.

I found that those who were more introverted appreciated some time for personal reflection before sharing with the group. Those who were more extroverted were eager to share, but sitting quietly first helped them not to jump ahead too quickly for the rest of the group. I haven't included this extra step of silent reflection for each sharing time in this series, but if it's helpful for your group, please feel free to add it at any time.

4. INTRODUCE THE EVERYDAY ICON

Briefly review *Sacred Pauses*, pages 22–24. Share your everyday icon with the group, and why you chose it.

5. PREPARE FOR YOUR NEXT SESSION

- Ask group members to choose an everyday icon if they haven't already done so, and to bring their icon (or a photo) to share with the group the next time you meet.
- Ask them to read *Sacred Pauses* chapters 4, 7, 8, 16 before your next meeting, and to bring their book and Bible to the next session.

My group met at 7pm with the intention of ending between 8 and 8:30pm. Since we were new to one another, I wasn't sure how much to prepare, so I had come with three additional ideas just in case: (1) after sharing my everyday icon, I could have asked people for any questions they had on chapters 1–3 and spent some time in discussion; (2) I could have asked if anyone had already tried any of the practical suggestions in the first three chapters and invited them to share their experience; (3) I had chosen Psalm 121 and brought my Bible so we could have ended the evening with lectio divina and prayer. As it turned out, our sharing of our personal experiences and hopes for the group took most of our time, so I skipped these other ideas, but they could easily be added.

6. CLOSE THIS TIME WITH SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER

Read the first part of James 4:8.

God, as we have met together, we have drawn near to you and to one another. Thank you for drawing near to us and for your faithful presence. We offer you the prayers of our hearts [brief silence or spoken prayer, depending on your group]. Go with us now—in the busyness of life and in our sacred pauses. Amen.

Since some of the people in my group were meeting one another for the first time, it seemed best for me to close with Scripture and a simple spoken prayer. Feel free to vary this depending on your group: ask for specific prayer requests to include, invite people to add their own verbal prayers, have a longer time of silent prayer, choose another written prayer from your own tradition, have someone else close in prayer, what ever works best for your group.

Session 2

ENGAGING SCRIPTURE

GETTING READY

- Reflect on your first meeting, and pray for the group. What went well? What would you want to do differently the next time? What group and individual needs have surfaced? What do you need as a leader?
- Read chapters 4, 7, 8, 16 of *Sacred Pauses*.
- Choose a text for *lectio divina* from the list on page 158, and bring your Bible to use during this session.

For my first Sacred Pauses group that met last spring, I put a printed notice in our church bulletin, talked to several people to invite them, collected email addresses and phone numbers, sent reminders in between our sessions, set up the room each time, and led each session. By fall and for leading a second, larger group, I knew I needed help. Two people volunteered to arrive early to set up the room and greet people as they arrived. Another became our contact person to send reminders and to keep in touch with anyone who might miss an evening due to illness or another commitment. Over time, as the group took more ownership, we added background music to welcome people in; we sang Be Still and Know that I am God as a theme song along with piano and violin; someone donated a floor lamp because the room needed more light; someone else suggested a Sunday afternoon walk; a few people decided to take turns bringing cookies and coffee. You may wish to consider some of these options as well and share the responsibilities among members of your group.

I. WELCOME EVERYONE AND BRIEFLY REVIEW YOUR PREVIOUS SESSION

Invite any newcomers to introduce themselves and to share their experience with sacred pauses along with their hopes for the group. Invite those who were present the first time to share any additional thoughts and experiences they may have had since then. Valuing your relationship with one another is itself a kind of sacred pause, so take your time in sharing together.

2. SHARE YOUR EVERYDAY ICONS

Go around the circle and have each person share their everyday icon. Encourage them to tell the story of where it came from, and how they came to choose it.

I was amazed and blessed by the different everyday icons that were chosen by members of my group. Some had even chosen more than one: a canoe paddle mounted above a doorway at home, a painted rock, a window, a cross made of three nails, an insulated coffee cup, a special Bible received as a baptism and birthday gift, an iPhone, a health mat used for relaxation exercises, pictures drawn by children, a beautiful sari quilt, a favourite moments candle, a family Bible, silver candlesticks with purple candles, fresh cut flowers in a special vase, a polished piece of malachite.

3. ENGAGE SCRIPTURE

- Read Matthew 4:1–11 as a group. If there are a number of different translations within the group, it might be easiest to have one person read the entire passage while others follow along in their own Bibles. If the group is using a common translation, you could just as easily read around the circle one verse at a time. Or assign parts and read the text with separate voices for the narrator, Jesus, and Satan.
- After you've heard this text together, ask the group to read it through again on their own, reflecting on what it tells us about Jesus, Scripture, and spiritual practice. After some moments of personal reflection, discuss this together as a group.
- In your discussion, some of the points that may surface and/or you may wish to mention: The text shows Jesus in solitude and fasting. His answers indicate that he must have spent time in Scripture. Spiritual practice may involve temptation and struggle. God's Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, and angels came to care for him; God also leads and cares for us.

4. PRACTICE *LECTIO DIVINA*

Briefly review the different ways of reading Scripture described in chapter 4 (pp. 49–52) and chapter 16 (pp. 156–59). Then do a simple group *lectio divina* with the text that you have chosen:

- Ask the group to set aside their Bibles, to get comfortable in their seats, and close their eyes if they wish.
- Let them know that you will read through the text three times: once for them simply to listen to the text and to listen for God's voice; a second time asking them to allow God to direct their thoughts to focus on a single word or phrase; a third time to stay with that one word or phrase and to ask, What is God saying to me about this?
- Read slowly and deliberately, making each word count. Allow for some time of silence between each reading.
- Invite people to reflect on their experience. What was their one word or phrase, and what was God saying to them? How did they feel about their experience? Remind them that each experience is different, and it may not always seem to “work,” but God is with us and cares for us even when our spiritual practice may be a struggle.

For my group, this was enough for one evening, but if you need more, consider adding: (1) Before trying the lectio divina together, invite the group to share their experience with reading Scripture. Ask: Has reading Scripture been a regular practice for you? Why or why not? What is your favourite translation? (2) Discuss Chapter 7 “Being Alone without Being Lonely” and chapter 8 “Valuing Relationships.” Invite the group to share an example of each from their own lives. Ask: Which comes more naturally to you? Which do you need more of at this point in your life?

5. PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

- Encourage everyone to choose one sacred pause from the reading so far, and to put it into practice before the next meeting. It could be a few moments of silence or *lectio divina*. It could be coffee with a friend, or writing a letter to a family member at a distance. Note that a pause need not be long, and there are plenty of choices.
- Ask the group to read *Sacred Pauses* chapters 6, 9, 11, 17.
- Ask each person to bring their book, Bible, pen, and journal (or other notebook or sheets of paper) to the next session.

6. CLOSE THIS TIME WITH PRAYER

Ask the group for any prayer requests they might have, then pray silently for these, and end with the Lord's Prayer.

By this time, I knew my group well enough that I knew we could pray the Lord's prayer together without my needing to supply the printed words. Members of our group also spoke different languages, so after praying in English, we were able to hear the Lord's prayer in German and Cantonese as well. Feel free to incorporate the different languages spoken by members of your group, and/or to provide a handout with the words as needed.

Session 3

JOURNALING

GETTING READY

- Reflect on your last meeting, and pray for the group. What went well? What would you want to do differently the next time? What can you share about your own experience with journaling for this session?
- Read *Sacred Pauses* chapters 6, 9, 11, 17.
- Choose several journal prompts from the book to use during this session.
- Bring supplies for this session: your own journal if you have one; extra paper and pens for anyone who might not have brought their own; a white board or large sheet of paper and appropriate marker; some music to play during the reflection and journaling time.

When we introduced ourselves in the first session, one group member mentioned an interest in the journal prompt on giving (p. 94), so that became one of my choices for us to do together. You may wish to focus on the journaling prompts in the chapters for this session, or choose more broadly from throughout the book. Or add some other more general prompts if you wish. I included these other options: (1) Read Psalm 46, or other portion of Scripture. In what ways does this text describe your life? What might God be saying to you in these words? (2) Reflect on a recent event in your life. (3) Write a prayer about whatever is on your mind and heart today. (4) Your own idea.

I. WELCOME AND CHECK IN WITH ONE ANOTHER

What has been happening in your life since the last time we met? What practical idea did you choose for your sacred pause, and how did it go? Any other thoughts you would like to share?

Two of our group members were away for this session, but both sent email greetings that I shared with the rest of the group. One email came from out of town: “Just wanted to drop by to send greetings to the group meeting tonight to consider journaling as a sacred pause. It is a session that I am sorry to miss. Today we were in St. Jacob’s. While in one store I saw paper napkins which read ‘I’m meditating while I multi-task’—trust tonight’s group will be more focused!” And from the other: “My son is coming to town tomorrow for a few days. I hate to miss the group, I’m enjoying it so much, but I’m reluctant to ditch him on his first evening here. Please pass on my regrets to the others and I will see you next week.”

2. INTRODUCE JOURNALING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE THAT RUNS THROUGHOUT THE BOOK

Read the two paragraphs on pages 28–29 beginning with “Journaling is a form of private writing“ and ending with “It’s possible to ‘journal’ in a notebook, a file folder, a shoebox, on a scrap of paper, on a computer.” Note that once journaling is introduced in chapter 2 “Slowing Down,” there are journal prompts in each chapter. Share your own experience: Do you keep a regular journal? Why or why not?

3. BRIEFLY REVIEW THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF JOURNALING

Divide the white board or large piece of paper in half with benefits on one side and challenges on the other. Ask the group to brainstorm a list for each, and have one person write down the responses for everyone to see. For a less formal option, ask the group for comments on their own experiences with journaling, and discuss the benefits and challenges as they emerge from the sharing. If it's helpful for your group, remember to allow for some time of personal reflection before brainstorming and discussing together.

I decided to try the less formal option with my group. Some were long-time journal keepers as adults, while others had little experience beyond childhood diaries and school assignments. Some expressed concern for privacy. One had already destroyed some early diaries. Another had labelled his journal "This is a private journal. If you decide to peruse it, please ask. If you plan on reading it, be forewarned." Our personal sharing allowed us to talk about both the benefits and the challenges of journaling, and was a great way for us to learn from one another.

4. EXPLAIN THE OPTIONS FOR JOURNALING THAT YOU HAVE CHOSEN, AND ALLOW 15–20 MINUTES JOURNALING TIME

Clear the whiteboard, or use a fresh sheet of paper to list the options for your group. Give the page numbers for the journal prompts. Let the group know that there will be time to share journal entries if they wish, but they are also very welcome to keep whatever they've written in confidence. Then turn on the music, and give the group 15–20 minutes of journaling time on their own. If there is another room available, offer a silent journaling option without music as well.

When I'm at home, I usually journal in silence, but in a group and especially for those new to journaling, I find that instrumental music helps to put people at ease. For others, however, even quiet music may be too noisy, and since my group met at the church, we could journal with music in the fireside room (which most people chose), or journal in silence in the library, or even sitting on the floor in the hallway as one person chose to do. Most brought their own journals or sheets of paper to write by hand, with just one of us keeping a digital journal.

5. CALL THE GROUP BACK TOGETHER AND ALLOW SOME TIME FOR SHARING

Did you find the time for journaling too long, too short, or just about right? What else did you notice about your experience? Would anyone like to share your journal entry with the rest of the group?

My group hardly had enough time for sharing our journal entries, but if you have the time, reflect on the more physically active practices (e.g., walking, giving things away, simplifying your life) with those that seem less physically active (e.g., slowing down, reading, sitting still to journal). How important is it to practice both for a healthy spirituality? Which are you more inclined toward? Which do you need more at this stage of your life?

6. PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

- Encourage everyone to choose a sacred pause from the reading for today, and to put it into practice before the next meeting. Take a walk as a sacred pause. Listen to music. Simplify something at home. Try more journaling, or choose something else.
- Ask the group to read *Sacred Pauses* chapters 5, 10, 15.
- Let the group know that the next session will include prayer journaling, so to bring their book, Bible, and journal again.

7. CLOSE THIS TIME WITH SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER

Introduce Psalm 139 as a psalm that is personal, prayerful, and journal-like in its tone. Read verses 1–6, then pause so the group can add their own prayers of praise or intercession, whether silently or out loud, more personally for themselves, their loved ones, and for the wider world. Then end by reading verses 7–12.

Session 4

PRAYING

GETTING READY

- Reflect on the experience of your group so far. What have been the highlights? How have you been challenged? Have there been any difficulties with one another or with the book? Bring these things to God in prayer.
- Read *Sacred Pauses* chapters 5, 10, 15. Be prepared to review the different forms of prayer described in these chapters, and to share examples from your own experience.
- Bring your book, journal, and Bible to this session.

1. WELCOME AND CHECK IN WITH ONE ANOTHER

How have you taken time for sacred pause since the last gathering? What else has been happening for you?

2. LEAD THE GROUP IN A DIRECTED PRAYER, GIVING THANKS FOR WHAT HAS BEEN SHARED, AND PRAYING FOR ANY CONCERNS

O God, we give you thanks for all your goodness. *(silent prayer)*

We lift up the concerns that we have shared and the longings still hidden in our hearts. *(silent prayer)*

We pause to be still and know that you are God. *(silent prayer)*

End this time by reading Psalm 46:1–10.

3. BRIEFLY REVIEW THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF PRAYER DESCRIBED IN THE READING FOR THIS SESSION

Like Scripture and journaling, prayer is another theme that runs through the entire book. The three chapters for today focus on informal praying-it-like-it-is, more formal prayers like the Lord's Prayer, and prayers of confession. Share examples from your own experience, and ask the group to share their own stories.

I would have liked to take a group prayer walk around our neighbourhood, but our evening meeting time was so short and not everyone was able to manage that much of a walk, so we stayed indoors for all of our sessions. But if your group is able and if you have the time, consider skipping this review and prayer journaling in favour of praying outdoors. See page 72, option 3.

4. REVIEW THE LORD'S PRAYER AS A MODEL PRAYER (PP. 107–9)

While the Lord's Prayer may be prayed as written, it may also be understood as a guide to prayer. Read the two "reality check" paragraphs: (1) page 108 beginning with "The Lord's Prayer can serve as a reality check for our own prayer life today," and (2) page 109 "Again, there's a reality check here for us."

Ask the group, do you resonate more with God's holy otherness or with God as intimate friend? Do you pray more for physical needs or for spiritual concerns? More for yourself or for others? Take some time for silent reflection before you talk about this as a group.

My group stayed together as one big group for all of the discussion and sharing, since they seemed quite comfortable with the size and group dynamics. But conversation in twos, threes, and fours may add some variety and/or be more helpful for some groups, so consider separating into smaller groupings as an alternative for any of the personal sharing or discussion times.

5. HAVE THE GROUP SPEND 10–15 MINUTES IN PRAYER WITH THEIR JOURNAL

Ask them to write, doodle, or draw their own pray-it-like-it-is prayer in their journal, or to mirror the Lord's Prayer (p. 110, option 3). Journal in silence this time, and when the group comes back together, ask for any responses: Did you notice any difference journaling in silence without the music playing? Did you experience this time as real prayer, or did writing your own prayer feel more like preparing to pray? Invite anyone to offer a prayer.

6. PREPARE FOR THE FINAL SESSION

- Ask the group to return to their prayer journaling within the next few days, and to pray the prayer that they have written or drawn. How does the prayer seem different to them once they've had some distance from it?
- Ask the group to read *Sacred Pauses* chapters 12, 13, 14, 18, and to try at least one sacred pause before the group meets again.

7. CLOSE THIS SESSION WITH PRAYER

Have everyone stand to pray, arms extended in front of them, palms up. Ask them to imagine God's blessing being poured into their hands and overflowing to fill the room. End with a time of open prayer. Or have one person pray the mirror version of the Lord's Prayer as it appears in the sidebar on page 110, and conclude with everyone praying the Lord's Prayer together.

To encourage praying together as a group, I sometimes pass my Bible around the circle. I tell people that when they have the Bible, it's their turn to pray, and they have the option simply to hold it and pray silently, or to offer a verbal prayer, or simply to pass it on. When I pray with groups this way, I find that verbal participation is generally higher than if I simply leave an open space for verbal prayers without passing my Bible around.

Session 5

PAYING ATTENTION

GETTING READY

- Bring your group before God in prayer once more. What does the group need to end well? How might you mark this transition? Consider next steps, whether continuing as a group in some form, or moving on.
- Read *Sacred Pauses* chapters 12, 13, 14, 18, taking note of the life review (pp. 140–44) as background to the examen of consciousness in this session.

Within the first couple of weeks, some of the members in my first Sacred Pauses group were already asking whether we could continue as a group again in fall. With an already full ministry calendar, I hesitated to commit myself to leading a regular weekly group that would require additional preparation. But since I was already planning to preach through the book of 1 Corinthians, I wondered, what if it were a Sacred Pauses 1 Corinthians group? It wouldn't take a lot of extra preparation on my part since I would already be working with 1 Corinthians for my preaching, and I generally have more to share on any given text than I can fit in a sermon. The questions and comments from the group could enrich my sermon preparation. We could engage the text in a different way than on Sunday mornings, with journaling and lectio divina and other practices. It would be a group that I could quite naturally invite any newcomers to join. Reflect on the possibilities for your own group: Is there interest in continuing in some form? What would be the purpose and focus of the group? As an alternative, would you want to offer this same series to a new group as a way of encouraging spiritual formation more broadly?

I. WELCOME AND CHECK IN WITH ONE ANOTHER

Invite the group to share once more about their experience with sacred pauses and anything else that has happened in their lives since you met last.

2. INVITE THE GROUP TO JOIN YOU IN AN EXAMEN OF CONSCIOUSNESS TO REVIEW THE DAY

This is an opportunity for the group to pray about what has just been shared and to reflect on the day. Invite them to sit comfortably with their eyes closed, to breathe slowly and deeply and to become aware of God's presence. Then lead them through the following silent examen, allowing time for prayer and reflection as indicated, and ending with the Lord's Prayer.

Give thanks for what has been shared and for each person in the group.

(silent prayer and reflection)

Think back through your own day. Where did you feel a sense of God's delight? What gave you joy?

(silent prayer and reflection)

Where do you sense the need for confession? Bring this before God, and receive forgiveness and healing.

(silent prayer and reflection)

Where did you feel a sense of self-denial—was that something you could give freely, or did you feel forced into it? Where there is resistance and hurt, receive God’s mercy and grace.

(silent prayer and reflection)

Let’s conclude with the Lord’s Prayer together.

(Lord’s Prayer)

This version of the examen was designed both for self-reflection and to prepare for the discussion that follows on fasting and having fun. By reviewing their day first, group members were more prepared to share their own examples of self-denial and delight. In my group, the work ethic was strong, and some felt guilty about taking time off to have fun. For them, fasting as self-denial was also clearly different than having something imposed on them. Be prepared for these and other issues to surface in your discussion.

3. REVIEW CHAPTER 12 “FASTING” AND CHAPTER 13 “HAVING FUN”

Note how fasting is described in Scripture (pp. 121–24). Compare and contrast it with having fun (pp. 129–31). Discuss any experiences of fasting or self-denial. What prompted these? What lessons were learned? Discuss the short illustration on page 131—how do you distinguish between “good” fun and “bad” fun?

4. INVITE THE GROUP TO JOIN YOU IN ANOTHER EXAMEN OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Only this time, let them know that instead of reviewing the day, the focus of this examen is to review your experience together as a group. Ask them to turn to page 144, option 2, and use this to guide their journaling. Encourage them to allow each question to speak into your experience together. So for example, instead of focusing on today, ask instead, Where has there been joy and blessing in our time together? As we have practiced sacred pauses in between? Where has there been disappointment or challenge? In what ways have we been drawn to God during this time?

By now, I had discovered that 20 minutes of journaling was a good length of time for my group, but you might allow more or less time according to your experience. Consider adding an additional question for reflection: How will you continue to practice sacred pauses? If there is an option for continuing the group in some form, invite group members to reflect on whether they are interested and able to participate. Ask: What might you be looking for?

5. SHARE YOUR RESPONSES

Invite the group to begin with any responses to the series that they would like to share. Be positive, but don’t be afraid to share any disappointments or challenges. If there are negative comments, don’t take them personally, but listen for what you can learn about the person and for what you could consider for the future. If there seems to be interest in continuing as a group, discuss the possibilities together. If not, simply thank the group for their participation, and move on to the closing.

6. CLOSE THIS TIME WITH SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER

Read Psalm 73:23–26 (p. 180, sidebar). Note that the text begins with “nevertheless”—whether you continue as a group or not, whatever joys or challenges any of you face in your daily lives, “nevertheless” God is with you. Then have the group stand in a circle and join hands if they are comfortable enough with each other. Close with a circle prayer with each person offering a sentence prayer: “I give thanks for” or “I pray for “ Bless each one, by responding as a group: “God guides you and strengthens you.” When you have come full circle, end with “Thanks be to God. Amen.”

Thank you for your interest in this group guide. I would love to hear about your experience, so please feel free to email me at mail@aprilyamasaki.com. Your comments and questions are most welcome. I also invite you and your group to visit my blog www.aprilyamasaki.com and connect with me through any of the social media icons there. In the meantime, may you walk with God in the busyness of life and in your sacred pauses. Amen.