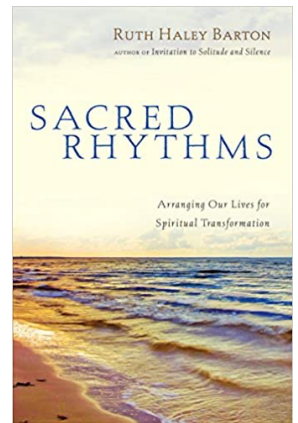


Sacred Rhythms – Study Guide

Book by Ruth Haley Barton

Do you long for a deep, fundamental change in your life with God? Do you desire a greater intimacy with God? Do you wonder how you might truly live your life as God created you to live it? Spiritual disciplines are activities that open us to God's transforming love and the changes that only God can bring about in our lives. Picking up on the monastic tradition of creating a "rule of life" that allows for regular space for the practice of the spiritual disciplines, this book takes you more deeply into understanding seven key disciplines along with practical ideas for weaving them into everyday life. Each chapter includes exercises to help you begin the practices--individually and in a group context. The final chapter puts it all together in a way that will help you arrange your life for spiritual transformation. The choice to establish your own sacred rhythm is the most important choice you can make with your life.



Leader's Note:

If you are leading this group discussion, please be sure to read *Appendix B: Leading A Group Experience* before you start. It will provide valuable insight toward making this study meaningful and transformational for you and your group. Also, if you have a larger group, consider what questions you might want to discuss in breakout groups. Breaking into groups of 5 or 6 for some of the questions in this study will allow for a much deeper discussion and more time for individuals to share, while sticking to an appropriate length of time for your gathering. It can help to set a time limit for each breakout group or for each person, to keep the group on track and ensure that everyone has sufficient time to share what's on their hearts.

Introduction

1. After reading the introduction, what are your feelings and expectations about this book?
2. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why?
3. What is it you hope to get from this study? Write out your goals, individually and as a group, so you can review them when your study is over.
4. Take some time to pray and invite God into your study. Ask him what HE wants you to get out of this and add those things to your list. Ask him to speak to you and to give you open eyes, ears, mind, and heart to receive all that he has for you, in humility, as you move forward.

Chapter 1 – Longing for More

Begin your time with a few moments of silence, creating space for each of you to settle into a stance of quiet listening to God and of preparation for listening deeply to one another. In the quiet, reflect on your experience of listening to your longings and what you feel God is inviting you to make known to the group. After several moments of silence, the leader or a designated person can offer a brief prayer, asking God to guide your time together and to help you truly listen to each other.

Invite each person to share their experience of attending to desire in God's presence using the following questions.

1. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
2. Where did you see yourself most clearly in the various stories where Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" *(Some people may not have even gotten to the point where they could hear Jesus ask them the question. They may still be experiencing themselves sitting by the side of the road or lying by the pool. This is fine. Allow people to be right where they are in the story and describe their experience.)*
3. How did you respond to Jesus' question as you heard him address you personally? What are the feelings and the words that express your desire as you are experiencing it these days? *(Encourage people to share from their journal if that is helpful to them).*
4. How did you experience God's response to you in the midst of your desire? *(Desire is a very tender, vulnerable thing to talk about with others. Be very careful to receive each person's words reverently and with gratitude. Be supportive but also be careful not to rush in with your own thoughts and perspectives.)*
5. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
6. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you've just read and discussed?

Close your time in prayer, thanking God for his presence with you. If you wish, go around the circle and have each person pray for the person to their right, affirming their desire and asking God to continue to meet them in the midst of it. If there is any action step they feel called to, pray that God would give them the courage to take that step.

Chapter 2 – Solitude

Begin with a few moments of silence to remind yourselves of your purpose for meeting together and to transition from chatting and catching up to a place of deeper listening to each other. If you have time, the silence could involve 15 minutes to half an hour for participants to experience the practice at the end of the chapter. Designate one person to close the time of silence with a prayer of invitation for God to guide you and assist you in being companions for one another.

Tell each other about your experiences with solitude and silence, remembering that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers, since silence is our invitation to God to speak and move within us *at his own initiative*. Part of the discipline consists of beginning to release our control mechanisms and create space for receiving whatever God gives (or doesn’t give) in these moments.

1. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
2. What has it been like for you to sit quietly, to rest in God and allow your soul to come out? Has your soul had something to say that it hadn’t been able to say in the noise and busyness of your life? Is there anything God has finally been able to say to you in the quiet?
3. Is there anything in particular that seemed to hinder your attempts to honor this commitment? How has God been guiding you in this?
4. What are your plans for becoming more intentional about incorporating solitude and silence into the rhythm of your ordinary life? Have you been able to identify a “sacred space” – a time and place that is set apart for God and God alone?
5. Are you entering in out of desire rather than feeling like it’s one more thing you have to do?
6. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
7. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you’ve just read and discussed?

At the end of your time together, take time to pray very simply for one another that God would help you in your attempts to establish a rhythm of solitude.

Chapter 3 – Scripture

Begin your time together with silence and then a brief prayer, asking God to help you listen to him and to each other in the midst of your gathering.

You may want to then ask a general question, “How is it with your soul?” giving ample time and space for each person to open up to the depth that is comfortable for them before moving to the specific topic of Scripture.

1. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
2. Summarize your response to this chapter’s distinctions between reading a textbook and reading a love letter. What has your approach to Scripture been lately – more like reading a textbook or reading a love letter?

Next you will actually enter into the *lectio* process as a group exercise and then debrief it together. Have the group leader or a designated person lead the process, following the moves in the *lectio* process but giving time for group members to share what God is saying to them as you go through it. If there is a passage you would like to use for this exercise, go ahead and use that. If not, use Mark 10:48-52.

Preparation: Take a moment to become fully present. Let your body relax, and allow yourself to become consciously aware of God’s presence with you. Breathe deeply. Express your desire to hear from God, using a brief prayer such as “Come Lord Jesus” or “Here I am” or “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Read: Have the leader read the passage slowly, pausing between phrases and sentences. Listen for the word or the phrase that strikes you or catches your attention. After the reading, take a moment of silence to ponder and savor the word that has been given to you without judging or analyzing it. After the silence, have each person share the word they have received, with no discussion and no commentary. Anyone can feel free to say “I pass” if they wish.

Reflect: Read the passage again, this time listening for the way the passage connects with your life – how is your life touched by this word? After reading, allow several moments of silence to explore thoughts, perceptions, and sensory impressions. If the passage is a story, ask yourself “Where am I in this story? What do I hear as I imagine myself in the story or hear these words addressed specifically to me?” Take some time to share briefly your answers as a group.

Respond: Read the passage one more time, this time listening for God’s personal invitation – is God calling you to respond in some way through this word? In the silence that follows the reading, take time to respond to God’s invitation, allowing your prayer to flow from the heart as fully and as truly as you can, entering into a dialogue with God. After a minute or two of silence, take time to share what you sense is God’s invitation to you. There is no need to elaborate, explain, justify, or comment on what is said – simply receive it with a prayerful spirit.

Rest: Read the passage one last time, this time being intentional to release any concerns you have and return to a place of rest in God. In the silence that follows, rest in God’s presence like the weaned child who leans against its mother in a posture of total yieldedness. After a minute or two of silence, close with a brief prayer and then continue your discussion with the following questions...

3. What aspects of the *lectio divina* process are comfortable for you? What aspects are uncomfortable?
4. What have you been hearing from God these days through the Scriptures? Is there a specific word you have been given?
5. What are God’s invitations to you? How are you responding.
6. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
7. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you’ve just read and discussed? Take some time to pray and ask God to help you in this, and brainstorm as a group about how you can take action and hold each other accountable in the process.

Chapter 4 – Prayer

Begin with a few moments of silence and a prayer of invitation for God to guide your sharing. Are these times of silence getting easier and more comfortable? More fruitful?

Spend some time talking with each other about what prayer is like for you these days.

1. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
2. Do you sense that you are in the transitional place that this chapter describes?
 1. Do you have a sense that God is inviting you into intimacy with him that is beyond words?
 2. What has it been like for you to sit in stillness and begin to listen for your breath prayer? Tell each other as little or as much as you wish about your breath prayer.
 3. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
 4. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you've just read and discussed?

Break into pairs within your group (preferably not as couples and preferably with pairs of the same gender). It is important that you find a quiet place where you will not be distracted or interrupted. In each pair, take turns, allowing each person to take about fifteen minutes to move through this exercise completely.

Silence: Begin your time of prayer with a few moments of silence in which you identify and find words to ask God for what you are most needing and wanting from God right now. This does not have to be anything major or earth shattering, just something that you are concerned about. During this time your partner should sit quietly with you, supporting you with care and silent prayer.

Supplication: When you feel ready, briefly tell your partner what you are understanding about your spiritual desire, and let them know your breath prayer if that feels appropriate. Then express this desire out loud to God in prayer.

Intercession: When you are finished praying aloud, let your partner pray for you, perhaps reiterating what they heard you say regarding your desire, validating it, and interceding on your behalf.

Rest: When there are no more words, spend another moment in silence, resting together in your knowledge of God's good intent toward you and his infinite capacity to carry it out. You may wish to end your time with a simple expression of gratitude to your partner for praying with you and for you.

Now repeat this process for the other person in each pair. As you leave, commit yourselves to continue to intercede for one another throughout the week.

Chapter 5 – Honoring the Body

Begin your time together by taking time to be silent and to breathe. Pay particular attention to your posture and the comfort of your body. Breathe deeply at least three times and then rest comfortably in your chair for a few moments. Designate someone to close the silent time in prayer, inviting God's presence as you share.

Reflect together on your life in a body.

1. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
2. How easy or how difficult is it for you to think of honoring the body as a spiritual discipline?
3. In your reading and in your practice, where has God been speaking most clearly about honoring your body as a part of your life in him?
4. Do you need to care for your body more intentionally? What will that involve for you?
5. Is there something your body has been trying to tell you that you have not been listening to? How are you responding to this awareness?
6. How has your body been guiding you to pray? How have you responded? Is there any way you might connect your life in the body with your spiritual practices?
7. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
8. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you've just read and discussed?

As a part of your small group experience, you might take some time to go for a slow, meditative walk together or even do something as simple as kneeling together as you pray.

Chapter 6 – Self-Examination

Take five minutes at the beginning of your time together to sit in silence and enter into the prayer of examen as you have learned it in this chapter. In the silence, reflect on the last twenty-four hours.

Notice those places where God was present and the places where he seemed absent. Notice those places where you experienced the goodness of your created self and the ways God is transforming you. Thank God for his goodness in your life. Also, notice those places where you were not all that you would like to be, times when you were not like Christ Without judging and berating yourself, allow God to show you what contributed to the situation. Confess to him, if you are ready to do so. Allow yourself to receive his forgiveness.

After five minutes or so, bring the silence to a close by offering a brief prayer. Move into a time of reflection, telling one another about your experience of incorporating the examen of consciousness and the examen of conscience into your spiritual rhythm.

1. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
2. When has it worked well for you to carry out this practice?
3. As you have practiced this way of reviewing your days, what have you noticed about God's presence with you? Were there ways God was with you that you would not have noticed if you had not been practicing this discipline?
4. Were there places where God's presence surprised you, places where you did not expect him?
5. Are there aspects of your created self that you have been able to celebrate and acknowledge as being deeply good? What difference has that made?
6. Are there sins or negative patterns that God has shown you in your times of examen? How is it changing you to acknowledge these areas to God and to those who have been affected by these attitudes and behaviors? Have you been able to move through the self-examination process to confession, release and forgiveness?
7. Is there a way the group can support and pray for you in your practice of self-examination?
8. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
9. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you've just read and discussed? Take some time to pray and ask God to help you in this, and brainstorm as a group about how you can take action and hold each other accountable in the process.

Chapter 7 – Discernment

Spend some time reflecting on the idea that God's will is generally for us to do more of whatever it is that gives us life (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10) How has this changed the way you are looking at your life?

Enter into a time of silence (3-5 minutes) in order to reflect privately on your recent experiences with consolation and desolation using the following questions:

1. Since the group was last together, when have you had a sense of life-giving connection with God, an ability to be your most authentic self in God and to bring that authentic self to others in love?
2. When did you have a sense of being cut off from a life-giving connection with God, from the ability to be your authentic self and give yourself to others in love?

After the silence, share your experiences of consolation and desolation with the group.

1. What wisdom, insight or further questions seem to arise from the awareness you just practiced?
2. How might God be inviting you to incorporate into your life more of that which gives you life and less of that which drains life from you?

If anyone in the group is facing a decision and sensing a strong desire to know God's will and enter into the practice of discernment, this is a good time to talk about that decision with your group and ask the following questions.

3. Where are you in the process of discernment as it is outlined in this chapter (prayer for indifference, prayer for wisdom, noticing without judging, gathering data)?
4. What are the things that are clear to you right now? What are your questions?
5. What do you need from God and from others as you seek to make this decision?
6. Take time to pray for each person who is seeking wisdom about a decision they are facing.

Finally, consider these questions to end your discussion.

7. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
8. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
9. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you've just read and discussed? Take some time to pray and ask God to help you in this, and brainstorm as a group about how you can take action and hold each other accountable in the process.

Chapter 8 – Sabbath

Begin your time together by having someone in the group read pages 143-144, beginning with “There have to be times in your life when you move slow... times when you walk rather than run..” Read to the end of the chapter, and take a few moments in silence to reflect on your need and longing for such fullness of time. Draw the silence to a close by offering a brief prayer of invitation to God to help you to live into your longings.

Talk to each other about where you are on the journey of exploring a sabbath practice.

1. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
2. Where are the places in your life where you are experiencing human limitations? When are you aware of your own desire for a sane rhythm of work and rest? Did any experiences that the author describes in this chapter particularly resonate with you?
3. Where are you in terms of motivation to begin incorporating sabbath time into your life? What are the challenges and impossibilities particular to your situation? Where do you think it might be possible for you to, at least, make a beginning?
4. Have you already been practicing the discipline of sabbath keeping? Is there anything you can share from your real-life experience that might be helpful to the group?
5. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
6. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you’ve just read and discussed?

End your time together by sharing your personal desires and intent regarding sabbath. If there is even one small step you can take toward practicing a sabbath, share that as well. Pray for one another that God would enable each of you to take that step, no matter how small.

Chapter 9 – A Rule of Life

Begin your time together with a few moments of silence in which you give yourself space to reflect on your longing for a way of life that works, a way of life that enables you to make daily choices to enter more deeply into the process of spiritual transformation. Ask yourself... *What is the longing of your heart these days? When do you feel your longing? What does your longing say to you?*

After a few moments of silence, speak out a brief prayer of invitation to God to guide you as you share your lives together and respond to the following questions.

1. What stuck out to you from this chapter? What did you agree with and disagree with and why? Could you relate to the stories and information being presented? What feelings did it evoke in you?
2. How has your desire deepened into greater intentionality regarding spiritual practices since you started this study?
3. Which disciplines have been most meaningful in producing the kind of life change you are seeking? What difference has it made to start incorporating these disciplines into your life?
4. As you have worked with the “practice” exercises, how are you doing with putting together a rhythm of spiritual practices in your daily life that enables you to live consistently with your heart’s deepest longings?
5. What are your MDR (minimum daily requirements) for maintaining the intimacy and availability to God that result in spiritual transformation? What are the daily, weekly, monthly rhythms that you would like to commit yourself to as a way to begin?
6. What arrangements do you need to make with those closest to you to make this rhythm work?
7. What challenges do you anticipate and how will you plan to face them and overcome them?
8. How will you continue to maintain spiritual friendship or spiritual community that helps you live consistently with your heart’s desire and continue to notice and respond to God’s transforming work in your life?
9. After each person explains the rhythms they are seeking to establish, pray for God to enable them to press through any challenges that face them so that they can respond with increasing faithfulness to God’s invitations.
10. What more would you like to learn about the topics presented in this chapter? What questions do you still have?
11. Where would you like to grow (personally and as a group) in relation to what you’ve just read and discussed?

If you haven’t already, be encouraged to write out your own Rule of Life following the guide on the next page. Do this at home, so as not to use group time for this. But perhaps you will want to share this with someone in your group for accountability. Check in with each other regularly to see how it’s going, talk through any challenges, celebrate the positive outcomes, and pray for one another for the courage and ability to stick with their plan.

Conclusion

1. What stuck out to you most from this study? What have you learned about God that you did not know before? What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others?
2. Take some time to review your goals from the beginning of your study. What goals have you accomplished, what are you still working on, and what do you need help with?
3. What questions do you still have after completing this study?
4. Finally, so what? What are you going to do with what you’ve studied, learned, and discussed? Be specific.
5. Now spend some time in prayer, asking God to awaken his purposes within you concerning this study. Consider whether you need to spend time in repentance, in a time of commitment and commissioning, or in a time of surrender. Add this to your prayer time as the Holy Spirit guides you.

Rule of Life

Re-read the "Practice" section on pages 162-163 and reflect on the questions it provides. As you write out your plan, be sure to take into account the limits and opportunities of your life stage, your personality, and your circumstances.

1. What practices will I seek to engage in on a daily basis? Weekly? Monthly? Yearly? Where will I engage in these disciplines? What time of the day/week/month/year?

DAILY:

WEEKLY:

MONTHLY:

YEARLY:

2. In the "journeying together" process, what have I learned about the importance of community?

What spiritual disciplines will I share with a spiritual friend, or a group of friends, so as to grow together?

3. What additional activities or practices are particularly important given my personality type or spiritual type?

How will I incorporate these into the rhythm of my spiritual practices?

Are there practices that are particularly needed because of my sins and negative patterns? (See Appendix C on pages 186-187, which lists various sins and the disciplines that can help address them.)

4. How will I need to adjust my schedule in order to consistently choose this rule of life?

What arrangements do I need to make with those I live with?

Do I need to have any discussions with those I work with in order to make this possible? If so, with whom and when will I have these discussions?

Take a break. After you have captured in writing your desire and plan for establishing spiritual rhythms, take a break. Go for a walk, take a nap, do some reading, pray or sit in silence. Feel free to set it aside for a day or two. Then come back to it and take another look at your plan.

5. How does it look and feel to you now? Is it personal enough? Balanced? Realistic?
6. Are you able to think of it as a flexible undertaking rather than a legalistic straitjacket?
7. Are there any questions or concerns that you would like to raise with your group or with others who can pray for you?

Commit yourself prayerfully. Are you able to commit yourself to this plan *out of desire for God* rather than a sense of obligation? As you feel ready, commit yourself prayerfully to your personal rule of life as a means of releasing yourself in a consistent manner to God's transforming work in you.

Notice gently. Feel free to explore and experiment with your rhythms and make adjustments along the way. After about six months, take some extended time in God's presence to evaluate how it is going and decide whether any larger adjustments need to be made. Follow up with your group as well, to see how things are going and discuss the changes and outcomes that have come from practicing your rule of life.