

RUTH HALEY BARTON

# SACRED RHYTHMS

SIX SESSIONS

*Spiritual Practices that Nourish  
Your Soul and Transform Your Life*

*Sample:*  
SESSION  
ONE

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

ALSO BY RUTH HALEY BARTON

*An Ordinary Day with Jesus*

*Invitation to Solitude and Silence*

*Longing for More*

*Sacred Rhythms*

*Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*

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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE



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*Sacred Rhythms Participant's Guide*  
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*We long to see our lives whole and to know that they matter. We wonder whether our many activities might ever come together in a way of life that is good for ourselves and others. Does all this activity make a difference beyond ourselves? Are we really living in right relationship to other people, to the created world and to God? . . . We yearn for a deeper understanding of how to order human life in accord with what is true and good.*

CRAIG DYKSTRA AND DOROTHY BASS,  
*PRACTICING OUR FAITH*

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# Welcome to Sacred Rhythms

**S***acred Rhythms* is a curriculum designed to help you arrange your life around a regular pattern of spiritual practices that God can use to nourish your soul and transform your life.

The idea of sacred rhythms is rooted in the ancient Christian practice of a *rule of life*—a practice that originated with great spiritual teachers like St. Augustine, St. Benedict, and Teresa of Avila as they provided spiritual guidance for the monks and nuns living under their care. Of course, our lives today are very different from those living in religious orders, but the practice of ordering our lives in such a way that God has access to our souls and freedom to do his transforming work in us has great power for us today.

To begin, we will explore our need to pay attention to our God-given desires, so that we know what we want to arrange our lives *for*. Then we will experience key spiritual disciplines, so that you can eventually put together a rhythm that works for *you*. Each session includes teaching and discussion about a particular spiritual discipline or practice and then a guided experience with that practice. Some of the guided experiences might feel different from anything you have done before, and you may even feel a little awkward at first. That's okay. I encourage you to at least try each discipline to see if it does indeed open up space for God. Your participant's guide will provide helpful instruction for continuing to explore and practice the discipline during the week, and you are also encouraged to read the corresponding chapters in *Sacred Rhythms* (the book on which this curriculum is based) for further information and support.

The disciplines you will experience here are ones that spiritual seekers down through the centuries have practiced as a way of opening to

the transforming presence of God. I am glad you have chosen to deepen your spiritual journey in this way and I pray God's blessing upon you.

—RUTH HALEY BARTON

**OF NOTE**

This curriculum is based on *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* by Ruth Haley Barton (InterVarsity Press, 2006).

Unless otherwise noted, the quotations interspersed throughout this participant's guide are excerpts from the book, used by permission.

# Before You Get Started . . .

## Guidelines for Spiritual Friends

**Y**our small group provides spiritual companionship for you as you explore the spiritual disciplines that help you to seek God. Spiritual friends listen to one another's desire for God, nurture that desire in each other, and support one another as each group member seeks to live in a way that is consistent with his or her desire for God. Spiritual friendships are not the place for giving advice, solving problems, and fixing people. They are not even *primarily* about Bible study—although significant interaction with the Scriptures will be offered in every session. Instead, your small group is a circle of friends that can assist you in paying attention to the ways God is moving in your life as you practice the disciplines. Good small groups will support one another in responding faithfully to God's presence. This commitment to community and spiritual friendship is in itself a powerful practice that is very important in the spiritual life.

Here are some simple guidelines you can commit yourselves to, guidelines that will help you to be effective spiritual companions for one another:

- *We will* make every effort to try each of the spiritual practices as they are presented.
- *We will* support and pray for one another as we practice the disciplines.
- *We will* create and maintain a safe environment for strong emotions, tough questions, and genuine curiosity. This means we

will listen rather than fix, ask questions rather than give answers or advice, and keep the focus on transformation rather than information.

- *We will* seek to be appropriately self-disclosing in the group, but we will never force or coerce anyone to share.
- *We will* pay particular attention to the times and ways in which God is moving in each person's life and seek to affirm evidence of each person's growth and transformation.
- *We will* honor confidentiality. What is shared in the group stays in the group!

It is important to take time at the beginning of your first meeting to go over these guidelines and agree to them together. It might even be helpful for group members to sign the bottom of this page as an indication that they have read and agree to companion one another in this way.

Starting with your second meeting, begin each session with a few moments of sharing how your practice of the previous discipline went.

## SESSION I

# Desire: Longing for More in the Spiritual Life

*The reason we do not see God is the faintness of our desire.*

— MEISTER ECKHART

**DESIRE.** The spiritual life begins with the willingness to name our desire in Jesus' presence. Your desire for God and your capacity to reach for more of God than you have right now is the deepest essence of who you are. It is one of the most powerful motivators for a life lived with intentionality and focus.

*“YOU MIGHT THINK THAT your woundedness or your sinfulness is the truest thing about you. You might think that your giftedness or your personality type or your job title or your identity as husband or wife, mother or father, somehow defines you. But in reality, it is your desire for God and your capacity to reach for God that is the deepest essence of who you are.”*

## LEARN ABOUT IT

### Video #1: Longing for More (14 minutes)

*Following the curriculum introduction, watch the teaching segment for session one and use the following outline to record anything that stands out to you.*

When was the last time you felt yourself longing for a deeper level of spiritual transformation?

Jesus asked people: What is it you want? What do you seek? What do you want me to do for you?

The story of Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52)

- Crying out from the place of our deep need: “Lord, Jesus Christ, son of David, have mercy on me, a sinner.”
- Leaving behind our cloak
- Naming our desire in Jesus’ presence: “My teacher, I want to see.”
- Following Jesus in a new way



## EXPERIENCE IT

### Video #2: Finding Ourselves in the Story (9 minutes)

*The “Experience It” segment provides an opportunity for you to engage in a guided experience of paying attention to your desire. Ruth Haley Barton will give specific directions in the video, so it’s not necessary to follow along in your participant’s guide. In fact, it is a good idea to close your book so it does not distract you. The notes below are provided as a resource and reference as you continue to practice this discipline on your own after the session.*

\* \* \*

This is a guided meditation based on the story of Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46–52. It is an invitation to find yourself in the story and allow the words of Jesus to speak to you personally.

- Find a comfortable position that allows you to remain alert.
- Place your hands open on your lap, close your eyes, and breathe deeply.
- Imagine yourself in the story of Bartimaeus . . .
  - Sitting on the dusty road . . .
  - Calling out to Jesus from the noisy crowd . . .
  - Hearing voices trying to silence you . . .
  - Being called by Jesus . . .
  - Throwing off your cloak and running to Jesus . . .

*What words do you cry out? Who tries to silence you? What do you need to throw off in order to come to Jesus?*

Hearing Jesus ask you, “What do you want me to do for you?”  
*What do you say in response?*

Hearing Jesus’ response to your request  
*What does Jesus say to you in response to your desire?*



3. Are you able to hear Jesus asking you the question “What do you want me to do for you?” What is your response to him?

*“WHEN YOU GO TO pray, do not try to express yourself in fancy words, for often it is the simple repetitious phrases of a little child that our Father in heaven finds most irresistible. . . . When you find a satisfaction in a certain word of your prayer, stop at that point.”*

— JOHN CLIMACUS

### **Closing Prayer**

Close your time with prayer. Ask God to:

- Help you identify and name your desires
- Give you a greater sensitivity to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, refining and clarifying your desire
- Help you become faithful companions to one another in your group as you practice these disciplines together

## BETWEEN SESSIONS

### Breath Prayer

Once you begin to uncover your true desire for God, you can practice a very simple discipline called a *breath prayer*. Breath prayer does not come primarily from the mind, which is where most of our words come from. Instead, the breath prayer arises from the depth of our desire and need, just like Bartimaeus' prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of David, have mercy on me!" In fact, you could also call it a "gut prayer" because it comes from such a deep "gut" level within us.

The breath prayer requires no thought to remember—once we really know it! It is typically a short (only six to eight syllables) expression that we pray rhythmically with the inhalation and exhalation of our breathing. Breath prayer is powerful because it is an expression of our heart's deepest yearning coupled with a name for God that is meaningful and intimate for us.

Between now and the next session, take some time to quietly explore the desire that is stirring in your own heart. What does it feel like? What words begin to express it? When do you experience it most strongly? Then use the following exercise to discover your own breath prayer.

- Return to the Bartimaeus story and imagine Jesus calling you by name and asking, "\_\_\_\_\_, what do you want?" Allow your truest answer to come up from deep within you and express it to God. The following phrase might help you to begin.

*God, what I most want from you right now is . . .*

- Choose your favorite name or image for God. For example, you could use one of the following names: God, Jesus, Father, Creator, Spirit, Breath of Life, Lord, Shepherd, Holy One, etc. Choose a name that best expresses who God is for you right now in your relationship or expresses who you need or want him to be.

*A name for God that is most meaningful for me right now is . . .*

- Now combine your name for God with the expression of your heart's desire. You may also be drawn to a phrase from Scripture or a prayer from Christian tradition that seems to capture your

desire at this time; for example, “Come, Holy Spirit,” “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” or “My Teacher, let me see again.” There is no right or wrong way to put these two together.

- Express your prayer in a way that is easy to speak in the steady rhythm of your breathing. There may be various ways of saying your prayer, and you may want to write them down until you have a prayer of about six to eight syllables.
- Once you have discovered your breath prayer, pray it into the spaces of your day—when you are waiting, when you are worried or anxious, when you need a sense of God’s presence. Over time you will learn to pray it underneath all the other thoughts and words that swirl around you throughout the day, and eventually you will discover that you are praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17) in a way that has deep meaning and great power.

### **For Further Reading**

For further information and guidance regarding the dynamic of desire and the practice of breath prayer as we have explored it in this session, read chapters 1 and 4 of *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton.

### **Reflect and Journal**

In preparation for the next session, take some time to reflect on your experience with paying attention to desire and seeking to discover your own breath prayer. It may help you to write about it in your journal or use the journal pages provided here. Consider these questions as you write:

- Where are you in the process of naming your desire in Jesus’ presence and discovering your breath prayer?
- What has it been like to walk through this week more aware of your desire?
- If you have discovered your breath prayer, how/when have you used it? What was that like?



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