



How to Prepare for a Personal Retreat?

By Luann Budd

I remember being laughed at the first time I went on a personal spiritual retreat. Everyone thought it was hilarious that I brought what looked like my entire library. I was “the bag lady.” I had a wonderfully glorious day despite all of their teasing! Thirty years later, I’m still a bag lady. I never know what I’m going to feel like doing during my retreat, so I bring it all.

There are several categories to consider as you plan and get ready for your retreat:

Prepare to Leave Home

Part of being able to be mentally present while on retreat involves making sure everything at home is covered.

- Give the phone number of the retreat center to loved ones—so if you need to be contacted, people can reach you.
- Make a to-do list. I like to empty my head onto a piece of paper by making a list of what I need to do when I return. I leave it in front of my computer. Then I can leave home and know I don’t have to worry about those things—I’ll know what needs to be done when I get home.
- Tell people who need to know you’ll be out of reach.
- Turn on your “out of office” email responder for people in your contacts. Then they’ll know why you aren’t responding right away.

Prepare for Your Physical Comfort

Some retreat centers are like hotels; some are more like rustic youth camps. If this is your first time at the center, plan for minimal creature comforts and then you’ll be pleasantly surprised, or give the staff a call and find out what to expect. Besides clothes, consider packing:

- Shampoo, conditioner, lotion (some retreat centers don’t provide toiletries), hair dryer.
- Alarm clock.
- Pillow, foam mattress (sleeping in some beds can be a real challenge for me—with my own pillow and a 2” foam mattress that easily fits in my suitcase, I can sleep anywhere.)
- Heating/air conditioning can be a challenge. (I bring warm and cool sleeping clothes so if the heater doesn’t work, I can bundle up; if I can’t get the heater turned down, I can sleep like I’m in Hawaii.)

- Chargers for electronic devices. (I like to put my devices on airplane mode and turn off notifications, but I still want my phone charged so I can use the alarm, flashlight, and perhaps listen to music or read.)
- iPad / AirPods or ear buds. (You may want to listen to music. However, you don't want to disturb others on *their* silent retreat, so be sure to use ear buds even in your room.)
- Backpack chair (bug spray, walking shoes, comfortable clothes).
- Healthy snacks (almonds).
- Medication.
- Bedside fan.
- Comfortable clothes, sweatshirt / sweater, jacket.
- Bottled water.
- Bible.
- Journal set apart just for personal spiritual retreats.
- Backpack/book bag/old journals/pads of paper/pens. (Like I said, I'm the bag lady.)
- Books/Kindle. (I go through my shelves and prayerfully look at the titles and notice what I'm drawn to. I don't plan to work on a Bible Study, but I like to read on retreats.)
- Art Supplies. (Sometimes I bring supplies so I can do an art collage, or watercolor, or calligraphy.)
- Playlist. (You may want to create one from your favorite worship music and download it.)
- Cash. (It's nice to leave the retreat center staff a tip.)

Prepare Your Heart

As you drive to the retreat center, begin to prepare your heart:

- I like to leave with more than enough time to get there, so I'm not stressed the whole time I'm driving. I print a map in case I lose internet connection and have the retreat center's emergency phone number handy. I like to stop at a Starbucks and enjoy a treat.
- Listen to your worship playlist for this retreat. Enjoy music or listen to a book.

Once you are checked in, let your family know you arrived safely. Then spend a few hours helping your heart to settle into the slower rhythms of retreat. Ideally, you want your mind to be free of distractions and present at the retreat, but this can take some time:

- Go for a walk and enjoy nature, especially noticing the tiniest creatures and flowers. Don't analyze but simply take in their loveliness. Engage your five senses.
- Make a bulleted list of whatever is going around in your head. And continue to add to it. Your brain will keep bringing things to mind so you don't forget them. If you put the items on a list, you can assure yourself they'll be taken care of when your retreat is done. This practice can really help you settle in.
- Ask yourself: *What am I bringing to this retreat? What concerns am I carrying?* (List them. You may want to bring some of these concerns to the Lord during your retreat, or you may want to set them down for now.)
- Notice if there is a question on your heart about which you want to seek the Lord's direction. Ask the Lord to use the various parts of your retreat to give you wisdom on that particular

question. Capture in your journal the Scripture, worship, prayer, books, nature, the Lord gives you, and reflect on it all toward the end of your retreat.

- Do you have a goal for your time with the Lord (a desire to draw closer to the Lord, time to find rest for your soul, time to process grief, etc.)? Ask yourself: *What would you love for the Lord to do during your retreat?*
- You may want to select some passages of Scripture, written prayers, or worship music that will form the structure of your time away and help focus your retreat to accomplish your goals.

As you prepare for your personal retreat, keep looking to the Lord and let him lead you. Even if your retreat turns out to be different from what you had hope, you can be confident that the Lord is speaking to you through all of it. It's good to linger with what annoys you. Reflect on what his message is for you in the helicopters that kept flying overhead, or the ceiling fan that sounded like a freight train barreling down the tracks all night.

I have found each personal spiritual retreat unique. I think this is because the Lord knows what we need. His Spirit guides our time—always. So do your best to prepare your home, your loved ones and yourself for you to be gone, but don't worry about making sure you brought everything. You can trust the Lord will guide you during your retreat.

"The Lord will guide you always. He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. And you will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail." (Isaiah 53:11)