

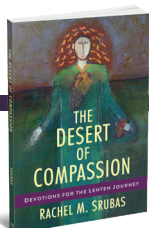
# *The Desert of Compassion*

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## SMALL-GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Whether in a small group that meets year-round or a specially formed Lenten Bible study group, online or in person, you can use this study guide to facilitate conversation around the content in *The Desert of Compassion*. Materials are provided for six weekly sessions, beginning on the First Sunday of Lent. Participants will read the Sabbath Rest Stop devotions together during their group gathering, then respond to questions that pertain to the week's theme, preparing them to engage the daily devotions more deeply in the days that follow. Groups that meet midweek can, of course, bring insights from daily devotions that have already been read in prior days that week.

Use the **title slides** to announce the week's theme and the daily readings it will cover, and to invite people to join your group and spark conversation on social media before the scheduled gathering. **Question slides** display each of the questions suggested in the study and allow participants to read the question on-screen in virtual meeting spaces or socially distanced small-group gatherings. Likewise, the **prayer slides** facilitate a unison prayer to close your time together. **Blank slides** are also included for you to customize with any additional elements you want to add to your group's study.



A Lenten Group Study Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

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# WEEK ONE

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## Remove the Heart of Stone

*In the human heart capable of feeling, compassion deepens.*

### Weekly Check-In

If this is the group's first time gathered together, spend some time getting to know one another's names and stories. If participants received their books prior to this session, share any insights gleaned from the devotions in the "Lent's Early Days" section.

### Sabbath Rest Stop

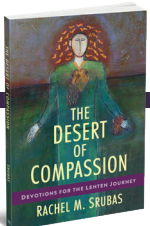
Read the devotion on pp. 19-20 aloud together.

### Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt "hard-hearted"? What was the circumstance and how did you work through it?
2. "Refusing to accept the desert as part of your life experience will only intensify its crushing effect on you" (p. 19). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
3. How might accepting the inevitability of struggles in life help you grow in compassion, for others and yourself?
4. The word compassion means "to suffer with" or "to feel with." How does this definition affect the way you think about having compassion for others?
5. Many people "give something up" for Lent. How can abstaining from something be spiritually sustaining?
6. How do you find your own emotions affecting the way you respond to others? Where does your heart need to be softened in order to show more compassion?

### Closing Prayer

Famished Jesus,  
in the hollows of your face I see my own hungers  
for acceptance, pleasure, power, peace.  
I see others' hunger for everything  
from bread to prestige to justice.  
May the same Spirit who drove you to the desert  
drive, sustain, and change me.  
May struggling people hear the voice  
that proclaimed you beloved,  
calling them by the same name. Amen.



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# WEEK TWO

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## Reach Out Your Hand

*Connecting with people wounded by life makes compassion possible.*

### Weekly Check-In

Share any insights gleaned from the previous week's devotions or the Lenten experience overall.

### Sabbath Rest Stop

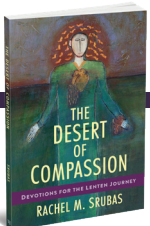
Read the devotion on pp. 45-46 aloud together.

### Discussion Questions

1. The author says, "Openhearted connection with another child of God makes compassion real—not just a virtue, but a practice, a way of living well with others" (p. 45). When has compassion felt "real" to you?
2. What are you experiencing these days (whether personally or more broadly in your community or the wider culture) that makes compassion all the more necessary? Where do you notice a conspicuous lack of compassion?
3. John Donahue says "In the parched deserts of postmodernity, a blessing can be like the discovery of a fresh well. It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless one another" (p. 46). How can we bless one another, both tangibly and spiritually?
4. What stories from Scripture can you recall that involve physical connection, someone reaching out and touching someone else? What lessons about compassion might they offer?
5. Have you ever longed to feel God's touch or see God's hand in your life, wondering, like Psalm 74:11, "Why do you hold back your hand?" Did you ultimately experience that touch? How?
6. Have you ever experienced "compassion fatigue" as a result of seeing or tending to others' suffering? How can you avoid such burnout or detachment from happening?

### Closing Prayer

Reach out your hand, O God,  
to the beings reaching out to you  
for help and answers. Reach out  
your hand through the hands  
of helpers wise enough to understand  
what they can and cannot do.  
Reach me, I pray, and find me ready  
to do the work that's mine,  
to put the time and gifts you've given me  
to needed use. Amen.



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# WEEK THREE

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## Stay Awake with Me

*Compassion requires distress tolerance, which practice strengthens.*

### Weekly Check-In

Share any insights gleaned from the previous week's devotions or the Lenten experience overall.

### Sabbath Rest Stop

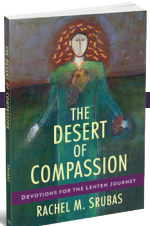
Read the devotion on pp. 69-71 aloud together.

### Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been asked to awake with anyone, to offer them comfort or moral support? Was it hard to do?
2. Is there a certain type of suffering, or a particular group of people, that you struggle to maintain compassion for? How can you imagine God helping you overcome those barriers?
3. The author says, "Distress tolerance is a God-given human capacity. It can be cultivated and put to compassionate use" (p. 71). On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your ability to tolerate distress?
4. How did adults in your life model distress tolerance or intolerance?
5. Is there a difference between compassion and empathy, in your mind?
6. Do you ever struggle to have compassion for yourself? What would it look like to practice "radical acceptance" in your life?

### Closing Prayer

God, give me the equanimity  
to accept Jesus at his most challenging,  
the humility to be transformed by his grace,  
and the discernment to live with compassion  
toward myself and others. Amen.



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# WEEK FOUR

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## Your Whole Mind

*Mindful awareness and thoughtful reflection foster wise compassion.*

### Weekly Check-In

Share any insights gleaned from the previous week's devotions or the Lenten experience overall.

### Sabbath Rest Stop

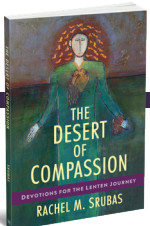
Read the devotion on pp. 95-97 aloud together.

### Discussion Questions

1. The author describes her experiences at a church engaged in deep Bible study and one with an activist focus, even as she longed for a more contemplative spirituality. What sort of spiritual practices most feed your soul?
2. The author says, "The life of the mind isn't everything, but it's a major part of a meaningful existence" (p. 96). Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What does it mean to you to love God with your mind?
4. How do your mind, heart, and body work together as you pursue the spiritual life? How do they work against each other?
5. How can mindfulness and intellectual inquiry lead you to practice greater compassion for self and others?
6. Have you ever envied the monastic lifestyle, emphasizing simplicity, devotional discipline, and a quest for holiness? What appeals to you about that sort of spiritual life? What doesn't?

### Closing Prayer

Be mindful of me, loving God.  
Help me trust that I am ever on your mind.  
Help me relinquish all anxiety.  
I aspire to look upon myself and all people  
as you look upon creation,  
not with condemnation  
but with insight and consoling mercy.  
Counselor of the troubled,  
Comforter of hurting souls,  
Teacher of all searchers,  
cultivate in me the mind of Christ. Amen.



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# WEEK FIVE

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## Do Not Condemn

*Condemnation stymies grace but compassion dismantles shame and fosters healing.*

### Weekly Check-In

Share any insights gleaned from the previous week's devotions or the Lenten experience overall.

### Sabbath Rest Stop

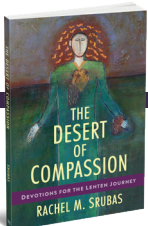
Read the devotion on pp. 121-123 aloud together.

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you tend to be more judgmental of yourself or of others?
2. The author urges the reader to “approach the threshold between your abilities and your limitations forgivingly” (p. 123). How does compassion for ourselves translate into compassion for others?
3. Where have you seen a cycle of hurt and condemnation perpetuate itself? Can you think of examples in your own life and in society or history?
4. The author mentions the common rhetorical question, “Do you want to be right or do you want to be kind?” (p. 133). Do you ever struggle with this choice?
5. Is it ever ok to condemn? What would a righteous condemnation look like, if there is such a thing?
6. How can we heal from hurts that were inflicted long ago?

### Closing Prayer

If I hold my enemies in contempt,  
Lord, in your greater mercy than mine,  
protect them, correct me,  
and heal us all from the cyclical  
sickness of sin inflicted  
and retaliated. Break  
the cycle before we break  
each other. Amen.



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# HOLY WEEK

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## Do This and You Will Live

*Wherever wounded creatures may be found, compassion takes action to alleviate suffering.*

### Weekly Check-In

Share any insights gleaned from the previous week's devotions or the Lenten experience overall.

### Sabbath Rest Stop

Read the devotion on pp. 147-149 aloud together.

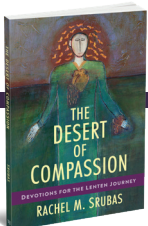
### Discussion Questions

1. The author says, "When you act to alleviate a neighbor's suffering without presuming to prejudge their worthiness of care, you do your part to realize God's beloved community" (p. 148). Are there any suffering people you tend to prejudge? How can you combat that impulse?
2. Have you heard of the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* (world repair) before? What brokenness do you see in the world that you feel called to help repair?
3. How might you experience the story of Jesus' death and resurrection differently if you had lived through or were descended from people who endured persecution and genocide?
4. What metaphorical deserts have you experienced in your life? What was lacking there? How can you take action to alleviate the suffering of those currently enduring that same desert?
5. The author quotes Saint Basil, who asked, "Whose feet will you wash . . . if you live by yourself?" (p. 163). Why is it so important to practice your faith in community?
6. How has the experience of this book study affected the way you approach Holy Week? How will you carry these lessons in compassion forward in your faith journey?

### Closing Prayer

God of memory and presence, you do not desert your people.  
When, like Jesus in agony, we feel forsaken, you take on our suffering  
and let it break your heart.

You let humankind exercise our freedoms as we will—  
foolishly or wisely, cruelly or kindly,  
but never do you leave us to our own death-dealing ways.  
From the very dust in which the meek lie crushed,  
you arise and raise us. God of all,  
all things fall to you, who lift the crucified to life. Amen.



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