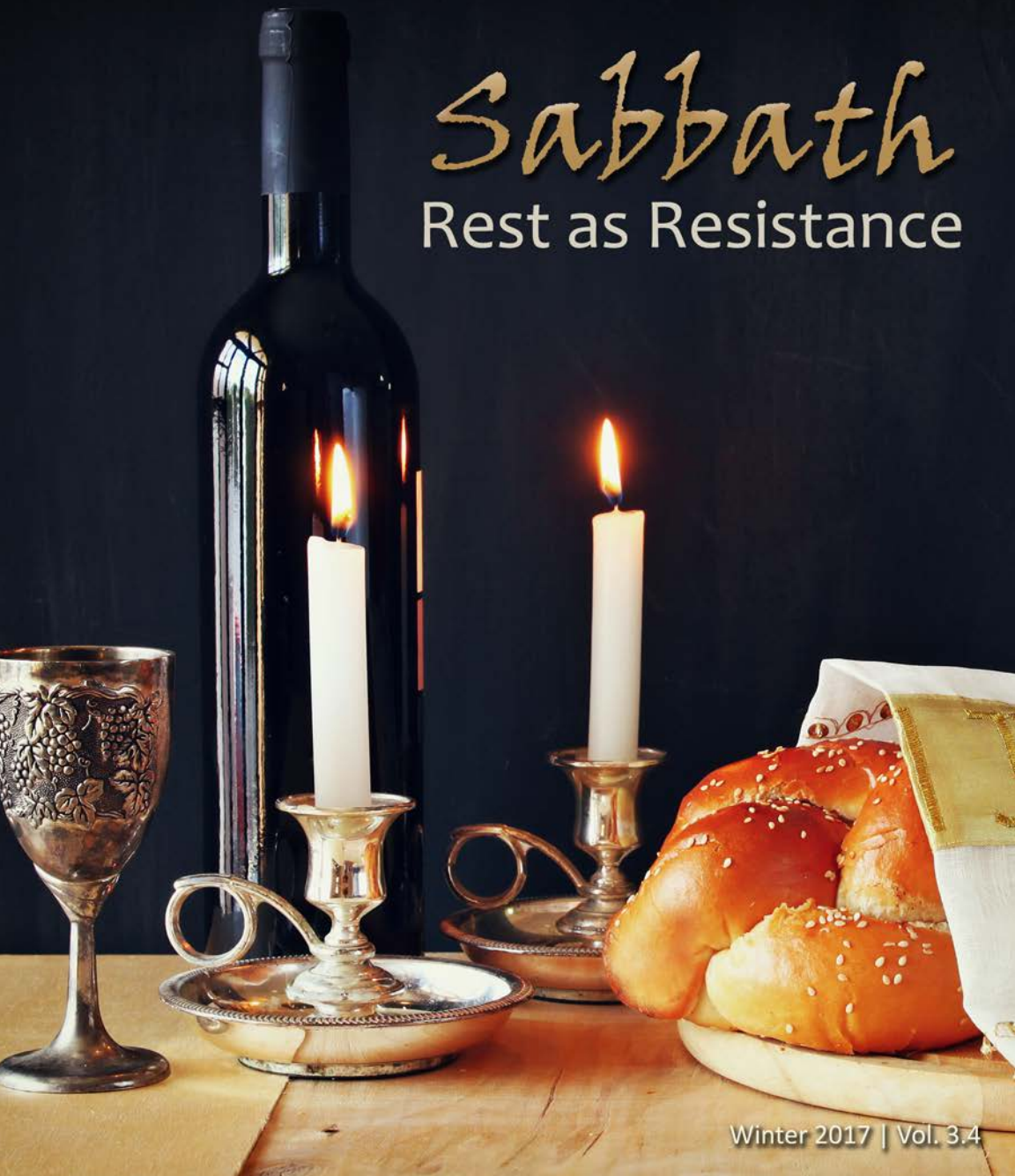


# *Resonance*

A THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

## *Sabbath*

Rest as Resistance



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## *Sabbath: Rest as Resistance*

Volume 3.4 | Winter 2017

### **Table of Contents**

- 6 Sabbath and Liturgical Time  
*Fr. Porter Taylor*
- 14 Sabbath, Snakes, and Solitude  
*Rev. Christopher De Haan*
- 22 Sabbath: Rest as Resistance  
*Dr. Markus Watson*
- 32 The Sabbath: Shattering the Hourglass  
*Marie Teilhard*
- 42 Sabbath Delight: Resisting Despair  
*Dr. Pamela Scalise*
- 52 Holy Saturday, Holy Rest, and Our Call to  
Care for Creation  
*SooHwan Park*
- 64 The Sabbaths  
*Redmond Mar*
- 72 Intentional Sabbath  
*Christin Roberson*
- 80 Starve the Hungry god of Work  
with Rhythms of Rest  
*J. Mark Bowers*

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An aerial photograph of a city, likely New York City, taken during the "blue hour" of sunset. The sky is a mix of deep blues and oranges, with scattered white clouds. A thin white contrail is visible in the upper left. The city below is densely packed with buildings, and the water of a harbor is visible in the distance. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered over the lower half of the image, containing text.

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## *Sabbath and Liturgical Time*

For the Christian, it is a routine struggle to tell time accurately and appropriately. We live in a fast-paced, high-tech, sound-bit driven, communicate in 140-characters or less, advertising-saturated world. Between smart phones, tablets, smart watches, and smart televisions, it is near impossible to remain separated from the rest of connected civilization. One could easily argue that our time-telling abilities are therefore also affected. To suggest just a few methods, time might be told according to the Julian calendar, to the solar/lunar calendar, or by social occurrences (*Game of Thrones* starts tonight, or tomorrow night is the “big game”). It is not that these things are inherently bad, but that rather than pointing to the One who made time, they point inward, to the self and to triviality. Channeling Luther and Augustine, we are a world constantly bent in on ourselves. How, then, can and should Christians tell time?

Without overstating the obvious, time is a tool of measurement marking the duration from one event to another. We keep time to assess our passage around the sun, our rotation on the earth’s axis, or the days between events such as our engagement and marriage rite. Alternatively, the Gospel of John orients time around the days of the week leading both *to* and *from* the resurrection of Jesus. The church has told time according to Caesar’s calendar for too long.

Embedded in liturgical time is the concept of sabbath. Both the liturgical calendar and the Mass are intimately connected with the biblical principle of sabbath rest and holy worship. The center of the Christian calendar is Easter, and the center of the week is worship on the Lord’s Day. The way that

we tell time, as believers, is based on these high points. We focus almost exclusively on the “highs” of Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. We hear sermons preached about living from Sunday to Sunday. Yet, before Palm Sunday is Lazarus Saturday; sandwiched between Cross and Resurrection is the rest and waiting of Holy Saturday. Rest and worship, participation and community, year and week cannot be separated.

The weekend has become a respite from physical labor rather than a holy sabbath given over to worshipping the Lord on his day. Learning to tell time liturgically is therefore an immersion into the salvation narrative of Jesus of Nazareth and is an active form of resistance against the rulers, powers, and authorities fighting for our primary allegiance. Liturgical time is not an alternative or counter-cultural form of marking the passing of days but is rather telling time as it really is. Even more than resistance, for the act of resisting seemingly places another in the role of primary agent/actor, sabbath is a form of participation in and engagement with the life and work of Jesus and the ongoing

ministry of his body, the church.

## **Sabbath**

The themes of rest and sabbath are integral to the Bible, central to Israel’s identity as God’s chosen people, and are still placed upon the church and the Christian as activities befitting believers. YHWH commanded his people on the slopes of Sinai to observe the sabbath and keep it holy.<sup>1</sup> Bear in mind that YHWH gave the Law to a people already redeemed. This command would form the heart of Israel’s calling as she would pause every seventh day to rest, to pray, to worship. Her trade and commerce would cease; her movements would come to a shattering and silent halt; Israel looked radically different from the other civilizations of the world. YHWH states from the onset that he was freeing the Hebrews from Egypt that *they might be his people and worship him in the desert.*<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the Old Testament we find more rules and regulations surrounding sabbath, and the New Testament provides a picture of 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism in which sabbath observance is still of the utmost

importance. The Pharisees constantly attack Jesus and his followers for their lack of proper observance. Jesus heals on the sabbath and the Pharisees, those devoted protectors of the Law, would have him thrown out or silenced completely.<sup>3</sup> By using the example of David and his men entering the temple to eat the consecrated bread as an example, Jesus' response is poignantly simple: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."<sup>4</sup> In a sense, sabbath had become the object of worship for the Pharisees and portions of the Jewish population. Whereas YHWH created the sabbath as a both a form of rest for his weary and already-redeemed-people *and* as the time set aside for worship, the religious leaders had placed sabbath above all other principles thereby inadvertently establishing yet another form of religious oppression.

### ***Liturgical Time – Church Calendar***

Even in her earliest centuries, the nascent church was already forming a calendar according to a different set of events and guiding principles. The measurement tool was

no longer *chronos* (minutes, days, years, etc.) – though it certainly involved this method. The new standard for measuring time was the life and work of Jesus. The early Church understood Easter to be the central event in history, the hinge upon which the whole of history turns; and it certainly became the center of the liturgical year.<sup>5</sup> Placed at the center of the calendar, Easter thus gave meaning and placement to every other liturgical day, feast, fast, and rite.<sup>6</sup> Beginning with the season of Advent, the Christian calendar traverses through the story of Jesus as follows: Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Eastertide, Pentecost, Ordinary Time. This takes place every year. Without question, without fail. A glaring omission from any conversation about Easter or liturgical time is Holy Saturday. As Christians, particularly evangelically shaped Christians – for better or for worse – in the West, we are quick to focus on Cross and Resurrection. What about the beautiful tension that is Holy Saturday? YHWH rested on the seventh day of the week after his work of creation was completed. Jesus rests in the tomb after his work upon the cross is complete. The pathway from



cross to empty tomb, from throne to resurrection is through sabbath, through rest.

The Orthodox Church highlights another significant Saturday in the liturgical calendar that receives little to no recognition from Protestants and other liturgical traditions. Lazarus Saturday is the day *before* Palm Sunday on which Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead en route to the palms, the Last Supper, the cross, and the empty tomb. The significance and meaning that Lazarus Saturday has on Palm Sunday is astounding and yet it is never mentioned — or at least rarely so — by those outside of the Orthodox Church. For it was on this sabbath that another body lay resting in the tomb, another family mourned their loss, another bit of proof that death affects us all. And yet Jesus comes to Mary and Martha, he announces himself as the Resurrection and the Life, and he raises Lazarus *on the sabbath*. There was to be no work on the sabbath and yet Jesus does what no one else can: he brings the dead back to life. It is then, and only then, that he rides into Jerusalem humbly triumphant.

### ***Liturgical Time – Weekly and***

### ***Daily Office***

Christians do not simply tell time on an annual basis. The Christian life is centered around two smaller circles, as well: the weekly and daily offices. Central to the week is Sunday worship; every Sunday is a little Easter and calls to memory the victory and joy that is the Resurrection.<sup>7</sup> The passage of time is not from one Sunday to the next — that is shallow Christianity, a hollow and vacuous version of what we know to be true. This is a short excerpt on the meaning and function of Sunday in the Christian calendar:

*Sunday is the first day of the week and the first day of creation. It is the day of the Sun of Righteousness, given that Saturday is the sabbath, the day of rest. It is the third day, because it was on Sunday that our Lord was raised from the grave, having conquered sin, death, and the devil; having “trampled down death by death,” he was raised to new life, echoing his bold claim from earlier in John’s gospel, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Finally, Sunday is the eighth day because the resurrection changes everything: it is the first day of the new week, the first day of the new creation. It is the breaking in of God’s Kingdom in the here and now. John*

*marks his Gospel according to days, and the Sunday of the resurrection is both a continuation of the first day but also its fulfillment.*<sup>8</sup>

This is taken from the picture given by John's Gospel and it represents the uniqueness of Sunday. To arrive at each Sunday, however, one must first go through sabbath rest.

Similarly, the Daily Office has Sunday as its referent. That is, Sunday worship is the blueprint for observing Morning and Evening Prayer (or Matins, Lauds, Vespers, etc. if you are particularly adventurous). Embedded deep within the rhythm of daily prayer are pauses, periods of silence, and rest. The very act of praying throughout the day can be seen as a mini-sabbath or rest because it represents the cessation of all other activity in order to devote oneself to prayer, meditation, and worship.

### ***Formed By Sabbath***

The church calendar and the Christian life should be informed and shaped by both the joy of Easter Sunday and the rest of Holy Saturday. It is in fact the connection between the two that leads to participation, to worship, to whole and holy living

because at the core, liturgical time is about participation in the life and love of Christ. The early church told time differently than the Romans and oppressive emperors surrounding them; indeed their timekeeping may be viewed by some as subversive, counter-cultural, and resistant, but that would be putting the cart in front of the horse. Just as the Eucharist may have a political element to it, or can be understood through political or social lenses from time to time, the point of the Eucharist is not first and foremost political. It is worship. Nothing more, nothing less. Liturgical time is participation before it can be considered resistance.

The question, Christian, then becomes simple: how do you tell time? In what narrative of the world are you actively participating? Our cue must be taken from our worship practices, from the liturgies that form and shape us, from the deep structures and rhythms of our week and calendar. We, as Christians, are a people of worship but can we truly claim to be a people of sabbath? Our weekends are filled to overflowing with sporting events, yardwork, chores, duties, tasks, and more. We set aside an hour, perhaps two



at most, for Sunday worship but very little more than that. Observing sabbath, however, shows that the rat race of life does not win in God's kingdom, that timekeeping is done on another level, and that we can *afford* to give over our time in worship to God even if the rest of the world thinks us foolish, irresponsible, or different.

Sabbath is a time of pregnant pauses, anxious awaiting, and emotion-filled worship. It is the gift of time back to the Timekeeper because the day given to prayer is one less day afforded for work and monetary/economic gain. It represents an alignment or re-ordering of values according to heavenly principles rather than earthly standards.

### ***Endnotes***

- 1 Exodus 20:8
- 2 Exodus 7:16
- 3 N T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, North American ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 432.
- 4 Mark 2:27-28
- 5 Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991), 1.
- 6 An Orthodox priest once commented to me that he could fill out the whole of

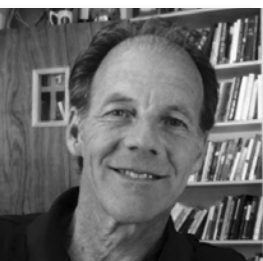
the liturgical calendar if he was given but one date: Easter. The knowledge of Easter's date in any given year would allow him to fill out the rest of the calendar because liturgical time is consistent, it is measured, and it is formative.

- 7 Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 13-14, 70.
- 8 This was originally written in a post for The Living Church. The whole piece can be accessed here: <http://livingchurch.org/covenant/2015/11/20/learning-to-tell-time-liturgically/>









## *Sabbath, Snakes, and Solitude*

*“No one who hurries into the presence of God is content to remain for long. Those who hurry in, hurry out.”*

— Calvin Miller

**REV. CHRISTOPHER  
DE HAAN**

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I had fallen asleep in the beach chair outside the door of my straw bale shack in the San Pedro valley desert east of Tucson. It was the fifth day of my retreat to solitude. The sound of the rattle brought me awake and as my eyes opened and glanced down there it was, a four foot diamond back rattlesnake under my legs. After over two minutes of a thumping heart and my body frozen still, my deadly visitor moved on.

This was my sixth visit to this desert place; a place of complete solitude; no roads, no people, no cell phone, no electricity, just four walls, a barrel of water, a metal roof, a cot to sleep on and a table in the wilderness with a loaf of bread and a cup of wine in its center. This sixth trip brought me to a total of forty days in this lonely place.

Sabbath, as Marva Dawn describes it - ceasing, resting, embracing, feasting; the climax of God’s good creation, an eternal covenant, a gift of time and a practice for both God and his people. It is a rhythm we neglect to our own demise and the resulting consequence that the stories of the world get an uninterrupted voice into our shaping and we give no chance for the one true story to wash over us once again. But isn’t sabbath a weekly rhythm built on numerous sabbath moments in our days? Why an extended sabbath? Why a rhythm of a drastic retreat to a place of desolation? Is not a faithful weekly rhythm enough?

Often - at best - we make it to church on Sunday



morning and call it our sabbath and of course for those of us in ministry it is just more work, more striving all disguised as sabbath. Or perhaps we do have a robust sabbath practice and yet that is not always enough. Jesus, in addition to his sabbath, frequently withdrew to a deserted place. For my soul, a once or sometimes twice a year sabbath retreat has been an indispensable practice to keep my weekly rhythms effective. My weekly rhythm has never been enough to fully unveil the idols of my heart that have crept in. Not only that but the dullness of soul that we are all inclined towards sometimes needs more than a day to be shaken loose.

Thomas Merton in describing the Desert Fathers said “Society ... was regarded by them as a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life. These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster.”<sup>1</sup> He went on further to say, “They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on

solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them.”<sup>2</sup> In my experience, to free myself from the conforming elements of the shipwreck and thus to be able to have something to offer has always required periodic sabbath retreats that supplement my weekly sabbath rhythm and help to do a deeper work on my anemic soul.

And so, for those that are able, I would recommend the practice of sabbath retreats. There are many guided personal and group sabbath retreats held around the country and there are retreat centers and monasteries that will provide a room and the promise to be left in silence. Other people just borrow a cabin or condo for a week. For myself, those options provide too many chances for distraction and if you endeavor to enter deeply into solitude and silence, finding a distraction can be an overwhelming temptation. In my desert place, there is nothing to do, nowhere to go, distractions are scarce.

In any case, whichever option you choose, here are a few things to expect and few ideas to help you on your way.

## ***Companions you can expect***

Henri Nouwen believed that solitude and silence were twin practices that gave rise to all effective ministry. As such, the enemy does not want us to go there. As you enter the solitude of a sabbath retreat you can expect at least three unwanted visitors: boredom, restlessness, and temptation. The first two companions show up because we are so accustomed to *doing* rather than *being*. Quietness, inactivity, listening, stopping are all intrusions to our learned patterns and boredom and restlessness will both try and move us out of the solitude and prevent its good work. In addition, as we discipline ourselves to deep silence we begin to see our inadequacies, frailty, and brokenness. Nouwen describes it as coming face to face with our own "frightening nothingness."<sup>3</sup> The enemy and our own shortsightedness want us to flee that realization, but staying in it leads to a renewed dependence on Jesus.

If we are willing to persevere, the third companion shows up - usually in the middle of the night. Temptation. It comes in the form of long held bitterness resurfacing, focusing on old hurts or

surprisingly lustful thoughts. They will assault with a vengeance seeking to invade the growing stillness of soul into which the Spirit will have a fresh voice. Again, the key is to persevere, to stay the course and in time, those three companions get weary and leave. One reason two day retreats are not always effective is that the time is too short for our busy souls to settle down and get silent. If we never get truly silent there is not any real transformation and so the enemy does not need to send the unwelcome companions.

Eventually, at least four companions come to our aid and join us as our friends. Conviction, stillness, clarity, and intimacy. Conviction is a good companion as it purges our mind, affections, and heart from all the compulsions that try to rob our soul. When we have received the convicting work of the Spirit we are finally ready for rest. Stillness comes from ceasing our striving so completely that any need to prove our worth or show we can produce come to an end and we settle deeply in the arms of Abba. He gives us the gift of needing to offer nothing. In that place we suddenly find that we see ourselves and the world

around us with a startling clarity through the eyes of God. Truth and falsehood are no longer confused. The Spirit's voice become familiar once again.

Finally, we experience the greatest companion, intimacy with the Savior. All the barriers have fallen away, our hardness of heart has been broken open and it is just our God and friend sitting with us in the quiet. "Fellowship with Christ is a table only for two- set in the wilderness. Inwardness is not a gaudy party but the meeting of lovers in the lonely desert of the human heart."<sup>4</sup>

If an extended time of solitude and silence is something you pursue, here are some practical ideas.

- Any time in pursuit of silence and solitude is well spent, but the longer the better. Like any spiritual

discipline, it takes practice. So, start with a couple of days and then work to lengthen the time.

- Bring a journal. Even if you don't normally journal, it is important to have a place to write down the insights, convictions, fears, and prayers as well as the invitations God offers for the weeks ahead.
- A hymn book. Silence means stilling all the outside noise and the noise in our hearts but it doesn't mean we can't sing. Our God is a singing God and I think he likes us to join in.
- A Bible. I suggest picking just one passage and staying with that same passage the whole time, letting the Spirit unfold layer after layer of truth.

### *For Further Reading*

*The Way of the Heart by Henri Nouwen*

*The Table of Inwardness: Nurturing Our Inner Life in Christ by Calvin Miller*

*The Wisdom of the Desert by Thomas Merton*

*Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting  
by Marva Dawn*



- A couple of books that draw you to the Lord and instruct about silence, sabbath, and solitude. One key is not to fill up all the time reading, or it just becomes a way to distract from the boredom. Read a little and then just sit and listen.
- Fasting. If you are able to fast, then the pathway to the realization of need and frailty comes quicker. We nibble at the food of the world every day and become too stuffed to have a hunger for the good food of the Spirit. Fasting is a powerful antidote.

Lastly, the retreat to solitude and silence is never an end to itself but is intended to flow out in ministry in the world. Again from Nouwen: "The Desert Fathers therefore considered their going into the silence of the desert to be the first step into the future world. From that world their words could bear fruit, because there they could be filled with the power of God's silence."<sup>5</sup>

## ***Endnotes***

- 1 Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (The Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc., 1960), 6.
- 2 Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, 25.
- 3 Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981), 28.
- 4 Calvin Miller, *The Table of Inwardness: Nurturing Our Inner Life in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 22.
- 5 Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 49.







# Margin

BY LAUREN HUNTER

*Every edge, every crack, every line—  
Filled up, full;  
Crammed in, actually,  
With no room for nothin'.*

*Can joy live here?  
Can Christ dwell?  
Can He be if the minutes, hours, and days  
Are all spoken for?*

*I think not.  
The space in and around the page—  
That should be blank—  
Is written in.*

*Too many notes in the margin.  
Lined or unlined—doesn't matter—  
Can't all be taken up  
By things that may or may not be important.*

*Ain't no joy if there ain't any space to move  
Or air to breathe.  
Can't live this way too long, with no margin, no room  
For Him to dwell within.*

## LAUREN HUNTER

is a daughter of Christ, wife, mom of four, writer, blogger, worship leader and lover of the "big picture" of God's journey we are all on together. Lauren is also the founder and editor of ChurchTechToday.com.



**DR. MARKUS WATSON**

*is the Director | Storyteller for Flourish San Diego (www.flourishsandiego.org). Growing up, Markus' dream was to make it as a big-time movie director. He interned with a production company and started working as a production assistant in Hollywood right after college...for a year. He brought his love for stories to Fuller Theological Seminary. There he was equipped to teach God's big story, animating his congregations as a pastor from Kentucky to San Diego, to live for the life of the world. Markus also earned a Doctor of Ministry at Fuller Seminary with an emphasis on Missional Leadership.*

## ***Sabbath: Rest as Resistance***

I was practically dragging myself on hands and knees to my next vacation. The previous summer, I had taken some time off to write my dissertation. Having been away from the church for several weeks, I told myself that, now that I was back, I would pour myself fully into my work as a pastor.

I ended up preaching twenty-three of the next twenty-four weeks. I must admit, it felt really good to be so productive. I wrote and preached some really good sermons. I made sure folks in my congregation received the pastoral care they needed. I led some fantastic Session (board of elders) meetings. People complimented my preaching. Those I visited thanked me for coming by. Our elders became more effective leaders. Yes, it was a season of tremendous productivity and I felt really good about myself because of it.

It was also a huge mistake. After five months of endless productivity, I felt desperate for a couple of weeks off just to catch my breath.

It was during those two weeks off that I realized I needed to ask my elders for a sabbatical. Most of them were supportive of the idea, but a few were not. They asked, "Why should Markus get a twelve-week vacation? What's he going to do while he's on sabbatical? How is a sabbatical going to help the church?"

These are the questions of a productivity-prone culture, a society that values production above all else. Our culture demands...

Go. Go. Go.

Do. Do. Do.

Produce. Produce. Produce.

These are the ethics we live by in North America in the twenty-first century. We are a people consumed with the need to be productive. Our culture tells us every day that the only person of any real value is the person who produces something of value. We talk, for instance, about helping the disabled or the homeless or even our children becoming “productive members of society.”

It is into this reality that God says, “Stop producing!”

This cry of God – the cry to rest, to practice sabbath – is utterly counter-cultural. It grates against the sensibilities of both the well-dressed white-collar professional and hard-working blue-collar laborer. It chafes at our understanding of what makes us valuable. It offends our notion of self-sufficiency and self-determination. We want to be able to claim that what we have we earned is ours because we worked for it. To depend on someone else, to surrender ourselves to someone else’s provision, is anathema for Western people.

“Rest!” God cries out. “Stop!” God implores. “You are more than what you do! You are more than what you produce! You matter, not because of what you accomplish, but

because of who you are!”

## ***Sabbath Myths***

It’s not that our culture utterly condemns the notion of a day off. The idea of taking time off is, in fact, highly encouraged in a lot of ways. Indeed, even some for-profit companies offer sabbaticals to their employees nowadays. A friend of mine works for a tech company in which every employee gets seven weeks off every seven years. The question we need to ask is – whether it is a day off or a seven-week sabbatical – what is the time off for? What is its purpose? Unfortunately, even when we take time off we may be succumbing to the tyranny of productivity. We see this tyranny expressed in two ways: 1) rest will make you more productive, and 2) because you’ve been productive, you deserve to rest.

### ***Myth #1: The Purpose of Rest is to Make You More Productive***

To say that rest will make you more productive is not untrue. Studies have proven that taking time to rest throughout your day and your week will actually increase your productivity. Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, author of *Rest: Why You Get*



More Done When You Work Less, says, "You're actually investing in your productivity by paying serious attention to rest."<sup>1</sup>

If you limit yourself, however, to understanding rest as merely instrumental, you assume that rest is a tool whose only purpose is to increase productivity. While it is true that a rhythm of rest will increase a person's productivity, this view of rest is not the same as sabbath. In fact, this view of rest runs counter to the biblical understanding of sabbath. The purpose of rest in this view is to make people better producers and, thereby, ultimately, better consumers.

### ***Myth #2: The Purpose of Rest is to Reward Yourself for Being Productive***

Speaking of being consumers, have you ever seen those commercials that say, "Hey, you've worked hard! Don't you think you deserve to indulge yourself a little?"

You can see this message in commercials for products ranging from candy bars (Kit Kat's "Give me a break" campaign comes to mind) to ads for luxury spas.

Is it wrong to reward yourself with a candy bar after a

long day of work or with a massage at the end of the week? Of course, not. But this is not the same thing as sabbath. The culture might say, "Go ahead, indulge yourself! You deserve it!" But there's a danger here. If we are not careful, we're at risk of letting the practice of sabbath become little more than self-centered self-indulgence. Eugene Peterson calls this "a bastard sabbath."<sup>2</sup> And it is not what God intended the sabbath to be.

Let's look at what the sabbath was intended to be.

### ***Sabbath Origins***

The people of Israel were a peculiar people. They were a people who stopped working every seventh day, a practice other nations viewed with both admiration and scorn. They couldn't fathom that even Israelite soldiers rested from their labor by not marching more than the permitted distance or carrying arms on the sabbath.<sup>3</sup>

But Israel's sabbath observance wasn't simply for the sake of taking the day off; it was a sign of its unique covenantal relationship with Yahweh. It was a reflection of the seventh day of creation, the day on which God rested. And it was a reminder to

the people of Israel that they were no longer slaves in Egypt, that their worth was not dependent on their productivity.

### ***Creation: The First Sabbath***

The first time we see the sabbath practiced in the Bible, it's not by a human being. In the creation story of Genesis 1, we see a God who is incredibly productive. God calls into being the sun, the moon, the stars, the oceans, the trees and vegetation, the animals, and finally human beings. God does a lot of work in those six days of creation. At the end of the six days, God tells human beings to imitate God's productivity, saying to them, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). Certainly, this command has to do with reproduction. But I suspect "being fruitful" and "multiplying" has to do with much more than having babies. God made us in his image—creators and multipliers and producers.

We were created to do the same kinds of things that God did during the first six days of creation.

If you keep reading, however, just a few verses after God tells the humans what to do, God does something rather surprising. God rests. God takes a break. God stops doing. God stops producing. In Genesis 2:2-3, we read, "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done."

Why did God rest on the seventh day? Was it because he was exhausted and needed a day off?

God's rest is not portrayed as though God were collapsing in exhaustion at the end of a week of wearisome toil. No. God's rest is depicted as a

### ***For Further Reading***

*Sabbath Ancient Practices Series by Dan Allender*

*The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man by Abraham Joshua Heschel*

*Dwell: Life with God for the World by Barry D. Jones*

*Emotionally Healthy Spirituality by Peter Scazzero*

delight! At the end of the sixth day, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God thought to himself, “What a wonderful world! Now, let’s see what happens!” Barry D. Jones says, “God rested to let the world he had made flourish as it should. He rested in order to delight in its flourishing.”<sup>4</sup>

Sabbath rest is inherent in the order of creation. Just as God rested from God’s work to delight in the goodness of creation, so we are designed, not be perpetually productive, but to stop, rest, and find joy in the beauty of the world in which we live.

### ***Exodus: More Than Producers***

The sabbath originated when God created the world. But it didn’t become a practice to be observed until after the Exodus.

For four hundred years, the Hebrews lived as slaves in Egypt, making bricks for the great construction projects of Pharaoh. Upon hearing their cry for deliverance, God sent Moses to lead them out of captivity. Once they had crossed the Red Sea they were fully and finally free.

Except that they weren’t free in their hearts or minds. All

their lives their identity and sense of self-worth had been wrapped up in the number of bricks they produced. “Get back to your work!” was the recurring snarl of the Egyptians (Exodus 5:4). The more bricks they produced, the more valuable they were. If they produced fewer bricks, then their value to the Egyptians – and their value as human beings, so they were told – decreased.

God had to break the Israelites of their misplaced sense of self-worth. If their identity was wrapped up in their productivity, then a pause in their productivity was required. God wanted his people to know that they were more than mere producers of bricks. God wanted them to know that they were cherished not for the work they performed, but because they were God’s children created in the divine image. God wanted them to know that their primary identity was not “slave,” but “child of God.”

And so God instructs the Israelites:

*“Observe the sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the*



*Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).*

The sabbath is a reminder to the Israelites – and to us – that we are not slaves. The sabbath is about the joyful flourishing of human beings created in the image of God. The sabbath is a resistance to the voices of the world that say, “You are only as valuable as what you produce.”

### ***Exodus: Trust in God***

Before God had instituted the sabbath in the Ten Commandments, God gave the Israelites the opportunity to practice the sabbath. As soon as they had crossed the Red Sea, the Israelites realized they would soon be without food or water. That’s when the grumbling began: “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate

all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death” (Exodus 16:3).

Had it been up to me, I might have said, “You’re already complaining?! Starve, then, if that’s your attitude!” But God is more gracious than I am. God responds by sending manna and quail to feed the Israelites. Six days a week, God would send manna and quail. Each day there would be enough for that day, and not more. Any manna or quail saved till the next day would rot.

But the seventh day was different. On the seventh day, God would rest. On the seventh day, God would not send any manna or quail. But that did not mean that God wouldn’t provide for his people on the seventh day. God would send a double portion on the sixth day so that there would be enough to eat on the sabbath. And on the seventh day, the manna and quail would not rot. With this, the Israelites were called to rest on the sabbath, as well.

The provision of manna and quail, along with the day of rest, was an exercise in trust. Trust that God would provide enough food for that day – their “daily bread” – and no

more. Trust that the manna and quail would come again tomorrow. Trust in God's provision, not their own productivity.

Trusting in God's provision is hard to do. It's much easier to trust in our own ability to produce what we need. But God wants the Israelites – and us – to remember that we are all completely dependent on God. We cannot, by our own effort, produce manna and quail. Manna and quail are not earned. They are a gift from God.

The sabbath, the Israelites discovered, was a contrast to life in Egypt. Egypt was a place where bread was received only in payment for labor, as a reward for productivity. And it was always received with fearful anxiety. The gift of manna, then, became a resolute break with the abusive and manipulative methods of Egyptian bread. Sabbath, therefore, became an opportunity to secede both economically and psychologically from the ways of Egypt.

The practice of sabbath is an act of resistance against the illusion of our own self-sufficiency. It reminds us that what we have is a gift from God, independent of our

productivity. It says, "God is in control. God will provide all you need. Trust in God."

### ***Sabbath Life***

It's one thing to understand why God gave us the sabbath, what it means, and what it says about our worth as human beings. But it's another thing to actually practice the sabbath. What does it mean to observe the sabbath? And how do we go about observing the sabbath in a culture that says, "Don't stop to rest. If you do, just make sure it's for the sake of being more productive when you get back to work"? To get a sense of how to observe the sabbath, I'd like to touch on three important sabbath qualities: delight, contemplation, and freedom.

### ***Sabbath Delight***

The sabbath is a command, but that doesn't mean it must be a chore. It is, in fact, intended to be the very opposite of a chore. God gave us the sabbath as a day to rejoice in God's goodness and to delight in the world in which we live.

The prophet Isaiah understood this when he wrote:

*"If you keep your feet from breaking the sabbath and from*

*doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord...."*

Yes, we are called to keep from "breaking the sabbath." But we are invited to "call the sabbath a delight"! And when we do, we "will find [our] joy in the Lord." The sabbath is not so much about dying to ourselves as it is about becoming fully alive!

How then do we practice delight on the sabbath? By doing the things that are life-giving for us. If you love movies, go see a movie. If you love hiking, go for a hike. If you love gardening, plant some flowers. If you love your kids, take them to the park. Whatever is refreshing and inspiring for you, do that.

And do it without guilt. The sabbath is a day to step away from being productive and to simply enjoy life. And in the midst of that joy, to say thank you to God.

### ***Sabbath Contemplation***

Gratitude is important because it reminds us that the sabbath isn't simply about having fun (though the

sabbath might involve doing fun things). The sabbath is also a day of contemplation. But not the kind of contemplation people tend to think of when they hear about spiritual contemplation. Sure, you might include some meditation and prayer in your sabbath; perhaps, also, praying the Psalms or *lectio divina*.

When I say contemplation, however, I'm really talking more about a state of mind. A contemplative posture toward everything you do on that day (even if you're screaming your head off on a roller coaster with your kids). Contemplation refers to the understanding that the sabbath is much more than merely a day off. The sabbath is a day unto the Lord.

It is a day set apart. It is a day for connecting with the God who created us. We see this again and again in the scriptures:

- "Tomorrow is to be a day of sabbath rest; a holy sabbath *to the LORD*" (Exodus 16:23).
- "You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a sabbath *to the LORD*" (Leviticus 23:3).
- "...the seventh day is a



sabbath *to the LORD* your God” (Deuteronomy 5:14).

Remember, the sabbath resists all notions of self-centered self-indulgence. Just as the sabbath was, for the Israelites, a reminder of their special covenantal relationship with Yahweh, so we are invited on the sabbath to be ever aware of the presence of the One who calls us into relationship with the God of creation.

### ***Sabbath Freedom***

The danger with practicing the sabbath is the tendency to legalize it; to impose the sabbath – on ourselves and on others – as something that we “should” do or “have to” do. Jesus encountered this problem again and again throughout his ministry. And over and over, Jesus resisted a legalistic practice of the sabbath.

The Pharisees and other religious leaders, on the other hand, relished in legalizing the sabbath. And they eagerly challenged Jesus’ practice of healing on the sabbath or his disciples’ practice of picking heads of grain on the sabbath (Matthew 12:1-14). In every case, Jesus rejected the simplistic understanding of sabbath as being little more than an occasion to follow rules. Doing good, Jesus

insisted, can never be wrong on the sabbath. “Which is lawful on the sabbath,” asked Jesus. “To do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4). Jesus reminds us that God’s intent for the sabbath – rooted in the reality that we have inherent worth because of who we are, not because of what we do – is distorted when it is subjected to rigid regulation.

“The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Jesus was clear. Though the sabbath was a commandment, its purpose was to be a blessing to human beings. As soon as the sabbath becomes a burden, it is no longer a true sabbath. Authentic sabbath, practiced with delight, compassion, and mindfulness of God’s presence, resists the world’s tendency to legalize and require.

### ***Invitation to Sabbath***

“You are only as valuable as the work you do.” “Your accomplishments are what define you.” “If you want a day off, you have to earn it.”

These are the lies that sabbath repels. Sabbath says, “Don’t believe it! You’re being deceived. You are valuable and worthwhile simply because you are a child of

God. You are not primarily a producer of goods and services. You get to rest for no other reason than that you bear the divine image.”

As we listen to the words that sabbath proclaims, our spirits cry out, “Yes!”

But it’s still so hard to practice the sabbath. So, for those who long to engage in sabbath, but just can’t see the feasibility of a weekly twenty-four hour period of rest, let me offer some encouragement and some grace.

My encouragement to you is this. Do it. Begin practicing the sabbath. You need that regular weekly reminder of your intrinsic value as a human being in order to counteract the false messages of the world the rest of the week.

And here’s the grace I’d like to offer. Start small if you need to. Remember, Jesus resisted a legalistic understanding or practice of sabbath. If twenty-four hours doesn’t seem possible, start with twelve. If twelve hours seems out of the question, start with six. And if six hours is too difficult, start with three.

But start. God invites you to rest in him, knowing you are

loved and held. You belong to God, not because of what you accomplish, but because of who you are — a beloved child of God.

### Endnotes

- 1 Els Van Asseldonk, “Use a strategy practiced by everyone from Darwin to Google to be more productive without becoming a workaholic,” *Business Insider*, December 5, 2016, accessed October 17, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/rest-makes-you-more-creative-and-productive-2016-12>.
- 2 Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: the Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eedrmans, 1987), 46.
- 3 Stephen Westerholm, “Sabbath,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1992), 716.
- 4 Barry D. Jones, *Dwell: Life with God for the World* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2014), 161.



## *The Sabbath: Shattering the Hourglass*

*“What is the Sabbath? Spirit in the form of time.... It gives us the opportunity to sanctify time, to raise the good to the level of the holy...” Abraham Heschel*

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Does modern-day Christianity emphasize the discipline of keeping the sabbath with a view towards sanctifying time to access eternity?

In twenty-first century Christianity, we expend earnest energy to save time, manage time and, when convenient, give time to others and causes. In these efforts, rarely do we appreciate time as a sacred gift offered by God to liberate us from the enslavement of material reality; where we might realize a liberation from the pursuit of saving, managing, and giving time in order to experience piercing, consecrating, and transcending time. We operate in space, striving to maximize time while simultaneously fearing the loss of time to accomplish our earthly missions. As a result, we have diminished our capacity to recognize that measured time provides us with a counterpoint to encounter the divine timelessness that constitutes the primal, spiritual reality of eternity.

For many, the sabbath is seminally regarded, as a day where one rests from work, enjoys the company of others, and engages in acts of recreation. Our culture typically looks forward to the sabbath as a biblically prescribed, (though treated as optional) retreat from the daily pressures of life. In “doing” sabbath, however, how many in our faith tradition perceive time as an entity, a presence, or a realm? Might Christianity reverently embrace the sabbath, not simply as 24 hours of rest during a week, but as a holy invitation to commune with God in the spiritual dimension of timelessness and time-fullness?

In his book, *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel offers, “The Sabbath is not only a legal institution, a state of mind or a form of conduct, but a process in the world of the spirit.”<sup>1</sup> The sabbath as a process in the world of the spirit, a journey to the spirit, and a holy communing with the spirit – imagine!

In the evangelical Christian tradition, we keep the sabbath as modeled in the creation narrative of Genesis 2:2 where God completes the processes and events of the creation week. Scripture succinctly yet eloquently describes, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing, so on the seventh day he rested from all his work” (NIV). With this narrative as our basis, the sabbath is primarily practiced to comport with God’s example of ceasing from work. In addition, as illuminated in various texts, many within the Christian faith extend keeping the sabbath to include recreation, fellowship, and feasting.

With respect to our shared origins with the Jewish faith, the sabbath incorporates a richer experience for the Christ-follower than what has been commonly practiced. In the Jewish tradition, the

sabbath is welcomed as invitation to break from the confines of dimensional time to enter into the expanse of eternal time and spirit.

The Genesis 2 account continues with, “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because he rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (Gen. 2:3). God *blessed* the day of rest and made it *holy*. The deep reverence for this blessing and consecration of the seventh day conveys a beautiful depth within the traditional Jewish observation of the sabbath. The Jewish tradition has intimately apprehended this appointed day as Heschel offers, “...on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Might the Jewish traditions associated with keeping the sabbath offer some insight as to the re-creating and sanctifying power of keeping the sabbath for Christians in this modern era?



## ***The Sabbath in Jewish Tradition***

The term “sabbath” derives from the Hebrew verb *sabbat* which connotes to “keep” or “cease.” For Jews, the sabbath affirms God as Creator and Sustainer of all things, conferring reverence to his sovereignty and to his completion of the creation week events — as an holy progression towards finality. Thus, keeping the sabbath is an act of worship to God and acknowledges his creation; its observance is a strict, sacred duty of every Jew. In fact, the first five books of the Old Testament (Torah) dictate that desecration of the sabbath was punishable by death (Exodus 31:14). To forego participation was an outward expression of disobedience to God’s covenant with his people. Moreover, the sabbath served as affirmation of the Jewish identity, a reminder that the Israelites were once slaves, delivered by God’s hand from exploitation and servitude to the Egyptians. As such, the command to rest on the sabbath commemorates the Jews’ liberated past, and represents a covenant reminder for the generations that the Israelites were God’s chosen people (Ex. 31:12).

In Judaism, the sabbath custom begins on Friday evening and concludes on Saturday evening to accord

with each creation day recount found in Genesis 1, “and then there was evening, and there was morning.” The family prepares for the sabbath by gathering together, cleaning the home, wearing special clothing, playing music and singing Jewish songs. The dinner table is elaborately set with flowers, fine linens, and dishes. Central to the setting are two candles (representing the two commandments to remember and observe the sabbath); a *Kiddush*<sup>3</sup> cup with wine (symbolizing joy and life); and two loaves of braided Challah bread (representing the double of portion of manna supernaturally given to the Israelites while in exile so that they would not have to gather manna during the sabbath). Judaic tradition specifies that both loaves of Challah should be covered with decorative cloth to signify human dignity, and the cutting knife, a weapon, is also covered with cloth as a symbol of peace. In Reform Judaism, The sabbath is often personified as a queen, thus the dinner table reflects a lavish offering:<sup>4</sup> “The day was a living presence, and when it arrived they felt as if a guest had come to see them.”<sup>5</sup>

Each component of the Jewish sabbath observance includes

a blessing. When the sabbath candle is lit, the prayer is spoken: “Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the lights of Shabbat.” Next, the Kiddush wine cup is upheld and blessed with the prayer:

*And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day. The heavens and the earth were finished, the whole host of them. And on the seventh day God completed His work that He had done and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it because in it he had rested from all his work that God had created to do. Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe Who creates the fruit of the vine (Amen). Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe who sanctifies us with his commandments, and has been pleased with us. You have lovingly and willingly given us Your holy Shabbat as an inheritance, in memory of creation because it is the first day of our holy assemblies, in memory of the exodus from Egypt, because You have chosen us and made us holy from all peoples and have willingly and lovingly given us Your holy Shabbat for an inheritance.*

*Blessed are You, who sanctifies Shabbat (Amen).<sup>6</sup>*

The concluding rite of the sabbath *Havdalah*, which means “separation,” is also quite elaborate. For the Saturday evening, lights are kept dim, and the dinner setting consists of wine and one braided candle with many wicks. Sweet spices are added to the closing ceremony to usher in the new week with fragrance. The Jewish faith holds that each person is given an extra soul at the start of sabbath, which is returned at the end of sabbath. Thus, as recompense for the lost, extra soul, sweet-smelling spices are inhaled. As a final ceremonial gesture, the candle with many wicks is extinguished with wine so that the room remains in holy darkness, full of hope — a hope for a fresh start of the week, and for a better world for mankind.<sup>7</sup> Heschel shares, “Every seventh day a miracle comes to pass, the resurrection of the soul, of the soul of man and of the soul of all things.”<sup>8</sup>

The rites associated with the Jewish sabbath substantively and materially declare reverence, liberation, and joy. Most important, however, the weekly sabbath observation symbolizes a renewed journey

towards an eternal rest of the soul: "Judaism tries to foster the vision of life as a pilgrimage to the seventh day; the longing for the Sabbath all days of the week which is a form of longing for the eternal Sabbath all the days of our lives."<sup>9</sup> Within this tradition, the sabbath is viewed as an inheritance and as an invitation to enter into a consecrated time, a time that was ordained by God. The people of the sabbath receive the blessing of six days work and the miraculous, culminating blessing of the soul's rest on the seventh day.

In her autobiographical discussion of the sabbath, Marva Dawn illumines, "God hallowed time....The Sabbath gives us the opportunity to... re-establish our connections with the eternal instead of being too closely tied up with the earthly buildings and our present circumstances."<sup>10</sup> The sabbath unites the cycle of God's heavenly works with the rhythms of man's earthly works. And through this unity, mankind aligns its soul with the creative (recreative) acts which were conceived by the mind of God in timelessness. With this rich tradition, how then might the Jewish observation of the sabbath be examined and applied in a New Testament-

forward context?

### ***Glimpsing Eternity***

*"To men alone time is elusive; to men with God time is eternity in disguise."<sup>11</sup>*

Within Jewish tradition, forms of time — years, days, and hours — significantly mark atonement (Yom Kippur), deliverance (Passover), and rest (Shabbat). "Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at *the sanctification of time*."<sup>12</sup> Time alludes to the mystery and magnificence of God's presence. It is during these sacred and sanctified periods that the Jew announces the impermanence of earthly activities and possessions. The rites associated with traditional Jewish holidays manifest opportunities to glimpse everlasting time where God resides.

How then is the pursuit of glimpsing eternity conveyed within the Christian faith? Christianity embraces the incarnate birth, life, and resurrected death of Jesus Christ — and embraces all of the convening and intervening miraculous acts of Christ which transcended time and space. The final ascension of Christ ushers in the presence of the Holy Spirit for all. With faith in

Christ and the consummate gift of the Holy Spirit, the Christian might observe the sabbath with greater reverence, liberation, and joy, with an emphasis towards transcending material cares to apprehending eternal truths.

Very much, with the advent of technology and attending pressures of modern life, Christian sabbath-keeping has been nominally reduced, if kept at all, to simply abstaining from remunerated work, under the guise of *resting*. And the modern Christian sabbath regularly involves completing otherwise neglected or overdue tasks.

With the minimizing of sabbath observance in current Christian culture, our focus upon eternal time diminishes under the execution of earnest, yet

nonetheless earthly-focused, tasks during our appointed day of rest. Our modern Christian sabbath practice has not fully perceived the ceasing of earthly works as a glorification of heavenly time. Heschel asserts, "Space is exposed to our will; we may shape and change the things in space as we please. Time, however, is beyond our reach, beyond our power. It is both near and far, intrinsic to all experience and transcending all experience. It belongs exclusively to God."<sup>13</sup> The sabbath uniquely invites us into the realm of God.

"Time to us is a measuring device rather than a realm in which we abide," Heschel observes.<sup>14</sup> As humanity has progressed, so has our reliance on man-made time-keeping devices, from the hourglass to the clock, and from the wristwatch to digital

### *For Further Reading*

*Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*  
by Walter Brueggemann

*Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*  
by Marva J. Dawn

*Sabbath Time* by Tilden Edwards

*Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*  
by Norman Wirzba



displays. These devices, though marvelous inventions, have in many cases distracted us from aligning with the primal rhythms of nature and from reserving a temporal period for meditation on the eternal. For example, an hourglass is constructed with two glass bulbs connected by a thin narrow neck of denser glass. Grains of sand reside within either bulb. When the hourglass is placed upright, the sand from the upper bulb empties continuously into the lower bulb until it is exhausted. The hourglass is inverted at the end of each cycle so that the lower, filled bulb becomes the upper bulb from which the sand once again flows. The sand remains confined within the hourglass where, with each inversion, time passes through the narrow, dense passageway.

Time shifts from one discrete bulb of space to the opposing space, a material metaphor of how one transfers time from oneself to another, or to another. But if the hourglass breaks, the sands of time will flow freely from within to beyond. The sand will escape its finite space and will scatter in infinite directions; it becomes impossible to gather, measure, or “keep” time. Extending this example into spiritual metaphor, the

sabbath discipline bestows upon us the power to break the hourglass, liberating our spirits from the body, so that we may experience, not the measured flow, but the expansive realm of the spirit in timelessness. “In the realm of spirit, there is no difference between a second and a century, between an hour and an age.”<sup>15</sup> We experience uninhibited time which transcends barriers to touch and consume all of our material surroundings. Rather than the strict transaction of time, we experience the wondrous transformation of time.

The transcendent process, spiritual blessing, and sacred communion of sabbath-keeping is not often promoted in evangelical circles to the same degree as congregational worship, tithing, and small group fellowship. And in our times of holy communion, we do not acknowledge how the momentary act of partaking of the elements of wine and bread can also create a space for the abandonment of linear time, so that we may divinely fellowship with God in timelessness. We rarely emphasize an intentional engagement with the wonderful realm of eternity itself. As a result, the breadth and depth of fellowship with

the Divine Creator is missed. Heschel explains, “spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time.”<sup>16</sup>

With respect to our Judaic roots, the sabbath extends to Christian culture an occasion to unite with the Divine. We might consider developing sabbath commencement, durational, and concluding rituals that include the offering of specific prayers. With a renewed perspective towards authentic rest and intimate communion with God, we have the opportunity to vanquish the impulses of time-driven days. For “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Pet. 3:8). Moreover, with an integrated focus of rest and communion, we may personally consider the works of God, including the creation of time, and the glorious phenomenon of current and future fellowship with God in the realm of eternity. Through these considerations, other boundaries of our individual will, desire, and imagination may also be transcended. Heschel suggests, “It is the dimension of time wherein man meets God, wherein man becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening

up new roads for ultimate realizations. Time is the presence of God in the world of space, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all beings.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, as we glean from the Jewish tradition of the sabbath, for modern-day Christians the clarion call becomes to free ourselves from activities of the calendar and premeditations of the mind marked by the measured constraints of alarms, clock ticks, or grains of sand. “One must be overawed by the marvel of time to be ready to perceive the presence of eternity in a single moment. One must live and act as if the fate of all of time would depend on a single moment.”<sup>18</sup> The Christian’s intention during the sabbath, therefore, aims to open the spirit to a sustained and holy encounter with the Divine Eternal — reflecting upon the imminent remnants of temporal time, resolutely and ultimately, “shattering the hourglass” into shards to immerse oneself in the wonder of everlasting seconds.

## Endnotes

- 1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951), 53.
- 2 Heschel 1951, 10.
- 3 *Kiddush* means “sanctification” and shares the same root as the Hebrew word *kadosh*, which means “holy.”
- 4 Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Shabbat Customs,” ReformJudaism.org, 2017, accessed on August 21, 2017, <http://reformjudaism.org/shabbat-customs>
- 5 Heschel 1951, 53.
- 6 Tracey R Rich, “Shabbat Evening Home Ritual,” *Judaism* 101, 1998-2007, accessed on August 21, 2017, <http://www.jewfaq.org/prayer/shabbat.htm>
- 7 Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Shabbat Customs,” ReformJudaism.org, 2017, accessed on August 21, 2017, <http://reformjudaism.org/shabbat-customs>
- 8 Heschel 1951, 83.
- 9 Heschel 1951, 90.
- 10 Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, William B. Publishing Co., 1989), 108.
- 11 Heschel 1951, 101.
- 12 Heschel 1951, 8.
- 13 Heschel 1951, 99.
- 14 Heschel 1951, 96.
- 15 Heschel 1951, 98.
- 16 Heschel 1951, 6.
- 17 Heschel 1951, 100.
- 18 Heschel 1951, 76.



# *Shattering the Hourglass*

**SELF-PORTRAIT BY MARIE TEILHARD**

*depicts the meaninglessness of measured time when spiritually accessing the timelessness of the sabbath. The hourglass, as a time keeping device, is broken, thus allowing the sands of time to freely consume one's being. For the Christian, the sand symbolizes the dimensionally vibrant blood of Christ and invites engagement with eternity.*







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## ***Sabbath Delight: Resisting Despair***

*If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs,  
then you shall take delight in the LORD  
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

*Isaiah 58:13-14, NRSV*

Everyone loves time off from work, a day or two to be free to do what one pleases, or to take it easy and enjoy one's self with family and friends. Leisure can be delightful! The laws of many countries protect the right of full time workers to have one or two days off in seven. Of course, countless people in this world work without a regular day off, for example, people who must work more than one job in order to make ends meet, caregivers who nurse their loved ones in their own homes, and slaves, whose unrelieved labor enriches others.

The benefits of rest and the enjoyment of freedom to manage one's own time and energy make weekly days off universally appealing. Yet, these are not the reasons given for sabbath rest in the Bible. The purpose of this essay is to consider the theology of sabbath in the Old Testament, the values and purposes of sabbath observance. It will not attempt to define what Christians should or should not do on the sabbath day. Readers' own reflections on the

theology of sabbath may lead them to confirm or alter their sabbath practices, but the goal is to discover reasons to “call the sabbath a delight” (Isa. 58:13).

Exodus 20:8---11 will be the basic text, along with Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, but they will lead to others in which we can explore four sabbath values.

*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work --- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day, therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.*

1. The sabbath command is about work. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work.” (Exod. 20:9). Six days of work provide the context for rest on the seventh day. Hard work is a consequence of disobedience in Genesis 3:16-19, but work itself is not a punishment. God created human beings to work, to fill the earth and have dominion over the other living creatures (Gen. 1:28), and to tend the garden (Gen. 2:15). God

provided plants and, later, animals as food for people, but they had to work to get them. Sabbath is resistance to over-valuing leisure time.

The Book of Exodus is about the Israelites at work.<sup>1</sup> In Egypt they built and did “field work” for the Egyptians (Exod. 1:11-14). How did they eat? The Bible doesn’t say. In the wilderness the Israelites built for God, who provided their food (manna and quail). Pharaoh’s buildings were for storing his wealth, taken from the people of his own and conquered lands. God’s structure was made “so that I may dwell among them” (Exod. 25:8), a promise and purpose fulfilled when God’s glory filled the completed tabernacle (Exod. 40:34). Pharaoh refused to give the Israelites three days of break following many years of work (Exod. 5:5), but God required weekly sabbath rest while building the tabernacle (Exod. 35:1-3). Exodus reveals a sharp contrast between working for Pharaoh and serving God.<sup>2</sup>

Exodus doesn’t describe the specific tasks performed by the enslaved Israelites other than gathering straw and making bricks (Exod. 5:10-14). The tabernacle building required various specialized

skills. Indeed, God gave “skill to the skillful” for all the items that had to be made. (Exod. 31:6) Bezalel, for example, was gifted by God “with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting and in carving wood, in every kind of craft” (Exod. 31:3-5). Skillful women volunteered to produce special fabrics (Exod. 35:25-26). The Israelites made the tabernacle and its furnishings exactly as God had instructed them (Exod. 39:32).

Exodus 16 is the first time in the Bible that God commands people not to work on the seventh day. Manna gathering was repetitive work; creativity and special skills were not required. The people didn’t even need the expertise of hunter-gatherers, as God rained down the manna and quails so that they lay on the ground around them. Every family had enough to eat, and extra work did not enrich one over the other (Exod. 16:18). Manna gathering was not a way to get ahead of the neighbors. Tabernacle construction was not for personal advancement either. People surrendered their personal possessions in order to build a blessing for

the community of God-with-Israel (Exod. 35:21-24). Yet, even from this holy labor they were required to rest (Exod. 35:1-3).

Sabbath values do not disapprove of exercising specialized talents or creativity, or require that human accomplishments and inventiveness not exceed the needs of village life. Lives lived in recognition of Genesis 1:24--2:3 acknowledge Creator God as sovereign provider, and humanity as a whole as responsible for the wise management of the earth and the other living things who occupy it. An uncountable variety of specialized work has developed to exercise this stewardship, but human management has also failed, putting lives in peril.

Sabbath does not resist learning, invention or progress; it reminds us that humans were made for responsibility. People who cannot work hard for any reason need not despair; they can still rest and “call the sabbath a delight” (Isa. 58:13).

2. The hierarchies of master over servants in the household and between Israelites and immigrants in the community had no significance on the sabbath. “But the seventh day is a

sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work ---- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns” (Exod. 20:10). The command to rest includes everyone in the community. The Deuteronomy version of the sabbath command names this purpose for abstaining from work on the sabbath: “...so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you” (Deut. 5:14). The powerful must not rest at the expense of the work of the powerless. The powerful do not control the powerless every day of the week.

Sabbath resists arrogant self-importance. In contemporary western society being busy is often a source of pride. A busy person feels important. Her work is valuable to others. They can't do without her. If she earns enough at her job, she may have the funds to fill her leisure hours with hobbies, volunteer work, and recreation. Filling leisure time with busy-ness is also a source of pride, and an opportunity to feel superior to others.

Author Sandra Boynton gives a humorous depiction of the way busy adults sound to children. They have no time even for punctuation, and the days of the week run together without pause for a comma or even a space. This is one verse:

*We're very very busy and we've got a lot to do  
and we haven't got a minute to explain it all to you  
for on SundayMondayTuesday there are people we must see  
and on WednesdayThursdayFriday we're as busy as can be  
with our most important meetings and our most important calls  
and we have to do so many things and post them on the walls.<sup>3</sup>*

Saturday doesn't appear in this song; so perhaps there is hope that Boynton's obsessively busy adults do take a break on the seventh day. Sabbath gives the opportunity to evaluate the purpose of anxious activity like this.

In some circumstances lives do depend on someone's extraordinary work. Working responsibly and well is the right thing to do. Sabbath values help one to resist the temptation to use work to elevate oneself over others, to feel superior because one is busier than people who cannot work.

The Old Testament sabbath instructions address an ancient society comprised mainly of agricultural communities.<sup>4</sup> The



command to cease work on the seventh day included the seasons of planting and harvesting, when a day of missed work could threaten the family's survival (Exod. 34:21). Sabbath rest for the land every seventh year was specifically relevant to farmers, and benefited landless members of the community as well as wild animals (Lev. 25:1-7). Godly work isn't limited to gathering manna or subsistence farming, however. Genesis 1:1-2:3 portrays a peaceful, wholesome, flourishing habitat for God's creatures, with humankind assigned the role of YHWH's vice-regents. God called it "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Humanity's role in creation has become highly diversified. God created human beings with capabilities for inventiveness, learning, and creativity. We can do and make new things and imagine even more. Individuals have different gifts and capacities. Some are more profitable in commercial terms, bestowing wealth on their possessors. Sabbath reminds us that wealth is not an ultimate value, however. It is a result of economic forces that may vary from society to society. Wealth may also be gained by conquest or injustice. Sabbath observance, according to Deuteronomy

5:15, was an occasion to remember that God had delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. Slavery – for sexual and other purposes -- still exists; it is the most profound devaluing of human beings for the enrichment of others.

Sabbath values oppose arrogant status seeking and greed. Work provides the setting and many opportunities to compete with others for prestige, authority, comfortable working conditions, and salary, or to exploit others' labor to acquire more wealth. Reflection on sabbath values and the experience of common sabbath rest reminds participants that other people do not exist to serve and enrich them or the group to which they belong. Sabbath should also be a constant reminder that humans who support themselves with subsistence labor, even if they never visit a museum, see a play or read a book, can and do live full human lives. They also participate in the divine blessing and commission to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). People with a wider range of

life experience are not more valuable human beings or more valuable persons of faith because of it.

Sabbath values and practices enable one to resist definitions of personal worth based on worldly standards, and the despair that accompanies failure to meet them.<sup>5</sup> Even great success may lead to the despairing question, “Is that all there is?” Isaiah describes a similar feeling, “Ah, you who join house to house, / who add field to field, // until there is room for no one but you, / and you are left to live alone / in the midst of the land!” (Isa 5:8). The burdens of failure and success are both related to the mundane, temporal values that measure a person in dollars and cents. Freedom from such burdens can lead one to “call the sabbath a delight” (Isa. 58:13).

3. In the Old Testament, sabbath observance is a sign of covenant with God. The sabbath commandment, “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy” (Exod. 20:8), is an obligation placed upon and accepted by Israel within the terms of the Sinai covenant. By this covenant, God gives Israel a new identity, “but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation”

(Exod. 19:6). Later passages identify sabbath as a sign of that covenant, and of Israel’s sanctification by God (Exod. 31:13; Ezek. 20:12).

The Bible connects God, Israel, and the sabbath in a circle of sanctification. God hallowed the sabbath day, and gave Israel the sabbath as a sign that God set them apart as holy (Gen. 2:3; Exod. 31:13; Ezek. 20:12). Israel, in turn, must keep the sabbath holy (Exod. 20:8; Deut. 5:12). Disregarding sabbath profanes God (Ezek. 22:26). The Old Testament blames sabbath violation for God’s judgment on Judah in 587 BC (Neh. 13:15-18; Jer. 17:19-27; Ezek. 20:23-24; 22:26), and imposes the death penalty on individuals who profane the sabbath (Exod. 31:13; 35:2; Num. 15:32-36). Sabbath observance epitomizes loyalty to God, and acceptance of Israel’s identity as the people of God.

Sabbath is different than circumcision, the sign of the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:9-14). The sign of sabbath observance requires constant tending and commitment, choosing every week and every moment of the seventh day to keep it. Women and men, old and young, masters and servants,

and even domestic animals practice sabbath observance. Circumcision, however, is a single act of obedience by the male head of household. The mark endures, but only on males. Sabbath is a more inclusive and visible sign.

Sabbath observance exposed the Jews' identity amidst societies in the diaspora that did not practice a day of rest. Under the Hellenistic ruler, Antiochus IV "Epiphanes," sabbath observance was forbidden in Jerusalem on pain of death (2 Macc. 6:6, 11).

In the Old Testament the sabbath command is for Israel, a sign of their specific covenant with YHWH, yet God's word at the end of Isaiah opens up the covenant people to individuals who had previously been excluded. Eunuchs and foreigners could be included in Israel because they were sabbath keepers (Isa. 56:4, 6).

Living within the circle of God's holy people is an antidote to despair. To the eunuch who considers himself "just a dry tree" (Isa. 56:3), God promises an enduring heritage (Isa. 56:4). Foreigners who "join themselves to the LORD," choosing to observe the sabbath and to keep the covenant will be made joyful in God's sanctuary (56:6-7).

Sabbath is a gift of blessing and belonging, a delight to the people who belong to the LORD.

4. Sabbath rest acknowledges Creator God's rule. "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it" (Exodus 20:11). God is in control, so God can rest.

On November 4, 2009, *The Seattle Times* ran an article by Janet Tu about the meeting of the Freedom from Religion Foundation in Seattle. She reported that there would be a "nonprayer breakfast." Instead of a moment of silence at the beginning, "there will be a 'moment of bedlam,' when members hoot, holler and tap on glasses, making as much noise as possible."<sup>6</sup> Were they aware that their scheduled act of rebellion against God echoed the rebellion of lesser deities and humans beings in the ancient Babylonian cosmogonies? Did they know that noise and mayhem that prevented the deities' rest constituted rebellion and resistance to their authority? Perhaps not. This is, however, a crucial concept for understanding Genesis 2:1-3.

God's rest can be understood against its Ancient Near Eastern background.

The senior deities in the Mesopotamian myths create humans to do their work, but the humans become too numerous and noisy so the deities cannot sleep. Ellil says, "The noise of mankind has become too much/ I am losing sleep over their racket."<sup>7</sup> Sleepless deities are no longer in control. The opposite conditions prevail at the end of Genesis 1. All of creation is good, indeed, very good, orderly, full and flourishing. Nothing resists God's authority; God can cease work and rest.

God is sovereign; human beings are vice-regents placed in charge of the rest of the living things. God inspired the composers of the first creation account (1:1-2:3) to organize it around

the structure of a human workweek as defined within the Sinai covenant --- six days of labor and one day of rest. This portrayal does not diminish the power of God or the vastness of creation, but it does elevate human work, the responsibility to serve as God's image, filling and subduing the earth. For Israelites and Jews the sabbath was an occasion when this hierarchy was acknowledged and practiced. They rested in order to acknowledge that God is in control. Creator God's sovereignty is a sabbath value that extends beyond the covenant people, however. Genesis 1 puts all of humanity in this chain of command. God blesses and commissions humankind as a whole, male and female (Gen. 1:26-28).

Human accomplishment and status in creation are almost beyond imagining. Psalm 8:5-

### *For Further Reading*

*Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*  
by Walter Brueggemann.

"*Stop! In the Name of Love: The Radical Practice of Sabbath-Keeping*"  
by Susan S. Phillips

"*Rest for the Animals? Nonhuman Sabbath Repose in Pentateuchal Law*"  
by A. Rahel Shafer

"*Sacred Space and Holy Time*" by Israel C. Stein



6 marvels at what God has made us, while acknowledging our limits:

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet.*

Sabbath values remind us of our role in creation and our relationship to God. We have been given dominion, but we are not God. No matter how hard we work to stay in control of our circumstances, we are not God. We will inevitably fail to be god over our own lives, but this failure is not a reason for despair. Sabbath values invite us to delight in these truths.

### ***Conclusion***

A review of sabbath in the Old Testament points to four values. God created humankind for responsibility, to work to feed themselves and to fill and subdue the earth. Status and wealth derived from work are not measures of a person's value to God. Sabbath creates community among individuals who are willing to be identified as people of God. They acknowledge that God is sovereign. We humans are called by God to live out these sabbath values and delight in them.

## Endnotes

- 1 Ellen Davis calls attention to the fact that the first 13 chapters of Exodus are about working for Pharaoh and the last 13 chapters are about working for God. Ellen Davis, "Slaves or Sabbath-Keepers: A Biblical Perspective on Human Work," *Anglican Theological Review* 83, no. 1, (Winter, 2001): 30.
- 2 Pharaoh said, "Go now and work (דָּבַעַ),"  
(Exod 5:18). God's word through Moses to Pharaoh was, "Let my people go, to that they may worship (דָּבַעַ) me in the wilderness," (Exod 7:16). The Hebrew verb is the same.
- 3 Sandra Boynton, "BusyBusyBusy," in *Philadelphia Chickens: A Too-illogical Zoological Revue* (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 2002), 58.
- 4 Carol Meyers describes many features of the ancient Israelite way of life in her book, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2012.
- 5 "[Sabbath] is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods." W. Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 2014. Preface,
- Kindle.
- 6 Janet Tu, "Atheist group Freedom from Religion Foundation to meet in Seattle," *The Seattle Times*, November 4, 2009, accessed August 15, 2017. <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/atheist-group-freedom-from-religion-foundation-to-meet-in-seattle/>.
- 7 Stephanie Dalley, trans. "Atrahasis," in *Myths from Mesopotamia*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20.



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## ***Holy Saturday, Holy Rest, and Our Call to Care for Creation***

Sabbath has increasingly become an interest among writers of Christian spirituality. Most writers acknowledge the importance of sabbath rest as an integral part of God's creation (Gen 1-2). After creating his beautiful universe, night and day, and human beings – made in his own image – to care for all his good work with beauty and goodness, God created an institution in time to keep our priorities straight in the right order of created things. Sabbath-keeping is a statement of the identity and relationship of all things to him. Jewish writer, Abraham Heschel calls sabbath a sanctuary in time, a *special place* in time, where God's people come and dwell in him, in his good creation. The observance of sabbath day is a command, not a recommendation, and there is a severe penalty when the people of God do not obey.

When it comes to practical approaches to life, there seem to be mainly three streams of sabbath literature. Some writers focus on the psycho-therapeutic dimensions of rest. They approach sabbath-keeping as a healthy alternative to the problems of workaholism, burnout, and dysfunctional relationships. Others highlight socio-economic dimensions of sabbath, especially with the expanded concept of Jubilee (Lev 25). Authors who emphasize these expanded societal dimensions of sabbath and Jubilee criticize the capitalist, materialist, and individualistic cultures of our times as the main obstacles getting in the way of sabbath living with justice and shalom. Another stream calls for spiritual and contemplative dimensions of sabbath keeping. Sabbath-keeping, as a spiritual discipline, has only one purpose: to desire God and to be with God. By

dedicating a period of time to something utterly useless in terms of human achievement, they oppose utilitarian motifs for sabbath-keeping.

These different views of sabbath-keeping complement one another and offer helpful perspectives, whether the therapeutic benefits of sabbath keeping, or communal wellbeing of Jubilee enactment, or deepening the inner disciplines of soul care by keeping sabbath holy as a central part of worship and discipleship. However, we find little common ground when it comes to understanding the New Testament on sabbath-keeping, especially Jesus' relationship to sabbath. Somehow Jesus fits in all of these dimensions, yet we are still left with an unclear picture when it comes to Jesus' relationship to sabbath, his actions and his own claims. Does Jesus really devalue the commands of sabbath-keeping taught in the Old Testament? Is he really replacing sabbath with himself, as with the conventional theological notion?

This ambiguous picture of sabbath and Jesus leads us in two unhelpful directions. One is that we tend to conclude

prematurely that sabbath-keeping was a commandment of the Old Testament that no longer applies in today's complex world; after all, Jesus didn't follow the religious establishment. The other is that because we have not resolved the relationship between Jesus and sabbath, we tend to lean on legalistic or utilitarian motives toward sabbath-keeping since we cannot survive "without some sort of pause" from the heavy demands of our culture. In order to resist these two tendencies we need a comprehensive theological vision encompassing the teachings of both Old and New Testaments and resolving the relationship between Jesus and sabbath.

This short essay explores one possibility to interpret the divisive picture of the relationship between Jesus and sabbath by revisiting the gospel stories, especially the dramatic development of the passion, cross, and resurrection of Jesus. I propose a new spotlight be added, in the grand drama of the *Easter Triduum*, on the special *Shabbat* during Passover. Holy Saturday is the least remembered day of Easter Mystery: day after Good Friday and day before Easter Sunday. All of Jesus'



claims and actions regarding sabbath points to *this* climactic place in time and must be interpreted in light of the Easter Mystery; the Son of Man must die and rise in three days in order to reconcile all things to the Father. Jesus points the rebellious human race in the clearest way to the “sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matt 12: 39-42). Jesus rests in ‘the heart of the earth’ on the special sabbath day after his suffering and death, before God raises him from the dead and inaugurates the new creation. This is the most powerful identity statement Jesus makes through his life, death and resurrection. When we understand this meaning of sabbath-rest of absolute passivity and nothingness after pain and suffering, we can discover our true identity as God’s creatures and our *creature-ly* mission.

### ***1. Jesus and Sabbath: the Son of God, Lord over Sabbath***

We know the story of how Jesus got in trouble with the Pharisees and how they began to plot to kill him. Jesus let his disciples pick grain from the field (Matt 12, Mark 2, Luke 6) and he heals the sick on sabbath (John 5). One important link in this picture, that is often missed, is that Jesus reveals his identity

and mission around sabbath: he is from the Father, and he is doing what the Father is doing, prior to making the claim of lordship over sabbath. The whole narrative is not about what Jesus did or did not do on sabbath days. Rather, the whole narrative is about Jesus identifying himself and his mission in his relationship to God.

The story of Jesus’ claims on sabbath is depicted in all of the Gospels. While Mark and Luke mention only the events that took place on sabbath days and the reactions by the Pharisees (Mark 2:23-28, 3:1- 6; Luke 6:1-11), Matthew and John include the identity claims made by Jesus in relation to the Father.

In Matthew 11:25-29, we hear Jesus exclaiming, “I praise you, Father. Lord of heaven and earth.” And he continues, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Then he offers an invitation of his gentle rest to those who are weary and burdened to come and receive his rest. We must keep this story together with the claims he makes in the following chapter, “for the

Son of Man is Lord of sabbath (Matt 12:8).<sup>1</sup>

John depicts another sabbath healing story of Jesus, the healing of a paralyzed man at the pool (John 5). In this story, Jesus not only claims his relationship to God, but also the mission ahead of him, as he says, “Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (vv 25-26).

There is another event around Jesus identity claim depicted in the synoptic gospels. Jesus revealed his own identity as Messiah through Peter’s confession (Matt 16:13-28; Mark 27-31; Luke 9:18-27). And this time, his identity claim is followed by his prediction of his own death: *the Son of Man must suffer and die to glorify the Father.*

We see two different settings in which Jesus’ identity is revealed as the Son of God. One is sabbath and his continuous work given by the Father. And the other is to his closest friends on earth as he reveals that he is Messiah, through Peter’s confession. In the first setting, the Jewish religious leaders decide to

kill him. In the second, Jesus himself predicts his suffering and death. Jesus uses sabbath to show his relationship with the Father, he does not replace sabbath with himself according to the conventional theological notion. He does not negate the importance of sabbath. Jesus, rather, makes the clearest identity statement in his relationship to the Father, and reinstitutes sabbath through his suffering and death, as we see further in the story of crucifixion and resurrection.

## ***2. The Cross and Sabbath: The Holy Saturday***

Besides the sabbath claims that Jesus makes, the last account which makes the Jewish leaders furious enough to murder Jesus sooner than later was when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Only John includes this story in his gospel (ch 19). Many of the Jews put their faith in Jesus as he demonstrates his power over death, and the high priest prophesies that Jesus would die for all people (vv. 45-52). The Jewish leaders hurried their plan to kill Jesus before Passover arrived (Matt 26:1-3; Mark 14:1-2; Luke 22:1-2).

Passover is the most significant festival of Israel

after the most significant event in Israel's history up to that point. God liberated the people of Israel from the bondage of Egyptian slavery. The Passover lamb signifies the miraculous act of God delivering Israel from suffering through the blood of the lamb (Exodus 12:13). God commands Israel to *remember* sabbath day, and now also the sabbath year to remind the people of Israel of "WHO" has delivered them from misery and "whom" they must remember in their midst - slaves and foreigners (Ex 23:10-13; Deut 15:1-11; and Lev 25). Sabbath day and sabbath year serve as the central framework of relationships not only between God and the people of God, but also among people in community to care for the weak and the suffering. Sabbath after God's deliverance includes a mission, so that people of Israel will remember that peace (*shalom*) comes with a costly sacrifice, the Passover lamb. Sabbath-keeping and reconciliation become inseparable.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus is introduced as 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29) Jesus predicts his suffering and

death as the ultimate Passover lamb; God sacrifices his own life for the sinful human race.

All four gospels include a detailed account of Jesus' passion, crucifixion, and resurrection, which took place around Passover. Jesus suffered and died on the cross on the Preparation day, the day before a special sabbath. He rose from the dead on the day after the sabbath. Jesus in his death rested in the dark tomb, sealed with a stone under surveillance on that sabbath day. Most of this three-day-event actually took place on the sabbath day, the day of rest. We do not know what happened inside the tomb as the gospel writers are silent, other than what we may speculate from Peter's letter (1 Peter 3:19-20).<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel writers, however, tell us two things about this special sabbath day. First, the disciples themselves rested in obedience to the commandment (Luke 23:55). Second, it is only mentioned in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew, knowing it is a special sabbath day,<sup>3</sup> intentionally describes the day as "the next day, the one after Preparation Day." The chief priests and the Pharisees made the tomb secure by putting a seal and

posting a guard (Matt 27:62-66). *The accusers of Jesus as the sabbath-breaker broke the sabbath commandment in order to ensure the death of Jesus as securely as possible. Here we see God's last sabbath on earth tightly enclosed by a rebellious human race in deep darkness in his own creation.*

### **3. Holy Saturday and Our Creature-ly Call**

Genesis tells us that God took his first sabbath in his creation with his people after the first act of creation. God's rest was in the complete picture of his good creation: the first creation out of nothing, darkness and chaos. Our human work began with the rest of God and with the call to tend to his creation (Gen 1:28-29). The narrative of Easter Triduum includes the day of rest, a special sabbath, Holy Saturday. The rest of Jesus in the dark tomb on Holy Saturday completes his life on earth and suffering as the perfect man and the Son of God. It leads to the glory of Easter Sunday in which his victory over death is revealed as God inaugurates the new creation. We, the church, as Christ's bride on earth, are given the task of joining him in his redemptive work in the world as the sign of new creation.

*These two must not be separated: God's first rest shown in the Old Testament creation story and God's second rest after Jesus' death on the cross as the New Creation story. Then, and only then, are our eyes open to see that God's work in creation and redemption deeply connects with the holy rest and our ears open to hear that our call to care for creation must be also deeply rooted in God's holy rest.*

Jesus does not contradict the Old Testament teachings of sabbath commandment, nor does he replace it with himself. Rather his sabbath claims show his identity as the Son of God and his anticipation of his suffering and death as Messiah. The Holy Saturday on which Jesus Christ, God the Son, rested in the earthen tomb of nothingness, darkness and chaos after his suffering and death, shows the model of sabbath rest and the beginning of new creation through Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. Without this profound sense of suffering and perseverance, one can never enter into God's ultimate gift of sabbath. As the old Jewish saying goes, we do not keep sabbath, sabbath keeps us. Sabbath is not a list of do's and don'ts; rather, it establishes our identity as



creatures and our creaturely mission to tend God's creation. This is a mission *out of death* toward life for the "perfection of God's creation."<sup>4</sup>

It is not difficult to engage sabbath rest with creation care. However, the incomplete picture of sabbath rest with only the Old Testament views, combined with the conventional understanding of creation care, gives us a confusing picture, as though creation care might mean recreational hobbies or a therapeutic nature walk, or some sort of activities in the wilderness aimed at spiritual or relational benefits. Others might also say creation care as sabbath rest involves doing justice to the earth by using fewer resources and by slowing down the degradation of creation. All of these can mislead us to the idea that creation care is "a good thing to do" for sabbath-keeping as the source of rest and relaxation, or simply a way of slowing down the demands of life, or practicing spiritual disciplines of abstinence against utilitarian performance and success.

Without the New Testament view of holy rest, which involves suffering and pain, we may be blinded from

seeing the reality of suffering creation: suffering from the effects of the fall, like the pain of childbearing and thistles in the garden (Gen 3), and from continued human sinfulness over and over throughout history. Without the lens of Holy Saturday, we can never see the suffering creation or hear the groaning of the creation waiting to be redeemed by sons and daughters of God (Rom 8:22-26).

On March 11, 2011, a devastating earthquake and tsunami swept the northeastern coast of Japan. Following the natural disasters, nuclear meltdowns happened in Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station. It was the unprecedented man-made disaster, which still continues to this day. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to evacuate from the area, many of whom are permanently displaced. Radiation leakage to air, ocean, and soil has caused irreversible damage. Fukushima, once a rice-basket of Japan, has now become the stigma of national shame and left deep scars in the hearts of the remaining people in Fukushima. As a disaster recovery measure, the Japanese government spent trillions of Yens to remove

the top soil from the affected area and stored it in turf bags to be piled near the nuclear power plant. One can never doubt the reality of suffering creation once they enter Fukushima. The black turf bags covering the beautiful mountain and coastal lines of Fukushima bring the painful image of the dark tomb where Jesus was once sealed up on

Holy Saturday.

In this challenging context of Fukushima, Christians and churches started working together to restore their homeland and communities, and to recover a resilient hope for the future. While many volunteers and relief professionals who had come in the first year of disaster

### ***For Further Reading***

*The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Your Sabbath*  
by Mark Buchanan

*Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*  
by Marva J. Dawn

*The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those Who Serve God, the Church, and the World* by Marva J. Dawn

*Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* by Abraham Joshua Heschel

*Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* by Alan E. Lewis

*The Cultivated Life: From Ceaseless Striving to Receiving Joy*  
by Susan S. Phillips

*Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World* by Siang-Yang Tan

*Life Out of Death: Meditations on the Paschal Mystery*  
by Hans Urs von Balthasar.

*Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* by Rowan Williams

*God's Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation*  
by Jonathan R. Wilson

*Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline*  
by Lauren F. Winner.

*Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*  
by Norman Wirzba

response had long gone due to burnout and stress, the faithful locals remained to serve. Nearly seven years have passed since the first day of the triple disaster. Babies born in that year are now in school. Teens who graduated from secondary schools entered into young adulthood in extremely difficult circumstances.

K (a pseudonym) lives in Koriyama, a city located 60 km west of the nuclear power plant. He graduated from high school this past spring and was preparing to go to a university in Fukushima. I met him for the first time only weeks after the disaster when he was just twelve, and yet busy volunteering at disaster evacuee centers. Through the disaster relief work organized by his home church over the last few years, he grew a deep passion for his homeland, Fukushima. Last year he started a music band with friends to create a safe and fun place where young people can gather in Fukushima. He spoke with a smile and a sense of joy when I asked him a year ago what he learned from the past few years of Fukushima disaster.

*“It’s like the story of the blind young man in John’s gospel [ch 9]. It’s not his sin that he was blind, but it is to glorify God. It is not our fault that we live in Fukushima or that Fukushima had the terrible disasters. Some say we are cursed, and others urge us to escape from here. But I believe we are blessed to live in Fukushima and serve the hurting people here, because we know Jesus and have hope in him.”*

Sabbath arrives in many forms. To K and his friends it is a fully lived life in the face of suffering, in order to offer the gentle gift of rest to hurting neighbors. Caring for creation in Fukushima seems like an unachievable task today. Perhaps it is best understood as the suffering creation’s deep rest on Holy Saturday until the Easter sun rises again on that land.



## Endnotes

- 1 The chapter break between Matthew 11 and 12 may be one of the main causes of misinterpretation of this whole passage.
- 2 I will not go into the divisive theological arguments over what 'descended to hell' means, and what Jesus might be doing and so on in this essay. That is an unhelpful tangent from the main point of this essay.
- 3 Might this be Matthew's literary strategy of pointing to what the Pharisees did all along only to contradict themselves in their legalism and intention to kill Jesus? Matthew describes the next morning, "After the Sabbath" (Matt 28:1).
- 4 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Life Out of Death: Meditations on the Paschal Mystery*. Trans. by Martina Stöckl (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 42-43.





*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

*Psalm 23 NRSV*

## *Times of Refreshing*



*Painting by Diane Fairfield*







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## *The Sabbaths*

The sabbath tradition consists of different cycling calendric events that Israelites were instructed to observe: the sabbath, sabbatical year, and Jubilee.<sup>1</sup> The issue of rest is the vision that binds these occasions (rest from slavery, poverty, injustice... etc.) culminating in the New Testament where Jesus presents himself as the ultimate source where one can find rest.

### *Sabbath*

The word sabbath first appears in Genesis 2:2-3 as a verb describing Yahweh's rest upon completing the previous six days of creation. Its use here serves as a descriptive account of Yahweh's activities rather than informing a prescriptive measure for others to follow. While instructions for sabbath observance do appear in Exodus 16, its purpose was tied exclusively to the gathering of manna. It is not until Exodus 20 is the institution of the sabbath formalized.

The sabbath day falls on the seventh day of the week where there is to be a cessation of work. Violation of this would result in death to the offender. The actual parameters that satisfy the stoppage of work are not explained. The only clear prohibition is the kindling of fire (Exodus 35:3). Numbers 15:32-36 provides an account of a man being stoned to death for gathering sticks, presumably with the intent to start a fire on the sabbath. Priests were exempt from this particular regulation (Numbers 28:9).

While the definition of what constitutes work and the reason why starting a fire warrants such severe repercussions are an unfortunate clouded mystery, scripture does provide more information in regards to possible reasons for sabbath observance. Exodus 20:11 ties it with the creation account and Deuteronomy 5:12-15 associates it with Yahweh's

redeeming the Israelites from their time as slaves in Egypt. These two seemingly disparate reasons actually can be viewed as referencing a common issue. In the creation account, Yahweh rested on the seventh day because everything that he had created was functioning in an orderly manner. In freeing the Israelites from slavery, Yahweh was restoring and returning them to a state that was originally intended. Yahweh's created order never meant for humans to be subjugated in the manner that Egypt oppressed the Israelites. To remind Israel of this, they along with all livestock, resident aliens, and slaves were to share in this rest from labor. On every sabbath day, all Israel was called to reflect on the rest that Yahweh had provided them from the beginning and the subsequent reinstatement of this rest upon their redemption from Egypt.

### ***Sabbatical Year***

If the weekly sabbath served to be a reflective occasion, then the sabbatical year can be viewed as a period for the Israelites to demonstratively exercise their identity as a people of Yahweh. During the weekly sabbath the Israelites experienced rest; in the sabbatical year, the

Israelites were taught how to provide rest to the poor amongst them. From the biblical evidence, one set of instruction for the sabbatical year operated on a rotational system while other parts were universally observed every seventh year.

In the Israelite community, as in every society, there were those who fell into extreme financial hardship. In cases of bankruptcy, one may be forced to indenture themselves as slaves. The premise of the sabbatical year was for the Israelite community to provide a way for slaves to regain independence. While slavery in ancient Israel consisted of both Israelites and foreigners serving as slaves, the sabbatical year stipulations applied only to Israelite slaves. The period of slavery would last six years regardless of the debt that is owed. In the seventh year, instead of simply releasing the slave, the slave-owner was required to generously provide the slave with enough resources to restart a new life. Should a slave desire to remain with the slave-owner, regulations were in place that would accommodate this (Exodus 21). Deuteronomy 15 explains that slave-owners were to free their slaves



because Yahweh redeemed the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt. A further ethical dimension is tied to the idea of a redistribution of wealth so that the poor will not remain perpetually poor.

While the seven year period for the slave release was determined by when a person entered into servitude, there are two other conditions of the sabbatical year that was universally observed by the Israelites every seventh year. The first of these two laws is the cessation of all agricultural work (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7). The land was to lie fallow, but the commonly proposed explanation of rejuvenating the productivity of the fields is not presented as a reason for this rest. The primary purpose is to provide relief for the landless. The natural growth of the fields is to be freely shared with all.

The remission of debt is the last requirement of the sabbatical year. As with the previous sabbath instructions, this final law is humanitarian in nature and seeks to offer relief to the poor. Anticipating that some would be resistant to lend when the seventh year was near, Deut 15:9 urges Israelites to do so regardless of the proximity of the

sabbath year. It is debated, with no clear consensus, whether the actual instruction refers to a full cancellation or a suspension of debt. In favor of a full remission "Josephus, rabbinical scholars, and many modern exegetes (e.g., von Rod; M. Weinfeld) understood the word to mean cancellation."<sup>2</sup> Others argue for a suspension of debt repayment, "...when the land was left fallow, many people would not have been in a position to repay a debt because of the temporary interruption of their normal source of income. Hence, to have insisted on the repayment of a debt during the year of release could have resulted in particular hardship for the debtor, such as entering into unpaid servitude."<sup>3</sup>

### ***Jubilee***

The year of Jubilee which occurred after every seven cycles of the sabbatical year can be viewed as a heightened form of the sabbatical year. The first day of the year of Jubilee coincides with the Day of Atonement. "The year of Jubilee appropriately begins on this day, for it is the most solemn day of the year when the whole nation receives forgiveness for all its sins."<sup>4</sup>

Along with the release of



Israelites slaves, stoppage of agricultural activities, and cancellation of debts (unlike the sabbatical year, there is no debate in regards to cancellation or suspension of debt repayment) that is shared with the sabbatical year, the year of Jubilee introduces a new provision: the return of land. "Any land that had been sold in the previous forty-nine years was to be returned to its original family of ownership according to the Mosaic land distribution (Lev 25:10b, 13)."<sup>5</sup> The return of land continues the humanitarian theme of providing rest to the poor. Presumably, Israelites who could not repay their debts would wind up forfeiting their land in bankruptcy. If the sale of the land did not satisfy the terms of the loan, they would find themselves sold as slaves. Alternatively, Israelites may be forced to sell their land due to other financial hardships, leaving them without means to provide for themselves. Both the sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee seek to reverse these unfortunate scenarios and provide a means for an Israelite to reestablish an economically viable life.

The law also provided another way for land to be reacquired by the original owner prior to the Jubilee

year. Should the original owner earn sufficient funds or a kinsman agrees to repurchase the land on behalf of the original owner, the current land owner would be obligated to return the land in exchange for an amount that is calculated based on the number of years remaining prior to the Jubilee year.

The theological implications of the Jubilee year are profound. It is no coincidence that the Day of Atonement marks the first day of Jubilee. Just as Yahweh has agreed to forgive the Israelites, the Israelites in turn are called to give relief to others. Another aspect that differs from modern economic policies is that land should not be viewed as something that can be owned; it belongs exclusively to Yahweh. Yahweh allows people to use the land not only for their own benefit but also to aid others.

### ***The Sabbath and Jesus***

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV)

It may be that there were times when the Israelites did honor the instructions established for the sabbath, sabbath year, and Jubilee year, but there is no clear record of them actually having done so. While there are accounts of the Israelites observing the sabbath there are other accounts admonishing them for defiling it. The biblical data for sabbath year and Jubilee observance is virtually non-existent. Perhaps during periods of Israel's history they did let the land lay fallow, release their slaves, cancel debts, and return land, but the only documentation that exist are records of them neglecting these statutes. "The nearest to an exception (significantly) is a story in Jeremiah 34:8-17 about it *not* happening."<sup>6</sup>

The passage from Isaiah 61:1-2 that Jesus cites takes the previous sabbath instructions in a new direction. An examination of Isaiah is necessary prior to assessing Jesus' implementation of the passage. In the closing chapters of the second section of Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), the Israelites were at the cusp of their release from their captivity in Babylon. Yahweh indicated that a prosperous future awaits them (Isaiah 55). When the third section of Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66)

begins, the time frame is located in an undisclosed time in the future when the Israelites were no longer under Babylonian bondage but under Persian rule. The anticipated fortuitous events for the Israelites detailed in the previous section never materialized, and they now find themselves repeating the same disregards for Yahweh's instructions that previously led to their judgment in Babylon. They defamed the sabbath, offered children sacrifice to Molech, practiced false piety, and neglected to care for the poor (Isaiah 57-59).

In response to the accusations against Israel, Yahweh says that he will bring about restoration and judge the wicked. It is in these conditions that lead to Isaiah 61. Isaiah 61 itself is no ordinary promise; its undertones are of a heightened Jubilee year. The only other appearance of the word for 'release' "comes only in Leviticus 25:10 in connection with the release associated with the Jubilee, in Jeremiah 34:8-17 in connection with Zedekiah's abortive proclamation of a seventh-year release of indentured servants, and in Ezekiel 46:17 in an incidental reference to the year of release."<sup>7</sup> The

promises in Isaiah 61, as with those in Isaiah 55, were never fulfilled for the Israelites. Perhaps Yahweh refused to carry it out because they continued to be entrapped in their disobedience that resulted in their chastisement in the beginning of the third section of Isaiah.

When Jesus arrived at his hometown of Nazareth and entered a synagogue on a sabbath day, he stood up, unrolled a scroll of Isaiah, and proceeded to read from Isaiah 61:1-2. Upon finishing he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21 NRSV). With these words, Jesus announced the inauguration of the eschaton; the kingdom of God had arrived.

Who are the captives and the oppressed that Jesus is referring to? Undoubtedly, the institution of slavery continued to be practiced under Roman rule, but Jesus' usage of the term encompassed a broader context. In the Isaianic passages, the Israelites expected that a time is coming when they would no longer be under the subjugation of a foreign superpower. With much disappointment, after their release from Babylon, the Israelites continued to

find themselves oppressed by subsequent foreign powers: Persia, Greece, and now Rome. Viewed from this perspective, the Israelites collectively were the captives, and Jesus had now come to inaugurate a freeing of Jubilee proportions.

The Isaiah passage should not to be understood as a predictive foretelling of a coming messiah. Instead, in identifying himself fulfilling this passage, Jesus is declaring that he is "bringing about another embodiment of the ministry described in Isaiah 61."<sup>8</sup> In Jesus, the people will finally be able to receive the rest that had for so long been denied them because of their stubbornness.

### ***Reflection***

Further on in Luke's writings we find the rest that Jesus proclaimed also included the gentile population. Jesus is the lord of the sabbath. It is in him that we find our rest. What are tangible ways for Christ-followers to practice rest? In the sabbath year and Jubilee year in the First Testament (I prefer this title over Old Testament), the community of God were expected to act as God's agents who would provide rest to the marginalized. This model of action continues for

us today. We are God's agents who are called to provide Jesus' rest to the weary and heavy burdened.

### ***Endnotes***

- 1 Various Israelite festivals are also referred to as sabbaths, but a description of these events is beyond the scope of this article.
- 2 P.A. Barker, "Sabbath, Sabbatical Year, Jubilee," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. David Baker and T. Desmond Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 701.
- 3 P.C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 236.
- 4 John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1992), 434.
- 5 Barker, 702
- 6 John Goldingay, "Jubilee Tithe" Accessed May 7, 2017. [http://infoguides.fuller.edu/ld.php?content\\_id=25473620](http://infoguides.fuller.edu/ld.php?content_id=25473620).
- 7 John Goldingay, *Isaiah: 56-66* (ICC; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2014), 300.
- 8 Goldingay, "Jubilee Tithe."









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## **Intentional Sabbath**

*“Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.” Elijah was afraid[a] and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.” (1 Kings 19 1-8 NIV)*

The biblical story of Elijah fleeing to Horeb contains several elements central to a modern day sabbath experience. He was under a great amount of stress, fear, and anxiety about his present circumstances. In an effort to relieve these emotions, even temporarily, he ran for his life into the wilderness. In the wilderness he experienced rest, recovery, and preparation for the journey ahead of him. Most importantly, he was able to encounter the Lord who provided guidance on how to spend his time before traveling to his next destination.

I can empathize with Elijah’s emotions and experience in my previous and current season of sabbath. I have experienced the need to “run for my life,” but also the need to have an intentional

encounter with God and compassion for myself through the act of sabbath. Early in my career, the need to “run for my life” came out of extreme exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. I was unaware that my mind, body, and spirit had limits on how much they could handle. I had recently completed my undergraduate studies, gained a new supervisor while losing my mentor, started a new job with non-traditional working hours, and was learning how to balance the complexities of my new role. I was always tired and rarely slept through the night, my diet was very unhealthy, and I was carelessly spending money on things I did not need. I skipped church due to work stress and began to isolate myself from friends and family. I knew I was off balance, but was unsure what was creating this feeling. On a whim, I took an online quiz to gauge if I was suffering from depression. The results revealed that I was not only suffering from it, but that I should seek help immediately. I spoke with a family member about my distress and sought more time in prayer to combat these emotions. Nothing seemed to help. One Sunday, I went to church and something unexpected

occurred. During the service, I became emotional and left the service to go home. On the way home, I considered ending my life. It was not the first time I had entertained this thought, but it was certainly a more serious consideration than I had ever had before. In the weeks that followed, I was able to receive professional help, but was also unexpectedly released from my job. I entered into a forced, but necessary sabbath. In the beginning of this season, a family member noted that I slept solidly for several days, possibly weeks. I isolated myself, did not attend church, and was angry at God for what had transpired. However, over the course of several months, I eventually made my way back to church and began to recover, heal, and prepare for the journey ahead. In *A Hidden Wholeness*, the author shares “I am astonished to see how nature uses devastation to stimulate new growth, slowly but persistently healing her own wounds” (Parker 2004, 5). The process was difficult and emotional, but a much needed time to recognize the importance of caring for myself holistically on a regular basis. It also taught me how to take a more intentional sabbath when my mind, body, and spirit are

nearing depletion.

Studying compassion, journaling, and creating time for reflection have been helpful in creating a regular practice of sabbath. In *Compassion in Practice* the author writes “instead, compassion invites us to turn inward -- to hear the cry within us, tend its needs, heal its wounds, and nurture its vitality.<sup>1</sup> Last year, I listened to the cry within me, the yearning for a much needed sabbath from my work role at the time. Being quiet and clearing my mind allowed me to analyze my thought patterns and areas I needed to pray and seek counsel about. “As we relax the fears, drives, passions, and hostilities that obstruct compassionate connection, our loving essence organically emerges from within.”<sup>2</sup> I often longed for more freedom to be creative, have more autonomy, and be renewed physically and spiritually. The nature of my work role was often exhausting and I mostly functioned in a burn out mode. I longed for time and space to rest and recover in order to operate more fully in my gifts. Reflecting on my previous personal journal entries highlighted these theme areas in my writing. I realized how pervasive

these feelings were in my leadership role and how they affected my ability to thrive and be compassionate towards myself. After much consideration and counsel, I made the decision to leave my position and enter an intentional season of sabbath.

In the beginning of this season, I attempted to focus on the things that I thought needed to be done. I knew I would need to be focused on writing as a current doctoral student, working on writing and revising my dissertation. I tried to rest and relax, but found my calendar contained numerous appointments, obligations, and projects. I traveled, planned, coached, and spent very little time using this season for the gift that it was supposed to be. I found myself becoming weary in the midst of my intentional sabbath. I attempted to plan and book a vacation for myself, only to cancel it at the last minute due to multiple projects that would not be complete before leaving. I knew I would end up taking all of my work with me, adding stress to what was supposed to be a relaxing vacation. I overcommitted myself, a practice that is often a regular feature of my life. Unexpected, but beautiful, personal situations arose

that warranted my attention and time. I realized that even when great things happened in this season, I was having a hard time enjoying them. The pressure and expectation I had put on myself to be available and helpful for everyone else was taking its toll once again. Clearly, something needed to change if I was to experience the true beauty of a sabbath. In *Present over Perfect*, the author describes this period of change:

*I thought it would be more like adding new shutters, but I'm finding it to be more like lifting up a home and starting to dig, reorienting the very foundation. There is nothing superficial about this process.<sup>3</sup>*

I began to dig and create a new foundation. I created

a list of what it looked like when I was kind to myself and when I was not. Not being kind to myself included saying “Yes” to everything, constant exhaustion, taking on too much, work piling up, not taking time to relax, or not being honest with myself. Being kind to myself was the complete opposite of all of these items: Saying “No,” healthy sleeping habits, allowing myself to relax, and eating healthy. There were other items on the kindness list that surprised me and became a part of my new foundation: grace, forgiveness, changing priorities, asking for help, quiet time, reading, letting others in, laughing, and celebrating accomplishments and happy moments. I began to learn how to incorporate

### ***For Further Reading***

*Leading with Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit* by Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal

*Necessary Endings: The Employees, Businesses, and Relationships that All of us have to Give Up in Order to Move Forward* by Henry Cloud

*Present over Perfect: Leaving Behind Frantic for a Simpler, More Soulful Way of Living* by Shauna Niequist

*A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* by Parker J. Palmer

*Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus* by Frank Rogers

these acts of kindness towards myself in an effort to build a foundation based on compassion and reflection. I needed to give myself grace when I did not get everything done on my to do list and I needed to forgive myself for the moments where I was not kind to myself. I needed to invite my family and friends into this process and ask for their help when I needed it. I needed to enjoy times of solitude, but also times of enjoyment with others to celebrate, have fun, and be present. I also needed to remember the journey ahead I was preparing for in this season. *“Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.”* If the Lord would not allow Elijah to move on to his next destination without being nourished, then perhaps my sabbath was providing the time and proper nourishment for the next role, responsibility, or task he would ask me to complete without getting burned out.

*I cannot give what I do not possess, so I need to know what gifts have grown up within me that are now ready to be harvested and shared. If the gifts I give are mine, grown from the seed of true self, I can give them without burning out.<sup>4</sup>*

It has been six months

since I left my most recent position and I am learning what it means to become *“strengthened by that food,”* mentioned in the passage regarding Elijah. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines food as “something that nourishes, sustains, or supplies.” My “food” has been quality time with family and friends, travelling, accepting opportunities to engage in creative projects, rest, and spiritual renewal. My renewal practices include starting my day with time in silence, reading, journaling, and paying attention to interior movements or the emotions, inner voices, desires, daydreams, or physical reactions that occur in response to moments in our lives.<sup>5</sup> I notice my levels of anxiety or shift in moods when my calendar is filling up. I give myself “recovery” days after traveling, heavy periods or writing, or when extroversion takes over my natural introversion tendencies. I have become attuned to what my mind, body, and spiritw are telling me and try my best to listen and respond accordingly. I have not perfected having intentional sabbaths, but I have learned to never give up in an effort to have them.

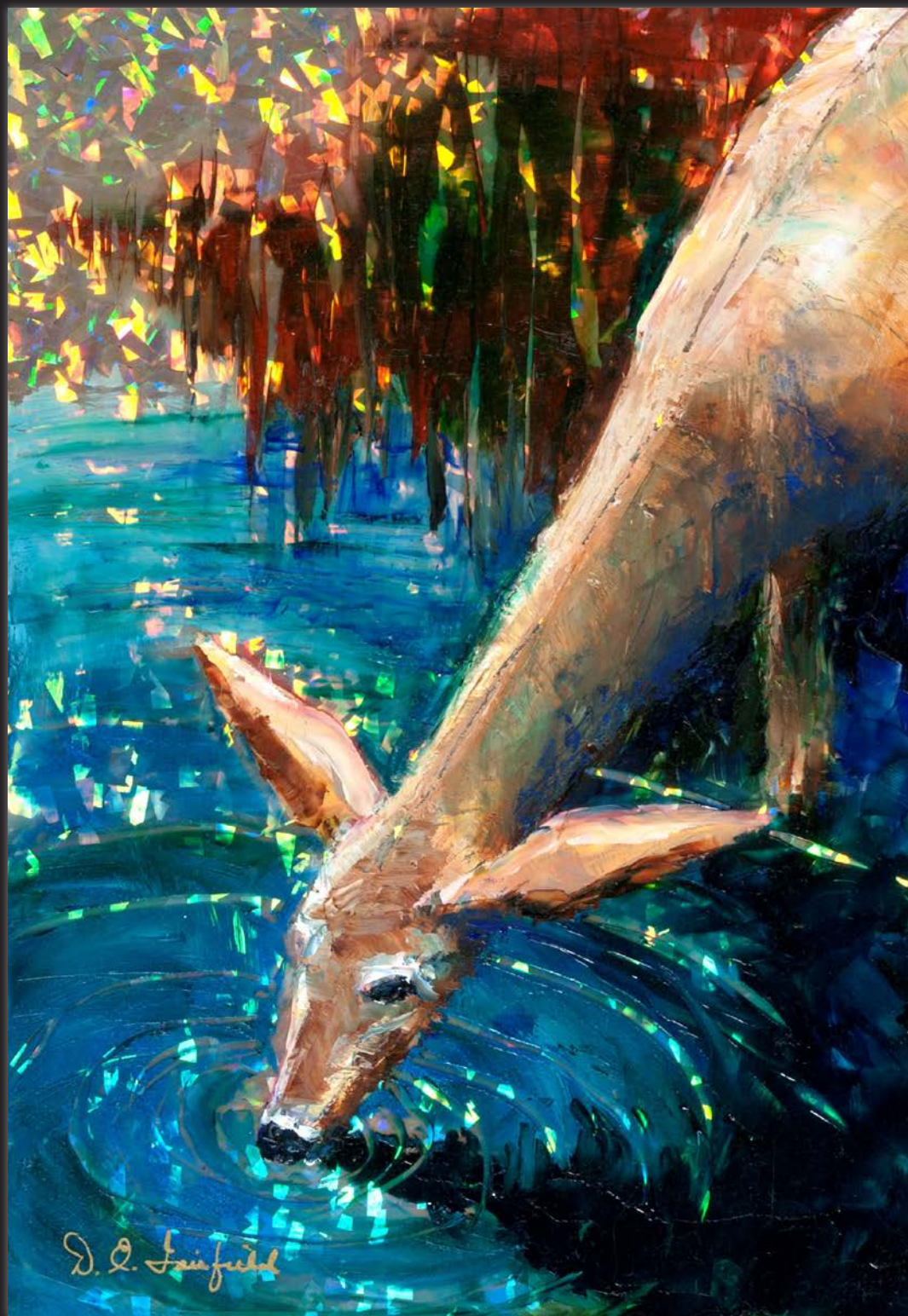


*It has taken every bit of more than three years to learn these things, and like any hard, good work, I fail and try again more often than I'd prefer. But there is a peace that defines my days, a settledness, a groundedness. I've been searching for this in a million places, all outside myself, and it astounds me to realize that the groundedness is within me, and that maybe it was there all along.<sup>6</sup>*

## **Endnotes**

- 1 Frank Rogers, *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus* (Nashville, Upper Room Books, 2016), 101.
- 2 Rogers, *Compassion in Practice*, 68.
- 3 Shauna Niequist, *Present over Perfect: Leaving Behind Frantic for a Simpler, More Soulful Way of Living* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2016), 18.
- 4 Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004). 83.
- 5 Rogers, *Compassion in Practice*, 69.
- 6 Niequist, *Present over Perfect*, 27.





D. Q. Fairfield





*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?  
My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”  
These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

*Psalm 42:1-6a NRSV*



**DIANE FAIRFIELD**

*Originally from the Northeast, Diane now resides in the Southwest where vast expanses influence her paintings. Her artistic passion was ignited as a child when her drawing of rain was used as an example to others. That passion has been confirmed many times in spiritual experiences. Diane is an intuitive colorist. Often bypassing preliminary sketches she plunges in with quick application of color, then building the painting, line upon line, layer upon layer. She often works in oils over acrylics, sometimes incorporating light diffracting and reflecting materials that make the pieces light interactive so colors change with light and angle. A participant in numerous solo and group shows she is currently represented by both traditional and online galleries. A member of Contemporary Artists of Southern AZ, Tubac Center of the Arts and Christians in the Visual Arts, her work is in private collections across the USA as well as overseas.*



**J. MARK BOWERS** writes and trains for the Chalmers Center, a church equipping organization focused on breaking the spiritual, social, and material bonds of poverty. J. Mark is the co-creator of Faith & Finances and Work Life, financial education and jobs readiness tools aimed at economically empowering people who are poor and restoring fellowship across socioeconomic lines. As part of a church plant, he spends his time after hours with Tannia and Elias, his wife and son, creating community in East Lake—their under-resourced neighborhood on the margins of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

## *Starve the Hungry god of Work with Rhythms of Rest*

The week I agreed to write this article, I blew it. A true sabbath fail.

Not only was it Sunday, but it was Father's Day, too. I spent the first part of the day with Tannia and Elias, my wife and toddler. We enjoyed hours of church gatherings, followed by a leisurely lunch. But, as my wife and son drifted off into a mid-day nap, I wandered innocently into project land. Before I knew it, the sun was setting and I was only half done. I found myself knee deep in grime as bedtime neared, foiling our plans to go out for Thai food. Tannia was upset. I was, too.

As I reflect on that situation, my sabbath priorities were obviously skewed. Yet, I'm convinced that my neglect goes deeper than failing to spend time with my family, rest up for the week, or come through on our Father's Day dinner plans. While those are also legitimate losses, by breaking sabbath, I offered a vote allegiance to a false god. By prioritizing productivity on a day set apart for rest, I declared what I really value—even, what I worship. *Sabbath is one way that we proclaim to the world, and to ourselves, who is Provider and Sustainer. I worshipped on the sabbath, and it was not Yahweh. I venerated the god of productivity—the work of my own hands.*

Does that seem harsh, even a little radical? To my modern American mind, I admit, it sounds legalistic and extreme. After all, many of us love Sunday. It means church services, big meals, preparations, errands, outings, dinners, conversations and visits. Sunday is a day to look forward to; a time that we await with joy. But, is this day actually set apart? If not, does that matter?



## Sabbath as Set Apart

In many Jewish traditions, candles are lit at sundown the evening before the sabbath to declare the day sacrosanct. The woman of the house prays this blessing over the candles: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with commandments, and commanded us to light Shabbat candles.” One modern Jewish woman writes:

*The Code of Jewish Law has candlelighting covered: It’s a simple way to honor and enjoy the Shabbat meal. Ever had a romantic, candlelit dinner? Friday night is our romantic date with G-d, the Creator of the Universe, and it’s only right that we have our meal lit by that soft glow. Light brightens the room and adds dignity and importance to the day.*

While a romantic date with Jesus is far from the way that I imagine and practice sabbath, the point is taken. In searching scripture, sabbath was meant to be set apart — a special, intimate time with God. Of course, you find this command throughout Exodus, most well-known in the 10 Commandments:

*Remember the sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your*

*work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11, NIV)*

Interestingly, sabbath shows up in other places in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 58, the Lord actually connects sabbath to practicing justice. He condemns his people for their religious hypocrisy, insisting that they care for the poor, exploited, homeless, hungry, and oppressed if their faith means anything. After this warning, he adds:

*If you keep your feet from breaking the sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord... (Isaiah 58:13-14a, NIV)*

Here, the Lord connects that same greed that causes us

to disregard the suffering with the selfish ambition of neglecting sabbath. The religious duplicity that goes through the motions, ignoring the work of God's kingdom among the oppressed, fails to set the Lord's day apart. In some whole and embodied way, we cannot practice our faith in a full, robust way — the fasting, prayer, care for the poor mentioned by Isaiah — without setting apart sabbath.

### ***Sabbath Reshapes Our Identity***

Fine, you say. Sabbath is unique; it should be set apart. To help us reorder our priorities — to get our heads back in the game. Maybe it's true — if we were more deeply rested, we'd be more clearheaded and generous, more able to do the Lord's work. It does make sense, after all, to take a breather. How will be productive the rest of the week?

The further I dig into scripture, the more I'm convinced that sabbath was not so that we could recharge. While recuperation might be a helpful byproduct, the Lord was aiming at something more than just conventional, can't-work-hard-if-ya-don't-get-your-rest, wisdom.

Old Testament passages on sabbath are telling us something far greater. These passages that command the practice of sabbath, along with Jubilee, gleaning, tithe meal, are ancient economic laws meant to completely reorient our identity. They are flooded with this reminder: ultimately, Yahweh owns it all. He sustains you — not your work. Remember, I brought you out of slavery. I am the Lord your God.

Radical sabbath rest confronts the gods of production, consumption, and Mammon, declaring: Jehovah-Jireh! These gods do not provide — Yahweh does. The work of our hands does not maintain us; he does. When we counterculturally choose rest, we announce this truth, putting the economic system in its proper place. When we are tempted to worship the work of our hands, sabbath reminds our hearts that more does not mean better. God is one who provides for us; not our own capacity to work. The sabbath rhythms tell us who we are, reordering our relationship with God, others, our work, and the creation. At sabbath, we remember our place, and thus, we recognize God's.

Here, yet again, you may

cringe. There is little space for this kind of practice in the modern West – it almost feels eccentric. Rest doesn't fit the cultural mold these days. In *Nice Work if You Can Get Out*, *The Economist* takes a compelling look at why leisure is no longer the status symbol it once was in America. In today's advanced economies, being busy – and thus significant and needed – is what affirms us. Few incentives push us in the direction of rest. Even in Christian circles, we justify our harried race. We excuse our addictions to produce and accomplish, couching them in terms of service and staying connected.

Frankly, in many of our faith communities, if you break promises to those you love, sleep around, or generally act like a pompous prick, you'll be held accountable. If you

neglect sabbath or venerate the god of work, few will call out your idolatry. As I age, paradoxically earning more income and assets, I feel this pull toward overproduction grow stronger. As the trend continues unchecked, I've seen many loved ones prioritize work and productivity at whatever cost. Often, the hungry god of work rears his ugly head – in poor health and broken relationships – revealing the fruits of his worship.

In these terms, sabbath means completely rewiring the way we see wealth, poverty, and well-being. At the Chalmers Center where I work, we long to see the church breaking these bonds among people across the income spectrum. We're convinced: the materially poor don't just need to become middle class. When churches do

### *For Further Reading*

*The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* by Andy Crouch

*Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*  
by Walter Brueggemann

*Practicing the Jesus Economy* by Rhodes, Holt, and Fikkert

*Love and Living* by Thomas Merton

*When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* by Fikkert and Corbett

economic ministry among low-income people, like savings groups or jobs readiness, the freedom of the sabbath rhythm — of knowing Jehovah Jireh — is our primary end. Social mobility is a tempting, easy motivator for good stewardship; however, workaholic and self-reliance are not messages from our Provider, but from middle class cultural idols of autonomy. If we help transform the poor into self-interested, material creatures who worship work and not Yahweh, then we are merely helping them to exchange one form of poverty and slavery for another.

### ***Leaning into Jesus for Changed Rhythms***

Whew. Are you still with me? This is heavy — and we're still at the level of ideas. So, how does one begin to actually live out these new sabbath patterns?

The weekly liturgy of sabbath isn't a concept — it's an action. Because I've struggled myself to ossify sabbath practices in my own life, (think: Father's Day fail), I set out on an experiment over the past two months. As I wrote this article, we sought to apply these principles in our home. Tannia and I threw

out all kind of ideas — no screens after sundown, no unnecessary driving, no-screen-Sundays — and on the brainstorm went. Ultimately, we decided to lean away from legalism, set the bar reasonably low for ourselves, and simply commit to prioritizing Sunday afternoon and evening as a slow, sacred time that includes intentional reflection.

Here come my excuses. This ended up being a full season to try experimenting new practices of sabbath. My role at work shifted significantly, engulfing my mind with more intense responsibilities. At the same time, we rejoice in the late-breaking news that we're expecting #2 — whooo! — but, that doesn't exactly equate to a season of rest. Add family visits, work trips, and vacations to this mix, and I have to admit: I mostly failed. I would love to write that after these two months, I feel some new-found sense of peace; that I've encountered a quiet contentment I can't describe. But, I'd be telling a tale.

My smidgen of learning can be summed up this way: sabbath isn't about rules, it's about rhythms. I must intentionally create rhythms of rest — then lean into Jesus.



In fear of serving you cliché, Christian-ese, let me explain.

I did learn to prioritize intentional rest. When Tannia and Elias were napping on Sunday afternoon, I journaled. Or read. I bid “peace!” to my projects and plans. I Xed out of my Evernote app. I trusted God and not myself to get the day done. As simple as it seems, that was surprisingly hard—and like I said, I didn’t exactly give it my all.

While I did feel refreshed by those still afternoons in meditation, I’m not sure that I gained much more than a small taste of the fruit of obedience. I learned, if only a shred more, to trust in God to provide for us. At the end of it all, I moved the needle an inch in the direction of practicing what I believe. I glimpsed a bit more fully the One who sustains me, and the rest that comes in trusting Him to supply my needs.

As I reflected on scripture one of those afternoons, the rhythm of rest mentioned in Hebrews 4 washed over me. Interestingly, the new covenant theme of the book suggests that the weekly sabbath day as described in the old covenant has been replaced by a new and better

promise. Mysteriously, our sabbath rest comes in the forgiveness of Christ. It is finished. Paul tells the Jewish believers something new: the works and observances of the Law are obsolete, insufficient to open the door into the true rest of Yahweh. Similar to these brothers and sisters to whom Paul wrote Hebrews, I won’t be able to conjure up God’s ultimate rest by organizing my life, shutting off screens, or implementing new practices. Rules and restrictions won’t reshape what my heart loves; I must adopt new rhythms of work and rest—Sabbath rhythms—that create space for my household to develop the image of our Creator in us. We can only flourish when our daily, weekly, and yearly patterns of work and rest reflect trust that Christ loves, sustains, supplies, and promises to provide for us.

In closing, I invite you to reflect on a poem I discovered in this season of practicing sabbath. It’s called: How to Prepare for the Second Coming. Like Hebrews, the poem points to the promise of new creation as ultimate rest—and how to live with eyes and heart wide open as we make ourselves ready.

## ***How to Prepare for the Second Coming***

by Abigail Carroll

*Start by recalling the absolute goodness of rain and repent for every grumble you have ever made about the weather (this will take approximately*

*forever.) Next, you will want to commit a theft: with deft lock-picking and shrewd hand, steal back the hours you fed to the hungry god of work,*

*then squander them on hydrangeas, Wordsworth, voluntary sidewalk repair. Teach a child to lace a shoe (your child or another's—any four-year-old*

*will do), and while you're at it, set the alarm for three, and fumble through the dark to the pond to guard the salamanders as they cross the road. If,*

*having accomplished these tasks, you wish to go on, sit at your desk and carefully design a few radical acts of grace, by which I mean*

*murder (of a sort): you must willfully, passionately kill the living, breathing debt owed you by those who stole your goods, your rights, or the jewel*

*that was the beating muscle of your hope. Apart from this, you cannot know the full extent of love. (For precedent, refer to the cross). Thrust*

*your nails into dirt and plant a few seeds (carrots, radishes, perhaps); indeed, get scandalously intimate with the earth. After all, it is where you will live*

*when the lamb lies down with the lion, and the lion has become your friend. And when the water of the new world breaks, all is said and done (heaven*

*and earth made one as the prophets foretold), you will lose each doubt to a song—which is a kind of praise—and reap the good you sowed.*

Brothers and sisters, I challenge you: start in small, simple ways to create new patterns that set your family and community apart. Starve the hungry god of work – and look again to Jehovah Jireh to nourish you. Lean on Christ Jesus to fill you up with beautiful, new-covenant patterns of his sabbath rest.

***Reflect: What is one step you will take to integrate sabbath rhythms into your life?***







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