



Sabbath as Resistance

A Reading Guide

Reading Guide

Lesson 1: Big Read

The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry

by John Mark Comer

pp. 1-28 (Prologue & Hurry: The Great Enemy of Spiritual Life)

**John
Mark
Comer**

**The
Ruthless
Elimination
of
~~Hurry~~**

**Foreword
by
John
Ortberg**

Prologue: Autobiography of an epidemic

It's a Sunday night, 10 p.m. Head up against the glass of an Uber, too tired to even sit up straight. I taught six times today—yes, *six*. The church I pastor just added *another* gathering. That's what you do, right? Make room for people? I made it until about talk number four; I don't remember anything after that. I'm well beyond tired—emotionally, mentally, even spiritually.

When we first went to six, I called up this megachurch pastor in California who'd been doing six for a while.

"How do you do it?" I asked.

"Easy," he said. "It's just like running a marathon once a week."

"Okay, thanks."

Click.

Wait . . . isn't a marathon really hard?

I take up long-distance running.

He has an affair and drops out of church.

That does not bode well for my future.

Home now, late dinner. Can't sleep; that dead-tired-but-wired feeling. Crack open a beer. On the couch, watching an obscure kung fu movie nobody's ever heard of. Chinese, with subtitles. Keanu Reeves is the bad guy.¹ Love Keanu. I sigh; lately, I'm ending most nights this way, on the couch, long after the family has gone to bed. Never been remotely into kung fu before; it makes me nervous. Is this the harbinger of mental illness on the horizon?

"It all started when he got obsessed with indie martial arts movies . . ."

But the thing is, I feel like a ghost. Half alive, half dead. More numb than anything else; flat, one dimensional. Emotionally I live with an undercurrent of a nonstop anxiety that rarely goes away, and a tinge of sadness, but mostly I just feel blaaah spiritually . . . empty. It's like my soul is hollow.

My life is so *fast*. And I like fast. I'm type A. Driven. A get-crap-done kind of guy. But we're well past that now. I work six days a week, early to late, and it's *still* not enough time to get it all done. Worse, I feel *hurried*. Like I'm tearing through

each day, so busy with life that I'm missing out on the moment. And what is life but a series of moments?

Anybody? I can't be the only one . . .

Monday morning. Up early. In a hurry to get to the office. Always in a hurry. Another day of meetings. I freaking hate meetings. I'm introverted and creative, and like most millennials I get bored way too easily. Me in a lot of meetings is a terrible idea for all involved. But our church grew really fast, and that's part of the trouble. I hesitate to say this because, trust me, if anything, it's embarrassing: we grew by over a thousand people a year for seven years straight. I thought this was what I wanted. I mean, a fast-growing church is every pastor's dream. But some lessons are best learned the hard way: turns out, I don't actually *want* to be the CEO/executive director of a nonprofit/HR expert/strategy guru/leader of leaders of leaders, etc.

I got into this thing to teach the way of Jesus.

Is *this* the way of Jesus?

Speaking of Jesus, I have this terrifying thought lurking at the back of my mind. This nagging question of conscience that won't go away.

Who am I becoming?

I just hit thirty (level three!), so I have a little time under my belt. Enough to chart a trajectory to plot the character arc of my life a few decades down the road.

I stop.

Breathe.

Envision myself at forty. Fifty. Sixty.

It's not pretty.

I see a man who is "successful," but by all the wrong metrics: church size, book sales, speaking invites, social stats, etc., and the new American dream—your own Wikipedia page. In spite of all my talk about Jesus, I see a man who is emotionally unhealthy and spiritually shallow. I'm still in my marriage, but it's duty, not delight. My kids want nothing to do with the church; she was the mistress of choice for Dad, an illicit lover I ran to, to hide from the pain of my wound. I'm basically who I am today but older and worse: stressed out, on edge, quick to snap at the people I love most, unhappy, preaching a way of life that sounds better than it actually is.

Oh, and always in a *hurry*.

★ [Why am I in such a rush to become somebody I don't even like?

It hits me like a freight train: in America you can be a success as a pastor and a failure as an apprentice of Jesus; you can gain a church and lose your soul.

I don't want this to be my life . . .

Fast-forward three months: flying home from London. Spent the week learning from my charismatic Anglican friends about life in the Spirit; it's like a whole other dimension to reality that I've been missing out on. But with each mile east, I'm flying back to a life I dread.

The night before we left, this guy Ken prayed for me in his posh English accent; he had a word for me about coming to a fork in the road. One road was paved and led to a city with lights. Another was a dirt road into a forest; it led into the dark, into the unknown. I'm to take the unpaved road.

I have absolutely no idea what it means. But it means *something*, I know. As he said it, I felt my soul tremor under God. But what is God saying to me?

Catching up on email; planes are good for that. I'm behind, as usual. Bad news again; a number of staff are upset with me. I'm starting to question the whole megachurch thing. Not so much the size of a church but the way of doing church.² Is this really it? A bunch of people coming to listen to a talk and then going back to their overbusy lives? But my questions come off angry and arrogant. I'm so emotionally unhealthy, I'm just leaking chemical waste over our poor staff.

What's that leadership axiom?

"As go the leaders, so goes the church."³

Dang, I sure hope our church doesn't end up like me.

Sitting in aisle seat 21C, musing over how to answer another

tense email, a virgin thought comes to the surface of my mind. Maybe it's the thin atmosphere of thirty thousand feet, but I don't think so. This thought has been trying to break out for months, if not years, but I've not let it. It's too dangerous. Too much of a threat to the status quo. But the time has come for it to be uncaged, let loose in the wild.

[Here it is: *What if I changed my life?*

Another three months and a thousand hard conversations later, dragging every pastor and mentor and friend and family member into the vortex of the most important decision I've ever made, I'm sitting in an elder meeting. Dinner is over. It's just me and our core leaders. This is the moment. From here on, my autobiography will fall into the "before" or "after" category.

I say it: "I resign."

Well, not resign per se. I'm not quitting. We're a multisite church. (As if one church isn't more than enough for a guy like me to lead.) Our largest church is in the suburbs; I've spent the last ten years of my life there, but my heart's always been in the city. All the way back to high school, I remember driving my '77 Volkswagen Bus up and down Twenty-Third Street and dreaming of church planting downtown.⁴ Our church in the city is smaller. Much smaller. On way harder ground; urban Portland is a secular wonderland—all the cards are against you down here. But that's where I feel the gravity of the Spirit weighing on me to touch down.

So not resign, more like demote myself. I want to lead one church at a time. Novel concept, right? My dream is to slow down, simplify my life around abiding. Walk to work. I want to reset the metrics for success, I say. I want to focus more on who I am becoming in apprenticeship to Jesus. Can I do that?

They say yes.

(Most likely they are thinking, *Finally.*)

People will talk; they always do: He couldn't hack it (true). Wasn't smart enough (not true). Wasn't tough enough (okay, mostly true). Or here's one I will get for months: He's turning his back on God's call on his life. Wasting his gift in obscurity. Farewell.

Let them talk; I have new metrics now.

I end my ten-year run at the church. My family and I take a sabbatical. It's a sheer act of grace. I spend the first half comatose, but slowly I wake back up to my soul. I come back to a much smaller church. We move into the city; I walk to work. I start therapy. One word: wow. Turns out, I need a lot of it. I focus on emotional health. Work fewer hours. Date my wife. Play Star Wars Legos with my kids. (It's for them, really.) Practice Sabbath. Detox from Netflix. Start reading fiction for the first time since high school. Walk the dog before bed. You know, *live*.

Sounds great, right? Utopian even? Hardly. I feel more like a drug addict coming off meth. Who am I without the mega? A

queue of people who want to meet with me? A late-night email flurry? A life of speed isn't easy to walk away from. But in time, I detox. Feel my soul open up. There are no fireworks in the sky. Change is slow, gradual, and intermittent; three steps forward, a step or two back. Some days I nail it; others, I slip back into hurry. But for the first time in years, I'm moving toward maturity, one inch at a time. Becoming more like Jesus. And more like my best self.

Even better: I feel God again.

I feel my own soul.

I'm on the unpaved road with no clue where it leads, but that's okay. I honestly value who I'm becoming over where I end up. And for the first time in years, I'm smiling at the horizon.

My Uber ride home to binge-watch Keanu Reeves was five years and as many lifetimes ago. So much has changed since then. This little book was born out of my short and mostly uneventful autobiography, my journey from a life of hurry to a life of, well, something else.

In a way, I'm the worst person to write about hurry. I'm the guy angling at the stoplight for the lane with two cars instead of three; the guy bragging about being the "first to the office, last to go home"; the fast-walking, fast-talking, chronic-multitasking speed addict (to clarify, not *that* kind of speed addict). Or at least I was. Not anymore. I found an off-ramp

from that life. So maybe I'm the best person to write a book on hurry? You decide.

I don't know your story. The odds are, you aren't a former megachurch pastor who burned out and had a mid-life crisis at age thirty-three. It's more likely that you're a college student at USD or a twentysomething urbanite in Chicago or a full-time mom in Melbourne or a middle-aged insurance broker in Minnesota. Getting started in life or just trying to keep going.

[The Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han ends his book *The Burnout Society* with a haunting observation of most people in the Western world: "They are too alive to die, and too dead to live."⁵]

That was me to the proverbial T.

Is it you? Even a little?

We all have our own story of trying to stay sane in the day and age of iPhones and Wi-Fi and the twenty-four-hour news cycle and urbanization and ten-lane freeways with soul-crushing traffic and nonstop noise and a frenetic ninety-miles-per-hour life of go, go, go . . .

Think of this book like you and me meeting up for a cup of Portland coffee (my favorite is a good Kenyan from Heart on Twelfth) and me downloading everything I've learned over the last few years about how to navigate the treacherous waters of what French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky calls the "hypermodern" world.⁶

But honestly: everything I have to offer you, I'm stealing from the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, my rabbi, and so much more.

My favorite invitation of Jesus comes to us via Matthew's gospel:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.⁷

Do you feel "weary"?

> What about "burdened"?

Anybody feel a bone-deep tiredness not just in your mind or body but in your soul?

If so, you're not alone.

Jesus invites all of us to take up the "easy" yoke. He has—on offer to all—an easy way to shoulder the weight of life with his triumvirate of love, joy, and peace. As Eugene Peterson translated Jesus' iconic line: "to live freely and lightly."⁸

What if the secret to a happy life—and it is a secret, an open one but a secret nonetheless; how else do so few people know it?—what if the secret isn't "out there" but much closer to home? What if all you had to do was slow down long enough for the merry-go-round blur of life to come into focus?

What if the secret to the life we crave is actually "easy"?

Now, let me clarify a few things before we begin:

First, I'm not you. While glaringly obvious, it needs to be said. I'm guessing this anti-hurry manifesto will grate on some of you; it did on me at first. It exposes the deep ache in all of us for a life that is different from the one we're currently living. The temptation will be to write me off as unrealistic or out of touch:

He has no idea what's it's like to be a single mom working two jobs just trying to pay off debt and make rent each week.

You're right; I don't.

He's woefully out of touch with life as an executive in the social Darwinism of the marketplace.

That might be true.

He doesn't get what it's like in my city/nation/generation.

I might not.

I simply ask you to hear me out.

Secondly, I'm not Jesus. Just one of his many apprentices who have been at it for a while. Again, obvious. My agenda for our time together is simple: to pass on some of the best things I've learned from sitting at the feet of the master. A man whose closest friends all said he was anointed with the

oil of joy more than any of his companions.⁹ My translation: he was the happiest person alive.

Most of us don't even *think* to look to Jesus for advice on how to be happy. For that we look to the Dalai Lama or our local mindfulness studio or Tal Ben-Shahar's positive psychology class at Harvard. They all have good things to say, and for that I'm grateful. But Jesus is in a class of his own; hold him up against any teacher, tradition, or philosophy—religious or secular, ancient or modern—from Socrates to the Buddha to Nietzsche to your yogi podcaster of choice. For me Jesus remains the most brilliant, most insightful, most thought-provoking teacher to ever walk the earth. And he walked *slowly* (more on that in a bit). So rather than buckle up, settle in.

On that note, finally, let me say it straight up: If you want Fast and Faster, this isn't the book for you. In fact, you don't really have time to read a book; maybe skim the first chapter? Then you'd better get back at it.

If you want a quick fix or a three-step formula in an easy acronym, this book isn't for you either. There's no silver bullet for life. No life hack for the soul. Life is extraordinarily complex. Change is even more so. Anybody who says differently is selling you something.

But . . .

If you're weary . . .

If you're tired of life as you know it . . .

If you have a sneaking suspicion that there might be a better way to be human . . .

That you might be missing the whole point . . .

That the metrics for success our culture handed you might be skewed . . .

That said "success" might turn out to look a lot like failure . . .

Above all, if your time has come and you're ready to go on a counterintuitive and very countercultural journey to explore your soul in the reality of the kingdom . . .

Then enjoy the read. This book isn't long or hard to understand. But we have secrets to tell . . .

**Part
one:**

**The
problem**

Hurry: the great enemy of spiritual life

Last week I had lunch with my mentor John. Okay, confession: he's not actually my mentor; he's way out of my league, but we regularly have lunch and I ask a barrage of questions about life, notepad open. John is the kind of person you meet and immediately think, *I want to be like that when I grow up*. He's blisteringly smart but more—wise. Yet he never comes off remotely pretentious or stuck up. Instead, he's joyful, easygoing, comfortable in his own skin, a raging success (but not in that annoying celebrity way), kind, curious, present to you and the moment . . . Basically, he's a lot like how I imagine Jesus.¹

John (last name Ortberg) happens to be a pastor and writer in California who was mentored by another hero of mine, Dallas Willard. If you don't know that name, you're welcome.² Willard was a philosopher at the University of Southern

California but is best known outside academia as a teacher of the way of Jesus. More than any teacher outside the library of Scripture, his writings have shaped the way I follow—or as he would say, apprentice under—Jesus.³ All that to say, John was a mentee of Willard for over twenty years, until Willard's death in 2013.

I never got the chance to meet Willard, so the first time John and I sat down in Menlo Park, I immediately started pumping him for stories. We hit gold.

Here's one I just can't stop thinking about:

John calls up Dallas to ask for advice. It's the late '90s, and at the time John was working at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, one of the most influential churches in the world. John himself is a well-known teacher and best-selling author—the kind of guy you figure pretty much has apprenticeship to Jesus *down*. But behind the scenes he felt like he was getting sucked into the vortex of megachurch insanity.

I could relate.

So he calls up Willard and asks, "What do I need to do to become the me I want to be?"⁴

There's a long silence on the other end of the line . . .

According to John, "With Willard there's *a/ways* a long silence on the other end of the line."

Then: "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life."

Can we just hit stop for a minute and agree, that's *brilliant*?

Thanks . . .

John then scribbles that line down in his journal—sadly this was before Twitter; otherwise that would have broken the internet. Then he asks, "Okay, what else?"

Another long silence . . .

Willard: "There is nothing else. Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life."

End of story.⁵

When I first heard that, I felt a deep resonance with reality. Hurry is the root problem underneath so many of the symptoms of toxicity in our world.

And yet Willard's reply is not what I would expect. I live in one of the most secular, progressive cities in America, but if you were to ask me, What is the great challenge to your spiritual life in Portland? I'm not sure what I'd say.

Most likely I'd say it's modernity or postmodernity or liberal theology or the popularization of the prosperity gospel or the redefinition of sexuality and marriage or the erasure of gender or internet porn or the millions of questions people have

about violence in the Old Testament or the fall of celebrity pastors or Donald Trump. I don't know.

How would you answer that question?

I bet very few of us would default to "hurry" as our answer.

But read the Bible: Satan doesn't show up as a demon with a pitchfork and gravelly smoker voice or as Will Ferrell with an electric guitar and fire on *Saturday Night Live*. He's far more intelligent than we give him credit for. Today, you're far more likely to run into the enemy in the form of an alert on your phone while you're reading your Bible or a multiday Netflix binge or a full-on dopamine addiction to Instagram or a Saturday morning at the office or *another* soccer game on a Sunday or commitment after commitment after commitment in a life of speed.

Corrie ten Boom once said that if the devil can't make you sin, he'll make you busy. There's truth in that. Both sin and busyness have the exact same effect—they cut off your connection to God, to other people, and even to your own soul.

The famous psychologist Carl Jung had this little saying:

|| Hurry is not *of* the devil; hurry *is* the devil.

Jung, by the way, was the psychologist who developed the framework of the introvert and extrovert personality types and whose work later became the basis for the Myers-Briggs

Type Indicator test. (INTJ, anybody?) Suffice to say: he knew what he was talking about.

Recently I was running the vision of our church by my therapist, who is this Jesus-loving, ubersmart PhD. Our dream was to re-architect our communities around apprenticeship to Jesus. (That feels so odd to write because what else would we be doing as a church?) He loved it but kept saying the same thing: "The number one problem you will face is *time*. People are just too busy to live emotionally healthy and spiritually rich and vibrant lives."

What do people normally answer when you ask the customary, "How are you?"

"Oh, good—just *busy*."

Pay attention and you'll find this answer everywhere—across ethnicity, gender, stage of life, even class. College students are busy. Young parents are busy. Empty nesters living on a golf course are busy. CEOs are busy; so are baristas and part-time nannies. Americans are busy, Kiwis are busy, Germans are busy—we're *all* busy.

Granted, there is a healthy kind of busyness where your life is full with things that matter, not wasted on empty leisure or trivial pursuits. By that definition Jesus himself was busy. The problem isn't when you have a lot to do; it's when you have *too much* to do and the only way to keep the quota up is to hurry.

That kind of busy is what has us all reeling.

Michael Zigarelli from the Charleston Southern University School of Business conducted the Obstacles to Growth Survey of over twenty thousand Christians across the globe and identified busyness as a major distraction from spiritual life. Listen carefully to his hypothesis:

✧ It may be the case that (1) Christians are assimilating to a culture of busyness, hurry and overload, which leads to (2) God becoming more marginalized in Christians' lives, which leads to (3) a deteriorating relationship with God, which leads to (4) Christians becoming even more vulnerable to adopting secular assumptions about how to live, which leads to (5) more conformity to a culture of busyness, hurry and overload. And then the cycle begins again.⁶

And pastors, by the way, are the worst. He rated busyness in my profession right up there with lawyers and doctors.

I mean, not me. *Other* pastors . . .

✧ As the Finnish proverb so eloquently quips, "God did not create hurry."

This new speed of life isn't Christian; it's anti-Christ. Think about it: What has the highest value in Christ's kingdom economy? Easy: love. Jesus made that crystal clear. He said the greatest command in all of the Torah was to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul . . . and with all your strength," followed only by, "love your

neighbor as yourself."⁷ But love is painfully time consuming. All parents know this, as do all lovers and most long-term friends.

Hurry and love are incompatible. All my worst moments as a father, a husband, and a pastor, even as a human being, are when I'm in a hurry—late for an appointment, behind on my unrealistic to-do list, trying to cram too much into my day. I ooze anger, tension, a critical nagging—the antitheses of love. If you don't believe me, next time you're trying to get your type B wife and three young, easily distracted children out of the house and you're running late (a subject on which I have a wealth of experience), just pay attention to how you relate to them. Does it look and feel like love? Or is it far more in the vein of agitation, anger, a biting comment, a rough glare? Hurry and love are oil and water: they simply do not mix.

Hence, in the apostle Paul's definition of *love*, the first descriptor is "patient."⁸

✧ There's a reason people talk about "walking" with God, not "running" with God. It's because God is love.

In his book *Three Mile an Hour God*, the late Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama put this language around it:

God walks "slowly" because he is love. If he is not love he would have gone much faster. Love has its speed. It is an inner speed. It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It is "slow" yet it is lord over all other speeds since it is the speed of love.⁹

In our culture *slow* is a pejorative. When somebody has a low IQ, we dub him or her slow. When the service at a restaurant is lousy, we call it slow. When a movie is boring, again, we complain that it's slow. Case in point, *Merriam-Webster*: "mentally dull: stupid: naturally inert or sluggish: lacking in readiness, promptness, or willingness."¹⁰

The message is clear: slow is bad; fast is good.

But in the upside-down kingdom, our value system is turned on its head: hurry is of the devil; slow is of Jesus, because Jesus is what love looks like in flesh and blood.

The same is true for joy and peace—two of the other core realities of the kingdom. Love, joy, and peace are the triumvirate at the heart of Jesus's kingdom vision. All three are more than just emotions; they are overall conditions of the heart. They aren't just pleasant feelings; they are the kinds of people we become through our apprenticeship to Jesus, who embodies all three ad infinitum.

And all three are incompatible with hurry.

Joy: Think of joy. All the spiritual masters from inside and outside the Jesus tradition agree on this one (as do secular psychologists, mindfulness experts, etc.): if there's a secret to happiness, it's simple—presence to the moment. The more present we are to the now, the more joy we tap into.

And peace? Need I even make a case? Think of when you're in a hurry for your next event, running behind: Do you feel the

deep shalom of God in your soul? A grounded, present sense of calm and well-being?

To restate: love, joy, and peace are at the heart of all Jesus is trying to grow in the soil of your life. And all three are incompatible with hurry.

Again, if you don't believe me, next time you're dragging the family (or if you're single, the roommate) out the door, pay attention to your heart. Is it love and joy and peace you feel? Of course not.

At lunch my non-mentor mentor John wisely observed: "I cannot live in the kingdom of God with a hurried soul."

Nobody can.

Not only does hurry keep us from the love, joy, and peace of the kingdom of God—the very core of what all human beings crave—but it also keeps us from *God himself* simply by stealing our attention. And with hurry, we always lose more than we gain.

Here for the win, Walter Adams, the spiritual director to C. S. Lewis:

To walk with Jesus is to walk with a slow, unhurried pace. Hurry is the death of prayer and only impedes and spoils our work. It never advances it.¹¹

Meaning, very little can be done with hurry that can't be done

better without it. Especially our lives with God. And even our work *for* God.

Here from Ronald Rolheiser, my undisputed favorite Catholic writer of all time, with hurricane force:

Today, a number of historical circumstances are blindly flowing together and accidentally conspiring to produce a climate within which it is difficult not just to think about God or to pray, but simply to have any interior depth whatsoever. . . .

We, for every kind of reason, good and bad, are distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion.

It is not that we have anything against God, depth, and spirit, we would like these, it is just that we are habitually too preoccupied to have any of these show up on our radar screens. We are more busy than bad, more distracted than nonspiritual, and more interested in the movie theater, the sports stadium, and the shopping mall and the fantasy life they produce in us than we are in church. Pathological busyness, distraction, and restlessness are major blocks today within our spiritual lives.¹²

I love Rolheiser's turn of phrase: "pathological busyness."

Again, a certain level of busyness is fine or at least unavoidable.

There's even a time and place for hurry—in a 911-caliber emergency, when your wife's water breaks or your toddler runs into the street.

But let's be honest: those moments are few and far between. The pathological busyness that most of us live with as our default setting, the chronic hurry we assume is normal, is far more, well, pathological, as in the technical sort: a pathogen let loose into a mass population, resulting in disease or death.

We hear the refrain "I'm great, just busy" so often we assume pathological busyness is okay. After all, everybody else is busy too. But what if busyness isn't healthy? What if it's an airborne contagion, wreaking havoc on our collective soul?

Lately I've taken to reading poetry, which is new for me. But I love how it forces me to slow down. You simply can't speed-read a good poem. Last night I picked up the Christian savant and literary master T. S. Eliot. A little of it I even understood, like his line about "this twittering world" where people are "distracted from distraction by distraction."¹³ Meaning, a world with just enough distraction to avoid the wound that could lead us to healing and life.

Again: We are "distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion."

As Ortberg has said,

For many of us the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.¹⁴

Do you see what's at stake here? It's not just our emotional health that's under threat. As if that's not enough. We move

so fast through life that we're stressed out, on edge, quick to snap at our spouses or kids. Sure, that's true. But it's even more terrifying: our spiritual lives hang in the balance.

Could it be that Willard was right? That an overbusy, digitally distracted life of speed is the greatest threat to spiritual life that we face in the modern world?

I can't help but wonder if Jesus would say to our entire generation what he said to Martha: "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one."¹⁵

The need of the hour is for a slowdown spirituality.¹⁶

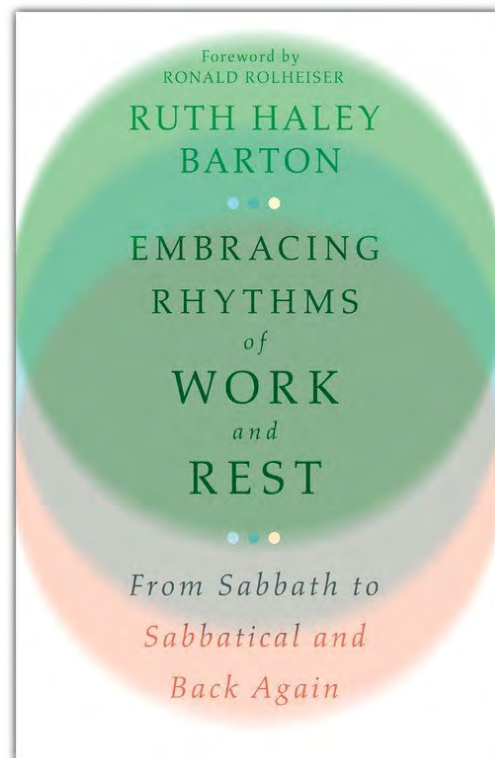
Reading Guide

Lesson 2: Big Read

*Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest:
From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again*

by Ruth Haley Barton

Chapters 1-2



Part One

SABBATH

A WAKE-UP CALL



✧ { *Sabbath is the most precious present humankind
has received from the treasure house of God.*

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

I AM QUITE CERTAIN I would not be alive today if it were not for God's gift of sabbath. And not just a weekly sabbath day, but also daily sabbath moments cultivated in solitude and silence, and sabbatical seasons for letting the soil of my soul lie fallow. These rhythms have given shape and form to a life—my life—lived as a creature in the presence of my loving Creator; these sabbath rhythms have, quite literally, kept me in the game.

But I have not always lived this way.

My wake-up call regarding God's gift of sabbath came when I was in my early forties, serving on staff in a high-performance church culture, married with three busy and athletic children, writing, teaching, and guiding others in spiritual practices, and yet . . . I was actively resisting sabbath. I knew sabbath was a thing. But on a level I had not yet been

✱ willing to acknowledge, I was too busy, too important, too caught in cultural expectations, to consider ceasing my work one day a week. In addition to my grandiosity, the logistics of family life and work made it all seem just beyond our reach. Sunday was the only day it was even possible for our busy family to attempt a sabbath; yet traveling sports teams competed on Sundays, my husband's place of work was open on Sundays, and my own job on a church staff made Sunday the busiest day of my work week! Sigh.

The deeper truth is that I just wasn't that attracted to sabbath as a concept. I had been raised in a fundamentalist environment where sabbath was kept, but in a very legalistic way. For me, sabbath had been a day of contradictions. We went to church in the morning and since my dad was the pastor we kids had to work very hard at behaving. Sitting in the front row knowing people were watching us from behind while our dad watched us eagle-eyed from the pulpit was stressful, to say the least. Even the most minor infraction (like giggling or whispering) was treated with great seriousness when we got home. This was not restful or delightful at all.

Added to this was the fact that as the pastor's family we often had guests for dinner or were guests at someone else's home most Sundays after church. I enjoyed the communal nature of the hospitality that was part of our sabbath routine (in fact, I still miss it!), but I will say that the womenfolk—including myself as “the responsible eldest”—worked very hard at cooking, serving, and cleaning up while the menfolk visited in the living room. In fact, I'm not sure there was any other day of the week in which we women worked harder than we did on that day; it didn't take long for me to grow resentful.

Our guests usually stayed through the afternoon, so we remained in our “Sunday clothes” all day, were limited in what we were allowed to do (no biking or swimming), and then it was back to church in the evening. All in all, sabbath was pretty exhausting and slightly punishing, so when I left for college and eventually established my own family, I was glad to leave that particular brand of sabbath-keeping behind. It was convenient to dismiss it as a practice we didn't need to worry about anymore—not to mention the fact that as a young adult I was really into working and achieving, and Sundays were a day when I could get a lot done. I was so driven by my goals and aspirations that I really did not want to stop—for anything or anybody, including God! That is, until years later I was so tired from my overachieving ways that in unguarded moments I started dreaming of a way of life that was not so exhausting. ✱

I developed a bit of a guilty pleasure—reading beautiful books about the sabbath, allowing the longing to well up within me for a few minutes, living inside the fantasy for just a bit, and then setting the book aside as a private indulgence full of pleasures I could imagine for others but not myself. I kept my explorations to myself because I wanted to dream without interruption—at least for a little while. I did not want the naysayers telling me sabbath-keeping was not possible.

By this time I had been to seminary and understood the basic hermeneutical principle that if you want to know what matters to God, you look for the great themes of Scripture, the arc if you will. The way I saw it, the theme of sabbath and rest was a vibrant thread running throughout Scripture—I had no patience for theologically resistant folks raising questions about whether or not sabbath-keeping is for today and why

Jesus didn't teach about the sabbath. [To my knowledge God had never "taken back" the gift of the sabbath—it was one of the Ten Commandments, after all, and the best one if you ask me!]

It seemed to me that Jesus never taught about sabbath because it was just assumed: as practicing Jews, he and his disciples kept the sabbath and that was that. Yes, he brought fresh nuance to it by making it clear that the sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath, *and* that he is Lord even of the sabbath (Mark 2:27). So rather than doing away with it, he actually rescued it from legalism, reframing it in such a way that it is even more life-giving for us as his followers. And then, to put an even finer point on it, the writer of Hebrews stated in no uncertain terms that the promise of sabbath rest is still available to the people of God and that to refuse such rest is to harden one's heart in disobedience (Hebrews 4:9).

So, while I longed for this kind of rest and was completely convinced of its importance, biblically speaking, I did not want to wrestle with all the complications and practical challenges just yet. Somehow, just knowing the possibility of sabbath existed and that somebody somewhere was able to figure out how to have it, lit up my soul from the inside. Yet it still felt impossible for me.

STOPPED IN MY TRACKS

Then I had this biking accident—one I now see as something similar to God knocking Paul off his horse and leaving him alone and sightless for three days so he could ponder his life. I will refrain from retelling that whole story here, except to say that after the initial euphoria of having survived such a thing

wore off, I went right back to work. But as relief gave way to other levels of awareness, God used a couple comments to help me ponder the meaning of things. One friend, after expressing his initial concern, laughingly commented, "Ruth, when are you going to learn that when you're on a bike, you can't take on a van?" Another friend, curious about the fact that I wasn't taking any time to recover, commented, "You know, you did just get run over by a car. You could take a day off!"

And then there was this sentence from Wayne Muller's book *Sabbath* that kept buzzing around in my head like a pesky fly buzzing against a windowpane: "If we do not allow for a rhythm of rest in our overly busy lives, illness becomes our Sabbath—our pneumonia, our cancer, our heart attack, our accidents create Sabbath for us."

Boom.

I did not want to hear this. I did not want to consider the fact that perhaps this accident, while not God's fault, was a way in which God was trying to tell me something. I did not want to acknowledge the possibility that it might be that hard for God to get my attention; nor did I want to face the fact that for years I had been thumbing my nose at human limitations, behaving as though I was beyond needing a sabbath. It was a nice idea for retired people or people who weren't in demand, but surely I wasn't one who *needed* a sabbath.

Except now I did.

And that is how God began nudging me to take next steps on my sabbath journey. Unbeknownst to me, my sabbath journey had already begun because I had been practicing solitude in a profoundly different way than the busy "quiet times" I had been schooled in during my youth. Through the witness of the

desert Abbas and Ammas (particularly Henri Nouwen's seminal reflections in *The Way of the Heart*), I had been learning how to cultivate solitude as a place of rest in God—body, mind, and soul. It was wonderful. It was restful. It was bringing me back to life. Little did I know that in my practice of solitude and silence, I was already experiencing what Tilden Edwards calls “a special quality of time available daily”—a way of being in time that is open and receptive, restful and replenishing.

God used my accident to stop me in my tracks—to provide the right kind of space to really consider my human limitations and the layers of exhaustion that existed within me. In this space I was able to stay with my desire for a more sustainable existence long enough for it to take me somewhere. Even though I do not believe God caused the accident, I *do* believe the Holy One used it to get my attention and draw me into his invitation to take a next step in sabbath living—from a few delicious sabbath moments daily to a full day once a week, and then eventually longer sabbatical seasons—until here I am today, able to testify that God's gift of sabbath is far more than just one day a week; it is actually a way of life.

A SANCTUARY IN TIME

Sabbath-keeping is a way of ordering all of life around a pattern of working six days and then ceasing and resting on the seventh. It helps us arrange our lives to honor the rhythm of things—work and rest, fruitfulness and dormancy, giving and receiving, being and doing, activism and surrender. The day itself is set apart, devoted completely to rest, worship, and delighting in God's good gifts, but the other six days of the week must be lived in such a way as to make sabbath possible. Paid work

needs to be contained within five days a week. Household chores, shopping, and errand running need to be completed before the sabbath comes or they need to wait. Courageous decisions must be made about work and athletics, church and community involvement.

This pattern of tithing one-seventh of our time back to God is woven deep into the fabric of Christian tradition. It is a pattern God himself established as he was doing the work of creation, and it was incorporated into Jewish tradition in such a way that it ordered their whole existence as a nation. For Jewish folks, the sabbath observance began on Friday evening and ended on Saturday evening, providing a sanctuary in time even during seasons in their history when they had no physical sanctuary. The practice of keeping the sabbath holy and completely set apart was and still is at the heart of their national identity. “It was as if a whole people were in love with the seventh day.”

I have experienced this love myself in the joy and relief that washes over me when sabbath comes . . . when the house has been prepared, special food has been bought, computers have been turned off and cellphones powered down . . . when final emails have been sent and the laptop has been closed, when work obligations have been completed or set aside . . . when the candles or the fireplace have been lit . . . and it is time to stop, whether everything has been finished or not. I know what it is like to rest for hours until I have energy to delight in something—savory food, a good book, a leisurely walk, a long-awaited conversation with someone I love. I know what it's like to feel joy, hope, and peace flow back into my body and soul when I thought it might never come back again. I know what

it's like to see home and family, friends and community, differently through sabbath eyes of delight in God's good gifts. I have experienced rest that turns into delight, delight that turns into gratitude, and gratitude that turns into worship. I know what it is like to recover myself so completely that I am able, by God's grace, to enter back into my work with a renewed sense of God's calling and God's presence.

How could you not love a day that does all that? How could you not sell everything you have for this pearl of great price?

A SABBATH PROGRESSION

If you ask me, sabbath is one of God's greatest gifts to us in our humanity—right up there with salvation through Christ. It is a gift that is both beautiful *and* functional, luxurious *and* essential all at the same time. And every time you open it, it feels brand new.

For me, sabbath-keeping has been a progression that started with cultivating a daily practice of solitude and silence as a place of rest in God, where I began to experience *for the first time* what it felt like to cease striving, to give in to the limits of being human, and to rest myself upon God's care and mercy. What an amazing experience this was for one who had worked so hard on so many things—including my spirituality—for so long. In the process I became more aware of my drivenness and how deeply entrenched it was. I had to really own the propensities of my personality and say, "Yes, this is what's true about me." Sitting uncomfortably with that admission, I could finally get honest about just how tired I was—deep in my bones—and this awareness prepared me to really hear God's invitation to set aside my work and my ceaseless striving for an entire day

once a week. These shorter, daily periods of resting in God in solitude gave me a taste of what could be.

As my capacity to let go and cease striving increased through this daily practice of solitude and silence, God drew me back to the biblical practice of a whole day set apart for rest, worship, and delight—a practice I had rejected but now God was returning to me in the most winsome way. Now I wanted it badly enough that I was willing to do pretty much anything to get it.

There were several fundamental principles that got me started with my sabbath practice—all of which we will explore in different ways throughout this book. The first was really digging in and seeking to understand God's heart and intention in giving us the sabbath—that we as his children would experience this rhythm of ceasing and resting, worshiping and delighting. Eventually it dawned on me that everything we choose to do or not do needs to somehow fit into *God's purposes* for this day. There is so much to this that it will take the first half of this book to plumb the depths!

The second principle is that it is important to establish a regular rhythm if at all possible. The human body and soul is accustomed to living in rhythms—rhythms of night and day, rhythms of the seasons, rhythms of eating three meals a day, and so on. Part of the restfulness of sabbath is knowing that it always comes at the same interval so we're not making decisions about it every week. When sabbath is not observed on the same day every week, there will be weeks when we go longer than seven days without a sabbath, and that is not optimal.

After seven days without rest, we risk becoming dangerously tired and unable to bring our best selves to anyone or anything.

Third, I eventually grasped that sabbath-keeping is not primarily a private discipline. It is and always has been a communal discipline or at least a discipline to be entered into with those closest to us. After experiencing church communities that ramp up their activities on Sundays versus guiding their people into sabbath rhythms, I could see that the reason sabbath worked in the Jewish community is that they all did it together. The communal nature of sabbath is such an important topic that we will devote an entire chapter to it later on. But having these foundational principles was enough to get me started.

FALLING IN LOVE GRADUALLY

Jewish folks had it right: the only way to even begin taking steps toward a sabbath practice is to let yourself fall in love with this day so that you long for it as you would long for a loved one. Rabbi Heschel puts it this way: "There is a word that is seldom said, a word for an emotion almost too deep to be expressed: the love of the Sabbath. The word is rarely found in our literature, yet for more than two thousand years the emotion filled our songs and moods. It was as if a whole people were in love with the seventh day." This beautiful perspective has guided me to resist making sabbath-keeping a weighty exercise but to fall in love gradually—to explore it with delight—as though God and I were learning how to spend time together in a new and special way.

Falling in love with the sabbath does not mean it is always easy or that I have never given in to the temptation to pursue my own interests on God's holy day (Isaiah 58:13). But twenty years later, I *can* say that I am a passionate lover of the sabbath

who would not be standing in the middle of my life and calling today if it weren't for this essential rhythm. The journey has continued to unfold as God has invited me into longer periods of retreat, and then finally into embracing sabbatical as part and parcel of my sabbath life in leadership.

A particular delight was discovering that I can bring this special quality of time into my everyday life through "sabbath pauses." I could take a moment to rest in God between one activity and the next. I could pause before entering a room or a new situation to orient myself to God and invite God's presence. Before meals I could sometimes create space for a moment of quiet gratitude rather than just offering up a perfunctory prayer. While waiting for an appointment I could choose to cease and just be instead of scrolling through the apps on my phone. I could use time in the car or on a walk to be still and allow God to replenish me rather than turning on music or podcasts or making phone calls. All of these are simple means of introducing a sabbath way of being into other days and moments of the week, affirming that sabbath is a quality-of-time way of being that is possible anytime, anywhere.

Taken together, this sabbath progression has kept me navigating within sane rhythms of work, rest, and renewal for long-term sustainability. It all starts with longing and love as we allow ourselves to get in touch with the desire that stirs deep within our soul—desire for a way of life that works. A way of life in which we are not so tired all the time. A way of life that recognizes, accepts, and even honors the limits of our humanity, fostering contentment through delighting in God's truest gifts. When we are brave enough to be in touch with this stirring of the soul, God meets us right there in the middle of our desire

Can you all have even to get in touch w/ your longing?

with the revelation of this amazing gift that is fitted perfectly for us. Then we simply say yes to a God who knows us so well and loves us so much that he has provided us with such a good gift—if we can just arrange our lives to receive it.

The encouragement to “simply say yes” is not to imply that sabbath-keeping is easy; it is not. In fact, sabbath-keeping has only gotten more complicated as our culture has moved away from distinguishing any one day as different from the rest. And the ubiquitous nature of technology has added layers of challenge and difficulty to the prospect of unplugging and resting from constant connection and stimulation.

To enter sabbath time despite all the challenges, there must be a real yes, deep down inside. Yes to our need, yes to our desperation, yes to God’s invitation and the rightness of it—before we even know how we’re going to make it real in our own lives. This is the very definition of faith—to say yes when we have no idea how it’s all going to work out, but we know it’s what we need to do. It is that deep interior yes that will carry us into and through all the knotty issues sabbath raises until we emerge with a sabbath practice that works. There really is no shortcut, no other way, except through the doorway of desire, accompanied by faith that God is calling us and will show us the way. In this process, we learn for ourselves that yes, indeed, the sabbath is the most precious present humankind has received from the treasure house of God.

EMBRACING SABBATH TOGETHER

Because it takes whole communities embracing sabbath together to ensure that we can all participate in this God-ordained way of life, in this book I am unabashedly addressing

pastors and leaders of churches and ministries who gather in Jesus’ name. Sabbath communities do not happen by accident; they must be led by leaders who are practicing sabbath themselves so they have the inner authority to guide others. And then these sabbath principles need to be lived into with others so that our shared life supports and catalyzes this practice rather than working against it.

In part one we explore the personal and communal practice of a weekly sabbath as foundational to a way of life that works and honors the God who made us. We conclude with the story of Pastor Dan and how God stirred in his heart and life to lead his community in embracing sane rhythms of work and rest together. Then in part two we explore the practice of sabbatical as an extension of our sabbath practice. There are many practical tools for sabbath and sabbatical offered throughout the book, including a conversation guide for communities seeking to explore becoming a sabbath community. Knowing about this communal emphasis, you may want to consider reading and engaging this work with a few other leaders in your community who have the desire, will, and capacity to move forward on this with you.

But first, let’s take a few moments to pay attention to what is stirring deep within our own souls as we reflect on God’s invitation to sabbath. Someone has said, “You’d be surprised what your soul wants to say to God.” And, I might add, “You’d be surprised what God wants to say to your soul.” At the end of each chapter, there is a section intended to create space for letting yourself be surprised by what your soul wants to say to God *and* to keep the space open long enough to listen for what God wants to say back to your soul.

What Your Soul Wants to Say to God

✧ *Desire is the language of the soul and every spiritual practice corresponds to some deep desire of the human heart. The practice of sabbath corresponds to the human desire for rest and replenishment. Freedom. Delight. A way of life that works. The commitment to actually embrace a sabbath life (rather than just reading about it, as I did for a while) emerges from a deep connection with our own souls and the desires that stir there, so we can eventually say something true to God about it. Here you can let your response to what you have read flow freely, and then sit quietly to listen for what God wants to say about how you can live a sabbath life. I pray you will not skip this part, because the best and most consistent practice always emerges from being in touch with our truest desires and then seeking to order our lives from that place. So go ahead and express the desire that stirs in response to this reading. Speak to God directly, in whatever words are coming to you right now.*

Also, reflect on your own history with sabbath-keeping. How did you first learn about the sabbath, and who taught you? Are those early voices still with you, and what do they say? If you do not have any history with sabbath-keeping, name that as well.

What insight emerges as you reflect on this history from your current vantage point? And what is God's invitation to you now?

2

BEGINNING *with* GOD

There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

ONE OF THE WAYS I got around sabbath-keeping for so long is that I dismissed it as “a Jewish thing” that had very little to do with me. It was certainly a nice idea, but I wasn’t convinced it was something important from God *for me*. I am not alone in this; it seems many have had a tendency to dismiss sabbath as being part of another culture, a relic of another place and time. This is why it is so important to begin our exploration of the sabbath by fully grasping that this whole idea actually begins with God. God lived it first and later shared it with his chosen people as the optimal way to live.

When time had no shape at all, God created “a holiness in time” by working six days and then ceasing on the seventh. Over time this rhythm became uniquely associated with the Jewish

culture because the Israelites were the first group of people to practice sabbath and experience its benefits, but the pattern of working six days and then resting on the seventh is something that flows from God's very nature and being. So we honor those who first incorporated sabbath-keeping into their way of life and learn all we can from them (which certainly puts the Judeo back into our Judeo-Christian tradition!), knowing that the practice of sabbath-keeping really cannot be relegated to one group of people in one time period. Sabbath begins with God.

MORE THAN A LIFESTYLE SUGGESTION

Sabbath is more than a lifestyle suggestion or an expression of one's ethnicity. It is a spiritual precept that emerges from the creation narrative where God expresses God's very nature by finishing the work and then ceasing on the seventh day. In an article about Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, George Robinson writes:

In the Torah it is written, "On the seventh day God finished the work . . . and ceased from all the work . . . and God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation" (Genesis 2:2-3). But what did God create on the seventh day? Didn't God "cease from all the work of Creation" on the seventh day? What God created on the seventh day, the ancient rabbis tell us, was rest.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel in his seminal work, *The Sabbath*, elaborates:

After the six days of creation—what did the universe still lack? *Menuha*. Came the Sabbath, came *menuha*, and the universe was complete. *Menuha* which we usually render

with "rest," means here much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion, more than freedom from toil, strain or activity of any kind. *Menuha* is not a negative concept but something real and intrinsically positive. . . . What was created on the seventh day? Tranquility, serenity, peace and repose. To the biblical mind *menuha* is the same as happiness and stillness, as peace and harmony.

What a thrilling thought! What if rest has already been created and all I have to do is find ways to participate? What if God has already done the work of creating this sanctuary in time and all I have to do is enter in? What if, on this one day a week, I am freed to cease my own work and productivity and can simply be at one with all that has already been created? And if this pattern of working six days and then entering into tranquility and peace, happiness and harmony on the seventh has always been there for us—established by God at the very beginning of the created order—how might this change our lives if we fully grasped its significance?

George Robinson continues:

Shabbat offers us a chance for peace with nature, with society, and with ourselves. The prohibitions on work are designed to make us stop—if only for one day a week—our relentless efforts to tame, to conquer, to subdue the earth and everything on it. The prohibition against making fire is also said by the rabbis to mean that one should not kindle the fires of controversy against one's fellow humans. And, finally, the sabbath offers us a moment of quiet, or serenity, of self-transcendence, a moment that allows us to seek and perhaps achieve some kind of internal peace.

That sounds *exactly* like what our world needs now. It is exactly what I need right now—to stop arguing and pushing and wrestling—for one day a week! Entering into this God-ordained rhythm is one very concrete way in which God's people can become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Sabbath is a means of grace, a practice that creates channels for God to impart something of God's self so we can then be a conduit of God's nature to the world.

Custom When we first start practicing the sabbath, we might not always experience this peace and serenity right away or even every time. The first thing we might experience is the discomfort of discovering how addicted we are to human striving and hard work; we might discover that we do not even know who we are when we are not working. As we unplug from our normal ways of being connected, we might experience intensifying feelings of angst or fear of missing out, or we might be ambushed by emotions we have kept at bay by staying so distracted and busy. This is all very normal and most of us will encounter some of these inner dynamics from time to time, making sabbath feel anything but peaceful. But after twenty years of practice and learning to wait through the initial discomfort, my experience now is that this peace, this tranquility, this shalom descends more quickly as I unplug and power down, trusting my weary soul to God. Given the stresses and strains that are part and parcel of life in a fallen world, what God does in and through my feeble attempts to try and enter in is a wonder each and every time.

SABBATH AS CEASING

Pastor David Alves offers this important clarification about what God actually did on the seventh day that is very helpful for our own reflection:

The Hebrew word *shabbat*, used by God in Genesis, is really a stopping or ceasing more than a rest. God never tires. He did not rest on the seventh day. He is the one who never sleeps nor slumbers. He needs no rest. Bible translators would have better served us to stay closer to the denotative definition of the Hebrew than to have made it seem that God just took a short breather. He ceased from his work. He stopped what he was doing. That is what *He* meant to communicate. Therefore, that is what he calls *us* to do on *our* Sabbath—make an abrupt end to our labor. All labor? No, our *usual* labor—the labor we've been doing the other six days of the seven-day week.

One of the reasons I find this nuance to be so life-giving is there are some activities that could be considered work that bring such delight to me I actually save them for the sabbath—so I can savor them rather than just push through to check them off my list.

One of those activities is being in my yard planting new plants, adding a few flowers, observing the beauty and the growth of what's already there; wandering around to rejoice at the tiny new shoots of perennials as they emerge from winter, the buds on my flowering trees, the courage of the daffodils as they dazzle us with their color before knowing if winter is even over yet. On the sabbath, I move slowly, dig deeply in the soil, pull up a dandelion here and there, and savor God's good earth without worrying about having a little bit of it under my fingernails. During the different seasons, being present in nature actually puts me in touch *experientially* with the different dynamics that undergird the spiritual life. Wayne Muller writes,

Sabbath honors the necessary wisdom of dormancy. If certain plant species, for example, do not lie dormant in the winter, they will not bear fruit in the spring. If this continues for more than a season, the plant begins to die. If dormancy continues to be prevented, the entire species will die. A period of rest—in which nutrition and fertility most readily coalesce—is not simply a human psychological convenience; it is a spiritual and biological necessity. A lack of dormancy produces confusion and erosion in the life force.

Where else can we actually learn this except by being in the garden? Yes, I suppose you could call this work, but it is a different kind of work, done in a different way. On the sabbath, I settle more deeply into the soil of my own life and call it good. And not just good, but very good! Now, if farming or gardening is your everyday work, this might be a different kind of choice for you and it probably should be! But the point here seems to be an emphasis on ceasing one's *usual* labors, whatever that is for each one of us. Tilden Edwards speaks to this distinction when he writes,

The principle involved here . . . is not so much the physical nature of the activity but its *purpose*. If its intent signifies human power over nature, if it shows human mastery of the world by the purposeful and constructive exercise of intelligence and skill, then it is *meluchah*, work, that violates the restful intent of Sabbath time to recognize our dependence on God as ultimate Creator-Sustainer.

What is so important about this clarification is that it keeps us all on the hook—in the best possible way. No one can say

(like I did for the first half of my adult life), ^{excuse} "I'm not tired so I don't need a sabbath," or "I'm so busy and my work is so important that I can't afford to take a sabbath." The fact that the God of the universe, who is infinite in time, space, and energy, chose to cease usual labor on the seventh day—not because of exhaustion but because the rhythm itself is simply good—offers a beacon of hope for us all. It is a manifestation of God's innate goodness that is oh-so good for us.

THE BEAUTY IS IN THE RHYTHM

But let's be careful not to create any false dualisms here. What the creation narrative clearly shows us is that the beauty of all this is in the rhythm. Work is not better than rest nor is rest better than work; God did both, and the goodness is in the movement back and forth between the two.

Work offers us the privilege of partnering with God in God's creative purposes through the use of our gifts and our own life-giving energies. It can be a place of deep union and communion with God if we know how to approach it with that desire and intent. As Fr. Ron Rolheiser states so beautifully,

We know God not just in our conscious awareness and in prayer, but also in a deep inchoate way, by participating with Him in building this world—by growing things, building things, carving things, creating things, cleaning things, painting things, writing things, raising children, nursing bodies, teaching others, consoling others, humoring others, struggling with others, and loving others. Work, like prayer, is a privileged way to get to know God because, when we work, we are toiling in partnership with Him.

And thanks be to God for that, since most of us spend eight to ten hours at work each day!

In a very real sense, work gives meaning to our rest because without work, there would be no reason to rest. But rest also gives meaning to our work as we step back from it, behold it, take the time to call it good, and savor its fruits.

When we practice ceasing in the way God intends, we touch the very ground of our being. We experience ourselves to be creatures in the presence of our Creator—beloved children who are cared for and loved as human beings rather than as human doings. We begin to actually *feel* the love our heavenly Parent has for us beyond what we can produce or accomplish, which is part of the tenderness of the day—at least this is what happens to me. To experience ourselves cherished for *who we are* while not achieving anything or doing anything to earn the air we breathe is a revelation each and every sabbath. As we allow our energies to be replenished—rather than behaving like automatons who can just keep going and going—we are able to reengage our work as energized partners with God in the goodness God wants to bring about in the world.

Wayne Muller offers another metaphor that helps us grasp the beauty of this rhythm.

In the book of Exodus we read “In six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested and was refreshed.” Here, the word “refreshed,” *vaiynafesh*, literally means, *and God exhaled*. The creation of the world was like a life-quickenning inhale; the Sabbath is the exhale. Thus, in the beginning, all creation moves with

the rhythm of the inhale and the exhale. Without the sabbath exhale, the life-giving inhale is impossible.

THE GOAL OF ALL EXISTENCE

The weekly rhythm of work and rest here on this earth is a powerful end in itself *and* it points to a far greater reality. For the Israelites, their weekly sabbath pointed to the greater reality that they would eventually “rest” from the rigors of their wilderness journey by entering into the Promised Land where they would finally settle and live on God’s terms for them. Today, the weekly sabbath practiced by God’s people points to the greater reality of the ultimate rest God is preparing for us in heaven. The writer of Hebrews connects the dots between the Israelites’ experience of struggle to enter into God’s rest and our own struggle—in chapters three and four the practice of sabbath rest presently and the promise of eternal rest are inextricably intertwined:

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. . . . A sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs. (Hebrews 4:1, 9-11)

Clearly the issue of rest is really important to God; in a paradoxical way, sabbath keeps us present in the here and now while at the same time pointing to the hope of eternal shalom in the future. As it turns out, sabbath rest is not an optional reprieve in the midst of an otherwise frantic or obsessive life. It is the goal of all existence.

What Your Soul Wants to Say to God

Give yourself a few moments to reflect on the truth that sabbath begins with God, that it is a part of God's very nature, that God then shares with creation by embedding this pattern within it. What does this mean to you, or what could it mean if you let it fully sink in?

Hebrews 4:1-11 contains a rather stirring ode to the promise of rest that still remains open for us as the people of God. The writer encourages us to make every effort to enter into that rest so that no one may fall through disobedience and hardness of heart. Read this passage slowly and reflectively, allowing yourself to wonder if there is any way in which you have hardened your heart toward God's invitation to rest or if there is any resistance to this promise. It might be practical resistance (I just don't know how I can make it work in my life), psychological (I've worked hard all my life and I really don't know who I am when I'm not working and producing), or spiritual (I'm so used to depending on myself that I'm not sure I really believe God will provide for me if I take a break one day a week); or maybe it's something else. But the point is, take this opportunity to go all the way to the bottom of any resistance you feel, and talk to God about it.

Now reflect on 2 Peter 1:4. Does it resonate with you at all that perhaps sabbath rest is one of God's "precious and very great promises"? What is it like to consider practicing rhythms of work and rest as one way we can become partakers in the divine nature?

Reading Guide

Lesson 3: Big Read

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

by Walter Brueggemann

Selections from Chapters 1-2



Chapter 1

SABBATH AND THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

INTERPRETATION SERIES EDITOR PATRICK MILLER HAS shrewdly observed that the fourth commandment on Sabbath is the “crucial bridge” that connects the Ten Commandments together.¹ The fourth commandment looks back to the first three commandments and the God who rests (Exod. 20:3–7). At the same time, the Sabbath commandment looks forward to the last six commandments that concern the neighbor (vv. 12–17); they provide for rest alongside the neighbor. God, self, and all members of the household share in common rest on the seventh day; that social reality provides a commonality and a coherence not only to the community of covenant but to the commandments of Sinai as well. For that reason, it is appropriate in our study of the Sabbath commandment to begin with a reflection

on the first commandment and, subsequently, to finish our work with a consideration of the tenth commandment that concludes the Decalogue.

The first commandments concern God, God's aniconic character, and God's name (Exod. 20:3–7). But when we consider the identity of this God, we are made immediately aware that the God who will brook no rival and who eventually will rest is a God who is embedded in a narrative; this God is not known or available apart from that narrative. The narrative matrix of YHWH, the God of Israel, is the exodus narrative. This is the God “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (v. 2). Thus the Sabbath commandment is drawn into the exodus narrative, for the God who rests is the God who emancipates *from slavery* and consequently *from the work system of Egypt* and *from the gods of Egypt* who require and legitimate that work system. It is, for that reason, fair to judge that the prohibition against “the other gods” in the first commandment pertains directly to the gods of Egypt (see Exod. 12:12) and other gods of the same ilk in Canaan, or subsequently the gods of the great empires of Assyria, Babylon, or Persia. In the narrative imagination of Israel, the gods of Egypt are stand-ins for all the gods of the several empires. What they all have in common is that they are confiscatory gods who demand endless produce and who authorize endless systems of production that are, in principle, insatiable. Thus, the mention of “Egypt” brings the God of Israel into the orbit of socioeconomic systems and practices, and inevitably sets this God on a collision course with the gods of insatiable productivity.

The reference to “Egypt” indicates that the God of Sinai who gives the Ten Commandments is never simply a “religious figure” but is always preoccupied with and attentive to socioeconomic practice and policy. If we want, then, to understand this God (or any god), we must look to the socioeconomic system that god legitimates and authorizes. In the case of the Egyptian gods (who are in contrast to and in competition with the God of the exodus), we look to Pharaoh's system of production that is legitimated by the gods worshiped by Pharaoh. In Exodus 5, we are given a passionate narrative account of that labor system in which Pharaoh endlessly demands more production. What the slaves are to produce is more bricks that are to be used for the building of more “supply cities” in which Pharaoh can store his endless supply of material wealth in the form of grain (see Exod. 1:11). Because the system was designed to produce more and more surplus (see Gen. 47:13–26), there is always more need for storage units that in turn generated more need for bricks with which to construct them. Thus, if we follow the required bricks from the slave camps, we end with surplus wealth, taken as a gift of the gods of Pharaoh.

In this narrative report, Pharaoh is a hard-nosed production manager for whom production schedules are inexhaustible:

- “[W]hy are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!” (Exod. 5:4)
- “. . . yet you want them to stop working!” (v. 5)
- “You shall no longer give the people straw to

make bricks as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy." (vv. 7–8)

- "Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words." (v. 9)
 - "I will not give you straw. Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least." (vv. 10–11)
- "Complete your work the same daily assignment as when you were given straw." (v. 13)
- "Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?" (v. 14)
 - "No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, 'Make bricks.'" (v. 16)
 - "You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Go now, and work; for no straw will be given you but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks." (vv. 17–19)
 - "You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks." (v. 19)

|| The rhetoric is relentless, all to the single point, as relentless as is the production schedule.

It is clear that in this system there can be no Sabbath rest. There is no rest for Pharaoh in his supervisory capacity, and he undoubtedly monitors daily production schedules. Consequently, there can be no

rest for Pharaoh's supervisors or taskmasters; and of course there can be no rest for the slaves who must satisfy the taskmasters in order to meet Pharaoh's demanding quotas. We may imagine, moreover, that the "Egyptian gods" also never rested, because of their commitment to the aggrandizement of Pharaoh's system, for the glory of Pharaoh surely redounded to the glory of the Egyptian gods. The economy reflects the splendor of the gods who legitimate the entire system, for which cheap labor is an indispensable footnote!

It requires no imagination to see that the exodus memory and consequently the Sinai commandments are performed in a "no Sabbath" environment. In that context, all levels of social power—gods, Pharaoh, supervisors, taskmasters, slaves—are uniformly caught up in and committed to the grind of endless production.

Into this system of hopeless weariness erupts the God of the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–6). That God heard the despairing fatigue of the slaves (2:23–25), resolved to liberate the slave company of Israel from that exploitative system (3:7–9), and recruited Moses for the human task of emancipation (3:10). The reason Miriam and the other women can sing and dance at the end of the exodus narrative is the emergence of a new social reality in which the life of the Israelite economy is no longer determined and compelled by the insatiable production quotas of Egypt and its gods (15:20–21).

The first commandment is a declaration that the God of the exodus is *unlike* all the gods the slaves have known heretofore. This God is not to be confused with

or thought parallel to the insatiable gods of imperial productivity. This God is subsequently revealed as a God of mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness who is committed to covenantal relationships of fidelity (see Exod. 34:6–7). At the taproot of this divine commitment to *relationship (covenant)* rather than *commodity (bricks)* is the capacity and willingness of this God to rest. The Sabbath rest of God is the acknowledgment that God and God's people in the world are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production and so dispatched, as we used to say, as "hands" in the service of a command economy. Rather they are subjects situated in an economy of neighborliness. All of that is implicit in the reality and exhibit of divine rest.

Thus the Sabbath command of Exodus 20:11 recalls that God rested on the seventh day of creation, an allusion to Genesis 2:1–4. That divine rest on the seventh day of creation has made clear (a) that YHWH is not a workaholic, (b) that YHWH is not anxious about the full functioning of creation, and (c) that the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work. This performance and exhibit of divine rest thus characterize the God of creation, creation itself, and the creatures made in the image of the resting God. Creation is to be enacted and embraced without defining anxiety. Indeed, such divine rest serves to delegitimize and dismantle the endless restlessness sanctioned by the other gods and enacted by their adherents. That divine rest on the seventh day, moreover, is recalled in the commandment of Exodus 31:12–17, wherein God is "refreshed" on the seventh day. The God of Israel (and of creation) is no immovable, fixed object, but here is said to be

depleted and by rest may recover a full sense of "self" (*nephesh*).

The second commandment is closely related to the first. The commandment against "graven images" (idols) is a prohibition against any artistic representation of YHWH, for such representation would serve to "locate" YHWH, to domesticate God and so to curb the freedom that belongs to this erupting God (Exod. 20:4–6; see 2 Sam. 7:6–7). Such images have the effect of drawing God, in imagination and in practice, away from covenantal, relational fidelity and back into a world of objects and commodities. The temptation to produce an "image" of God in artistic form is always, everywhere a chance to produce a commodity out of valuable material, at best gold if it is available, or lesser valuable material if there is no gold. When a god is fashioned into a golden commodity (or even lesser material), divine subject becomes divine object, and agent becomes commodity. We may cite two obvious examples of this temptation in the Old Testament. First, in the narrative of the "Golden Calf" in Exodus 32, it was gold that was fashioned into the image that readily became an alternative god who jeopardized the covenant. The ensuing narrative of Exodus 33–34 tells of the hard and tricky negotiations whereby covenantal possibility is restored to Israel after its foray into distorting images (Exod. 34:9–10). Less dramatically, it is evident that Solomon's temple, designed to "house" YHWH, became a commodity enterprise preoccupied with gold (emphasis added):

The interior of the inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high; he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid the altar

with cedar. Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure *gold*, then he drew chains of *gold* across in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with *gold*. Next he overlaid the whole house with *gold*, in order that the whole house might be perfect; even the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with *gold*. (1 Kgs. 6:20–22)

So Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of the LORD: the *golden* altar, the *golden* table for the bread of the Presence; the lampstands of pure *gold*, five on the south side and five on the north, in front of the inner sanctuary; the flowers, the lamps, and the tongs of *gold*, the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense, and fire pans of pure *gold*; the sockets for the doors of the innermost part of the house, the most holy place, and for the doors of the nave of the temple of *gold*. (7:48–50)

Even as YHWH was honored by such extravagance, the temple was clearly intended to reflect honor on Solomon and on his regime. The attention to gold objects clearly skewed the simple and direct matter of covenantal possibility. Commodity desire has, for the most part, crowded out the covenantal tradition.

In the modern world, Karl Marx reflected most deeply on the compelling power of commodity. He took his famous phrase “commodity fetishism” from current study of the history of religions in which it was judged that “primitives” had such fetishes that occupied their desire and their devotion. Marx transferred that idea from “primitive” practice to modern market fascination and came to see that possessing commodities of social value generated a desire for more such value so that commodity took on a power of its own

that consisted of desire for more and more. It is easy enough to see Pharaoh's compulsion for more grain (a measure of wealth) beyond anything he could have needed, simply so that he could exhibit his great wealth and power. His desire for more created a restlessness that could permit no Sabbath rest for himself or any in his domain. And clearly Solomon is sketched out as the one who would possess all of his available world in his insatiable need for more (see 1 Kgs. 10:14–25).

For good reason the book of Deuteronomy ponders the force and danger of “images of God.” In what is likely a late exposition of the first two commandments, this sermonic chapter looks back to the danger done by “commodity religion”:

Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. (Deut. 4:15–19)

The danger is to compromise the peculiarity of YHWH and of Israel.

After this inventory of possible images, the rhetoric of verse 20 voices the alternative:

But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now.

The emancipatory gift of YHWH to Israel is contrasted with all the seductions of images. The memory of the exodus concerns the God of freedom who frees. The clear implication is that fixed images preclude freedom and become icons of stable equilibrium. Such image-religion becomes a way of sustaining status quo socioeconomic power that negates the emancipatory impulse of Israel's God and Israel's defining narrative. Thus it is credible to see that the culmination of *creation* in Sabbath and the culmination of *exodus* in Sabbath together refuse Pharaoh's pursuit of commodity. This refusal is decisive for Israel's faith and Israel's management of the economy: Do not worship such objects or make them your defining desire! That radical either/or is precisely the issue of the first commandment. It concerns the two temptations Israel faced, a temptation toward idols and an economic temptation of Israel to commodity.

YHWH is a Sabbath-keeping God, which fact ensures that restfulness and not restlessness is at the center of life. YHWH is a Sabbath-giving God and a Sabbath-commanding God. Israel, for that reason, is always again to re-choose between "life and death" (Deut. 30:15–20), between YHWH and "the gods of your ancestors" (Josh. 24:14–15), between YHWH and Baal (1 Kgs. 18:21), between the way of Torah and the way of sinners (Ps. 1). Sabbath becomes a decisive, concrete, visible way of opting for and aligning with the God of rest.

That same either/or is evident, of course, in the teaching of Jesus. In his Sermon on the Mount, he declares to his disciples:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matt. 6:24)

The way of *mammon* (capital, wealth) is the way of commodity, which is the way of endless desire, endless productivity, and endless restlessness without any Sabbath. Jesus taught his disciples that they could not have it both ways.

In the tradition of Matthew, the next verses (vv. 25–33) exposit the power of anxiety as the alternative to trust. It is, of course, in the same gospel tradition that Jesus comes to these familiar words:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (11:28–30)

"Weariness, being heavy-laden, yoke" are all ways of speaking of the commodity society of endless productivity. In context, this might have referred to the strenuous taxation system of the Roman Empire, for "yoke" often refers to imperial imposition. Alternatively, this may have referred to the endless requirements of an over-coded religious system that required endless attentiveness. With reference to imperial imposition or over-coded religion, Jesus offers an alternative:

come to me and rest! He becomes the embodiment of Sabbath rest for those who are no longer defined by and committed to the system of productiveness. In this role he is, as he is characteristically, fully in sync with the tradition of Israel and with the Sabbath God who occupies that tradition.

Because Jews and Christians continue to attend to these commandments as contemporary mandates, we may consider the ways in which the first commandment (concerning the emancipatory God and no other) and the second commandment (concerning images as commodities) pertain to our common life. It is, of course, the case that the commandments always pertain to the constancy of the human condition and to gospel possibility. But we may more particularly consider the peculiar and immediate way in which the first two commandments pertain to our present circumstance. The "choice of gods" is, in context, a choice of restlessness or restfulness.

The reality of restlessness in our contemporary society is obvious and epidemic. The identification of that restlessness perhaps goes back to the categories of Martin Luther concerning "faith and works," with the accent on "works" indicating a need to produce, perform, and qualify for the goodness of God. It is an easy move to take that Reformation accent on "works" and see in our current social restlessness evidence of not yet being good enough or having done enough. Or perhaps such restlessness is rooted in the Enlightenment discovery of the individual and the emergent ideology of individualism that cuts us off from the buoyant sustenance of community and tradi-

tion. In that ideology, one is not only free to secure one's own future without answering to any other; one is also required to secure one's own future, because a laissez-faire economics mandates that one must sink or swim by one's own effort, and it is never enough simply to tread water.

These rootages in Reformation and Enlightenment categories have created a contemporary circumstance in our society that generates an endless pursuit of greater security and greater happiness, a pursuit that is always unsatisfied, because we have never gotten or done enough . . . yet. The gods ("other gods") of this system are the gods of market ideology that summon to endless desires and needs that are never met but that always require yet greater effort.

The various elements of that restlessness of "not enough yet" and "greater effort required" are evident everywhere. But they are grounded in a theological desire for an ultimate reality of total satiation that is no reality at all. That theological "mis-commitment" —

— is apparent in economic performance that can never fully satisfy. Such an intrinsic and systemic inadequacy is a recognizable echo of the ancient Hebrew slaves, harassed by many supervisors and taskmasters who kept reminding them of the inadequacy of their production.

– It is impossible, is it not, to overestimate the level of anxiety that now characterizes social relationships in our society of acute restlessness? That violent restlessness makes neighborliness nearly impossible.

None of this is new; all of it is much chronicled among us. All of it is as old as Pharaoh's Egypt. The narrative of the exodus is not a "one off" miracle. The portrayal of the slave camps of Egypt and the deliverance of the exodus do not constitute an isolated miracle. The narrative is a rendering of recurring social relationships legitimated by anti-neighborly gods who give warrant, in the interest of commodity, to redefine neighbors as slaves, threats, rivals, and competitors.

Only when we ponder the "other gods" and the systems they authorize can we appreciate the radical nature of these first two commandments. Into this arena of restlessness comes the God of rest who offers relief from that anxiety-producing system. This God has no hunger for commodities and does not legitimate commodity systems. This God is attentive rather to the cries of those "left behind" and comes to open futures by exit (exodus) from systems of restlessness into the restfulness of neighborliness.

The two commandments go beneath social performance and social appearance to the deep, elemental, defining issue of "God versus the gods." These gods of commoditization for the most part go unchallenged in our world. As a result, their exploitative systems go unchallenged and unnoticed. The abuse becomes normal. Restlessness is unexceptional. Anxiety is a given, and violence is unexamined as "the cost of doing business." It is all a virtual reality in which we become narcotized into a system that seems to be a given rather than a construction.

Chapter 2

RESISTANCE TO ANXIETY

Exodus 20:12–17

SABBATH-KEEPING IS A DISTINCTIVELY JEWISH ART FORM. It is, however, a practice and a discipline that has long preoccupied Christians who have responded to a core requirement of the God of covenant. It is unfortunate that in U.S. society, largely out of a misunderstood Puritan heritage, Sabbath has gotten enmeshed in legalism and moralism and blue laws and life-denying practices that contradict the freedom-bestowing intention of Sabbath. Such distortions, moreover, have led to endlessly wearying quarrels about “Sunday activities” such as movies and card playing and, currently in my state, purchasing liquor on Sunday.

All that common lore in U.S. society, of course, amounts to a pitiful misrepresentation of Sabbath-keeping as an art form. When taken seriously in faith by Jews—

and derivatively by Christians—Sabbath-keeping is a way of making a statement of peculiar identity amid a larger public identity, of maintaining and enacting a counter-identity that refuses “mainstream” identity, which itself entails anti-human practice and the worship of anti-human gods. Understood in this way, Sabbath is a bodily act of *testimony* to alternative and *resistance* to pervading values and the assumptions behind those values. In these expositions, consideration will be given to Sabbath-keeping as testimony and resistance, acts of faith commonly shared (in different forms) by Jews and Christians.

I

Our beginning point is the Sabbath command at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20:8–11. Israel arrived at Mount Sinai directly after it miraculously departed from the exploitative environment of Pharaoh’s Egypt. Without knowing what would happen at the mountain with YHWH or what it would be like to meet the emancipator God of the exodus, Israel came to the mountain to enact and acknowledge “regime change,” an embrace of the rule of the God of the covenant as an alternative to the rule of Pharaoh, who was still so well remembered. The regime change itself had been accomplished dramatically in the wonder of the exodus whereby YHWH had acted in power and exposed Pharaoh as a weak and failed governor. The departure from Egypt evoked a great celebrative hymn from Israel that continues to have echoes in Handel’s *Messiah*:

The LORD will reign forever and ever. (Exod. 15:18)

Israel embraced the new governance, but then it had to receive and accept the new rules of governance that would enact the will and purpose of the new Governor in the world. That is what happened at Sinai. Israel received and swore allegiance to the new commands of YHWH that were in stark contrast to the commands of Pharaoh:

Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." (24:7)

While there are other commands from YHWH at Sinai, the oath pertains centrally to the ten commandments (20:1–17). In that recital of new "policies," Israel is enjoined to "love God" in a singular way (20:3–7) and to "love neighbor" in respectful ways (20:12–17).

II

The utterance of the ten commandments by YHWH to Israel begins, amazingly enough, with reference to Pharaoh and to Egypt. The recent departure from Egypt, still vividly remembered, provides the context and urgency for the new rule of YHWH:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (20:2)

All parties at Sinai—YHWH, Moses, Israel—could well remember what it had been like in the world of Pharaoh:

- They could remember that Pharaoh was regarded, and regarded himself, as a god, an absolute authority who was thought to be immune to the vagaries of history, a force with insatiable demands.
- They could remember that Egypt's socioeconomic power was organized like a pyramid, with a workforce producing wealth, all of which flowed upward to the power elite and eventually to Pharaoh who sat atop that pyramid.
- They could remember that Pharaoh, even though he was absolute in authority and he occupied the pinnacle of power, was an endlessly anxious presence who caused the entire social environment to be permeated with a restless anxiety that had no limit or termination.
- They could remember that Pharaoh, who controlled the Nile, nevertheless had nightmares of anxiety, as he dreamed of famine and as he imagined that the creation would not produce sufficient food (Gen. 41:15–32).
- They could remember how that nightmare of scarcity, which contradicted the wealth and power of Pharaoh, led to rapacious state policies of monopoly that caused the crown to usurp the money, the cattle, the land, and, finally, the bodies of vulnerable peasants (47:13–26).
- They could remember that such exploitative policies eventually reduced the peasants to state slaves, who were kept busy building granaries to store the vast food supplies of the state monopoly (Exod. 1–11).
- They could remember that the frantic policies of

Pharaoh, based on anxiety about food production, would lead to heavy-handed misery and the need to keep working and keep producing in order to meet insatiable imperial quotas that were without end.

They could remember all of that when the God of Sinai announced God's self as the one "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

III

Pharaoh was remembered at Sinai. But Pharaoh was not at Sinai. He was left helpless and disabled at the bottom of the waters (15:4-10). At Sinai, while Pharaoh was remembered, YHWH was front and center as the decisive force who enwrapped Israel in new promises and new social possibilities. Israel was so eager to trade off Pharaoh's hopeless commands and requirements for those of YHWH that, even before they heard the new commands, they gladly swore their readiness to sign on for the new regime:

The people all answered as one: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do." Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. (19:8)

Without knowing what would be required they had no doubt it would be better than the demands of Pharaoh.

And then God spoke ten times in the midst of fire and smoke.

God spoke three times in self-regard with a claim of exclusiveness:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. (20:2-7)

This claim of exclusiveness sounded at first like the exclusive claim of Pharaoh, for Pharaoh also required absolute authority without any rival. But the exclusivity of YHWH was different because of what followed.

God spoke six times about the neighbor:

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (vv. 12-17)

This terse summary was quite unlike any decree of Pharaoh, because it includes the neighbor in the

social calculus and dares to imagine the maintenance of a neighborly community. It was not so in Egypt. There were no neighbors in that system, only threats and competitors. In his continued interpretation of the commands, Moses spoke more about the most vulnerable of the neighbors who receive attentive consideration and protection by the Lord of the covenant:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. (22:21–24)

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate. (vv. 25–27)

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (23:9)

These folk are put at the center of Sinai imagination, even though they are nowhere in the horizon of the Egyptian system.

But that posed a deep question for those fresh from Egypt. How does one regard the neighbor seriously when one has imbibed the profound anxiety of the Egyptian system? If one is a slave, one has anxiety about the brick

quotas. If one is a Pharaoh, one is anxious about the food monopoly. In fact, Pharaoh and slave colluded in a common enterprise that made neighborliness impossible. To that issue, YHWH spoke one more time from the fiery mountain and placed this utterance exactly between the exclusivity of YHWH and the production of the neighbor:

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 and consecrated it. (20:8–11)

How strange to use the most airtime at the mountain on the Sabbath command. The divine utterance must have come as a shock to the listening Israelites. There had been no Sabbath in Egypt, no work stoppage; no work stoppage for Pharaoh who worked day and night to stay atop the pyramid. There had been no work stoppage for the slaves, because they had to gather straw during their off; no work stoppage of anybody in the Egyptian system, because frantic productivity drove the entire system. And now YHWH nullifies that entire system of anxious production. There are limits to how much and how long slaves must produce bricks! There are limits to how much food Pharaoh can store and consume and administer. The limit is set by the weekly work pause that breaks the production cycle. And those who participate in it break the anxiety cycle. They are

invited to awareness that life does not consist in frantic production and consumption that reduces everyone else to threat and competitor. And as the work stoppage permits a waning of anxiety, so energy is redeployed to the neighborhood. The odd insistence of the God of Sinai is to counter *anxious productivity* with *committed neighborliness*. The latter practice does not produce so much; but it creates an environment of security and respect and dignity that redefines the human project.

IV

Perhaps someone would ask for a basis for work stoppage that contradicts the core enterprise of the economic rat race. YHWH, at the mountain, anticipates such a question and answers:

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day and consecrated it. (20:11)

God rested! God enjoyed a work stoppage! The verse is a direct reference to the creation liturgy of Genesis 1:1–2:4a. In that well-known liturgical recital, the world begins in chaos, “formless and void.” The narrative account reviews the steady pace of God’s creative activity in taming and ordering chaos and making viable life in the world possible. The verses articulate the way in which God ordered the world to be fruitful and generative and the way in which God substantiated the power of blessing in the intrinsic ordering of creation. And the congregation responds in the recital with the repeated formula, “It is good.” It is good that

order defeats chaos. It is good that the world is ordered for fruitfulness. It is “very good” that creation bears the life-giving power of the creator. It is very good indeed!

And then, reported as the culmination of the liturgical recital, God rested. God rested on the seventh day. God did not show up to do more. God absented God’s self from the office. God did not come and check on creation in anxiety to be sure it was all working. God has complete confidence in the fruit-bearing, blessing-generating processes of creation that have been instituted. God exhibits no anxiety about the life-giving capacity of creation. God knows the world will hold, the plants will perform, and the birds and the fish and the beasts of the field will prosper. Humankind will govern the earth in a generative way. All will be well, and all manner of thing will be well!

Israel, in its many songs, voices complete confidence in the food-producing, life-assuring potential of the earth:

These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are filled with good things. (Ps. 104:27–28)

The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.
(145:15–16)

The world is an anxiety-free one of well-being because the creator is anxiety-free and publicly exhibits that freedom from anxiety by not checking things out. God is not

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~~a workaholic.~~ God is not a Pharaoh. God does not keep jacking up production schedules. To the contrary, God rests, confident, serene, at peace. God's rest, moreover, bestows on creatureliness a restfulness that contradicts the "drivenness" of the system of Pharaoh.

V

Moses at Sinai says to the new post-Pharaoh community of covenant:

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 and consecrated it. (Exod. 20:8-11)

Rest as did the creator God! And while you rest, be sure that your neighbors rest alongside you. Indeed, sponsor a *system of rest* that contradicts the *system of anxiety* of Pharaoh, because you are no longer subject to Pharaoh's anxiety system. Create restfulness with theological rootage, political viability, and economic significance for all in the domain of covenant—all sons and daughters, all slaves, all cattle, all immigrants, all who depart the death system of Pharaoh—who engage the offer of life given in covenant. Those who live by the death system:

- are bound to dishonor parents and all non-productive kin;

- are bound to engage in killing violence, because the others are a threat;
- are bound to reduce sexual interaction to exploitative commodity;
- are bound to usurp from others if it is something they want;
- are bound to engage in distortion and euphemism to gain advantage;
- are bound to be committed to acquisitiveness.

Moses recited all the commandments. You who keep Sabbath do not need

- to dishonor mother and father,
- to kill,
- to commit adultery,
- to steal,
- to bear false witness,
- to covet.

You do not need to because you are able to depart the exploitative system.

So imagine, says Moses at Sinai, you who engage in production and consumption are not little replicas of anxiety-driven Pharaoh. You are in the image of the creator God who did not need to work to get ahead. Nor do you! God invites the ones at Sinai to a new life of neighborly freedom in which Sabbath is the cornerstone of faithful freedom. Such faithful practice of work stoppage is an act of resistance. It declares in bodily ways that we will not participate in the anxiety system that pervades our social environment. We will not be defined

by busyness and by acquisitiveness and by pursuit of more, in either our economics or our personal relations or anywhere in our lives. Because our life does not consist in commodity.

It is no wonder that Jesus invited his disciples out of the anxiety system:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" (Matt. 6:25-31)

The birds and the lilies are attestation that creation works! Trust it and live out righteousness, and your "heavenly Father"—the creator—will see to your well-being. Behind the sermon away from anxiety by Jesus is the good word of Moses:

Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other

gods; do not let them be heard on your lips. (Exod. 23:12-13)

The "other gods" are agents and occasions of anxiety. But we, by discipline, by resolve, by baptism, by Eucharist, and by passion, resist such seductions. In so doing we stand alongside the creator in whose image we are made. By the end of six days God had done all that was necessary for creation . . . so have we!

Reading Guide

Lesson 4: Big Read

The Sabbath as Rest and Hope for the People of God
(*Short Studies in Biblical Theology*)

by Guy Prentiss Waters

pp. 106-128 (Chapter 5: New Creation)



THE SABBATH AS REST AND HOPE FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

GUY PRENTISS WATERS

Thus, the resurrection of Christ from the dead is a watershed moment in human history. It is the dawn of the last days and of the age to come—the consummation of human history. It stands parallel to the creation of the world in its significance and scope.

Overall, understanding what the resurrection is and means for human history helps us to understand its implications for the Sabbath. The Sabbath, we have seen, is a creation ordinance. God instituted it at the creation so that human beings might remember God's creation of the world in six days. By setting the Sabbath on the seventh day, God was showing humanity his goal for human

3. G. K. Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 339.

4. Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 339.

existence—the worship of him who made all things. Later, in Deuteronomy, the Sabbath comes to take on added significance as God tells Israel that it is a day to remember how he redeemed them from bondage in Egypt.

Connected to both of these purposes, the resurrection is equally the dawn of the new creation in human history and part of the unique, once-for-all work of Christ to save sinners from among the nations. In fact, all those and only those whom Christ has redeemed by his life, death, and resurrection are given entrance into the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). In this way, God is bringing his purposes for humanity to realization. It is by the work of the last Adam, the second man, that God redeems sinners in every age. And this new humanity, forged in Christ, communes with the triune God through faith in Christ.

The Sabbath, then, comes to commemorate God's work of new creation and redemption in the resurrection of Christ. There continues to be one day in seven when God's people lay down their earthly labors and commitments and gather together to worship God. Thus the substance of the command is unchanged. However, the particular day does change. Beginning at the resurrection, the appointed day for God's people to assemble in the holy resting of worship is Sunday. On this first day of the week, we are to remember that Christ was raised from the dead. In Christ, we have witnessed God's purposes for the creation come to fulfillment and fruition and we engage in that for which we were made—worship of our great God.⁵ We also remember that, by his death and resurrection, Christ redeemed a multitude of sinners. What the exodus anticipated in shadow form, Christ has accomplished in his saving work. Thus, on the first day of the week, we look back in grateful remembrance on the fact that Christ was

5. Of course, the people of God worshipped him before Christ's resurrection as well.

“raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25) and that, in union with the risen Christ, we have been brought from death to life (Eph. 2:5–6).

But if, on the first day of the week, we look back upon Christ’s resurrection as the inbreaking of new creation into human history and as the saving victory of God to redeem his people, we no less look forward. The Sabbath, in other words, continues to be eschatological in nature. The new creation has been inaugurated in Christ but not yet consummated. Redemption has been fully accomplished, once for all, but it will not be fully applied to all the elect until Christ returns in glory. United with Christ, believers have already begun to share in his resurrection. But we have yet to experience all that he has won for us in his resurrection. The resurrection of the body, in conformity with Christ’s resurrection body, is the sure and certain hope of every Christian (1 Cor. 15:35–58; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; Phil. 3:21). And the “redemption of our bodies,” Paul tells us, is of a piece with the renewal of the whole creation (Rom. 8:23; see Rom. 8:18–25). Fully redeemed, we will dwell with God in Christ in new heavens and new earth.

In light of what the resurrection means—for Christ, for believers, and for God’s purposes in human history—we are better able to appreciate why God moved the Sabbath from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week when Christ rose from the dead. God’s work of creation and redemption finds its center and culmination in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The consummation of God’s purposes for humanity and the world has found its beginnings in the death and resurrection of Christ. It is on Sunday, then, when people are to look back to what God has done in Christ and to look forward to what God will certainly do in Christ. Fittingly, on the very first Sabbath under the new covenant—the day on which Christ was raised from the dead—we see Christ meeting in fellowship with his people, we see the word of Christ bringing blessing, instruction,

guidance, and direction to his people, and we see the people of God assembled to worship the Savior. It is precisely these features that will characterize the life of the early church on the first day of the week. Thus, we may now turn to explore what Acts, the Letters, and Revelation tell us about the Sabbath under the new covenant.

Acts, the Letters, Revelation, and the Sabbath

ACTS

In Acts, we see the church developing from a handful of Jewish believers to a multinational body numbering in the tens of thousands. By the authoritative command of the risen Christ (Acts 1:8) and the power of the Spirit of Christ (1:5, 8), the apostles carry the gospel from the Jew to the Samaritan to the rest of the nations (1:8). The apostle whom Christ preeminently tasks with extending the gospel to the Gentiles is Paul (9:15; 22:21; 26:17). Paul consistently made it a point to present the gospel to Jewish audiences when he first arrived in a new location; he would find the local synagogue and preach Christ there. Luke, in fact, tells us that this was Paul’s “custom” (17:2). For this reason, Paul was often found on the Jewish Sabbath in the synagogues of the cities where he was preaching. Typically, his preaching met with both acceptance and resistance. And this resistance occasioned two important steps on the part of Paul. First, he would signal his commitment to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Second, he would gather those who had accepted Christ and form a distinct community of those who had professed faith in Christ and of their families. This is precisely the trajectory of Paul’s ministry in Corinth (18:5–8) and it was likely replicated in other cities as well.

However, Luke is clear that in separating from the synagogue, the church in no way repudiates the Scriptures of the Old Testament. On the contrary, the Old Testament finds its intended fulfillment in

the person and work of Christ (see Luke 24:25–27, 44–49). Thus, the apostles preach Christ to Jewish audiences from the Scriptures of the Old Testament (see, representatively, Acts 17:2–3), and when Jewish audiences reject Jesus Christ, they are rejecting their Scriptures and the God who authored those Scriptures. This is one reason why Christians in Acts form communities distinct from existing synagogues. Baptized into Christ, disciples live out their faith and life together in the church. Together they take up the mission that Christ has entrusted to his church—to carry the name of Jesus into the world and to live under the lordship of Christ.

One feature that is constant to the churches that Luke describes in Acts is that they are worshipping communities. We see them gathered in prayer (Acts 1:14; 4:23–31; 12:12) and under the ministry of the preached word (see 19:9; 20:20, 21, 27). Luke tells us that, from the beginning, the disciples “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42). Because Luke is primarily concerned to document the extension of the gospel from the Jews to the nations, we have comparatively few details about the services of gathered worship in the early churches. But we do have one such account, and we are likely intended to take it as representative of the church’s public worship under the supervision of the apostles.

In Acts 20, toward the end of Paul’s last documented missionary journey in Acts, Paul gathers with the church in Troas. Luke—who was accompanying Paul on that journey—says, “we were gathered together to break bread,” a reference to the Lord’s Supper (20:7; cf. 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23, 24). Further, before they observed the Supper, Paul “prolonged his speech until midnight” (20:7)—that is to say, he preached the word of God before he administered the Supper to the church (20:11). Thus, overall, word and sacrament characterized the public worship of the churches of Jesus Christ.

There is one further detail about this particular gathering that helps us to understand the pattern of Christian worship at the dawn of the new covenant—Luke tells us that the church in Troas gathered “on the first day of the week” (20:7). This expression is also found in Luke 24:1 and in John 20:1 (cf. 20:19). Its use in Acts, therefore, points to this particular day as having special significance in the Christian church.

One might suppose that perhaps the church met on this day because it was convenient to the itinerary of the apostle Paul. After all, we learn later that Paul is “hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16). However, when we look more closely at Paul’s itinerary, a different picture emerges. Paul is indeed in a hurry to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. His trip from Philippi (in Macedonia) to Troas (in northwestern Asia Minor) took “five days” (20:6). Previously, Paul had sailed from Troas to Philippi in just two days (16:11). Adverse winds likely accounted for the delay. Yet, his haste and this deficit of time notwithstanding, Luke tells us that Paul and his fellow travelers “stayed [in Troas] for seven days” (20:6).

So why did Paul spend an additional seven days in Troas, given his tight schedule? The answer comes in the following verse. Paul was waiting to gather with the church in Troas “on the first day of the week” (20:7). The “first day of the week” was, of course, the day on which Christ had been raised from the dead. And, under the new covenant, it is now the particular day on which God’s people observe the weekly holy resting that he had required of them since creation. Thus, Paul does not call the church to gather for public worship on an earlier day, even though that would have been far more convenient for him, but arranges his travel schedule so that he can observe that day in worship with the church.

Overall, these events confirm that in the early church, the first day of the week had been set by divine authority. And because

there is nothing in this account that suggests that what transpired on this Sunday in Troas was peculiar either to the circumstances of the church or to the location of this particular church, it seems this practice was one universally embraced by the apostolic churches and intended for the church in every place and in every age. This conclusion finds confirmation from the Letters of the New Testament, to which we now turn.

LETTERS

There are two passages in the Epistles of the New Testament that, in different ways, point to the first day of the week as the day when local churches were to gather to worship God by divine command. The first comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians when he writes,

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. (1 Cor. 16:1–4)

Here, Paul is likely taking up a question or concern that has come to him from the church.⁶ He mentions a “collection for the saints” (16:1), and the Corinthians seem to already be familiar with it. This collection is one that Paul is gathering from the Corinthians, the Galatians, and the churches in Macedonia (see 2 Cor. 8–9). As Paul

6. A point rightly captured by the ESV's explanatory note, “The expression *Now concerning* introduces a reply to a question in the Corinthians' letter.” *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2216n1.

explains in his letter to the church in Rome, this collection will be an expression of fellowship and unity between its givers (predominantly Gentile churches) and its recipients (the predominantly Jewish churches in Judea) (see Rom. 15:22–33).

In these verses, Paul tells the Corinthians that he wants this collection to be taken up in the same way that he had told the “churches of Galatia” to take it up (1 Cor. 16:1). In particular, the collection is to be gathered from willing givers in the church “on the first day of every week” (16:2). This appears to be a regular provision for the church—until Paul arrives in Corinth, the Corinthians are to be taking up the collection on a weekly basis.

But why does Paul instruct churches in two different regions (Achaia and Galatia) to take up the collection “on the first day of the week”? The reason is because he knows that these churches—just like the others—are already gathering together on that day for worship. The day's significance, of course, derives from the fact that it is the day on which Christ rose from the dead.

Thus, it is likely that Paul intends the taking up of this collection to be a part of the public worship of God in the church on the first day of the week. As an act of worship, the members of the church generously give what they have thoughtfully prepared beforehand to give. In this instance, the collection will serve to meet the temporal needs of brothers in another part of the church. And even after the collection is gathered and disbursed, Paul likely expects the churches to continue to take up a collection in public worship to support, among other benevolences and ministries, the genuine needs of fellow Christians. As under the Old Testament, so under the New Testament—God wants his people to worship him from hearts that are sensitive to the earthly needs of others, particularly fellow believers, and are willing to take concrete and practical steps to address those needs. As we have already seen in Isaiah, the worship of God is

primarily vertical, but it has an indispensable horizontal component to it; the love of God may never be divorced from the love of one's brothers and sisters in Christ.

A second passage that points to the regular, weekly gathering of the church for public worship is Hebrews 10:24–25, which exhorts believers to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” The core of this exhortation is that they are not to “neglect” to “meet together.” Since the author to the Hebrews delivers this command to his audience without qualification, we are safe in concluding that it pertains to the whole church—that is to say, the church is under a divine command to assemble.

This command derives a certain urgency from the fact that “some” are in the “habit” of neglecting to gather. The writer does not tell us exactly who these people are or specify the details or motives of such failure to gather with the church in these meetings; he only says that it is a standing or habitual neglect. The writer is clear, however, that this behavior is a violation of a divine command.

To be sure, the writer does not specify exactly when the church is to “meet together.” But, in the context of the teaching of the New Testament as a whole, it is almost certain that he has in mind the gathering of the church for worship on the first day of the week. As we have seen above, this was the practice of the churches in Troas, Galatia, and Corinth, churches that were under the supervision of the apostle Paul. This practice, furthermore, was a matter of obedience to a command of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition to the exhortation to gather, the writer of Hebrews also describes what he expects will happen on this particular day when the church gathers, and these details confirm the conclusion that the meeting in view here is the regular gath-

ering of the church for worship on Sunday. First, this is a day when believers “stir up one another to love and good works,” when they “encourag[e] one another.” Such activity takes place in the context of the fellowship of believers and is the fruit of the ministry of the preached word in the church. The word supplies both the commands (“love,” “good works”) and gospel motivation (“encourag[ement]”) that enable believers to undertake this ministry to one another. Furthermore, the singing of “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” is the “content (or possibly manner) of the ‘teaching and admonishing’” in Colossians 3:16.⁷ Thus, when God’s word is sung in public worship, believers are instructing and encouraging one another. It is in these ways, then, that the writer is urging his audience to be faithful in attending and participating in the public worship of the church so that they may urge one another on to fruitful living for Christ.

Second, the writer tells the Hebrews to commit to regular, gathered worship because “the Day [is] drawing near” (10:25). This “day” is, of course, the return of Christ in glory. As the writer goes on to say, it will be characterized by judgment and condemnation to those who do not truly belong to Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:26–31), but it will also be a day when God’s people fully enter into their “better” and “abiding” “possession” and “receive what is promised” (10:34, 36). It is this prospect, the writer reasons, that should motivate believers to engage in the regular, gathered worship of God on the first day of the week.

Strikingly, the writer has earlier termed this hope of the Christian a “Sabbath rest” that “remains . . . for the people of God” (4:9). It is this future “rest” into which every believer will enter when Christ returns in glory on that “day” (4:10; 10:25). As we saw earlier, calling

7. G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 303.

this rest a "Sabbath" rest indicates that the creation ordinance of the weekly Sabbath continues under the new covenant. It points to the eschatological life in Jesus Christ that believers have yet to experience in full. The weekly Sabbath, then, serves to point believers to their heavenly hope so that they may strive toward it along the path of faith and good works.

Thus, although the writer of Hebrews does not use either the term "rest" or "Sabbath" in his argument in chapter 10, his lines of argumentation in chapters 4 and 10 run on parallel tracks and serve to complement and reinforce one another. The return of Christ is the hoped for "day" when believers will receive their "possession," "reward," and "rest" (10:34, 35; 4:9). Presently, believers are on pilgrimage and therefore require "endurance" in the way of "faith" (10:36, 39); they need to "strive to enter that rest" through "faith" (4:11, 2). So, as a help to believers, God calls his people to gather together weekly (10:25; cf. 4:9). These weekly gatherings serve, by the grace of God, to "stir up" believers "to love and good works" and to "encourag[e]" them (10:24, 25)—that is to say, God intends those meetings to be precisely the help that pilgrims need as they make their way toward their heavenly home. The final book of the New Testament, Revelation, helps us understand the foundation and effects of such encouragement more fully.

REVELATION

Revelation opens with the apostle John in exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). He hears an authoritative voice (1:10–11) and sees a vision of the exalted Christ (1:12–16) while he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (1:10). The expression "Lord's day" is otherwise unattested in the New Testament, although later Christians would soon pick up the phrase to designate Sunday as the weekly day of Christian worship, but we may reliably draw some conclusions about

this phrase's meaning by attending to a few details in this verse and its surrounding context.⁸

First, the adjective "Lord's" (*kyriakos*) appears in one other place in the New Testament ("the Lord's supper," 1 Cor. 11:20). In both places, it likely denotes possession. In other words, the "supper" or "day" in view is one that belongs particularly to the Lord; he lays unique, proprietary claim to that meal and period of time. In the case of the phrase in Revelation 1:10, John is saying that Jesus Christ has set this day apart from the other six days of the week. The phrase "the Lord's day" thus "simply means the day belonging to the Lord."⁹

Second, the immediate context of the phrase helps to clarify and to sharpen our understanding of its meaning and significance. After hearing the authoritative voice, John sees a vision of Jesus Christ. He writes,

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (Rev. 1:12–16)

8. See the discussion of the second-century evidence in R. J. Bauckham, "The Lord's Day," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 222–32. Bauckham concludes that "the use of *kyriakē* in the *Didache*, Ignatius, and the *Gospel of Peter* seems to presuppose a well-established usage, and in that case it is rather probable that *kyriakē hēmera* already meant Sunday in the reign of Domitian." Bauckham, "The Lord's Day," 232.

9. Roger T. Beckwith and Wilfrid Stott, *This is the Day: The Biblical Doctrine of the Christian Sunday* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1978), 36.

After seeing Jesus, John then hears his voice saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have keys of Death and Hades” (1:17–18).

Overall, what John sees is a vision of Jesus Christ in power and glory. When Jesus speaks to John, he identifies himself as one who has been raised gloriously from the dead, will never die again, and has absolute authority over death as the one who conquered death in his resurrection. This self-identification of Jesus underscores the fact that the one John sees in Revelation 1:12–16 is the powerful and glorious *risen* Christ.

This vision is precisely what John and his readers need to see. John, after all, is in exile on Patmos “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). He has been punished by the civil authorities for his faith in Jesus. Further, John is not unique in his suffering for Jesus Christ—he identifies himself to his readers as “your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus” (1:9). Thus, what all these suffering Christians need is a vision of the reigning, glorious, risen Christ who is sovereign over his church and the world.

But how does this setting and message help us to understand the meaning of the phrase “the Lord’s day” in Revelation 1:10? This context shows us that the “Lord” of this day is the risen Lord Jesus Christ. In light of this pairing of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and a day Christ particularly claims for himself, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that “the Lord’s day” is the first day of the week, the day when Christ rose from the dead, and the day when Christians—under apostolic supervision—gathered together to worship God, remembering the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Overall, this passage helps us to understand at least two basic characteristics of this day and of Christian worship on it. The first is that on this day, the church remembers that Jesus Christ has been

raised from the dead and has conquered death and Hades; he is sovereign over all things. As the church experiences persecution and tribulation in the world, believers need this weekly reminder of the victory that Christ has already won, of his absolute lordship over anyone and anything that would threaten to harm them. The church needs this perspective in order to persevere faithfully in the face of threats both external and internal to the church (see 2:1–3:22). Thus, on this “Lord’s day,” the risen Christ gives his servant John a message for the church—“fear not” (1:17). Every time the church gathers to worship on the Lord’s Day, then, they are reminded that they have no reason to fear the people and authorities who stand opposed to Christ and to his church.

Second, “it is through the corporate worship of the church that Christ’s lordship is actually realized in the life of the church.”¹⁰ In other words, the church’s willing and faithful obedience to this command of the Lord Jesus Christ is itself an expression of his absolute lordship. Further, as the word of Christ is proclaimed in the churches on the Lord’s Day, believers are equipped to “confess Christ as Lord” in every area of their lives.¹¹ Thus, the Lord’s Day visibly demonstrates Christ’s lordship when his people gather to worship him, and as believers live in accordance with the word of Christ in their families, schools, places of work, and communities, they further give expression to the lordship of Christ in front of a watching world.

The Law, the Sabbath, and the Christian

As we have seen, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was an epochal event in human history. It marks the inbreaking of the age to come, the beginning of the last days, and the dawn of the new creation. As such, it transforms the worship of the people of God. They

10. Bauckham, “Lord’s Day,” 245.

11. Bauckham, “Lord’s Day,” 245.

continue to observe the weekly Sabbath rest that God had appointed for all people at the creation; Hebrews confirms that the eschatological Sabbath rest remains future to them, implying the continuation of the weekly Sabbath in anticipation of that rest. But the particular day of that rest has changed. From the creation to the resurrection of Christ, the Sabbath fell on the seventh day of the week. This day commemorated the completion of God's work of creation in six days. From the resurrection of Christ until his return, the Sabbath now falls on the first day of the week. This day commemorates the new creation that has dawned because of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

There is no command in the New Testament that explicitly spells out this change of day. We learn of this change, rather, in implicit ways. The Gospels show us not only that Christ was raised from the dead on the first day of the week but also that he met with his disciples on the first day of the week. The events that transpire during those meetings anticipate what the New Testament tells us happens when believers gather together each week to worship God—the ministry of the word, the breaking of bread, and the presence of Christ in spiritual blessing to his people. As we have seen in the Letters and Revelation, the church, under the supervision of Christ's apostles, met regularly on the first day of the week, the "Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10). And on this day Christian congregations worshipped God through the reading and preaching of the word, the administration of the Lord's Supper, and the taking up of a collection. Every indication from the New Testament is that churches observed this day in obedience to Jesus Christ.

The absence of an explicit Sabbath command in the New Testament letters (such as, "you shall keep the first day of the week as the Sabbath under the new covenant") has troubled some Christians enough for them to conclude that the New Testament's apparent silence points to an abrogation of the Sabbath under the new covenant.

However, we have argued in this chapter that the New Testament is not silent on the matter and offers multiple positive indications of the church's regular and widespread observance of the Sabbath as a divine command.

Further, there is an additional line of teaching in the New Testament that helps to confirm this conclusion—as the New Testament reflects on the implications of the finished work of Christ, it does so in relation to the Mosaic law. Thus, we will now briefly explore three passages that point us to the Decalogue (which, of course, includes the Sabbath command) to spell out Christian obligation under the new covenant. We will also address a few passages that some have taken to say that the Mosaic law (generally) or the Sabbath (particularly) has been abrogated under the new covenant.

THE DECALOGUE

In at least two passages, the apostle Paul shows us that the Ten Commandments summarize the duty of the Christian under the new covenant. First, in Romans 13, Paul helps us to understand the relationship between love and the law of God when he writes,

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom. 13:8–10)

In this passage, Paul shows us that, far from there being any tension between love and the law of God, love actually fulfils the law. It is precisely through the keeping of God's commandments that believers love their neighbor (and love God). Further, Paul does not

leave us in doubt as to what those commandments are. He quotes several of the Ten Commandments, and he quotes them in the form that they appear in the Decalogue (“You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet”; see Ex. 20:13–17; Deut. 5:17–21). Paul understands this list to be representative and not exhaustive (as he adds “and any other commandment”). Thus, he sends us to the Ten Commandments to find the standards of Christian duty.

Paul does not cite any commandment from the Decalogue regarding our duty to God, including the Sabbath commandment. But the context of these verses affords a ready explanation for why Paul only mentions the portion of the Decalogue that addresses our duty to our fellow human beings—this section of Romans (Rom. 12:1–15:13) is overwhelmingly concerned with the Christian’s duty toward other people, whether fellow believers, those outside the church, or the civil magistrate. Thus, Paul’s omission of those laws in the Decalogue addressing our relationship with God should not be taken to mean that they are no longer binding on the Christian. In fact, given the ongoing normativity of the portion of the Decalogue summarized by the command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” one may reasonably presume that the portion of the Decalogue summarized by the command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” is no less binding (see Matt. 22:34–39).

The way in which Paul directs Christians to the Ten Commandments in Romans 13, then, speaks volumes about his understanding of the Sabbath commandment in the Christian life. Paul points the believer to the Ten Commandments as the rule or standard of Christian obedience. The Sabbath is among those Ten Commandments. Therefore, the Sabbath remains a commandment that God’s people under the new covenant must observe.

A second passage offers a critical qualification to what we have observed from Paul’s handling of the Ten Commandments in Romans 13:8–10. In Ephesians 6:1–3, Paul gives the children of the church in Ephesus specific direction, telling them, “obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.’”

As he did in Romans 13, Paul quotes the commandment to honor one’s parents in the same form as the Decalogue (see Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). That Paul is doing so intentionally is confirmed by the fact that he parenthetically comments, “this is the first commandment with a promise.” He then goes on to supply the reason annexed to the commandment from Deuteronomy 5:16, “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

What is striking about Paul’s citation of this promise is that while its original recipients were Israelites who had been redeemed from Egypt, the apostle applies it to the children of a largely Gentile congregation in western Asia Minor (see Eph. 2:11). In other words, the Ephesian children are neither Jewish (for the most part) nor inhabitants of Canaan. Tellingly, Paul does not cite the remainder of Deuteronomy 5:16, “the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” Paul, then, understands the commandment and its promise to have a wider and more extensive application than it does for old covenant Israel. It is “valid not merely for the Jew who worships the Father in Jerusalem, but for all those true worshippers everywhere who worship him in spirit and in truth.”¹²

In fact, the way Paul interprets and applies this particular commandment from the Decalogue is a window into how he interprets

12. B. B. Warfield, “The Sabbath in the Word of God,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1971, 1973), 1:323. Warfield renders the word translated “land” (ESV) as “earth.” While this is a defensible translation of the underlying Greek word, one need not concur with Warfield’s translation in order to affirm his argument here.

and applies each one of the Ten Commandments. Overall, his application reflects the momentous changes in redemptive history between Sinai and Calvary. The death and resurrection of Christ has meant that the law has come to fulfillment and has undergone transformation. And as a result, anything specific to the Israelites under old covenant (such as promises relating to the land of Canaan) has been correspondingly affected—that is to say, the law undergoes the changes necessary to reflect the fact that God’s people, in the age of fulfillment, is comprised now both of Jews and Gentiles.

This transformation guides us in understanding how Paul approaches the Sabbath commandment—this commandment binds believers under the new covenant insofar as this commandment reflects transformation in light of the finished work of Christ. For the New Testament writers, including Paul (see 1 Cor. 16:2), that transformation entails a change of day. By divine appointment, the holy day of resting now falls on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day of the week. The commandment has not undergone any substantial changes, just as the commandment to honor one’s father and mother has not undergone any substantial changes. The change, rather, is a circumstantial one, and it reflects the triumph and victory of Christ’s resurrection, the dawn of the new creation in human history.

The apostle James confirms what we have seen in the apostle Paul—that believers are bound to the Ten Commandments as the standard of Christian duty under the new covenant. Similarly to Paul in Romans 13:8–10, James tells us, “if you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well” (James 2:8). Love, in other words, is the fulfillment of the law of God. James then explains what he understands this law to be—he mentions two commands, “Do not commit adultery” and “Do not murder” (2:11), both of which are drawn from the

Decalogue. Thus, we can conclude that James understands the “royal law” (2:8)—that is, the “law of liberty” (2:12) to which Christians are held to account—to be the Decalogue.¹³ Although James only mentions the commands governing adultery and murder, he “might have taken any others of the precepts of the Decalogue to illustrate his point—the Fourth as well as the Sixth or Seventh.”¹⁴

AN OBJECTION

On the other hand, the apostle Paul makes statements in his letters that have suggested to some readers that he understands the Sabbath commandment to be abrogated under the new covenant. Here are some examples:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col. 2:16–17)

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. (Gal. 4:9–11)

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. (Rom. 14:5–6)

13. “The Decalogue evidently lies in [James’s] mind as a convenient summary of fundamental duty; and he says in effect that it is binding on us all, in all its precepts alike, because they all alike are from God and publish his holy will.” Warfield, “The Sabbath,” 315.

14. Warfield, “The Sabbath,” 315.

Overall, each of the letters in which these statements appear reflects the confusion of some individuals concerning the Mosaic law. We may look at each of them in turn. First, in Colossae, there are teachers who are “pass[ing] judgment” on the Colossians “with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.” Paul declares these to be a “shadow” of the “substance,” namely, Christ. As such, the church is not bound to observe these particular days. The phrase “a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” is one that surfaces a number of times in the Old Testament (see 1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Ezek. 45:17). It serves to describe the liturgical calendar that God gave to Israel in the Mosaic law. Importantly, “a Sabbath” is plural in the Greek (*sabbatōn*). It refers, then, strictly to the multiple feast days in Israel’s calendar that God added to the weekly Sabbath. Thus, what Paul is telling the church in these verses is that the liturgical calendar in the Pentateuch has served its purpose now that Christ has come; believers are no longer under any obligation to observe it. Paul’s comments, however, say nothing about the weekly Sabbath.

Similarly, the churches in Galatia were under the influence of teachers who were pressing the observance of the Mosaic law for their justification. Paul pens this letter to dissuade them from that teaching and to remind them of the gospel that he had preached to them and that they had believed. Here, Paul rebukes the church for “observ[ing] days and months and seasons and years” (Gal. 4:10). And again, in context, this expression refers to the liturgical calendar of the Mosaic law, which set apart periods of time for Israel’s worship. Now that Christ has come (4:4), Paul reasons, Israel’s calendar has fulfilled its purpose in redemptive history. Thus, for new covenant Christians to try to observe this calendar is a return to bondage.¹⁵

15. Paul sees the bondage in view in Galatians in two lights. There is the comparative bondage of God’s people’s existence under the Mosaic covenant relevant to their existence under the new covenant (Gal. 4:1–6). And there is the added bondage of attempting to keep the law for

Last, in the church in Rome, there was a division among believers whom Paul identifies as “weak in faith” and “strong” (Rom. 14:1; 15:1). This division centered around food (14:2) and the observance of days (14:5). Here, Paul views the individual who abstains from eating certain foods and who “observes one day as better than another” to be a believer, but one who is weak in faith (14:5). The coupling of dietary restrictions with calendrical observances suggests that the issue in the church in Rome concerns the keeping of the dietary laws and the liturgical calendar of the Mosaic law. Thus, for a third time, when Paul implicitly tells the Roman Christians that they are not divinely obligated to regard “one day as better than another,” he is not talking about the weekly Sabbath—he is talking about the feasts and festivals of the Mosaic calendar. As in his letters to the churches in Galatia and Colossae, Paul helps the Roman Christians to understand that those aspects of the Mosaic legislation unique to Israel—such as laws regarding food, feasts, and festivals—are no longer binding under the new covenant.

Conclusions

Overall, the New Testament shows us that the resurrection of Christ effected a profound transformation of the Sabbath. The Sabbath, now observed on the first day of the week, commemorates the in-breaking of the new creation at Christ’s resurrection. It continues to point to creation, redemption, and consummation, now in light of the finished work of Christ. The Sabbath commemorates God’s work of creation, even as it points forward to the rest that awaits the people of God, and the Sabbath commemorates God’s work of redemption shadowed in the exodus and accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ. It is Christ, the second Adam, who brings

justification, something God never intended for Israel to do with the law that he gave them (see Gal. 5:1–6).

creation to its intended goal, and it is Christ who guarantees that each of his redeemed ones will enter into their appointed rest. In our final chapter, we will think about some implications that this biblical theology of the Sabbath has for the way that we read the Bible and live the Christian life.

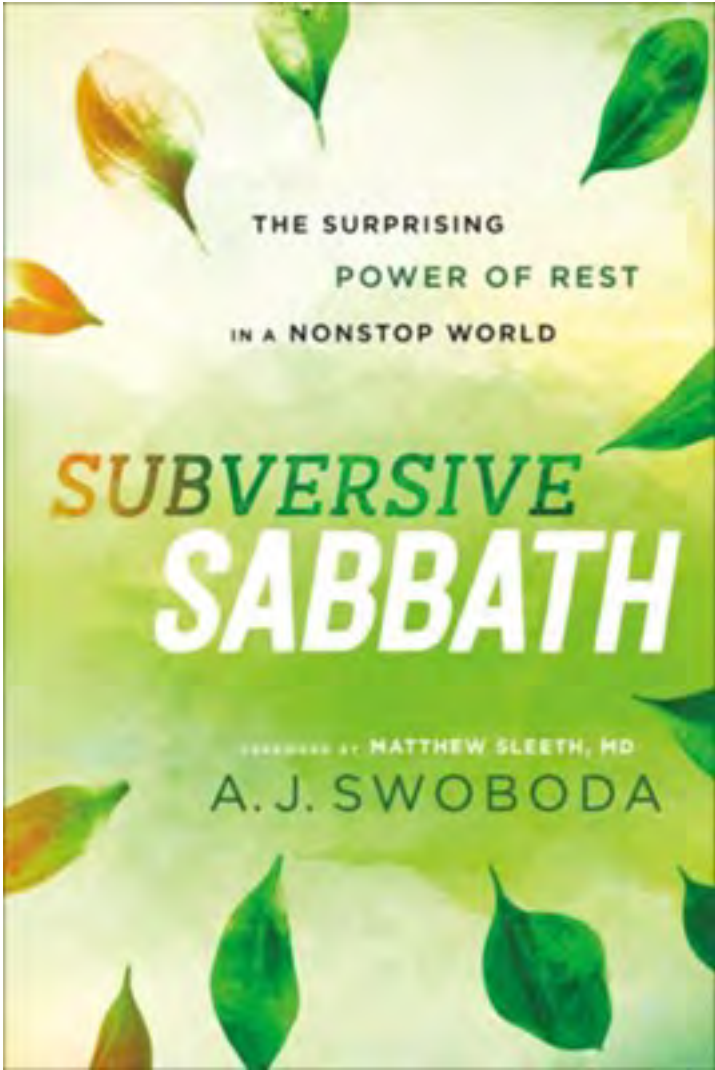
Reading Guide

Lesson 5: Big Read

*Subversive Sabbath:
The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World*

by A.J. Swoboda

pp. 25-41 (Chapter 2: Sabbath and Work)



THE SURPRISING
POWER OF REST
IN A NONSTOP WORLD

SUBVERSIVE
SABBATH

FOREWORD BY MATTHEW SLEETH, MD
A.J. SWOBODA

2

Sabbath and Work

Six days a week the spirit is alone, disregarded, forsaken, forgotten. Working under strain, beset with worries, enmeshed in anxieties, man has no mind for ethereal beauty. But the spirit is waiting for man to join in.

Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath*

The Sanctity of Work

In the previous chapter, we examined the biblical roots of a theology of Sabbath and time. Our journey now moves us toward engaging human work with explicit regard to how the Sabbath renews our vocation in this world. In the beginning, Adam and Eve worked. Their tasks? To care for, and nurture, the garden of Eden. The responsibility of naming the animals was placed on Adam. They were to "be fruitful and multiply." What this teaches us, of course, is that nothing remains as close to human identity as the work God has invited them to partake in. Work was not, and is not, punishment for sin. Work precedes sin.

Have you ever wondered whether you will have a job in heaven?

Will we work for eternity?

Will resurrection offer us all a much-desired career change?

If humans worked in the garden, will humans work in heaven?

In a little examination of the prophet Isaiah, *When the Kings Come Marching In*, Richard Mouw discusses the biblical portrayal of the new

Jerusalem, where “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord” (Isa. 11:9). This soon-coming new Jerusalem is intricately detailed as a resurrected, renewed *old* Jerusalem. Mouw points to the “flocks of Kedar,” “rams of Nebaioth,” and the “ships of Tarshish,” which freely enter the new Jerusalem carrying silver, gold, and costly woods of cypress, plane, and Lebanese pine. These are welcomed alongside camels from Midian, Ephah, and Sheba carrying gold and frankincense. What is this all about? The prophet Isaiah, Mouw contends, is using extraordinary measures to describe the future Jerusalem in fundamentally physical, real, elemental, *earthy* terms. “Animal, vegetable, mineral,” concludes Mouw, “are all brought into the renewed Jerusalem.”¹

By no means is this the only depiction of the new Jerusalem that includes animals, technology, and artistry. Concluding a parallel passage in the New Testament text of Revelation 21, John depicts the new Jerusalem in equally earthy terms. Heaven is depicted as a city. Unlike popular Christian art, heaven is not depicted as that place where the saints reside eternally on billowy white clouds while playing harps and reading hymnals. What is found, however, is an actual city where Christ is the ruler; the city includes a river, buildings, food, drink, feasts, and jewels and metals gathered from the nations. There, we will have physical bodies—“He will *wipe* every *tear* from their *eyes*” (Rev. 21:4). The new Jerusalem will be spiritual *and* physical. Mouw even suggests that the “ships of Tarshish” referenced in Isaiah—widely identified as icons of pagan culture—will enter the new Jerusalem as sanctified items that have been cleansed of their former pagan “functions.” In heaven, they will still be boats. This time, however, they will be boats for the glory of Yahweh, not the tyranny of the pantheon.²

This is the renewal of all things. Isaiah and John both look forward to that time when Christ will rule and reign. In fact, the biblical language regarding the future is noticeably absent of humans “going to heaven.” Quite the opposite, in fact: John sees “the new Jerusalem, *coming down* out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed” (Rev. 21:2). God makes all things new. God does not make all new things. This distinction underscores a theological reality—a great similarity and continuity will exist between this world and the next. Mouw drives this point home: “The Holy City is not wholly discontinuous with the present conditions. The biblical glimpses of this City give us reason to think that its contents will not be completely unfamiliar to people like us. In fact, the contents of the City will be more akin to our present cultural patterns than is usually acknowledged in discussions of the afterlife.”³ The Bible’s depiction of the new Jerusalem is surprising: heaven will look a lot like earth.

The new Jerusalem is a renovated, not replaced, city. Indeed, this raises countless theological possibilities and problems. What of our bodies? What of our artistic creations? Will we have tattoos in heaven? I have long surmised that we may retain our tattoos in the world to come. I wonder if our tattoos—like the “ships of Tarshish”—will continue into glory but be sanctified of their old purposes, resurrected into the glorious presence of Christ. Why would this not be the case? Jesus had the marks of his death on his resurrected body. Other possibilities of the eschaton remain to be teased out.

In light of all this, could it be that many of our creations and achievements might actually resurrect into the new world? In a groundbreaking work, theologian Miroslav Volf echoes Mouw by contending that human work and cultural flourishing must be understood not as being destroyed in the coming of God’s kingdom but as being purified. In fact, Volf argues that our technological advancements that have changed human culture for the good, such as Gutenberg’s press, may actually be *included* in the renewal of all things. “Through their work,” contends Volf, “human beings contribute in their modest and broken way to God’s new creation.”⁴ Humanity does not have the power to resurrect our work. Still, God may resurrect the very human city we have built. In short, the new creation, unlike the first, will not be created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). It will incorporate aspects of this present creation.

What, then, does one do with texts regarding a coming worldly destruction? For example, 2 Peter 3 says the “present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (2 Pet. 3:7). This does not necessarily mean that the world must be *destroyed* for God’s kingdom to fully come. Evangelical biblical scholar Douglas Moo points out that the thrust of 2 Peter 3, among other texts, describes a world being renewed rather than destroyed. Moo points out that throughout Scripture, fire is an image of purification, not of destruction. Fire retains things of value but annihilates the worthless.⁵ We must be cautious: this is not to say that we are currently building the new Jerusalem and that heaven only comes down on the earth metaphorically. Rather, this is to suggest that God will take elements of the present creation and resurrect them while purifying the new creation of worthless elements. In the same way that we cannot resurrect Christ from the grave, we cannot “build” the new Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem, we remember, comes down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:2). Heaven is not from around here. The new city comes down to us and is put on top of our existing one.

I have a hunch: we *will* have jobs in the new Jerusalem. We will work. As Eden was a place of work, so will heaven be. Work was not a result of sin. Why? Because humans are *homo faber* (humans who work), created to “tend

and keep" and enjoy the fruits of their work. So close to their human function was work that the biblical author uses the same word for "tend" as "worship." To care for the garden was to worship the Creator. Eden was a divine domain of work and worship, not a world of sedentary laziness or unproductivity. The created world was to be creatively worked and nurtured. Work is not a mistake or a curse. Yet work becomes our curse when it becomes what we worship. "Labor is not," writes Abraham Heschel, "only the destiny of man; it is endowed with divine dignity."⁶

Jewish rabbis have a phrase, *melechet machshevet*, to illustrate this reality, meaning that our work "is done unto the realization of God's plan and vision."⁷ When Adam and Eve were placed in the garden, they were placed with a purpose to work and cultivate and nurture the created space. Their task was to bring about God's desires through their vocation. Our task *is* and *will be* no less. Our work is valuable, and it matters to God. Although work is holy, the human tendency as a result of sin is to exalt work as the central part of the human vocation. But work, or activity, is not our core identity. At the heart of the human vocation is to *be* with God, not to *do* anything. It is tempting to think of Sabbath as the intrinsic result of a job well done, but it is not. Sabbath is not a wage for our hard work. Sabbath is not a benefits package. Rather, work is a reflection of Sabbath-keeping. Work is a benefit of our rest.

Worshipping Work

"Achievement," once wrote Mary Bell, "is the alcohol of our time."⁸ Work is our drug, our numbing agent, escape hatch, and anesthetizing behavior. Achievement makes us feel the semblance of some glow of heightened, idolized identity where we are what we do. In this modern world, we have become addicts to doing, making, producing, and accomplishing. Our modern dogma is that of Batman: "It's not who you are underneath. It's what you do that defines you."⁹ How did it come to this? Why has our work taken center stage in our lives?

We are what we accomplish—or so goes the unquestioned popular dogma. The origins of this devilish approach to life are illustrated in the early pages of Scripture as we observe the destructive effects of sin taking root. Adam and Eve were created to work in the garden, yet their relationship to that work fundamentally changes once sin invades the garden. We see that work—done in service to God and creation—immediately gets twisted into acts of abuse and sinfulness and injustice. When Adam is assigned the responsibility of naming animals, God extends to him freedom and creativity to live in harmony with and have authority among the created realm. In the ancient world, to name something or someone was to have a sense of authority over it. Naming the

Descend for our love
"I accomplish I am b/c I
accomplish."

animals implied Adam's God-ordained authority over God's creatures and his responsibility to them. But he is to name the animals and the animals alone. Thus, the woman is given no name in Genesis 1 and 2 when she is created. She is simply called "woman." The implication is profound: Adam had authority over the animals. But with the woman, who was his helper, he was to walk side by side.

The fundamental relationship between the man and the woman was one of mutuality. As Peter Lombard long ago observed, we must remember that Eve was taken out of Adam's side, not from his head nor his feet. Why? Because Adam was never to rule *over* the woman or be ruled *by* her. Rather, she came out of his side; she was to be his helper.¹⁰ Similarly, Matthew Henry in his *Commentary on the Whole Bible* writes, "The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved."¹¹

Sin changes everything, turning the good world upside down. Once Adam and Eve sin, the blame game begins. The first couple hide from God, and their very relationship to the land and the rest of creation is changed. They are banished from the garden of Eden, becoming wanderers on the earth, displaced from place. Now, their work will be toilsome. God was left with a difficult choice—discipline was necessary. He offers strong words of discipline to each guilty party. God curses the serpent, saying he will be at enmity with the woman and her seed. God then speaks to the woman and says child labor will be painful and she will yearn for her husband, but he will "rule" over her. Then, to Adam, he describes how Adam's relationship to work will be greatly marred. Then he speaks over the man and woman the consequences of their decision. Immediately, we see a change in the relationship within humanity's first family. The very next thing Adam does reveals that something is shattered in their relationship.

Adam *names* the woman "Eve."

Her new name meant "mother of the living." In fact, naming the woman becomes the very first thing Adam does after God names their punishment. Immediately. Remember, God never instructed Adam to name Eve. When God created Eve out of the side of Adam, Adam sang a song over her—"this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." But Adam did not name her at first. She was his partner, his wife, his "suitable helper." Adam had permission to name the animals, but Eve was not an animal. From the beginning, man and woman were to work together, side by side, in the garden, tasked with loving and serving God, each other, and creation. This act of Adam naming Eve initiates, I believe, a perversion of God's desire that Eve would

work alongside Adam in loving, mutual harmony to work and care for the garden. In fact, God saw it coming when sin entered the world. When God tells Eve that Adam will “rule over her,” he is simply lamenting what is to come. God is not commanding it. His language is descriptive, not prescriptive. Adam naming Eve, putting her in her place, was neither what God ordained nor desired. It is interesting that he names her for what he sees she is good for—having babies.

Sin turns the world upside down. Just as Adam’s relationship to the woman is perverted, so is his relationship to his work. God says of Adam’s work: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:19). Adam’s work—which originally brought life and fruitfulness—now turns to toil. When some Christians read the curse narrative, they wrongly assume that work itself becomes the consequence of sin. As New York University’s Daniel Fleming has aptly shown, the phrase “by the sweat of your brow” does not mean that physical labor is cursed. Rather, this was an ancient way of speaking of a new anxiety around work that is the result of fear and accomplishment.¹² Sin, in the words of Sandra Richter, causes work to become about “perspiration-inducing *fear*.”¹³ Humanity ceases to work as God intended and starts to worry about its work identity.

After the fall, humanity becomes enslaved to work.¹⁴ The very vocation God created to serve the world ceases to be an act of worship to the Creator and becomes about self-fulfillment. Humanity ceases being purpose driven and becomes fear driven. It is interesting that as God judges Adam, he says, “[The ground] will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field” (Gen. 3:18). Notice the word *plants*; the Hebrew word is *eseb*. The word is used for an annual, any plant that must be planted every single year. An annual dies every year. A perennial, however, is any plant that produces year after year without needing to be replanted. I have long theorized that the food God planted in Eden was exclusively food from perennial plants that came back every year—apples, asparagus, oranges, and pomegranates. Notice that Eden had trees. Trees produce food year after year after year. God’s provision is visible even in the landscape.

After their exile from Eden, however, humanity relies on annuals for survival. No longer will Adam and Eve reside in the garden that God himself had planted with all of its perennials; they are now forced to raise their own plants that will die each year. Annuals are the landscape of displacement, of a people not at home. The only way one can eat perennials is by being established in a place. The joys of a perennial must be enjoyed in the same place year after year.

Eden was abundant with perennials. This is why Adam and Eve could rest *and eat* on their first day of existence—the work was already done for them. God himself had planted the garden. Can you imagine living in a place free from toil, a garden of perennials, the way Adam and Eve did? In exile from Eden, humanity has been thrust to self-production and subsistence rather than trust and abundance. The annual replanting year after year illustrates a world without rest. Ours has become a world mostly of annuals. Do not be misled: annuals are not bad. But they are not the fullness of God's original design. Perennials and annuals were meant to exist together, but we have an unhealthy reliance on annuals, which is taking a toll. In fact, our heavy reliance on annuals is actually destroying our planet. In his book *Dirt*, David Montgomery describes the reality that we are "skinning our planet."¹⁵ Ecologists would tell us that our methods for cultivating crops, primarily annuals, deplete the earth's soil at a rapid rate. The Levitical commands to let the land rest every seven years were the result of what? Sin. Why? Before exile from Eden, humanity lived off of the perennial foods of the garden and never needed to let the perennials rest. The land only needs to rest when we work it. Again, God gave us a world of delight to work and play in. Only when we ignored his way did he have to give a law to call us back to the original aim.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus wore a crown of thorns at his death? Why thorns? Thorns are *eseb*. At his death, Jesus literally wears on his head the sign of the curse—thorns from annuals. Our curse became his crown. It was as he wore our annual that he brought the perennial grace and love and forgiveness of the Father.

What we learn is that sin changes our relationship with work. In a world of perennials, work was not something that humanity did to falsely find its meaning. Instead, work was done in the context of trust and provision. After sin, work that was originally entered into as an act of worship became the thing we worshiped. I think God knew humanity would sin. And I think God knew we would be prone to worship our work, which is why God initiated rest and Sabbath before the fall. In sin, humans are prone to worship the good things of this world over the Ultimate, the Creator. "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie," writes Paul, "and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25). We turn good things into ultimate things. This gives us a helpful theological and biblical framework for understanding *why* we are workaholics. Work is not the problem—it is our replacing God with work that is a problem.

That is why even good work can turn bad. I have a friend who travels the world and speaks on rest and well-being. She is brilliant. Catch the irony: she burned out speaking about rest and well-being. How is it possible for someone

to burn out traveling the world teaching on rest? By putting a good thing in the wrong place in our lives.

Nearly ten years ago, as a college pastor at the University of Oregon, I toiled nearly eighty hours a week doing the “work of the Lord.” No boundaries. No rhythms. No intention. No rest. Every crisis was *my* crisis. Every complaint was *my* problem. Everything and everyone came to *me*. Anxiety was the norm; fear was my god. The long and short of it: I began to burn out. And I knew there was a problem when I started hoping I would burn out.¹⁶ Burnout offered a way out of all the insanity. Though I had never thought it possible, I was, in Paul’s words, beginning to “weary in doing good” (Gal. 6:9). The cost was high. I constantly got sick, my marriage was struggling, and my ministry became misery as I went frantically from crisis to crisis.

Flannery O’Connor has this little throwaway line where she speaks of a priest who is “unimaginative and overworked.”¹⁷ That was me. There was only one problem: the ministry was thriving. People were getting baptized. Students were repenting. The group was growing. It all came to a head one Saturday morning. After an eighty-hour workweek, I scheduled an appointment with a student in our college ministry for 10:00 a.m. that Saturday morning. Having not slept well for over a month, I missed my appointment, not even hearing the sound of my alarm. I woke up to a voicemail on my phone: “How could you miss this appointment? Pastors shouldn’t miss appointments. You have failed me.”

I had become a “quivering mass of availability.”¹⁸ A need-filler. A gofer. A Christian handyman, available to everyone and everything but the Lord my God. Standing there, I nearly broke my flip phone over my knee and threw it against the wall. I had been working tirelessly only to let one more person down. I could not go on like I had been. By the sovereign grace of God, I had been reading a book by pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson. Through reading the book, I discovered something I had completely ignored in ten years of Bible reading—this thing called the Sabbath. Peterson eloquently discussed how one day a week he would say no to ministry demands and go on hikes, eat good food, read poetry, and meet with God. I was intrigued. Was this not a waste of time? Was he not wasting his time on selfish endeavors? Then it clicked.

Up until this time, I had thought Sabbath-keeping was selfish. And I thought that if I did rest, it was a sign of weakness. Then I had the epiphany of a lifetime: I had been trying to be *selfless*. In helping everyone else, I had forgotten myself. I had become the preacher of the gospel who needed the gospel himself. Or, worse yet, I subconsciously thought God wanted me to forget about myself so I could serve others. But that is not the gospel. Jesus loves

me too. I could love others only to the extent that I could recognize God's love for me. I could see to the needs of my community only to the extent that I admitted my own needs. I could care for God's people only to the extent that I would allow him to care for me. In forgetting all this, I had neglected to care for the body God had given me, the spirit he breathed into me, this soul that he molded with his own hand.

Wisdom prevailed. I admitted my limits and embraced my finitude. It was one of the first "not goods" in my life where I recognized I had a deep, human, God-created need. In living for everyone else, I had been trying to be omnipotent and omnipresent, neither of which God desired for me to be. As I read the Gospels, it became clearer and clearer to me that Jesus himself was not selfless. Jesus went into the mountains and prayed to the point that even his disciples could not find him. Jesus ate. Jesus drank. Jesus slept. He took care of himself. And never once was Jesus hurried from place to place, controlled by a busy schedule. Jesus lived a rhythm completely different from anyone around him. The rhythm of his life was, in itself, a prophetic act against the rhythms of the world.

Sabbath rhythms are not meant for paper; they are meant to be practiced. "Holy days, rituals, liturgies—all are like musical notations which, in themselves," one Jewish scholar writes, "cannot convey the nuances and textures of live performance."¹⁹ We are not to know about the Sabbath. We are to know the Sabbath. In the years since starting to practice the Sabbath, my family and I have become avid, albeit imperfect, amateur Sabbath-keepers. One day a week, my family turns all the screens off, lights some candles, prays, and invites the God of Sabbath to bring us rest. This practice, which, again, we do far from perfectly, has saved my marriage, my ministry, my faith, and, I might even say, my life. However, we have come to find that Sabbath never just happens. In our 24/7 world, I have never once seen someone accidentally keep a Sabbath. Sabbath is an action of great purpose, one that demands feisty intentionality. It requires us to live in a rhythm that squarely opposes the dangerous pulse and the habits of our world. Sabbath-keeping is not just a small vignette in the Bible. Page after page, story after story, book after book, Sabbath comes to us. This is not a minor motif in the story of the Bible—it is one of the greatest themes of the Bible. Sabbath is not extra credit. It is a commandment, not a suggestion.

Sabbath is God's eternal way of helping us worship our good God and not worship the good work he has given us to do.

The Sabbath, Jacques Ellul contends, "shows that work is not after all so excellent or desirable a thing as people often tell us."²⁰ In other words, Sabbath provides work with a healthy framework within which good work can be

done. The fourth commandment, we must remember, only prohibits us from work on Sabbath. Nothing else is prohibited. This simple act of not working revolutionizes our lives by re-centering our identity on being with God rather than on what we *do* for the world. Workaholism, in the end, is the result of our sense of self not fully coming into the light of Christ. Workaholism is very different from alcoholism—for the alcoholic there is no slowly reintegrating alcohol into their life after getting clean. They must go cold turkey; there can only be a clean break. Workaholism is different. For a workaholic, the issue becomes learning to live rightly in relationship to work. A workaholic will most likely have to get back to work. As for my work, studies continue to reveal that pastoral burnout is connected to the pastor's sense of being and worthiness.²¹ I became a workaholic chiefly because I had not allowed the grace of Jesus to reside in the depths of the caverns of my soul. I even used to think the Sabbath was a break from ministry. Now I see Sabbath as ministry. It frees people. It helps others in the church. It establishes boundaries. And, above all, it proclaims the good news of Jesus. As I read Peterson, one question came back to me over and over again: How can I preach salvation by grace when my life is built on an altar of workaholism?²²

In our culture, in place of a meaningful relationship with Jesus where we are defined by the Father's love, we will continue to relish our overstuffed, busy lives. Busyness will be our trophy. More often than not, the only way we can truly feel good about our lives is if we are burning out doing it. We want scars to brag about. We have, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "made an idol of exhaustion." The only time we know we have done enough is when we're running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see least."²³ It seems this cultural mantra has been treated like a command from God, but God never asked us to work to the point of burnout.

We were not created just to work.

Work is not our Ultimate.

Defining Work, Defining Rest

In teaching, preaching, and writing on the Sabbath, I have observed some generational differences regarding rest. At one point, a baby-boomer pastor confessed his frustration over the Sabbath principle because he perceived millennials as being lazy. His sentiment was that the older generation worked too much and the younger generation worked too little. Certainly this may be true. Indeed, older generations may very well tend to work seven days a week, while younger ones may work only three or four days a week. Each generation has its own neuroses. One may even wonder whether the younger generation

does this as a response to overworking in their parental generation. But this raises a critical point: Sabbath rest assumes work. That is, the Bible has a word for Sabbath minus any work: laziness. Likewise, the Bible has a word for work without a Sabbath: slavery. Rest is not truly possible without work, and work is not done appropriately without rest. A balance is required for them to both be what they were created to be.

The weighty sense of *qodesh*, "holiness," implies uniqueness from the other weekdays. Sabbath was set apart from the other days—it embodied a different purpose. Six days of work, one day of rest. That was the cadence. Consider any piece of music. Music is never merely an endless stream of notes played at the same tempo; rather, there are pauses, intentional breaks, and a variety of notes. Even the Psalms have a *selah*—a pause—to the praise of Yahweh. Work without rest is like music with no rhythm, the Psalms minus *selah*, every song with no refrain. P-acter

Mark's Gospel illustrates how Jesus embodied a rhythm of both work and rest. In one account, Jesus's disciples return from healing the sick, raising the dead, and preaching the kingdom. Kingdom activity indeed was happening among them. The ministry success was so remarkable that the disciples "did not even have a chance to eat" (Mark 6:31). Mark's portrayal likely hits close to home for many whose work offers but a few paltry minutes to stop for fast food on the way to the next activity. How does Jesus respond to such an insane workload? Jesus sees, and responds, to the disciples' needs: "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). Jesus does not condemn their hard work. Rather, he honors their hard work, inviting them to rest within it. The flow of discipleship was engagement, ministry, and work, followed by rest, quiet, and solitude. Work and rest are meant to be bedmates. In Matthew's Gospel, in fact, we find that Jesus calls himself both the "Lord of the harvest" (Matt. 9:38) and the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8). Personally, that reminds me that Jesus is Lord over my work and Jesus is Lord over my rest. He is not Lord over just one. Both are realms of his lordship and my discipleship. Jesus is Lord of rest *and* work.

Still, the transition between work and rest can be daunting. As anyone begins to Sabbath, they will often report on the difficulty in transitioning from days of work to the day of rest. Certainly, Israel knew precisely how challenging this transition was. In Egypt, Israel was enslaved under Pharaoh's rule. Then, after the Passover, they were led to Mount Sinai, where God gave them the Ten Commandments. One commandment was to Sabbath one day a week. One can only imagine how difficult this commandment was to receive for the simple fact that they had been living in a system of slavery for so many years

that they had come to objectify themselves. Israel had maybe even come to see themselves merely as their own slavish work. Henri Blocher describes Israel's relationship of work to rest:

Now what is the meaning of the Sabbath that was given to Israel? It relativizes the works of mankind, the contents of the six working days. It protects mankind from total absorption by the task of subduing the earth, it anticipates the distortion which makes work the sum and purpose of human life, and it informs mankind that he will not fulfill his humanity in his relation to the world which he is transforming but only when he raises his eyes above, in the blessed, holy hour of communion with the Creator. . . . The essence of mankind is not work!²⁴

The transition from slavery to rest proved nearly impossible for Israel, as it might for us. Their story is our story. In fact, in any Passover Seder meal, it is read, "In every generation—*bachol dour va dour*"; or, "every Jew must feel as if he himself has come out of Egypt." Israel's journey toward the Sabbath is *our* journey to the Sabbath.

By experience I have learned that I rarely enter the Sabbath day with a finished to-do list. In fact, there is no such thing as a finished to-do list for a pastor. Ministry is never done. Nor is anyone's work ever really done on the Sabbath. We rarely rest because the work is done. In fact, it often feels like there is more work at the end of the day. I normally find that I go into my Sabbath with tasks and conversations intentionally set aside for afterward.

For each of us, the Sabbath is such an important rhythm because it dethrones our workaholic tendencies and reminds us that the ultimate work is not that which can go on a to-do list. Rabbi Heschel ponders this very question: "Is it possible for a human being to do all his work in six days? Does not our work always remain incomplete?"²⁵ The Sabbath reminds us that nothing that is worth doing can be fully achieved in one day. Indeed, our work is always incomplete. By the grace of God, Sabbath is not the result of all the work being done. Mark Buchanan brilliantly touches on this:

The rest of God—the rest God gladly gives so that we might discover that part of God we're missing—is not a reward for finishing. It's not a bonus for work well done. It's sheer gift. It is a stop-work order in the midst of work that's never complete, never polished. Sabbath is not the break we're allotted at the tail end of completing all our tasks and chores, the fulfillment of all our obligations. It's the rest we take smack-dab in the middle of them, without apology, without guilt, and for no better reason than God told us we could.²⁶

If we wait for the work to be completely finished before we can rest, we will never enter rest. The powerful lesson is that God remains at work on the Sabbath—in us. Listen to something interesting from the creation story: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished. . . . And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done” (Gen. 2:1–2 NRSV). Note, first, that God “works.” When humanity works, we are imitating God. Work is not only a human activity—it is also a divine action. But there is a mystery in this story: God “finished” his work on the sixth day and then “finished” it on the seventh. How can God finish something on two different days? Heschel calls this the “puzzle” of the text.²⁷ Theologian Nathan Stucky unpacks this seemingly confusing passage: “The text suggests that on the seventh day, creation is both finished and unfinished. . . . Creation remains incomplete or unfinished. God finishes creation on the seventh day, not by way of further creative activity but by way of God’s own rest and the implied invitation to all creation to participate in God’s rest.”²⁸ God had finished his work on day six, yet it was not complete until day seven, when he provided creation with *menukhah*, the rest of God.

The lesson of this paradox is beautiful: work is never actually complete without rest.

Early on, I experienced something extraordinary and unusual in my Sabbath-keeping. When I skipped a Sabbath, my week would go by in the blink of an eye, and I would be far less productive. It seems counterintuitive: the more days I had to work, the less I accomplished. But when I *did* Sabbath, it was as though God stretched my time. I once heard that some Jewish mystics believed that when we take a day of rest, as a gift, God literally stretches our time on the six days we do not work. I don’t know exactly how it works, but I can say from experience that it was almost as though God was finishing my work. He was putting the finishing touches on that which I had been doing all week long. It was as though God were multiplying the fish and the loaves of my work. Not only would there be enough—it was like there were leftovers.²⁹

I once encountered a story that illustrated this. There is a legend that says that when the Oregon Trail was brimming with prairie schooners, those who kept a Sabbath arrived in the Oregon territory sooner. The ones who did not keep a Sabbath arrived much later.³⁰ When we entrust our responsibilities to God and rest, God puts his finishing touches on our work.

Sabbath is not God stepping away from creation or from us.³¹ Sabbath is God finishing us, fulfilling us. This teaches us a lesson, does it not? Unreflective creativity and impulsive labor is not the work that God honors—that is merely anxious “sweating from the brow.” To work and toil and strive and never take a moment to stop and enjoy it all is living under the curse

rather than God's promise. Reflective labor, however, is at the heart of God. The ultimate work is the work of God in our lives. Martin Luther writes of Sabbath, "The spiritual rest which God especially intends in this commandment is that we not only cease from our labor and trade but much more—that we let God alone work in us and that in all our powers we do nothing of our own."³² Sabbath is the day that we rest in God's presence even when our to-do lists are not even close to done. We choose to enter rest even before the work is complete. Why? Sabbath is not a reward for a job well done. Sabbath is the result of a world that is oriented toward a good and generous and loving God.³³

What is work, and what is rest? This is a very important question to ask. Jesus, of course, kept a Sabbath. Luckily, alongside practicing Sabbath, Jesus taught a great deal about Sabbath. Every generation has certain issues and questions it wrestles with. Perhaps the most controversial conversations in our time are about sexuality and racial injustice. In Jesus's time, however, cultural conversations were often about the Sabbath. Jesus dealt with the popular issues of the first century, refusing to skirt around them. So it should not be surprising how many conversations about the Sabbath Jesus willingly entered: "What is Sabbath?" "What is work?" "What can one do on the Sabbath?" Among the religious classes of his time—particularly the Pharisees and Sadducees—there was great consternation and disagreement over these questions. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" they asked at one point (Matt. 12:10). Is one to save a sheep if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, as Matthew 12:11 suggests? Is picking heads of grain work, or can it be done on the Sabbath day, as Matthew 12:1–8 and Mark 2:23–28 discuss? Conversations around these particular questions were quite heated largely because Sabbath observance was one of the main ways a Jewish person in the first century demonstrated to the world and their community that they were indeed Jewish.

In those days, great attention was devoted to the question of what was work and what was not work. This question is illustrated in what was called *melachah*, or the thirty-nine categories of work, a list the rabbis wrote to spell out what was forbidden on the Sabbath day. The list included the following:

- kneading
- baking
- slaughtering animals
- hammering

- dyeing wool and weaving
- performing strenuous activity
- traveling
- worrying
- earning money
- tying a knot
- plowing
- planting or harvesting
- lighting or extinguishing fire
- cutting fingernails
- writing more than one letter of the alphabet
- boiling eggs
- putting out a lamp
- getting a haircut up to an hour before afternoon prayers before the Sabbath so that if the scissors broke, they would need to be fixed³⁴

Many of these were connected to biblical commands. For example, the prohibition against lighting a candle is derived directly from Exodus 35:3. Others, however, were not biblically rooted. Even today there are many Sabbath prohibitions that surpass the biblical commands. In Jerusalem today there are "Sabbath elevators," in which people do not have to stop at floors other than the desired one. Sabbath elevators are not derived from any biblical mandate. This invention came out of a culture that was formed by these lists. These rules may seem extreme to us, yet they articulate how serious this conversation was in the first century.

The same question presses today: What constitutes Sabbath rest, and what constitutes work? Jesus, again, offers us clear teaching on this particular question. In Mark 3:4, Jesus asks a question that summarizes the purpose of the Sabbath: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" Sabbath is, for Jesus, about doing good and not evil, saving life, not killing. Our family has summed it up like this: Is the activity in question life giving, or is it life taking? That is, does it bring us life, rest, hope, wholeness? Or does it drain us, pour us out, stress us, or load us down?

Instead of asking "Is this allowed on the Sabbath?" the question we should ask ourselves is "Is this day full of *menukkah*?" Sabbath is a day we are to be free from work, toil, and productive activity. In short, it is a day we are no longer trying to improve the world. John Murray points out that "Sabbath

... is not defined in terms of cessation from activity, but cessation from the kind of activity involved in the labours of the other six days.”³⁵ The question is not always what we are doing but what we are ceasing doing. Tilden Edwards adds, “If its intent signifies human power over nature, if it shows human mastery of the world by the purposeful and constructive exercise of intelligence and skill, then it is *meluchah*, work, that violates the restful intent of Sabbath time to recognize our dependence on God as ultimate Creator and Sustainer.”³⁶ The pressing issue is the *purpose* behind the activity. Why is it being done? Yet God is the only one who can discern the hearts of people. Why does God reprimand Sarah alone when both she and Abraham had laughed at God for the promise of a child in old age (Gen. 17:17; 18:12)? Why is Abel’s sacrifice acceptable to God and yet Cain’s is not? Because God alone knows the purposes of the human heart.

Does this mean that we should refuse to help others on the Sabbath? By no means. Emergencies happen on the Sabbath. This is a particularly important question in pastoral ministry. Emergencies arise in the life of a church. So what are guiding principles for when to help or when not to help?

First, we must recognize that “Sabbath emergencies” will happen. They do to everyone. They did to Jesus. They will to us. And it is important to recognize that the “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). It was on a Sabbath day that my grandfather passed away. Because our phones were off, my mother-in-law had to drive to our house to inform us that he had died. Emergencies do happen on the Sabbath. And we must remember that the Sabbath exists to serve us, not the other way around.

Sabbath is a benevolent servant but a malevolent master. Through properly understanding our relationship to it, we learn to resist legalistically closing ourselves off from acts of compassionate love toward others needing help. The Jewish tradition, in light of this, speaks of the “necessary works” of the Sabbath—being the Sabbath acts of care and compassion toward others.³⁷ Crises happen on the Sabbath. We will need to attend to them. Jesus, we find, cast out demons and healed the lame on the Sabbath. This has direct import to our lives today. For example, if a storm hits on the Sabbath, is a farmer expected to ignore the needs of his animals? Or should he not care for a crop in bad weather, though his livelihood depends on it? For a pastor, what if someone loses a family member on the Sabbath? Situations like these create a need for discernment. This much is true: Sabbath is no hall pass from responsibility or compassion. We will learn to care for people, animals, and crops in a discerning and sensitive way. The underlying principle is that we are called to be more faithful to Jesus than we are to the rules of the Sabbath. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. Thus we act in obedience both by resting

and caring for others. I have often wondered whether, in the parable of the good Samaritan, the Jewish priest passing by the man robbed on the Jericho road was late to some Sabbath engagement. The Sabbath should never be a disengagement from the love of neighbor.

Second, not every disturbance on the Sabbath is a "Sabbath emergency." Our technological society allows us to be reachable at any and all moments of the day. As a result, we are pressured to be perpetually available. What should we do when our phones are in our pockets all the time? In our family, one of us will leave our phone on during the Sabbath in case of an emergency. More often than not, my wife will leave her phone on. She discerns whether an issue that arises is indeed a legitimate emergency or something to which a response can wait. Discerning the difference between a legitimate Sabbath emergency and something that can wait is an art form acquired over time. In my work, two parishioners in a relational spat is not an emergency. An elder needing to talk through a finer point of theology is not an emergency. A conversation about a roommate who needs to do the dishes better is not an emergency. I learned long ago that if I am needed to help resolve everyone else's "emergency," then I am discipling people to be more dependent on me than on God and even on each other. Thus, if I am compelled to respond to every pressing need, I am creating a context in which my parishioners have an unhealthy relationship of dependence on me. The result: I start developing an overinflated sense of my importance. The longer I have kept a Sabbath, the more I have found that *not* answering nonemergency Sabbath issues actually releases people to grow in their dependence on God and on other people in the community. Again, Sabbath is ministry. My Sabbath-keeping helps others learn to minister to one another.

Psalm 92, known as the "Psalm of the Sabbath Day," is deeply edifying in this regard. The psalm was written to be read on the Sabbath day and was used in public worship as God's people gathered to praise the God of Sabbath. While reading it, one is struck by the immediate presence of God. The psalm, writes Norman Wirzba, demonstrates a strong "contrast to our current stressful, exhausting, death-wielding ways."³⁸ It overflows with thankfulness, praise, a strong declaration of the love and mercy of God, rejoicing with songs and with instruments, looking on God's works with joy, and trusting in God's justice. As we think about what to do and not do on the Sabbath, we should be quick to realize that our question should be less about certain activities and more about how we are posturing our hearts. Psalm 92 invites us to bow low and love the God of Sabbath.

What defines work? And rest? Our hearts. Are we entering into trust and love and peace and goodness? Are we being thankful? Can we be still? Sabbath

invites us into the freedom of God's love. Hear the psalmist's invitation: "It is good to praise the LORD, and make music to your name, O Most High" (Ps. 92:1).

QUESTIONS for Reflection

- ★ • How might Sabbath be a way of resisting the instinct to worship work?
- ★ • Can you identify areas of your own life where work or achievement have served either as a numbing agent or as what provided your identity?
- How might your work be driven by either fear or purpose?
- Why did God give the law of Sabbath rest?
- What do you think about rest being a way to worship God?
- How might admitting your own needs allow you to care for the needs of your community?
- What needs of yours are currently unmet?
- ★ • What are the rhythms of your life saying to the world around you? Do they indicate that you serve a God of grace or that you serve at the altar of workaholism?
- Have you experienced a time when God did the seemingly impossible when you entrusted something to him (like God stretching time)?

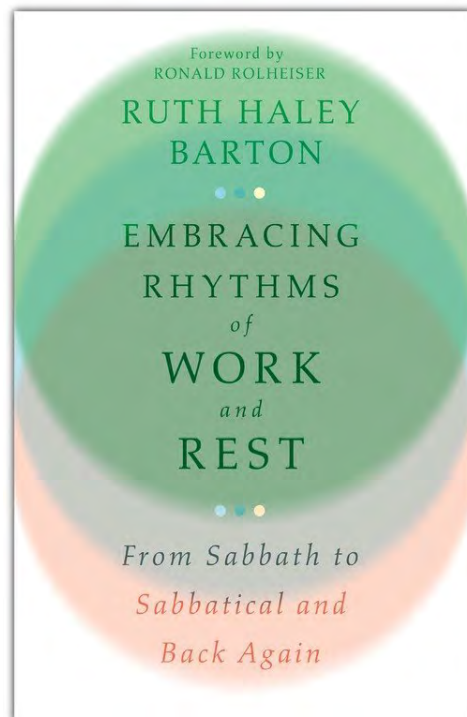
Reading Guide

Lesson 6: Big Read

*Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest:
From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again*

by Ruth Haley Barton

pp. 95-111, (Chapter 8: Shaping Sabbath)



SHAPING SABBATH



*Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes,
it is the pause that transforms.*

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

*Coming back to sabbath is
you can savor or
God's reflection*

I AM A BETTER PERSON on the sabbath. I am not as stressed. I move slower, talk slower, and listen better. I am kinder, more patient, more loving, and more grateful—for the big things and the small things. I am more in love with my life and the people God has given me than on any other day of the week. Somehow, in a way I cannot explain, I come back to myself and to what's most important. I sink and settle into the gifts of my life and savor them with abandon.

I am really not sure how all this happens, but on the sabbath I am more at home in my humanity, more satisfied, and less driven. I am insanely happy to putz around and just *be*, letting the day unfold. In this quieter, slower pace with fewer distractions, I am often able to plumb the deeper well at the center of my being, and from that place say true things to God—things

that surprise me, things that need more time in order to come to the surface and form themselves into words, things that keep my relationship with God true, fresh, and alive.

It amazes me, really, that a person who is as driven and dis-tractable as I am, can settle in like this, and I know the ability to do this only comes now after years of practice and pressing through the hard parts. Truly, I wish I could be the person I am on the sabbath all the time!

To what can we attribute all this betterment? While most of us have heard about sabbath and have maybe even attempted it to some extent, I'm not sure we fully understand how trans-formative and essential it is. It is a spiritual practice that opens us to God's transforming work, enabling us to be the kind of people we want to be on this earth. If we understood this, I think we would take it more seriously.

Like all spiritual disciplines, sabbath-keeping is a means of grace—a way of opening to the transforming work of God beyond anything we can accomplish for ourselves. I cannot will myself to be the person I experience myself to be on the sabbath, but I can open myself to it so God can come in and do what only God can do. As Rabbi Heschel puts it, "Every seventh day a miracle comes to pass, the resurrection of the soul."

FREE TO BE

So, what does sabbath-keeping actually form in us, not only as individuals but as communities of faith? What are we freed for? We are freed to love and be loved, to experience ourselves valued and blessed just for being. Free to delight in gifts that money can't buy and experience them as being enough. Free to rest ourselves in God and live on God's own terms for us. Most

of us don't even know what to do with that much freedom and it can be quite life changing!

One of the main things we are freed for on the sabbath is to simply be human—to honor the body's need for rest, the spirit's need for replenishment, and the soul's need to delight itself in God for God's own sake. It begins with the willingness to acknowledge the limits of our humanness and to live more graciously within the order of things. And the first order of things is that we are creatures living in the presence of our Creator, the One who knows and loves us better than we know and love ourselves. *This is especially important for leaders* who, in a celebrity culture, are often put on pedestals and seen as superhuman. Even though other people might insist on seeing us as superhuman, we know better and simply must put a stop to it—at least on the sabbath.

By establishing a sabbath practice, we affirm and accept the fact that God is the only one who is infinite, and we are finite. This means we live within the physical limits of time and space, strength and energy. There are limits to our relational, emotional, mental, and spiritual capacities. By being faithful to a sabbath practice, we are saying in a very concrete way, "God is the only one who can be all things to all people; I am not. God is the only one who can be in two places at once; I am not. God is the one who never sleeps; I am not."

Our resistance and/or our dismissive attitude toward sabbath is often related to an unwillingness to acknowledge and live within the limits of our humanity, to honor our finiteness, to confront the nasty lie that we are indispensable. On some level we may be convinced that the world cannot go on without us, even for a day. Or we might believe there are certain tasks and activities that are more significant than the delights that God

is wanting to share with us on this day. Like the Israelites, we struggle to believe that God can and will provide for us if we stop for one day doing all we think is needed to provide for ourselves. This is a grandiosity we indulge to our own peril.

Sabbath, on the other hand, marks out a path that enables us to live humbly within the limits of being human by letting go of our relentless human striving at least one day a week so we can nurture our human being-ness versus our human doing.

This becomes our confession each and every time we enter in: *I am human. I am finite. I have limits. Thank you, God, for the rhythms you put in place for my good.*

Can't you just feel the freedom contained within these statements? Why not stop and practice saying them out loud right now?

A SPIRITUALITY OF LIMITS

There is something deeply spiritual about honoring the limitations of our existence as human, physical bodies in a world of time and space. There is a peace that descends on our lives when we accept what is real rather than always pushing beyond our limits. There is something about being gracious and accepting and gentle with ourselves once a week that enables us to be gracious and accepting and gentle with others too. There is a freedom that comes from being who we are in God, resting in God and resting with God, that eventually enables us to bring something truer to the world than all of our relentless striving. We touch something more real in ourselves and others than what we are all able to produce. We touch our very being in God that carries with it limits that are part of God's original act of making us, which he called 'good.']

Our limits are not a surprise to God, nor are they a disappointing they don't exist or pushing beyond them in ways that are detrimental to self and others is as old as the creation narrative; to accept our finiteness and live graciously within the particularity of how we have been created is to actually honor the One who made us.

This is what we witnessed in the radical choice American gymnast Simone Biles made during the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. An athlete who has routinely seemed to defy limits, Biles came to the realization that she had hit up against real limits, so she pulled out of four Olympic finals—she knew she was “off” mentally and needed to prioritize her mental health. Having come into the Tokyo games under immense pressure to win five gold medals, she had been haunted for a week by the “twisties,” a condition affecting spatial awareness, and concluded that it would not be safe for her or helpful to her team for her to continue to compete. In an Instagram post she described what she was experiencing this way—“It’s honestly petrifying trying to do a skill but not having your mind and body in sync.”

In a stunning move that captivated us all, she prioritized attending to her mental well-being, eventually coming back to win one bronze medal. Commenting on the rationale for her decision she said, “We’re not just entertainment; we’re humans. And there are things going on behind the scenes that we’re also trying to juggle as well, on top of sports.” Not only was she experiencing the stress of performing well, but she was also dealing with the aftereffects of going public about team doctor Larry Nassar’s sexual abuse of the athletes under his care. As one of the young girls who had been abused, she was a leading

voice in seeking to confront the systems that allowed this to happen and bring him to justice. This is the stuff of being human, and really, how much can one person take?

Biles did not come home with a fistful of gold medals, but standing on the podium with a bronze medal hanging around her neck, it was clear that twenty-four-year-old Biles had claimed something even more valuable—respect for her existence as a human being, not just a human doing. In reflecting later on this choice, she said, “It was something that was so out of my control, but the outcome I had at the end of the day, my mental and physical health is better than any medal.”

Time will tell how history remembers her, but what do you think Simone Biles will be remembered for—the number of medals she earned in these particular Olympic games or the self-respect she demonstrated by acknowledging her limitations and prioritizing her long-term health and well-being over risking her life to perform in the expected ways? As past stories were recalled of young gymnasts who were paralyzed or in other ways gravely injured because they and those around them didn’t know when to stop pushing, USA Gymnastics said in their statement, “We remain in awe of Simone, who continues to handle this situation with courage and grace.” Awe, yes. We are in awe of a young woman who knows more about limits at twenty-four years old than many of us who are still pushing beyond limits rather than allowing them to inform our decisions in life-saving ways.

Sabbath shows us how to move beyond lamenting our limits as liabilities to embracing them as gifts that are part and parcel of being human—an aspect of our created selves that God actually intended and called good. This may be a new thought for

some of us. *My human limitations as a gift? Really? I’m so used to apologizing for my limitations and always trying to keep them under wraps!*

But what if the reality of limits really is part of how God created us that God pronounced good? What if important aspects of the will of God are contained within our limitations? What difference would it make if we believed this? And what would that mean in terms of how we might prioritize sabbath as a practice for helping us do exactly that? In his book *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News*, Kelly Kapic offers these questions to help us reflect on our limitations as gifts and sources of insight about the human experience:

What does it mean that we are creatures and not God?

What does it mean that we have *these* talents and resources and not *all* talents and resources? What does it mean that we are finite, particular, and rooted, and not infinite, universal, or standing above all local circumstances? Answering these questions honestly will change how we imagine the world, ourselves, our relationship to God and others.

I could not agree more.

SAYING NO SO WE CAN SAY YES

The heart of God’s intention for sabbath-keeping is that there would be this regular rhythm of ceasing our work for the purpose of resisting cultural influence and personal drivenness, so we can live on God’s own terms for us. God knows we need a regular rhythm of rest, worship, and delight, so everything

we choose to do and not do on sabbath should correspond to those categories. Sabbath is shaped by what we say no to, what we say yes to, and in what spirit. As we shape our sabbath time, there are several categories we would do well to exclude from our sabbath-keeping.

Work. It is important to be very thoughtful and discerning about what constitutes work for us and commit to not doing these things on the sabbath. This will take trial and error so never beat yourself up if, in your explorations, you try something that ended up feeling like work when you thought it was going to be restful and replenishing. And it will be helpful to identify the challenges and temptations related to your work specifically and your own tendencies so you can establish clear boundaries to protect sabbath time.

The greatest challenge for me in the beginning was having a home office, because it meant my work was easily accessible all the time. Since the Covid-19 pandemic there are more and more of us in this situation, and I have already told you about putting St. Francis in front of my office door! Another consequence of the advent of the computer and cellphone is that these devices allow us to work from anywhere, which has made it almost impossible to establish clear boundaries between work and home, work and family time, work and rest. The great temptation to check email, text messages, and social media (just once) or to try to get writing and speaking prep done (just a little) is a constant because the possibility is right there all the time.

As I struggled with my practice and experimented with “checking just once,” I noticed that computers and communications technology carried me back into work mode and constant stimulation that is deadening to my spirit. The smartphone

carries me back into constant connectivity, checking to be sure I haven’t missed anything, with push notifications and news *coming at me* versus me having control over what I want to see and when, not to mention the rabbit holes they take me down. These things might serve a good purpose during the work week, but in the context of sabbath they are a real intrusion and do not help us enter into and maintain the restful posture we so desperately need.

We might also pay attention to whether or not a particular activity kicks up our activism, our addiction to productivity, or our feelings of indispensability. Yard work may be restful for some, but for others, it may be a way to check something off the to-do list, which is really not what sabbath is about. Real discernment of spirit is needed to recognize these inner dynamics and make sabbath decisions accordingly.

Buying and selling. On principle, if we are out buying, selling, and engaging in the world of commerce, we are feeding our consumerism, which is another aspect of life in our culture that needs a rest on the sabbath. The world of commerce functions to entice us into thinking we need things we don’t really need and to convince us to buy things we can’t really afford. It is a world designed to keep us overstimulated so we are never satisfied nor able to delight in the gifts of God that money cannot buy. To abstain from being a consumer one day a week sensitizes us to the more substantive gifts of God in our lives, fostering contentment instead of consumerism. This is another place where sabbath becomes a form of resistance because we are actively resisting a culture of consumption that grounds human value and identity in achievement and possession. In addition, if we refrain from buying and selling on the sabbath,

we are not supporting the system that forces others to work on the sabbath.

Worry and emotional stress. There are more kinds of work than just physical work. There is also the emotional and mental hard work we engage in all week, trying to figure everything out in our lives and make it all work. Sabbath is an invitation to rest emotionally and mentally from engaging aspects of life that cause worry and stress—like taxes, budgets, to-do lists, event planning, major decision-making, conflict resolution, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and so on. If we observe sabbath from Saturday evening to Sunday evening, perhaps Sunday evening after dinner is a time when, from a more rested place, we can engage the harder conversations and decision making that do need to be done, but just not when we are trying to rest. And we can also make plans for the next week so that we are not caught unprepared for Monday morning.

Technology. Given all we have discussed regarding technology, consider how you will limit or eliminate it as part of your sabbath practice. I do not want to tell you what to do about technology as much as I want to give you a way to think about technology—and that has to do with noticing what happens inside you with different kinds of technology. Here is how my good friend Bob Fryling has paid attention to this in his own life and practice:

I take a defined break from electronic and commercial stimulation on the sabbath because I need to have a clean break from my weekday thoughts and activities. One particularly difficult choice for me was with respect to watching sports on television. Because I like to do so, I

used to think that watching a baseball or football game was a relaxing activity and sometimes it is—unless you are a Cubs fan! But when I was really honest with myself, I realized that often after a three-hour involvement with not only the game, but all the replays and the hyped up commentary, I was emotionally tired whether my team won or not. If they won I was excited and if they lost I was discouraged, but either way I was emotionally depleted. I was entertained but I was not rested.

I do not want to impose my disciplines on others, as we all need to sort out for ourselves what is restful and what is not. But even as a sports fan, I do think there is a level of idolatry and time consumption with sports that robs our souls of energy and spiritual vitality. Of course, there are idolatries for non-sports fans, like excessive shopping or movie watching that seem relaxing at first but can also weary our bodies and souls. The issue is not to be legalistic for each other but to be attentive to what is truly restful and provides the environment for a quiet heart.

SAYING YES TO REPLENISHMENT

So then, what is to replace all that we are excluding from our sabbath time? The simple answer is, whatever delights and replenishes you—body, mind, and soul. Here are some categories and ways of thinking about planning for replenishment.

Resting the body. What activities rest and replenish your body? The invitation of sabbath time is to replace the time you would normally spend working, shopping, and checking things off your to-do list with activities that rest and restore your physical self: wearing comfortable clothes, taking a nap, going for a walk or a

bike ride, enjoying a hot shower or a long bubble bath just because it feels so good, eating your favorite foods (no dieting on the sabbath), sitting in the sun or lying in the grass, lighting candles, listening to beautiful music, making love. (As a side note, in Jewish tradition married couples get rabbinical brownie points for making love on the sabbath and double brownie points for making love twice. You've gotta' love a religion like that!)

Resting the mind, replenishing the spirit. Another sabbath invitation is to rest your hardworking mind and pay attention to what replenishes your spirit, choosing only those activities that delight you and bring you joy. Obviously, what falls in this category will be highly personal to each one of us, but it is the most amazing thing to have permission to get in touch with what delights you and to only do those things on this day, knowing God is in it. Pay close attention to activities that merely stimulate you or become filler and those that actually replenish you—in other words, those that leave you with more energy rather than feeling drained. Television and most things technological are not really replenishing; they are merely distractions from God's more meaningful gifts.

My favorite thing to do on the sabbath is so simple: I have a couch in my office that is really comfortable right in front of a sunny window facing a garden. I love to lie on that couch under a quilt (not a blanket but a quilt, because I love the weight and feel of them) and read a book for pleasure. On a really good sabbath I will get to do this for several hours. The couch itself is very comfortable and restful for my body and I savor how good that feels. Plus, I have many symbols and religious artifacts in my office that delight me and speak to me about God's presence with me. In fact, I have a bronze plaque hanging there that

simply says "Beloved" that my friend Vicki gave me, and on the sabbath I savor the fact that I am beloved—by her and by God! Since I love words but spend so much time working with words, reading for the sheer pleasure of it is the most delicious thing I could choose—novels, poetry, or a spiritual book for my own soul that I do not plan to share with others right away for any sort of ministry purpose. I also love it when different members of my family come into that space just to sit and talk quietly with me. There is rarely this kind of spaciousness during the work week and since it is so rare, it is one of the most precious things that ever happens to me. It replenishes me someplace deep inside.

Restoring the soul. The soul is the part of us that gets most lost during the work week, which is governed almost completely by the value of productivity. Perhaps the deepest refreshment is the invitation to renew your soul by *being with God with what is*, trusting God to keep working even while you're resting, and engaging the life-giving presence of God through prayer, worship, and quiet reflection. Of course, you will want to incorporate worship with your faith community, but you may also find it replenishing to incorporate more personal ways of lifting your soul to God. As an individual you might be able to spend some extra time in silence and prayer, take a slow, meditative walk, or read a spiritual book God has been using in your life and then journal about it. You might also do an extended version of the *examen*, looking back over your whole week to notice where God was present, where God felt absent, where God was at work transforming you (praise God!), and where you might have been caught in a place of un-freedom and you need to confess something to God. You may want to give particular attention to those things you are grateful for (which will lead

to private worship) or an experience or a Scripture from the past week that caught your attention because God seemed to have something to say in and through it. It is an amazing thing to have space to listen, ponder, and make meaning.

As a family (if children are old enough), consider maintaining a quieter and more spacious feeling in your home for at least part of the day. Pay attention to how you can express love to each other on this day. Identify rituals or shared activities that create a spirit of reverence for God and enjoyment of each other. Share a special meal preceded by the lighting of candles and a Scripture reading. Over dinner go around the table and share where God seemed particularly present with you during the week. Turn off the TV and talk with each other. Take a walk together, play games, write or call long-distance loved ones. Open your home to friends, family, or neighbors.

A FLOATING SABBATH?

Invariably when the topic of sabbath comes around, someone will ask, "Is it okay to have a 'floating sabbath'?" This is a question that warrants care and great sensitivity because some professions (the medical profession, restaurant workers, retail sales, etc.) require floating the sabbath to different days of the week or month because schedules change regularly. I do not want to tend at all toward legalism, and this is a place where Jesus' statement, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27), really does apply. Since Jesus is Lord of the sabbath *and* the sabbath is made for us in whatever vocational situation we find ourselves in, Jesus can guide us in intimate ways toward solutions that honor God and honor our human needs. That said, establishing a regular

rhythm of sabbath-keeping is important if there is any way at all to swing it. And here's why.

As we observed earlier, human bodies and souls respond well to regular rhythms and, in fact, are accustomed to living in seasonal rhythms and daily rhythms. Part of the delight and restful feeling of sabbath is knowing that it is always coming in consistent intervals so we're not having to make decisions about it every week. When sabbath is observed on different days every week, we actually add a stressor to our lives—figuring out week by week when the sabbath is going to be. If we are practicing as a family, we might have to call a family summit every time it comes to planning our sabbath!

A floating sabbath also means there will be weeks when we go longer than seven days without rest and the needed break from the intensity and pressure of work and life in our culture; we risk drifting into dangerous levels of exhaustion and an inner life that is a pressure cooker ready to blow. Wayne Muller drives this point home:

Because we do not rest we lose our way. We miss the compass points that would show us where to go, we bypass the nourishment that would give us succor. We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom. We miss the joy and love born of effortless delight. Poisoned by the hypnotic belief that good things come only through unceasing determination and tireless effort, we can never truly rest. And for want of rest our lives are in danger.

Grace abounds for situations that do not allow for regularity, and God can find us and replenish us even if we can't establish regular sabbath patterns. But as you think about incorporating

sabbath into your life, if at all possible, try to establish a regular rhythm. You'll be glad you did!

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

Beginnings and endings matter, so if there is any way you can have a clear beginning to sabbath and a clear ending, that would be most helpful—for your own psyche and for your shared experience with others. For the Hebrews, sabbath began on Friday night with the lighting of candles and a special meal. For many of us, sabbath would likely begin on Saturday night, extending into Sunday, and this is a great way to begin if you can make it work. I love the way Wayne Muller describes a beginning ritual: "Light a candle, alone or with friends. Let each of you speak about those things that are left to do, and as the candle burns, allow the cares to melt away. Do not be anxious about tomorrow, said Jesus. The worries of today are sufficient for today. Whatever remains to be done, for now, let it be."

Given my history, I do have concern about how much of the work of preparing for the sabbath might fall to the women of the house, making sabbath something less than restful for them. We need to be careful about this and make sure everyone shares in the work of preparing. For sabbath to work for everyone, the whole family needs to help. Do not let the table setting, the shopping, and the cleanup fall to one person. Consider going out sometimes if preparations don't get made in time. Meals could be more simple with food that has been bought and mostly prepared before sabbath begins. For families who enjoy cooking together, preparing food could be a wonderful way of spending time together—one person grilling the steaks, someone else chopping vegetables, and others helping set the table. Even

though it might seem easier to do everything yourself, in the more relaxed environment of sabbath, involve young children who really enjoy the feeling of importance that comes from feeling like they have contributed. Or in a family with older children, have everyone contribute a specialty or a recipe they want to try. You could also make your special meal the dinner at the end of sabbath when everyone is rested and ready to enjoy the process of preparing and cooking together.

One of the best things we did with our family during the teen years was to make sure dinner on the sabbath was fantastic—with special foods we didn't usually buy and recipes we didn't usually make. Even if nothing else went quite right for our sabbath plans, knowing dinner would be extra-special pretty much guaranteed people found a way to be present for what oftentimes felt like a celebration.

"DO SOMETHING BEFORE YOU DO EVERYTHING"

This is one piece of advice I have found helpful in a multitude of situations, and it is in that spirit that I make this recommendation: determine that you will try one sabbath. Don't feel like you have to change your whole life—yet. Look out over the next six months on your calendar and pick *one day* that would work for you (and anyone you want to practice with) to set aside as your sabbath. (See appendix A for a worksheet that will help you shape your sabbath time.) Have faith that the God who calls you is faithful, and God will do it, no matter how impossible it may feel on a human level or how countercultural it is. If no one else in your life is ready to try it with you, determine that you will try it for yourself. The only person you can control is you—and who knows what might happen if you follow God in this way?

