

When was the last time you felt truly rested? Not just after a decent night's sleep, but at both a physical and soul level, renewed and rejuvenated, tank on full? For some of us it's been weeks...months... maybe since the last vacation... maybe so long we can't even remember. Resting well is not one of the strong suits of our culture or society. We often greet one another by saying, "How are you doing?" The most common answer to that question is, "Good," or, "Fine." But the second most common answer is, "Busy." *So busy. Crazy busy.* That's our normal. Our calendars are always so full. We end up rushed, fatigued, thin, running on fumes. But that is not the way God designed us to live, always busy, scurrying from one commitment to the next. He loves us too much for that, so much that at the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis, he gave us a gift called Sabbath, for rest, renewal, rejuvenation, and worship.

Sometimes when people hear about Sabbath, they are instantly defensive, reluctant to let anyone poke around in their calendar. We want to do what we want to do when we want to do it. Hands off my calendar! We don't want anything super-imposed on us. That's why it's so helpful to be reminded of how Jesus spoke about the Sabbath during his earthly ministry. Do you know that Jesus was confronted more for the way he practiced and taught about the Sabbath than anything else in his life or ministry? There were religious leaders who were extremely legalistic, coming up with a long list of 39 rules of all the things you weren't supposed to do on the Sabbath, and they demanded everyone do it how they thought was right, and it was legalistic and exhausting. But Jesus came and reminded us: "Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27). God designed us. God knows our operating systems inside and out. God knows that we can't live in a continual cycle of production and output. We need rest, so he made the Sabbath and gave it to us as a gift, one we really need to give attention to these days!

We live in a time in history when people are more stressed, more anxious, more depressed, more exhausted, more disconnected than ever. The rise has been startling, and it happens to correlate with the fact that we live in a time in history when people are less likely than ever to take a day for rest, worship, renewal, and rejuvenation. The fall off has been precipitous. We live in the most stressed, anxious, and exhausted generation in history. At the same time, fewer people than ever practice Sabbath. Any athlete who spends a lot of time in the gym knows the importance of a rest day. It's essential not only for recovery and injury prevention, but also to build strength. Even in the Indy 500, when the cars are going 200 miles an hour, they must pull into the pit to get their tanks filled and their tires replaced. You can't keep going and going and going without pulling into the pit! What's true of the body and what's true of a car is also true of a soul. Maybe God knew what he was doing when he wove rest into the fabric of creation. God designed us to need rest, and he created a day just for it! "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done" (Genesis 2:2-3).

Let's look at few simple observations from these opening words of the Bible.

God observed the Sabbath day. "On the seventh day God rested from all his work." The word translated "rested" is the Hebrew word "shābat," from which we get our word "Sabbath." It simply means to cease, to stop, to rest. Of course, God is God, so he doesn't stop and rest on the seventh day because he's tired. God isn't fatigued and in need of a nap. God is stopping to observe all he

created and enjoy a job well done. For six days he created a temple; on the seventh instead of working, he filled the temple and sat down on the throne.

God blessed the Sabbath day. God looked at day seven, the day he himself rested, and blessed it. “Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy,” which in Hebrew carries a meaning of filling the day with life-giving power, favor, and abundance. The seventh day is a gift that keeps on giving, a gift that continually provides and unlocks other gifts. A few years ago, someone gave us a small strawberry plant and we put it in our garden. The plant was the gift, and it continues to produce gifts spring after spring after spring. That’s what the Sabbath is like, a gift that keeps giving.

God consecrated the Sabbath day. He set the day apart and made it special. “Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” The other six days can be used any way you want—production, output, creating—but the Sabbath day is holy. It is for worship, rest, renewal, thanksgiving, family, friends, and community. It’s a different kind of day.

Sabbath appears on the first page of Scripture! It’s foundational to our understanding of theology, creation, humanity, and society. Our focus today is going to be simple and clear. We are going to talk about the purpose of Sabbath and the practice of Sabbath—why God gave us the Sabbath and how to keep a Sabbath. Let’s dive in.

The Purpose of Sabbath

Throughout the Scriptures there are three primary reasons given for the Sabbath. The first reason is rooted in Creation. This is spelled out in the ten commandments.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, your daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

How important is it for God that his people take a day for rest, worship, and renewal? He put it in the top ten, along with not worshipping idols, not killing each other, not stealing and not committing adultery—it made *that* list. There are 317 total words used in the ten commandments, and one third of them are given to the Sabbath. God spends more time spelling out the priority of the Sabbath and the purpose of the Sabbath than any other command! Did you notice how God himself grounds the practice of the Sabbath in creation?

- “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.”
- “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.”

In Genesis 1, we learned that God made us in his image, in his likeness. Because God is a God who both works and rests and we are made in his image, we were created and designed to both work and rest as well. God’s pattern of work and rest in creation is like the music to a song, and our lives are like the vocals. When our lives line up with the music—with the rhythm of work and rest in

creation—the song sounds just as God designed it to be. When our lives are out-of-sync with the rhythm of creation because we are refusing to rest, it's like a scratched-up CD that skips every few seconds. No one wants to hear that sound. We sabbath because of creation, because we were created in the image of a God who rests.

We also sabbath for celebration. In Deuteronomy God again communicated the ten commandments to his people, and this time, when he commanded them to rest, he gave a different rationale than in Exodus:

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God... Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:13-15)

God told his people one of the reasons for Sabbath is that they used to be slaves, slaves who were worked like dogs, treated like scum, and valued only based on what they could produce. They didn't get a day off. No PTO. No vacation time. No weekends. But they had been delivered, set free. God told them to take this day, every single week, and celebrate their salvation!

Sabbath has the same value for us in the New Covenant. God has not saved us from slavery or indentured servitude to Egypt, but he's saved us from an even worse taskmaster of slavery to sin. Before Jesus, we were in bondage to our sin and staring death and eternal punishment in the face with no hope. There was absolutely nothing we could do about it. But Jesus came and set us free! He died on the cross so we could be forgiven. He rose from the dead so we can have eternal life. So we stop, every single week, to look back on that salvation and celebrate what God had done for us in Jesus. We stop to remember the place we were at, remember what God has done for us, and say thank you! Without Jesus, we would be working to pay off our debt for eternity! That's why Christians worship and have our holy day on Sunday. The Jews practice the Sabbath on Saturday, the end of the week. From the earliest day of the church, Christians moved their day of worship and celebration to Sundays, because that was the day Jesus rose from the dead, that was the day Jesus set us free, that is the event we remember and celebrate!

Sabbath is grounded in creation, celebration and, finally, culmination. When God's people rest, we not only look back to creation and the cross, we look ahead. In Revelation 14:13, the angels in heaven said, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor.'" In many ways, all our life here on earth is work. We toil and labor and strive. But when this life is over, if we follow God, if we have placed our faith in Jesus, not in our work, but in his work on our behalf, we will be given true, complete, encompassing rest forever! "They will rest from their labor." When we practice Sabbath now, it's a foretaste of the ultimate Sabbath to come.

This is good news. Creation grounds us in the rhythm of creation, creates space for us to both celebrate our salvation and anticipate the culmination of all things! That's why God gave the Sabbath to us as a gift.

The Practice of Sabbath

That leads to a very practical question: How do we keep the Sabbath? What really matters for our lives is not that we understand the concept of the Sabbath but that we put into practice what we understand. There are many helpful comparisons between a tithe of our money and the practice of Sabbath. Tithing is giving 10% of our money to God. It's countercultural. It's costly. It's a huge commitment to say, "God, I am going to take you at your word and put you first." It's challenging to start doing. But once people start doing it, nearly across the board they say things like, "Tithing has invited God's favor on our finances." Or, "We've come to discover that 90% with God's blessing always seems to go a lot farther than 100% without his blessing." Or, "Tithing has helped break the bondage of greed and materialism in my life." What's true with honoring God with 10% of our finances correlates to honoring God with an entire day each week. A full day represents not 10% but 14% of your week. Trusting God with it, honoring God with it, putting him first with that day is countercultural, it can be challenging to start doing, you might have to say no to other things. But everyone I know who does it has a similar testimony: "Our Sabbath is now our favorite day of the week. Practicing a Sabbath has invited God's favor on our entire life. We've found that six days of productivity with God's blessing and favor goes a lot further than seven days without it." My mentor used to tell me, "If you can't get everything on your to-do list done in six days, you've made someone or something other than Jesus the Lord of your life."

We want Jesus to be Lord of our lives; we want to honor him and live the way he designed us to live. So what do we need to do? How do we practice the Sabbath? Before GPS, when people were traveling in unknown areas, they relied heavily on a compass with the four cardinal directions to guide them and help them make the right turns. I want to give you a compass for practicing Sabbath.

North (God)—When you Sabbath, the first and most important element is to focus on and incorporate God into your day. You are all doing that right now. For most of you, Sunday, at least Sunday morning, has become a sacred day, and the first thing you do is come to church to worship God, hear his word, receive communion, and connect with your creator and savior. Church is a perfect way to center on God, but you can also read Scripture, go on a prayer walk, go on a drive through the country with the windows down and listen to worship music, put some logs on the firepit, watch the stars come out, and revel in awe at creation—whatever avenues help your soul sing and feel connection to God.

South (Rest)—Sabbath literally means to rest, to stop, to cease, to pause. As you practice Sabbath, guard against work and production and commitments and anything that spreads you too thin. Your day of rest is a great day to sleep in. It's a great day to take a nap. It's a great day to not check email. It's a great day to not run errands. Anything that causes you stress or feels like work, save for the other six days. The Sabbath is not a day for checking tasks off the list. Rest. And don't do lazy rest. Try to be technology-light. It's not a day for binge-watching Netflix. That doesn't replenish your soul. It's not a day for scrolling on your favorite social apps for two hours. That distracts you and numbs you; it doesn't replenish you.

East (Renewal)—During the Sabbath you are turning off output and turning up input. Think about the things that bring you the most joy and know that you have a day every week to do them. A lot of people have learned to have a pejorative, negative view of the Sabbath, focusing on a long list of rules and all the prohibitions of what you cannot do. But the only reason the "don't do" list is there is so that, with all the "don't dos" out of the way, you can focus on all the things you can do that breathe life into your soul.

That's the magic and power of the Sabbath. If you hate cooking, don't do it on the Sabbath. But if you love cooking, make your favorite meal. I love a great steak. Preparing a steak dinner is one of my favorite activities on the Sabbath. If you hate running, don't do it on the Sabbath. If running makes you feel healthy and energized and alive, then go on a run. If you like gardening, don't do four hours of exhausting work, but spend 20-30 minutes doing enjoyable work. Find what renews you and do it! A coffee shop. A good book. A journal. A hammock. A golf course. A hunting blind. Know what renews you and fill your sacred day with those activities. This is what some pastors and theologians call "pleasure stacking." Do the things you love most on the day God gave you as a gift. Experience the presence and pleasure of God on this day he gave you as a gift!

West (People)—Sabbath isn't about getting away to a monastery and sitting in silence with God for 24 hours. It's about enjoying people and celebrating sacred time together. My favorite Sabbath practices in this season are wrestling with my kids, reading books to my kids, fishing with my kids, going on a walk with my wife, going to a friend's house for dinner and enjoying good conversation around a table, playing pickleball with a buddy. People are not only an expression of the image of God, but if they are Christians, then the Spirit of God lives inside of them, and you can feel close to God and built up by God by encountering the presence, grace, goodness, and love of God in them.

God is not a taskmaster who wants to burden us by forcing a Sabbath upon us. He's a loving father who wants to bless us with the gift of a Sabbath, a weekly reminder that our worth is not in our work, our identity is not in our productivity, and our hope is not in this world. Every week when we stop, we remind ourselves that one day, Jesus will return and we will enter perfect rest with him forever. Until then, we Sabbath as people who look back to creation, look up in celebration, and look forward to culmination and our eternal rest.