

Embracing Sabbath – The Cure for Runaway Souls



Our Lives Are in Danger

How many times day do you hear (or say yourselves), “I am so busy...” It is the sigh of our day. We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, as if our ability to withstand stress was a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others.

To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or to even notice the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single, mindful breath...this has become the model of success.

Wayne Muller writes, “Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something....anything...is better than doing nothing. Yet under the spell of speed, we are desperately in need of something sacred. Because we do not rest, we lose our way. Poisoned by this 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.” We are in need of a new sense of rhythm, a slowing, a Sabbath. Without such a Sabbath rhythm, we are often absent from our own existence.



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A Rhythm of Rest



All of creation operates on pre-established rhythms. There is a rhythm in our walking activity and the body’s need for sleep. There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into morning. There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter. There is the tidal rhythm between land and sea. There is the commanded rhythm between work and rest...that we look at today.

Sabbath keeping is the linchpin of a life lived in sync with the rhythms that God himself built into our world.Its rhythms match how we were created; only in its keeping can we truly flourish.

Just as Tithing keeps us from being greedy people, Sabbath keeps us from runaway souls. And like tithing, we wonder how we can make it on 90% only to find out in God’s economy, we have more than we need. So, too, with Sabbath...when we rest, everything gets done that needs to get done.

When my son was in college one of his secular history textbooks was titled, "World History & Cultures. In a chapter referencing the French Revolution it wrote: "To remove any remnant of religion from government, the Convention introduced a new calendar which removed Sundays, Easter, Christmas, and all other religious holidays. To avoid dating history by the birth of Christ, they declared the year 1792 to be the beginning of the Republic. Months were renamed, and weeks were declared to be 10 days long rather than 7. (They were named "Decades," with the tenth day of each day taking the place of Sunday.) It is said that people and even horses were physically unable to cope with ignoring God's law of one day of rest in every seven. The system was shortly abandoned as unworkable." (p. 310)

Rest was never meant to be a luxury...but a necessary.

Chinese pictograph for "busy" is composed of two characters....can you guess....*heart and killing*. Hurry kills everything from creativity to compassion.

The problem is....most of us know only one speed: full steam ahead. And we have been stuck in that speed for a very long time. If we do not establish saner rhythms in our own lives—life patterns that curb our unbridled activism and calm our compulsive busyness—we will not make it over the long haul.

When we keep pushing forward without taking adequate time for rest, our way of life may seem heroic, but there is frenetic quality to our work that lacks true effectiveness because we lose the ability to be fully present. Present to God and present to other people.

Most of us could nod in agreement again with Job in 3:26: "I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest but only turmoil."

Of course...The danger of all this endless dizzying haste is our bodies will suffer; our souls will suffer; our relationships....with God and with others....will suffer. Yet try to explain Sabbath to an overextended American....they will think you've gone mad!

The literal meaning of Sabbath in the Hebrew is "Stop it. Quit." It can also mean... to catch our breath. We are not only invited to join God in his work, but according to the 4th Commandment...we are invited to share in his rest.

Look at Exodus 20:8:



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Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days a week are set apart for your daily duties and regular work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day, no one in your household may do any kind of work, which includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock and any foreigners living among you, for in six days, the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea and everything in them, then He rested on the seventh day. That is why the Lord blessed the seventh day and set it apart as holy.

Sabbath was designed to be a gift for God's people. A rhythm of time, a rhythm of celebration that we can live in.

I know we don't use the term Sabbath...you don't have to be Jewish to observe the Sabbath any more than you don't have to be Jewish to love the Lord your God...love your neighbor as yourself...or not steal or commit murder.

...but it IS a concept we need to get our arms around if we are to be intentional about living into the abundant life Jesus promised us.

I think it is about an attitude and a heart...an orientation of the soul, if you will... that desires to enter into the rest of God.

Sabbath is set apart, distinct, from the regular patterns and habits of our week to celebrate and embrace God and the abundant life God offers.

It has to do with setting aside a day in which we live differently and we experience life differently. It means being set apart as people and setting apart time in a way that makes it different.

Menuha is the Hebrew word for rest, but it is better translated as joyous repose, tranquility, or delight...God didn't rest in the sense of taking a

nap or chilling out; instead, God celebrated and delighted in his creation.

It seems fitting that we should build into our days is a rhythm of rest, an intentional pausing that we might delight in God. Contrasted against the sorrows, struggles and pain of the other six days it stands out as "holy." "Holy simply means set aside, not lost in the sea of everything else." Sabbath is set apart, distinct, from the regular patterns and habits of our week to celebrate and embrace God and the abundant life God offers.

In the Jesus' six recorded clashes with the religious leaders over Sabbath keeping Jesus did not dispute the significance of the Sabbath. Instead he addressed appropriate behavior and embraced the qualities of it. For example, when the religious leaders accused Jesus and his disciples of breaking the Sabbath law for plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath, Jesus firmly establishes the foundation of Sabbath keeping: "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:23-27)

Sabbath is reiterated by Jesus, as a sheer gift; not something to which one must slavishly conform...

I like...Mark 3:1-6 - Jesus went to the synagogue again and noticed a man with a deformed hand. Since it was the Sabbath, Jesus' enemies watched Him closely. Would He heal the man's hand on the Sabbath? If He did, they planned to condemn Him. Jesus said to the man, "Come and stand in front of everyone." Then He turned to the critics and asked, "Is it legal to do good deeds on the Sabbath or is it a day for doing harm? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?" But they wouldn't answer Him. He looked around at them angrily because He was deeply disturbed by their hard hearts. Then He said to the man, "Reach out your hand." The man reached out his hand and it became normal again. At once, the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to discuss plans for killing Jesus.

Is this a day to save life or to destroy it? Jesus saved this man's life. Jesus was

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constantly healing on the Sabbath, whether it was a crippled paralyzed man on a mat or a blind man or a crippled woman, He was constantly healing people on the Sabbath because the Sabbath was about giving life to people.

Finally, look at Jesus' solution when life gets separated from its roots: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28) Sabbath rest is the cure to runaway souls and lives.

Look at Psalm 92, "A Psalm for the Sabbath," captures its spirit: "giving thanks, making music, declaring God's love and faithfulness, a spirit of gladness, a song of joy, exalting the Lord, celebrating God's justice, praising God's provision and power."

While not advocating a strict adherence to Jewish Sabbath as it is traditionally practiced, the focus is on the invitation of Jesus for abundant life. As a way of example, but certainly not prescribed, let me share some hints:

One is to plan for it. It has to be intentional. It will get gobbled up in the same hurried, frantic pace of the rest of the week if you don't plan for it. When my kids were growing up, I tried to protect Saturday night...no one allowed to stay out late. If Sabbath for you is Sunday and there's a big thing on Monday...get your work done on Saturday.

STORY: Louis Aggasiz, Harvard's renowned biologist, returned one September to his classroom and announced to his students that he had spent the summer traveling...he had managed, he said, to get halfway across his backyard. (p. 50)

Sabbath interrupts the break-neck speed of our lives. That might mean turning off your cell phone...(I thought I would hear one amen!)...shutting down the computer of laptop... If you have a problem doing that....it might be...well, a problem.

Secondly, It involves rest...without feeling guilty! Someone has said...“If you don’t give our body its Sabbaths, your body’s own system of checks and balances will take them back.” Take a nap. Sit in a lawn chair. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is sleep. Resist the urge to label this time as “wasteful.”


It is not, however, necessary to stop moving altogether. It is a matter of moving in different, more meaningful ways. It is a day where we not only rest, but where we clear away the bustle so to attend to God in a particular way...such as in community.

Here’s the deal: We do not rest because our work is done. If we only stop when we are finished with all our work, we will never stop--because our work is never completely done.... If we refuse rest until we are finished, we will never rest until we die. Sabbath dissolves the artificial urgency of our days, because *it liberates us from the need to be finished.*


One of the heroes from church history was a guy named Philip. You may not have heard of him but he was a good friend of Martin Luther’s and was one of the chief theologians of the Protestant Reformer. He was the heady guy, and he came to Luther one day and he said we shall discuss the governance of the universe. And Luther looked at him and said, “No, today, we will go fishing, and we will leave the governance of the universe to God.” Luther, who was in the midst of reformation, who was in the middle of receiving communication and attending inquisitions and translating the Bible into German chose to go fishing, to enjoy the rest of God.

Thirdly, it involves Delight – What brings you delight? Do that. This could mean doing one thing that brings pleasure and refreshes the soul. Read (for leisure, not self-improvement);eat (perhaps design special meals eaten only on Sabbath); go for a walk (a walk without a purpose, no need for insight or revelation); visit with friends; hike; read a Psalm or favorite Scripture; play music; enjoy nature; pray (prayer is like a mini-Sabbath); read the Bible (linger and savor it; read it differently than normal); play games with your kids; cultivate gratitude; do something pleasurable like write a poem, cultivate a garden or go for a long motorcycle ride on a hot day; gaze at the stars; lay in the grass; pay attention to the things you might have missed; pay attention to God’s presence and movement in your life; take a long hot bath with bubbles; extend forgiveness; or ask for forgiveness.

Fourth, involve family and friends. When we were in Israel 2 years ago, there were families at the hotel where we stayed who gathered in the main meeting room with lots



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of other families...there was dancing, singing, and celebration. They do that EVERY week! Sabbath is distinctly different than the rest of the week.

It has often been noted that it was not Israel that kept the Sabbath, but the Sabbath that



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kept Israel. Esp. during their times of exile, when they were immersed in a different culture, it was Sabbath keeping that reminded them of their true identity as God's people.

Invite a bunch of friends over, have dinner, play games, share with one another what God is doing in your lives. Celebrate the work of God in each other.



Finally, make sure to incorporate gratitude. Sabbath should help us slow down and appreciate the things of God, the ways of God, the blessings of God. And as we practice gratefulness, we enjoy Sabbath.

All of these rhythms create space for God, fostering an ability to bring something truer to the world than all of our doing. All of these rhythms put us in touch with something more real in ourselves than what we are able to produce... Surely that is what our families and the people around us need most.

Life is meant to be much differentfuller, richer, deeper, slower, from what it is. Sabbath is a gift to restore your runaway soul.

Father thank You so much that You have given us this gift of Sabbath. Forgive us for missing the opportunity. We know this is not about rules or something we have to do, it is about something we get to do. You have commanded us to give us permission to take a day and enjoy it. Help us to enter into your rest, help us to celebrate your provision and your creation. Help us experience your joy and your rest. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Reflection Questions:

What were Sundays like when you were growing up? Was it a special day you looked forward to?

What are your Sundays like now? What ceasing/stopping do you do? What resting/enjoying God and others do you do?

What might you need to change to observe the Sabbath more fully?

What expectations of others and/ or compulsions of your own could make it challenging to observe a weekly Sabbath? e.g. checking emails, work obligations, etc.

The Practical:

Discuss with your family (including kids and teens) how you might try to arrange your Sabbaths so everyone can do some of what is life giving, refreshing and delightful. Since some vocations require Sunday work, decide if your Sabbath will be a different day than Sunday.

Begin to practice Sabbath as best you can. Accept less than perfect. Keep practicing. Establish a rhythm. Enjoy.

Resources: For a group or individual study we recommend the following books/resources:

- *Sabbath* by Wayne Muller
- *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul By Restoring Sabbath* by Mark Buchanan
- *Sabbath* by Dan B. Allender
- For Families: *A Way In The World: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline* by Ernest Boyer Jr. & *Making Sunday Special*, by Karen Burton Mains