

SUBVERSIVE
SABBATH

THE SURPRISING
POWER OF REST
IN A NONSTOP WORLD

A. J. SWOBODA



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Foreword

As a physician, I've listened to thousands of hearts. During prenatal exams, I've heard the rapid swish-swishing of babies still in the womb. Often, moms and dads burst into tears when they hear their child's heart for the first time.

I've smiled at the strange murmur those thumb-sized hearts make when they are born into the great big world, fetal shunts closing of their own accord as the baby breathes independently for the first time. I've listened to the chests of three-year-old children as they inhale deeply—and then wonder whether the man in the white coat can hear their thoughts through those tubes attached to his ears.

I've listened to athletes' strong, slow hearts. I've heard asthmatic hearts pounding away in fear and the muffled sounds of failing hearts. I've listened to the hearts of saints and of murderers. I'm in the first generation of physicians to ever listen to the heart of one person after it has been transplanted into the body of another.

Doctors and nurses listen to patients' hearts using a stethoscope. Although this is convenient, it's not necessary. In fact, the stethoscope wasn't invented until a generation after our country became a nation. For thousands of years, physicians listened to heart sounds without the aid of a stethoscope. They simply laid their ear on the chest of their patients. Now it is only children who lay their heads on the chest of their parents to listen to beating hearts.

My daughter used to love curling up in the big green chair by our fireplace in winter and falling asleep listening to my heartbeat. These days, my children are grown. I'm still close to them and hug them every time I see them, but it is only my little granddaughter who's falling asleep on my chest now . . . or so I thought. Last week, my son dropped by our house after a long shift at

the hospital. He flopped on the couch next to me, and within a few minutes he was asleep, his head resting on me. He was no longer a pediatrician at the university hospital; he was just my little boy, resting in his father's arms.

I had just finished reading *Subversive Sabbath*, and I got to thinking about our exhausted world, laying our heads down, and hearing heart sounds. These thoughts led me to the thirteenth chapter of John's Gospel—the story of the Last Supper. The chapter begins with Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Later, Judas dashes off to betray Christ. The chapter ends with Jesus giving a new commandment to love one another.

But midway through, an extraordinary detail is recorded. Here we see the portrait of a commercial fisherman with sunburned skin and calloused hands. His name is John, and he's a man's man. Jesus calls him a "son of thunder." Normally, John conveys an image of courage and strength, but at this moment he appears like a little child: "Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23 KJV).

There in the middle of the most extraordinary events in human history is a man listening to the heart of God. Don't you wish you could lay your head down on the Maker of the universe and just listen to his heart? Don't you wish that you could lay all your problems down for just a moment and rest on Jesus?

The heart of A. J. Swoboda's book is that you can: starting next Sabbath, for twenty-four hours, you can lay your head on the chest of someone who loves you enough to die for you. *Subversive Sabbath* is an invitation to rest in the Lord.

The Sabbath commandment begins with an odd word: it tells us to "remember." Don't forget how good it is to rest in the Lord, to be loved by the Lord, to hear his heartbeat. A. J. Swoboda's narrative is both a reminder to those who have forgotten and an instruction for those who have never known the peace of Sabbath rest. "Once you start," Swoboda warns, "you cannot stop. It is profoundly life giving."

Ultimately, however, reading about Sabbath is like looking at a picture of food. It will not fill you. It can only whet your appetite. You must finish the book, put it down, and actually do the Sabbath. You must get your life quiet enough one day out of the week to hear God's heart. Only then will you experience the countercultural joy of *Shabbat shalom*, Sabbath peace.

Matthew Sleeth, MD

author of *24/6* and executive director of Blessed Earth

Prologue

Walking home from school, I found Grandma, Grandpa, and Mom standing in the kitchen. I was ten. Their faces shone with a distinct luminescence that I had not witnessed before. Being an only child, I of course presumed the exuberance directly related to my arriving home. My pride was soon popped. They showed me a little piece of paper gently lying atop the newspapers on the dining-room table. That little paper changed everything.

The story is well known in the family: my grandparents had driven up from California the evening before. Stopping at a gas station along the Oregon border, they purchased some snacks, gas, and, as they often did, a lottery ticket. Thinking little of it, they stuffed the ticket in a pocket and continued journeying north. At their hotel that night, Grandpa stayed up to watch the news. The lottery numbers were to be announced. As the numbers were picked from a whirling globe of balls, the first number matched. And the second number. Then the third number. At this point, he shakes Grandma awake. She wipes her eyes as they watch the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh numbers match. *All seven numbers.* Jaws dropped. Their minds could not ascertain what had transpired in just a few short seconds. Unimaginable. Unthinkable. How much did they win? What does this mean? The host announced the winning amount. That night, Grandma and Grandpa won \$4.6 million.

After a sleepless night, they drove to our home and placed the lottery ticket on our dining-room table. The winnings helped our family in profound ways. Debts were paid. Vacations were had. Tuitions were covered. But the story has a dark side. A profound gift that created momentary bliss eventually led to bickering, infighting, and anger in the family. After nearly fifty years of marriage, Grandma and Grandpa's marriage ended. Family members stopped

talking. And a cold bitterness took over. I don't retell this difficult story to shame a single soul. By the grace of God, healing and reconciliation has begun in our family. Yet the fact remains: no one knew how to steward such a gift.

This cautionary tale illustrates an important lesson: more critical than a gift is how we *handle* the gift. We receive something incredible, even unimaginable, yet have no way of knowing what to do with it. Rather than enjoying the gift, we fight over it. Jesus warns of this problem in the parable of the workers and the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16). As the story goes, a group of underemployed men are hired for much-needed work during harvest season. After their day of work, the manager compensates an amount far and above the going wage at the time. But rather than celebrate both a good day's work and abundant provision, the employees gripe that other workers received similar generosity. This parable demonstrates what so many followers of Jesus do with the grace of God. Rather than enjoy it, we demand account for God's generosity toward others who we believe deserve it far less.

The Sabbath is a gift we do not know how to receive. In a world of doing, going, and producing, we have no use for a gift that invites us to stop. But that is the original gift: a gift of rest. Of course, at the world's beginning, God finishes the very first week by extending to the whole creation a gift: a day to stop, breathe, cease, enjoy, feast. God named it "Sabbath." That Sabbath day—time honored and approved—has sustained and nourished human communities and all of creation since the origins of the world. Still, like many of God's gifts, we have struggled to receive it. In church life, we bicker over its validity. We argue over what day Sabbath has to be. We get trapped in Sabbath rules and nuanced doctrinal rationale for why we no longer need to seriously consider it. We start whole denominations over Sabbath disagreements. We fall into the same trap time and again—not knowing how to enjoy a gift from God. When all is said and done, the worst thing that has happened to the Sabbath is religion. Religion is hostile to gifts. Religion hates free stuff. Religion squanders the good gifts of God by trying to earn them, which is why we will never really enjoy a sacred day of rest as long as we think our religion is all about earning.

This is nothing new: hostility toward the Sabbath has flowed in the church's and the world's blood for a long time. Many early church fathers, such as Justin Martyr, saw the Sabbath day as punishment for the Jews, who he believed needed a day of obedience to be reminded of their depravity. But is Sabbath a punishment? Others have rejected it lock, stock, and barrel, relegating it to the status of relic—antiquated, arcane, unworthy of contemporary consideration, an idea from our "dusty pawnshop of doctrinal beliefs."¹ Others dismiss it as an idealistic, if not impossible, practice. "Who has time to

Sabbath, anyway?” they ask. “I’ll sleep when I die. I mean, if the devil never rests, why should I?” But these hollow notions are based on human reason rather than God’s good word. A Sabbath proves an awkward fit in our fast-paced, work-drunk, production-obsessed world. Yet whatever skepticism we harbor toward Sabbath, such disdain is not shared by the Bible, Jesus, or much of church history. God’s story has fundamentally been a story about a simple gift of a day of rest.

Marva Dawn writes, “The spiritual resources given to us through faith in the Triune God are the best treasures available.”² The Sabbath is one such treasure. Our problem? We do not know what to do with Sabbath. That is what this book comes to terms with—understanding the gift of Sabbath, how we can receive it, and what receiving it does for the world.

A few points of concern before continuing. First, a note about the book’s title. How is the Sabbath *subversive*? The truth remains that Sabbath will be challenging for anyone to live out in our busy, frenetic world. Sabbath goes against the very structure and system of the world we have constructed. Sabbath, then, becomes a kind of resistance to that world.³ Such resistance must be characterized as overwhelmingly good. In other words, if the Sabbath is hard, then we are doing it right. It is never a sign of health or godliness to be well adjusted to a sick society. Putting up a fight to enter the Sabbath is as critical as anything. By illustration, I have been told that when a cow is born, she innately senses that her departure from her mother’s warm womb to a cold, scary, unknown world outside is upon her. In response, she will resist birth and try to stay in the womb. On the other hand, the absence of such resistance is often a sign of a stillborn calf. Relating to our world of death, “going along” is a sign of death. Living fish swim against the stream. Only the dead go with the flow. The Sabbath *is* subversive, countering so many of the deathly ways we have felt at home in. When we live the Sabbath, we slowly depart the womb of the status quo to a scary, unknown, new world. But that is okay. The world’s warm womb *feels* nice. But no one can grow up in there.

Sabbath is an alternative lifestyle that goes against everything our world knows. Flannery O’Connor, that famous Southern Catholic novelist, once reported the words of an admirer she encountered in public who had read a book of hers: “That was a profound book,” he said. “You don’t look like you wrote it.”⁴ My goal in authoring this book is that if my readers ever see me in public, they might say I look like I wrote it. The truth is, the alternative lifestyle of Sabbath-keeping that this volume prescribes has revolutionized my life, my relationships, and others around me. True, I almost burned out writing this book. If I were writing about anything else I probably would have. But it was, ironically, writing about the Sabbath that refreshed my spirit every

step of the way. Even thinking and writing about Sabbath has the power to heal the soul. I have come to believe that Sabbath cannot save your soul, but it very well may save your life. I am different because of the Sabbath. And I am different for having written this book. I want to look like I wrote this book. And I certainly want my readers to look like they actually read it and took it to heart.

By way of organization, the book is outlined into four parts: the Sabbath for ourselves, for others, for creation, and for worship. The outline itself should reflect a conviction that the Sabbath is not just for us. In fact, as Scripture will show us, it is for everyone and everything—even God.

This book, second, has one main intended audience: anyone interested in living life God's way *and* desiring to be a part of Christ's healing work in the world. This includes but is not limited to pastors, leaders, small-group leaders, seminarians, Bible-college students, thoughtful Christians, thoughtful atheists, nonthoughtful Christians, nonthoughtful atheists, academics—basically anyone interested in living the Sabbath and seeing the Sabbath extended to others. To help, I have blended top-shelf academic resources with simple Sabbath practice. This is intentional. There remain plenty of brilliant academic or practical books on Sabbath-keeping. Too often they overlook each other. I think having two Sabbath wings is the best way to fly.

Third, I feel I need to confess some hesitations about writing a book on Sabbath. These circle around two issues. For one, I am skeptical of any kind of fix-it-all theology purporting to be *the* thing that can repair everything. Theology cannot save anyone. It can only point us to the One who saves. Theology as such is only useful to the degree that it delivers us into formed people who know how to worship God and love people. Too often we theologians get it into our heads that our scholarly products are what everyone needs to be fixed—a kind of theological snake oil. Madeleine L'Engle once told of a dinner party where she was invited to become a communist. She refused on the grounds that communism purported to be a perfect, fit-it-all system.⁵ Similarly, the theology presented here is not a perfect system. Nor is this a perfect book. This book is a stab at the Sabbath question, not the final answer.

For another, I question whether *I* am the right person to write a book on Sabbath. I am not a Jew. I am a Christian. A gentile one at that. In the early stages, I originally wanted to title this book *Bacon for the Sabbath: A Guide to Gentile, Christian Sabbath-Keeping*. The idea was never taken seriously. The truth remains that I am writing about something far outside my scope of scholarship. Others—particularly Jews and Christians in communities that have been keeping a Sabbath for centuries—know far more about the Sabbath

than I. Throughout, I lean strongly on those wise and credible voices. But my newfound venture into Sabbath is why I have chosen to write this book. The Sabbath is new to me—ten years to be exact. But I think fresh eyes can be helpful eyes. I have, in the words of Wendell Berry, willingly endured “the risks of amateurism” for the sake of my readers who probably feel like Sabbath idiots as well.⁶ Fear, I am learning, is never a credible excuse to ignore responsibility or truth.

Fourth, and finally, gratitude. This book is dedicated to my dear friends Matthew and Nancy Sleeth. In the course of writing, my editorial assistant commented all too often, “You got that from Matthew and Nancy, didn’t you?” Unquestionably, so much of what I know about the Sabbath is drawn from the Sleeths, who have made the Sabbath come to life. To both of them, I acknowledge my debt. “The most brilliant people in the world,” Albert Einstein reportedly said, “aren’t the most brilliant. They are just best at hiding their sources.” Einstein was unwittingly describing me writing this book. The only thing original about me is my sin, and even that I plagiarize most of the time. Throughout this volume, I have tirelessly worked to conceal the fact that most of what I know about Sabbath comes from the Sleeths. Matthew and Nancy: you are humble giants. *Thank you.* We all stand on some giant’s shoulders. But they never tell you that the giants have to be humble enough to let you get on their shoulders.

Finally, endless gratitude goes to my wife, Quinn. You are my Sabbath wife. I love you. Elliot, my little man, get the griddle hot. Those Sabbath pancakes will not cook themselves. My faithful and humble administrative, editorial, and research assistant, Madalyn Salz, has been invaluable throughout this book’s evolutionary process. Without her, it would still be a bunch of napkin scribbles in some box in my bedroom. Aaron Yenny, as well, offered critical feedback regarding many of the concepts herein. Thank you for your insights and a helping research hand. Finally, Theophilus, that church that calls me pastor: I love you dearly even though I do not really understand you. If you are not a miracle, I do not know what is.

None of the names mentioned are responsible for any errors within. I get credit for those.



PART 1

***SABBATH
FOR US***

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1

Sabbath and Time

Don't underestimate the value of Doing Nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering.

Winnie-the-Pooh, in *The Complete Tales of Winnie-the-Pooh*

Remembering Sabbath

In 1991, a yet-to-be-identified flea market enthusiast discovered a simple picture frame to his liking. Securing the purchase, the shopper returned home only to discover an ancient document hiding inconspicuously behind the frame. Thinking little of the discovery, he continued about his life. Two years later, a friend stumbled on the document and investigated its origin. The rest is history. The four-dollar frame had hidden a first-edition copy of the Declaration of Independence reportedly worth north of one million dollars.¹ This accidental discovery is not isolated. There was the contractor who found \$182,000 in a bathroom wall he was remodeling.² A three-dollar Chinese bowl later sold at Sotheby's for \$2.2 million—it was a treasure from the Northern Song Dynasty.³ Then there was that California family who stumbled on a can of ancient gold coins in their backyard valued at \$10 million.⁴

To borrow Calvin's words from Bill Watterson's iconic comic strip, "There's treasure everywhere."⁵ Not only do treasures of gold and silver lie hidden everywhere around us, but priceless *ideas* do as well. History is the story of ideas lost and found, disappearing and reappearing time and again to the surface.⁶

This is important, for ideas are a matter of life and death. Take slavery, for example, which deems some peoples as inferior to others and regards people as objects to be used. Eugenics similarly witnesses to a whole set of beliefs that suggest only certain human lives are intrinsically valuable—so long as (in the case of Nazism) they are German, have blond hair and blue eyes, and do not have Down syndrome or a disability. One cannot read Hitler’s writings on the concept of *lebensraum* (“final solution”) and suggest that ideas, even in seed form, are insignificant or not worth debate. In the end, the ideas of a few led to the murder of millions. For this very reason, Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl commented that the very ideas behind the Holocaust did not arise out of nowhere. Rather, these monstrous ideas were disseminated mostly from the cold lecterns of university classrooms across Europe in the years leading up to World War II. The Holocaust was first conceived as a simple, inconspicuous idea—unchallenged and unquestioned by far too many.

Ideas are not neutral, be they religious, philosophical, or scientific. Cultural critic and historian Howard Zinn once wrote, “We can reasonably conclude that how we think is not just mildly interesting, not just a subject for intellectual debate, but a matter of life and death.”⁷ Christian philosopher Dallas Willard agrees: “We live at the mercy of our ideas.”⁸ Christ followers, for this reason, must awaken to their calling to critically examine each and every idea, eschewing any false security within the safe harbor of anti-intellectualism. We must, as Paul admonishes, “take captive” any idea opposed to Christ’s work (2 Cor. 10:5) with the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). As John writes, we “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1). Avoidance of critically examining our ideas, in the end, is the worst (and least Christian) idea of them all.

Sometimes humanity lives its worst ideas and forgets its best ideas. In Scripture, God’s people often forget the ideas of God. For instance, 2 Kings 22 tells the tale of King Josiah. Rising to power at a time when Israel had all but completely forgotten God’s law and ways, Josiah sends his secretary into the temple to do some administrative work. Seemingly by accident, Shaphan discovers a number of dusty, old, unfamiliar scrolls. He discerns their identity: scrolls of Jewish Torah! When they are carried to the king, Josiah’s heart is cut to its core. He becomes aware of the tragedy: God’s people have literally forgotten God’s word. In a profound act of repentance, Josiah publicly calls Israel back to God’s law. Remembering is a godly act—time and again retrieving the truth of God in the present.⁹ Perhaps this is why St. Paul constantly “reminds” the early churches of the gospel of Jesus—the church is the one that so easily forgets it. God’s people are indeed saved from their sins. But apparently not from a bad memory.

Have you ever wondered whether there is something *we* have forgotten?
 What has the church overlooked in *our* time?
 What might *we* have amnesia over?
 “Remember the Sabbath” (Exod. 20:8).

Sabbath is that ancient idea and practice of intentional rest that has long been discarded by much of the church and our world. Sabbath is not new. Sabbath is just new to *us*. Historically, Christians have kept some form or another of the Sabbath for some two thousand years. But it has largely been forgotten by the church, which has uncritically mimicked the rhythms of the industrial and success-obsessed West. The result? Our road-weary, exhausted churches have largely failed to integrate Sabbath into their lives as vital elements of Christian discipleship. It is not as though we do not love God—we love God deeply. We just do not know how to sit with God anymore. We have come to know Jesus only as the Lord of the harvest, forgetting he is the Lord of the Sabbath as well. Sabbath forgetfulness is driven, so often, in the name of doing stuff *for* God rather than *being with* God. We are too busy working for him. This is only made more difficult by the fact that the Western church is increasingly experiencing displacement and marginalization in a post-Christian, secular society. In that, we have all the more bought into the notion that ministering on overdrive will resolve the crisis. Sabbath is assumed to be the culprit of a shrinking church. So time poverty and burnout have become the signs that the minority church remains serious about God in a world that has rejected him. Because we pastors rarely practice Sabbath, we rarely preach the Sabbath. And because we do not preach the Sabbath, our congregations are not challenged to take it seriously themselves. The result of our Sabbath amnesia is that we have become perhaps the most emotionally exhausted, psychologically overworked, spiritually malnourished people in history.

Similarly challenging are the cultural realities we face. Our 24/7 culture conveniently provides every good and service we want, when we want, how we want.¹⁰ Our time-saving devices, technological conveniences, and cheap mobility have seemingly made life much easier and interconnected. As a result, we have more information at our fingertips than anyone in history. Yet with all this progress, we are ominously dissatisfied. In bowing at these sacred altars of hyperactivity, progress, and technological compulsivity, our souls increasingly pant for meaning and value and truth as they wither away, exhausted, frazzled, displeased, ever on edge. The result is a hollow culture that, in Paul’s words, is “ever learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7)—increasingly so. Our bodies wear ragged. Our spirits thirst. We have an inability to simply sit still and *be*. As we drown ourselves in a 24/7 living, we seem to be able to do anything *but* quench our true thirst for the

life of God. We have failed to ask ourselves the question Jesus asks of us: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matt. 16:26).

We must begin by remembering. If you journey into a contemporary Jewish home prepared for Sabbath, you will likely encounter two candles lit by (more often than not) the woman of the home.¹¹ On Friday evening, she waves the flames from the kiddush candles—setting the mood for restful intimacy—toward her face to symbolize the Sabbath entering her home. One tradition holds that these candles symbolize a room set for lovemaking.¹² But why two candles? They represent the two lists of commandments, one commanding us “to remember” (Exod. 20:8) and the second “to observe” (Deut. 5:12) the Sabbath.¹³ Those two candles are a reminder, the rabbis insisted, that Sabbath observance depended on Sabbath remembrance. To *do*, one must first *remember*.

As said, contemporary Christianity has an acute case of Sabbath amnesia—we have forgotten to remember. We have become what the rabbis called *tinok shenishba*. Literally translated, this means “the child who was captured.” Judith Shulevitz illuminates the image of the one who forgets the Sabbath: “The rabbis [discussed] the legal implications of forgetting the Sabbath. . . . What would the penalty for such amnesia or ignorance be? And what kind of Jew could be so oblivious to the Sabbath? Only, the rabbis thought, a Jew who had suffered extreme cultural dislocation. *Only a Jew who had been kidnapped as a child and raised by non-Jews.*”¹⁴ For Jews, forgetting the Sabbath was akin to forgetting one’s entire identity. A Jew forgetting the Sabbath was like an Israelite who was raised by Pharaoh. While Christians are going to enter into the Sabbath in a unique way, to remember the Sabbath is to remember who we are—children born of the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. To keep a Sabbath is to give time and space on our calendar to the grace of God.

Made to Rest

Humans were made to rest. Literally. When God created the world, he entrusted Adam and Eve with a wondrous world of potential where they could explore, discover, play, eat, and enjoy. A new world spanned brilliantly before them. A cadence can be immediately discerned to that creation story: “Let there be light . . . Let there be a vault . . . Let the water . . . Let the land . . . Let there be lights . . . Let us make . . . 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” (Gen. 1:3–2:3). There is a rhythm to the week. God finished six days of work by resting for one.

God’s rhythm of work and rest soon became the framework for human work and rest: “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” (Exod. 20:9–10). From the beginning, God’s own life becomes the model for human life. Diana Butler Bass draws a connection between God’s rhythm and ours: “Our bodies move to a rhythm of work and rest that follows the rhythm originally strummed by God on the waters of creation. As God worked, so shall we; as God rested, so shall we. Working and resting, we who are human are in the image of God.”¹⁵ To image God is to work and rest as God worked and rested.

Humanity was made on day six of creation. Day seven was that day in which God, Adam, Eve, and the whole garden ceased from productivity and effort. Striking as it is, Adam and Eve’s first full day of existence was a day of rest, not work. What a first impression! Social scientists point out that we make up our minds about people in the first 100 milliseconds of our first meeting.¹⁶ Indeed, first impressions matter. Imagine what Adam and Eve learned about God’s generosity from their first impression of him on their first day. Their first knowledge of God and the world God had made was that rest was not an afterthought—rest was of first importance.

Adam and Eve had accomplished nothing to earn this gratuitous day of rest. Sabbath is, in my estimation, the first image of the gospel in the biblical story. God’s nature always gives rest first; work comes later. This is reflected in all of our lives. Before our lives in this world began, we got nine months of rest in the womb. Before taking up a vocation, we get a few years to just play as children. And before our six days of labor, we receive the day of rest. Karl Barth famously pointed out that the only thing Adam and Eve had to celebrate on that first Sabbath was God and his creation: “That God rested on the seventh day, and blessed and sanctified it, is the first divine action which man is privileged to witness; and that he himself may keep the Sabbath with God, completely free from work, is the first Word spoken to him, the first obligation laid on him.”¹⁷ Humanity had only God’s goodness to celebrate, nothing more. Work had not even begun. The Sabbath teaches us that we do not work to please God. Rather, we rest because God is already pleased with the work he has accomplished in us.

A problem quickly ensued—God’s word was forgotten. Eden’s first residents, Adam and Eve, were given God-established boundaries, such as with food: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden,” God says, “but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:16–17).

Adam and Eve could eat from any tree but one. There were similar boundaries around time. One day a week, as a culminating moment in time, Adam and Eve were to rest, or *menukhab*, from their garden activities.

These boundaries soon fell by the wayside. Amnesia set in. The memory of God's word eroded, as reflected in Eve's attempt to explain God's command to the serpent after being tempted to eat the forbidden fruit: "But God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not *touch* it, or you will die'" (Gen. 3:3). Eve, in that critical moment, reveals humanity's vexing and perennial problem: a keen ability to forget what God actually said. Of course, God never commanded Adam or Eve not to *touch* the tree. Rather, God commanded them not to eat from the tree. Eve added to God's word. A good deal of our own sin, we cannot deny, is largely the result of addition or subtraction to what God has spoken. We forget what God actually said or, worse yet, add or subtract to what God has said. Scripture reminds us, "Do not add . . . and do not subtract from [God's word], but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you" (Deut. 4:2). That is the human condition: to forget, to add, to subtract, or even to bend God's good word so that it fits our own selfish liking. Humanity is, in this sense, like Jill in C. S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair*, who was told to repeat Aslan's instructions so as not to forget them. "'Child,' said Aslan . . . 'perhaps you do not see quite as well as you think. But the first step is to remember. Repeat to me, in order, the four signs.'"¹⁸ Jill soon forgets, however, and it alters her and her companions' course.

So even if we do remember the Sabbath, we often add or subtract from it. On one side, moralists and legalists add precept upon precept to the Sabbath, as the Pharisees and Sadducees did during the times of Christ, a tendency that time and again infuriates Jesus in the Gospels. Others have subtracted from the Sabbath commandment or ignored it altogether as though it did not matter to God or the well-being of creation. Both of these extremes grieve our Creator. Addition and subtraction are simply different ways of forgetting what God has said.

Not only did a day of rest orient Adam and Eve's life around God; it also orients our hearts, bodies, and minds toward the Creator. Sabbath reminds us that "our time" was never *our* time in the first place. All time is God's time. And the time we have been given is to be used faithfully in worship of him. *Orientation* is a fascinating word based on the Latin word *oriri*, meaning "to rise," as in where the sun rises. The sun rises in the east. Early Christians gave great thought and intentionality to what they oriented themselves toward. For instance, the altar in the earliest churches was intentionally directed east so that worshipers would face Jerusalem as they

received the Lord's Supper together.¹⁹ For this same reason, many of the earliest Christians were buried with their feet facing toward the east. Their rationale was simple: when Christ returned and resurrected their bodies, they wanted to be standing and be facing Jerusalem in their resurrection. To be a Christian was, and is, to reorient one's entire life and death around Jesus Christ. Sabbath is an orientation as well—an all-encompassing turning toward the Creator God that changes everything about our lives. Sabbath is that kind of complete reorientation of our lives toward the hope and redemption of Christ's work.

Sabbath baptizes our week into the grace and mercy of God.

The First "Holy"

The Jews were not the only religious people in the ancient world. There were others, such as the Akkadians, Egyptians, and Phoenicians, and they had their own creation stories. When one compares the biblical creation story with these other creation stories, a number of critical differences rise to the surface. For example, the biblical creation story is the only one that contends that matter—creation, people, the world, everything—is intrinsically good. In other creation stories, the world is essentially bad.²⁰ Another difference is the role of women in creation. In an ancient context where men, rulers, and kings alone bore God's image, the biblical story depicts a world in which men *and* women are created in God's image.²¹ Among patriarchal societies, no other sacred text held such a high view of women as the Hebrew Bible. Third, consider God's invitation to rest on the seventh day. In other ancient Near Eastern creation myths, people were created for the purpose of being worked to the bone to accomplish the fiats of the gods; this was particularly the paradigm of the Egyptians.²² Unlike those other gods, however, Yahweh commands that humanity is to work hard *and* rest well. In no other creation narrative do the gods provide this kind of rest to creation. No other god gave a break. No other god carries the well-being of creation as close to the heart as this One. Again, imagine what first impression that would have given to the Akkadians, Egyptians, and Phoenicians about the God of the Bible and the people who worshiped him.

We worship the God who invented the weekend. This is why biblical scholar Al Baylis contends that "Genesis 1 is one of the most remarkable put-downs ever administered."²³ The biblical creation account essentially served as a theological rebuttal of all the other "gods" who never allowed anyone to rest. In a restless world, Yahweh *required* rest. Again, imagine what kind of first impression that would have given to an ancient person's understanding of

Yahweh. The God of Scripture not only rests himself but invites the world to rest with him.

The impression would undoubtedly have been that Yahweh was the Lord of time.²⁴ Time, it turns out, is one of the first components of the created order listed in the Genesis account, coming before any physical object such as light, animals, or humanity. God's entire creative action in making everything signifies not only his sovereignty, lordship, and authority over creation but also his sovereignty over time. For this reason, the Jewish people had many "holy days" that helped them remember the sacredness of time and God's role in creating it. The prominent role that time plays in the Genesis narrative resulted in time being understood as sacred, or of ultimate importance, for Jewish faith.

But what kind of time frame does God create? God creates a seven-day week. Theologian Henri Blocher writes, "Nobody reading the panoramic prologue of Genesis can miss the structural fact which gives the text its most obvious arrangement: the framework of the seven days."²⁵ That is, the framework of seven days is rich with divine intention. Certainly in biblical numerology, the number seven symbolizes divine perfection. But perhaps it goes deeper than that. Echoing church father Basil of Caesarea, theologian Colin Gunton argues that the ordering of seven days establishes a distinct relation between the present time and eternity. That is, the seven-day week was created by God to serve as a contrast to the realm of eternity in which God dwells.²⁶ Time serves as a contrast to eternity. Have you ever walked into a perfume store at the mall and encountered an array of overwhelming scents simultaneously? Somewhere, you will also see a small cup of coffee beans sitting nearby. What are the coffee beans for? Coffee beans clear the palate so one can distinguish and fully appreciate the nuanced characteristics of each perfume separately, rather than being bombarded by the many scents at once. In a way, time serves as a cup of coffee beans. Time establishes a contrast to eternity, where God dwells.

As has been said, time is basically God's way of keeping everything from happening at once. This is why Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel beautifully describes Sabbath as "eternity uttering a day."²⁷ Sabbath is a moment of eternal glory momentarily breaking into our finite, present world. The emphasis in Scripture is not on the time of creation, as some so easily assume, but on the creation of time itself. The seven-day week is God's brilliant creation, what one poet calls "the most brilliant creation of the Hebrew spirit."²⁸

This seven-day week is not something that can, or should, be tinkered with, although some have tried to. In 1793, France, in an effort to increase human productivity, de-Christianized the calendar by modifying the seven-day week to a ten-day week. New clocks were even invented to reflect the

revised week. The experiment, however, radically failed: suicide rates skyrocketed, people burned out, and production decreased. Why? It turns out humans were not made to work nine days and rest only one in a week. We were made to work six days and rest one. The seven-day rhythm is sacred. The seven-day week is not the result of human ingenuity; rather, it is a reflection of God's brilliance.

In every week, one day is to be set aside for rest. So central to God is the ethical imperative to rest that it is established in Scripture before commands against murder, adultery, divorce, lying, incest, rape, jealousy, and child sacrifice. In fact, of the Ten Commandments, Sabbath is the only command originally expressed directly to Adam and Eve. Why do we Sabbath? Genesis says we Sabbath, first, because God kept a Sabbath and, second, because God built it into the DNA of creation, and it is therefore something creation needs in order to flourish.

As God invites us to Sabbath, we will be tempted to think that Sabbath cannot "work" for us. "I don't have time to take a whole day to rest," people have expressed to me for years. Biblically, however, this is not the case. The biblical story tells us that to rest one day a week is to be truly human, and to not rest is to be inhuman. Humans were made to rest. When we say we don't have time to rest, we cannot find time for something that has already been found. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, with God, an imperative is an indicative.²⁹ That is, what God commands us to *do* tells us something of who God *is*. God invites us to rest. And God rests. Are we stronger or wiser or better than God? As the creation story reminds us, the need for rest is built into the genetic makeup of the universe, and ignorance of such is like humanity trying to genetically modify the whole universe. We should learn from France—God's rhythms can never be tinkered with. As H. H. Farmer once said, "If you go against the grain of the universe, you get splinters."³⁰

Even scientific communities increasingly grasp these realities. In 1974, nearly halfway through the eighty-four-day mission aboard the Skylab space station, Colonel William Pogue requested a day of rest from mission control for his overworked and exhausted space crew: "We have been over-scheduled. We were just hustling the whole day. The work could be tiresome and tedious, though the view is spectacular." How spectacular the view and work must have been, but even a breathtaking view from space cannot relieve the human need for rest. What happened? NASA refused his request. Subsequently, the crew went on strike in space, a first of its kind. Disobeying orders, the crew took a space Sabbath. In response, ground control was forced to change their policy.³¹ To this day, NASA now schedules time for rest on all space travel. Even NASA factors in rest.

The Sabbath day is a holy day. Interestingly, the only thing God deems as *qadosh*, or “holy,” in the creation story is the Sabbath day. The earth, space, land, stars, animals—even people—are not designated as *qadosh*. The Sabbath day was holy. Heschel speaks of the Sabbath as the “sanctification of time”: “This is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been established, God would create a holy place—a holy mountain or a holy spring—whereupon a sanctuary is to be established. Yet it seems as if to the Bible it is *holiness in time*, the Sabbath, which comes first.”³² This holiness of the Sabbath is one of the distinctive marks of Jewish theology, Heschel contends. Again, it is telling that there is no mention of a specific, sacred *place* in the creation story. There is only a sacred day. While space and location are significant, it is important to note that the exact location of Eden is omitted. Yet we know that the Sabbath day is holy.³³

Adam and Eve were invited to “keep” that seventh day holy. Do not misread the text: they were not to *make* the Sabbath holy. Humans cannot make anything holy. The day’s holiness is assumed. They were to *keep* the Sabbath holy, which was already holy before they came to it.³⁴ This does not mean that there are days that are *not* holy. Time *itself* is holy. Every day is a holy day. Jacques Ellul once identified our religious and cultural tendency to see some days as holy and some as mundane: “Very quickly some days of the week . . . come to rank as sacred.”³⁵ In contrast to our notions of time, the biblical tradition states that *all* time is sacred (Pss. 31:15; 139:16; Isa. 60:22). It is not only theologically inaccurate but also dangerous to suggest that some days are sacred and others are not—time is in itself the first thing designated as sacred. All time is holy, not just the Sabbath. But the Sabbath is set aside as a unique kind of holiness.

The First “Not Good”

God only creates “good” things.

Long before the techniques of italicizing or boldening text, repetition was the ancient author’s literary tool to highlight an idea. So the authors of Scripture would make their point by repeating something over and over again. For this very reason, the creation narrative repeatedly depicts God declaring the *goodness* of everything he made. “It was good . . . It was good . . . And it was very good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). In what might appear as pompous, self-congratulatory commentary, we are actually blessed by the knowledge of God’s own recognition of the brilliance of his creation. He is well aware that what he has made is valuable, right, and good. Repeating this

refrain each day, the biblical author makes clear that this world is fundamentally made good. The intrinsic goodness of creation speaks to an important practice of Sabbath living—the need of humanity to reflect on and delight in the goodness of what God has made.

Once, when sharing my faith with an agnostic friend, I was asked to make my greatest argument for God’s existence. I uttered one word: *mangoes*. I was not talking about just *any* mangoes. I was talking about fresh, ripe, just-off-the-tree mangoes, about have-to-change-your-shirt-afterward mangoes. Mangoes, I explained, were my greatest argument for God’s existence. To this day, I cannot eat a mango and say with a straight face that this is a world that has been invented by a jerk. Or that something so delicious could come from nowhere. Creation is good. Why? Because God is good. And his goodness is reflected in what he makes. A mango, as part of creation, is God’s love letter to humanity.

There is an Indian restaurant in my neighborhood called Bollywood Theatre. I once went to lunch with my friend Todd Miles, a theologian at a local seminary. Taking in our first few bites, he blurted out, almost surprised by his own proclamation, “You know, A. J., when you think about it, food didn’t have to be *this* good!” One could argue that this is the thesis statement of Genesis’s first two chapters—a good God makes a good creation. Creation is not bad. Creation is not “just okay.” Creation is good. The words of Martin Luther echo this refrain: “God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.”³⁶ Were it not for lack of space, I bet Luther meant to include mangoes and Indian food. In his goodness, God delights in giving us food that did not have to be this good. And then, if we did not already grasp his goodness, he decides to give us taste buds.

The good news: mangoes and Indian food are merely a foretaste of the good world to come. Consider the final words of the old English martyr John Bradford, who reportedly declared as he died on the stake: “Look at creation—look at it all! This is the world God has given to his enemies; imagine the world he will give to *his friends*.”³⁷ Bradford’s point: we cannot even begin to imagine heaven’s mangoes or Indian food. God’s good world is a world of delight, one that offers only a preview of the majestic, unimaginable world to come. A world of goodness and blessing, joy and generosity, and, of course, glorious rest. What is the Sabbath but a day to reflect on God and all the love letters sent our way? The Sabbath is celebration, a day of rejoicing over the goodness of what has been made and who made it.

As part of this good creation, Adam was created to tend the garden and name the animals. Yet Adam found that the animals did not serve his every need. Something seemed missing—Adam needed a “helper” to assist in the

work of caring for the garden. The text does not suggest that Adam knew what exactly it was that he needed. Rather, God recognizes Adam's need before he knows he is missing something. Recognizing his need, God puts Adam to sleep, saying, "It is *not good* for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Thus, we encounter the first "not good" in the Bible. Notice *when* the first "not good" happens in the Bible. It was not a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Rather, the first "not good" appears *before* the fall. How is this possible?

This first "not good" reveals to us something about humanity's nature. Namely, God did not create human beings to exist with God alone. Adam needed food, water, rest, and relationship. In fact, God's design for humanity was complete only in relationship with God and others. That is, despite the fact that Adam had *most* of his creaturely needs met—such as food, water, work, and even an unmediated relationship with the living God—Adam still lacked something. One need remained to be filled. Adam needed a helper—he needed human community.

God created human beings with needs. We often read Jesus's words "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4) as meaning we just need God and can forsake all physical needs. But that is not what Jesus meant. He was saying we live on God's word and his being, but we *also* need bread. Both. Adam needed food. He needed work. He needed God. And he needed a helper.

Needs are not bad. If God is sovereign and the "first good" comes before sin invades the world, then why did God wait to create the woman until later? In my mind, there can be only one rationale: God desired Adam to have a deep recognition of his own needs. It is one thing to have a need. It is another thing to come to *recognize* and *deeply appreciate* that need and be humble enough to have it fulfilled. It is only when we have a need and recognize it that we can confess our dependence on God and be thankful for God's gracious hand. Humility is essentially that: recognizing our own needs and our ultimate inability to fulfill them by ourselves. Imagine the joy and thankfulness of Adam to know his need was fulfilled by God the moment Eve was created.

Jesus asked the blind, hungry, and needy, "What is it that you want?" He was not ignorant of their needs, nor did he want them to be ignorant of their needs. Rather, he wanted them to have a deep awareness of their own needs. We need many things. Humans need relationship. Why was it not enough for Adam to have unfettered access to God? The nature of God—as we can observe from the very beginning of the biblical narrative—is deeply relational and communal. God is a Triune God. "Let *us* make mankind," God says as he creates humanity (Gen. 1:26). Therefore, at the core of the human experience,

each human being reflects the image of God, who created humankind after his own being. Humans, made by the Triune God, were created with a need for relationship.³⁸ Relational needs are not a by-product of the fall. Likewise, the need for rest, or Sabbath, is not an aftertaste of human sinfulness, unlike our chronic inability to receive rest. In fact, as we shall see, Sabbath is a foretaste of heaven.

All of this means that humans' need for rest and sleep was not a result of sin or disobedience. Sleep does not come after, but before, the fall. In fact, we see that the first act of "deep sleep" (Hebrew *tardemah*) is initiated by God, resulting in the creation of the woman. Sleep is a result of God's activity, intended to take place in paradise before it was lost.³⁹ Likewise, our need for Sabbath rest as well as sleep points not to our sinfulness but to the very way God has created us and thus intended for us to function. Like sleep, the day of rest comes *before* the fall. Rest was not a result of the devil's work. As we were made to eat and breathe and walk, we were made, from the foundations of the world, to rest, or to Sabbath, in God. The need for rest is greatly misunderstood by so many Christians in today's world. I cannot count how many times I have heard a well-intended Christian leader say, "I'll sleep when I get to heaven." What a lamentably nonbiblical cliché. In the end, we will get to heaven much quicker if we opt not to rest. Sabbath rest is no sign of weakness or sinfulness—God himself rested. Is God weak?

If we choose never to rest, as we are built, it will catch up to us. We cannot dodge our needs. Truth is not a set of cold, disembodied rules written in heaven. Rather, as Augustine saw it, truth is reality. Thomas Williams offers a compelling description of this in his introduction to Augustine's book *On Free Choice of the Will*: "Violating the eternal law is not like doing 40 in a 35-mile-per-hour zone when there is no traffic around; it is more like trying to violate the law of gravity. . . . An apple falling from a tree has no choice about whether to obey the law of gravity. . . . [but] human beings can voluntarily wreck their lives by running afoul of the laws that govern their nature. This is indeed a sort of freedom, but it can hardly be the best sort."⁴⁰ Williams's point? We can violate truth, but by doing so, we will suffer the consequences. God created gravity—not just a law written somewhere, but the actual reality we daily experience. Gravity just *is*. Our belief or disbelief in it cannot invalidate it, change it, or make it disappear. Gravity always wins.

Just like Adam and Eve's need for Sabbath, our need for rest is like gravity. It just *is*. Our feelings and opinions cannot change it. Humans need rest. Animals need rest. Land needs rest. And without rest, things will cease to exist as they should. Still, we may choose to ignore this need for a while, but gravity always wins. When we look honestly at our workaholic, boundaryless, frantic

lives, we can hear God say, “Not good.” Like he saw Adam’s need for a helper, God sees our need for rest. His judgment is his love. Only a malevolent deity could celebrate and enable habits that lead to the death of his creation, calling that which is bad for us “good . . . good . . . good.” The truth is, if we do not rest, we will not be well. We might be fine for a while. But over the course of time, our bodies, minds, and souls will pay a hefty price for ignoring gravity.

But when we do rest, we experience incredible healing. Like Adam’s intrinsic need for relationship, rest is a need that God built into us. The New Testament calls Jesus the “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8 and parallels). Jesus’s rest restores *us*. On one Sabbath, Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand—“his hand was completely restored” (Mark 3:5). Sabbath and restoration are quite synonymous in God’s vocabulary. To Sabbath is to live as God intended. When we enter into that rest, it is like entering back into Eden.

The First “Rest”

Following a close reading of the Genesis account, one notices an unexpected lack of any mention of the word *Sabbath*. Rather, there remains a repetition of the word *rest* (*menukhab*). In fact, the first usage of the actual word *Sabbath* is not until Exodus 16:23. Other notable words are missing in the creation narrative as well. For example, Genesis 1 and 2 lack language concerning “marriage” between Adam and Eve. The exact language of “marriage” is not used until later in Scripture. Now while marriage is not initially discussed, covenant relationship is. Sabbath is not initially discussed, but rest is an integral part of creation. The inspired language of Genesis is that God instituted *menukhab*-rest into creation from the very beginning.

Sabbath and *marriage* are similar in that they are legal terms utilized later to establish what humanity needed to do after its created purpose was usurped. Let me illustrate. I remember the first time I drove by myself. I had the ability to drive wherever I wanted, with whomever I wanted, however fast I wanted. With the steering wheel in my hands, I had freedom and power. However, to ensure that I did not abuse my newly found freedom and power, there were laws in place. The government had established a speed limit and required drivers and passengers to wear seat belts. The laws clarify what safe driving looks like, for my benefit and everyone else’s. But the point of the laws is not to keep the laws. Rather, the point of those laws is to remind us what driving safely is all about. In the end, I think God hates law giving. Why? Because law giving implies intent breaking. Sadly, we love living in ways that God never created us to. God gave us a world of delight to work and play in, but

over time we continued to ignore his way. God had to institute Sabbath law because humanity had failed to live the intent of God's rest.

The seventh day was the final creation act of God, a day of *menukhab*-rest. As days progress in Genesis 1 and 2, the story feels as though it is building toward something particularly special. This structure seems to offer a lesson, in Lesslie Newbigin's words, "claiming to show the shape, the structure, the origin, and the goal not merely of human history, but of cosmic history."⁴¹ As an architect designs particular rooms in a home, each with a special purpose so that they may function together, the creation structure reveals something of God's intents. First, God built the foundation of the light. Then he built the frame of the seas, followed by the walls of the animals and the inhabitants of humans. What is interesting is that humanity is not created on the final workday. What is the culmination of creation? In Genesis 2:2–3, there are three sentences of seven Hebrew words each, and the middle word of each sentence is the word for the seventh day. This textual feature is utilized to state that the seventh day is the goal of creation.⁴² The climax of creation is not humanity, as we have so arrogantly assumed. Rather, the day of rest is the climax, when creation all comes together and lives at peace and harmony with one another. Sabbath becomes the culminating roof of the entire house.

The picture is stunning—the first day for Adam and Eve was not a day to work the garden. God established a weekly rhythmic reminder of his love—the Sabbath. Again, the Bible offers a view of God that is so entirely unlike the gods of other religions' creation narratives. No other god gives rest. No other god beckons us to enjoy Eden's mangoes.

Adam and Eve's first impression of God would have been that God was no slave driver. Still today, we are reminded of that truth each week when we take a day to rest in God's presence. Sabbath is a scheduled weekly reminder that we are not what we do; rather, we are who we are loved by. Sabbath and the gospel scream the same thing: we do not work to get to a place where we finally get to breathe and rest—that is slavery. Rather, we rest and breathe and enjoy God *that we might* enter into rest.

We must distinguish a biblical day of rest from the world's way of rest—a biblical Sabbath should be distinguished from vacations and "days off," although even those we are not proficient at. Studies reveal that 37 percent of Americans take fewer than seven days of vacation a year. In fact, only 14 percent take vacations that last longer than two weeks.⁴³ Americans take the shortest paid vacations of anyone in the world. And 20 percent of those who do, often spend their vacation staying in touch with their jobs through their computers or phones.⁴⁴ The point? Even when we do vacation, we do it poorly.

But even if we *did* vacation well and took great amounts of time off for restorative rest, vacations are a poor substitute for a weekly day of Sabbath rest. I think the devil loves taking that which is of God and giving us cheap knockoffs. When God invents sugar, the devil makes Sweet’N Low. When God makes sex, the devil comes up with adultery. The devil always twists the goodness of God. The Bible is silent on vacations. Why? Because if we kept a weekly Sabbath, we would not need vacations. Vacations are what Jürgen Moltmann has called the “Coca-Cola philosophy” of Western life.⁴⁵ In the 1990s, Coca-Cola had a well-known campaign depicting people doing hard work, then popping open a cold bottle of Coke and taking a swig. We yearn for the “pause that refreshes.” Unfortunately, we try to refresh ourselves with empty calories, or vacations, which are not what we really need. Our souls stir, longing for Sabbath. Not for the frills of a can of saccharine drink, a sugary vacation.

What differentiates a weekly Sabbath from a vacation? Quite a bit, in fact. When my son was four, he learned how to put his head underwater when swimming. Elliot can hold his breath for a good ten seconds, a feat indeed. Still, he cannot believe how long I can hold mine—upward of sixty seconds. When we both emerge from the water, we catch our breaths. It would be fascinating to watch someone go about their life holding their breath all the time and breathing only when they absolutely had to—a difficult life that would be. A Sabbath is like breathing. Imagine a life where you breath once every sixty seconds. Or, can you think of what life would be like if we opted to breathe for only two weeks out of the year? It is interesting that God’s invitation to rest once a week is so hard for us to grapple with, yet we do not blink at the notion of breathing all the time. A rest is not the only thing that matters. What matters even more is the consistency and rhythm of rest that we enter into.

Why do we think we know better than God? Do we think we have a superior understanding of his creation, our bodies? Did we invent ourselves?

While a biblical Sabbath is different from a vacation, it is not just a “day off” either. It is possible for one to not be at work physically but still be at work in one’s heart. Culturally, it is assumed that when we are not at work, we are free to do as we please. But in reality, our jobs and bosses do not really allow us to disengage from work even in our off hours. It is presumed in the modern workplace that we will all continue to work at home. This is exacerbated by the fact that, as we will discuss in a later chapter, we often do not Sabbath because technology invades every part of our life. With our computers in our pockets, what should be a Sabbath day turns out to be a day at home where we are thinking about work. This problem has been identified as a cultural crisis in France. Because of the modern rhythms of work that are mediated

through personal computers and phones, people, in the words of one cultural commentator, “leave the office, but they do not leave their work. They remain attached by a kind of electronic leash—like a dog.”⁴⁶ More often than not, our “days off” are days where we are spatially at home, but emotionally and mentally at work. Do these “days off” constitute a Sabbath day?

A biblical Sabbath is a day when we are spatially, and emotionally, not at work. “Days off” are actually, in the words of Eugene Peterson, “bastard Sabbaths.”⁴⁷ They are days when we are technically at home but really at work. This cultural crisis has led the French government to undertake drastic measures to outlaw employers from sending work emails after hours, barring an emergency.⁴⁸ A business now faces stiff penalties if it requires employees to work when they are to rest. A “day off” cannot sustain the human soul. Only a Sabbath can. By contrast, Sabbath is a day when our hearts are at rest from striving, doing, producing, and—most important—responding to emails. A Sabbath day is not merely stopping our work; it is also stopping our thinking and scheming about work.

The Taste of Sabbath

We conclude this chapter with the words of Isaiah 58:13, which instructs us to “call the Sabbath a delight.”⁴⁹ Sabbath *is* a delight. Not useful. Delightful. Yes, there are innumerable by-products of honoring the Sabbath: we become healthier, happier, and more available to God and others. But we must be cautious—the Sabbath being delightful is different from the Sabbath being useful. Sabbath does not always pay off the way we wish it would. Resting is costly. Nor is Sabbath the day we get to do whatever we want or whatever feels right. Sabbath is to be cherished as a delight in itself, not something we use to get elsewhere. All the things of God are like that—we do not use them as tools to get something. Nor do we use God. Jean-Jacques Suurmond, a Dutch theologian, speaks to our pragmatist tendencies to only love God or follow the life of God if it is useful: “Anyone who tries to prove God’s existence by demonstrating the need for God makes the same mistake as those who claim that in our modern secularized society God no longer has any function and has thus become superfluous. Both begin from the usefulness of God. . . . God is not useful. God does not serve any purpose, since God is an end in himself. . . . God has often either been reduced to a useful, predictable idol, or is experienced as absent.”⁵⁰

We do not love God because God is useful to us. We love God because God is worthy of being loved. “God is interesting,” writes Gunton, “in and of himself.”⁵¹ Or to echo Karl Barth: “God *is*.”⁵² Sabbath, likewise, should not

be understood in merely useful or pragmatic terms. A Sabbath is done out of obedience to God, not to get something. While there are endless benefits to keeping a Sabbath, we do not do it *for* the benefits, in the same way that we do not enter a marriage in order to make love. Sex is a benefit of marriage, not the reason for marriage.

Gerald May once lamented how a pragmatic culture often treats the Sabbath: “We know we need to rest, but we can no longer see the value of rest as an end in itself; it is only worthwhile if it helps us to recharge our batteries.”⁵³ Sabbath is something enjoyed for its own sake, inviting us to play. And play is not undertaken to accomplish; it is undertaken for its own sake. Dorothy Sayers once argued that most legalistic Sabbath-keepers had added to “Thou shalt not work” the phrase “Thou shalt not play.”⁵⁴ God never outlaws Sabbath play. On the contrary, Sabbath is time for creation to play in the world of God once again—as *re*-creation. Sabbath is the celebration of God’s life and his work in our lives. But our overproductive lives have no space for play or celebration. Years ago, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox argued that the death of God in our culture was related in some way to the fact that we no longer celebrate, or integrate festivity, in our culture. That is, our celebration deficit is part of our loss of God in culture. And when festivity and play ended, argued Cox, culture and community begin to erode at their very core.⁵⁵

The Sabbath creates space for rest and play in our lives. The prophet Zechariah looks hopefully to a future day in which our cities would have space for play: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there’” (Zech. 8:4–5). Such an urban environment has space, places for play, for walking, for talking. Even children play in the street. Can you imagine New York City without Central Park? Whenever God dreams of a city, like a dream for our lives, he dreams of places where we are not so crowded and full that we have no room to play in the streets. The Sabbath makes room for us to play outside once again, like when we were kids.

Rather than rest God’s way, we have replaced Sabbath with a kind of therapeutic individualism that seeks to self-entertain, self-please, self-soothe. Christopher Lasch has described this kind of therapeutic culture that is focused on getting the self to sense bliss: “People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.”⁵⁶ Soong-Chan Rah connects our false desires for blissful happiness with deep individualism and the human creation of a culture that is all about the self

and what the individual wants.⁵⁷ Sociologist Philip Reiff echoes this point in his prophetic text *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. Reiff argues that all pleasures (in his example, “sexual”) are intended to be subordinated under the reign of God, but they are not a substitute for God. In today’s age, when we have ceased celebrating God and have begun celebrating celebration, we have turned the means into the goal. “Religious man was born to be saved,” writes Reiff, and “psychological man is born to be pleased.”⁵⁸ What was intended by God to be a celebration reflecting on his goodness and the goodness of his creation has been, once again, replaced by the devil’s false forms of celebration: drunkenness, loss of self-control, and debauchery. We sell ourselves short by celebrating for celebration’s sake rather than for God’s sake. The authentic call to Sabbath is to enter into celebration as God intended it to be, not what we think it should be.

But the Sabbath is not a form of indulgent individualism dressed in religious piety. Sabbath is about delighting in God for his sake and the sake of the world. Marva Dawn has said that Sabbath is about four things: ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting.⁵⁹ It is in Sabbath that we enjoy, we delight, we relish in the goodness and generativity of God. We play. We feast. We rest. We echo with God, “It is good!” And in our Sabbath play, we discover that to play is to pray.⁶⁰ Hear the words of Donna Schaper: “Sabbath keeping is a spiritual strategy: it is a kind of judo. The world’s commands are heavy; we respond with light moves. The world says work; we play. The world says go fast; we go slow. These light moves carry Sabbath into our days, and God into our lives.”⁶¹

Once we get a taste of Sabbath, there is no going back. Our family Sabbaths each Wednesday. On Tuesday evenings, after preparing for the Sabbath, we sing a song together. Some families sing the *L’khab Dodi*, a traditional Jewish song sung on Friday nights. It goes, “Come in peace, and come in joy, Thou who art the bridegroom’s pride; Come, O Bride, and shed thy grace, O’er the faithful chosen race; Come, O bride! Come, O bride!” Our family sings a song called the *Shabbat Shalom*, or “Sabbath Peace.” Each person in the family is named.

Shabbat Shalom to A. J.

Shabbat Shalom to Quinn.

Shabbat Shalom to Elliot.

We have six chickens, and we usually name them in the song too. Then we eat a big meal, read books together, and go to bed. In the morning, we wake

up. We have two rules on the morning of the Sabbath. First, nobody makes their bed. Second, pancakes. Pancakes are essential to our Sabbath. As Quinn sleeps in, I often get up early with Elliot, and together we craft the largest pancakes known to man. Sitting on the counter, he helps me stir the batter. Then we cook them up. Elliot will pour syrup on that thing like nobody's business (I sometimes worry he has a problem). Then we eat. It is a pancake feast—slappy cakes, bacon, eggs, coffee with extra honey in it.

The pancakes are essential. I read at one point that some Jewish fathers, on the morning of the Sabbath, would give their children a spoon of honey. What a beautiful tradition! The idea was simple: that they would always remember the sweetness of the Sabbath for the rest of their lives. It is similar to the way the earliest Christians took Communion: with milk and honey. This symbolism was to remind them that in Christ they had come to the promised land. That is my hope—that when I am dead and gone and my boy is all grown up, if anyone even whispers the word *Sabbath* around my son, he will just start drooling. It is a Pavlovian experiment of the highest order.

Nathaniel Hawthorne once wrote that the Sabbath sunshine was unlike any other sunshine during the week—that sunshine is a “shadow of great truths.”⁶² Pancakes are a shadow of great truths.

All are welcomed in, friends. The Sabbath awaits. Come and delight in it. I can almost see you drooling.

QUESTIONS *for Reflection*

- What do you think about a weekly day of rest happening from the outset of creation, not just when the law was given?
- Why do you think God designed Adam and Eve's first day to be one of rest?
- Take a moment to reflect on the fact that this world was made fundamentally good. What does reflecting on the goodness of Sabbath bring about in your heart?
- How might you confess your dependence on God by recognizing your own needs? What are those needs?
- How might entering rest be likened to entering back into Eden?
- What does Sabbath rest indicate to us about God's intent for humanity?
- Imagine what it would have been like to be Adam or Eve. What would have been your first impressions of God?

- Why do we not rest? What might this tendency reveal about our trust, or lack thereof, in God?
- How might you begin to envision Sabbath as the celebration of God's life and his work in your life rather than a tool or something that is merely pragmatic or useful?
- How might Sabbath be an invitation to celebration?