



PAUSE

Reclaiming Sabbath

If you ask people how they are doing, the most common answer is busy. We are living in the most pressured time in history.

There is a constancy about the demands upon us to be successful and productive. Work places are demanding more from us than they ever have. There is also pressure on our leisure time – to be well rounded we have to be fit, play an instrument, have the right look and be up with the latest technology and media. Our ability to be online anywhere, anytime is our greatest blessing and maybe our greatest curse. We have forgotten how to switch off. It was only this century that the phrase 24-7 was coined. It reflects our belief that all time is the same, we are constantly available and switched on.

The Bible doesn't see time in this way at all. God designed time with a sense of rhythm. The rhythm of Sabbath (6 days to work and 1 day to rest) is designed to help us recover and to enjoy God and others. Sabbath is a gift that God has given for us to enjoy, rather than a burden of obligation.

The Hebrew word for Sabbath literally means stop. Often in the Bible it is translated as rest, an equally valid translation, but rest has overtones of something different than stop. And so one of the questions for us as we reclaim Sabbath is what shall I cease from doing on the Sabbath?

Deciding what to cease from

The reason given for Sabbath in Deut 5:15 was for God's people to remember that their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt, and to remember the freedom that God had brought. A guide to decide what to cease from is to consider what form of slavery we fall into most easily. Slavery to possessions? Slavery to achievement or completion? Slavery to perfectionism? Slavery to fear? To competition? To work? What are you a slave to? Sabbath invites us to remember that we have been freed from slavery by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This is about experimenting with what works for you, given your life stage,

interests and personality. Choose **ONE or TWO** things to eliminate on your Sabbath and experiment for 3-6 months. After that time spend some time reflecting on what has happened in your emotions and soul. What are you learning about God? What impact has it had on your family and friends? You may want to make changes, vary the pattern slightly or start with something completely new. Remember we are trying to observe the spirit of the Sabbath law, not trying to make rules or create new burdens. We are ceasing from some activities to make space for resting in God and enjoying the gifts that he has given us.

Suggestions of what we might cease from:

Work

First and foremost Sabbath calls us to cease from work (Ex 20:9-10). Work goes beyond what we do for pay. As you consider what work is for you, think as broadly as you can. Here are some ideas, not to prescribe what you should do, but to discern what may be helpful for you. Does anything in this list resonate with you? Decide on **ONE or TWO** things to try ceasing from:

- Cease from a "to do" list
- Cease from things that rob you of a feeling of peace
- For students, cease from assignments and study

- For those with young children, perhaps organise occasional babysitting. Or perhaps cease from cooking, washing or errands and instead focus on enjoying your children without having to get other things done.
- Cease from multi-tasking – choose to focus on one thing at a time
- Cease from thinking about unfulfilled desires
- Cease from social media
- Cease from machines – choose one heavily used appliance and let it rest.
- Cease from screens, eg. computer, TV, computer games or smart phones
- Cease from media – anything that reminds you of unfulfilled desires.

Some good questions are:

- *Do certain kinds of media exercise a form of mind control in my life, and do I need a day free from that influence?*
- *Do certain types of media draw me too far into our secular culture, and would I profit from a day to stand apart?*
- *Does some media create background noise that stops me from listening to God?*
- Cease from shopping. Shopping can do two things; stir up desire for things we don't have; satisfy our hunger and inner longings with possessions, rather than directing our hunger and thirst toward God. Sabbath helps us rejoice in what we have, focusing on our abundance rather than our lack.
- Cease from competition -

computer games and other media can fire up a competitive streak. Sports can also do it. For people who engage in competition during their work week, stepping aside from it on the Sabbath can be rejuvenating. One couple who enjoy bike riding spoke about the difference between feeling driven as they used the Sabbath to train for a long distance ride, as opposed to choosing to ride for leisure on the Sabbath.

- Cease from words – the Psalmist says “Be still and know that I am God”. You might observe an hour of silence before a church service, drive to church in silence. Turn off the radio or music in the car. Since Sabbath provides an opportunity for relaxed relationships, ceasing from talking all day would be counterproductive.
- Cease from anxiety – be aware of what raises fearful thoughts and anxious feelings and choose to lay those things aside. Choose not to dwell on that which is causing you stress. Or refrain from activities that will summon stress such as paying bills, doing tax returns and making lists of things to do for the coming week. Make a choice not to think about the people who make you angry.
- Cease from negative self-talk

The intention of ceasing from something on the Sabbath is to clear away the distractions of our lives so that we can rest and experience God's grace. Sabbath invites us to notice God's creation and activity,

and to enjoy our relationship with Him and with people we love.

In addition to ceasing, we may need to create some simple rituals that help us redirect our attention and affection back to God. Choose **ONE or TWO** habits to build into your Sabbath that will help you nurture intimacy with God and with those you love.

Suggestions for Sabbath habits

Some guiding questions are:

What kinds of things nurture our friendship with God and our friendships with other people?

What kind of things re-energise physically, emotionally and spiritually?

What might help you notice God's creation and activity?

What would help you seek the Lord? Sabbath is more than doing nothing, it is a day to remember and to re-create.

Examples of Sabbath habits

- Have a physical reminder of God's presence eg. candle.
- Plan a nice meal with family or friends; Jewish tradition always celebrated Sabbath with feasting. Just make sure that it doesn't feel like work or obligation.
- Some choose a Psalm or simple prayer to mark the beginning of Sabbath.
- Take time to be leisurely, to remind yourself of that set-apart feeling eg. wake up slowly, eat a special breakfast, linger over coffee, spend a few moments watching the birds.
- See worship with others as part of

Sabbath eg. church or small group if the day works for you. If not, that's OK. Don't see a church service as your sole expression of Sabbath.

- Some people like to engage their senses on the Sabbath – go outside and enjoy the warmth of the sunshine. Get out in creation – beach, bush, garden, park, mountain biking, even buying yourself a bunch of flowers. Be mindful of God's creation as you do it.
- Take time to thank God for the abundant blessings he has given you – family and friends, a place to live, food to eat, ideas to pursue, health, work to do etc. Starting the day with thankfulness will set the tone for the day – appreciating what God has already given, rather than focusing on unmet desires. Cultivate your ability to appreciate God's gifts.
- Deliberately go slower. Take time to see and enjoy things that you would normally rush by. Savour a moment, enjoy a conversation, enter God's peace. Often I think of about 10 things at once, I am physically here but thinking of the next place I need to be or next thing I need to do. On Sabbath I try to be present in the moment and enjoy it for what it is without anxious thoughts.
- Walk or drive more slowly. Eat more slowly. Being conscious of enjoying the journey, not focused on the destination. As part of slowing down, some focus on their breathing as a way to slow down

racing thoughts or restless bodies. It can help us focus on the moment.

- Some find journaling helpful on the Sabbath, it can be helpful to reflect on your week, or even to listen to God. Sit with a pen and your journal for 20 mins and take note of any thoughts that God might bring to mind.
- Sabbath can include acts of compassion – making a meal for someone who is sick, visiting an older person, helping a neighbour.
- Sabbath shouldn't be all serious activity – enjoy being active, enjoy meals with friends and family, enjoy playing games with your children. A good Sabbath should include praying and playing. Just be aware that much of what is considered play in our culture easily slides into mind numbing escapism. A quick computer game or internet search can be fun, but be wary of technology drawing you into a place where you can no longer experience thankfulness or listen to God.

Just choose one or two habits to do on your Sabbath and practice them for 3-6 months. If we give ourselves too many things to do, Sabbath will become a legalistic, burdensome day. It's about finding balance; resting from things that drain us and choosing a couple of things that will re-energise us and help us remember God and enjoy relationships.

For those of us who are fairly goal oriented, here are some gauges for Sabbath activity:

“As soon as something becomes compulsive and we must get it done, or it creates in us a sense of obligation, then we need to stop doing it on the Sabbath. As long as it stays relaxing that’s fine.” Much depends on our attitude. The same activity eg. exercise, can be either compulsive or can be very relaxing, depending on our approach.

The Spirit of Sabbath

Remember Sabbath is an attitude, rather than a list of activities. It is not another thing that you have to do. It is a gift that will help you live life more joyfully and connect with God and people you love.

What we choose to do on the Sabbath needs to bring us rest and life over time. The challenge is discernment, experimenting what works for us and people we love, what helps us catch our breath and remember that we are God's most loved children. It will also involve adapting in different seasons of our lives – Sabbath will look different when we are students, to when we are working full-time. It may look different if you get involved in a Sunday ministry. It will look different if you get married or if you have kids. The key is to keep experimenting – adapt with changing seasons. Also take your personality into consideration. Introverts will enjoy more alone time than extroverts who will enjoy spending their Sabbath with others.

What is the best day to observe a Sabbath?

It might be a Sunday. But if you are involved in ministry or work, it won't be the best day. Consider the rhythms of your week and choose a 24-hour period free from work and study. It really does take 24hrs to settle into rest, so don't cut the time short. Pick a beginning and an end based on what works for you and any people with whom you will be sharing the Sabbath. Keep the time consistent each week. If you occasionally have to work, take the next available day. But do guard your Sabbath jealously.

Support from others

Because Sabbath is so counter-cultural, it is helpful to have the support of others. Find someone with whom you can share all or part of your day. For example, you might need to spend part of your day alone, but plan to share a meal with others. In your small group, share how you are going with your Sabbath experiment, ask others to pray for any struggles that you have in keeping it or using it well, share the things that are working. If you are married, try to observe Sabbath as a couple. If you have kids train them early to practice and enjoy Sabbath time as a family. If you share your Sabbath with others, you may need to establish some boundaries eg. I don't want to be asked questions about work on the Sabbath. How are we going to respond to phone calls? Etc

*** Some content has been drawn from Sabbath Keeping by Lynne Baab*