

Articles on Sabbath

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The Gift of Rest

By Lynne M. Baab

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"I'd like to observe the sabbath in our family," the young woman said. "I've been reading books about it, talking with my husband and kids, and we're going to start soon."

"Great," I replied. "Tell me about what you plan to do and not do on your sabbath."

She said, "I love the idea of starting on Saturday at sunset with a festive meal. I'd like to have special food, blessings for the children, prayers and candles, like Jewish people do. Maybe we could sing some songs. Then the next day, after we go to church, I hope we can read some Bible stories, do some crafts, really help the kids to center the day around God."

"What do you plan to stop doing on the sabbath?" I asked.

She looked at me blankly. Stopping, slowing down, had not figured into her consideration of the sabbath day. She was focused solely on adding new activities.

My Own Story

My husband and I lived in Tel Aviv, Israel, for 18 months more than 20 years ago. We were forced to observe a sabbath each week because everything stopped in our neighborhood from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. Stores, movie theaters, and restaurants were simply not open. We didn't have a car, so it really made a difference that the busses stopped running for those 24 hours. At first we had a hard time finding things to do on Friday evenings and Saturdays, but after a few months, we found ourselves enjoying a day with few options for entertainment.

We read, we walked, we talked. My husband sometimes went bird watching in the field near our apartment. I wrote long letters. Sometimes we prayed together in a leisurely fashion. We napped. We simply slowed down. We rested in God's love and experienced God's grace.

Our sabbaths in Israel felt like a gift from God, and when we returned to the U.S. we wanted to keep on receiving that gift. The sabbath had brought us an experiential understanding that we are loved by God quite apart from what we do, and we wanted to continue to grow in our ability to receive love from God in that way. The sabbath blessed us as individuals, connecting us with

God's unconditional love, and it enriched our life as a couple, giving us relaxed and spacious time together.

We decided to observe a sabbath on Sundays, embracing a slower pace with fewer options on that one day each week. Our first son had been born in Israel, and soon we had a second son. I remember those Sundays sabbaths as a young family with great fondness. After church, we read to the kids, we walked, we talked. We went to the zoo and the park.

We had to think carefully about what was the work we would avoid on the sabbath. For me, a part-time student and stay-at-home mom, work consisted of studying, housework, and shopping. My husband's work involved anything from his paid job, as well as house repairs and mowing the lawn. We simply didn't do any of those tasks on Sundays.

As the years passed and our children grew up, our sabbaths changed. Two things stayed constant: no work and a slower pace.

Stop, Pause, Cease, Desist

In the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel are commanded to keep the sabbath day holy, or separate, from the other days of the week. The marker of that holiness is to refrain from working on the sabbath. No one is supposed to work. "You shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates" (Exodus 20: 10).

The Old Testament does not give a lot of specifics about what constitutes work. One of the very few clear commands forbids lighting a fire (Exodus 35:3). No fires for a day assured that the daughters, wives, and female servants could not be expected to cook. All the food had to be cooked before the sabbath began, and the dishes washed afterwards. The sabbath granted rest to everyone, even the women who would usually be productive seven days a week.

As we consider sabbath keeping for our time, we women in particular need to remember our need for rest. The word "sabbath" means stop, pause, cease, desist. Never did a culture need a sabbath like we do today. The messages we hear from our culture encourage us to be productive, to get things done, 24-7. Everything we do has to look good, to accomplish something. Nothing encourages us to stop.

Women can easily bring our culture's values into our attempts to observe a sabbath. We can turn the sabbath into one more thing to do perfectly, one more task to achieve. We can plan elaborate meals and creative Bible studies. We can have high expectations of the ways our family will cooperate with our sabbath agenda.

The command in Exodus says, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work." What constitutes work for women today? What work do we need to confine to six days each week?

The Sabbath as a Gift

My husband and I received a gift from our commitment not to work on Sundays: a day to spend with our children — and later with each other — without needing to get something else done. A

day free of multi-tasking. A day free of the need to achieve anything. A day to rest in God's goodness. Over many years, that gift has continued to bless us and give us freedom in Christ.

We established our sabbath without any of the encouraging books that people can now read about the sabbath. Those books have wonderful suggestions, drawing on the Jewish sabbath traditions, for a celebratory meal after sunset, complete with blessings and candles and special prayers. Those books suggest many activities for parents and children.

All of those suggestions are good things, but a significant danger lurks within them. We can so easily forget the core meaning of the sabbath—stopping and resting—and set up the sabbath as one more thing to achieve.

In our time, what is the equivalent of lighting a fire? What are the actions that send us into work mode? Each of us needs to consider what those actions are, and how to stop them for 24 hours, perhaps by doing them ahead of time, if we want to keep a sabbath.

For me, turning on my computer, balancing the checkbook, and weeding in the garden feel like work. Shopping for food, running errands, doing laundry, and some kinds of cooking also put me into work mode. I know some people find gardening and cooking relaxing. Those people will have a different list of “work” activities to avoid on the sabbath.

Having high expectations for family time also feels like work, whether we are expecting a perfect meal, a wonderful Bible study together, or a deeply spiritual experience as we talk. As more people take on the gift and challenge of sabbath keeping, we need to keep considering and discussing the simple disciplines that can help us draw near to God without moving into perfectionism and a feeling of working hard.

“Simple” is a great word to describe the ideal activities for the sabbath. We certainly want to experience God's presence on the sabbath, but we need to experiment with gentle and unforced ways to do it. As soon as we are working too hard to achieve anything on the sabbath, we have violated the central idea of the day.

A short prayer time or Bible reading can be helpful in keeping the focus of the day on God's goodness. Being together with family members or friends in a relaxed way, perhaps playing games, reading, or eating a celebratory meal, can give a sense of simple abundance that speaks of God's grace.

Creative Sabbath Ideas for Women

For many people, being outside on the sabbath—walking, riding bikes, flying kites, sitting on a bench in a park—helps them feel close to God. Sabbath time outside can be a time of reflection and prayer alone, a time of relaxed conversation with a friend, or an exuberant playtime with a group of family members or friends. A woman who works at a desk job finds that her best sabbath activities involve vigorous exercise outdoors. Being in nature invites us to notice God's care and creativity in the beautiful creation.

Many women benefit from some silent time on their sabbath day. One single woman spends the afternoon of her sabbath day entirely alone. She needs a block of quiet time because she works in a very people intensive job. Often she meets up with friends at the end of the day for a meal together.

A woman who has young children prepares a “sabbath box” of special activities for her children. During one hour of Sunday afternoon, her children know they are expected to play alone, enjoying the delights in the sabbath box, while their parents get some silent time.

One single woman I know tries to avoid worry on the sabbath. She considers herself a “worrier,” and she feels overwhelmed at the thought of trying not to worry on a daily basis. One day a week, however, feels manageable to her. A day free – or at least mostly free – from worrying has been a great gift to her.

I’m a person who has disliked my body for as long as I can remember. I try to keep my sabbaths free from self-disgust about the way I look. On the sabbath I don’t try on clothes, and I don’t read novels with very slim and beautiful heroines. When I find myself thinking negative thoughts about myself, I try to set them aside for the day.

In fact, I try to avoid most negative and stressful thoughts on the sabbath. When I find myself starting to consider whether or not we should remodel a part of our home, I try to set it aside. When I start to think about something I disliked in my childhood, I try to stop my mind from going there.

In one Jewish tradition, intercessory prayers are not allowed on the sabbath because they are viewed as too much work. In that tradition, the appropriate prayers for the sabbath are prayers of thankfulness. On the sabbath, I spend some energy focusing my thoughts on the beauty of the world God made and the good gifts God has given me in the past week. I try to rest in thankfulness. I don’t try to be “hyper-spiritual” all day long, but a little thought discipline goes a long way towards giving me a day that is restful and rejuvenating.

Because I’ve been an enthusiastic sabbath keeper for so many years, I am delighted that so many Christians are rediscovering the gift of the sabbath. I long for my Christian sisters to experience true joy and rest on that day, rest from the striving for perfection and constant productivity that our culture stimulates in us.

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Are You Dangerously Tired?

by Ruth Haley Barton

See how many symptoms you have.

Irritability or hypersensitivity. Do things that normally wouldn't bother you (such as a child's mistake, another driver cutting you off in traffic, or a coworker's irritating habit) put you over the edge?

Restlessness. During waking hours are you aware of a vague sense that something isn't quite right or an even stronger feeling of wanting to bolt from your life? When it's time to rest, do you find yourself unable to settle down and sit quietly or fall asleep?

Compulsive overworking. Do you struggle with work boundaries? Do you check email late into the evening? Are you unable to unplug completely to go on vacation? Do you struggle to enter into solitude or spend uninterrupted time with family?

Emotional numbness. Do you feel you aren't able to really feel anything emotionally—good or bad? And if you did, are you afraid you would be overwhelmed?

Escapist behaviors. When you do have a break in the action, do you find yourself succumbing to escapist behaviors (compulsive eating, drinking, or other substance abuse, spending, television, pornography, surfing the internet)? Do you feel you don't have the energy to choose activities that are life giving (exercising, going for a walk or bike ride, connecting meaningfully with friends and family, enjoying a hobby or interest like playing an instrument, cooking, painting, drawing, writing poetry, playing sports, working with our hands, reading a good book)?

Disconnected from our identity and calling. Do you go through the motions of doing ministry but feel disconnected from a true sense of who you are and what God is calling you to do? Are you at the mercy of other people's expectations and your own inner compulsions because you lack an internal plumb line against which to measure these demands?

Not able to attend to human needs. Do you feel you don't have time to take care of basic human needs such as exercise, eating right, sleeping enough, going to the doctor, having that minor (or major) surgery we need? Do even simple things such as getting the car washed, picking up the dry cleaning, or staying organized seem impossible to accomplish? Do you sense that your most important relationships (family and friends) are routinely being short-changed?

Hoarding energy. Do you have the inner experience of always feeling threatened, as though exposing yourself to additional people or situations would drain the last of your energy or the energy you're trying to conserve for what you think is important? Are you overly self-protective and even reclusive in your attempts to hoard the few resources you do have?

Slippage in your spiritual practices. Have practices that are normally life-giving (solitude and silence, prayer, personal reflection on Scripture, journaling, self-examination, caring for the

body) become burdensome? Do you believe you don't have the time or energy for them even though you know they're good for you?

If even a few of these symptoms are true for you, chances are you're pushing up against human limitations, and you might need to consider that "what you're doing isn't good" for you or for the people you're serving.

Two Kinds of Tired

As I've paid more attention to my own tiredness and fatigue, I've learned that there are at least two kinds of tired. One is what I call "good tired." This is the kind of tiredness we experience after a job well done, a task accomplished out of the best of who we are. If we're living in healthy rhythms of work and rest, this tiredness is a temporary condition, and when it comes, we know that after we take appropriate time for rest and recuperation, we'll soon be back in the swing of things.

But another kind of tiredness is more ominous, and this is what I call "dangerous tired." It's deeper and more serious than the temporary exhaustion that follows periods of intensity of schedule and workload. The difference between "good tired" and "dangerous tired" is like the difference between the atmospheric conditions that produce harmless spring rain clouds and those that bring an eerie green-tinted sky and the possibility of a tornado. When the sky is green like that, you're not quite sure what's going on, but something doesn't feel right, and you know you'd better pay attention. One atmospheric condition is normal and predictable; the other is risky and volatile.

Dangerous tired is the atmospheric condition of the soul that's volatile and portends the risk of great destruction. It's a chronic inner fatigue accumulating over months and months, and it doesn't always manifest itself in physical exhaustion. In fact, it can be masked by excessive activity and compulsive overworking. When we're dangerously tired we feel out of control, compelled to constant activity by inner impulses that we may not be aware of. For some reason we can't quite name, we're not able to linger and relax over a cup of coffee. We can't keep from checking voicemail or email "just one more time" before we leave the office or before we go to bed at night. Or we can't stop cleaning or doing repairs and projects in order to take a walk in the evening or be quietly available to those we love.

Rather than reading anything for the sheer pleasure of it, we pile the nightstand with books and professional journals that cram our heads full of information to keep us at "the top of our game." The idea of taking a full day off once a week (a Sabbath) seems impossible both in theory and in practice. We rarely, if ever, take a real break or vacation, choosing instead to work through holidays and break times. Not surprisingly, even when it's time for well-deserved sleep or rest, we may be unable to relax and receive this necessary gift.

While our way of life may seem heroic, there's a frenetic quality to our activity that's disturbing to those around us.

Simple Ways to Begin to Rest

One of the most sobering things I learned as I listened to my exhaustion and allowed God to minister to me is that when I'm dangerously tired I can be very, very busy and look very, very important but be unable to hear the quiet, sure voice of the One who calls me the beloved. When that happens I lose touch with that place in the center of my being where I know who I am in God, where I know what I'm called to do, and where I'm responsive to his voice above all others. When that happens I'm at the mercy of all manner of external forces, tossed and turned by others' expectations and my own compulsions. These inner lacks then become the source of my frenetic activity, keeping me forever spiraling into deeper levels of exhaustion.

As you read these words you may realize that you're teetering on the brink of dangerous tired—or that you're already over the edge.

This can be a painful realization. But what would happen if, rather than judging and berating yourself, you lingered with your awareness, noticing the weariness that makes it hard for you to be attentive and alert in times of prayer and attentiveness to God? What would happen if you allowed yourself to wonder about your tiredness just a bit?

Rather than criticizing yourself about falling asleep during prayer or your lack of interest in solitude, what if you gave yourself the freedom to notice your weariness *with compassion*? "Wow, I'm really tired. I'm not sure I was aware of just how tired I am. What is that all about?"

Rather than distracting yourself in some way, what would happen if you chose to stay in God's presence and talk with him about your tiredness, acknowledging it as a child would with a parent who cares and can help? What if, rather than feeling alone and weighed down by the seeming impossibility of your situation, you invited God into it with a prayer: "Dear God, this tiredness is what's true about me. What are we going to do about it?"

Such honest noticing and questioning open up the opportunity for God to touch us and care for us in the midst of our humanness.

As you consider your level of tiredness, don't rush to try to solve or fix anything; instead, give yourself time and space to notice what is true about you. Invite God into this moment by saying, "God, this is what is true about me. What are we going to do about this?"

Allow yourself to become fully aware of God with you in these moments, loving you and extending compassion to you. Hear the words of Jesus spoken to you in these moments: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). What is it like to hear these words right now? Do you believe it's possible for you to find the rest you need? Tell God what you need, and listen for what he wants to say to you now.

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Sabbath Rest with Small Children

by Ashley Latvala

Ever since my first child was born, I have struggled with what it means to have true Sabbath rest. Before kids, my husband and I would reserve one day a week for extra time in the word and prayer, extra time with each other, extra sleep, and rest from our work.

Then along came our daughter and suddenly I had a new job that came with 7 twenty-four hour shifts each week. It has been and continues to be a learning process to figure out how to find time to truly rest, as well as to fulfill all my responsibilities as a mother that don't have the option of being put on hold. Here are a few ideas that we've come up with in our family for keeping a Sabbath day restful and truly refreshing. It would be great to hear your ideas too! In our schedule, Saturday is generally our Sabbath day, so I'll probably refer to that.

-“My soul finds rest in God alone...” Ps. 62:1 Whether or not our days are physically restful, our souls are always able to find rest. Try to find special ways to focus on God on your own and with your family. Perhaps have a special time reading and talking about a Bible story, take time to pray for each other, take some time to enjoy the beauty of God's creation in nature or in art, or do something that your family loves doing and thank God for the blessing of one another and for giving you things that you love doing together...

-Prepare beforehand. In old testament times, there was much preparation prior to the sabbath in order that the Sabbath day itself was protected and free from work. I know that meal prep and clean-up takes a large amount of time each day, so here are some ideas to reduce that time on your day of rest: prepare food the day before, plan to eat left overs, have easy meals reserved that don't take much time to prepare or clean up, freeze a meal earlier in the week to have on your day of rest, have necessary groceries on hand, etc. Another thing that I like to do is have my major house cleaning day the day before so I can enjoy a clean home and not be tempted to spend my extra rest time doing house work.

-Don't get sucked into unnecessary tasks. Often times I do various tasks just because they come to mind and I am afraid that I will forget about them if I don't just get them done right then. A way to avoid your rest time being slowly etched away is to keep a small piece of paper where you can write down these tasks as they come to mind. Then you won't forget them and won't have to spend your precious moments of rest on things that you can easily do later.

-Think about Sunday on Friday (or whatever days this works out to be for you). Since I usually prepare for the next day the night before, it makes sense for me to take a couple of minutes preparing for Sunday on Friday night. Make sure clothes are clean for church, set aside stuff for the diaper bag, etc.

-Use paper plates/cups. I don't do this much since we don't have recycling here, but on occasion it is nice to have a meal with easy clean up. As all moms know, even an extra 10-15 minutes of rest is a huge blessing!

-Have different standards for the Sabbath. For example, I like to make my bed each morning and clean up the house before nap time each day. On Saturdays I just close the door to our room and don't worry about making the bed or straightening up. I also generally don't take much time to tidy up the house when the kids are napping since this is the longest stretch of physical rest that I can get during the day. Sometimes this idea doesn't work for me though, because I find that if things are too messy, it is harder for me to rest comfortably.

-Take turns getting some time away. My husband and I usually take turns getting a little bit of alone time out of the house on our day of rest. I usually just go to a nearby cafe to read for a little bit, but it feels so refreshing! With little kids who are always needing me, getting a little time out does wonders for helping me rest. I am sure the day will come when our kids are older that we can all just have a restful day at home, but with little kids, "rest" has a different meaning. We do spend much of the day enjoying just being together though.

-Spend time with people, or spend time alone. I am sure we are all familiar with whether or not we are introverts or extroverts. I am an extrovert and am very refreshed by spending time with people. I love good, deep conversations and talking about what God is doing in my life and hearing what He is doing in the lives of others on my day of rest. My husband on the other hand is an introvert, and in order for him to rest well, he prefers to spend time alone or just with our family on his day of rest. I think it is helpful to know yourself and your family with regards to this and make sure that everyone has a chance to feel rested.

In all of the extra opportunities for rest that we can create with a little bit of planning, the important part of course is keeping our focus on God and finding our rest in Him, through the word, prayer, praise, and having our hearts focused on Him. I know that no matter how physically restful a day turns out to be, my soul will not be rested apart from Him. It encourages me to know that the flip side of this is also true. Even though there are many days, even sabbath days, that are physically and emotionally exhausting, God does provide rest for us in supernatural ways apart from our circumstances.

Latvala, Ashley. 2009, March 5. *Sabbath Rest With Small Children*. Retrieved October 4, 2014, from For Missionary Moms: <http://formissionarymoms.com/2009/03/05/sabbath-rest-with-small-children/>