



CHAPTER ONE

A Gift for Our Time

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work. . . . For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.

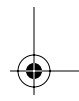
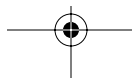
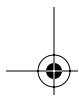
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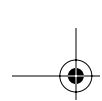


I didn't know I was allowed to rest."

I heard these words from a mother with young children just after I had spoken to a Mothers of Preschoolers group about the sabbath. During the discussion time, many of the moms talked about the seven-day-a-week pressure they feel to keep countless balls in the air. They drive their kids to activities, keep the home front organized and clean, fix meals, shop for food and kids' clothes and toys and school supplies, and try to give their children a significant amount of undivided attention. Many of them also work part time or full time for pay. They multitask continually, and they find it exhausting.

I could see wistful smiles on the women's faces when I de-





scribed my own sabbath observance during the years when I'd had young children. I talked about how one day each week I chose not to do housework or run errands. On that day, my husband and I could play with our kids or take them to a park without worrying about the other things we needed to do.

Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something—anything—is better than doing nothing.

“I didn't know I was allowed to rest.”

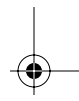
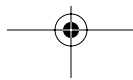
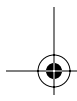
What's going on in our culture, in our world, that a mother with young children believes she's supposed to be

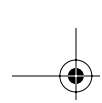
WAYNE MULLER, *SABBATH*

active and productive every minute? Why is it scary to think about stopping or slowing down all this relentless activity? Why do we need to justify our existence by constant motion? Why would we think we aren't allowed to rest?

The sabbath has been a great gift to me by slowing me down and inviting me to experience God's rest—not just analyze it. Jesus said to his disciples, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28-29). I have received that gift of rest in Christ because of the sabbath.

The sabbath has also enabled me to learn from Jesus, to take his gentle yoke on my shoulders rather than live in response to the world's demands and my own unhealthy desires. Keeping a sabbath has taught me the deep truths of God's love as much as any faith discipline I have observed as an adult. It has shaped my heart,





opening me to receive God's gifts more fully. The sabbath has inscribed God's grace on my soul in a way I can barely describe.

I stumbled into sabbath keeping because I experienced it while living in Israel many years ago. My commitment to the sabbath didn't come from theological conviction, guilt or any outside force. I experienced it, felt it was a gift and believed God wanted me to experience that gift every week. I'm glad it happened that way.

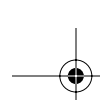
CONFUSION ABOUT THE SABBATH

What is the sabbath? A weekly day of rest and worship. A day to cease working and relax in God's care for us. A day to stop the things that occupy our workdays and participate in activities that nurture peace, worship, relationships, celebration and thankfulness. The purpose of the sabbath is to clear away the distractions of our lives so we can rest in God and experience God's grace in a new way.

Some people find the sabbath confusing. The idea raises so many questions that they have decided not to observe a sabbath or to ignore the issue as much as possible. Some of the questions are theological. When we observe a sabbath, aren't we falling into Old Testament legalism? Didn't Jesus come to fulfill the law? Doesn't that mean we no longer have to observe a sabbath?

The practical questions can be equally confusing. Even if we want to keep a sabbath, when should we do it? Some Christians say that Sunday parallels the Saturday sabbath for Jews and that we must keep Sunday special because Jesus rose from the dead on "the first day of the week." Other Christians say the Saturday sabbath is still mandated by God. Some people work on Saturday and Sunday. Are they violating God's law? Can they observe a sabbath on a weekday?





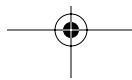
Adding to the confusion is the question of what to do and what not to do on the sabbath. The 1982 movie *Chariots of Fire* was based on the true story of Eric Liddell, a devout Christian who eventually became a missionary to China. In his early twenties, he was selected to run for Great Britain in the 1912 Olympics. His initial heat was scheduled for a Sunday, and he refused to compete. His story made front-page news. Britain was up in arms about his decision.

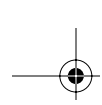
If we set out to keep a sabbath, should we refuse to engage in sporting activities as Eric Liddell did? Is a bike ride different from competing in organized sports? What about playing tennis or swimming with your kids? Going for a long walk?

The Old Testament rules about the sabbath centered around a day of rest from work. In our world, what constitutes work? Reading and answering e-mail? Balancing the checkbook? Cooking? Shopping for groceries? Doing a little home remodeling project? Mowing the lawn and pulling up weeds? Getting organized for the week ahead? The Bible acknowledges that some kinds of work are necessary even on the sabbath. Children need to be cared for, cows need to be milked and animals need to be pulled out of pits. How do we know if we are tending to genuine needs rather than slipping into patterns that inflate our sense of self-importance?

SABBATH PRACTICES

A growing number of people have found answers to these questions, answers that work for them. They have established sabbath patterns that nurture intimacy with God. They have experimented with a variety of habits for the one day, in order to see which observances enable them to live in grace the other six days.





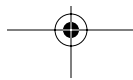
The variety of sabbath possibilities is amazing. A university student loves to wear a dress to church. Then she stays in her dress through the evening to remind herself that this is a special day. Even something as mundane as breakfast cereal can mark a day of rest. A couple prepares steel-cut oats on Sunday mornings because the meal takes so long to cook. The gift of the sabbath is the gift of abundant time, and a slow-cooking breakfast helps this couple step outside their daily routine of schedules and hurrying.

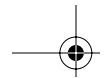
Some people nurture particular Bible study and prayer habits for their sabbath. One business owner saves up the homework for his Bible study class and does it all after church on Sunday, his sabbath. He admits that he enjoys letting the assignments pile up, because then he's motivated to spend time in the Scriptures on Sunday afternoons. Another man, a Bible school teacher and administrator, says he devotes Sunday afternoons to intercessory prayer. Whenever he gets an e-mail with a prayer request, he prints it out and sets it aside for Sundays. He enjoys reading back over those prayer requests and praying in a leisurely fashion on his sabbath.

A sabbath to me is a day of rest from the modern-day craziness of life.

CRAIG, A MAN IN HIS TWENTIES

One family observes a sabbath that begins on Saturday in the late afternoon and goes until just before dinner on Sunday. They begin their sabbath with a family gathering that includes a breath prayer. "Breathe out your frustrations and worries into the presence of God," the father or mother says. "Breathe in God's presence. God is as near as the air you breathe." This prayer has become so special to the kids that if the parents forget the breath prayer, the kids remind them.





SOLD OUT ON THE SABBATH

Wayne, an ad agency writer in his midthirties, began observing a sabbath a few years ago, motivated both by obedience to God and by a sense that a day of rest is a commonsense thing to do. He has

If you work seven 50-hour weeks
in a row, you'll get no more done
than if you worked seven 40-hour
weeks in a row.

concentrated on making his sabbath different from the other days of the week. On Sundays he tries not to do anything related to his job. He goes to church, does fun things with his family and sometimes does nothing.

STUDY CITED IN *THE SEATTLE TIMES*,
AUGUST 24, 2003

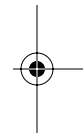
He occasionally works in the yard or runs errands. He says he is willing to do this

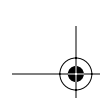
kind of work on his sabbath because errands and chores don't demand from him the same energy and focus of his job. In fact, some of these activities are relaxing and meditative.

Wayne has found that when he does a little work for his job on Sunday in order to be better off when the workweek starts, it doesn't do the trick. Instead, his week is harried and difficult, and he feels chronically behind. In contrast, when he doesn't work on Sundays, even when he feels he needs to, he has a better week following.

"It's weird," he notes. "But I think I can guess why this happens. First, God knows me better than I know myself. He made the sabbath for me. When I live the way he tells me to, I'm simply operating in the most optimal, efficient way. The day of rest gives me more energy, focus and ability. If you change your oil according to the manufacturer's specs, your car works better."

Wayne also believes our obedience triggers a touch of the





miraculous. “God honors our obedience,” he says. “When in faith I decide not to work, even though all my data tells me that a few hours spent on Sunday will save time later on, God makes things happen—probably thousands of small, hardly noticeable things—so that I come out ahead.”

Wayne compares sabbath keeping to tithing, observing that when people give away ten percent of their income in obedience to God, their finances just work out better. He also cites the Israelites in the wilderness. When they followed the manna-gathering schedule as instructed, they always had enough—even though that meant manna behaved inconsistently, staying good for an extra day to cover the sabbath, rotting in the same amount of time on other days. Sabbath keeping works the same way, giving a gift of time that we often can’t figure out logically.

Wayne is one of many people who talked to me about how they get more done during the weeks when they observe a sabbath. The rhythm of work and rest seems to help us function more purposefully and energetically, living in responsive obedience to the pattern God designed for us.

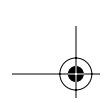
Just as tithing reminds me that all I have is from God, so sabbath keeping reminds me that God is in control.

SUSAN, A MOM IN HER LATE THIRTIES

SIMPLY BELOVED, A CHILD OF GOD

Ann, single and in her early fifties, is another enthusiastic sabbath keeper. She has observed a sabbath for thirty-three years, ever since she was in college. Over the years, her sabbath has occurred on various days, depending on her work schedule. Currently her sabbath is on Friday because she works in a church.





Ann begins her sabbath on Thursday evening and usually continues resting through Friday evening, so her weekly sabbath is actually a little longer than twenty-four hours. As she has gotten older, she has found she needs that much rest in order to cope with the stresses of the other days of the week and to work productively.

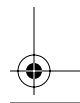
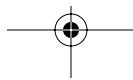
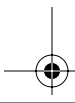
On her sabbath, Ann ceases working on anything that might have appeared on a “to do” list earlier in the week: all work, all thoughts of work, all chores and household details. She acknowledges that this routine took many months of practice in her first year of observance, but it is now almost automatic. If she finds “life” intruding into her sabbath, that’s a sign of serious stress and triggers remedial action.

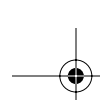
She takes the day as a gift, a day to do anything in the presence of God. Her sabbath often involves fiction, ferry rides and salt-water beaches. Because she can’t observe the sabbath on Sunday, public worship is seldom involved, so in that sense the day is incomplete, she says.

Ann reflects on her day of rest:

I began observing a sabbath because someone convinced me it was a biblical command and linked it to wonderful promises. I have continued to observe a sabbath because I have experienced it as my greatest joy. On that day I am not “Ann the _____” (insert various roles and titles). On that day I am a disciple, not a leader. On that day I am beloved, simply beloved.

In the early years, I felt I had truly kept the sabbath if I reached that moment when my active life identity fell away and I was just a child of God. In these later years, it’s not a struggle to enter into that state. Being a child of God, and





only a child of God, feels like old clothes that I slip into with relief for those hours each week.

The sabbath is one of those gospel duties that absolutely convinces us of the goodness of God. The more we practice it, the greater a privilege it becomes, the more essential it feels, the deeper it connects us to the river of life that provides fruit in all seasons.

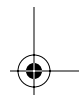
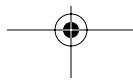
What a wonderful God we worship, whose creative work models a day of rest that is sweet to the ones created. "It is very good." What a gift is human life on earth, set in relationships. We've been given good work worth doing, done with gusto for six days, celebrated with a sigh and song on the seventh day. The sabbath-keeping command is like the promise, "O taste and see that the Lord is good."

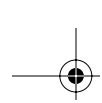


THE SABBATH AND GRACE

Recently I was talking with a friend about a biblical passage on grace: Ephesians 2:1-10. In that passage, the apostle Paul insists that apart from Christ we are dead, and in Christ we receive love, mercy and new life. All this comes to us as a gift, the gift of grace. We cannot do anything to earn it. My friend asked me if I ever truly experienced God's grace. As I thought about her question, I realized that the sabbath, more than anything else, has enabled me to experience this grace that comes to us in Christ.

The sabbath teaches us grace because it connects us experientially to the basic truth that nothing we do will earn God's love. As long as we are working hard, using our gifts to serve others, experiencing joy in our work along with the toil, we are always in danger of believing that our actions trigger God's love for us. Only in stopping, really stopping, do we teach our hearts and souls that we





are loved apart from what we do.

During a day of rest, we have the chance to take a deep breath and look at our lives. God is at work every minute of our days, yet we seldom notice. Noticing requires intentional stopping, and the sabbath provides that opportunity. On the sabbath we can take a

Why do I observe a sabbath?

Because the Scriptures encourage us to do so. Because I need time to recharge the human batteries.

Because I need and want to worship with others on a regular basis.

SAM, A RETIRED MINISTER IN HIS SEVENTIES

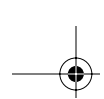
a moment to see the beauty of a maple leaf, created with great care by our loving Creator. We can slow down long enough to observe the loveliness of our child's face or our friend's smile. On the sabbath, perhaps while taking a walk or waking from a nap, we can reflect on the previous week and notice a particular way God acted in our lives or answered a prayer. All these gifts come to us from the hand of God, and

taking time to notice them helps us remember the generosity of the giver.

The sabbath teaches grace because it invites us to rest and rejoice in what we have, rather than focus on what we do not have. The sabbath invites us to practice thankfulness. On workdays we have to think about what we don't have and what we need to do. On the sabbath we can forget all that and simply enjoy what is.

Our culture is obsessed with production, possession and accomplishment. The sabbath invites us to spend a day apart from the media's incessant cry of "More!" The sabbath invites us into a rhythm, a structure, that frees us from outside pressures. And that





freedom communicates God's grace to us.

The sabbath gives us time to reflect. What do I really care about? What are my deepest feelings and longings? In what areas of life do I need God the most? What do I need to confess to God? What do I need to explore that has great potential for growth? Who am I, anyway? Why am I here? What purpose does God have for my life? What purpose do I desire for my life? Bringing our innermost feelings into the open can teach us deep grace as we grow in understanding that God accepts us completely, forgiving us for the sin we find and helping us grow in our sense of purpose and direction.

When I take a break once a week,

I remember that God is the one in

charge of keeping the world turning

and not me. Taking a day off each

week also encourages me to be

responsible with how I spend my time

on the other six days.

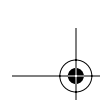
CHRIS, A WOMAN IN HER TWENTIES

Without time to stop, we cannot notice God's hand in our lives, practice thankfulness, step outside our culture's values or explore our deepest longings. Without time to rest, we will seriously undermine our ability to experience God's unconditional love and acceptance. The sabbath is a gift whose blessings cannot be found anywhere else.

FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

The sabbath nurtures relationships. The fast pace of our world encourages us to forget that relationships take time. Friendship is a slow art, whether it's with God, family members or other people.





The sabbath can give us precious and much-needed time to grow in friendship, to have leisurely conversations that help us go deeper with the people we love and with God. Loving and being loved bring grace into our lives.

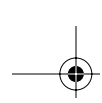
As people near the end of life, they usually engage in a kind of review, examining their regrets about how they lived. “I worked too hard,” many people say. “I was a stranger to my kids when they were little, and I wish I had spent more time with my spouse.”

In the same way, our own hard work and busy pace can make us strangers to God. Catholic theologian Leonard Doohan believes that without the reflection and meditation that come from regularly stopping our activity, “we lose a sense of God or drag an out-moded image along behind us.” Our relationship with God gets stuck, and we deny ourselves the opportunity to let our childish views of God grow into a real relationship, full of depth and wonder and mystery.

Doohan continues, “To fail to see the value of simply being with God and ‘doing nothing’ is to miss the heart of Christianity. . . . If in life we are not still, cannot be inspired by the beauty around us, cannot concentrate or be silent, how then can we suddenly achieve this in prayer?”¹ Prayer and contemplation grow out of patterns of quiet and leisure. We want to bring our concerns to God, confess our sins and draw near to him in prayer, but we are expecting something impossible if we do not also allow ourselves to “do nothing” and rest in quietness from time to time.

The sabbath provides a structure to build “doing nothing” into our schedules. This kind of rest provides a foundation for deeper prayer and continued growth in friendship with God because it nurtures within us the stillness and silence that are essential to prayer.

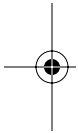




SABBATH ISSUES AND STORIES

We will continue to consider how the sabbath connects with prayer, Christian growth and grace as we proceed through this book. We will look at the biblical commands regarding the sabbath, evaluating the way Christians today are called to respond. We will explore patterns of sabbath observance for different ages and stages of life: for single people, families with young children, students and empty nesters. Two of the biggest sabbath questions are, “What shall I cease from doing on the sabbath?” and “What shall I do on the sabbath?” We will look at many options for both.

We will hear from a variety of voices. As I tell people’s sabbath stories, I will change the names and some of the identifying details. As a beginning foundation, in the next chapter I will tell you my own story.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION, DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

1. What do you remember from your childhood about the sabbath?
What positive models do you remember? What negative models?
2. When you consider slowing down for one day each week, what obstacles and fears do you find in your heart? What do you imagine might be a positive result of keeping a sabbath?
3. What questions do you have about sabbath keeping?

PRAYING ABOUT THE SABBATH

Spend some time praying about your fears and your questions about the sabbath. Ask God to meet you and answer you. Ask him to attune your spiritual ears so you can hear his invitation to rest, and to open your heart so you can respond.

