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THE SABBATH WE NEED

FINDING TRUE REST
in a WORLD of COUNTERFEITS



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1

BRICKS WITHOUT STRAW

JASON WOULD SIT IN THE BACK of the auditorium with his family most Sundays with an earpiece discreetly nestled in his ear. Half-present in worship, half-engaged in a conference call, he straddled two worlds. Occasionally he'd step out when he needed to contribute to the call, then quietly reenter. Jason worked in finance. He was good at his job and was regularly promoted. His success seemed especially commendable in an industry where godliness rarely flourished. Jason made a lot of money and gave a lot of money away. He was the friend who was always first to grab the check, always aiming to be present. But his presence proved elusive.

"It's a busy season," he'd assure us. "It won't always be like this." Yet the season never changed. "I'm stuck in a role that demands constant availability, but another promotion is coming. Then I'll have the margin I need." That promotion arrived, then another, but the margin was always out of reach. He was tired. His family grew weary. Friendships were difficult to maintain. Rest was elusive. Concerns were raised by friends, but reasons and explanations were always given. Justifications were always available.

We had another friend in finance who seemed to navigate rest with greater ease. *What's the difference?* we'd ask. He replied simply, "I make far less money, and the promotions don't come as fast."

Other friends, Anthony and Crystal, had two boys who played soccer. As their boys grew older and more skilled, they entered more competitive leagues. They formed good relationships in the community and received lots of encouragement from the coaches. Soon, Sundays dissolved into tournaments and travel, weeknights consumed by practice and games.

This is just what you do! became their refrain. Their presence with their faith community began to suffer. We missed them and sensed their guilt, but we understood their dilemma. Pulling their kids from promising opportunities seemed not just unfair but unthinkable.

When a friend gently noted that soccer had subtly become a master they can't say *no* to, they were offended and hurt. They gave reasons and explanations. They had justifications readily available.

It's easy to begin to pile up criticisms for these friends of ours. They overwork and overextend themselves, sacrificing worship, healthy rhythms, and friendships for what seem like temporary gains. But sympathy is needed as well. They, like us, live and work within systems that offer appealing rewards but exact exhausting demands. Our friends often feel a double guilt: one kind from the system when they do not keep up, and another from their community when they do. Fatigue becomes normalized. *This is what you have to do.*

No wonder we often hear, *keeping Sabbath just doesn't work.* We've internalized the narrative that to succeed, to get what we need, and to keep up, saying *no* is not an option. The demands feel inevitable and irresistible.

CONFISCATORY GODS

Many of us live and work within systems shaped by greed and anxiety—institutions and industries that promise flourishing but demand relentless production and consumption. In this context, Sabbath keeping isn't simply about ceasing work, it's the resisting of our cultural demands and promises. It's an exodus from greedy and anxious systems and industries. It's not the "renouncing of civilization" but "attaining independence from it." To all the good things that our world offers, the Sabbath reminds us "there is only one proper attitude—to have them and to be able to do without them."¹

The inability to do without them is a deep, interior slavery that is often hard to recognize and even harder to escape. This is why the Sabbath command in Exodus stands in contrast to Egyptian slavery. The spiritual principle is simple but seismic: Yahweh, not Pharaoh, is Lord.

In Egypt, everything was grounded in fear and surplus that depended on Israelite bondage. "They set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses" (Exodus 1:11)—storehouses for wealth that could never be enough. The system Joseph once built to preserve life during the famine (see Genesis 47:13-26) had been twisted into a mechanism of control. What God intended as blessing, Pharaoh used for power.

Greed always finds justification, and anxiety only intensifies the cruelty. There's an interior logic to these systems—one that legitimizes the cheapening of labor, allowing us to use others a means to an end. The Israelites were caught in a grind of endless

production, because there's never enough and our desire for glory is infinite.

“Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them” (Exodus 1:9-10). And when freedom for the Israelites became a real potential (see Exodus 4), their abundance became more vulnerable, which only escalated the anxiety. The more the Israelites longed for freedom, the more anxious the system became. So the Egyptians withheld straw but still demanded bricks. “Complete your daily work as when there was straw,” the taskmasters urged. The word translated “urgent” gives us the texture of the system: not just hurried but narrowed—life compressed into endless efficiency. More done in *less* time. Desire for freedom becomes a threat. Longing is punished.

These systems are what Walter Brueggemann calls “confiscatory gods”—deities who “authorize endless systems of production that are, in principle, insatiable.”² They demand more than they give. And the more you resist, the more anxious and punishing they become.

The tragedy of these predatory systems is how quickly we normalize the conditions. *This is the way it is! It's how I get in, get by, and get ahead.* We see it in Exodus. When Moses speaks of freedom, the Israelites lash out: “You have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh!” (Exodus 5:21). It won't be the last time they long for the predictability of slavery over the risk of freedom. Even on the way to the Promised Land, they pine for Egypt. Better the system you know than the wilderness you don't (see Exodus 16:4, 27-29; 17:2-3; Numbers 11:1-4; 14:1-4). Systems of greed and anxiety often form those under their demands, normalizing what is expected, teaching us to live as slaves.

But God promises to be good to his people. He hears their cries and responds: “I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm” (Exodus 6:6). He promises presence. Peace. A new land. A new identity (vv. 7-8). But promises are hard to receive when your spirit is broken: “But they did not listen . . . because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery” (v. 9). When slavery has shaped your imagination, freedom sounds like fantasy.

In the introduction, we named two modern distortions of work and identity: *achievement culture* and *well-being culture*. Neither traffics in chains or taskmasters, but they are *bricks without straw*—driven by scarcity, masked as freedom, and ruled by gods who always ask for more.

ACHIEVEMENT CULTURE

Our achievement culture, as journalist Anne Helen Peterson describes, is one that “revenge[s] rest.”³ Advancement, according to Jonathan Crary, requires that we become like a robot. In his book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, he describes a Department of Defense study of the white-crowned sparrow—a bird that can stay awake for seven days during migration. The goal? To find ways for soldiers to function productively without sleep.

As history has shown, war-related innovations are inevitably assimilated into a broader social sphere, and the sleepless soldier would be the forerunner of the sleepless worker or consumer. Non-sleep products, when aggressively promoted by pharmaceutical companies, would become first a lifestyle option, and eventually, for many, a necessity.⁴

This is an ordinary narrative for many of us: What was first a “lifestyle option” to get ahead, to be noticed, and to be promoted, has become normal and necessary.

We now live and work in systems that demand continuous output. The human subject, Crary argues, is being reshaped to fit these demands. We’re taught that our limitations are bottlenecks to be optimized—so we tweak our sleep, energy, diets, and even relationships to match production goals. We don’t rest. Rather, we simply go into “sleep mode.” “There are now very few significant interludes of human existence,” says Crary, “that have not been penetrated and taken over as work time, consumption time, or marketing time.”⁵

In an achievement culture there are ever-expanding opportunities to make money and advance, which means the incentives to overwork grow too. The consequences of resting are high. These are confiscatory gods—demanding more than they give, taking more than they promise. We’re not talking about the workaholic archetype in a Hallmark redemption story. This is ordinary life for most of us—navigating systems that prize optimization over sanctification.

Achievement culture diminishes us in at least two ways:

First, it weakens our ability to make ethical and relational judgments.⁶ We become like the structures we serve: greedy, anxious, and reactive. There’s just no time to be reflective. Reflection requires time, and time is a luxury few can afford.

Over the years, as leaders of our church community, we’ve seen how long seasons of restlessness and overwork can lead to a lack of clear judgment, moral failure, and heartache. Burnout often

prohibits clear, spiritual discernment in moments of temptation. In such seasons, impulse replaces sacrificial love.

Second, it undermines our ability to prepare fruitfully for the future. That may sound strange in a culture obsessed with five-year plans and retirement portfolios. But to *fruitfully* prepare is a different discipline than having a five-year plan. We are often led not by discernment, but by gut and impulse, giving up long-term relational intimacy (with God and others) for potential promotions and pay increases. We will compromise integrity for advancement. Simply put, we cannot both comply with anxious and greedy structures and live a life of obedience to God. In such soil, faithfulness can't grow.

Sabbath is our exodus from these systems. It reframes time and self as God sees them. In Sabbath, achievement becomes grace, possessions become gifts, and people become beloved—not tools. Sabbath isn't escapism, nor does it demand we quit our jobs or flee our industries. But it does require resistance. And resistance is costly.

Many of us have attempted to stay within an achievement culture *and* aim to find rest. But this is attempting to serve two masters: the confiscatory gods and the Lord of the Sabbath. Both demand absolute allegiance. Anxiety and rest, greed and contentment—these cannot dwell in the same heart. One must be rooted out and the other planted firmly in.

Sadly, in the end, we will often choose to remain within achievement culture. Why?

There are a few reasons for this:

First, to rebel against the systems of achievement culture is costly. When the Israelites sought freedom, Pharaoh punished

them with greater demands. Similarly, when we begin to set limitations on what our work can demand from us, we risk reputation, promotions, and raises. And when we have been formed to seek our sense of self through these rewards, the loss feels like suffering. “*I have become a stench to my supervisors for seeking freedom!*”

Sophia was a young and gifted teacher within a high-performing charter school system in New York City, with ambitions toward more administrative leadership positions. She worked late into the evenings and most weekends. She was also in graduate school, opting for every advantage for advancement. But she was also slowly realizing she had no meaningful relationships. Her mental and physical health were suffering.

In pastoral care, she admitted she had trusted the promises of her industry more than the promises of God. Slowly, she began taking a day off. Encouraged by her community, she set limits.

There’s a version of Sophia’s story where everything works out—her supervisors saw she was a healthier teacher, trusting her and advancing her to the positions of leadership she’d always wanted. But that’s not what happened. She didn’t get promoted and watched her peers receive the positions and pay raises she once hoped for. But she was able to be a good teacher, build meaningful friendships, and for the first time, experience real spiritual growth. Taking a Sabbath, for Sophia, was costly.

Second, we often resist Sabbath because we feel guilty for taking a weekly day of rest. Achievement culture has formed us into believing that productivity and accomplishments are what make us good and provide meaning. So when we rest, we feel guilty, and in feeling guilty, we feel restless. *I shouldn’t just be sitting here!* The feelings of guilt are a part of our Sabbath story.

I (Jena) come from long lines of Californians—fourth and fifth generation on each side. The stereotypes, of course, abound, and many of them with merit. But when I think of my family, I think less of sun and ease and more of the characters in Steinbeck novels—the grit of farmers, the moral weight of hard work, the sense that labor is not just survival but virtue. My parents worked hard. Not just in their jobs, but in the hidden places—at home, in the care of others. Their work carried a sense of purpose, of dignity.

John, by contrast, grew up in the Midwest, where the shape of hard work was no less real, but its structure came from something different. There, the effort was communal, passed down through family systems and cultural expectations. In my family, the drive came from within. In his, from the stories and structures around them.

Then we moved to New York City. What hope did we have of not getting swept up into its unrelenting currents? Beneath our differences, we shared the same inherited creed: To be worthy of belonging, you must be productive. Slowness is a kind of sloth. Rest is a concession.

When we became convinced that we needed to keep a Sabbath, I found myself staring at guilt I couldn't quite name. I knew, in my mind, that rest was good—that God rested, joyfully and without shame. But something in me resisted. My instincts had been formed long ago. There were Sabbath days where the slowness provoked me to remember what hasn't been finished, accomplished, or finalized. I felt guilty for resting and instinctually made a rational for why Sabbath could be put off—*maybe I'll just work on some things half of the day or put off Sabbath all together until next week.*

My instincts, however, were gradually being reshaped. The Word of God was pressing in from the outside and the Spirit of God rising up from within. Still, the process was slow. I had to practice the truth to get my heart to align with it.

Those first Sabbaths were difficult. Guilt lingered. I didn't just have to resist working—I had to press into delight. I had to rehearse joy. But something began to change. The muscles of my soul began to remember. Over time, anticipation replaced resistance. Now I can enter the day with joy. Not because I've earned it, but because God has given it.

Like the Israelites in Egypt, we normalize our interior slavery. *This is just what you do.* Calls for rest feel not only impractical, but almost cruel.

But not everyone responds to the pressures of achievement with hustle. Some have turned the other way—toward what could be called a “secular Sabbath.”

WELL-BEING CULTURE

There's a growing response to achievement culture, especially among younger adults who are working less, demanding more flexibility, preferring hybrid or remote work, and seeking more vacation time. Many are willing to take lower pay in exchange for better work-life balance. They want freedom and better mental health. They value *experiences* over *achievement*. There's a lot of good desires behind this perspective. It's attempting to correct what achievement culture has distorted. You could call this a *secular Sabbath*—“secular” because the goal of well-being culture is self-fulfillment: freedom and experience, life as something enviable rather than meaningful. This conflicts with the holiness of

the Sabbath. A life driven by self-fulfillment cannot, at the same time, be driven by obedience to God.

Remember, the Sabbath has two tensions:

1. It resists the restrictive, diminishing demands of overwork: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Well-being culture gets this emphasis right. We should not work in a way that diminishes our lives and steals our joy.
2. Sabbath also calls for self-denial: “It is a day of sabbath rest, and *you must deny yourselves*” (Leviticus 16:31 NIV). Well-being culture misses this. A life aimed at self-fulfillment ends up just as restless—just as diminished.

The problem with well-being culture is not its diagnosis—mental, emotional, and physical health are real needs. The issue is that it lacks a coherent vision of what well-being actually is. For every perceived need, there is a product to purchase. If you need better mental health, there’s therapy. Want to get in shape? Buy a gym membership, hire a trainer, download an app. Want better nutrition? Subscribe to a meal plan or pay for a coach. There’s a subscription for everything, but none of these industries has an endpoint. There is no destination—only ongoing maintenance.

Comedian Liz Glazer tells the story of being in therapy for seventeen years. After claiming this fact, the crowd cheers, affirming the good that therapy provides and the courage to spend that much time on herself. She goes on to say, “People tell you, don’t screw up your kids because they’ll have to go to therapy. But *I love therapy!* It’s my favorite hour of the week. Therapy is a party, and the theme is *me*. I love it! I live my entire life, weaving together a

narrative into an episode of television that I present to Dr. Weisberg at 11:10 a.m. where I have been going for seventeen years.”

The bit is actually pretty funny, and to be clear, we think therapy is a good thing and often refer folks in our community to mental health experts and therapists when the difficulties go beyond our competencies. But where Glazer finds herself, therapy had become an expensive replacement for friendship and community—and tragically, there was no real vision for her well-being. Just a weekly invitation to talk about herself.

Since the goals of *well-being* are often unclear, we resort to comparison: *How am I doing? Am I emotionally balanced enough? Am I in shape enough? Am I eating the right things? Am I traveling to the right places? Do I have the right opinions?* These questions are often answered by scrolling through curated content, driven by algorithms designed to keep us looking and never feeling *well enough*.

We’re fed endless visions of what’s wrong with us—unmet standards, untraveled destinations, unachieved lives, providing an ever-growing market of options to purchase, consume, and experience. Fundamentally, well-being culture denies (or at least attempts to ignore) the reality of death and aging, the deterioration of our body and mind. But aging and death are inevitable. Our bodies will break down. Yet well-being culture combats this with marketing slogans like “age is just a number” and just provides more products to purchase. Our coming death and experience of aging makes all this an endless treadmill demanding new financial deposits.

In 2023, the wellness app industry generated a billion dollars, a number almost five times its revenue in 2016.⁷ And yet, despite

this overwhelming focus, mental health—especially among young adults—is in crisis.⁸ A Cigna study revealed that young adults feel far more isolated and lonely than their older coworkers. Seventy-three percent reported sometimes or always feeling alone,⁹ with alarming rates of depression and suicidal thoughts, especially among young women.¹⁰ Our modern vision of self-care is often dependent on consuming the products the market provides. Alan Noble argues that our culture is:

marked by unrestrained desire and consumption. Either we desire greater heights of self-mastery and excellence, or ever more entertainment and pleasure (also experiences). The market is happy to aid us in these quests. But unlimited desire and consumption always leave us exhausted and empty. There is always more to buy, always some way to improve, always something else to watch, always something else to try. To cope with our exhaustion and emptiness, we self-medicate.¹¹

In well-being culture, freedom is idealized as the highest good. Anything that might get in the way of my freedoms—even things like friendships, marriage, children, aging parents—become negotiable. Often the result is that any commitment or relationship that demands we sacrifice our personal autonomy is viewed as a *threat* to my well-being. Jean Twenge argues that many young adults have traded healthy and meaningful relationships for short-term, positive emotions.¹² The result, unsurprisingly, is soaring levels of loneliness and depression.¹³

Cynthia was expressing some doubts about her faith in pastoral counseling. “I have a friend at work who is a Buddhist and he seems so much more balanced and less anxious. His life seems to

be put together and not bothered by the stress that the rest of us at work are feeling. And I can't help but wonder if his spirituality is deeper than mine." While we don't personally share in our friend's doubts, we can feel the pull of this temptation. You look at the lives of others and see their public virtue and displays of competence and confidence. What are they doing differently? What's their morning routine? And when our culture teaches us that this balance and well-being is *the point* of our life, we can wonder if we are fundamentally doing something wrong.

It's important to note that the goal of keeping a Sabbath or any kind of formation practice is not *balance* or *well-being*. In fact, if following Christ means "picking up our cross" it will likely mean disorienting experiences. The cross is often destabilizing, rather than balancing. Well-being culture doesn't work in a life where I must also die to self.

If achievement culture is a slave to industry, well-being culture is a slave to self. Both are slave masters, disguised as abolitionists. Both demand bricks without straw.

RETURN TO YOUR REST

If you go to Paris, you'll find—especially in the most touristy spots—thousands of locks clipped onto fences and guardrails. Near Sacré Coeur, the Pont des Arts, Notre Dame, or the Eiffel Tower, you'll see these "love locks," etched with the names of lovers and the dates they experienced Paris together. The city regularly removes them, but they always return.

When our family visited Paris, we brought our own lock. We wanted our kids to return one day, find it, and remember our time together. We clipped it somewhere hidden, hoping it wouldn't be

easily found and removed. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but we hope it's still there. On the underside, we engraved a verse: Psalm 116:7—"Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you."

That verse has become important for us. While we practice Sabbath weekly, we often need the reminder that God is not merely after our schedules—but our souls. *Return, O my soul, to your rest.* The psalmist wrote those words not in comfort, but in the middle of pain—his body was failing, the world was filled with lies and betrayal. Yet in all of that, the Lord had been good to him. "I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living," he says (v. 9). Death may encircle him, but the God of life will have the last say.

I can imagine the psalmist—like many of us—putting his hope in the physical mastery of his body or believing the promises of success, only to be disappointed or betrayed along the way. He's been humbled and sobered, so he addresses his soul: *Go back to your first love! Return to your true rest.* This is one of the earliest hints in Scripture that Sabbath is not only a day during the week, but the Lord himself.

"Come to me," Jesus says, "all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find *rest for your souls*. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30, emphasis added).

Jesus is aiming for an inner rest, not simply a physical one. The truth is, there are plenty of anxious Sabbath keepers and also many who never take a day off and yet carry an unusual peace. But Sabbath is a weekly rest that is concerned primarily with our

hearts, our commitments, and our desires. Jesus is contrasting himself with the confiscatory gods of achievement culture and well-being culture. “I will give you rest,” Jesus says. “I will be good to you.”

True rest means we serve no other god—neither industry nor self. Yahweh over Pharaoh. Christ over self.

Practicing Sabbath is how we begin to say with our time, our spending, and eventually our hearts: *Christ is Lord. Christ is my rest.* Every Sabbath is the way we say to our souls, “*return.*” Don’t trust the promises of advancement or self-optimization. Your body will fail you. The world will betray you. But Christ will be good to you.

Sabbath keeping is how we say to our work: *You cannot have my soul’s devotion.* It is a way to say to our self: *Your rest is not found in self-fulfillment.* It’s a reminder that while the world never keeps its promises, and our bodies will weaken toward death, *I will walk in the land of the living and experience the goodness of the Lord.*

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