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# Sabbath

FINDING GOD'S REST IN A RESTLESS CULTURE

by VALERIE WEAVER-ZERCHER

► SUNDAYS DON'T FEEL MUCH DIFFERENT THAN ANY OTHER DAY OF THE WEEK AROUND OUR HOUSE. WITH THREE BOYS UNDER THE AGE OF FIVE, I FIND IT HARD TO CLASSIFY ANY DAY AS A "DAY OF REST." THERE ARE ALWAYS DIAPERS TO CHANGE, arguments to referee, and a baby to prevent from chewing through electric cords. Add the tasks of getting the kids ready for church—and then getting home and preparing lunch before they go into hypoglycemic tantrums—and you understand why Sunday often feels like the furthest thing from a Sabbath I can imagine.

Pop wisdom would tell me to simply find another day of the week or a couple hours when I can rest. For people like pastors and nurses, who need to work on Sundays, such advice is important. I'm sure God doesn't care whether we count our Sabbath as Sunday or Saturday or Tuesday.

Pop wisdom would also tell me that I, as a mother of small children, should "make some time for myself." I imagine that my grandmothers, raising children in the mid-1900s, never received such counsel. And I'm grateful for friends and mentors who regularly ask me, "Are you finding time for yourself? How are you renewing your energies?"



Yet I'm curious about the way our culture defines rest, and I wonder if it bears any resemblance to the rest that God intended, following God's own example of resting on the seventh day. If you've ever glanced at the headlines of popular women's magazines, you know they're rife with articles on how to "make time for yourself." One recent article listed ways to find rest in as little as fifteen minutes; among the suggestions were: "Plan your next get-away [to Bermuda or St. Paul]," "Polish your silver," "Indulge your sweet tooth," "Reread love letters from your husband—or his predecessor," and "Go online to get the latest dish on your favorite celebs."

Unfortunately, magazines aren't the only media that water down the possibilities for true Sabbath rest. L. Roger Owens, in his essay "Christian Sabbath-Keeping and the Desire for Justice" in *Vital Christianity: Spirituality, Justice, and Christian Practice*, claims that Christian writers often reduce Sabbath rest to simply "one more expression of popular, marketable spirituality"—a way to recharge batteries so that we can reenter the frenzied world of production and consumption with renewed vigor. He cites the example of one popular Christian writer describing how he declared a sabbatical by browsing in Barnes & Noble and sipping a latte. Such Sabbath-keeping, rather than challenging the fundamentals of how we work and spend our money, simply makes us more energized cogs in our spinning materialistic wheel.

So does authentic rest ever include celebrity gossip and chain bookstores? How can we differentiate between leisure activities that simply feed our desires for more stuff, and rest that truly realigns our spirits with God's? Is Sabbath-keeping a formative Christian practice or just a good idea—at least on those Sundays that the kids don't have soccer games and the grass isn't too long?

There's certainly no easy formula for figuring out what constitutes God-glorifying rest, nor how to discern what a modern-day Sabbath should be. Christians who are attempting to be faithful will practice Sabbath differently. I have found it helpful to reflect on the following two questions:

### 1. Are my leisure activities life-draining or life-giving?

The Hebrew word for rest means to "catch your breath." Many of us live at such a breakneck pace that even our leisure activities require speed and action: amusement parks, action movies, extreme sports. People can certainly experience release and escape through such venues. Whether such activities really allow me to "catch my breath," however—not to mention the breath of the Spirit—is another question.

It's often in hindsight that I can tell whether a certain leisure activity was life-giving or not. Do I feel rested or just restless? Did I sense God's voice or was it drowned out by noise? Do I feel full of peace and joy and hope—or just full?

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### 2. Do my Sabbath experiences require producing and consuming or being?

Materialism shapes our characters as Christians more than most of us would like to admit. We rarely stop to wonder where we learned to desire boot-cut jeans and iPods. The market requires that we give over more and more of our affections and time and energy to consuming. Owens and others, most notably theologian Walter Wink, have compared consumerism to Paul's "powers and principalities," which want to claim our allegiance and enslave our desires. In light of this, the idea of resting from the consumptive frenzy for one day a week looks radical indeed. By observing the Sabbath in this way, Owens writes, "our possessions will not possess us and we will walk more easily through the world, a little freer of the market's grasp."

Perhaps harder than not buying anything one day a week is not producing anything. I love to check tasks off my to-do list, and it's tempting to view Sunday as a perfect chance to do so. Yet producing can be as enslaving as consuming, especially for

Sabbath, parents who made their children sit straight in wooden chairs and read their Bibles all afternoon. We need to remember Jesus' insistence that legalism has no place in Sabbath-keeping.

Yet perhaps I can learn something from my grandparents, who wouldn't have dreamed of mowing the lawn or shopping on Sunday. They would have worked just enough to get the family to church and to keep the bellies fed (and as I now know, there's more than enough work in those activities

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those of us schooled in the Protestant work ethic. We begin to classify our days based on how much we accomplished, rather than whether we talked to a friend or hiked in the woods or read to a child. Not only that, but we begin to classify ourselves accordingly. True Sabbath rest might remind us that we're children of God, not employees. And I've yet to catch any of my children with a to-do list.

### Catching your breath

There's a danger in writing—and reading—an essay like this. It's easy to turn even “rest” into something to be examined, measured, and performed. We've all heard the stories of how people have reduced God's command to rest on the seventh day to nothing more than rigid, unforgiving rules: Jewish leaders who chided Jesus for healing on the

for one day, especially for women who used wood stoves and did dishes by hand). But after meeting their families' basic needs, they stopped. Took naps. Read. Went for walks. Visited family. Went to church in the evening. Caught their breaths.

I want my children to learn this rhythm of work and rest that my grandparents took for granted. I want to model for them this freedom from the tyranny of things and to-do lists that Sabbath rest enables. I hope that for them, “catching their breath” through Sabbath rest is, indeed, as natural as breathing.



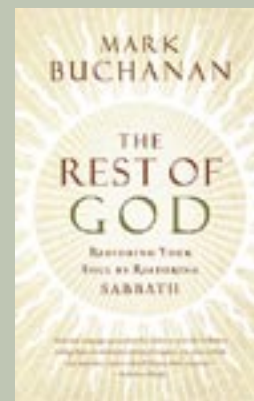
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## THE NEXT STEP TOWARD SABBATH

➔ Do you find yourself catching up on chores or even worse, working at home, during your day off each week? Does the word “Sabbath” conjure up images of legalistic, joyless Sunday afternoons spent at home?

If so, consider picking up one of these books. They might just hold the key to what you're missing—the rest of God.



**The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath**

by Mark Buchanan  
W Publishing Group, 2006



**Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest**

by Lynne M. Baab  
Intervarsity Press, 2005