

Enjoying God's Gift of Sabbath

*An Experiential Journey into
God's Day of Rest*

David Gundlach

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God's Gracious Invitation

“Do we still have to keep the Sabbath as new covenant Christians?” Over the years, I’ve been asked this question many times, and, in one sense, I can appreciate the question. As new covenant Christians, we want to live in the freedom God offers us in Christ, and the concern of the question is that Sabbath observance might be performed as a work of the law that discounts God’s grace.

In another sense, however, the question strikes me as somewhat strange. It feels a bit like the question, “Do we still have to keep going on dates now that we’re married?” In each case my response would be, “Well, I suppose not, but why wouldn’t you want to?” In my experience, observing the Sabbath doesn’t discount God’s grace. Just the opposite: observing the Sabbath is one of the most tangible ways we can experience God’s grace in our weekly lives.

The underlying assumption in what follows is that the Sabbath is one of God’s great gifts to his children. In giving us the Sabbath, I picture God like a parent on Christmas morning: having thoughtfully chosen and wrapped the perfect gift for his children, he waits with eager delight to see their joyful faces as they open the

gift. Do we have to open the gift? Maybe not. But why wouldn't we want to open such a wonderful gift?

Time and again, I've been struck by the gut-level negative image many people have of the Sabbath. Get inside their minds, and what ultimately emerges is a day that carries obligations and requires them to put on a super-spiritual version of themselves. But I believe the Bible offers us a picture of the Sabbath that is thoroughly refreshing and life-giving. In the end, the Sabbath is not a day of obligation to be spiritual versions of ourselves. It's a day of refreshment to be fully human again.

The Sabbath has been God's gift to humanity since the very beginning of time, and experiencing this gift is more needed today than ever before. In our hurried, anxiety-ridden, achievement-oriented, status-seeking, and generally rest-less world, what could be a greater gift than the gift of rest? Imagine the benefits that would immediately come to our lives if we simply enjoyed a Sabbath once a week: greater emotional and physical health, stronger bonds between family and friends, and a more life-giving relationship with God, to name a few.

My thoughts on the Sabbath as a gift emerged out of my own experience with the Sabbath. Twenty years ago, I was going through a particularly busy and stressful time. I was anxious, depressed, and a bit overwhelmed with life. At the same time, through my reading of Scripture, I was becoming convinced that taking a regular Sabbath was something God was inviting me to do.

I fought that conviction for several months. I couldn't see how I could take a full day off and fulfill my responsibilities. The math just wasn't adding up in my head. Before I made the decision, I looked at the idea of a Sabbath, and it felt costly, demanding, and unrealistic. In short, it felt like law.

But I chose to do it as a simple act of faith, and the minute I made that decision, my whole perspective changed almost instantaneously. I realized that I had, with that simple decision, given myself a lifetime of life-giving days. That is, no matter how busy or stressful my weeks would be, I knew that every seven days I had a wonderful day waiting for me that was dedicated to rest, fun, and play. I could almost see the days visibly laid out in front of me like waves coming in off the ocean. Every seven days another one was there waiting to be enjoyed . . . and then another . . . and then another.

And, as it turned out (surprise, surprise), there was actually plenty of time in the other six days to accomplish what I needed to accomplish. In fact, I found myself more effective and productive in those six days than I had previously been in seven days.

I have found that obeying God often follows this pattern. Prior to choosing to obey a conviction from God, the obedience feels limiting, restricting, and demanding. It feels like law. But after taking the step of faith and choosing to obey, I find that God's command was simply calling me into greater freedom all along. The Sabbath has been for me such a tangible example of how God's commands truly do lead to freedom.

My hope is that you can experience something similar to what I experienced twenty years ago and continue to experience today. Over the past twenty years, my own experiences with the Sabbath have been varied, and today as a husband and father of three children, my Sabbaths look very different than they did twenty years ago. But the basic gift of the Sabbath remains the same.

There are plenty of great books that address the Sabbath in a more holistic and comprehensive way. My working assumption in offering this short resource is that the best way to understand and appreciate the Sabbath is to simply experience it for yourself. You've got to open the gift yourself in order to enjoy it. So my approach is to give you only the very basics of the Sabbath before launching you into some of your own Sabbath experiences.

Along those lines, I love the first words of Jesus in John's gospel. Two soon-to-be disciples were following behind him, and he asked them "What are you seeking?" When they said, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" he simply replied, "Come and see" (John 1:37-39). He didn't give them detailed directions or describe the house to which he was going. He simply said, "Come and see."

Ultimately, that simple invitation was the beginning of a whole lifetime with Jesus that could only be experienced in the coming and seeing. The Sabbath is much like that. You simply have to "come and see" and experience it yourself in order to appreciate

it. Hopefully the following pages can be your invitation to come and see for yourself.

Sabbath Basics

Before you experiment with your first Sabbath, I want to give you some Sabbath basics and then address some practical considerations. To offer a summary statement: *the Sabbath is a day for stopping to enjoy rest, gratitude, and freedom with God and others.* Let's take a moment to consider each of these five Sabbath basics.

Stopping

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he "sabbath-ed" from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he "sabbath-ed" from all the work of creating that he had done. (Genesis 2:2-3)

Our first encounter with the Sabbath takes place in the creation story itself, not as a command but as a simple description of God's own experience. The word I've translated as "sabbath" above comes from the Hebrew word, *shabbat*. In its most basic sense, *shabbat* simply means to stop. Nothing more complicated or nuanced than that: stop, cease, desist.

So, before we ask questions about what we should do on the Sabbath, we need to recognize that the Sabbath

is, first and foremost, a day to actually stop doing things. And to the question of what we should stop doing, the answer is that we should stop all our working and achieving, just as God stopped all the working and achieving he had done in the first six days of creation. This is the most basic Sabbath posture of all. It is a day when we stop. We simply stop.

The moment we recognize this basic meaning of *shabbat* as stopping, we will quickly realize two realities about the Sabbath. The first is that it is actually quite simple. That is, it's not complicated or sophisticated. That's important to remember, because as we begin to experiment with the Sabbath, our temptation will be to overthink it or overcomplicate it. And this word reminds us: Don't overthink it. Just stop.

The second reality is that, while it is simple, that doesn't mean the Sabbath is easy. Because in our hurried, achievement-oriented culture, simply stopping is one of the most challenging things we can do. Many of us are so addicted to achievement that whenever we try to stop, we start experiencing the withdrawal symptoms of restlessness and anxiety. As we sit with this restlessness, we'll begin to realize that underneath the command to stop is an even deeper command: the command to trust.

In the end, stopping is not just about stopping. It's about trusting. It's about trusting that God is fully in charge of the universe, and we are not. It's about trusting that the world won't unravel if we let go for a day. Simply put, to observe the Sabbath is to re-entrust

to God the job of running the universe (and then to wonder what we were ever doing taking on that job in the first place).

Rest

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy . . . For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. (Exodus 20:8,11)

Our next Scriptural encounter with the Sabbath comes within the Ten Commandments given to Israel at Mount Sinai. There we see that the command to observe the Sabbath is, not surprisingly, rooted in God's own action at creation. God performed six days of work followed by one day of rest. 6 + 1. That was God's formula for himself, and that is God's formula for human flourishing.

Later in Exodus 31:17, Israel is commanded to observe the Sabbath because on it God himself, "rested and was refreshed." What it might mean for God himself to rest and be refreshed is an intriguing idea to consider, and one that we'll come back to in a minute. But for now, we can say that these two words together—rest and refreshment—capture a fundamental purpose of the Sabbath.

Refreshment is a particularly delightful word to me. It feels a bit more proactive and life-giving than rest. When I think of refreshment I think of drinking a glass of cold water on a hot day or, better yet, breathing in deeply and taking in the surrounding air into my lungs.

Other authors have compared the weekly rhythm of Sabbath to the rhythm of our breathing. For six days we exhale: we expend our energies on work and responsibilities. And then for one day we inhale: we breathe deeply and take in the goodness of God and his creation. God's formula of 6 + 1 is intended to give us an experience of diaphragm breathing: that pattern of deep, slow, refreshing breathing.

Alternatively, when we ignore God's 6 + 1 formula, both our work and our rest suffer. We actually find ourselves never fully refreshed and, therefore, never fully productive. Living this way is like chest breathing: that pattern of quick, shallow, anxious, breaths in which we never fully inhale and never fully exhale. Sabbath invites us to take that deep refreshing inhale that sets us up for a productive exhale.

Gratitude

And God saw that it was good . . . and God saw that it was good . . . God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. (Genesis 1: 10, 25, 31)

Returning to the creation account, Genesis 1 portrays God as the consummate artist. In days 1-3, he paints the background canvas (light and darkness, sea and sky, land and sea), and then in days 4-6 he places his characters in those respective backgrounds (the heavenly bodies, the fish and birds, the land animals and humanity).

Throughout the account, there is a little Hebrew word that keeps popping up all over the place: *tov*. It simply means “good.” Again and again, God is stepping back, observing what he has created, and crying out, “*tov, tov, tov . . . good, good, good!*” Much like a skilled artist who paints and then steps back and appreciates the beauty of what he or she has made, so also God steps back and acknowledges the goodness and beauty and orderliness of what he’s made.

In this way, God is engaged in what I call a creation-appreciation rhythm. It is the rhythm of creation followed by appreciation. Each day God creates, and then he steps back and appreciates what he’s created. And after six days of a daily creation-appreciation rhythm, God steps back for an entire day to appreciate the entire week of creation he has just completed. So, the Sabbath day is the pinnacle of this creation-appreciation rhythm.

I think that’s part of what it means when Scripture says that God was “refreshed” on the Sabbath. We know that God needs no rest, but it seems that he does experience a deep and refreshing satisfaction in appreciating the work he has done.

And the Sabbath is a day when we get to enter into God’s own creation-appreciation rhythm through gratitude. On the Sabbath, we get to appreciate God’s artistry by tasting deeply of the creation all around us. Sabbath is a day for tasting good food, listening to good music, enjoying an afternoon at the park, or exploring the trails. It is a day to be filled with gratitude

for the wonders of God’s creation and to cry out with God, “good, good, good!”

The Sabbath also gives us an opportunity to appreciate the work God has done around us over the past six days. Undoubtedly, the past week has brought many tangible expressions of God’s grace in our lives: a good conversation with a friend, the completion of a project at work, the resolution of a conflict with a family member. The Sabbath is a day to look back on those events, appreciate them again, and give thanks to God.

In addition, the Sabbath is an opportunity to appreciate the work God has done through us over the past week. As his image bearers, we too engage in fruitful and creative work, and at the end of the week it is entirely appropriate for us to step back and appreciate the fruits of our labor. For six days, we pray that God would establish the work of our hands, and on the seventh day we give thanks for the ways he has answered that prayer.

Freedom

“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you . . . You shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:12, 15)

It’s interesting that the two versions of the Ten Commandments in Scripture ground the Sabbath command in two different events. At Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus, the Sabbath command is grounded in

creation. But on the plains of Moab in the book of Deuteronomy, the Sabbath command is grounded in salvation: namely, God rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt and leading them to freedom. So, taking these two versions together, Sabbath reminds us that God is both our creator and savior.

Let's consider this theme of salvation and freedom on the Sabbath. Think about the Israelites' experience in Egypt: they never took a day off work there. They worked and worked and never got to rest. They worked that way because they weren't free. They were enslaved. And then God gave them their freedom. He broke the yoke of their oppressors and lifted that heaven burden off their shoulders.

Then God gave them the Sabbath as a day to enjoy their newfound freedom. This full day off once a week, this day with no back-breaking labor, would serve as a wonderful reminder that they weren't enslaved anymore. They were free children of God.

And Sabbath remains for us as a day to enjoy our freedom as children of God. At the most basic level, Sabbath is a day to remember the freedom of our salvation. Sabbath is a day to celebrate the forgiveness and eternal life we have through Jesus, our savior.

But beyond that, Sabbath is a day to experience freedom from other burdens of life as well. Just as the Israelites suffered the burdens of the gods and idols of Egypt, so also we live in the context of the gods and idols of our own culture, and it's easy for us to become subtly (or not so subtly) enslaved to them. We become

enslaved to achievement and productivity. We become enslaved to materialism and consumerism. We become enslaved to our technology and digital devices.

In light of that, Sabbath is a day to disengage from those idols and activities, reminding ourselves that they do not define us. Sabbath is a day to remember what is most true about us. Our deepest identity is not in what we can achieve, produce, or consume. Our deepest identity is this: we are God's children, free and loved. Sabbath is a day to live fully in that freedom.

As we begin to disconnect from those other identities and embrace our identity as God's children, a new behavior begins to emerge on Sabbath. It's a behavior that is so basic to our humanity, and yet so elusive the older we get. I'm talking about the activity of play. Free play. Sabbath is a day for the freedom of play. Like little children secure in their parents' love enjoying the unhurried experience of play, we too can experience the Sabbath as a day of unhurried play as God's freed children.

With God and Others

“The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27-28)

Let's conclude these Sabbath basics by focusing on our Lord Jesus himself. It is a historical fact that Jesus' own actions and words on the Sabbath were a significant part of what got him killed. Clearly he had a view of the Sabbath that differed radically from the religious leaders

of his day. Within that divisive context, Mark records two statements Jesus made that are utterly foundational to our understanding of the Sabbath.

First, Jesus claims to be Lord of the Sabbath. That claim struck the religious leaders as utterly preposterous, but if Jesus is, in fact, the Lord of the entire universe, then he is certainly Lord of the Sabbath as well. That means that Jesus has authority to define why the Sabbath exists and to clarify what God's intentions were for the Sabbath from the beginning. That also means that Jesus' own observance of the Sabbath is the definitive example for all humans. So what does the Lord of the Sabbath have to say about the Sabbath?

“The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.” Jesus reminds us of the creation story we've already explored. Accordingly, God did not first create a Sabbath day and then later create human beings whose purpose was to keep that day holy. Just the opposite: he first created human beings made in his image, and then he created a day designed to bless them, refresh them, and nurture their relationships with each other and with him.

It is precisely this prioritizing of human beings that marks Jesus' own Sabbath observance. He constantly prioritized human need over external religious observance. After all, if the Sabbath was created to bless human beings, then what better way to honor the Sabbath than by blessing human beings who were suffering? If the Sabbath was created to give human beings rest, then what better way to observe the Sabbath

than by giving them rest from their sickness and bondage?

“The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.” That is a Sabbath basic that we can first apply to ourselves. I will continue to stress the idea that the Sabbath is not a day we have to try to live up to or a day where we have to put on a super-spiritual version of ourselves. Rather, this day exists for our benefit. On this day we get to ask the question, “What would be truly refreshing and life-giving for me?” and we get to do that.

But more to my point here, we also want to apply this Sabbath basic to the people around us. This is a day for them to be refreshed as well. It's a day for them to be released from the achievement-oriented world of human “doings” in order to be human “beings” again. This is important to remember, since our temptation during these Sabbath experiments will be to dial in the perfect Sabbath for ourselves without regard for the larger community around us.

Jesus' own example reminds us that the Sabbath was not primarily given to individuals. It was given to the community. So the Sabbath invites us to ask larger relational questions such as: How can we better appreciate and enjoy one another today? How can we be a restful and refreshing presence for one another today?

Throughout the work week, we regularly approach one another as a means to an end: we need a co-worker to get a task done, we need a roommate to clean their

dishes, we need a child to get ready for school on time, we need the driver in front of us to get a move on, etc. But the Sabbath is a day to see each other as ends in and of themselves—as precious gifts from God. It's a day to let go of our need to control and fix each other, so that we can truly enjoy one another right in the midst of our imperfections.

Sabbath is a day to drink deeply from the well of God's grace together. In short, it is a day for stopping to enjoy rest, gratitude, and freedom with God and others.

Now that we have some Sabbath basics in mind, let's walk through some practical considerations before we move to our first Sabbath experience.

Practical Considerations

Over the next few months, you will be embarking on five Sabbath experiments, and each experiment will have its own unique focus. The hope is that after five experiments with the Sabbath, you will feel equipped to make the Sabbath a regular part of your weekly rhythm.

When it comes to these Sabbath experiments, the most important advice I can offer is this: take a moment right now to identify another friend or family with whom you want to go on this Sabbath journey. The idea is not necessarily to spend your Sabbaths together but to simply make a shared commitment to engage in five Sabbath experiments. Share this idea with them, and schedule a dinner together in about three months. The purpose of that dinner will be to debrief your experiences and share what you've learned along the way. It's remarkable how much the encouragement and accountability of another person can make all the difference in the world.

So please, for your own sake, take a moment right now to do this. Identify a name or a couple of names, write them down on the bottom of this page, and plan a time to reach out and share this idea with them.

With that encouragement, here are some practical issues to consider that will apply to all of your Sabbath experiments.

When to Sabbath

Historically the Jewish community has observed the Sabbath as a 24-hour period from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. However, in light of Jesus' resurrection on Sunday morning, the early Christians began to gather for worship on Sunday mornings, and over time the Sabbath moved to Sundays in most Christian circles.

The goal here is not to mandate a particular day of the week but rather to help you consider your own life and what will be most sustainable and fruitful for you. I would strongly encourage a full 24-hour period, but it's up to you as to when that is, and you may need to experiment a bit until you find a rhythm that works.

For some, the sundown-to-sundown rhythm is the most helpful. For instance, for people working a traditional Monday-Friday work week, a Saturday-sundown-to-Sunday-sundown Sabbath rhythm may be the most sustainable. That gives them a full 24-hour period of rest and also leaves a couple of hours Sunday night after sundown to do a bit of planning and preparation for the upcoming work week.

For myself, I prefer to have an entire waking day fully dedicated to rest. I really enjoy being able to wake up and go to sleep on a day in which I don't engage in any

productive work. Because I work on Sundays, Saturdays are the best option for our family.

For most people, all things being equal, I would encourage Sunday as the default Sabbath. It makes the most sense to connect Sabbath with the gathered worshiping community, and Sunday still remains a day that is probably lighter on activities for most people.

Take a moment to look at the next couple of months in your calendar, and schedule your five Sabbath days. If scheduling all five feels too challenging at this point, schedule your first two and then go from there. If you can schedule them on the same day of the week for successive weeks, that's ideal, but if you have to space them out differently, that's fine too.

There may be no completely open day free of all activities (children's sports, social engagements, etc.), so simply pick the best days you can. Whatever you decide, it's important to actually identify a specific day and plan accordingly. The Sabbath requires scheduling and planning. You don't want to wake up one morning and decide in the moment that today will be your Sabbath. You want to schedule it, look forward to it with anticipation, and then enjoy it when it comes.

The Do's and Don't-Have-To's of the Sabbath

When it comes to the do's and don't-have-to's of the Sabbath, there is a balance between creating boundaries that protect the Sabbath while also allowing for plenty of freedom. This means that there aren't any hard and fast

rules because what feels like work for one person might feel like refreshing activity for another.

For example, some people will be refreshed by not having to exercise, while others will find a good run or bike ride to be perfectly refreshing. Some will look forward to finally not having to cook a meal for a day, while others will look forward to being able to slow down long enough to cook a really delicious meal. Some will want to avoid any yard work, while others will enjoy finally getting a chance to get their hands dirty in some soil. With that reminder of freedom and flexibility, here are some general guidelines.

The Don't-Have-To's

Various authors have identified three categories of activity to avoid on the Sabbath. Rather than thinking about these in terms of what we "can't do" on the Sabbath, I'd encourage you to think of these as activities we "don't have to do" on the Sabbath. All week long, these activities consume us and threaten to define us, and so the Sabbath offers us a wonderful respite. The three don't-have-to's are work, digital technology, and worry.

1. Work

By work, I'm certainly referring to any responsibility connected to our paid job, but I'm also referring to other responsibilities in life for which we don't get paid: chores, house cleaning, errands, shopping, paying bills, catching up on emails, etc. Ideally, Sabbath is a day to be freed up from all forms of work.

One of the "aha" moments for me in this regard came as I began to rethink my weekend. Most people experience a five-day work week followed by a two-day weekend, and the various chores and responsibilities of life often bleed into both of those weekend days. The "aha" moment for me was deciding to actually distinguish between those two days by setting one apart from all forms of work and using the other day to attend to other forms of unpaid work. This might mean we start doing slightly more work on that other day, but I've found that being able to enjoy a day completely free from all forms of work leaves me much more refreshed.

A good question to ask yourself is this: What kind of work needs to get done on another day in order for us to be freed up to enjoy our Sabbath? For instance, there might be an email you need to write, and getting that written before the Sabbath will free your mind from that burden. For me, I discovered that waking up to a clean house on the Sabbath made my experience far more restful, so often we'll take an extra 15-20 minutes on Friday night to make sure the house is tidied up before going to bed. Over time I've learned there are some small tasks we can complete on another day to feel more freed up to fully enjoy the Sabbath.

2. Digital Technology

While you might engage in some level of digital technology, I would encourage you to significantly step back from your digital devices on the Sabbath. There are lots of good reasons for this. Our digital devices keep us connected to our work. With every notification

pinging in our ears or buzzing in our pockets, we get that little hit of adrenaline and that reminder of the work we're trying to leave behind.

Our digital devices are also a huge source of distraction. Sadly, when we are with family or friends, rather than enjoying the richness of their presence, we are often only half present to them and half present to our phones. Sabbath is a day for pure unadulterated presence to what is right in front of us, and that's impossible when we're tied to our devices.

There is also the temptation to use our day of rest as a day to "veg out" in front of a screen. But Sabbath is a day for true soul-refreshment, not mind-numbing distraction. That's not to say we can't enjoy a movie with family or watch a sports event on television with friends, but six hours in front of a screen is a very cheap substitute for a truly refreshing Sabbath.

In light of this, I'd encourage you to significantly limit your screen time. Keep the television off, or limit your watching to a specific show or event. And when it comes to your phones, turn them off, or turn off your notifications, or leave your phones in a specific place and only check them once or twice that day.

3. Worry

Finally, Sabbath is a day to rest from the work of worry. Obviously, Jesus invites us not to worry every day of the week, but Sabbath provides a unique opportunity to give ourselves explicit permission not to worry. God has given us this day as a day to truly rest,

so as those voices of anxiety pop up throughout a Sabbath day, we can remind ourselves, "Self, today of all days, you have God's explicit permission not to worry."

As these boundaries become second nature, you will find great freedom on the Sabbath, and you will set a new culture for yourself and your family. For instance, I love the fact that sometimes I'll jump into house cleaning on the Sabbath and my young daughters will now actually call me out: "Daddy, today is the Sabbath!"

The Do's

This is where the fun begins. Our five Sabbath experiments will give you plenty of concrete suggestions as to what to do on the Sabbath, but to sum it up, the guiding question is this: What would be truly refreshing and life-giving for us today? To say it one more time: don't over-spiritualize the Sabbath. If the Sabbath fills you with legalistic images of intense Bible study or long hours in silent meditation, you've got the wrong image. Sabbath is not a day to be super Christians. It's a day to be human beings.

To get specific, Sabbath is a day for sleeping in or taking a nap. Sabbath is a day for good food and good wine. Sabbath is a day for good music and good books. Sabbath is a day for play and recreation. Sabbath is a day for walks and rides. Sabbath is a day for oceans and hills. Sabbath is a day for fires and pools. Sabbath is a day for museums. Sabbath is a day for games and puzzles. Sabbath is a day for silence and conversation. Sabbath is a day for

friends and family. In short, Sabbath is a day for rest, freedom, and gratitude with God and others.

Here's a word for those living with family. We will inevitably experience a tension on the Sabbath between our own individual desires and the needs of our family members. For example, as an introvert I could dial in the perfect Sabbath for myself that would leave my wife carrying the load of childcare for a significant amount of time. Likewise, she could dial in her own perfect version of the Sabbath that would not be ideal for me.

There is an inherent tension here between the individual and the group that is something you'll have to navigate together as you experiment with the Sabbath. Have honest conversations with each other and ask each other, "How can we find ways to experience this day as refreshing for our whole family?" This will inevitably involve making some personal sacrifices in order to find areas of common ground.

So with that, let the experiments begin! What follows are five stand-alone Sabbath Experiments. Consider each experiment not as a rigid formula to follow but as a unique ingredient that will give that day its own unique flavor. Each experiment involves a psalm meditation, a brief reflection, and some concrete ideas and activities for the day.

In each case, I'd encourage you to read the reflection a day or two ahead of time as it may spark ideas that will require a bit of planning. Then I'd encourage you to read the reflection more slowly and deliberately at the

beginning of your Sabbath day itself to set the tone for the day. So, in the words of Jesus, "come and see . . ."

Sabbath Experiment #1

Enjoying God through His Creation

Sabbath Meditation

Read Psalm 104

Sabbath Reflection

I love how earthy and tangible Psalm 104 is. It doesn't presume to be overly spiritual. Instead it lands us squarely within the realities of our embodied existence: mountains, valleys, rivers, grass, donkeys, birds, cattle, wine, oil, satisfying food, and refreshing water. It lands us in the goodness of God's creation.

Another psalm similarly invites us to, "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). I love how sensual the invitation to "taste and see" is. That is, it engages not just our minds but our senses. I also love that the creation account we've considered is not a story of God creating disembodied spirits and placing them in the clouds to think spiritual thoughts. Rather, it's a story of God taking dust, breathing life, and forming image bearers who are placed in an edible garden full of minerals, rivers, plants, trees, sunlight, and shade. The story is entirely earthy and embodied, tangible and textured.

So, the focus of our first Sabbath experiment is to pursue this invitation to "taste and see that the Lord is good" by taking in the goodness of his creation.

Years ago, I heard a statement that has impacted me ever since: "God's grace is often mediated through the senses." I usually think of God's grace as an abstract and spiritual concept, associating it with forgiveness or salvation. While that is certainly true, this statement reminds me of how often I experience God's grace in very tangible and sensual ways. For example, his grace comes to me through a beautiful sunrise that I take in through my eyes on a crisp morning. His grace comes to me through a beautiful song as I take it in through my ears. His grace comes to me through the bodies of my wife and children as I hug them and experience God's comfort that comes to me through them.

Along these lines, Christians have historically pursued both fasting and feasting as ways to encounter God. In fasting, we intentionally withhold one of God's creation gifts (food, alcohol, etc.) in order to remind ourselves that God himself, and not his created gifts, is our ultimate desire. But in feasting, we intentionally pursue his created gifts, seeing them as windows through which we experience God's grace itself. So, in fasting we experience God's grace apart from his created gifts, but in feasting, we experience God's grace through his created gifts. And Sabbath is a day for feasting, not fasting.

Sabbath Experiment

Our first Sabbath experiment involves asking the question: how can we experience God's grace through his creation today? How can we feast on the goodness of God through his created gifts? The answer is entirely up to you, but here are some ideas.

First, ask yourselves: how can we experience God's creation in ways time doesn't allow on the other six days? Pursue at least one activity that sets you squarely in God's good creation for a considerable length of time:

- Take a walk and take in the sights, sounds, and smells
- Take a bike ride or hike and lean into the joy and refreshment of physical exertion
- Go to a favorite park and enjoy a picnic
- Go to a pool and enjoy the refreshment of the water and the warmth of the sun
- Go to the beach and spend time walking among the shore or tide pools, enjoying the beauty
- Put on a fire and enjoy its beauty and warmth over a good conversation

Second, ask yourselves: how can we take experiences of God's creation we have every day of the week but approach them with greater attention and enjoyment today? For example:

- Take a few extra minutes in the shower to enjoy the feeling of warm water on your body
- Eat one really good meal today and intentionally enjoy each bite

- Take a few deep breaths and feel the air come in and out of your lungs
- Take time in the kitchen to enjoy the smells, colors, and textures as you cook

With each activity, see through these “sensual” realities to the God who provides them for you.

Third, for those of you with young children, or for the childlike at heart, consider doing a “sense experiment.” Find a place outside (a yard, a park, wherever) and walk through an experience of the five senses.

- Close your eyes and pay attention to the sounds you hear
- Open your eyes and identify every color you can find
- Take time to smell a nearby plant
- Continue on through each of the five senses as much as possible

Slow down enough to experience God's creation through the senses, and then discuss together what you learn about God through that experience.

In closing, I once heard a priest say, “lose your mind and come to your senses.” This clever play on words is actually a wonderful invitation to get out of our own heads for a bit in order to get present to the physical goodness that is right in front of us. And through an experience of that tangible goodness, we can experience the goodness of God who, “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17). So,

today give yourself full permission to experience God's grace through the five senses. Enjoy tasting and seeing that the Lord is good!

Sabbath Experiment #2

Enjoying God's Gift of Unhurried Time

Sabbath Meditation

Read Psalm 131

Sabbath Reflection

Psalm 131 is one of the shortest psalms in the Bible. I love the simple image of a child whose heart is not restless and anxious but rather stilled and quieted in the safety of his or her mother's presence. There is a stillness and an unhurriedness in this image that is so restful. This stillness and unhurriedness will shape our experience of the Sabbath today.

To go back to the creation story for a moment, many of us are so familiar with the story that we fail to recognize how unexpected the ending is. I would have expected the story to reach its climax with God blessing his creatures or blessing the earth he has made. Instead, he concludes by blessing a length of time: the seventh day. He sets apart a length of time as sacred and designates it as a source of unique blessing.

The ancient Greeks had two distinct words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is quantity time,

measured time, clock time. Whenever we ask questions like, “What time does the meeting begin?” or “How much time will it take to get there?” we’re thinking of *chronos* time. *Kairos*, on the other hand, is a quality of time. It’s a time that is pregnant with a particular significance or opportunity. When we say things like, “We had a great time last weekend” or “I think it’s time to make some changes in my life,” we’re thinking of *kairos* time.

In today’s world, it’s hard to escape the constant awareness of *chronos* time. Our daily schedules are divided by the hour and even the minute, and we carry clocks with us everywhere we go. This leaves us with a profound sense of measured time, which in turn leaves us with an underlying sense of hurry. And when we live with hurried hearts, it’s hard to be fully present to the moment. Our hurried hearts are only partly present to this moment and partly present to the next scheduled moment, and the next, and so on.

In contrast to this, my three young children rarely live in *chronos* time. They live in *kairos* time. That’s why they almost never feel hurried—hurried to get to school or to go to bed (much to my chagrin). They aren’t aware of the minutes ticking down until the next responsibility. Instead, their unhurried hearts are entirely present in the *kairos* moment. And Sabbath is a day to experience *kairos* time not *chronos* time. Sabbath is a day God blessed that we might enjoy a rich, unhurried presence to each moment of the day.

Consider music as an experience of unhurried *kairos* time. Music occurs in time. Music takes its time. Good

music has nothing to do with the quantity of notes that can be fit into a length of time. In fact, the power of a song has as much to do with the spaces between the notes as it does with the notes themselves. And music must be experienced in time and on its own time. You simply can’t “speed listen” to an album. It must be experienced in its time.

And like music, Sabbath is day to be experienced in and through time, enjoying each moment as it comes, and enjoying the spaces between the moments as well.

Sabbath Experiment

Our second Sabbath experiment involves asking the question: how can we enter into *kairos* time today? How can we enjoy an unhurried day where we are fully present to each moment without regard for what comes next? Practically speaking, here are some suggestions to flavor this day’s experience of sacred time.

First, make sure you have large blocks of unscheduled time today. While you may have one or two time commitments for the day (church, a scheduled dinner with friends, etc.), as far as possible let your only sense of time be the basic divisions of morning, afternoon, and evening. In fact, if you can, leave your clocks behind: take off your watch and turn off your phone. A huge success would be for there to be a moment during this day when someone asks you, “What time is it?” and you respond, “Actually, I have no idea.”

Second, pursue activities that would feel like a delicious waste of time. By that I mean doing things that

would feel utterly unproductive yet purely enjoyable. These might be things you do alone or with others:

- Read a good novel or a favorite poem (and read slowly)
- Listen to a favorite album and experience it in time
- Engage in an enjoyable hobby for a good length of time
- Build a puzzle together
- Play a favorite game with family or friends
- Take a slow and leisurely walk instead of a drive to a nearby restaurant

Whatever it is, enjoy it in an unhurried way without worrying about or trying to plan what comes next.

Third, try engaging in the mundane activities of the day at a slower pace:

- Linger in bed a few extra minutes before you get up
- Make your bed and take an extra minute to make it
- Put on your clothes more slowly
- Sip your coffee more slowly

Be fully present to each one of these simple activities. As simple and even silly as this might sound, it's amazing what an intentionally slower pace can do for our hurried hearts.

Fourth, try doing absolutely nothing at some point during the day. Here's what I mean: find a place to sit

for a few moments (your yard, balcony, living room, wherever). Simply be still and watch the world happen for a few moments. Let time pass and be present to what is around you.

So, today give yourself full permission to enjoy God's blessing of unhurried *kairos* time.

Sabbath Experiment #3

Enjoying Gratitude

Sabbath Meditation

Read Psalm 136

Sabbath Reflection

Psalm 136 begins and ends with the invitation to, “give thanks to the Lord.” We have already discussed how gratitude itself is a central part of the creation story. There the repeated phrase, “and God saw that it was good,” signals a creation-appreciation rhythm in which God first works and then steps back to appreciate the work he’s done. God engages in a daily creation-appreciation rhythm, and then at the conclusion of six days, he steps back in a deeper way to engage in a weekly creation-appreciation rhythm, reviewing all that he has done and acknowledging that it was “very good.”

Today’s Sabbath experiment involves entering into this creation-appreciation rhythm through practicing gratitude. Before we get specific with today’s experiment with gratitude, it’s worth noting two realities about gratitude.

The first reality is that gratitude is not a posture that comes naturally to some of us. This is especially true in the busyness of the work week. For myself, I live with a sense of responsibility and a desire to do things well, and I am so quick to move from task to task, seeking to be responsible to each task. But what I fail to do is pause between tasks to acknowledge the work just done and to be grateful for accomplishing it before moving on to the next task. Likewise, all day long evidences of God’s grace are being showered on my life, and I often fail to pause and give thanks for them as they come. I assume I am not alone in this.

The second reality is that, while gratitude doesn’t come naturally to some of us, gratitude has tremendous benefits for all of us. Recent studies have shown the correlation between gratitude and our emotional wellbeing. Gratitude is a great antidote to stress and other postures that leave us turned in on ourselves, such as pride, anxiety, and jealousy. More importantly, gratitude opens our hearts to the reality of God’s rich and undeserved blessings that come to us every day. Gratitude completes the life-giving cycle in our relationship with God: God gives gracious gifts, and we respond by giving our gratitude.

Sabbath Experiment

For today’s Sabbath experiment we consider this question: how can we enter into God’s creation-appreciation rhythm through a practice of gratitude?

Today we will experiment with the weekly Examen. The Examen is a centuries-old Christian

practice, and while the name may be new to some, there's nothing new about it. The Examen is simply a way to review the events of the past day or week, looking for evidence of God's grace throughout that time. The Examen helps us notice and appreciate what we might not have noticed and appreciated fully in the busyness of the moment.

Here's a simple way to do this. First, carve out some time alone or with others to review the past week with gratitude. Give yourself an unhurried period of time to simply go back over the past week in your mind. It might be helpful to actually have your calendar in front of you to recall the events of the past week. Walk through each day acknowledging moments of God's grace and care.

Here are two specific lenses through which to view the past week:

First, what are some things God accomplished through you this past week for which you can give thanks? Just as God appreciated the fruits of his labor at creation, we too can look back on our labor with a sense of appreciation. We might recall specific projects at work we accomplished or moments of personal growth, such as overcoming a temptation or stepping into a challenging conversation. These can be big moments or small moments. For some of us it may feel uncomfortable or prideful to acknowledge our own work, so it's helpful to remember that we are simply celebrating the ways God has been working through our work to make it fruitful.

Second, what are some ways God's grace and generosity have shown up in and around you this past week? Again, these may be significant moments (a championship win for one of your children, a long-standing deal finally going through at work, a reconnection with an old friend), or they may be small moments (a particularly good meal, a book you're enjoying). However God has been gracious to us, we have the opportunity to acknowledge with gratitude that "it was good."

Ideally, you can follow-up this personal reflection time with an intentional discussion with family, friends, or roommates. Gather together over a meal and give each person the opportunity to answer these questions:

- What is one thing you accomplished this week that you are thankful for?
- What is one way you experienced God's goodness this past week that you are thankful for?

Then take some time to pray together and acknowledge God as the giver of all these good gifts.

Sabbath Experiment #4

Enjoying Our Freedom as God's Children

Sabbath Meditation

Read Psalm 126

Sabbath Reflection

Psalm 126 looks back to a moment of freedom from captivity and looks ahead with hope to another time of freedom when God would restore Israel's fortunes. The images of people enjoying their freedom in this psalm are refreshingly human: men dreaming dreams, mouths filled with laughter, tongues singing songs of joy, streams in the desert, and harvesters bringing in the fruit of the harvest.

We've already discussed how the Sabbath command is connected with the experience of freedom God gave to Israel:

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:15)

Israel had experienced the painful and dehumanizing reality of slavery in Egypt. Seven days a week, they were subjected to back-breaking labor under the hot desert sun. Their identity was marked by slavery. And then God gave them their freedom. He rescued them from Egypt and gave them a new identity: “Israel is my firstborn son” (Exodus 4:22).

And he gave them the Sabbath as a tangible way to experience their freedom. Every week, this full day off would remind them of their truest identity: “We are no longer slaves. We are God's children. We are free.”

Thousands of years later, through Christ, we too have been freed—from our bondage to sin and its consequences—and we have been adopted into God's family. And the Sabbath gift remains for us as a tangible way to experience our freedom. It is a way to reconnect with our deepest identity as children of God.

While we may not have experienced the kind of oppressive slavery the Israelites experienced in Egypt, we do experience the reality of living in a culture that constantly tries to squeeze us into its mold. All week long, the cultural “gods” of success, consumerism, image-management, and entertainment tell us that our worth is defined by what we can achieve, experience, consume, and purchase. These voices can be very alluring, but over time they end up enslaving us if we let them define who we are.

In light of this, observing the Sabbath is a wonderful way to disconnect from these cultural identities in order

to reconnect with our deepest identity. Sabbath reminds us that we are free children of God.

Sabbath Experiment

Today's Sabbath experiment involves asking the question: how can we experience our freedom today? How can we disconnect from the identities our culture places on us in order to reconnect with our truest identity as God's children?

First, today's experiment involves disconnecting from three common cultural practices. While we have stressed the importance of this throughout our discussion, today is the day to go "all in" on this particular commitment:

- Completely disconnect from anything related to work today: no work-related emails, texts, calls, projects, or planning. No errands, bills, or house work today either (cooking a good meal would be the exception).
- Disconnect from all digital devices today: no phones, tablets, computers, or televisions. If you have to, schedule one or two moments in the day to check texts or calls.
- Disconnect from any financial purchases today. No purchases online, in store, or wherever.

We are disconnecting from these cultural activities in order to recalibrate the hold they have on our hearts. In a sense, we are declaring our freedom and affirming that we will not be defined by and enslaved to these realities.

Inevitably, since our lives are so tied to these behaviors, this may create some internal restlessness and anxiety throughout the day. Don't avoid those feelings. Lean into them. Sit with them, and invite God into them. Let those feelings be the place where a deeper relationship with God takes place, and consider what God might want to speak into your life in the midst of them.

Second, today's experiment involves reconnecting with our deepest identity as God's children. As we free ourselves from productivity, distraction, and consumerism, a space opens up in the day to do something many of us have not done in a while: play. By play, I'm simply referring to the unhurried experience of an activity that we deeply enjoy. This kind of play, as simple as it sounds, is actually a subversive declaration of freedom in the midst of the forces of our culture.

So today we engage in some free play, whatever that might look like for each of us. Here are some options:

- Play a musical instrument
- Play a sport
- Enjoy a favorite hobby
- Enjoy a board game with friends or family
- Paint, draw, or create something
- Go to a museum

These are activities we may have already enjoyed on other Sabbaths, but today we are intentionally experiencing them as expressions of the freedom we have as God's children.

One of my greatest joys as a father is watching my three children absorbed in free play, whether that's making a craft, playing make-believe, or dancing around the room. I find great joy in my children enjoying play. In light of that, I can only imagine the joy that God our Father has as he watches us, his children, enjoying free play on this day of freedom.

Sabbath Experiment #5

Enjoying God's Gift of Each Other

Sabbath Meditation

Read Psalm 133

Sabbath Reflection

The opening line of this psalm reminds us that when we experience unity with each other, it is both “good” in God’s eyes and “pleasant” for us. This psalm is a brief but profound celebration of what happens when God’s children live together in unity.

Our final Sabbath reflection draws our attention to the relational side of the Sabbath, reminding us that the Sabbath wasn’t just given to individuals but rather to the community. Again, it’s tempting to try to dial in the perfect Sabbath day for ourselves without giving full thought to the needs and desires of others, so today’s experiment helps us avoid that temptation.

As we’ve discussed, the most obvious observation about Jesus’ own approach to the Sabbath was the way he made room for other people. Whereas the religious leaders of the day saw certain people and their needs as barriers to faithful Sabbath observance, Jesus actually

welcomed people and their needs on the Sabbath. He extended relational hospitality by taking them in without agenda and allowing himself to be interrupted by them. He saw each person as made in the image of God, and he loved them accordingly.

One of the greatest barriers to true hospitality occurs when we approach other people with our own self-centered agendas. If we are honest with ourselves, rather than making room for others as Jesus did, we often find ourselves trying to fit them into our predetermined agenda for our personal comfort and happiness. At work we're tempted to view our boss merely as someone to impress or a co-worker as someone to outperform. At home we're tempted to view our kids as behavioral problems to fix or roommates as energy suckers to be avoided at the end of a long day.

None of this is "good" or "pleasant." It is not "good" because God wants us to see each other not merely as objects or projects but as people made in his image. And it is not "pleasant" because when we approach people with our own agendas, we often become frustrated or annoyed with them, seeing them as barriers to our happiness rather than as the gifts that they truly are.

In light of this, Sabbath is a day to recalibrate our experience of the people in our lives. It's a day to practice true relational hospitality where we make room in our hearts and minds for others, clearing ourselves from selfish agendas, and taking them in exactly as they are without judgment.

This will involve surrendering any need we feel to control, avoid, or fix people on the Sabbath. There may be things we'd love to change about the people in our lives, but the Sabbath is a day to entrust to God the job of changing people as he sees fit. And once we stop trying to fix or control others, we will find that we are finally free to do something entirely different: enjoy them. We are free to take them in, in all their imperfections, enjoying them as the gifts they truly are.

Sabbath Experiment

Our final Sabbath experiment involves asking this question: how can we enjoy the gift of others by extending relational hospitality to them today? Here are three ways to do this:

1. Receive whatever relational encounters come your way with hospitality.
 - Practice hospitality at church today. Church inevitably puts us in contact with some people whom we'd rather not engage, but for that reason it is a great opportunity to practice hospitality. During the worship time, take in the (very imperfect) voices around you. Notice people as they receive communion. Enjoy the shared experience you all have of being imperfect people saved by God's grace. After the service, rather than intentionally avoiding certain people, take in each person and each conversation that comes your way without agenda. Be present to each person and receive them as a gift, even if it's not the gift you thought you needed.

- Practice hospitality with your spouse today. Throughout the week, the busyness of schedules and the shared task of parenting can leave us feeling like ships passing in the night or, even worse, frustrated and angry with each other. But Sabbath is a day to fully receive and enjoy one another again. It's a day to remember why we got married in the first place, what we most appreciate about each other, and how we experience God's grace through each other. Give extra grace to your spouse today, and focus not on what is inadequate about each other, but on what is worthy of praise.
- Practice hospitality with your children today. We spend our weeks working hard to shape and train our children in the way that seems best to us. But Sabbath is a day to more fully enjoy them. It's a day to let them be exactly who they are, in all their incomplete-ness. Enjoy the unhurried moments with your children today. Receive them as gifts and enjoy the moment.
- Practice hospitality with your friends and roommates today. I think you get the idea.

2. Actively create opportunities to enjoy people today.

- Identify some friends who are truly life-giving for you and invite them to do something together today. These should be people who don't require energy or work to be around but who are fun and refreshing people for you.
- Choose an activity with your family that you really enjoy doing together. It may be a game, or going

to a favorite restaurant, or engaging in a recreational activity. Whatever it is, it should be something that brings out the best in your family and helps you enjoy each other.

3. Have an intentional time of affirmation.

This may feel unnatural to some of us, but it doesn't have to be anything grandiose. Just use this experiment as an excuse to do it. Spend time with friends or family ideally around a meal. Start with one person at the table, and have everyone answer one of the following questions about him or her, then work your way around the table:

- What is one quality you enjoy about this person?
- What is one thing you've noticed in this person lately that you have appreciated?
- What is one way God makes your life better through this person?

Where Do We Go from Here?

I trust that over the past few months you've been able to "come and see" and experience the gift of Sabbath for yourself. If your experience has been anything like mine, the process has been clunky and challenging at times, but it has also been refreshing and life-giving in ways you didn't anticipate. Whatever your experience, I believe God delights even in the process of his children opening his Sabbath gift, however imperfectly.

Remember, the Sabbath is a gift. It is a gift to be enjoyed in its own right, and it is a gift that helps us better enjoy the Giver. After all, our God is a father who enjoys giving good gifts to his children. Now it remains for you to continue to open this gift week after week.

If you've engaged a particular family or friend on this journey, I'd encourage you to get together and debrief your experiences. Gather for a meal and enjoy a discussion around simple questions, such as: What did you learn through these Sabbath experiences? What was particularly challenging for you? What was particularly life-giving for you? What do you want to commit to moving forward?

Beyond that I'd encourage you to take what you've learned and make it your own. I've offered some simple ingredients in the hopes of preparing a Sabbath meal that is delicious and nourishing. That being said, there is no definitive recipe for the Sabbath. So now it remains for you to mix and match the ingredients that will work best for you and those around you.

Finally, as you look to the days ahead, I pray you experience a vision for your future that is similar to what I experienced twenty years ago. I pray you can see that by opening this Sabbath gift each week, you have given yourself a lifetime of life-giving days. I pray you can see the days of joy and refreshment lined up week after week, like waves coming in off the sea, one after the next.

In the words of the Apostle John, "From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (John 1:16). May you experience more and more of God's grace as you continue to enjoy his gift of Sabbath!