

RUTH HALEY
BARTON



EMBRACING
RHYTHMS
of
WORK
and
REST



*From Sabbath to
Sabbatical and
Back Again*



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest* by Ruth Haley Barton.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

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A WAKE-UP CALL



*Sabbath is the most precious present humankind
has received from the treasure house of God.*

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

I AM QUITE CERTAIN I would not be alive today if it were not for God's gift of sabbath. And not just a weekly sabbath day, but also daily sabbath moments cultivated in solitude and silence, and sabbatical seasons for letting the soil of my soul lie fallow. These rhythms have given shape and form to a life—my life—lived as a creature in the presence of my loving Creator; these sabbath rhythms have, quite literally, kept me in the game.

But I have not always lived this way.

My wake-up call regarding God's gift of sabbath came when I was in my early forties, serving on staff in a high-performance church culture, married with three busy and athletic children, writing, teaching, and guiding others in spiritual practices, and yet . . . I was actively resisting sabbath. I knew sabbath was a thing. But on a level I had not yet been

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willing to acknowledge, I was too busy, too important, too caught in cultural expectations, to consider ceasing my work one day a week. In addition to my grandiosity, the logistics of family life and work made it all seem just beyond our reach. Sunday was the only day it was even possible for our busy family to attempt a sabbath, yet traveling sports teams competed on Sundays, my husband's place of work was open on Sundays, and my own job on a church staff made Sunday the busiest day of my work week! Sigh.

The deeper truth is that I just wasn't that attracted to sabbath as a concept. I had been raised in a fundamentalist environment where sabbath *was* kept, but in a very legalistic way. For me, sabbath had been a day of contradictions. We went to church in the morning and since my dad was the pastor we kids had to work very hard at behaving. Sitting in the front row knowing people were watching us from behind while our dad watched us eagle-eyed from the pulpit was stressful, to say the least. Even the most minor infraction (like giggling or whispering) was treated with great seriousness when we got home. This was not restful or delightful at all.

Added to this was the fact that as the pastor's family we often had guests for dinner or were guests at someone else's home most Sundays after church. I enjoyed the communal nature of the hospitality that was part of our sabbath routine (in fact, I still miss it!), but I will say that the womenfolk—including myself as “the responsible eldest”—worked very hard at cooking, serving, and cleaning up while the menfolk visited in the living room. In fact, I'm not sure there was any other day of the week in which we women worked harder than we did on that day; it didn't take long for me to grow resentful.

Our guests usually stayed through the afternoon, so we remained in our “Sunday clothes” all day, were limited in what we were allowed to do (no biking or swimming), and then it was back to church in the evening. All in all, sabbath was pretty exhausting and slightly punishing, so when I left for college and eventually established my own family, I was glad to leave that particular brand of sabbath-keeping behind. It was convenient to dismiss it as a practice we didn’t need to worry about anymore—not to mention the fact that as a young adult I was really into working and achieving, and Sundays were a day when I could get a lot done. I was so driven by my goals and aspirations that I really did not want to stop—for anything or anybody, including God! That is, until years later I was so tired from my overachieving ways that in unguarded moments I started dreaming of a way of life that was not so exhausting.

I developed a bit of a guilty pleasure—reading beautiful books about the sabbath, allowing the longing to well up within me for a few minutes, living inside the fantasy for just a bit, and then setting the book aside as a private indulgence full of pleasures I could imagine for others but not myself. I kept my explorations to myself because I wanted to dream without interruption—at least for a little while. I did not want the naysayers telling me sabbath-keeping was not possible.

By this time I had been to seminary and understood the basic hermeneutical principle that if you want to know what matters to God, you look for the great themes of Scripture, the arc if you will. The way I saw it, the theme of sabbath and rest was a vibrant thread running throughout Scripture—I had no patience for theologically resistant folks raising questions about whether or not sabbath-keeping is for today and why

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Jesus didn't teach about the sabbath. To my knowledge God had never "taken back" the gift of the sabbath—it was one of the Ten Commandments, after all, and the best one if you ask me!

It seemed to me that Jesus never taught about sabbath because it was just assumed: as practicing Jews, he and his disciples kept the sabbath and that was that. Yes, he brought fresh nuance to it by making it clear that the sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath, *and* that he is Lord even of the sabbath (Mark 2:27). So rather than doing away with it, he actually rescued it from legalism, reframing it in such a way that it is even more life-giving for us as his followers. And then, to put an even finer point on it, the writer of Hebrews stated in no uncertain terms that the promise of sabbath rest is still available to the people of God and that to refuse such rest is to harden one's heart in disobedience (Hebrews 4:9).

So, while I longed for this kind of rest and was completely convinced of its importance, biblically speaking, I did not want to wrestle with all the complications and practical challenges just yet. Somehow, just knowing the possibility of sabbath existed and that somebody somewhere was able to figure out how to have it, lit up my soul from the inside. Yet it still felt impossible for me.

STOPPED IN MY TRACKS

Then I had this biking accident—one I now see as something similar to God knocking Paul off his horse and leaving him alone and sightless for three days so he could ponder his life. I will refrain from retelling that whole story here, except to say that after the initial euphoria of having survived such a thing

wore off, I went right back to work. But as relief gave way to other levels of awareness, God used a couple comments to help me ponder the meaning of things. One friend, after expressing his initial concern, laughingly commented, “Ruth, when are you going to learn that when you’re on a bike, you can’t take on a van?” Another friend, curious about the fact that I wasn’t taking any time to recover, commented, “You know, you did just get run over by a car. You could take a day off!”

And then there was this sentence from Wayne Muller’s book *Sabbath* that kept buzzing around in my head like a pesky fly buzzing against a windowpane: “If we do not allow for a rhythm of rest in our overly busy lives, illness becomes our Sabbath—our pneumonia, our cancer, our heart attack, our accidents create Sabbath for us.”

Boom.

I did not want to hear this. I did not want to consider the fact that perhaps this accident, while not God’s fault, was a way in which God was trying to tell me something. I did not want to acknowledge the possibility that it might be that hard for God to get my attention; nor did I want to face the fact that for years I had been thumbing my nose at human limitations, behaving as though I was beyond needing a sabbath. It was a nice idea for retired people or people who weren’t in demand, but surely *I* wasn’t one who *needed* a sabbath.

Except now I did.

And that is how God began nudging me to take next steps on my sabbath journey. Unbeknownst to me, my sabbath journey had already begun because I had been practicing solitude in a profoundly different way than the busy “quiet times” I had been schooled in during my youth. Through the witness of the

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desert Abbas and Ammas (particularly Henri Nouwen’s seminal reflections in *The Way of the Heart*), I had been learning how to cultivate solitude as a place of rest in God—body, mind, and soul. It was wonderful. It was restful. It was bringing me back to life. Little did I know that in my practice of solitude and silence, I was already experiencing what Tilden Edwards calls “a special *quality of time* available daily”—a way of being in time that is open and receptive, restful and replenishing.

God used my accident to stop me in my tracks—to provide the right kind of space to really consider my human limitations and the layers of exhaustion that existed within me. In this space I was able to stay with my desire for a more sustainable existence long enough for it to take me somewhere. Even though I do not believe God caused the accident, I *do* believe the Holy One used it to get my attention and draw me into his invitation to take a next step in sabbath living—from a few delicious sabbath moments daily to a full day once a week, and then eventually longer sabbatical seasons—until here I am today, able to testify that God’s gift of sabbath is far more than just one day a week; it is actually a *way of life*.

A SANCTUARY IN TIME

Sabbath-keeping is a way of ordering all of life around a pattern of working six days and then ceasing and resting on the seventh. It helps us arrange our lives to honor the rhythm of things—work and rest, fruitfulness and dormancy, giving and receiving, being and doing, activism and surrender. The day itself is set apart, devoted completely to rest, worship, and delighting in God’s good gifts, but the other six days of the week must be lived in such a way as to make sabbath possible. Paid work

needs to be contained within five days a week. Household chores, shopping, and errand running need to be completed before the sabbath comes or they need to wait. Courageous decisions must be made about work and athletics, church and community involvement.

This pattern of tithing one-seventh of our time back to God is woven deep into the fabric of Christian tradition. It is a pattern God himself established as he was doing the work of creation, and it was incorporated into Jewish tradition in such a way that it ordered their whole existence as a nation. For Jewish folks, the sabbath observance began on Friday evening and ended on Saturday evening, providing a sanctuary in time even during seasons in their history when they had no physical sanctuary. The practice of keeping the sabbath holy and completely set apart was and still is at the heart of their national identity. “It was as if a whole people were in love with the seventh day.”

I have experienced this love myself in the joy and relief that washes over me when sabbath comes . . . when the house has been prepared, special food has been bought, computers have been turned off and cellphones powered down . . . when final emails have been sent and the laptop has been closed, when work obligations have been completed or set aside . . . when the candles or the fireplace have been lit . . . and it is time to stop, whether everything has been finished or not. I know what it is like to rest for hours until I have energy to delight in something—savory food, a good book, a leisurely walk, a long-awaited conversation with someone I love. I know what it’s like to feel joy, hope, and peace flow back into my body and soul when I thought it might never come back again. I know what

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it's like to see home and family, friends and community, differently through sabbath eyes of delight in God's good gifts. I have experienced rest that turns into delight, delight that turns into gratitude, and gratitude that turns into worship. I know what it is like to recover myself so completely that I am able, by God's grace, to enter back into my work with a renewed sense of God's calling and God's presence.

How could you not love a day that does all that? How could you not sell everything you have for this pearl of great price?

A SABBATH PROGRESSION

If you ask me, sabbath is one of God's greatest gifts to us in our humanity—right up there with salvation through Christ. It is a gift that is both beautiful *and* functional, luxurious *and* essential all at the same time. And every time you open it, it feels brand new.

For me, sabbath-keeping has been a progression that started with cultivating a daily practice of solitude and silence as a place of rest in God, where I began to experience *for the first time* what it felt like to cease striving, to give in to the limits of being human, and to rest myself upon God's care and mercy. What an amazing experience this was for one who had worked so hard on so many things—including my spirituality—for so long. In the process I became more aware of my drivenness and how deeply entrenched it was. I had to really own the propensities of my personality and say, "Yes, this is what's true about me." Sitting uncomfortably with that admission, I could finally get honest about just how tired I was—deep in my bones—and this awareness prepared me to really hear God's invitation to set aside my work and my ceaseless striving for an entire day

once a week. These shorter, daily periods of resting in God in solitude gave me a taste of what could be.

As my capacity to let go and cease striving increased through this daily practice of solitude and silence, God drew me back to the biblical practice of a whole day set apart for rest, worship, and delight—a practice I had rejected but now God was returning to me in the most winsome way. Now I wanted it badly enough that I was willing to do pretty much anything to get it.

There were several fundamental principles that got me started with my sabbath practice—all of which we will explore in different ways throughout this book. The first was really digging in and seeking to understand God's heart and intention in giving us the sabbath—that we as his children would experience this rhythm of ceasing and resting, worshiping and delighting. Eventually it dawned on me that everything we choose to do or not do needs to somehow fit into *God's purposes* for this day. There is so much to this that it will take the first half of this book to plumb the depths!

The second principle is that it is important to establish a regular rhythm if at all possible. The human body and soul is accustomed to living in rhythms—rhythms of night and day, rhythms of the seasons, rhythms of eating three meals a day, and so on. Part of the restfulness of sabbath is knowing that it always comes at the same interval so we're not making decisions about it every week. When sabbath is not observed on the same day every week, there will be weeks when we go longer than seven days without a sabbath, and that is not optimal. After seven days without rest, we risk becoming dangerously tired and unable to bring our best selves to anyone or anything.

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Third, I eventually grasped that sabbath-keeping is not primarily a private discipline. It is and always has been a communal discipline or at least a discipline to be entered into with those closest to us. After experiencing church communities that ramp up their activities on Sundays versus guiding their people into sabbath rhythms, I could see that the reason sabbath worked in the Jewish community is that they all did it together. The communal nature of sabbath is such an important topic that we will devote an entire chapter to it later on. But having these foundational principles was enough to get me started.

FALLING IN LOVE GRADUALLY

Jewish folks had it right: the only way to even begin taking steps toward a sabbath practice is to let yourself fall in love with this day so that you long for it as you would long for a loved one. Rabbi Heschel puts it this way: “There is a word that is seldom said, a word for an emotion almost too deep to be expressed: the love of the Sabbath. The word is rarely found in our literature, yet for more than two thousand years the emotion filled our songs and moods. It was as if a whole people were in love with the seventh day.” This beautiful perspective has guided me to resist making sabbath-keeping a weighty exercise but to fall in love gradually—to explore it with delight—as though God and I were learning how to spend time together in a new and special way.

Falling in love with the sabbath does not mean it is always easy or that I have never given in to the temptation to pursue my own interests on God’s holy day (Isaiah 58:13). But twenty years later, I *can* say that I am a passionate lover of the sabbath

who would not be standing in the middle of my life and calling today if it weren't for this essential rhythm. The journey has continued to unfold as God has invited me into longer periods of retreat, and then finally into embracing sabbatical as part and parcel of my sabbath life in leadership.

A particular delight was discovering that I can bring this special quality of time into my everyday life through “sabbath pauses.” I could take a moment to rest in God between one activity and the next. I could pause before entering a room or a new situation to orient myself to God and invite God's presence. Before meals I could sometimes create space for a moment of quiet gratitude rather than just offering up a perfunctory prayer. While waiting for an appointment I could choose to cease and just be instead of scrolling through the apps on my phone. I could use time in the car or on a walk to be still and allow God to replenish me rather than turning on music or podcasts or making phone calls. All of these are simple means of introducing a sabbath way of being into other days and moments of the week, affirming that sabbath is a *quality-of-time* way of being that is possible anytime, anywhere.

Taken together, this sabbath progression has kept me navigating within sane rhythms of work, rest, and renewal for long-term sustainability. It all starts with longing and love as we allow ourselves to get in touch with the desire that stirs deep within our soul—desire for a way of life that works. A way of life in which we are not so tired all the time. A way of life that recognizes, accepts, and even honors the limits of our humanity, fostering contentment through delighting in God's truest gifts. When we are brave enough to be in touch with this stirring of the soul, God meets us right there in the middle of our desire

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with the revelation of this amazing gift that is fitted perfectly for us. Then we simply say yes to a God who knows us so well and loves us so much that he has provided us with such a good gift—if we can just arrange our lives to receive it.

The encouragement to “simply say yes” is not to imply that sabbath-keeping is easy; it is not. In fact, sabbath-keeping has only gotten more complicated as our culture has moved away from distinguishing any one day as different from the rest. And the ubiquitous nature of technology has added layers of challenge and difficulty to the prospect of unplugging and resting from constant connection and stimulation.

To enter sabbath time despite all the challenges, there must be a real yes, deep down inside. Yes to our need, yes to our desperation, yes to God’s invitation and the rightness of it—before we even know how we’re going to make it real in our own lives. This is the very definition of faith—to say yes when we have no idea how it’s all going to work out, but we know it’s what we need to do. It is that deep interior yes that will carry us into and through all the knotty issues sabbath raises until we emerge with a sabbath practice that works. There really is no shortcut, no other way, except through the doorway of desire, accompanied by faith that God is calling us and will show us the way. In this process, we learn for ourselves that yes, indeed, the sabbath is the most precious present humankind has received from the treasure house of God.

EMBRACING SABBATH TOGETHER

Because it takes whole communities embracing sabbath together to ensure that we can all participate in this God-ordained way of life, in this book I am unabashedly addressing

pastors and leaders of churches and ministries who gather in Jesus' name. Sabbath communities do not happen by accident; they must be led by leaders who are practicing sabbath themselves so they have the inner authority to guide others. And then these sabbath principles need to be lived into with others so that our shared life supports and catalyzes this practice rather than working against it.

In part one we explore the personal and communal practice of a weekly sabbath as foundational to a way of life that works and honors the God who made us. We conclude with the story of Pastor Dan and how God stirred in his heart and life to lead his community in embracing sane rhythms of work and rest together. Then in part two we explore the practice of sabbatical as an extension of our sabbath practice. There are many practical tools for sabbath and sabbatical offered throughout the book, including a conversation guide for communities seeking to explore becoming a sabbath community. Knowing about this communal emphasis, you may want to consider reading and engaging this work with a few other leaders in your community who have the desire, will, and capacity to move forward on this with you.

But first, let's take a few moments to pay attention to what is stirring deep within our own souls as we reflect on God's invitation to sabbath. Someone has said, "You'd be surprised what your soul wants to say to God." And, I might add, "You'd be surprised what God wants to say to your soul." At the end of each chapter, there is a section intended to create space for letting yourself be surprised by what your soul wants to say to God *and* to keep the space open long enough to listen for what God wants to say back to your soul.

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