

I read an article a couple weeks ago that referred to the time we are in as *The Great Pause*. It reflected on how we've been forced to slow down because so many aspects of our normal lives have come to a screeching halt. My guess is that it's gotten your attention and you've responded with equal parts relief and anxiousness; relief because you've been able to catch your breath, and anxiousness because you are struggling with how to live your life without all that activity.

I had a grace-filled, yet sobering, revelation last week. Richard was preaching and that allowed me time to focus my attention on other church business and also allowed me to get a break last weekend. I committed to have nothing to do on Friday but, about midway through the day, I did not find myself feeling relieved and rested. In fact, it was just the opposite. I was uneasy, stirred up, and not really enjoying the time. God showed me my source of discomfort. I realized I was uncomfortable because I wasn't operating with a sense of urgency. I have been so dialed in, the idea of slowing down was foreign and unsettling to me. It was a wake-up call I needed.

These are symptoms of our national addiction to pace. We are over-scheduled, constantly engaged (iPhone users touch their phones 2,617 times/day), competing for the prize of "he who is busiest wins" and, if we do get a moment, all we can do is collapse in exhaustion. The consequences are devastating. Since 2007, the advent of the digital age, incidents of mental health issues have skyrocketed, including a recently named ailment called "hurry sickness". Our personal relationships are starving for attention, happiness surveys show we are in steady decline and, most importantly, our spiritual lives are suffering and shallow because **you can't sprint in life and walk with Jesus at the same time**. But that's never the way God intended us to live, and now might be our opportunity to recapture it.

We are in a series called *A New Normal*, looking at this idea that God wants us to come out of this time different than we were going in. And today, we are going to look at a spiritual practice God ordained at the beginning of time, that he commanded his people to practice, that Jesus himself practiced when he walked on the earth, and that he gave to the Church. Of all the new normals we've been talking about, I believe this one may have the greatest potential to change our lives for the better. It's a new rhythm in life that includes the practice of Sabbath. I am both excited to talk about it today, and also feel completely unqualified, because I don't do it well. My prayer is that we can all learn together to see what God intends.

In Exodus 20, the nation of Israel is assembled at Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments: **[Exodus 20:8-11] 8 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.**

The fourth commandment is for the nation to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. This is one of five instances it's commanded in Exodus, one of over 100 times it's mentioned in the Old Testament. God is very serious about this. Holy means to be set apart for special purposes. Think about a special set of dishes that get used only for special occasions. Or, I'm officiating two weddings this weekend and will be wearing a suit; special clothes set aside for a special

occasion. The Sabbath is a special day set aside for a special occasion. But, unlike a set of dishes you might pull out twice/yr, the Sabbath is a special day set aside every week.

This is not a new idea. It is a rhythm that was established since the beginning of time. The fourth commandment references Genesis 2. In the creation story, God created the earth in six days and rested on the seventh. God models and commands that one day per week would be set aside as holy. So what does that mean for us?

Sabbath is not ritual but rest.

Our word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word Shabbat, a word that literally means “stop”. The spirit of the word is that we would stop from work, distraction, striving, pace, performance, that we would put the brakes on our lives and pause for a day to rest and be refreshed.

That idea likely doesn't catch us off-guard. We know it almost intuitively. If I asked you to name one thing that could go and go and continue at peak performance without taking a break, you'd be hard-pressed to think of anything. God, and maybe the Energizer Bunny. But even God chose to rest, not because he was exhausted, but because he knew it was good to regularly pause from our work to reflect and be refreshed. He established it as a rhythm for us to follow and gave us a God-ordained day to slow down.

The value of stopping was shown to me recently. About a month into this season, my family and I were around our dinner table and I asked if there was anything good that has come out of the shutdown. All of my boys answered, in their own words, that they were enjoying our newfound pace of life. We weren't jumping from school to band to sports to homework to whatever else we'd try to cram in. We were getting up a little later, working a little slower, sharing multiple meals together daily, playing lots of board games, and laughing more than we have in a while. There was a stillness and peace that settled on our home, and it was the result of us slowing down. That starts to get at what God wants for us. Now, what does God mean by rest?

We may be tempted to go one of two ways on this. The first would be to get legalistic about it. That, in order to Sabbath, we have to follow strict protocol. We are not obligated to follow the ritual in the Law of the Jews, but we do have our pattern of gathering on Sundays as part of our Sabbath. It would be easy for us to suddenly look at church as a compulsory activity we must do right as opposed to the grace-filled opportunity to gather with God's people to connect with God and each other. That happened in Jesus' day. The Pharisees had put so many rules around the Sabbath that it became a burden instead of a blessing. Jesus confronted the Pharisees when he said [Mark 2:27] **27 And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”** That means the Sabbath is a gift, a God-ordained command to stop and rest.

We may also be tempted to go the other way and see it as just a day to totally check out and binge Netflix all day. That's not what God has in mind for us either.

[Matthew 11:28-30] 28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

The rest Jesus wants for us is the rest that only he provides, and we must come to him to receive it. It is a restoration, a revival, of our soul and our body where we attach ourselves to him so that he carries our burdens and we can live free and light. But we rarely experience this kind of rest. FOMO, YOLO, pursuit of money and stuff, the pride that comes with a jampacked calendar, and an inability to sit still all work against us truly finding rest in Jesus. That will be the case until we recognize something. **What we fill up our life with because we think it will fulfill us only exhausts us and numbs us to where we can't truly enjoy it.** Jesus says "stop". All that striving, the weight of that burden, is unnecessary. Come to him and be restored.

What was the pace of your life before The Great Pause began?

I've said over the last few weeks the wilderness reveals, and this is an opportunity for us to take stock of how frantically we were living our lives before all this hit. Would you characterize your life as restful? Healthy? And now that you've had to pause from it, do you want to return there at the same pace? Ask God to help you take a sober evaluation of the pace of your life.

Sabbath is not absence but presence.

It's easy to look at the Sabbath and say it's basically just a day you don't do stuff, a day of being deprived. But it's so much more. Sabbath means "stop", but it also has a secondary meaning of "delight" or "celebration". In the beginning, God rested on the seventh day and blessed it. There are three things God blesses in the creation account: animals, about which he says to be fruitful and multiply, man, whom he says to be fruitful and multiply, and the Sabbath. If the other two are blessed and able to give life, so too can the Sabbath. And that life comes from clearing out a day in the week to make room for the Lord and be blessed by his presence.

[Isaiah 58:13-14a] ¹³ "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth."

That sounds pretty good. God is basically saying if you trade in your own desires that are apart from me one day a week and focus totally on me, you will be delighted in him. That must mean your own pleasures apart from God are not nearly as fulfilling as experiencing God himself. It doesn't mean they are bad. It means we miss out if we focus on them alone. The Sabbath has been set apart by God, for us to focus on God, so that we can be delighted by God. The result is fulfillment beyond what anything else can provide.

I remember being in Jerusalem on a Friday evening. The city was hurrying to get ready for the Sabbath, which started at sundown. There was a buzz and anticipation in the air. The group I was with was scheduled to spend the evening at a rabbi's house to experience a Shabbat dinner with him and his family. It turned out to be one of the most moving experiences I've ever been a part of. They had prepared an enormous feast. No being deprived there. They sang songs, prayed, read from their Scriptures. **They had stopped, and delight is what followed.** In fact, they were so adamant about stopping everything that, at one point I pulled out my phone to take a picture of our group and promptly got in trouble with the wife! As we walked back to our hotel that

night, we heard singing coming from many of the houses. I thought “This is what joy sounds like.” Since then, I’ve observed Christians who Sabbath regularly and I find them some of the most joyful people. I don’t think it’s a coincidence.

So how can that happen for us? It is through worship. Now, I say worship and you might think singing, which would be right, or church, which is part of it (but not all of it). But that’s not what Sabbath worship is limited to. If Sabbath is a celebration to delight in the person and presence of God, that can take on all kinds of forms. **Worship is anything that directs your heart towards God**, anything that causes you to pause and be grateful for him and for what he has done. For me, that’s the Psalms and Christmas hymns. But it’s also feasts with my family, hiking in the mountains, laughing with friends. For Martha, it’s reading Scripture that speaks of the bigness of God, being with family, spending time in God’s creation, and offering prayers of thanksgiving. What is it for you?

From the beginning of time God has called us to throw a weekly celebration where we stop all we are doing to focus our hearts upon him. It’s not a day of limits, it’s a day to connect with the one who is limitless. Imagine that being a regular experience in your life, a part of every week, where you stop, commune with God in a variety of ways, celebrate our Savior without any distractions, and let your soul be delighted by him. It has the potential to become the best day of your week.

What was your joy meter reading before The Great Pause began?

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit and it can come when we delight in the presence and promises of God, but that only happens when we stop long enough to do so. Did your old way of life allow for that? Make it the priority? Even know it was possible? Ask God to show you as we focus on his presence right now.

Sabbath is not sporadic but rhythmic.

I find it fascinating that God gave the command of Sabbath to a bunch of people who were wandering around the wilderness with little to do other than gather manna, tend to some animals and some children, and to walk when God said move. Why didn’t God just wait until they got to the Promised Land? It’s because he knew they’d show up and get to work and it would be nearly impossible to implement it once they started. So he commands them while they have the margin to make it an established part of their lives so that, when they enter the land, everything will be added around it. God knows we will not Sabbath by accident or by trying to fit it in our schedule. The only way it happens is if we do it intentionally and regularly.

Sabbath changes the way we look at rest and relationship. Many of us have it backwards. We see rest as the remedy for exhaustion rather than the preventative for it. God wants us to rest so we don’t become exhausted, not rest because we’ve become exhausted. It would be like waiting until your car ran out of gas and was stalled on the side of the road before you tried to fill it up. No, Sabbath keeps our tanks full so that we can thrive not only that day but the other six days of the week. Walter Bruggemann: “People who keep the Sabbath live all seven days differently.”

And think about our relationship with God. What if we wait to connect with him only when we begin to feel distant? Think about an old friend you talk to once every couple years. The friendship is there, but you spend most of your time just catching up rather than growing in your relationship. Sabbath allows us to delight in God's presence and grow in intimacy with him. It is a day of the week dedicated to the Lord that keeps him in the center of our life.

[Hebrews 4:11a] ¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest.

It's a little disorienting to see "strive" and "rest" in the same sentence. But that striving is about fighting to set aside and protect that Sabbath time each week, to clear the deck so that you can experience God's rest and his presence.

What can your new normal look like if Sabbath rest is a non-negotiable part of it?

Many of us have experienced life at a slower pace these last couple months. More time to be still. More time with God and, because of that, more depth with God. It is a taste of what a Sabbath-filled life can be like. We all have a wonderful opportunity to start this life-giving practice now so that, when we get the all clear, and all the options come running to us asking for our time and devotion, there will be a day of the week that is off limits because it belongs to God. You will be not only more rested, but more AT REST, and you will be closer to God.

This is no silver bullet, a switch you simply turn on. It will require discipline. But it could be the beginning of an entirely new way of life for you, a new normal. It will take time, perseverance, hope, and an abundance of God's grace that I know he will give you freely and gladly. He wants this for you. He gave the day to us as a gift. Accept the gift and see what he does.