

1. Am I guilty of telling others about rest and not taking it myself?
2. On a scale from one to ten, ten being the most tired, how tired am I?
3. Do I have a weekly block of time for Sabbath-rest that will help me keep all of life in proper perspective and help me avoid burnout and breakdown?

Real Churches Implement Vision

Chapter 7

Sabbath-Rest, A Time to Release

Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.

(Exodus 23:12)

Sometimes our difficulties and fears become like precious antiques. We love to talk about them, but we would not give them up for anything.⁴⁷

(Henry Blackaby)

FROM RICHES TO RAGS

Long ago in a country far away lived a nobleman named Nils. Nils and his wife had a son named Victor. Nobility gave Victor access to private land, hired servants, and a lifetime of opportunity. A nobleman's son did not have to work. Work was for the people noblemen hired to keep their prestigious standard of living enviable. The potential advantages of nobility expanded as Victor entered adulthood.

Nobility, however, comes with expectations. This was no exception. It was difficult to lose the privileged position of nobility and next to impossible to rise to nobility. But there was one great equalizer that could lift one to that privileged status or reduce one to a begging peasant—marriage. Nils sternly warned Victor that he was to “have no social ties with the landless commoners.” Victor had a good life ahead of him; he had it made as long as he did not fall in love and marry a peasant girl.

Victor spent much of his leisure time hunting, which often brought him to the perimeters of his father’s land. It was there at the edge of his family’s property that Victor met a poor widow’s daughter named Mathilda. Walks outside Victor’s home became less about hunting and more about Mathilda. As love stories go, one thing led to another until Victor fell in love with her. Whatever it was about Mathilda that attracted him, it was more powerful than land or nobility. Victor would marry Mathilda.

Victor had done the one thing that negated his nobility. He had married a peasant girl without a cottage. He would be disinherited and banished from his parents’ land. He was forced to leave his home, and since Mathilda had no home the newlyweds voyaged across the Atlantic Ocean to a new world where land was plentiful. Once landing in New York’s harbor, they journeyed west through forest and farm until they found a climate worse than the one they left in Sweden. They settled in Minnesota.

Victor was twenty-seven and Mathilda just seventeen. For Mathilda it was simply the exchange of one hard life for another. Victor, however, endured strenuous physical labor foreign to his life of leisure and nobility in Sweden. He worked with timber harvesting the virgin white pine forests of northern Minnesota. Later he and Mathilda bought farmland in central Minnesota. Together they tilled the rocky soil and raised eight children on the farm.

One of those children was named Elmer. Elmer experienced nothing of his father's childhood nobility. What little Elmer learned about nobility came as Victor reminisced about the old country. In contrast, hard work molded Elmer's childhood. He watched his father work himself out of a hole and into some degree of prominence only to see him lose it all. Once the farm and the large farmhouse were paid for, Victor cosigned a business loan for two of his sons. The timing couldn't have been worse as the Great Depression swept through the land and the farm was taken as collateral. Elmer watched his father die suddenly from a kidney infection shortly after the tragic loss. From Elmer's perspective, one could not work hard enough in the hope of establishing some security!

Elmer left farming and began logging in the northern part of the state, hauling logs first with horses and later with trucks. He also applied his ingenuity toward loading and hauling huge stones from granite quarries. Heavy work became his trademark. He eventually became a road construction contractor. While Elmer submitted bids for new jobs, he also worked a bulldozer until cancer took his life at age sixty eight. Work was intensely physical for Elmer. The drive to survive never left his veins. Elmer never knew retirement. Scarcely did he know how to spend a day in leisure.

Elmer left behind a wife, a daughter, and a son named Harold. That same drive to survive lodged itself in Harold. At a young age he assisted his father during the Great Depression as a measure of survival. World War II brought an even more literal meaning to the word as Harold survived thirty missions over Germany as a B-24 pilot. Following the war he drove a truck for his father until the day he was too ill to drive another mile. At age thirty-four Harold was pulled from his truck and sent to the Veterans Hospital in Minneapolis where he would spend fifteen weeks in recovery from rheumatic fever. That would be the end of his truck-driving career. Doctors told him that he could no longer do physical work. Those words would

create a rift between Harold and his father who viewed work as physical. Hiring and managing people along with accounting and strategic planning did not qualify as work.

While rheumatic fever would put an end to Harold's truck driving, it would not end his trucking. The blessing of his physical limitations would send him into management, which was his greater asset. Harold did not just survive work; he loved it. He thrived on solving the challenges of an ever-changing trucking industry. He worked through his thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, seventies and well into his eighties. He lived to say, "My seventies were my best years." Retirement was never a consideration and occupied no place in his vocabulary.

In his eighties he was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis. Oxygen tanks and tubes were not very compatible with his manner of running a business: "If I am on oxygen I have to stay home, and if I have to stay home, I won't be on oxygen." While Harold did submit to the oxygen tank, he was not a very good oxygen patient. At age eighty five he was seen walking slowly between the office door and his car on a Wednesday evening. The next day he celebrated Thanksgiving with his family. That evening he contracted a fever and made a final trip to the hospital. Within a week he was gone.

Harold left behind his wife, two sons, and a daughter. The second son and middle child inherited the worst of his workaholic tendencies. Like Dad I became an entrepreneur, but not as a businessman. Far from the smell of diesel fuel, I attended seminary and became a church-planting pastor. The risks of planting a church nearly bankrupted my physical, mental, and emotional reserves. At age thirty I experienced an incapacitating illness initiated by fatigue. A case of atypical mononucleosis led to hepatitis and put me in bed for six weeks. It took nearly a year to fully recover.

I share all this personal history because of the pattern it presents. Each generation had to discover on his own that life has an edge, a place of no return. Like my father I had to learn the hard way—I can work myself to death. I can worry myself to death.

Prior to the six weeks spent in bed, I had worked hard and worried much in an all-out-effort to hold a fledgling church plant together. Willing to die trying I had not yet learned that everyone could not be pleased, at least not by me. Night after night I struggled to go to sleep. When I finally dozed off, our ten-month-old son would wake up screaming in pain because of a chronic ear infection. I attempted in vain to go back to sleep, usually tossing and turning until dawn. I would go to work tired day after day.

As hard as I tried and as much as I worried, I could not stop three families from leaving the church, a small percentage that left big scars. Two months after the dust had cleared and the losses were counted, the impact of my sleeplessness erupted, like a long fuse between the time of stress and its incapacitating effects.

One Saturday morning I could barely get out of bed. I did not preach the next day. I preached the following Sunday after giving this mysterious illness a week to leave. The next week I attempted to work as usual. By Friday I was back to where I began nearly two weeks earlier. I remember sitting in the surgery waiting room with Lois, while our ten-month-old had tubes put in his ears to reduce ear infections. That morning sitting on a chair was as strenuous as lifting barbells to my maximum capacity. I wanted to collapse on the floor.

That afternoon we drove home from the hospital together. I can't remember if I drove or held our youngster. What I do remember is that going a few miles seemed to take forever. Our son was on the mend and I was not. It was a beautiful spring day, so I decided to lie out in the sun for a few

moments hoping to feel better. I could hear Lois on the phone describing my symptoms to the doctor and stating emphatically, “Jim is not getting better.”

The next morning I went into the clinic for more extensive blood work. The results told the truth of my condition. Only after a prolonged period of rest would I feel better. What surgery could quickly do for our son, only long bed rest could do for me. I did not preach and did practically no church work the next four weeks.

The doctor instructed Lois to guard me from any potentially stressful phone calls. Most encouraging were the daily calls from my Dad who understood because he had once been in the same prone position for several weeks. Lois was also to guard me from working. I would sneak books between the blankets and read them when she assumed I was sleeping. She would come in and confiscate them, only to have to do it again. Later she learned that I had outlined the entire book of Joshua in anticipation of preaching a series from the book.

Most of the time was spent trembling under the covers, begging God to make me well again. Grandiose dreams of serving big churches melted down to hopes of being able to be a pastor and preach to a handful of people. I loved my work and wanted to return to it. But it was not to happen until I learned some lessons. I needed to be released from the constant preoccupation with work. There was a sense in which I was like a prisoner held in captivity.

SETTING THE CAPTIVES FREE

Jesus came to set the captives free—free from Satan, sin, and self. I am not surprised that captors despised his freedom ministry, like the owners who profited from a slave girl with a clairvoyant spirit (Acts 16:16-24). The

reluctance of captives to seize the opportunity to be free does puzzle me. Not even those in his hometown of Nazareth recognized freedom or the one who frees when it was offered to them.

One day Jesus walked into his hometown synagogue and read publicly from the Scriptures: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed...” (Isaiah 61:1, Luke 4:18).

Some were obviously angered by his reference to these words from the Prophet Isaiah being fulfilled in him at that moment. Perhaps others were agitated by his inference that they needed good news, freedom as prisoners, recovery of sight, and release from oppression: *Who does he think he is anyway, the Messiah? We remember him running around these streets as a small boy. How dare he think that he knows what we need?*

Praise God he slipped away from the attempt on his life that day (Luke 4:28-30). He lived to die another day and set us free from our sins, long before we knew we were captives. That explains why most people don't plead with Jesus to free them and why others despise any reference to captivity; they don't know they are captive to do Satan's will (II Timothy 2:26). I must include myself as one who was not desperate enough to recognize my captivity. Praise God for those who recognize their bondage and allow Jesus to set them free.

SABBATH, A TIME TO RELEASE CRIPPLES

Jesus went down to Capernaum where he proceeded to teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Not only did he teach, he also freed a man held captive by an evil spirit. Before that Sabbath was over, he delivered many from their various afflictions and forms of captivity. Setting people free on

the Sabbath was not only a trend with Jesus; he was quite intentional about it. In Luke six he healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. In Luke chapter thirteen Jesus healed again on the Sabbath. This time it is a woman who was crippled.

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹ and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” ¹³ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.
(Luke 13:11-13)

These were more than healings from physical afflictions. They were acts releasing people from various forms of captivity, especially the grip of Satan.

It made no difference to the rulers of the synagogue. In their eyes freeing people from anything was work forbidden by Sabbath Law. Their lack of compassion for captives blinded them from seeing their gross hypocrisy.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” ¹⁵ The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶ Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.
(Luke 13:14-17)

SABBATH, A TIME TO RELEASE CRITTERS

Jesus pressed the issue of hypocrisy further with yet another healing on the Sabbath. The Pharisees experienced no disturbance of conscience as they walked by an invalid in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Yet they would think nothing of exerting themselves to free an animal caught in a well on the Sabbath.

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. ² There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. ³ Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” ⁴ But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away. ⁵ Then he asked them, “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” ⁶ And they could make no reply to this.
(Luke 14:1-6)

The hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees rested on their failure to acknowledge an essential element of the Sabbath. While straining themselves in an all-out-effort to prohibit work on this holy day, they violated the benevolent aspects. In truth there was nothing wrong with exerting energy to release a cripple or critter that was captive on the Sabbath. It was a day to set captives free. Any effort to set a cripple or critter free on the Sabbath was commendable. It was worshipping one's work efforts in place of worshipping God that was a true violation of the Sabbath. The fourth commandment establishes the profound purpose of the Sabbath.

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not

do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. ¹⁵ 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 5:12 -15)

SABBATH SENSE

The Sabbath serves as a circuit breaker to keep God's people from burning out. Burnout is the result of being a captive to your work. One of the causes of burnout is a relentless effort to work until the job is done. What is commendable for short projects is dangerous for assignments that last for more than a week. I learned this the hard way. I could not continue to work as a church planter week after week without a weekly time of release, which was for me something more than a day off.

The Sabbath is comprehensive in scope. Everyone is to rest, from admirals to animals. In fact it is quite important that those in charge rest so those taking orders could get a rest from their domination. "Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed" (Exodus 23:12).

Several years ago I interviewed Eugene Peterson on the topic of the Sabbath. He spoke of an Exodus reason for the Sabbath and a Deuteronomy reason for the Sabbath:

The Exodus reason is that this is what God did. We enter into the rhythm of creation and grace when we do this. The command functions to

disengage us from our own work habits so that we can be prayerful people. Things become fulfilled in wholeness as we rest in God's action, not in our actions.

The Deuteronomy reason is the social reason that we do this for the sake of those whom we're living with and working with. If we don't have a Sabbath, we turn people around us into slaves of our own ego, servants of our own ambition. It's socially oppressive not to keep a Sabbath. You were slaves four hundred years in Egypt, and I'm not going to let you do that anymore. I'm not going to let you do to anybody else what was done to you. This is really important for pastors because we need to give our wives, our children, our parishioners at least one day off from us. So we're not pushing our agenda for ministry or whatever else on them.⁴⁸

The Sabbath is a commemoration of release from four hundred years of captivity. There was no freedom in Egypt for the Israelites, only captivity. Slaves were called to work any day of the week for any number of days in a row. The Israelites were not to go back into captivity even as their own masters.

The Sabbath is a celebration of freedom from every form of bondage. The Israelites were to celebrate freedom from their four hundred year captivity in Egypt. Sinners of every kind are to celebrate liberation from sin and Satan's death grip on their lives (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Work worshipers are to celebrate their freedom from the compulsion to work without ceasing. God in his mercy sets us free from the preoccupation of work to think of higher things. We are to think of him, for he is to be thanked. Jesus declared the Sabbath was not a curse to confine us but a gift to free us from harming ourselves: "Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath'" (Mark 2:27-28).

God's people are now free to serve God who released us by his powerful arm and gave us a day of rest as a proof of his compassion and the end of captivity. To a degree the Sabbath reverses the toilsome curse of original sin set forth at the fall of man (Genesis 3:17-19). The Sabbath gives us unlimited hope toward a full reversal of the curse in the age to come.

SABBATH, A TIME TO RELEASE CHRISTIANS

Jesus not only fulfilled the function of the Old Testament Sabbath by releasing the unfortunate from their bondage, he set a precedent for a day of release in the New Testament and the age to come. The Sabbath was a day of release. I would not expect Sunday and the age of grace to offer anything less. How fitting for church services to offer ministries of release, especially on Sundays.

Some Christian traditions still offer invitations during their worship services for attendees to receive Christ, healing, and deliverance from bondage, including satanic oppression. It is a means of offering release to people who are ready to be freed.

Jesus asked the man at the pool of Bethesda, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6). It remains an appropriate question as long as it is understood that human willingness is not the only prerequisite for wellness. God still teaches through infirmities (II Corinthians 12: 8, 9).

"Do you want to be released?" is just as appropriate in light of the gift of the Sabbath. What is the nature of your bondage? Is it physical, spiritual, emotional, or mental? What enslaves you? Is it an addiction or is it idolatry?

The longer I study the Sabbath and its pertinence to God's people today, the more I am persuaded that worship services offer a broad invitation to be released from all forms of bondage. A weekly Sabbath-rest is often the difference between surviving and thriving in ministry.

A SABBATH RELEASE

Looking back on my days as a local church pastor, I must confess that I did not regularly make use of worship services as a time of release from the bondages that ensnare people today. My Sabbath journey remained personal, not something I made compulsory for others. However, it was no secret that I practiced and promoted a weekly Sabbath for everyone. I cannot speak from experience regarding the relief a weekly Sabbath provides for business personnel, professionals, or factory workers. I can say with confidence, however, that a weekly Sabbath-rest is often the difference between surviving and thriving in ministry.

Ministers are as human as everyone else, perhaps more so. The call of God upon their lives does not exempt them from personal concerns. Pastors catch colds and flu bugs like everyone else. Their cars break down and roofs leak. Likewise ministers are vulnerable to financial difficulties. Even PKs, pastors' kids, may enter seasons of rebellion along with deacons' kids. There are ministry-related tensions as well.

A pastor's chief concern is often the complexity of work to which he or she has been called. The serious nature of pastoral work can easily become an emotional burden. While the medical doctor must make life-and-death decisions, the minister must give directions for eternal life. He or she is called upon to bring peace into many situations: the death of a child, a dispute among board members, dysfunctional families, sinners seeking repentance, and restless church shoppers, to name a few. Pastor John Lavender says the most difficult aspect of being a pastor is shifting gears:

For example, you have the tremendous demand of having to go from a funeral where you've had to help a young couple bury a child to a young couple preparing to get married and they're full of joy and excitement. You have to be real in both of those situations. It is very demanding, emotional, and wrenching, going from the requirements of being a leader to the demands of being a man alone with God.⁴⁹

The pastors' visible positions make them vulnerable to criticism as well. During a church leader's retreat, the senior pastor's Sunday morning dress code became the topic of discussion. Like many of my colleagues, my platform apparel had changed considerably over the last twenty-five years. For years I wore suits and only on certain summer Sundays did I dress down to a sport coat. By the turn of the century I was wearing dress slacks with a well pressed shirt, with or without a tie, but no sport coat. One leader suggested I dress down even further, while the leader next to him barked out emphatically, "No way! He should always wear suits on Sunday mornings." I laughingly thought of how I might please them both by wearing a suit coat and tie over a t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

More serious issues may include: how much pastors should be paid, should his family live in the parsonage or buy their own home, how much time off should he or she be granted, should the pastor be an evangelist, shepherd, teacher, or administrator? Recently a pastor told me that one of his elders attacked him for using sports illustrations. While some parishioners identify with sports and sports figures, others disconnect their auditory nerve at the mere mention of them. While the church parking lot hums like a beehive with diverse opinions, a pastor and his wife may wonder, *Will all of this buzz eventually sting our children and steer them away from the church or even God?*

Add to this the immeasurable nature of pastoral work. Bottom lines such as bodies, bucks, and buildings are not necessarily trustworthy indicators of faithful service. While visible results are encouraging, they are not always an accurate barometer of a minister's character or worth. Jesus told the disciples: "*Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor*" (John 4:37-39). Some pastors cultivate spiritually hard soil faithfully for years only to have others enjoy the harvest. If the pastor does not discover "*the peace of God, which transcends all understanding*" (Philippians 4:7) the weighty call of God may feel like an inescapable trap slamming down on him or her.

This is not God's intent. Burnout or breakdown is not necessary. Pastors can escape the apparent bondage of ministry without leaving the ministry.

RELEASE FROM MINISTRY BONDAGE

Ministers must recognize the obvious: even God rested from his work (Genesis 2:2). If the compassionate Creator rested, it follows that he would grant his creatures a break as well. The truth is he does not simply grant it, he commands it (Exodus 20:8-11). Seeing that God rested from his work and commands a weekly rest, the pastor should at least give himself the permission to rest.

Ministers must understand clearly that the people whom they serve are not their personal property. Peter reminds pastors to "Be shepherds of God's flock" (I Peter 5:2). A possessive attitude by the people in ministry eventually gives birth to an obsessive attitude toward the work of the ministry. Congregations belong to God. Unless ministers wrongfully add to the troubles of the flock, church problems are not a minister's personal problems. They must make the distinction between God as the owner of the flock and themselves as stewards. As stewards of the flock, pastors

patiently bear the burdens of troubled people (Romans 15:1-3), without making them their own.

Pastors must also go through the act of releasing their personal and pastoral cares to the Lord. Before that is likely to happen, humility must replace the bondage of pride cultivated by *this is my church* notions. Humility is a prerequisite to releasing cares; therefore the imperative *humble yourselves* is the main phrase of I Peter 5:5-7:

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

After addressing shepherds Peter instructs young men to humble themselves and cast their cares upon the one who cares for them. It is assumed the elders or shepherds had adopted the practice of surrendering concerns before being appointed to their shepherding tasks. Unfortunately most contemporary pastors have only an intellectual understanding of this practice. It took years of bearing unnecessary burdens of anxiety before I discovered the *transfer of crushing weight* the late J. Oswald Sanders described:

Anxiety implies “distraction of mind and heart in view of conflicting emotions.” But the undershepherd need have no fear that the cares of his flock of God will be too heavy for him. By a definite act of mind and will, he can transfer the crushing weight of his spiritual burdens to the powerful shoulders of the God who cares.⁵⁰

Cares will become sleep stealers if they are not released. Of greater concern, anxious pastors and parishioners alike become easy prey for the

roaring lion to single out. In the context of releasing concerns, the Apostle Peter refers to the adversary: “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (I Peter 5:8).

As I see it Peter connects failure to release concerns with being vulnerable to Satan’s schemes. If Satan cannot distract God’s servants into careless attitudes about ministries, he will drive them out into the open with anxiety about performing ministries well. It is the anxious that succumb to the lion’s dreadful roar. Driven by fear they spring into the open like panicky prey about to be pounced on by a devouring lion. Both parishioner and pastor are apt to become flushed prey for the evil one. The consequences of not releasing concerns can be disastrous.

THE SABBATH-CONCEPT IS FOR EVERYONE

During my twenty-five years of serving churches, I often heard from churched and unchurched people alike: “You’re a pastor? Wow! You have a hard job.” At the time I didn’t think my job was harder than most. Looking back I am more aware of the joys of serving local churches. I am also acutely aware of the heartaches endured by those pastors I now shepherd. But there are many hard jobs in our society. Everyone bears a load.

While I have focused on release for ministers, the Sabbath-concept is for everyone. My undergraduate degree is in music education, specifically string instruments. Tuning the violins of beginning students is not exactly my idea of making music. Nor does teaching general music to eighth graders satisfy my musical tastes. Other than a little student teaching, I never taught music in a school system. I don’t envy school teachers today.

I have already described how my great grandfather and grandfather strained themselves with physical work; and how my father’s health broke down on

the road while driving a truck. As I observe truck drivers at my corporate chaplaincy job, I feel they are the most unappreciated servants in our society. After spending a lifetime behind the wheel of an eighteen wheeler, many die prematurely from the consequences of obesity. Typically only a handful of relatives and childhood friends show up at their funerals. Being on the road week after week limits their development of close friendships and diminishes most hometown relationships. Drivers of passenger cars do not appreciate having to share the roads with the big rigs. “You’re going too fast; you’re driving too slow; you’re blocking the road—get out of my way!” When they need to stop they are told, “You can’t park here.” Yet it is the truck driver who often stops to help out a motorist with a broken-down car. The truth is everything we purchase in stores has been delivered by a truck even if it was loaded from a ship, train, or plane.

Likewise, it is not easy to be an executive or owner of a company. Many were surprised when I left for seminary instead of sliding into a position already made for me within the family company. It was not that difficult, given the call of God on my life and the fact that I had seen the strain of a family business from the inside. My dad’s life was honorable, but not easy.

The hardest situation of all belongs to the single mom who gets her children ready for daycare or school every morning. After she comes home from a long day at work the children are priority. She cooks supper, helps with homework, washes clothes, and gives baths. Life is tough!

Everyone has concerns to release. If we don’t learn to release them, sooner or later we feel like life has been squeezed out of us by a boa constrictor. Bearing burdens of concern is a suffocating bondage.

Learning to release my concerns to the God I know as always good and great has freed me from many forms of bondage. Through much of my life I have been captive to worry and anxiety; I cannot manage either. I must

release them. Release became a reality when I began practicing a weekly Sabbath. Doing so during daily quiet times did not satisfy. I needed more than drive-through devotionals to get to the core of what was making me anxious. I needed time to review my life after releasing my concerns, which I will cover in the next chapter. When I began entering Sabbath experiences I had no idea of how compatible a practice of release was with the Sabbath concept.

With pad and pen I would list all my concerns. Nothing was too small. Personal fears, family problems, ministry challenges were all recorded. Each time I would begin a sentence with the phrase, “I release to you, Lord....” Each act of release was an admission of my lack of control, ability, or power to do enough to solve any problem. Release became a form of relief, but not a form of irresponsibility. Marva J. Dawn, in her insightful book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, concurs that a weekly Sabbath practice is relief and not irresponsible.

At this point you might be thinking that it doesn’t do any good to set worries aside for just a day. If we merely run away from them, they will be there to bother us the day after the Sabbath. Before I began to practice Sabbath keeping seriously, I too thought that would be the case. On the contrary, I’ve discovered that the longer I enjoy Sabbaths, the very customs of that day give me not only refreshment, which makes the tension much less powerful in the days that follow, but also new perspectives, new priorities, and a new sense of God’s presence, which all cause the tensions themselves to assume a less hostile shape during the week to come. The Sabbath is not a running away from problems, but the opportunity to receive grace to face them.⁵¹

Releasing my concerns to God has had untold positive effects on my life. I can relax and think more clearly. I can see a distinction between my part and God’s part. In my journal, I record anything I could realistically do to

help the situations I had released to the Lord. I would also state what only God could do as a prayer. For instance, I could comfort a person in the hospital with a visit, words, Scriptures, and prayer, but I could not heal anyone. That would be up to God. I would pray that he heal the person and use medical professionals as he saw fit, but I would not pretend to be more than I was—his humble and available servant. Much of worry is a matter of playing God, attempting to fill God’s big role while neglecting my humble part.

Once anxieties are released, one is able to think objectively. A person can now distinguish between what is the responsibility of God and what is personal responsibility. A list of alternatives can be made for action. A prayer list can be made for intercession or supplication with thanksgiving: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Eventually I began to date the original release statements as well as identifiable answers to prayers. Some would call this a prayer list. But it was essential that I begin with the word release, because I was captive to my concerns. With the passing of years more time is spent listing answers than detailed concerns. God is so ready to respond to my needs when I am willing to release them to him.

Releasing my concerns has allowed me to take myself less seriously. There have been plenty of times when I have smiled about past anxieties because they were mere shadows of serious threats. Mark Twain said it well, “I have been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.”

A REFLECTION OF REST

My great-grandfather Victor died broke but blessed. He was described as a calm man who had found peace with God and made peace with man. No one had to say, “God rest his soul” for he had already found rest.

Mathilda outlived Victor by thirty-two years and never remarried. I frequently visited my grandparents during my childhood, and on occasion Mathilda was with them. She was tall, thin, and frail. Her Swedish brogue and withered vocal cords made it almost impossible to understand her when she spoke. Half of what she said was probably in Swedish anyway. What I do remember is that she was a reflection of rest, sitting for hours in her rocking chair. Poor and fatherless in childhood, despised by her in-laws for marrying Victor, crossing the Atlantic in hope of a new home in the new land, logging, farming, raising eight children, suffering bankruptcy, Victor’s death, and being a widow for thirty-two years was her life, all ninety-three years of it. Somehow she was able to release it all to God and reflect his rest.

Prayer

Lord, I release my many concerns to you, knowing that you care for me and can carry my burdens farther than I can. I trust you to do in and through my life what only you can do, as I trust you to show me my part and what I can do. In Jesus’ name and for his sake I pray, Amen.

Questions to Ponder

1. Have I ever worked or worried myself into a physical, emotional, or mental breakdown?
2. Do I need to be released from any form of bondage?
3. Do I need to begin releasing my concerns right now?

4. Am I able to distinguish between my part and God's part in response to what concerns me?
5. When and where is my first or next Sabbath-rest for releasing my concerns?

See Appendix, Part I (p. 269) for the exercise on releasing concerns.

Chapter 8

Sabbath-Rest, A Time to Review

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

(Psalm 139:23-24)

When I was young, I set out to change the world. When I grew older, I perceived that this was too ambitious so I set out to change my state. This too, I realized as I grew older was too ambitious, so I set out to change my town. When I realized I could not even do this, I tried to change my family. Now as I am an old man, I know that I should have started with myself. If I had started with myself, maybe I would have succeeded in changing my family, the town or even the state—and who knows, maybe even the world!

(The words of an old Hasidic rabbi on his deathbed)⁵²

The longer I live the harder it is to look in the mirror, so I spend less time doing it. Not that I was ever enamored by what I saw in years past. It's just that gray hair and wrinkles are reminders that time on earth is running out. There is more to do in less time.