

# French Resting

When the Sabbath is Biohacked

*“God gave me the gospel and a horse. I’ve killed the horse, so I can no longer preach the gospel.”*

Robert Murray McCheyne

In the 1700’s the French developed a different calendar in a futile attempt to scrub any residue of God from how we divide time. Occurring during the French Revolution when sanitizing culture from God, they cooked up what is called the French Revolutionary Calendar. The main things we’d all notice immediately is the months have different names. The new month also had ten days in the week instead of seven. They were fascinated with the number ten, which is why this time period is also when we inherited the metric system. This only lasted around 12 years however because Napoleon thought it was dumb and quashed it, returning back to our current calendar. One of the primary aversions to the new calendar was the amount of days *off* of work. They went from no less than 52 days of recovery a year to around 35. That’s over a 40% reduction in recovery time and workers were getting burned out, overworked, over fatigued...and grumpy. They revolted and things went back to normal. Unfortunately for us all the metric system stayed.

The moral to this history lesson is that God knew best what we’d need regarding rest. When we try to biohack this, we burn out. This French calendar only lasted 12 short years, but for sick leaders, it’s still hanging on the wall. We are tempted to operate on the French’s busted up and cobwebbed calendar. Only 56% of polled pastors regularly take one day each week. 21% confessed they take zero days off.<sup>1</sup> Even if you aren’t uber disciplined in reserving a day of sabbath rest every week, I hope you can at least admit working everyday with no retreat isn’t helping your health.

So far, we’ve been focused on how the body’s rhythms work during the day when under load. We’ve seen that God created particular rhythms, like circadian and ultradian rhythms to govern our activity and rest. Cooperating

and trusting in these God designed rhythms with gospel motivations leads us to resilient leadership. Now I'd like to pan out and look at our macro-rhythms. How we rest weekly, seasonally, annually, and even beyond that speaks to how we see our finiteness and how our rest honors God's capability. It's time to put the broken calendar away.

## Weekly Rest

It's not really the goal of this book to lay down a lengthy apologetic on what and where the sabbath ought to be in our lives, but I will submit that it's a Biblical imperative that ought to be honored. I hear too often that we were liberated from the bondage of a sabbath rule in our life, but the cross and vacant grave doesn't nullify the gift of the sabbath to us, *it focuses and recalibrates it*. If you differ in how you perceive the sabbath day, I still challenge you to look into what I'm saying before you exit. Even if your theology differs from mine, thanks to science, and the car wreck that was the French calendar, I hope to change your mind.

I'm totally convinced that leaders don't take a day of rest because the work isn't done yet. But can we all be honest for a minute? The work will never be done. Not if you're doing it right. If you finally get to the bottom of your To Do list, then you have missed the mark somewhere. Broken people and broken cities will always keep our lists flush. We don't rest because we run out of things to do and get bored, but because we'll never run out of things to do. We need God to replenish, remind, and recalibrate our hearts as we employ our effort for his glory.

Consider the context of the sabbath when the Jewish nation received it as a gift. Not only did they work six days and rest on the seventh, but they even rested the land. There was certainly work that could have been done, but a picture was being illustrated of God's people resting in the arms of a sufficiently active God. Later this would come into full focus as Jesus worked and plowed for us so that we'd enjoy an eternal sabbath in him. Jesus is our sabbath rest. DeYoung relates it similarly, "The observance of this mandate is a day of commemoration of God's creative rest, a celebration that Christ has entered that rest, that believers have begun to enter such rest, and a pointing

forward to believers completely entering that rest.”<sup>2</sup> Simply, we’re a sabbath people who have a gift of sabbath rest we get to celebrate.

Again, I’m not going to get into a slap fight over whether this ought to be on Sunday or Saturday, but I hope you see that the Creational mandate of the sabbath agrees with what the French found out the hard way - we need rest and we need it *often*. He made the sabbath for man, not man for the sabbath.<sup>3</sup> He did this because man needs it. We will burn out if we place industriousness ahead of honoring God’s wiring in us. If I’m more fascinated in my work than God’s, then I’m aiming for a rocky coastline in my health. With an eroding trust in Jesus’ peace, I will shipwreck my leadership health. If I am fascinated with God’s work however, then it will require acknowledging I’m carved out of dust and require recovery.

Additionally, consider that your “day off” is not always a very good sabbath. Sometimes a day off is just another day of work in a different garden. Trading staff meetings for broken toilet plumbing. Replacing the mouse and keyboard for the water pump on the family van. Even off days spent on the lake may be more tiring than the workday you left the day before. Recall in past chapters how leisure isn’t work, but it also isn’t always rest. I personally long for the off days where I can sit and rest and watch at least one half of a good college football game, run a trail where I won’t see anyone, pray, catch up on some reading, destroy my kids in whatever game still works on the Wii, etc... Those days are full of rest mingled with a bit of leisure. I’m not fixing, solving, or being taxed. I’m simply day off-ing. I’ve also had off days where I’ve hiked in the sun for over six or seven miles with grumpy girls or spent the day at Dollywood.<sup>4</sup> Those days have me coming home more wiped out than any workday. That was a day off, *but not a suitable rest day*.

I’m drawing a distinction between resting and day off-ing because too many will take a day off that exhausts and consider it a sabbath rest day. Wrong. If you enter the next day still emotionally wonky from the day off, it may have been a day off, but it most certainly wasn’t a restful day. On weeks like that, you’d be wise to take an *extra* day, or a couple half days. Predictably, I get push back here due to the reduction in scheduled work time that leaves leaders, but remember, *rest is more than not working*. Rest resets us for better and more creative work. It’s multiplication by subtraction. You’ll get more done in less time as you cooperate with how God has engineered your biology.

Be especially discerning on heavy weeks where the day off is also abnormally intense. On those weeks, be diligent to create space to rest in God. For example, my rest day is Monday and my day off is typically Saturday. If my Saturday is very restful and I have a lot of flex where I can steer it, then I may choose to work a bit on Monday afternoon. Right now however we're in a home remodel, so Saturdays are full of flooring, demolition, installation, and a billion trips to Lowe's because I got the wrong thing. Those days aren't restful at all, but wear me down. I'll be needing that Monday after all. Too many leaders self congratulate themselves on working six days and checking the "rest" box because they take Saturday off. Maybe, maybe not. It depends on how taxing that Saturday is.

If my Saturday wasn't too taxing, I'll *still* be careful as to what *kind* of work I'm doing on Monday. Afterall, Sunday was just yesterday and I still have the residue from it. If you lead or preach on Sundays and enjoy it like I do, you are unarguably still in need of rest. It's useless to try and convince yourself that Sunday is your sabbath rest if you are a preacher/teacher. You might as well be a Dallas Cowboy and try to convince people that game day is restful. Your body is being popped emotionally and cognitively as much as any athlete and more than most.<sup>5</sup> You may remember from an earlier chapter my self experimentation while preaching. The goal was to analyze the effects and emotional load on the nervous and endocrine system of a common Sunday preacher. Measuring heart rate, heart rate variability, cortisol response, and blood pressure before, during, and after the service. I was certainly able to see a "fight or flight" signature.<sup>6</sup> Even though I enjoyed the work, the eustress and distress cocktail from Sunday required a commensurate rest. Sabbath rest isn't archaic and optional to leaders hunting resilience. Not only do we see Biblical wisdom and care in this recalibrating celebration, we see that our work - *even the work that energizes us* - is stretching our biochemistry to the point it requires recovery.

I've tried many different variations of rest/work when it comes to the weekend, and I keep finding fruit in a restful family day on Saturday (where I'm predominantly day off-ing), working hard on Sunday, and taking Monday at whatever pace makes sense given the preceding Saturday. If Saturday was taxing, I'm going to rest totally on Monday. If Saturday was mostly restful, I'll enter work on Monday at some point, typically around the middle of the day. Even then, the type of work is radically lighter. I bubble wrap myself on

Mondays because I'm still not quite ready to be spread thin. Dr. Archibald Hart, an expert in the effects of stress on the leader explains, "I advise pastors to work on Mondays, but to use that day to do low-energy or routine activities. It's the time to tidy your desk, throw out the trash or do some filing...It's not a time to pick a fight, go hassle those who annoy you, make a critical decision or deal with difficult budget problems. If you get your adrenaline up again, you may feel all right, but you'll rob your body of rest and recuperation."<sup>7</sup> Mondays will be the day I get caught up on my lighter entrepreneurial work, reading, studying, and other tasks I can do with low emotional deposit. My assistant and other leaders however know that I am not accessible on that day and my phone is either off or in a mode where only particular calls can get through. This allows me to holistically process Sunday and yield better leadership Tuesday through Friday.

When we act French and try to hack the work/rest rhythm, we are recruiting damage and sickness. No one burns out for skipping a rest day, but everyone burns out if they skip a big bucket of rest days. If you're not building these wisely into your calendar and guarding them, you'll see linearity and health that's deteriorating. When you think about it, you're preaching with your calendar and your message is "God's work wasn't enough and he isn't strong or good enough so I need to stay clocked in." Even Martin Luther struggled here. Biographer Roland Bainton notes Luther's struggle to retreat from work, "I did not want to come here," Luther wrote, "I wanted to be in the fray." And again regarding rest, "I had rather burn on live coals than rot here."<sup>8</sup> Bainton goes on to list out Luther's medical report to include gems like constipation, anxiety, poor nutrition, and insomnia. Most would agree that he accomplished volumes in his life, and we'd further agree that God worked greatly through him, and yet even this giant among men struggled with resting.

## Monthly Rest

Towards the end of King George V's reign he was asked what he would do if he could do anything. He quickly answered that he'd, "...take his biggest car and drive and drive as far as it would take him. There he would find a little farmhouse, and in the farmhouse there would be a small, clean, whitewashed room, furnished only with a bed and an open fire. He would lie

down on the bed, and lying so, alone in the small, clean room, he would look at the glowing coals of the fire, and the flames playing blue about them— and so he would rest. For once in a royal lifetime he would rest.”<sup>9</sup> I think we all get George. He’s describing an unhurried place that is different and inaccessible. My kingdom is much smaller than George’s, but I need to take a day or two every so often and create space to move slowly, be inaccessible, and out of my typical context.

As mentioned earlier, I keep a hammock in my truck next to my trail shoes. I also have a sort of “go box” full of what I’d need to camp for a couple days and nights if I needed to leave quickly. Once every five-six weeks or so, I make use of the mountains and streams around me. I even named my hammock King George because staring at a campfire ends up being one of the more spiritual and therapeutic things I get to do. Of all the changes I kicked against, this wasn’t one of them. I’ve simply profited too much from it. I leave behind all media, hanging To Do list items, and unreturned phone calls. Retreating to the mountains where I can square my shoulders with the beauty of God, I rest. This has been such a game changer for me that my wife makes sure these days are put in my calendar a year in advance.

During the spring, summer, and early fall I camp. In the late fall, winter, and early spring months I find a cabin. I bring as little as possible and may even fast during most of these retreats, which makes them easier to slip in and out of. The whole goal is to get alone - gain perspective - be unhurried - untouchable - and rest. Sometimes I read a book that happens to be timely, sometimes I journal. Often I use a personal assessment that is designed for my temperament and weaknesses. This spiritual discipline has radically shifted my leadership health and I cannot recommend it enough.

I’ve personalized my self-assessment to specifications, knowing where I can skid off track and where my personal danger zones are. This means I’m innovating the assessment often, adding or taking away prompts as I change over time. It’s purposefully a work in progress, like a living document. I also handwrite everything because I’m often in places where a laptop would just ruin it all. When going through this assessment, I always take my time. I’m never in a hurry and may not even finish. There have been times where I never make it past the halfway mark. The goal for me is to take a deep breath, defragment, and get my swing back.<sup>10</sup> I’ll list some of my prompts, but suggest you make your own to reflect you.

A *hotspot* is what distance runners call the discomfort that comes just before a blister. Pre-blister, the skin gets pretty hot, but can be easy to miss. They develop in key areas of friction and if you don't address them by tying your shoes differently, changing socks, or applying a lubricant (yes, there is lubricant for feet), they bloom into impressive blisters. As I retreat into these deep moments, I'm hoping to keep hotspots from becoming blisters. Both my wife and leadership team can tell when I've had these times. I'm rested and leading with a full tank.

Here are some examples of my assessment prompts. After answering the initial question, I always follow with "why?" and then end with (1) what I can do to see change and (2) how I can pray right now. As you drive your life into healthy resiliency, I hope you enjoy this exercise as I have.

- What have been some recent examples of God's grace on my life?
- How accurately have I seen God recently? Where have I perceived him wrongly?
- How has my confidence been lately before God in prayer and worship?
- How's my dominion over electronics and media?
- How has the purity of my eye gate been recently?
- How has my connection to my wife been recently?
- How has my discipling of my individual kids been lately?
- How have I handled my mouth lately?
- How has my discipline been regarding my schedule and time?
- Has my energy been spent in the proper places?
- How has my delegation been lately?

- What's filling my tank? What's draining it?
- How has my personal study, sabbath, and times of solitude been?
- How has my sermon and teaching prep/delivery been lately?
- What sins have been the hardest for me lately?
- How has my health and energy level been lately?
- How has my sleep been lately?
- How has my stewardship of wealth been lately?
- Who has sinned against me and how am I responding to them?
- Where should I be seeking wisdom currently?
- Are there any early warning signs of burnout?
- How honest have I been lately with myself, and is there any self-deception I am accommodating for?
- How has my writing been lately (journaling, blogging, personal study)?
- Where am I being a coward currently?
- What is my biggest fear currently?
- How have I been in preaching the gospel to myself? Kids? Wife?
- What opportunities are overwhelming me currently?
- What am I currently expecting that only God can do?
- What decisions am I avoiding because of the "fear of failure?"

This isn't a time you're escaping, but investing in the future of your leadership. London and Wiseman speak to this in their book, *Pastors at Greater Risk*, and they happen to agree with the leadership hygiene that these

monthly pauses produce. After their research they comment, “We think a pastor should establish a practice of getting away for a whole day once a month to a quiet place where he does nothing but read the Bible and think about personal spiritual growth. This isn’t time away from ministry but time that feeds ministry.”<sup>11</sup> I understand “personal spiritual growth” is a wide category, but times like this are best spent examining our emotional awareness (EQ) and how we’re currently interacting with God and others. When it comes to emotions, we don’t really set the agenda. You need uninterrupted time to consider deeply what you’re unable to in the frenetic pace of leadership. If you neglect this valuable time, the emotions don’t really pass by, but dig deep. They stack like in layers and erupt later. Developing emotional intelligence escapes the scope of this book, but make no mistake, exploring your cluttered emotional self in times of retreat is far better than seeing it all reveal itself improperly later during burnout.

I can already hear your push-back and see your smirk. “Soooo I’m supposed to leave my wife with the kids?”, “How can I afford that?”, “Not everyone lives in the mountains.” Sabbath moments? Sure. Sabbath days? Okay. Even Sabbaticals get a pass, but for too many, this periodic retreat seems unnecessary. I felt the same way at first, but when I returned from my first two-dayer my wife immediately noticed the shift in me. In fact, she became the biggest supporter of these trips. *“I’d much rather have you gone one or two days per month if I get this upgraded version of you when you’re here!”* The leaders around me agree, which leads me to the next point. The expenses for this are firmly in our church’s budget. Right under “Pastoral Retreat,” everything from the gas to the firewood and cabin rental. It seemed odd to our team to fund my books and conference travels to help me lead better, but not endorse this crucial aspect of leadership health. They know a chunk of my health depends on it.

Not only my health, but my ability to carry vision, creativity, and inspiration is fueled by these periodic trips. My friend, Bubba Jennings spoke with Matt Perman about this in Perman’s work, *What’s Best Next* and also designs these days not just for physical or emotional health, but for the ability to be refreshed and inspired. “If you don’t take time to get outside of your regular rhythms and dream, you’ll never innovate. You need to reinvent your rhythms every so often and block out a day, like a dream day. Look at all the things weighing you down, look at how you can actually get them done or who

you can delegate them to. Look at what rhythms are working and which aren't working. If you don't give yourself the flexibility and freedom to do that as needed, you'll burn yourself out."<sup>12</sup> Jennings is right, remember that one of the key symptoms of burnout is feeling distant, unmotivated and uninspired. The raw truth is the longer you remain in the same place doing the same basic thing, the more you'll have to *work* at staying inspired and engaged. Gallup found that after six months doing the same thing, only 38% of employees remained engaged, but after three years the figure drops to 22%.<sup>13</sup> You need to retreat for health, but you also need to retreat for a refreshed heart and mind to continue faithful leadership. This is what it means to be resilient.

I know that not everyone has paradise in their backyard. I grew up in dusty West Texas so I know how much of a pilgrimage it can be to get somewhere impressive so let me repeat: the goal isn't to go somewhere *exotic*, but to get somewhere *else*. Even if it was the Holiday Inn in the neighboring town or a friend's house when they're gone. Recalibrate your surroundings away from familiarity. When you skip this step, you end up opening jars and killing bugs for the girls, picking up the phone, and slipping into your everyday routine. Stay put and you'll be too easily reclaimed by the average environment.

On a practical note, I typically leave for these 1-2 day retreats *right after I preach*. I take off the mic, slip out the back door and am in the mountains in 45 minutes. This allows me to leverage my Sunday afternoons, gives me a full Monday, and allows me to return on Tuesday. I have found that this spread of time creates enough space for me. Another day feels too long and eats up too much of the week, but any shorter and I end up feeling rushed. You may need a different format, but beware of locating them so that you're tempted to prepare a sermon while away. Or even worse, turn your retreat *into* a sermon - don't do that. Whatever the format, *unrushed time elsewhere* is the essential ingredient. Brennan Manning says it best, "It takes time for the water to settle. Coming to interior stillness requires waiting. Any attempt to hasten the process only stirs up the water anew."<sup>14</sup>

## Annual Resting

Scaling outward towards longer moments and days of rest, you'll immediately notice the rise in the need to intentionally plan and invest. Don't be overly concerned of the increase in investment. A leader who isn't getting away annually is a pastor who may save money and time short term, but pays a heavier long term price tag in unrelenting fatigue and dreams of quitting. I'm specifically talking about taking *vacations* and annual spiritual *retreats* here.

It's unfortunate that I have to comment on ministry leaders scheduling a vacation, but 63% of ministry leaders indicate that they don't take sufficient vacations each year.<sup>15</sup> Many grab a quick "day or two here or there," or plop an extra day on the back of a work trip and call it a vacation day to little effect. Although I'm a big fan of making use of conveniently placed days of rest around trips or holidays, it can't add up to the time you really need. Taking two or three weeks off at a time is more valuable than taking equivalent time broken up over the span of a year. Just as we just saw Manning say a moment ago, water takes a while to settle down and there is no good way to rush it.

It takes a few days of vacation to even realize you're on vacation and the last couple days are spent thinking about what's waiting upon return. In other words, a two week vacation is really closer to nine or ten days. I cannot recommend too highly taking as much vacation as your ministry or church allows, placing it *all in a row*. If you're a teaching and preaching pastor, I'd also suggest you take a month off of your preaching roster. I've done this for the last several years and it's been powerfully refreshing. Not the same thing as a sabbatical or retreat, it still frees up an inordinate amount of time and removes the deadline of Sunday morning. It's amazing how much RAM is freed up to rest, get caught up on reading, leave town, or work on things that fill your tank and bring refreshment to you. Access the bullpen around you (or build one) and give those leaders opportunities to serve. When I do this in the deep summer, I'm able to stay at a 30,000 ft cruising altitude where I can examine who we are and where we're going.

I'm starting to see younger pastors leverage their sermon load in summers which is refreshing and makes sense. July, especially in college towns or larger metro areas, is a great time to do this. I've even noticed how some leaders will attend other congregations on Sundays during that month to be encouraged without the temptation to clock back in. This is especially helpful for those preachers and teachers who are unable to afford a true

sabbatical. In church plants or young ministries a sabbatical may be a bit tougher to come by as it requires so much in the way of expense and leadership capital. Sabbaticals aren't impossible in church plants, just more difficult. A month of no preaching every year until the church can carry a sabbatical is an innovative answer.

## Sabbaticals

So it's 2017 as I write this and we have a new president in the White House, which means we also have an ex-president on vacation. A long one. Seeing pictures of him relaxing after a long hard job reminded me of another president, Teddy Roosevelt. I've read a few of his biographies and it's often recorded that after every tough campaign or presidential term, you'd find Theodore hunting elephants in Africa or exploring jungles in South America. It was his thing. It'd take him forever to get over there and forever to get back, and he'd spend copious time tromping through God's country or stalking large game. I'm going to call that his *sabbatical* in a certain sense. He wasn't quitting public service, but knew he'd need a moment to collect himself so he could return with durability and vision. As we zoom out even further, we come to the rest we should find every several years.

As a young church, we're presently looking to build out my first sabbatical. I have to admit; the thought of it frightens me. Everyone I know who has traveled through a true Sabbatical considers it both the greatest and hardest thing they've done. Some even exit these long rests deciding not to enter the same position or role again. I understand that isn't the best endorsement to those already unsure of their future. For many, the sabbatical is equally parts frightening and enchanting. For the burned out leader, or one who has already wrestled burnout, the sabbatical must be a serious consideration, not a mythological artifact.

Wayne Cordeiro handles this last part of scalable rest well and I highly recommend reading his thoughts on taking sabbaticals if you're considering one. He wisely suggests a third of a sabbatical to be spent reinforcing education through extra reading, conferences, maybe even a college class. "Congregational life, technology, and societal norms change rapidly, and the educational opportunities a sabbatical provides ensure that the leadership and

the congregation do not end up in a slow, downward spiral to obsolescence.”<sup>16</sup> This allows the leader to fly at the entrepreneurial level by “futuring” and expanding their breadth of knowledge. This can be both exciting and refreshing and carries no obligations to implement it on the spot.

Also, according to Cordeiro, the remainder of a sabbatical is wisely spent in rest and recreation. I’ve witnessed friends employ something similar. They’ll traffic in continuing education for things they happen to be interested in, and the rest of the time they do whatever they want that isn’t work. I have one friend who revisited his Greek and did an exhaustive work through the book of John - when he wasn’t sailing a small boat. I heard of another leader on sabbatical that spent time learning how to make guitars. Another hiked a chunk of the Appalachian Trail. You get the picture.

What makes a Sabbatical efficacious isn’t just doing what you want, or brushing up in a class or two, it’s the copious time allowed to do those things. In fact, most who go on a true Sabbatical talk of how uncomfortable the amount of time was, which is indicative of a workaholic in deep need of retreat. For your biology, vision, inspiration and creativity to charge back up, it needs more of a low drip slow trickle charge. This cannot be done over a long weekend or even a vacation. It cannot be rushed.

This firmly fits a principle we’ve been majoring on to this point: the time on sabbatical must be commensurate to the amount of energy spent and damage done. If you’ve not been carried off the field in a stretched with heavy endocrine and neurological degradation, maybe three months is responsible. If you’re under heavy medical/health and wellness supervision and are likely to quit or can’t leave the bed, maybe a year is more responsible. This is something for your surrounding leadership team and spouse to speak into heavily, because you’ll likely want to short change the duration due to feeling indispensable.

Some submit that a sabbatical should only occur after seven years of leadership. I would concur, but mainly because it takes approximately that long to get an endeavor (ministry, church plant, replant, etc...) to cruising altitude. I also see wisdom in long-term or tenured leaders scheduling a repetitive sabbatical every seven years thereafter. Some naysayers might react with: *“I do not understand why pastors and certain leaders need a sabbatical. I don’t get one.”* It bears repeating something I mentioned earlier, ministry leaders rarely take a sabbath or day off, and most put in an 8-12 hour

days on Sundays. In the marketplace, most workers get at least a two-day weekend. Added to that, most employees in the secular marketplace get around six long weekends a year due to national holidays. This means they have paid time off from late Friday afternoon until Tuesday morning— six times a year. If you were to add up all the long weekend, holidays, sick days, vacation days, and any other paid time off over a seven years span you'll get - you guessed it - about what a responsible leader will end up taking in a true sabbatical. It's just math.

I hope you see the oscillation between work and rest something that God has designed to celebrate his work for us. It's as if he embedded a piece of his gospel story even into our finite capacities. "The death mark of the believer is deep restfulness. Jesus knew God would fulfill His work. As the believer advances he learns to rest perfectly in his God."<sup>17</sup> Even as Andrew Murray says this, I can feel the blood pressure and anxiety wane. God has built us to work, and he has built us to rest - and both glorify him brilliantly. Recovering in the middle of your days, weeks, months, years, and long seasons is a celebration of God's gospel, and when we honor it, it creates resilience in us. As leaders, we can work harder when we work, and rest confidently knowing our rest is more than just not working. If you're interested in avoiding burnout, or are attempting to come out of burnout, you must find rest, find it often, and do it to the glory of God!