

SABBATH

Megan
Hill

EDITED BY WINFREE BRISLEY



DISCIPLINES OF DEVOTION

REST

“The Disciplines of Devotion series is a timely and valuable resource for women who long to grow in spiritual depth and maturity. With biblical insight and godly wisdom, each volume offers practical help for cultivating habits that lead us closer to Christ. I’m thankful for this series and eager to see how God will use it to strengthen and encourage the hearts of women.”

Melissa B. Kruger, author; Vice President of
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“These gospel-centered primers are saturated with scriptures that nourish the delight of knowing Christ. The accessible content, coupled with practical ideas and heart-oriented application questions, invites the reader to draw near to God through cultivating Spirit-empowered holy habits.”

Karen Hodge, Coordinator of Women’s Ministries,
Presbyterian Church in America; coauthor, *Transformed:
Life-Taker to Life-Giver* and *Life-Giving Leadership*

Sabbath Rest

Disciplines of Devotion

Edited by Winfree Brisley

Fasting, by Cassie Achermann

Prayer, by Courtney Reissig

Sabbath Rest, by Megan Hill

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Sabbath Rest

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*For Evelyn, child of the covenant.
May you always call the Sabbath a delight (Isa. 58:13).*

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Series Preface

ON A CHILLY JANUARY MORNING, two friends and I huddled around a coffee shop table to share life updates and prayer requests. One friend reflected on the previous year with frustration: “I feel like I didn’t accomplish anything.” The other friend and I, surprised by her assessment, rattled off a long list of worthwhile things she had done. But she persisted. It wasn’t that she truly believed she had accomplished nothing; it was that the things she had done weren’t the things she had hoped to do. Things she valued had been pushed aside by what seemed more urgent in the moment.

I could say the same, and I bet you could too. As women living in a do-it-all culture, we tend to

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have a lot on our plates. We juggle work, husbands, children, aging parents, and friends. We manage households, serve in the church, and volunteer in the community. Year after year, many of our goals and good intentions get pushed to the back burner—especially when it comes to spiritual growth.

We want to grow in relationship with the Lord. We want to know the Bible better, fight sin, and establish a consistent prayer life. But amid all the things we have to do, we often miss the one thing we really need. In Psalm 27:4 David said,

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

As king, David surely had many things to do and many things he might have asked of God. But he knew that what he most needed was to dwell with

the Lord. Similarly, Jesus explained to Martha in Luke 10:41–42 that she was “anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.” What was the one thing? Sitting at his feet, listening to his teaching.

As you consider your relationship with the Lord, are you more like David or Martha? Are you *devoted* or *distracted*? I suspect that many of us would admit that we identify with Martha’s distraction but also long for David’s devotion. So how can we grow in devotion to God in a world of endless distractions?

We see from both David and Martha that a life devoted to the Lord won’t happen by accident. David resolved to seek after God’s presence. Jesus suggested that Martha needed to sit down and listen. You see, discipline helps us grow in devotion.

In fact, throughout history Christians have used spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and Bible study to seek the Lord and grow in relationship with him. If the phrase “spiritual disciplines” sounds intimidating, don’t worry! It simply means practices

that promote spiritual growth.¹ And these practices can help you draw near to God whether you're a new believer or have been walking with the Lord for decades.

Perhaps the idea of cultivating a life of devotion to the Lord is new or confusing, and you don't know where to start. You have faith in Christ, but you're trying to figure out what it looks like to grow in relationship with him.

Or maybe you're going through the motions of spending time with God, but if you're honest, he feels distant. You want the Holy Spirit to warm your affections for the things of God and restore the joy of your salvation.

Or perhaps you have a vibrant relationship with the Lord, but you'd like to learn new ways to seek him. You've been wanting to try fasting or you'd like to learn about Sabbath rest.

Whatever your situation, the *Disciplines of Devotion* series was written for you. Each booklet explores

1 Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Nav-Press, 1991), 17.

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one thing—one practice to cultivate, one spiritual discipline to grow in—to help you draw near to the one true God. In each booklet, you'll gain a biblical understanding of a particular discipline and why it's worth cultivating. And you'll explore three practical ways to get started.

If you'd like to grow in these disciplines alongside other believers, we've included reflection questions to facilitate group discussion. Consider using this series in one-on-one discipleship, with a group of teens, in a neighborhood Bible study, or with a church small group. Also, Christians have a variety of perspectives on these disciplines, so if you'd like to continue your personal study, you can find a list of recommended resources at the end of each booklet.

When you finish this volume, let me encourage you not to set it aside in a pile of good intentions. These booklets can be read in less than an hour, but the disciplines they recommend can help you seek the Lord for a lifetime—even as you go about all the things you have to do.

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Preaching about the “one thing” David desired in Psalm 27:4, Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren observed, “Most of us seem, to our own consciousness, to live amidst endless distractions all our days. . . . But if we are true to the one purpose of serving and keeping near God, then we have a charm against the frittering away of our lives in distractions.”²

The *Disciplines of Devotion* series isn’t about productivity or efficiency or doing less. It’s about pursuing a life of devotion to the Lord in an age of endless distraction. It’s an invitation to “taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8) no matter how much is on your plate.

Winfree Brisley

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2 Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Psalms* (Eerdmans, 1932), 146.

What Is Sabbath Rest?

EVERYONE I KNOW is longing for rest. The teenagers in my life are worn out with studying, extracurriculars, and relational drama. The moms and grandmas are juggling everyone's schedules while squeezing their own tasks into the margins. My coworkers are putting in extra time and marking the days until the next paid holiday. Our alarms get us up early, our to-do lists keep us up late, and each week brings a fresh set of urgent responsibilities. We are tired. The psalmist didn't have text messaging or video calls or car repairs, but he knew the same sense of weariness that we do. "It is in vain that you rise up early and

go late to rest,” he wrote, “eating the bread of anxious toil” (Ps. 127:2). The must-dos and have-tos of life in 900 BC were just as pressing as they are in our day. But, he continued, the Lord “gives to his beloved sleep” (v. 2).

In a lifetime of “anxious toil,” we need a regular reset. Day after day, the tasks just keep coming, and while the Bible affirms the goodness of work, it also acknowledges its frustrations. “In vain” you fold the laundry and do the dishes, only to face a new pile tomorrow. “In vain” you schedule appointments and meet deadlines, only to confront an overflowing inbox next week. We need rest. Thankfully, the psalmist knew where to find it. It’s a gift from “the LORD” (v. 1). And it’s a gift particularly to his people, “his beloved” (v. 2), the ones he has redeemed. As God’s people, we look to the Lord to establish our work and relationships (vv. 1, 3–5), and we look to him to give us periods of rest (v. 2).

So where can we sign up for regular rest from the hand of our gracious God? Where do we receive this gift? We receive it in the Sabbath.

Psalm 127 isn't merely a song about the daily grind and our biological need for eight hours of sleep every night. That's a tune our unbelieving neighbors could sing without regard for the Lord. Psalm 127 is a psalm of ascent, one of the songs Old Testament believers would sing together on their way to worship. These lines about yielding our labor to the Lord and looking to him for refreshment echo the pattern of the Sabbath. They're about more than sleep for the body; they're about respite for the soul.

Leave your anxious toil, beloved ones, and enjoy God's Sabbath rest.

Sabbath's Foundations

The word *Sabbath* may sound curiously old-fashioned. Maybe it's a word you associate only with Moses's Ten Commandments or with laws governing colonial New England. It may seem like a hopelessly dated idea or a harshly Pharisaical one. But *Sabbath* appears throughout both the Old and New Testaments, and Sabbath observance continues to be practiced by believers throughout the world today.

What's more, the Bible consistently presents the Sabbath as the Lord's gift to the weary.

Simply defined, the Sabbath is one day each week that God sets aside for his redeemed people to rest from their daily work in order to worship and enjoy him.

To understand the Sabbath and how the Lord would have us observe it, we need to turn to Scripture. In a brief survey of key passages in the Bible, we'll see that the priority of the Sabbath stretches throughout the story of redemption, from the beginning of time all the way into our eternal future.

Creation (Gen. 2:1–3)

The Christian practice of Sabbath rest has foundations that were laid long before our days of smartphones and remote work. They were laid before the time of Christ and before the time of Moses. They were laid even before “thorns and thistles” sprang up to make our work in a fallen world more toilsome and less rewarding (Gen. 3:18). Sabbath rest has its foundations in creation.

On the seventh day of creation, “God finished his work that he had done, and he rested . . . from all his work that he had done” (Gen. 2:2). Having created the world and everything in it, God rested. And he established that day of rest as a sacred day of blessing going forward: “God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation” (v. 3). Beginning with the first Sabbath in the history of the world, God and all his creation enjoyed holy rest.

Manna (Ex. 16)

In the wilderness, too, God’s people observed the Sabbath. They looked to him to order their work, their worship, and their time. He graciously provided food for them—“bread from heaven”—that they only had to collect and eat (Ex. 16:4). But even the minimal labor of scooping bread into baskets had God-given boundaries of rest: “‘Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none.’ . . . So the people rested on the seventh day” (vv. 26, 30). After creation and

even before the law of Moses, God gave his people “a day of solemn rest” (v. 23).

*Mosaic Law (Ex. 20:8–11;
31:12–17; Deut. 5:12–15)*

At Sinai, when God wrote his law in stone, one of his commandments concerned rest and worship on the Sabbath: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8; cf. Deut. 5:12–15). This commandment has both positive and negative aspects. The people were to “remember” and “keep” the day, doing “all [their] work” on the other days, and they were to “not do any work” and require no work from others on the Sabbath (vv. 8–10). Later, the Lord expanded on his Sabbath command and called it “a covenant forever” for his people to observe “throughout their generations” (Ex. 31:16). Because of the pattern of the Lord’s own day of rest at creation (Ex. 20:11), God’s people rest individually and corporately on the Sabbath from their daily work. As Christopher Watkin explains, “God’s rest [at creation] makes it clear that work is not all there is for God, and we

know from Exodus 20 that he doesn't want it to be all there is for us either."¹

Prophets (Isa. 58:13–14)

The prophets regularly speak about the Sabbath, and Isaiah has one of the most beautiful pictures of the Sabbath in all Scripture. Writing to a people snared by sin and threatened by their enemies, he offered them the joy of God's rest:

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;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride on the heights of
the earth. (Isa. 58:13–14)

1 Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Zondervan Academic, 2022), 79.

Sabbath rest is ordained by God (“my holy day”), directed by God (“not going your own ways”), and blessed by God (“you shall take delight”). When God’s people honor him on this day, he refreshes their souls, making them “ride on the heights of the earth.”

*Jesus (Matt. 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–3:6;
Luke 14:1–6; John 5:1–17)*

Sabbath rest isn’t just an Old Testament practice. In his earthly ministry, Jesus honored the Sabbath day, resting from his daily work and prioritizing corporate worship (Luke 4:16), and his disciples did too (Luke 23:56). He did God’s will on the Sabbath, healing and feeding people and ministering to their souls (Matt. 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–3:6; John 5:1–17). He affirmed the Sabbath’s goodness (Mark 2:27). Additionally, he declared his identity as God by calling himself “lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8). Jesus’s practice of the Sabbath was perfect, and we honor and imitate him when we delight in the day he made for us.

*New Testament Church (Acts 20:7;
1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10)*

With Christ's resurrection on the first day of the week, the Sabbath experienced a shift. Old Testament believers set apart the seventh day, shaping their week in light of creation; New Testament believers set apart the first day, shaping their week in light of the resurrection. "The first day of every week" (1 Cor. 16:2; cf. Acts 20:7) became the day of fellowship and worship—the Christian Sabbath—for God's new covenant people. Even the apostle John, exiled on the island of Patmos, observed the Sabbath. He received his vision of the things to come when he set aside his ordinary tasks and was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10). As God's people celebrate Christ's resurrection and honor his day, we receive his presence and blessing.

Sabbath's Future

Sabbath rest is part of our weekly life now, and it will characterize our life in eternity too. In fact, our practice of Sabbath on this earth anticipates and

prepares for the Sabbath to come. The author of Hebrews connects the Old Testament Sabbath with our Sabbath observance today and then points ultimately to the Sabbath rest of heaven (Heb. 4:1–13). In the new heavens and earth, believers “rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” (Rev. 14:13).

The trajectory of Scripture is not that the Sabbath becomes less important through redemptive history. Rather, it becomes increasingly more important until eventually it becomes all there is—that great, eternal Sabbath rest when God’s people will gather in their Lord’s near presence, cease all their earthly work, and worship him forever (Rev. 7:9–12).

Reflection Questions

1. What has been your past experience with Sabbath rest? Why are you interested in growing in this discipline?
2. Read one of the Scripture passages discussed in this chapter. How does this passage add to your understanding of Sabbath rest?