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| <b>Series:</b><br>Sabbatical  | <b>Reference:</b><br>Various Passages | <b>Title:</b><br>Sabbatical | <b>Date:</b><br>07.23.23 |
| <b>Website Writeup:</b><br>Today we address what's the reason for, and what happens when a pastor takes a sabbatical? |                                       |                             |                          |

A week ago you should've gotten an email from me concerning my upcoming sabbatical.

In that letter I pointed out that starting the first week in August I'll be taking a 3 month sabbatical. A time away to reconnect with God & rediscover God's purpose for a pastors life: a time for rest, renewal & reflection. This is at my request, and not for any problems or issues other than the need to press into these three things for this next phase of my life & ministry.

Concerning sabbatical, Dallas Willard says..."I can state without wavering that the single greatest need of the church today is the restoration of ministers. What is required is a quite different approach to their life & work. It's a matter of leading them into a massive shift of the dynamics of their personality under God - one that cannot be done by more books & conferences. They need to be taken out of circulation for a sufficiently long time to re-vision & re-structure their lives in communion with Jesus & His kingdom."

Healthy churches employ sabbaticals. My former church gives their pastoral staff 3 months every 3 years, and 6 months every 6<sup>th</sup>. Another gives 3-4 months every 7 years for all staff. It's a normal healthy practice for churches to maintain vision & health.

This comes at the advice of good people the Lord has placed around me, not the least of which is my wonderful wife. I will be utilizing a sabbatical coach during this time, and engage in activities which are challenging & life-giving, peppered with spiritually directive elements.

One pastor wrote..."When I took my first sabbatical, I had served for 9 years in a normative sized church. I had no idea how depleted I was. My vision & passion had slowly faded away. I felt completely empty & hollow. I was still leading, but not with the strength, stamina, or enthusiasm of early days. I found myself in a dry & weary land. The church continued to progress, but I was leading on empty. A lack of boundaries, an inability to say no, and always feeling I needed to be working hard led me to this wilderness. God made it clear that if I didn't take a break...I would break."

Another wrote..."I didn't know what to expect when I took a sabbatical. I brought a stack of books on the journey thinking they would help me go deeper in my walk. However, something unexpected happened. God didn't speak to me though the stack of books. He spoke to me in the quiet places. He did His work as I rested, healed & relaxed. I came back from my sabbatical with tons of fresh ideas. I found none of them in a book. I returned healthy, whole & happy to get back to work. God did a deep work in my heart during my sabbatical. I can't imagine all I would have missed if I hadn't stepped out of regular ministry."

Sabbatical includes four broad movements: rest, renew, recall & reinvest. I've shortened that to my search for Vigor (spiritual, emotional & physical) & Vision (for ministry)

As it concerns REST, Jesus said in Mt 11:28, *“Come to me, all who labor & are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*

The first phase of sabbatical should be rest in God. Important because it sets the stage for all the other movements. Sufficient rest's necessary to have the clarity of mind & spirit needed to connect with God on a deep level. During this phase of rest the mind, body & soul heal from the stress & trauma of ministry.

The Soul Shepherding Sabbatical Guide says, “Eventually, after your body stops jittering, after your thoughts stop flitting about, after you start feeling your emotions, after your ideal self that performs & pleases is dismantled, after you experience your nothingness & nakedness before God, after you experience unconditional love, then you can hopefully begin to really rest in your body & soul.”

Rest isn't easy. When we spend time in quiet before God, the inner turmoil of our souls comes to the forefront turning rest into a spiritual battle. Deep rest is hard to attain, many never get there. It requires working through all of our inner darkness, helplessness & becoming naked before God. Only when we've given up all our own striving can we truly rest in God's love for us. We learn our humanity isn't defined by what we do, but by who we are in Christ – becoming human beings again instead of human doings. The time of rest comes to a close when we begin to experience ourselves solely as people who are deeply loved by God in Christ.

At the root of the word sabbatical is sabbath, or rest. Pastoral ministry's demanding. One pastor wrote... *“I was a police officer in a large metropolitan city prior to being a pastor. I thought I knew what stress was. After all, I had worked over 10 years in a large city, patrolled high crime areas, was a supervisor, member of a SWAT Team & a media spokesperson. How could serving as a country pastor in a normative sized church compare with the stress I had already faced? I was wrong. My role as a pastor placed me into a new world of unrelenting expectations, requests & challenges. I soon realized the stress of being a pastor can be brutal.”*

Pastors are constantly on an emotional roller coaster dealing with ups & downs of congregational life which takes a toll. There are times in life where we need to disconnect - where the normal shorter breaks just don't cut it, there needs to be a prolonged disconnection to regain focus.

Pastors often look like Martha in Luke 10:38-42, *“anxious & troubled about many things.”* Over time they find their identity in the job rather than Jesus & need to get back to the 'one thing' which is all important & life-giving - time with Jesus.

Sabbatical helps a pastor re-orient life & ministry in the direction of Christ. **Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843)** said. “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness.” Pastors can often forget the value of modeling a godly & prayerful life. Christianity is all about the pursuit of God. A pastor does well to slow down & give themselves wholly to knowing Christ (John 17:3, Philippians 3:10-11).

Concerning **Renewal**, as we begin to rest in the love of God it can be tempting to return to work prematurely. Like athletes recovering from an injury, we need to take it slow & rebuild strength before re-entering the game, or risk further injury. The renew phase is all about living in the love of God until it becomes a foundational reality. During this phase we begin to live in such a way that every day’s shaped by our identity as a child of God, deeply loved; learning to live as Father & child again.

Renewal’s about building a relationship with God which reframes & sustains. We begin to learn to live from our rest in God, instead of resting from our work for Him. We experience the fullness of God’s life in us (Ephesians 4:14-19). The presence of God transforms how we approach life & ministry. We learn how to minister from a place of power through dependence on Him (Ephesians 4:20-21). Only then are we ready to recall God’s purposes for our lives.

During the **Recall** phase we ask God, “What do you want to do through my life?” To truly ask it rightly we need to have a holy indifference to everything but God’s will. George Muller said: “I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people generally is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord’s will, whatever it may be.”

Ruth Haley Barton said it this way, “God’s will: nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.”

Having surrendered to the will of God, it’s time to step back & look at the big picture of our lives. What’s God been up to? How’s He prepared me for this moment? What direction is He leading? Working to get clarity on calling takes time, giving confidence upon re-entering ministry. This clarity of call will help push through the obstacles, conflicts & sabotage which accompany leading change. Clarity, allows a pastor to plan well in how to return to ministry in a healthy way.

All pastors & elders have the same basic job description: to preach “Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:23) “devote themselves to prayer & the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). To “shepherd the flock of God” (1 Peter 5:2) and to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Timothy 4:5). All necessary. But the calling which transcends these is personal intimacy with Christ. To be unfettered, asking God, “what do you want to do through me? How can I best use my gifts for Your glory?”

The **Reinvest** stage is all about planning & practicing a new way of living. To establish a rule of life - a plan of daily living which emphasizes relationship with God at various

points of the day. Plans for self-care, which can be so easy to neglect. Caring for the body, mind, emotions, soul & family must come before ministry or it becomes self-destructive. During this phase we ask, "How can I maintain my new life in God while fulfilling God's clear call on my life?"

The Holy Spirit is here & will bless you in my absence. His work will continue & advance. He'll provide for needs. The answers to these needs are already here. The absence of a pastor can do something wonderful in the life of a church. People are encouraged to step-up & exercise their gifts in new ways - as some of you have already. Taking a sabbatical requires faith from church & pastor. God's able to shepherd His church during a pastor's absence.

One pastor wrote, "My church had never granted a pastor a sabbatical. How would they respond? Could my absence damage the trajectory of the ministry? Will the church want me to come back? These were just a few of the concerns which peppered my mind. However, I knew God had called me to take a sabbatical. Yet, I wondered how it would all work out. Upon my return, it was clear God has done something beautiful in the church. Church members worked together in new ways. Lay leaders stepped up into new roles. To my delight, and the Glory of God, I'm happy to report my sabbatical was profoundly good for the life of our church body...and thankfully, they were happy to see me again."

The Bible contains a wealth of direction as to this healthy practice, and the wisdom & necessity of it. Three areas of Scripture are worth consideration: 1) The Example of Jesus 2) The way God uses time in the lives of leaders, and 3) the practice of Sabbath.

Taking those in order...Mark 6:31 says...*And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place & rest a while." For many were coming & going, and they had no leisure even to eat.*"

Jesus commanded His disciples to physically separate themselves from the busy demands of ministry. His call to a desolate place gave His followers the margin needed to rest & be replenished. This command also emphasizes another overlooked aspect of our Lord's ministry: Jesus wasn't always available.

Luke 5:15-16 says...*Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him & to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places & prayed.*

Jesus retreated frequently as ministry demands increased. Retreating to a desolate place separated Him from the requests, demands & questions involved in growing ministry. Jesus went to unoccupied places. The practice of Jesus stands in glaring contrast to many leaders who fall into unhealthy patterns when ministry demands increase. Jesus considered time away from the demands of ministry essential.

Secondly, effective leadership's often preceded by large periods of time outside of regular ministry. Scripture indicates God used significant periods of time to prepare the hearts of key leaders.

Moses spent forty years in the desert (Exodus 2:11-7:7) before returning to Egypt & leading God's people.

David spent significant time in the wilderness caring for & protecting sheep. His time as a shepherd shaped how he looked at life & his relationship with God (Psalm 23).

After conversion, Paul retreated to Arabia for years to study Scripture (Gal 1:17-18). He retreated for this season before entering his most effective work.

We live in an age where the idea that leadership preparation requires extensive periods of time outside of typical ministry is unpopular. But, God often calls leaders into extended periods of separation & isolation prior to their greatest ministry assignments. Using periods of time to leave an unmistakable mark on the lives of leaders.

And thirdly, the strongest support for Sabbaticals may well be found in one of the oldest & most central practices of Scripture, which is Sabbath.

Genesis 2:2-3 says, *And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. <sup>3</sup>So God blessed the seventh day & made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.*

Exodus 20:8-11 says, *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 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. 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.*

And Mark 2:27 says, *And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*

For many Christians, a discussion about sabbath involves little more than deciding what one is permitted to do on Sunday. For others, the Sabbath's nothing more than an obsolete relic from an ancient time. Could we be missing something?

Why did God give man the Sabbath? Why was keeping the Sabbath so central to Israel? What timeless principals can guide the lives of modern Christians as we consider what God did after He finished His own creative work? Every Christian should seriously consider God's original design for rest exemplified in the Sabbath.

From the beginning, God planned for humans to be intentional about rest & the care of their spiritual lives. The importance of this rest is clearly communicated through the various commands & instructions on the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath was an intentional act of rest, fellowship & the pursuit of a deepening commitment to God.

Far from legalistic checklist, the Sabbath's an invitation to plumb the depths of a relationship with God & others. It served as a defining characteristic of God's People unparalleled in the ancient world. The massive emphasis Scripture places on the Sabbath shouldn't be overlooked. This ancient practice should inform our own views on the importance of rest & its connection with deepening our relationship with God.

So...what will this time look like for you & me? God's provided Steve Munz to do a 9 week series on Ephesians this fall. Other Sundays in August we'll fill with thoughtful speakers & other elements so that you can seek the Lord for the future of our church as well - in a very real sense, you'll be participating in sabbatical with me.

Some have stepped up to help run the church while I'm gone; in reality we'll need everyone's engagement. Kim will still be present handling kids scheduling & lessons. Although many Sundays she'll accompany me either on trips, or in visiting other churches for fresh ideas.

I disconnect best while wilderness backpacking. My journey begins in Asheville, NC, with Kim at the National Vineyard Conference from July 30-Aug 7. After which I have scheduled some long distance backpacking in Idaho & Colorado. A total of 450 miles, the majority of which will be me & Jesus walking in nature. In consultation with my coach I will include elements to my time for restoration & growth (readings | spiritual retreats | church visits | counsel with my spiritual director | etc.).

I covet your prayers. Beginning now, I ask that you put a reminder on your phone to pray 5 minutes daily for this time; both leading up to & throughout its duration. Specifically for refreshment, renewal, direction, vision, depth/growth in faith & that details would go smoothly. Additionally, for me to stretch finances well, given I had no time to procure a grant normally available for pastoral sabbaticals.

Pray also for our church to (1) seek the face of Christ, (2) cry out for His glory, and (3) to invite the direction & conviction of the Holy Spirit - that if there is anything which grieves Him to reveal it, prompting repentance.

In my absence please direct church communications to Dave & Donna Christie. Mark Tindall, another Vineyard Pastor will be 'Pastor on Call' for any larger pastoral matters. Plans will be made for fall Bible studies, and communicated through Breeze emails/texts & announced at church as usual.

Thank you for your prayers in advance, for your engagement, and for being a great church! If you have questions, I would certainly be willing to discuss them.

**RESOURCES:**

<https://dailypastor.com/ministry-sabbatical-guide-pastors/#:~:text=Pastoral sabbaticals provide a unique, and focus of a pastor.>

<https://pastorsoul.com/2019/02/08/how-to-structure-a-sabbatical-for-your-pastor/#:~:text=A sabbatical is time away, God's purposes for their life.>

<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/church/6-reasons-pastors-should-consider-a-sabbatical/>