



049: Sabbath Rest in Missions – Helping our Workers Avoid Burnout – Mark Buchanan

Mark Buchanan is an associate professor of Pastoral Theology at Ambrose Seminary in Calgary, Alberta, and formerly was pastor of New Life Community Baptist Church in Duncan, BC. Mark's work has been published in numerous periodicals, including *Christianity Today*, and he is also the author of several books including two that I have on my shelf, *Your God Is Too Safe*, and *The Rest of God* - today's interview topic.

Let's begin with some definitions – you talk about Sabbath as a day of the week and as an attitude.

- The Sabbath as a day of the week is obvious – the Bible tells us to work six days and rest on the seventh. This doesn't mean that it has to be Sunday, but rather to stop, to take a day to rest.
- Fundamentally, we aren't going to be able to take that day and rest if we don't have what I call a Sabbath heart – which is about the attitude. The foundation of a Sabbath heart is trusting God to run the universe when you're resting.
- Sabbath is an act of faith. We have to trust God to give up control and to provide for us, to attend to things we're stepping back from.
- My quickest definition of Sabbath is when we imitate God in order to remember that we're not God in order that we might receive afresh all that we need from God.
- Sabbath is an invitation to God's restfulness.
- It's easy to physically rest, but it can be more challenging to let our hearts and minds rest.

How does the physical rest play into the process of spiritual rest?

- The core of Sabbath is two-fold:
 - It is receptivity - a mode of receiving rather than producing
 - it is attentiveness – so we start noticing things that we've ignored – we notice our own heart, our spouse, our children, our neighbor.
- Some people just fall asleep when they sit still. If the heart of the Sabbath is receptivity and attentiveness, going for a walk might be a better spiritual practice around Sabbath keeping than simply lying down or sitting down.



There's a story you relate in your book about chopping wood – some people might say that you shouldn't chop wood on a Sabbath but for you, you found it to be refreshing. But you were doing, so it's not necessarily doing nothing.

- Right, we may be producing something but the purpose isn't productivity. To expand on that example, I had a pile of wood at the end, but I found just the sheer joy and pleasure of being outside, the sounds, the textures, the smells of the sap, I was relishing being in the moment of that. The value was the attentiveness and receptivity, not the pile of wood I had at the end.

There's another quote from your book, you say, "A Sabbath heart is restful even in the midst of unrest and upheaval." So, there is something that can linger as well.

- Absolutely. We often quote Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God." If you look at the Psalm it's a description of all the activity that God is up to on earth – throwing mountains into the ocean, breaking weapons, etc. – and so it's a depiction of God at work, not God at rest, and yet the invitation is for us to practice stillness, to practice openness, receptivity and attentiveness, if we are going to see and be thankful for all the work that God is doing in this earth.
- It's an invitation to be at rest in a world that is not at rest.

If there is someone listening and thinking, "I need to consider Sabbath and have a better practice of Sabbath in my life" what advice do you have for them?

- Develop a ritual that marks the beginning of your Sabbath and a ritual that marks the end of your Sabbath.
- A long-standing tradition is the Sabbath candle – you begin your Sabbath (start in the evening – you're already winding down and moving towards a quietude) by lighting a candle to acknowledge that your Sabbath has begun. It's finding an entry point that marks this moment in time as different from the rest of the week.
- You're stepping into holy ground and you want to mark that out.
- If you look at Jesus' practice of Sabbath – it was his favourite day to heal, either healing people from demonic possession or from blindness.
- Start by identifying what isn't working in your life that's hampering your effectiveness and then humbly invite Jesus to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. Ask him to show up as you rest in him.

Are there other things you've seen people do to mark the beginning of their Sabbath?

- Many people find that if you work with your hands, you should Sabbath with your mind and if you work with your mind, you should Sabbath with your hands.



- If your day job is talking, writing, lecturing, reading, then you may find that some element of gardening, or woodworking, or doing something with your hands is deeply restful.
- If you're a carpenter or laborer, the last thing you want to do would be something physical. Instead you might read or write poetry.
- Identify the thing that most ties you into your day job – is it your smart phone, or paperwork – quarantine it for twenty-four hours. If it's your smart phone that's pulling you back into your work, try powering it down and put it away during your Sabbath.

In our North American society, this Western culture values being busy and productive. This spreads into the body of Christ, into the church and into ministry and mission work. How does this contribute to burnout? Do we need to raise the bar on Sabbath?

- I am more and more convinced that Sabbath is the central discipline of the spiritual life. If you look at it within the 10 commandments. The 3 before are about God and the 6 after are about people. I think there is importance to the order that the 10 commandments appear. If I trust God to rule the universe without me, then those first three commandments are foundational to building that trust.
- Then you look at the following 6 that are about relationships – I think that those are overflows of Sabbath. Implicitly, if you keep Sabbath and are well rested, you're less likely to feel murderous.
- It's sadly ironic that in the Christian community, the only commandment that we consider option is the command to observe the Sabbath.
- The Sabbath commandment is one of the few commandments that God gave a rationale for – it has one in Exodus and one in Deuteronomy.
 - The one in Exodus points back to God's 6 days of creation and his rest on the seventh.
 - In Deuteronomy, the rationale points back to having been slaves, and God freed us, so we should rest.
 - If we don't take Sabbath rest, we forget our created nature and our redeemed nature. We are made in the image of God and we're redeemed in the blood of the lamb – if we keep Sabbath, we keep a weekly reminder of this.

What are some of the challenges that mission workers face overseas when it comes to making room for the Sabbath?

- The cultural differences are striking and often the expectations of a community of believers, say in Africa, is that the missionary is available all week long, any time of the day. There isn't a need to make an appointment, you just show up at the missionaries' house and it is never light-hearted issues they show up with – it's marital problems or a great physical need.
- Missionaries have a heart to serve and can sometimes be a bit of a pathology underneath this heart to serve, when a person begins to derive their identity from what they do. That in any world or vocation is a ticket for burnout because fundamentally we can never do enough or do it good enough.



- If you look at the story of Jesus and Lazarus – Jesus is told that Lazarus is dying and Jesus doesn't hurry. When he arrives, Lazarus has already been dead four days. He's not caught up in other people's urgency. He's discerning what the Father is doing, but he doesn't feel anxiety over what other people expect of him.

As we think of our audience, many of us are serving in churches that know these workers. What is your advice to the churches and the mission committees – how can we be helpful with this?

- Be as generous as you can. Missionaries don't always have the resources to get away with their spouse or family – so I'd encourage those churches and mission agencies to be generous.
- If you have a lovely cottage in lake country, offer your cottage to them for a couple of weeks for uninterrupted family time. Or send your missionary away on a short vacation and create space for them to get away and renew and restore.
- Be on the lookout for signs of burnout.
- Communicate to your workers that it's ok to rest – as their home church or sending agency, give them permission to rest.

What advice would you give to our missionaries around the world?

- Proverbs 4:23 – “Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.” If you want to be fruitful, it's not from effort, it's from abiding in the vine.
- The best thing you can do is enjoy Sabbath and rest so you can be fruitful.

Are there any other books or resources you'd recommend on this topic?

- [The Sabbath – Abraham Joshua Heschel](#)
- [Sabbath as Resistance – Walter Brueggemann](#)
- [Sabbath – Wayne Muller](#)

If our listeners would like to learn more from you, how can they contact you?

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