Hebrews 4 Part #2 “Sabbath-Keeping In A Stressed-Out World”
Based in part on Marva Dawn’s excellent book “Keeping The Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting”

I. Sacred Time

- Time is something modern man seeks to control with scientific precision which ends up controlling him. But embedded in the heart of this idea of Sabbath is that time is something to steward rather than manipulate and his call to set aside Sabbath rest is an invitation to be who He made us to be and to trust Him in a very tangible way with our time.

- Sabbath is about interference! “Sabbath is a deliberate act of interference, an interruption of our work each week, a decree of no-work so that we are able to notice, to attend, to listen, to assimilate this comprehensive and majestic work of God, to orient our work in the work of God.” (Eugene Peterson “Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places” pg. 110) God coming to the rescue is at the heart of what the gospel is about, yet the rescue of God is usually first perceived by us as interference. His gracious command can strike us as an annoyance and as being out of touch with reality. In actuality it is an invitation to get more in touch with true reality rather than the distorted world of illusions created by the tyranny of the urgent.

- Sabbath is a counter-cultural stand. “We’re not gonna take it!” (Twisted Sister) “Sabbath erects a weekly bastion against the commodification of time, against reducing time to money, reducing time to what we can get out of it, against leaving no time for God or beauty or anything that cannot be used or purchased. It is a defense against the hurry that desecrates time.” (Eugene Peterson pg. 111) “Sabbath keeping is a publicly enacted sign of our trust that God keeps the world, therefore we do not have to.” (William Willimon)

- Remember, getting in touch with reality is not just about acquiring knowledge but is about submitting to God and His Word and His definitions of what is good and what we were made for. God doesn’t just create, He tells us what it means and that it is good.

II. Ceasing

“Sabbath ceasing [means] to cease not only from work itself, but also from the need to accomplish and be productive, from the worry and tension that accompany our modern criterion of efficiency, from our efforts to be in control of our lives as if we were God, from our possessiveness and our enculturation, and, finally, from the humdrum and meaninglessness that result when life is pursued without the Lord at the center of it all. In all these dimensions we will recognize the great healing that can take place in our lives when we get into the rhythm of setting aside every seventh day all our efforts to provide for ourselves and make our way in the world. A great benefit of Sabbath keeping is that we learn to let God take care of us – not by becoming passive and lazy, but in the freedom of giving up our feeble attempts to be God in our own lives.” Marva Dawn (pg. 3-4)

- Self-examination is a vital but oft-neglected spiritual discipline. We need time to get away and examine from a different vantage point the lives we live and the thoughts we think.

- Without this ceasing that gives us freedom to see differently, work becomes a prime breeding ground for idols. “[W]ithout Sabbath... the workplace is soon emptied of any sense of the presence of God and the work becomes an end in itself. It is this ‘end in itself’ that makes an un-sabbathed workplace a breeding ground for idols. We make idols in our workplaces when we reduce all relationships to functions that we can manage. We make idols in our workplaces when we reduce work to the dimensions of our egos and control...If there is no Sabbath... we soon become totally absorbed in what we are doing and saving, and God’s work is either forgotten or marginalized. When we work we are most god-like, which means it is in our work that it is easiest to develop god-pretensions.” (Eugene Peterson)

- Why do we resist God’s command to cease? What are we afraid of? Where do we need to pray for God’s rescue in specific, tangible ways? It begins with submitting to the righteousness of Christ. As Luther put it (in “Christian Liberty”) “Our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works.”

III. Resting

We begin with ceasing, but Sabbath keeping is more than just ceasing – it is also resting and trusting as God says in Isaiah 30:15 “This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.” Marva Dawn points out that we must begin with spiritual rest (trust) in the gospel because it is impossible to rest our bodies until our spirits are at rest. But we also must think in terms of keeping the Sabbath in ways that bring physical rest, emotional rest, and intellectual rest. She discusses a number of aids to resting like recreation, time in the Word and prayer, and genuine fellowship.

IV. Embracing

Marva explains that it is important to understand that “Sabbath keeping is not just negative ceasing” but involves deliberately embracing Christian values and practices. “The important point in all our imitation of God is its deliberate intentionality. We don’t just think God’s values are good. We embrace them wholly... To embrace is to accept with gusto, to live to the hilt, to choose with extra intentionality and tenacity.”
• Embracing intentionality: We have to get used to the idea that living as a Christian brings us into conflict with the dominant assumptions of our culture. Living as a Christian is not something that just happens without thought, prayer, a community, and great struggle. “Sabbath keeping says clearly that we are not going to do what everybody else does. We are going to be deliberate about our choices in order to live truly… in response to the grace of God. [For example], everyone else goes window-shopping at the mall on that day, but we have chosen to cease the American hankering after possessions. We have chosen to embrace the Sabbath day as a holy time for carefulness.” (Marva Dawn pg. 104)

• What price are we willing to pay to live as the true counter culture? We can’t have our cake and eat it too, or as Jesus put it “you can’t serve two masters.” James says we mustn’t live as double-minded people. This means we must embrace not just parts of the Christian life, but the whole ball of wax.

• Consider these counter-cultural ways to live as Sabbath keepers: 1) Embracing giving rather than gimme through becoming intentionally generous. It is so important that we learn to practice mercy and generosity not just with our money but with our time – and the Sabbath is a great time for doing that. 2) Embracing thankfulness instead of complaining. We must intentionally cultivate the practice of thanking God for His gifts and His providence. There is always “joy to find in every station, something still to do or bear.” 3) Embracing the regular rhythm of Sabbath rather than being bounced around by our circumstances and the tyranny of the urgent. Marva mentions how important regular rhythms are to our lives and how we need to fight for regular practices as there are always things that want to press us to give them up. She also mentions how we embrace our identity as part of a huge, community that stretches across cultures and across time when we participate in Sabbath keeping with God’s people elsewhere and elsewhen. 4.) Embracing the world rather than running off into a safe cozy retreat. “Sabbath keeping is often disparaged as not useful, but we certainly do serve the world better out of the wholeness, order, revived spirits, empowered emotions, healthy bodies, renewed minds, [etc] that Sabbath keeping creates… Sabbath keeping changes the world. The practice does not remove us from the world… Rather it plunges us more deeply into the world and its needs because it carries us more deeply into the heart and purposes of God. We learn this especially from Jesus. Time after time the Gospel narratives state that He was teaching on the Sabbath or healing on the Sabbath as was His custom. Yet He observed the Sabbath and sanctified it as a holy day… We do not… spend the Sabbath trying to save the world… our observation of the day equips an… minister to the world on the other six days of the week.” (Marva Dawn)

V. Feasting

• The Sabbath is to be a joy and a delight. “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, 14 then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.” The mouth of the LORD has spoken. ” (Isaiah 58:13-14)

• The Sabbath is a party that whets our appetite for the marriage supper of the Lamb that is coming! Thus there is an ache and a longing that is cultivated through Sabbath keeping, even as there is great joy in the celebration of the day itself. It is just one day in six and it continually comes to an end each week. But there is a Sabbath coming that will never end!

• It is a day to feast on our God in worship! What a privilege that God gives us permission to focus on adoring Him for a whole day! “Instead of trying to create our own security, we worship the One who is our security. The Presence of God in our worship, in His Word, and in our customs for keeping the day transforms us for the entire week into persons whose values are not transient, into Sabbath people who carry the kingdom of God within them wherever they go.” (Marva Dawn pg. 164)

• It is a day to focus on beauty and the good gifts of our God and to enjoy them! It is a day to enjoy music and beauty. “Focusing on beauty on one day causes us to notice it on the other six days of the week… In a larger sense, the whole practice of Sabbath keeping makes me feel more beautiful. As I spend the day reflecting on the character of God, I am overwhelmed by His love for me.” It is a day to enjoy special food! She points out that the Jews have always (even in their poorest times) sacrificed to buy special food and candles for the Sabbath celebration. Marva says it reminds them of how God provided special manna for them that would keep for the Sabbath on the day before the Sabbath – even though every other day hoarding more manna that a days worth would make it go bad. She suggests eating more simply during the week and learning to feast on the Sabbath, or even just using special dishes on the Sabbath – something to bring the reality of the joy of the day into every aspect of life. “The attentiveness and adoration that Sabbath-keeping cultivates develops into a capacity for wonder…that permeates the days of the week.” (Eugene Peterson “Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places” pg 119)