



## Leadership letter

### *Do you need a Sabbath?*

Exodus 20:11 “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the **Sabbath** day and made it holy.”

I have just read the Genesis story again and marvelled at God’s creativity and attention to every detail. What a wonderful world he has given us. After being busy for 6 days, he rests on the 7<sup>th</sup>. Have you ever asked the question, why? This is God we are talking about. Why does he have to rest? He has all the resources he will ever need or want at his disposal. He never gets tired or sick or has need of a break to see his family and friends back home, or take time to raise finance. Yet he takes a Sabbath to rest. What does he do? Well, he reflects on what he has done in the previous 6 days. He evaluates and comes to the conclusion his work was very good. In that act, he has modelled something for us that we need to take note of.

I don’t know about you, but I like projects. I like an assignment with a beginning and an end, a clear goal and a good team to see it become reality. The problem comes when one project moves into the next and life becomes one ongoing project with no time to pause. Pausing is good for the soul. My wife and I have just had a few weeks with no debriefing and issues easily mount up. We have to sit down, talk and listen to one another and recognise what is happening so we can move on with greater clarity and understanding.

It reminds me of the missionary travelling in Africa. The first few days they made good progress and were ahead of schedule. However the next day the African guides wouldn’t budge. Their comment was that they needed to wait for their souls to catch up as they had been travelling too fast. Do we go so fast that we don’t have time to meditate on what has taken place? Do we go through days, weeks and months without having time to debrief? Events, experiences, and life in general desperately need to be talked and thought through, whether it’s good or not so good. We need a debrief each day, week, month and year. Sometimes it’s simply having a friend to talk with. But that act of talking about it can bring some understanding, resolve and closure. It’s good to think through and evaluate what went well and what could have been done better? We grow in wisdom as we reflect on the lessons we have learned as we go through each experience.

So back to the question: Do you need a Sabbath? There are some binary questions below with the opportunity of you giving a yes or no answer. If you answer several with a “NO”, then perhaps you aren’t thinking seriously enough about Sabbath.

- Do you regularly stop to ask yourself how things are going and evaluate progress?
- Do you take time to reflect and identify lessons learned from your recent experiences?
- Are you dealing with past issues before jumping into thoughts and ideas for the future?
- Are you taking time to hear God convict you of sin in your life?
- Is there a passion stirring and growing in your heart?
- Are you aware of what the Lord is saying to you in this season?
- Are there guiding scriptures that seem to be key for you right now?

Of course there are all kinds of Sabbath:

**1. Daily.** If you are “living life abundantly” as Jesus wants us to, then life will be busy. That’s why we need time apart each day to keep our spirit’s in tune with the Lord and keep our

priorities right. Many Christians take time in the morning for devotions – a time to read the bible, pray and listen for what God has to say to them. This is a wonderful habit. However there are many ways of going about keeping our relationship with God hot. One person shared with me that they set their watch to chime on the hour and they take a few minutes to pray. Others take time after lunch for reflective 10/15 minutes. Perhaps you take a nap as part of that reflection time! As I have a dog that needs walking, I often take her out just before bed at night and spend a few minutes debriefing the day. Whatever the method – take time, plan and take those Sabbath moments.

- 2. Weekly.** The classic use of Sabbath is for a day each week. The 4<sup>th</sup> commandment in the bible instructs us: *Exodus 20:8* “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” The tradition for the first century Christians was to celebrate the resurrection day of Christ – the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week. Most Christians have set apart Sunday as a day of rest and a time to go to church, worship and receive teaching. For those involved in giving out on Sunday, their own personal Sabbath may be on a Monday instead, where they can be refreshed themselves. We all need a day to regroup, to retreat from the normal work and get in touch with our souls and spirits if we have been rushing ahead!

For me growing up, Sunday was a different day. We always had church in the morning, and invited back people for the traditional Sunday lunch. Sunday afternoon was for a quiet walk, or read, followed by church in the evening and a youth event at someone’s house to finish the day. We had a fast from TV and generally more of a family oriented time together. Some might consider it legalistic but looking back we didn’t know any different and I think it was actually helpful for us. Anyway, it is important that you establish your own traditions that help you to relax, be refreshed, reflect on the week and be strengthened for the week ahead.

*Exodus 31:12-13* “Then the LORD said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.’”

- 3. Monthly.** Many of the Christian celebrations are being turned into secular holidays. So it’s not happy Christmas but happy holidays, Easter becomes spring break and so it goes on. Our yearly calendar has many celebrations with holidays attached. Living in Spain over these last few years makes me realise that the Spanish know how to celebrate. Although Spain has become secular, they continue with their religious holidays and there seems to be lots of them spread across the year. What about you and me? Do we make the most of these Sabbaths in our year to rest, refresh and reflect? Whether it’s Christmas, new year, Easter, Pentecost, Harvest festival/thanksgiving, plus many more if you are from a catholic or orthodox tradition, these special days can bring space into our busy diaries. How about doing something special every month, going somewhere new, doing something different to break yourself out of the mould. This kind of Sabbath needs more planning but it well worth it.
- 4. Yearly.** Depending on your job and the culture you are from, you will have from 2 weeks to perhaps 6 weeks a year for holidays. These breaks need even more planning. Sometimes getting out of our normal schedule, with its routine can really mess us up if we are not careful. We stay up later, get up later and our normal devotional life and rhythm go out the window with the effect that our breaks aren’t always helpful. As Hebrews 4 shares, there is a paradox – “labour to enter into rest”. We almost have to work harder to

take a break and really be blessed by it! So in a holiday think about body, soul and spirit and see how relationships will be built in the process.

## 5. 7<sup>th</sup> year Sabbatical.

*Exodus 23:10-11* “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unploughed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.”

I am not one who subscribes to a formula or taking a year off every 7 but I know some who do and love it. However often the span of time we have in a particular role is from 7-10 years and so in between roles its good to have some kind of transition or sabbatical. My rhythm in ministry, growing up with a family and jobs to juggle has been to take 4 weeks in Canada every other year to catch up with family, then every 7 years or so to receive some kind of input from a training programme of some kind. If you are in full time Christian work there is a need to think about an extended break to evaluate whether you are where God wants you to be, what you have been doing and how effective it has been, how you are utilising your gifts, how you and the family are being fulfilled, etc. etc. In order to do this well you generally need to get away somewhere so that you have no responsibilities. We need time away to process and find our next direction and passion. This isn't an overnight process and takes weeks and months.

Here are some of the things to think about:

- Time for training input of some kind. It's not simply a time to let go of responsibilities for a season but to be enriched, having your mind stimulated and challenged. So think about the right kind of input that will be a blessing and help you to develop in the new season.
- Debrief the previous season. This often needs an objective person to help in asking the right questions. Some of these questions will be hard questions that deal with failures as well as successes, weaknesses as well as strengths and struggles and frustrations as well as joys. It often takes a few weeks to just unwind before you can really have the energy for this exercise so don't jump into it too quickly.
- Building relationship with God. Hopefully you have experienced a Sabbath each week and so are not in a situation of burn out. However, a longer focused sabbatical gives the opportunity of going deeper with God in areas that are difficult during the normal day to day life. Make the most of this and be thinking of specific goals of development that you want to explore. It may include some specific areas of study, spiritual disciplines, or dealing with particular strongholds, lies or baggage that you know you have been carrying. Having someone who is available to ministry to you is of great value here.
- Building relationship as a couple if you are married, and as a family if you have one. You need time to catch up, so develop a rhythm if you don't have one already, that helps you have lots of communication and time in all sorts of activities with your spouse. Read together, pray together and take time to develop specific areas that need life in your relationship.
- Rest for body and soul. This is a time to focus on feeding your body and soul. Not simply good food but looking after our body and soul in the best possible way. This will include exercise, healthy food, possible changes of diet, emotional releases,

enjoyable activities, developing new hobbies and doing things you have always wanted to do.

- Building relationships with family, home church, friends back at home. This takes time especially if you haven't been home for a while. You can be on a different wavelength, have very different agendas and find you don't have so much in common. Need time to connect, relax together and establish new foundations.
- Take a stack of books that you want to read but haven't had the time. Ask others what books they have enjoyed and can recommend. One for sabbatical itself would be "The rest of God" by Mark Buchanan.
- Create some boundaries for emails. Some work-emails still need to be received in order to keep you in the loop, but it's good to keep them to an absolute minimum. Some work colleagues are actually friends too so you don't want to cut them off. Wisdom is necessary to know how to come to balance here.
- Fund raising. Take some relational time to build your team and raise finance as necessary.
- Vision for the next season – time to wait on God for fresh direction, development of ministry, change of roles, delegation with the role, movement to different sphere of influence. Time of praying with others for feedback, support and prophetic encouragement.

*Here is an example of a plan of a YWAM couple on their sabbatical:*

1. **Leadership Audit.** *My wife's company has offered to do a 360C audit on my leadership in the last 10 years. This exercise will evaluate how I lead and areas of development. The company director will have a coaching time with me. This leadership report will allow me to interact with anyone to dialog with me further as I reflect this journey with the Lord.*
2. **Spiritual alignment.** *After talking with leaders, our family will be spending one month with a 24/7 prayer ministry. I felt that this is crucial as we spend time in an environment of worship and prayer to hear God and to allow Him to align, refresh and recharge.*
3. **Input.** *After the prayer ministry, we will go to do a Summer Term in a bible school. I am considering signing up for a Diploma and possibly do a long distance learning.*
4. **Prayer.** *After this, we will take all these processes and input into a place of prayer and giving God the space to crystallize what He wants to say.*

I would encourage you to take time to make plans for how you are going to enjoy the Sabbath in your life, whether it's daily, weekly, monthly, yearly or every seven years.