

Freedom To: Rest and Celebration

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 23:10-17

A 2017 mini-lecture by NYU business and psychology professor Adam Alter recently introduced me to the concept of stopping cues. Alter looked at the allocation of time in an average person's week: time sleeping; time working and commuting, time doing necessary activities such as eating, grooming, caring for household members. He found that most people had a few hours of discretionary time each day when, he says, "the magic happens": time spent in meaningful and satisfying ways as we interact with other people and with our world.

Next Alter traced the use of discretionary time since 2007, when the iPhone first released. And he found that since the invention of our handy devices, the time we spend in front of them has grown, more than doubling in a decade. Now all but a sliver of this discretionary time is spent on-screen. Alter learned that some of the screen-based activity did contribute to happiness; but three times as much of it led to increased dissatisfaction with life. Alter contends that our texting, our email, our news feeds and our gaming lack something that was common in the 20th century: The stopping cue. Here's what he means. When we read a book, we reach the end of a chapter and it's a signal to either stop, or make a choice to continue. When we play a board game, someone eventually wins and everything goes back in the box (unless of course you're playing Monopoly). Our favorite TV show ends and we wait a week to watch the next episode. By contrast, internet news never sleeps; email fills inboxes at all hours; and online games incentivize continuous play.

Please know this is not a message on the dangers of technology. But Alter's idea of stopping cues resonated with me as I studied Exodus on Sabbath this week. We seem to need signals, stop signs, guidelines that help us tell our hours and our minutes what to do. This is especially so since we are people who acknowledge that our chief goal in life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We want to spend our time well, wisely, for our good and the good of others.

More than 3000 years ago, God instituted stopping cues in the corporate life of his newborn people. Our passage today has God speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai. God unpacks the Israelites' covenant responsibilities for particular situations, and outlines general expectations after the giving of the Ten Commandments.

"For six years you are to sow your land and gather in its produce. ^{23:11} But in the seventh year you must let it lie fallow and leave it alone so that the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave any animal in the field may eat; you must do likewise with your vineyard and your olive grove. ^{23:12} For six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you must cease, in order that your ox and your donkey may rest and that your female servant's son and any hired help may refresh themselves."

God's wilderness instructions about a Sabbath year, a Sabbath day, and the three pilgrimage feasts look ahead to a better time. They envision this nation of ex-slaves prospering in the Promised Land. The people will work their own land and have responsibility for their own servants. And shockingly, stopping work one day in seven is to be an equal-opportunity practice—rest for the greatest to the least among them. Even the animals are included.

How strange these commands must have sounded to a people whose life rhythm was work, work, work, 24/7! Pharaoh and his slave drivers had no interest in stopping cues. In fact, if the work wasn't taxing enough, it could certainly be made harder. Productivity and progress—for the honor of the Egyptian kingdom! So the prohibition of work on the Sabbath bore repeating. The habit needed reinforcement; the practice didn't come naturally. Our passage isn't the first the people have heard about setting aside a day to stop working. The idea of Sabbath shows up several other times in the book of Exodus.

After God delivers the Israelites through the Red Sea, the people learn about Sabbath by experience. They have an opportunity to trust God as they keep—and fail to keep—his Sabbath instructions about collecting manna to survive (Ex. 16). Later, in the shadow of Sinai, God gives the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20). There the rationale for the people's Sabbath-keeping is that it imitates God. The people are to reflect God's own seventh-day stop at the dawn of creation. Then, when God outlines the construction of the Tabernacle for Moses, he again reminds the people to keep Sabbath. Even when they are doing work directly for God, they must rest (Ex. 31). Finally, after the Golden Calf catastrophe and a renewal of the covenant, God again calls the people to stop all their work and keep a day of rest.

Keeping a day of rest was such a strange practice that it set the Israelites apart from all the surrounding nations. Other ancient law codes have no Sabbath regulations. Fast forward fourteen hundred years to the time of Jesus and you could overhear the Stoic philosopher Seneca say the concept of Sabbath was ludicrous. Why, he wondered, would those strange Jews waste “almost a seventh of their life in inactivity?”—and why would they upset the social order by insisting that this rest was not just for the rich? Especially for accomplished people, people who recognize they have been given enormous gifts to serve God and others, stopping is strange. It is counter-intuitive for us. Sheer momentum carries us on unless we plan and prepare to stop. Maybe you are in a cycle of responsibilities that seems to demand nearly constant attention. The hamster wheel keeps spinning, and even if you'd like to stop there's no clear way to slow things down.

Maybe you're a business owner. Your company is hopping but understaffed. You can't hire more employees just yet so you carry more than your share of the business yourself, not wanting to overwhelm your staff. And at 3 a.m. you stare at the ceiling. “I hope I sent that bid back to the client. Did I?” Or maybe you're a medical professional. You feel the weight of sustaining life, as far as it depends on you. Sometimes you walk out to your car and you can't leave work behind. “Did I make the right call for that patient who coded at the end of my shift?” Or maybe you're a caregiver for a spouse or a parent or a child. Each day you ask God for strength to meet the needs that face you today—and maybe tonight too—with tenderness and respect and some measure of joy. But truth be told, it's very hard. And you're very tired.

The momentum of our work and our worry carries us on...until it runs out and we don't have much left. Author and pastor Mark Buchanan describes this problem and its signs in his book “The Rest of God”: “When we lose concern for people, both the lost and the found, for the bride of Christ, for friendship, for truth and beauty and goodness; when we cease to laugh when our children laugh (and instead yell at them to quiet down) or weep when our spouses weep (and instead wish they didn't get so emotional); when we hear news of trouble among our neighbors and our first thought is that we hope it isn't going to involve us—when we stop caring about the things we care about—that's a signal we're too busy....And then the moment of reckoning comes—when we must meet the situation with genuine, heartfelt compassion, wisdom,

courage— and nothing’s there, only grim resignation and a dull resentment that we got dragged into this.” (p. 48)

Buchanan writes as if he knows something about overdue stopping cues. Maybe some of us do too. So how can we pay attention to these stopping cues? On one level we’re doing that now, resting in God’s presence, worshipping him and listening to his Word, encouraging each other. And at another level, we pay attention to what refreshes our own souls.

Let’s look again at the verbs in verse 12. God’s people are to work for six days; then *stop* so that the working animals may *rest* and the servants and the hired hands may *refresh themselves*. At the most concrete level, the word for “refresh” in verse 12 means “to breathe.” The same verb is used in Exodus 31, painting a very human picture of how God himself “rested and was refreshed.” And a closely related verb appears in Genesis 2 as God breathes life into Adam.

We stop so that the God who showed us how to stop, the God who gives us life and breath and everything else, can re-inflate our lungs. Somehow, stopping and resting in God’s care restores us. God resets our perspective. He renews our awareness that he is who he says he is. We breathe for a while and acknowledge that we are dependent and frail who can fully trust his care. For those of us on hamster wheels that don’t seem to stop spinning, how do we find a ledge to stand on in the middle of it all, until our planning to rest can catch up with the momentum?

One stopgap possibility is that we remember, breath by breath, whose breath refreshes us. We breathe out our fatigue and breathe in, acknowledging Jesus’ love and power flows through us. We breathe out our worry and breathe in, knowing Jesus’ grace completely covers us. We breathe out our need to measure up, certain that Jesus loves us and is carrying to completion the work he began in us. This is one way to practice moment-by-moment life in the Sabbath rest of God.

Some of you are hoping I’ll mention that the Sabbath command is the only one of the Ten Commandments that isn’t renewed in the New Testament. And that’s true, it’s not. Jesus redefines Sabbath, saying “My Father is always at work, and I too am working” when challenged by the Pharisees (John 5:17). He frees Sabbath from rigid legalism and sees it as a time to act—even “work”—in ways that heal and restore, noting that “The Sabbath was made for people, and not people for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)

Yet the example of Jesus and his followers was to continue observing one day in seven to stop, to gather for worship, to rest. When the demands of ministry grew intense, Jesus called his disciples to be refreshed. No time even to eat? That’s a stopping cue. Jesus calls to his disciples, “Come with me to a quiet place by yourselves and get some rest.” (Mark 6:31). Overmatched by people needing physical and spiritual healing? That’s a stopping cue. Time to carve out space with the Father before the clamor of the crowd descends (Mark 1:35).

We who come 3400 years after the Israelites in the desert aren’t too late in history to get in on God’s rest. We watch our Lord Jesus, the model of restored humanity, and follow his ways as we seek to live eternal life with God here and now. And in an even more important way, God’s promised rest is still for us. It comes to us as sheer gift through Jesus, who entered human weakness and fatigue and knows it firsthand. Jesus, who extended his arms over us and gave up his spirit so that we would be able, today and forever, to enter into a life of trust and peace with God. Jesus, who long before we knew our need, wrapped us up to rest in the blanket of his grace. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.