



# SABBATH

4 Countercultural Practices  
to Start and Keep a Biblical Sabbath

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SABBATH: 4 Countercultural Practices to Start and Keep a Biblical Sabbath  
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# INTRODUCTION

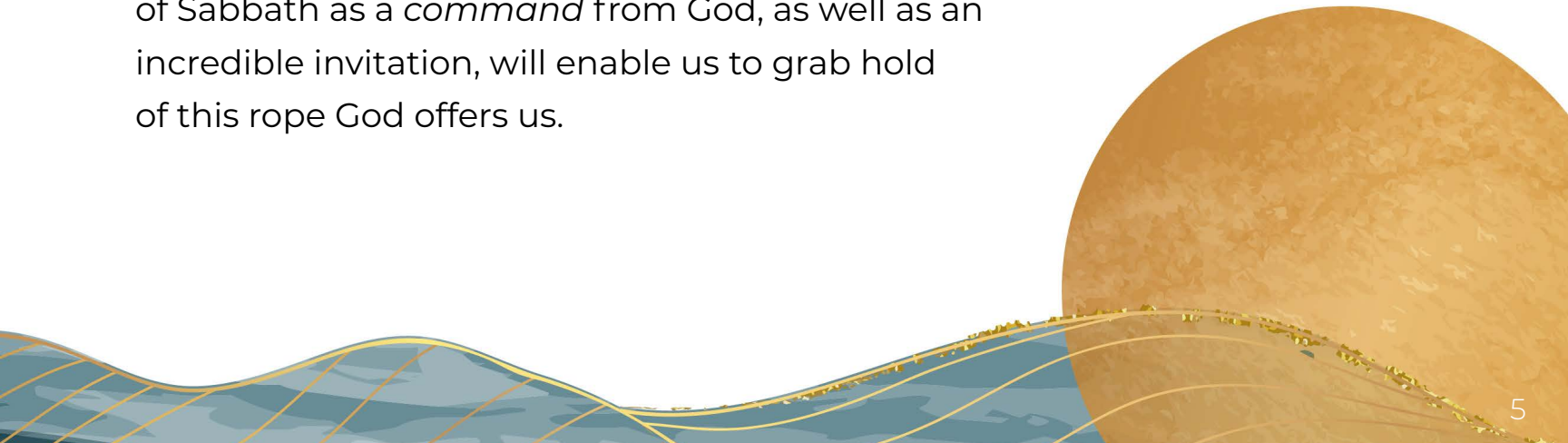
*The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word that means “to cease, to stop working.”*

It refers to doing nothing related to work for a twenty-four hour period each week. It refers to this unit of time around which we are to orient our entire lives as “holy,” meaning “separate, a cut above” the other six days (see Genesis 2:2, 3).<sup>1</sup> Sabbath provides for us now the rhythm for an entire reorientation of our lives around the living God. On Sabbaths we imitate God by stopping our work and resting.

Make no mistake about it: keeping the command to Sabbath is both countercultural and extremely difficult in our everyday lives. It cuts to the

core of our spirituality, the core of our convictions, the core of our faith, and the core of our lifestyles. Our culture knows nothing of setting aside a whole day (twenty-four hours) to rest and delight in God. Like most, I always considered it an optional extra, not something absolutely essential to discipleship. But, living in a fallen world is much like being in a blizzard. Without the Sabbath, we easily find ourselves lost and unsure of the larger picture of God and our lives.

I am convinced that nothing less than an understanding of Sabbath as a *command* from God, as well as an incredible invitation, will enable us to grab hold of this rope God offers us.



# GOD'S COMMAND FOR RHYTHM IN OUR LIVES

*Keeping the Sabbath in Scripture is a commandment* — right next to refraining from lying, murdering, and committing adultery. Sabbath is a gift from God we are invited to receive. Israel lived as slaves in Egypt for over four hundred years. They never had a day off. They were treated as tools of production to make pyramids. They were “doing” machines. They worked seven days a week all year long. Imagine how deeply ingrained activism and overwork must have been for them! They had never observed or experienced a rhythm of work and rest. They had neither permission nor the choice to do so. Living meant performing tasks, with one day blurring into the next.

When God called Israel out of Egypt, he affirmed they were sacred human beings made in his image. He then showed them how to live according to their God-given nature. In effect, God said, “It may feel awkward at first, but as a fish is created to live in water, I created you to live according to this design.” The longest and most specific of the Ten Commandments is the fourth. Let’s take a look at all



of them in comparison:

- You shall have no other gods before me.
- You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord our God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 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.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not give false witness.
- You shall not covet. (Exodus 20:1-17)

God worked. We are to work. God rested. We are to rest. After completing his work of creating the heavens and earth, God rested on the seventh day. It was the climax of God's week in Genesis 1:1-2:4, and it is to be the climax of ours.

Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses proclaimed further that the very act of ceasing from work in the midst of all the surrounding nations was a sign of their liberation by God (see Deuteronomy 5:13ff). By the very act of refusing to succumb to the enormous pressure of Western culture around us, we too serve as a sign of a free people. We have been called out of a world trying to prove its worth and value by what it does or possesses. We are deeply loved by God for who we, not for what we do.

The Sabbath calls us to build the doing of nothing into our schedules each week. Nothing measurable is accomplished. By the world's standards it is inefficient, unproductive, and useless. As one theologian stated, "To fail to see the value of simply being with God and 'doing nothing' is to miss the heart of Christianity."<sup>2</sup>

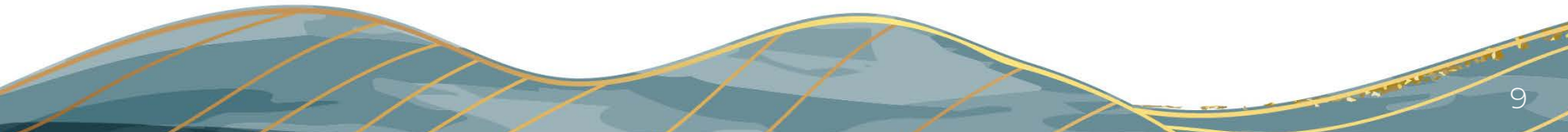
The Sabbath was always a hallmark of the Jews throughout their history. This one



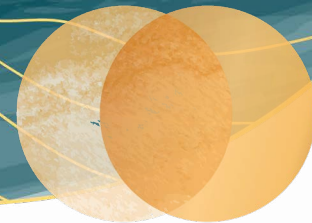
act, perhaps more than any other, kept them from the pressure of the powerful cultures that have sought to assimilate them. For this reason it is often said that, for 3,500 years, the Sabbath has kept the Jews more than Jews have kept the Sabbath.

This is certainly not the case with Christians living in the twenty-first century. Sabbath, when lived, is our means as the people of God to bear witness to the way we understand life, its rhythms, its gifts, its meaning, and its ultimate purpose in God. Observing the Sabbath, we affirm: “God is the center and source of our lives. He is the beginning, the middle and the end of our existence.”

Eugene Peterson points out even though Sabbath has been one of the most abused and distorted practices of the Christian life, we cannot do without it. “Sabbath is not primarily about us or how it benefits us; it is about God and how God forms us. . . . I don’t see any way out of it; if we are going to live appropriately in the creation we must keep the Sabbath.”<sup>3</sup>



# THE FOUR PRACTICES OF BIBLICAL SABBATH



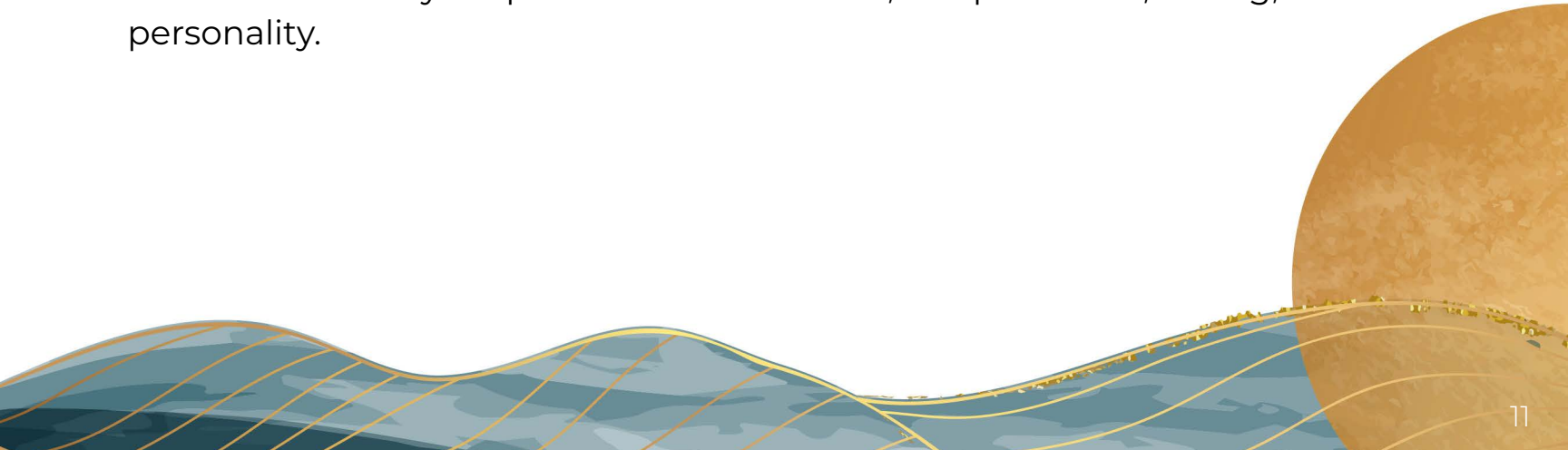
*One of the great dangers of faithfully observing Sabbath is legalism.*

What about pastors, nurses, doctors, police officers, and others who must work on Sundays? Jesus observed Sabbath but he also healed the sick and preached sermons on that day. What might be work for you may be different for someone else. Some people will have to choose another day besides Saturday or Sunday (depending on your church tradition) if it is to be a day without work.

The key is to set a regular rhythm of keeping the Sabbath every seven days for a twenty-four hour block of time. Traditional Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and ends on sundown Saturday. I know many Christians

who begin their Sabbath precisely at 6:00 PM or 7:00 PM on Saturday until the same time the following day. Others, like myself, choose a day of the week. The apostle Paul seemed to think one day would do as well as another (see Romans 14:1-17). What is important is to select a time period and protect it!

The following are four countercultural practices that have served me well in distinguishing a “day off” from a biblical Sabbath. A secular Sabbath is to replenish our energies and make us more effective the other six days. A “day off” produces positive results but is, in Eugene Peterson’s words, “a bastard Sabbath.”<sup>4</sup> I commend them to you as you develop a biblical framework for Sabbath that fits your particular life situation, temperament, calling, and personality.



# PRACTICE 1: **STOP**



## *Sabbath is first and foremost a day of “stopping.”*

“To stop” is built into the literal meaning of the Hebrew word *Sabbath*. Yet most of us can’t stop until we are finished whatever it is we think we need to do. We need to complete our projects and term papers, answer our e-mails, return all phone messages, complete the balancing of our check books to pay our bills, finish cleaning the house. There’s always one more goal to be reached before stopping.

On Sabbath I embrace my limits. God is God. He is indispensable. I am his creature. The world continues working fine when I stop.

I have hated stopping my entire life. When I was a college and seminary student, I had too much homework to stop for one twenty-four-hour period.

When I taught high school English, I had too many papers to grade to stop. When I was learning Spanish in Costa Rica, I couldn't stop if I was going to learn the language. If I was going to be responsive to the needs of the people in our church and still have time to pray and study, I needed to work at least half of my Sabbath, didn't I?

*We think, Maybe I will stop when our children grow into adults and are on their own, when I have enough saved to buy our first home, when I retire and . . .*  
The list goes on.

We stop on Sabbaths because God is on the throne, assuring us the world will not fall apart if we cease our activities. Life on this side of heaven is an unfinished symphony. We accomplish one goal and then immediately are confronted with new opportunities and challenges. But ultimately we will die with countless unfinished projects and goals. That's okay. God is at work taking care of the universe. He manages quite well without us having to run things. When we are sleeping, he is working. So he commands us to relax, to enjoy the fact that we are not in charge of his world, that even when we die, the world will continue on nicely without us. Every Sabbath reminds us to “be still and know that [He] is

God” (Psalm 46:10) and to stop worrying about tomorrow (see Matthew 6:25-33).

The core spiritual issue in stopping revolves around trust. Will God take care of us and our concerns if we obey him by stopping to keep the Sabbath?

The story is told of a wagon train of Christians traveling on its way from St. Louis to Oregon. They observed the habit of stopping for the Sabbath during the autumn but as winter approached the group began to panic in fear they would not reach their destination before the snows began. A number of members of the group proposed they should quit the practice of stopping for the Sabbath and travel seven days a week. This caused an argument in the community until it was finally decided to divide the wagon train into two groups. One group would observe the Sabbath day as before and not travel. The other would press on. Which group arrived in Oregon first? Of course—the ones who kept the Sabbath.

Both the people and their horses were so rested by their Sabbath observance they could travel much more efficiently the other six days.<sup>5</sup>



When I trust God and obey his commands, he provides. Jesus takes our loaves and fishes that we offer him, even though they are insufficient to feed the multitudes, and somehow miraculously and invisibly multiples them. We can trust him enough to stop.

## PRACTICE 2: **REST**



### *Once we stop, the Sabbath calls us to rest.*

God rested after his work. We are to do the same—every seventh day (see Genesis 2:1-4). What do we do to replace all we are now stopping during our Sabbath time? The answer is simply: whatever delights and replenishes you.

For example, in my case work relates to my vocation as founder of Emotionally Healthy Discipleship, along with writing and speaking. I purposely engage in ideas and people that get my mind off even the thought of work!

That includes napping, working out, going for long walks, reading a novel, watching a good movie, going out for dinner. I avoid the computer and cell phone.

For me to enjoy Sabbath rest on Saturday, however, requires I have another day of the week to do the tasks of life that consume my energy or fill me with worry. For example, planning my week, paying bills, balancing our checkbook, cleaning the house, fighting traffic and crowds to shop, doing loads of laundry are all work I need to do a different day of the week.

The following list gives you nine possibilities to consider replacing with rest. The primary one, of course, is rest from work. But you may want to also consider picking one or two of the others over the next couple of months as you develop your practice of Sabbath-keeping.

- work
- physical exhaustion
- hurriedness
- multitasking
- competitiveness
- worry
- decision-making
- catching up on errands
- talking
- technology and machines  
(e.g., smart phones, TV, computers)

When we stop and rest, we respect our humanity and the image of God in us. We are not nonstop human beings. Sadly, it often takes a physical illness such as cancer, a heart attack, a flu, or a severe depression to get us to rest. We don't serve the Sabbath. The Sabbath serves us.

# PRACTICE 3: **DELIGHT**



*A third component to biblical Sabbath revolves around delighting in what we have been given.*

God, after finishing his work of creation, proclaimed that “It was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God delighted over his creation. The Hebrew phrase communicates a sense of joy, completion, wonder, and play. This is particularly radical in a culture like ours, both secular and Christian, that is “delight deficient.” Because of the way pleasure and delight has been so distorted by our culture, many of us as Christians struggle with receiving joy and pleasure.

On Sabbaths we are called to enjoy and delight in creation and its gifts. We are to slow down and pay attention to our food, smelling and tasting its riches. We are to take the time to see the beauty of a tree, a leaf, a flower, the sky that has been

created with great care by our God. He has given us the ability to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch, that we might feast with our senses on the miraculousness of life. We are, as William Blake wrote, “to see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower.”<sup>6</sup>

I will never forget the first time I took pleasure in warm water running over my hands in a McDonald’s restroom on a Sabbath. I slowly dried my hands, rubbing them together under the drier as the water dissipated. I did not run out of the restroom, drying my hands on my pants as I walked to the car. I did not skip putting soap all over my hands. I relished the present moment and tasted the Sabbath gift of simply washing my hands!

On Sabbaths God also invites us to slow down to pay attention and delight in people. In the gospels, Jesus modeled a prayerful presence with people—whether it was a Samaritan woman, the widow at Nain, the rich young ruler, or Nicodemus. He seemed “into” the beauty of men and women crafted in God’s image. This has become a spiritual discipline for me. I try, for example, to walk



slowly, leaving lots of free space and time on Sabbaths so I can stop for unexpected conversations with neighbors, family, and shopkeepers. I ask God for the grace to leave the frenzied busyness around me and be a contemplative presence to those around me.

Finally, Sabbath delight invites us to healthy play. The word chosen by the Greek Fathers for the perfect, mutual indwelling of the Trinity was *perichoerisis*. It literally means “dancing around.”<sup>7</sup> Creation and life are, in a sense, God’s gift of a playground to us. Whether it be through sports, dance, games, looking at old family photographs, or visiting museums, nurturing our sense of pure fun in God also is part of Sabbath.

# PRACTICE 4: CONTEMPLATE



*The final quality of a biblical Sabbath is, of course, the contemplation of God.*

The Sabbath is always “holy to the Lord” (Exodus 31:15). Pondering the love of God remains the central focus of our Sabbaths. Throughout Jewish and Christian history, Sabbath has included worship with God’s people where we feast on his presence, the reading and study of Scripture, and silence. For this reason Sundays remain the ideal time for Sabbath-keeping whenever possible.

Every Sabbath also serves as a taste of the glorious eternal party of music, food, and beauty that awaits us in heaven when we see him face to face (see Revelation 22:4). On every Sabbath, we experience a sampling of something greater that awaits us. Our short earthly lives are put in perspective as we look forward to the day when God’s kingdom will come in all its fullness and we will

enter an eternal Sabbath feast in God's perfect presence. We will experience his splendor, greatness, beauty, excellence, and glory far beyond anything we ever experienced or dreamed.

As with stopping, resting, and delighting, we will need to prepare in advance how to do this. Is it any wonder that the Jewish people traditionally had a Day of Preparation for the Sabbath? There was food to buy, clothes to wash for the children, and final preparations to be made.

What will it mean to prepare yourself for worship, to receive the Word of God? What time do you need to go to bed the night before? When might you have times of silence and solitude or prayer during the day? What final items do you need to resolve so you can have an uncluttered Sabbath?

Devout Jews today have numerous customs related to their Friday Shabbat meal as a family. They maintain various traditions, from the lighting of candles to the reading of psalms to the blessing of children to eating of the meal to the giving of thanks to God. Each is designed to keep God at the center of their Sabbath.<sup>8</sup> There are an amazing variety of Sabbath possibilities before you. It is vitally

important you keep in mind your unique life situation as you work out these four principles of Sabbath keeping into your life. Experiment. Make a plan. Follow it for one to two months. Then reflect back on what changes you would like to make. There is no one right way that works for every person.

Sabbath is like receiving the gift of a heavy snow day every week. Stores are closed. Roads are impassable. Suddenly you have the gift of a day to do whatever you want. You don't have any obligations, pressures, or responsibilities. You have permission to play, be with friends, take a nap, read a good book. Few of us would give ourselves a “no obligation day” very often.

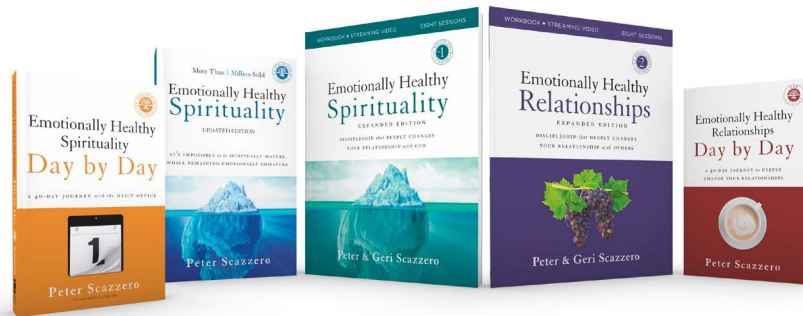
God does—every seventh day.

Think about it. He gives you over seven weeks a year (fifty-two days in all) of snow days every year! And if you begin to practice stopping, resting, delighting, and contemplating for one twenty-four-hour period each week, you will soon find your other six days becoming infused with those same qualities. I suspect that has always been God's plan.

# NEXT STEPS

Imagine if your entire church was stopping for 24 hours once a week to practice the Sabbath together. It would change everything!

*The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course* was designed to lay a theological and practical foundation for every member your church to slow down and be with Jesus. In this 2-part course, not only will your church learn the countercultural practice of Sabbath-keeping, but they'll learn much more.



**Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (Part 1)** is designed to deeply change your relationship with God, and **Emotionally Healthy Relationships (Part 2)** is designed to deeply change your relationships with others.

Preview the Course online at [emotionallyhealthy.org/preview](https://emotionallyhealthy.org/preview)

# ABOUT PETE SCAZZERO

Pete Scazzero, along with his wife, Geri, are the founders of [Emotionally Healthy Discipleship](#), a ground-breaking ministry that moves the church forward by slowing the church down, in order to multiply deeply changed leaders and disciples. This journey began when Pete founded New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York, a large, multiracial church with more than seventy-three countries represented—where he served as senior pastor for twenty-six years.

Pete hosts the top ranked [Emotionally Healthy Leader podcast](#) and is the author of a number of best-selling books, including *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* and *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship*. He is also the author of *The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course (Part 1 and 2)* that has transformed tens of thousands of lives around the world.

For more information, visit [emotionallyhealthy.org](http://emotionallyhealthy.org) or connect with Pete on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or [Instagram](#).



# NOTES

- 1.** For an excellent study on the word holy, see R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishers, 1985), 53-65.
- 2.** This comes from Catholic theologian Leonard Doohan. It is quoted in an excellent book on Sabbath: Lynne M. Baab, *Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 20.
- 3.** Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 116-118.
- 4.** Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 46.
- 5.** Marva Dawn. *Keeping the Sabbath: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 65, 66.
- 6.** Quoted in Wendall Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington, D.C: Counterpoint, 2000), 115.
- 7.** Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), 66.
- 8.** Dr. Siang-Yang Tan, *Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000), 101-104.