



Sabbatical: Learning to Work Best From Rest

By Merle Mees, Co-Founder, Soul Care Matters

Most of us know how to work hard.

We were trained for it, applauded for it, and rewarded by it. We know how to push through, power up, and press on. Very few of us, however, know how to rest well. And yet, from the very beginning, God wove rest into the fabric of creation—not as a luxury for the weary, but as a rhythm for the faithful.

Rest was never meant to be a reward for finishing the work. It was meant to be a way of trusting the One who gave us the work in the first place. A sabbatical is simply an extended Sabbath—a season to cease, to breathe again, to remember who God is—and who you are.

If you've been running fast for a long time, you may discover that the hardest work God invites you into is the work of slowing down. This is an invitation to rediscover rest—not as escape, but as formation.

Sabbatical Is Biblical

The word *sabbatical* comes from *Sabbath*, which simply means “to cease.” In the opening pages of Scripture, we're told that God rested on the seventh day—not because He was tired, but because He was finished. He delighted in His work. He celebrated it. And in doing so, He modeled a rhythm for us: work and rest, both as acts of trust.

Jesus later reminded us that the Sabbath was made for us—not as a burden to carry, but as a gift to receive. Scripture even points us toward an ultimate Sabbath rest that still lies ahead (Hebrews 4:9–11). And Jesus Himself extends the invitation:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28–30).

In the Old Testament, sabbatical rhythms shaped the life of God's people in tangible ways:

- The land rested every seven years (Leviticus 25). God promised a bumper crop the year before—a bold invitation to trust.

- The poor were welcomed to glean from the fallow fields.
- Debts were canceled.
- Servants were released without cost (Exodus 21).

Sabbatical was a reset—for the land, for the people, and for the soul.

And here's a truth worth sitting with: If you're not practicing Sabbath weekly, a sabbatical will feel like trying to run a marathon without ever having jogged around the block.

Sabbath is the weekly inhale.

Sabbatical is the extended exhale.

What Is a Sabbatical?

At its core, a sabbatical is a planned time of renewal—a season to step away from routine responsibilities so you can return with fresh perspective, spiritual vitality, and renewed passion for what God has called you to do.

Every healthy sabbatical includes three essential components:

Healing – Space for God to tend to the wounds, weariness, and unspoken burdens you've been carrying—often longer than you realize.

Experimentation – Room to explore, try new things, and let curiosity breathe again. Sabbatical reminds us that we are more than our job descriptions.

Reflection – Time to gain insight into your soul: your calling, your patterns, your pace, and the places where God has been quietly at work all along.

The Four Elements of a Sabbatical

1. Set Up

Before you ever step away, ask the deeper questions: What kind of sabbatical do I need? What is God stirring in my heart right now? What do I need most in this season?

- Write a simple vision statement.
- Count the cost—financially and emotionally.

- Give yourself permission to step away.
- Delegate responsibilities.
- Make a plan that honors both your absence and your return.
- Choose a location that allows you to settle in. One place is usually better than bouncing around.
- Consider pairing rest with spiritual development—perhaps a retreat, a conference, or time with a spiritual guide who knows how to listen more than they speak.

2. Show Up

Woody Allen once said that 90% of success is showing up. I'd say 90% of sabbatical is actually pulling the trigger. You'll likely wrestle with three barriers:

- **Cost** — "Can I afford this?"
- **Optics** — "What will people think?"
- **Responsibilities** — "I'm too important to step away."

Let me tell you from experience—when I returned from sabbatical, people noticed. My laughter returned. My energy was renewed. Creativity flowed again. My passion for mission reignited.

Show up to God. Show up to yourself. Show up to your family. Be present. Be attentive. Be honest.

3. Slow Up

This may be the hardest part of all. The RPMs don't drop easily. For the first few days, my soul felt like it was still sprinting. I had to let it catch up to my body. I had to relearn how to live at the speed of God—about three miles per hour, the pace of a human walk. Discipleship, after all, is most often described as a walk for a reason.

Here are a few practices that help slow the soul:

- **Rest** — Sleep without an alarm. Take naps. Trust God with what you're not doing.
- **Relax** — Productivity is not the goal. Presence is.
- **Read** — Slowly. Not too much. Choose what feeds your soul, not just your mind.

- **Reflect** — Practice the Examen. Pay attention to where God has been at work.
- **Rejoice** — Notice small gifts. Gratitude quietly rewires the heart.
- **Restore** — Eat well. Walk. Bike. Sit in nature. Watch sunsets. Let beauty do its quiet work.

4. Shut Up

Silence and solitude are not optional. They are the furnace of transformation. Habakkuk writes: *"The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him."*

Silence quiets the external noise so we can finally hear the internal truth—and ultimately, the voice of God.

- Fast from technology.
- Turn off the podcasts.
- Let your thoughts rise to the surface.
- Pay attention to the emotions you've buried beneath busyness.
- Ask yourself: Who am I apart from my role? What are the deep longings of my soul? What is God saying when I finally stop talking?

Key Principles for a Healthy Rhythm

- Shoot bullets before cannonballs—start small.
- Practice Sabbath weekly.
- Take a 2–3 day retreat quarterly.
- Take a two-week vacation annually.
- Take a four-week sabbatical every 12–18 months.
- Don't force anything. Let God come to you.
- Ease out and ease back in—create both an off-ramp and an on-ramp.

A Final Word

A sabbatical isn't an escape. It's an investment. It's a declaration of trust. A way of saying,

"God, You run the universe—and You can run my life while I rest."

And when you return, you won't just come back rested. You'll come back renewed. Re-centered. Reconnected to the One who gives true rest.

And you may just discover that you do your best work—not from striving, but from rest.