

Wasting Time with God and a Good Book



Discovering the blessings of a reading Sabbath

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Lately I have found myself falling into a routine. I wake up on Monday, confident that I have forgotten something crucial for the coming week, go to work, come home, and take care of pressing items. Then I go to sleep, wake up the next morning, repeat the process and realize that suddenly, somehow, it is Friday. Weekends are filled with a different set of activities: time with my family, time at church, a desire to experience some sort of “fun” that the pace of my week has crowded out. I go to sleep on Sunday night, and then the process begins again.

What amazes me, as I grow older, is the length of time I can find myself in such a cycle without poking my head above the surface of the water, without checking in with myself to see how life is really going. Even devotional time can become sandwiched into a schedule: ten minutes for a shower, make the children’s lunches, fifteen minutes for God, ten minutes for breakfast. Holidays have always been important to me, especially those of the church calendar, but I seem to fall into a pattern where even these don’t put a stop to my schedule—instead, they just become something else on a list of things to do. They mark time rather than enrich it.

Last month, during an evening in the middle of the week, I had one of those “aha!” moments. Something was going on that was out of the ordinary and at the same time peaceful, pleasant. I was sitting on the couch in my living room, reading a book, and suddenly I realized what was wrong—or,

rather, what was right. The television was off, no one was stationed at the computer, the rain pounded against the windows in a sudden gale, and in the room with me was my wife and my three boys. We were all quiet, all reading books. Even the cats felt the difference—they were stationed on their respective heaters, asleep, heads tucked down. We, as a family, were resting.

Many of us grew up in Sunday school hearing and memorizing the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” But I had heard the concept so often that the Sabbath had never meant much to me, and I have always struggled with the concept. Yes, we remember God on the day commemorating his rest from the act of creating, but don’t we remember God each day? Then I read the following Old Testament verse: “When you enter the land I am going to give to you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the Lord. For six years sow your fields, and for six years

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prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest” (Leviticus 25:2-4, NIV).

What strikes me about this Scripture is that this kind of Sabbath year is inconvenient, impractical, and painfully necessary. If the land is not allowed to rest, eventually it will cease to produce. Moreover, even if we work hard to take care of its every need, as we work for our families or our churches or our own happiness, eventually we will lose the big picture for the details. We’ll forget the real reasons we work at all.

On that evening with my family, I experienced a reading Sabbath, a time of real rest for our family when we all, together, did nothing “useful.” But the moment washed over me in a wave of peace. It’s embarrassing for an English professor to admit forgetting about the benefits of reading, but reading for me had become just another part of work.

Christians are encouraged to keep up a devotional life, and rightly so, but I would like us to consider something additional: reading Sabbaths, moments of real, quiet pause centered on books that address Christian issues. Such Sabbaths are inconvenient—they force us to find or make a quiet area (and thus disrupt those busy folks around us)—and they force us to be still when there is almost certainly something else that we could be doing. They remind us of life’s big issues, and bring us into conversation with others who have thought and struggled with the same.

And perhaps they give us, as we breathe and pause from schedules that have come to control us, a glimpse of our families, or the sound of the rain on the windows. Or the peace of watching a cat asleep on a heater, perfectly relaxed and doubting not a bit that someone else is taking care of the details. □

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Atticus, by Ron Hansen: a novelized account of one of Christ’s parables, set in contemporary Mexico and Colorado

Till We Have Faces, by C.S. Lewis: probably the best work of fiction by Lewis, centered a woman protagonist of depth and spiritual honesty

A Prayer for Owen Meany, by John Irving: at times irreverent, at times hilarious, a novel about what it means to be a Christian in a postmodern world

Mr. Ives’ Christmas, by Oscar Hijuelos: a beautiful, gentle book of a man derailed by unanswerable questions, and his journey to regain a sense of God’s plot for his life

Traveling Mercies, by Anne Lamott: a story of a journey into faith and Christian authenticity

“Leaf by Niggle” (from *The Tolkien Reader*), by J.R.R. Tolkien: a short story or parable that gives an insight into Tolkien’s faith and its effect on how he sees the world

Everything That Rises Must Converge, by Flannery O’Connor: short stories not for the weak of heart, calling Christians to self-examination

Two-Part Invention, by Madeline L’Engle: the moving, thoughtful account of L’Engle’s marriage and the loss of her husband to cancer

A Canticle for Leibowitz, by Walter M. Miller Jr.: a cold-war, science-fiction novel that has surprisingly much to say about the conditions of our own culture today

Me and My Baby View the Eclipse, by Lee Smith: not a “Christian book” in the strict sense, but a collection of stories that examine moments, eclipses, in which our way of seeing things is shaken and redrawn □

