

## THE SABBATH LADDER



**G**leaning is one of those biblical words, and ideas, all but lost to those of us who live in postindustrial societies. It is the subject of one of the more remarkable commands in the book of Leviticus, placed right in the midst of commandments of the gravest importance about idolatry and injustice, and it culminates with the solemn name of the Lord who gives it:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10)

We see the practice of gleaning at work most vividly in the book of Ruth, where widows and foreigners like Naomi and Ruth are able to follow the harvesters, gathering enough grain from the corners of the fields that they can support themselves. Gleaning is not charity, in the sense of passively received handouts that take the place of work; rather, leaving the edges of the field unharvested and the grapes between the vines ungathered makes it possible for “the poor and the alien” to participate in the dignified productivity of harvest. Faithful agriculture will, like the fields of the prodigal son’s father, produce “bread enough and to spare,” so that every member of the community has the opportunity to experience the abundance of good work.

But gleaning requires discipline on the part of the landowner and the harvesters. Gleaning is a discipline that tames power, placing limits on the temptation to idolatry and injustice. You might think a diligent harvester's job would be to extract the maximum amount of grain from the field and the greatest tonnage of grapes from the vines. Instead, the discipline the Lord required of Israel was *not* to do everything within their power, *not* to push their own productivity to the limit—to intentionally leave margins that made room for others to participate in the economy of the community (and perhaps, as in the book of Ruth, to get to know a distant relative a bit better).

The practice of gleaning raises suggestive questions about our own economy. What kind of margins should be left at the edges of modern economic sectors so that the unemployed can still do meaningful work, and the poor have opportunities to provide for their own families rather than standing in line waiting for others' generosity? In the restaurant and grocery sector, with their close links to agriculture, for-profit companies and not-for-profit organizations have partnered to ensure that the abundant leftovers of modern food service become available for the clients of food banks—though these efforts could be much improved by creating opportunities for the dignity of harvest rather than the passivity of handouts.

But the practice of margins and gleaning has more than just an economic application. It applies wherever there are dramatic disparities in power. Precisely because our power is the result of genuine image bearing, a genuine human calling to have dominion over the world in God's name, the human hunger for power is insatiable. We seek greater opportunities to use our gifts for a good reason: we are meant for far more. It is not wrong to want to "expand our territory" (in the words of the Old Testament figure named Jabez). But the more our territory expands, the more we must embrace the disciplines that make room on the margins for others to also exercise their calling to image bearing.

Indeed, in the wider context of Leviticus, leaving margins along the fields for gleaning is just the first step on a ladder of disciplines. Each one is meant to *limit* Israel's agricultural productivity in the name of preserving the possibility of true image bearing, not just for Israel but for any human being who sojourns among them as stranger or slave. Every day when the

workers harvest, they will leave margins; every week, they will observe a day of sabbath, leaving the crops to grow on their own; every seven years they are enjoined to leave the field alone entirely and live simply on whatever may come up without active cultivation; and every fiftieth year (that is, after seven sevens) they are to celebrate the extraordinary festival of Jubilee, where debts are forgiven, land that has been pledged as security for debts is returned to its original family, and slaves are freed. At each stage of this escalating “sabbath ladder” the powerful are asked to relinquish more of their power and, especially, their privilege—the accumulated fruits of their successful exercise of power. On a daily basis they are to hold back from wringing the last possible ounce of produce from the land, but at intervals of weeks and years and most of all once a lifetime, they are to prodigally withhold the rightful exercise of their power. *Not* because God does not intend wealth to be invested productively and yield an abundant harvest, but because both the wealthy and the poor are image bearers, and only by climbing the sabbath ladder will the powerful be assured that they are making room for others to glean, to rest and to feast.

What does the discipline of margins for gleaning look like for those of us who do not own fields or vineyards? In essence, it seems to ask that in every area that we are especially competent, we must ensure that our productive work does not crowd out other image bearers. Part of our responsibility with our own power, oddly enough, is not to use it as much as we can.

In the fall of 2011 I had the opportunity to exercise a certain amount of power by writing an essay for the *Wall Street Journal* after the death of Steve Jobs. Though the circumstances that gave rise to the piece were tragic, the opportunity to offer a Christian reflection on the meaning of Jobs’s life seemed like an image-bearing moment. There was also, inevitably, the heady experience of realizing that two pages of a national newspaper had been devoted to my words and that my careful work had opened up relationships with editors I had not previously known—the kind of “break” every writer hopes for.

A few weeks later, in fact, the editors reached out to me again, asking if I was interested in writing a similar essay on the football player Tim Tebow. Now, to tell the truth, I am pitifully uninformed about football, but no cultural commentator could miss the significance of this openly Christian

quarterback during his first season in the NFL, along with his efforts to use his power—his fame and football prowess—to point to something greater than the game itself.

In a given year, hardly anyone has two shots at the coveted two-page cover story in the *Journal's* weekend Review section. Every worldly calculation would have said that I should say yes to the invitation and get to work, patching up my football knowledge with some quick visits to Wikipedia and maybe even ESPN.com. Never mind that to do so would have taken me to the absolute edges of the field I know how to cover as a journalist, that I would have been reduced to picking up the grapes dropped by other better-informed writers, and that the invitation came in the midst of an already packed week. I am fairly sure that had this same sequence of events happened when I was thirty years old, I would have said yes in an instant and gotten feverishly to work.

But instead, I chose to leave this particular field unharvested—at least by me. As it happened, just a few weeks earlier my friend Patton Dodd, an experienced, insightful journalist who also happened to be (as I could tell by his Facebook posts) a devoted Denver Broncos fan, had told me about a writing project he was completing, an ebook on Tim Tebow and his Christian faith. I wrote the *Journal* editor, declining the assignment but suggesting they take a look at Patton's ebook and giving them his cell phone number. That weekend, Patton's article was on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal Review*, followed over the next few weeks by Patton's appearing on most of the major sports radio and TV networks for interviews about his timely and controversial subject.

I would have to be more of a saint than I am not to have tracked the success of Patton's article with keen attention. But I would be less of a saint than I am becoming if I didn't cheer as my friend got the opportunity to reap a much richer harvest than I could ever have managed. The truth is that while I suppose I could have written a competent article about Tim Tebow, Patton was the right one for the job. And far beyond any effect my not writing, and Patton's writing, may have had on his career and mine, I am sure beyond any doubt that there was a greater abundance of grace and truth in the major media in the weeks following his article than there would have been if I had attempted to reap that harvest by myself.

Making room for gleaning does not just ensure that others can eke out a dignified living even in straitened circumstances; by preserving the conditions for fruitful image bearing for every person in our circle of influence, it also makes room for abundance and flourishing far beyond the mere provision of basic needs. The book of Ruth, indeed, is one of the many reminders sown throughout the Bible that our small disciplines make room for extraordinary infusions of God's grace into history. Boaz and his workers were simply obeying the Levitical law to make room for the poor, widow and alien, and if all that resulted was the provision of food and dignity to a few Moabite image bearers, that would have been enough. But in the providence of God, a gleaner named Ruth was able to meet a kinsman-redeemer who could not only rescue her and her mother-in-law from exile, but become with her the ancestor of the kinsman-redeemer of the whole human race. In the very margins of the field where Boaz left room for gleaning, God was planting the seeds for the ultimate abundance of history.

Indeed, from a cosmic perspective it is not just human beings who make room for gleaning. The Creator of the universe spoke uncountable galaxies into being, and at the fringes of the vast cosmos created by his Word and sustained by the Spirit, he placed us. Compared to the power and creativity that brought the universe into existence we are infinitesimal and poor. Modern science is showing us in detail how utterly dependent we are on things far beyond our control, from the fine tuning of the cosmological constants to the fusion furnace of our own nearby—but not too nearby!—star to the millennia's worth of creatures whose death and decay gives life in the few inches of soil in which everything grows. Perhaps even more amazingly, the bewildering field of quantum mechanics suggests that at the very core of the universe is uncertainty and, therefore, freedom. For all our utter dependence on the creative power of God, he has carved out for us a habitable environment of dignity, freedom and possibility (as well as the risk of falling and failing). At the edges of the vast fields of stars we do our little work, sowing what we could never have provided for ourselves and harvesting what we have not sown. We are all gleaners. When we ensure that our use of power does not extend to its absolute limits but freely limit our power so that others can themselves

harvest, we are doing exactly what the Creator God himself has done. To make room for gleaning is to play the true God.

## SABBATH

Making room for gleaning limits and disciplines our daily exercise of power. Any of us who possesses any significant power should ask each day what we might leave *undone* that day for the sake of others' creativity. But on a weekly basis we are commanded not just to leave margins around our exercise of power but to withdraw from it altogether. In the practice of sabbath, as of making room for gleaning, we once again play in the footsteps of the Creator God, whose work was not without rest and within whose sabbath all the rest of the story has unfolded.

The sabbath is more familiar to us than gleaning, and in recent years not just Christians but our society as a whole have been embracing—well, at least gingerly sidling up to—the possibility that restless, work-filled lives are not as good as lives with regular rhythms of ceasing and feasting. Yet it is extraordinary how few Christians make any concerted effort to keep the commandment of sabbath rest. We have somehow twisted Jesus' pithy rebuke of the Pharisees, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27) from a warning against legalism into a license for neglect. We seem to forget that in the very next breath Jesus asserts, "so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (v. 28), thus asserting his lordship over—not exemption from or indifference to—this very good gift from God to his image bearers.

There is perhaps no single thing that could better help us recover Jesus' lordship in our frantic, power-hungry world than to allow him to be Lord of our rest as well as our work. The challenge is disarmingly simple: one day a week, not to do anything that we know to be work.

But as soon as this simple definition is laid out, the objections begin. Someone has to cook and do the dishes, right? Well, no—for one thing, as Jewish families know well, the cooking can be done the day before and the dishes will wait for the next. And for those of us not bound by the details of the Jewish halakha, in most households there is someone for whom doing dishes is *not* work, not part of our daily calling but a diversion from it. In our own household, where doing the dishes is part of my daily main-

tenance of our shared life, I will often get up from my Sunday afternoon nap to find that my wife has done the dishes for me. Conversely, Catherine somehow manages to fit cooking in to the family routine along with her demanding research and teaching; so on Sundays, more often than not, I do the cooking instead. We are not legalistic, though, about either dishes or cooking; we save that for our computers, which are firmly shut Saturday night and not reawakened for twenty-four hours.

There is so much more to sabbath than what we stop doing, but for the purposes of disciplining power, simply stopping matters a great deal. The God whom we are meant to play is a God who stops. Indeed, in Genesis 1's creation account God stops every day, as the day comes to an end, in order to celebrate what he has done with the benediction of goodness. (While surely it is true that the Maker of the world neither slumbers nor sleeps, the Creator of Genesis 1 does not pull all-nighters.) Likewise, in the Garden of Eden we find God walking (not working) in the cool of the day. But on the seventh day God stops not only to bless but to "hallow" or set apart the sabbath. The holiness of God is revealed not just in what he does but how he rests.

There is no quicker way to discern our god playing or image bearing than to take the measure of our sabbath observance. The point is neither to outdo one another in extreme acts of sabbatarian asceticism nor to find the finest possible line between work and rest—it is simply to ask ourselves and be asked by our friends, Is there a day a week when we can honestly say that we do not work? In particular, as our power has increased, what has happened to our sabbath observance? Has it become deeper, faithful and more joyful, or has the idol of false god playing driven us ever more toward busyness and 24/7 control? One reliable sign that you are worshiping, and playing, a false god is when your power has increased but you find yourself on an ever-steeper treadmill, less and less able to rest.

As with all the best spiritual disciplines, sabbath observance serves perfectly as both diagnosis and prescription. Our ability to disengage from the activities that give us identity, meaning and agency in our public worlds will tell us volumes about whether our activity is fruitful image bearing or increasingly desperate god playing. And if we do keep the laptop closed, let text messages go unanswered and billable hours uncollected, we will learn a great deal about our own spiritual condition. In the

resulting quiet, the worship shared with others, and hours of unstructured time, do we find ourselves anxious or content, fearful or confident, peaceful or restless, depressed or joyful?

In recent years sabbath has told me (and my family) more than I really wanted to know about the extent to which I was failing to leave margins for gleaning in my daily work. Too often I have retired, exhausted, for a long nap after church (and on too many weeks I have been too tired to take much joy in going to church at all). As the end of the day approaches, low-grade irritability and depression at the demands of the coming week have been evidence that my life, for all its appearance of satisfying work and gratifying influence, is infected with idolatry and is probably therefore perpetuating injustice, distorting the way I treat other image bearers. I rarely feel such clear signs of fatigue and anxiety on days that are filled with travel, meetings and assignments—only when I stop to rest. Without sabbath, I would be dangerously ignorant of the true condition of my soul.

But sabbath is prescription as well as diagnosis, the path toward a cure for our god playing. Properly observed, sabbath is a weekly practice of the generosity and goodness of God. Without our having to work one bit, we find we are sustained and even lavishly provided for; we taste and see that the Lord is good. Indeed, in the marvelous economy of God, it has been the experience of countless disciples that the more faithful and trusting our weekly rest, the more real fruit we have to celebrate from our weekly work. What idol ever granted its worshipers this kind of rest? Just as the cessation of work is an incentive to make the work on our other days more focused and faithful, the promise of sabbath's weekly festivity—not some distant holiday or vacation, but every seventh day!—reorients us toward the truth about God and God's very good world.

### THE UNTHINKABLE SABBATH

It is surpassingly ironic that the most powerful people in the world often are the ones who believe most firmly that sabbath is unrealistic. The ones you might think would have the right to doubt whether weekly rest is advisable would be those who live, like most of the Bible's original readers, within the horizons of subsistence agriculture and its terribly thin margins for error. Yet as our technological capacity has expanded and our economy

has generated undreamed-of wealth and opportunity for billions of people, many Americans seem to have become more convinced that a day of rest is unthinkable, even unpatriotic.

The unthinkable sabbath is closely related to the demands of advanced capitalism for a distinctly ungleaming-friendly level of productivity from capital assets. Factories operate three shifts, seven days a week, because that is the way to extract the maximum productivity from machinery. Costly buildings on costly land can return more in retail sales to their owners if they are open on Sundays. If you have promised your investors that you will squeeze every possible penny of productivity from the assets purchased with their dollars (that is, if you have been seduced into a contract or economic system that makes no provision for gleaning), a true sabbath starts to seem like an impossible indulgence. And to be sure—unlike agricultural land, animals and people—well-maintained machines can in fact operate round the clock and round the week. Even the most diehard sabbatarians rely on this unique feature of industrial technology if they do not switch off the electricity and other utilities altogether on Saturday night. Certain features of this very good world do not, in fact, have to be switched off to be kept good. (Some sources of electricity, in fact, such as hydroelectric and nuclear power, cannot be prudently disconnected on a weekly basis; they produce a steady output day after day.)

But what is thankfully true and good for these features of the physical world is not true and not good for creatures. Sabbath was made for humankind, and for the creatures with whom we share the world. And for people, animals and land (which is not an inert substance but a wondrously complex living system of fellow creatures), sabbath is not just realistic but so absolutely necessary that to ignore it is itself unrealistic. Faithful observance of the sabbath may or may not require that we idle a factory or a store one day a week, but it unreservedly requires that image bearers, and every creature that can only flourish when image bearers are properly exercising their dominion, be allowed to rest. Not to do so is idolatry—and idolatry, no matter how promising it seems at the beginning, is the ultimate and greatest unrealism.

So those who are stewards of capital goods like factories and stores must, if they are to be lastingly fruitful, provide a way for everyone affected by

their power to truly rest one day a week. Even in our hypercompetitive, gleamingless economy it is possible to observe an organization-wide sabbath. Many Christians are familiar with the privately held restaurant chain Chick-fil-A, which is closed every Sunday in consistently profitable defiance of retail wisdom, but the successful electronics retailer B&H, owned by Orthodox Jews, not only closes its massive (and endlessly tempting) Ninth Avenue store in Manhattan every Saturday in order to keep the sabbath, but turns away orders on its website for those twenty-four hours as well. If these businesses, operating in two of the most competitive segments of retail, can succeed, there is no reason that many more enterprises cannot follow suit.

In an individualistic society, sabbath can easily seem like a private question of personal piety. But few other disciplines reveal so directly that both idolatry and injustice are necessary categories for the stewardship of power. Personal sabbath observance is all well and good, but as Isaiah cried out six centuries before Christ, sabbath raises the even more pressing questions of how we are treating those over whom we have power:

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
 and oppress all your workers. . . .  
 If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
 from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
 if you call the sabbath a delight  
 and the holy day of the LORD honorable;  
 if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
 serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;  
 then you shall take delight in the LORD,  
 and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
 I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 58:3, 13-14)

Who depends on us for the exercise of their own image bearing? We are responsible not just for ensuring that we can rest one day out of seven but that they can too. In a consumer economy this includes not just the “workers” whom we may directly employ or supervise, but the people who serve us at gas stations, restaurants and retail establishments, and those who work behind the scenes to make our lives go smoothly, from the cus-

todial staff at our church to the employees of the local utilities. The point is not so much to avoid all commercial entanglements of any sort on the sabbath; that is not really possible in a complex economy. And in a religiously pluralistic society there may well be three different days of rest represented among the religions of those who serve us (Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews, and Sunday for Christians and *New York Times* readers). Rather we need to ask whether those who are directly or indirectly employed by us are free to honor the sabbath pattern of rest and work. If the answer is no, what might we do, whether through changing our patterns of consumption or advocating for different labor laws and practices, to include them in the circle of those who are able to play the true, sabbath-making and sabbath-taking Creator God?

If we do not ask these difficult questions and simply settle for piously observing our own private sabbaths, we run the risk of playing a false god—a god whose leisure is purchased at the price of others' labor and whose abundance comes at the expense of others' deprivation. True sabbath practice expands in ever increasing circles until every creature experiences the blessings of both meaningful work and abundant rest. If we are not helping to create and sustain systems that allow for sabbath, our own rest will be nothing more than an expression of privilege and power, and it will be, or should be, troubled by the prophets' denunciations.

## FROM SABBATH DAY TO SABBATH YEAR

From the barely imaginable practice of sabbath we turn to the truly inconceivable practices beyond it. In the book of Leviticus a weekly sabbath is just the bottom rung on a ladder of sabbath practices that extend over years and generations—for every seventh year, Israel was commanded to forgo active agriculture altogether:

Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. (Leviticus 25:3-5)

For an entire year the people of Israel would let the land lie fallow. Just as they bore the image of God by working the land, sowing in it and reaping from it, they would also bear the image of God by resting and letting the land rest.

Today, of course, we know that there are good agricultural reasons for letting fields “rest,” and even in biblical times there must have been some inkling that a fallow year would allow nutrients to be replenished and ecological diversity to be maintained. But if a weekly sabbath demanded a certain amount of faith and trust, a “sabbatical year” must have required tremendous discipline from people whose entire sustenance came from the land. It would require advance planning, storing up sufficient grain in the years preceding the sabbath year. It was a kind of gleanings to the seventh power, since during the sabbatical year the poor, who had no land of their own to harvest, were free to harvest anything that came up (Exodus 23:11).

But the sabbatical year’s implications were not just agricultural—they were cultural. People who did the demanding work of agriculture six years in a row would find themselves with very little to do for an entire year. What would replace the labor of agriculture if not all sorts of other kinds of culture? The seventh year would become an ideal time for pilgrimage, for worship and study, for sport and song. The seventh year ensured that even people whose existence was largely defined by subsistence would explore the broader and deeper implications of image bearing.

Most Westerners do not work directly with or on the land, but to have a healthy relationship to our own power we would be well advised to ask what a sabbatical year might mean for us. In our culture *sabbatical* is a term reserved almost exclusively for teachers and scholars (and the occasional fortunate pastor) who are granted a year off to allow their teaching to lie fallow and to pursue other callings. The sabbatical year in academia is not a vacation—“time off” without goals or accountability. Rather, it is an opportunity to expand and redirect one’s vocation, to explore what we may be called to next.

If weekly sabbaths seem out of reach for many of us, a sabbatical year must sound like fantasy. Assuming we do not work in an institutional setting like a university or church that will pay for our time, how could

we ever afford to withdraw from our day-to-day productive activities for an entire year?

This question was exactly what the Israelites asked about their own sabbatical year, and God had a very specific response recorded alongside the Levitical law: “Should you ask, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’ I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years” (Leviticus 25:20-21). The commandment came with the provision to keep it; all Israel had to do was be prepared to harvest the abundance in advance and steward it over the following years of rest and return to ordinary work.

And in fact, in Western societies we are familiar with the idea of laboring while planning and saving up for a future when our activity will not be economically productive. We call it “retirement”: many years of leisure after decades of hard work, ideally filled with enjoyable travel and time with extended family and friends. Many Americans have no trouble, at least in principle, with the idea of people saving up for their retirement years (though having the means and the will to save *enough* is a different matter).

As it turns out, retirement and sabbatical require similar amounts of time. If one were to start full-time work at twenty-one and retire at the age of sixty-nine, then hoped to enjoy an “active retirement” until, say, seventy-seven before being more constrained by the limitations of old age, the forty-eight years of work would be matched by eight years of retirement—exactly the 1-for-6 ratio of the sabbatical year.

Yet modern “retirement” is far less healthy than the 1-for-6 pattern of Leviticus because all the years of leisure are piled up at the end of one’s life. Two years of rest are not twice as satisfying as one, and ten years are assuredly not ten times as satisfying. Leisure has sharply diminishing returns, especially when there is no meaningful work ahead of us to which we might apply the insights and energy gained during our year of rest. Image bearers are not meant to take a permanent vacation from responsibility and creativity. The retirement model not only asks us to soldier through an entire working life without ever benefiting from the rest and refreshment of a sabbatical year, it gives us no wider cultural purpose for our retirement years than our own leisure and pleasure.

As more and more people who have the luxury of retiring are finding out, endless unproductive leisure is something to be avoided, not sought. A cruise may feel like heaven for two weeks, but it would feel like hell after two years. And at the same time, the gifts of modern medical care and the shift to less physically demanding work mean that there is no good reason for many people to cease working at sixty-five or sixty-nine. So why is there a vast industry designed to channel our planning and saving toward the dubious reward of retirement, and none designed to help us plan and save for periodic sabbaticals?

I recognize that there are vast complexities in implementing a sabbatical vision for any one individual, let alone a whole society. All I am really trying to do is to awaken us to our odd situation. Working without extended periods of rest, we dream, plan, save and strive for a vision of the good life that will come in our later years. But in practice that dream may turn out to be just a disappointing, diminishing form of idolatry. And should we discover at that point that retirement is not as satisfying as we had hoped, it will be difficult if not impossible to change course and make different choices. Meanwhile, we think Scripture's much more realistic, beneficial and achievable vision inconceivable.

The sabbatical year is both a discipline toward power and a discipline that tames power. Sabbaticals force us to relinquish our sense of indispensability. So they subvert the god playing that can afflict custodians and CEOs alike. The truth is that others are fully able to fill the roles we set aside. This humbling reality can help us return to work with a more sober sense of our own importance and abilities, as well as providing organizations with a deep "bench" of people who have grown in their capacities during one another's absence.

The benefits of sabbatical could apply to families as well as firms. After a stay-at-home mother has been parenting full time for the better part of a decade, couldn't the older children and the father grant her a sabbatical leave from many of her household responsibilities? They could learn to cook and clean in her place while she takes on a temporary assignment outside the home or pursues a formal or informal course of study.

At the same time as a practice of sabbatical years would tame our power, it would lead us toward true creative power. I have had two sabbaticals in

my life, year-long interruptions in my life's routine: first a year off between my sophomore and junior years of college, and then a year with no formal employment at age thirty-five after the magazine I had edited failed and our family moved to a new city. The first was a much overdue sabbath after fifteen years in school, all the more crucial for my spiritual health and vocational development given how much success and satisfaction I enjoyed in academic environments. Instead of spending more time in classrooms, I temped for a mid-level executive at a corporation in Boston, apprenticed at a retreat center in Georgia, and traveled around the eastern United States performing as a singer-songwriter to groups of three to thirty-three people in tiny halls and churches. Each of these was a profoundly humbling experience, but each was also an opportunity to meet people from a far wider range of regions, backgrounds and economic circumstances than I ever would have on my educational track.

I wouldn't have sought the second sabbatical, which came on the heels of failure. But that year allowed me to focus on settling our family into a new home, schools and community just as my wife was embarking on a challenging new work assignment. And in the quiet time in between I mulled over and eventually wrote the proposal for the book that became *Culture Making*.

These fallow years, which were not at all like vacations and were by no means easy, were profoundly formative for the person I have become. Whatever creative contributions I have managed to make to the world emerged largely from the crucible of these two years. My wife Catherine, meanwhile, has the great fortune to work for a college that makes sabbaticals possible for its faculty, and she too has benefited, along with our family, from these opportunities to stop, explore, reflect and seek a vision for the next phase of her calling.

Sabbaticals are a tremendous privilege in the most precise sense of the word: the accumulated benefits of past exercises of power. I realize that even raising the idea of a sabbatical year, in our unjust (that is, idolatrous) society, will provoke envy and discontent for many readers who feel they have no such option. But it is crucial that we recognize that the sabbatical year was a privilege *commanded by God* for the people of Israel. The Creator God is not an idol who extracts endless work while dangling the promise of

eventual leisure—he is an abundant God fully capable of providing everything we need to be faithful to his cosmic pattern of work and rest.

Why can't we imagine a sabbatical year being possible for every image bearer—for students in the midst of their years of schooling (the AmeriCorps national service program in the United States is an example), laborers after six years of hard work, fast-food workers who live from paycheck to paycheck, or CEOs who require “key man” insurance that implies their utter indispensability? The fault is not in the realism of the biblical pattern for life but our shared lack of faith and imagination, and our reluctance to work and save diligently in the six years in order to provide a way for our work to lie fallow in the seventh.

The point is not to erect another legalistic hurdle that neither we nor our children will be able to bear, but to hold out hope for a sabbath-shaped life that would both tame our power and greed and would release untold human capacity in the midst of, rather than at the end of, the years we are given on this earth. God intends this kind of abundance for all of his image bearers. Doing the hard and careful work to make sabbatical years possible for ourselves and our neighbors is one of the best contributions we could make to the flourishing of the world.

## JUBILEE

There is one more step on the biblical “sabbath ladder.” Beyond gleaning, sabbath days and sabbath years lies the “sabbath of sabbaths,” the seventh year of the seventh cycle of sabbatical years. This year, unlike the sabbath years, was not just a year of rest, letting crops and workers lie fallow. The Jubilee year was to be a time of dramatic activity, beginning with a trumpet blast and continuing with a mass migration that would make Thanksgiving in America or the New Year in China look tame.

For in the Jubilee year the people of Israel were to reset their status, privilege and power by returning land to its original owners and canceling the debts accumulated in times of personal or national crisis. Every forty-nine years the lucky and the hard-working would give up their excess gains, and the less fortunate and less diligent would get another chance to work the land that had belonged to their parents. A multigenerational system of indentured servitude and caste, like the one that had existed in

Gudiyatham before World Vision's intervention, would never emerge among a people who practiced Jubilee, because every generation would remember and anticipate the time when debts would be forgiven and privilege would be released. Jubilee would guard the image-bearing dignity of every member of Israel, undermining patterns of accumulated wealth that might eventually lead some to play god and others to shrink into the broken images of persistent poverty.

The premise of Jubilee was the goodness of God, the true God who had chosen a people from among the peoples, given them an abundant land, and called them to bear witness in the midst of the nations to his goodness. Through Jubilee, as through every other step on the sabbath ladder, Israel would be reminded, and would remind the world, that power was not an achievement but a gift, that prosperity comes not from idolatry or injustice but from gratitude and generosity, that wealth does not have to be hoarded and debts are meant to be forgiven.

Jubilee would be a way of playing the true God at the most visceral level of land, wealth and work—playing the God who cancels debts and gives the homeless a home. Imagine the joy of grandchildren moving back to land their grandparents had been forced to mortgage in time of famine or disease, the astonished gratitude of slaves seeing their documents of indenture ripped into pieces, the stunned delight of people who had been dutifully paying off debts realizing that next month they owed nothing. And imagine the relief and hope that might well up in the powerful who extended that kind of mercy and opportunity, the freedom from the subtle chains of privilege and the release from the slowly growing resentment of those less fortunate. You can understand why the result might be a full year of celebration and worship.

All this might have been true, but we have scant evidence that Israel ever actually obeyed the Jubilee instructions. Certainly there is no record in Scripture itself of a Jubilee year being carried out. We hear about it in the pages of Deuteronomy, as Israel prepares to enter the land; we hear about it again in the clarion call of Isaiah and the prophets to worship and justice; but in the historical books, not a word.

This is not so surprising. For the histories make it clear that Israel was constantly tempted by idolatry. Once in the land, surrounded by seem-

ingly powerful alternative gods and conformed to the prevailing social and economic systems those gods legitimated, God's chosen people faltered early and often, individually and systemically, in their worship and in their obedience. In the failure of Israel ever to implement the Jubilee year, we see the economic and cultural counterpart to the failure of Israel ever to fully cleanse their hearts of the temptation to run after other gods.

The Jubilee year, if practiced, would have led to a kind of flourishing that no human society has seen. But just as idolatry and injustice are linked, so are justice and worship. An Israel that never managed to worship the true God with a pure heart also never managed to play that true God to the depth of generosity that the Jubilee year would have required.

And so the Jubilee stood for Israel, as it does for us, on a distant horizon: the picture of what would happen if people so trusted their Maker and Redeemer that they did not need to cling to privilege and status; the promise to the downtrodden that one day they too would be flourishing image bearers with authority over part of God's good world; the warning that everything we cling to apart from God will one day be torn from us, that the only lasting good is the one that is given us as a gift. That Jubilee was never fully enacted is the same as saying that the true God was never fully worshiped and obeyed.

But Jubilee was never forgotten. The true God never gave up on his people and the flourishing that his image bearers were meant to bring. When Jesus began his ministry, he found the place in the scroll where Isaiah revived the hope of the Jubilee year and read it aloud (Luke 4). Wherever Jesus went, there were foretastes of Jubilee.

### LIBERTY THROUGHOUT THE LAND

Is Jubilee possible in our own time? We live in a vastly different economic and cultural world than the land-based economy of ancient Israel, and the nations of the earth are not subject to the same law that was given to God's chosen nation. But we will find echoes of Jubilee whenever individuals, families, communities and nations embrace the twin ideas of the cancellation of debts and the surrender of privilege.

Among the great innovations of Anglo-American law is the invention of bankruptcy. Before the invention of bankruptcy, those who ran up ex-

cessive debts were subject to debtor's prison—a one-way ticket to despair that, obviously, made it almost impossible to repay even a fraction of one's debts. The dependents of debtors were often left without any support and cut off from the prisoner. Bankruptcy replaced this dead-end system by providing a legal means for discharging obligations that cannot be repaid.

We don't normally think of bankruptcy as a good thing, and going bankrupt is no fun, by design. But the institution of bankruptcy is actually a little piece of Jubilee in an economic system. Bankruptcy ensures that debts do not ensnare generation after generation. It extends mercy and a measure of dignity even to debtors—in ordinary bankruptcies, for example, one cannot be forced to give up one's home no matter how great one's debts. In the United States, in an unmistakable echo of the biblical pattern, the cancelled debts of bankruptcy cease to appear on a credit report after seven years.

Oddly enough, the possibility of bankruptcy contributes to flourishing. Not long ago I had dinner with an attorney who represents creditors in bankruptcy cases. Every day he tries to collect money from debtors through the legal system. He has seen every possible abuse of the bankruptcy system, and no doubt the debtors on the other side sometimes resent his efforts on behalf of his clients. But he told me, "As a Christian, I am glad bankruptcy exists. We are so much better off as a society with it than without it." He laughed. "Sometimes my clients don't like to hear that. But it's true."

Bankruptcy provides even failed entrepreneurs a second, or even third or fourth, chance at creating wealth. It puts a limit on the damage that can be done to image bearing by even the most foolish financial choices. Of course bankruptcy comes with all the same moral hazards that the Jubilee year would have posed: why avoid debt if you know you'll never have to pay it back? And yet creditors find a way manage that risk. In the end, economic systems that provide for bankruptcy are more robust than those that do not, and nations with strong bankruptcy protections have more new businesses and economic vitality than those that do not. Like Jubilee itself, bankruptcy sounds like it could never work, but this impractical system actually makes room for a kind of flourishing that a merely practical system would not allow. It is a system for creatures, not would-be gods.

Another remarkable example of Jubilee-like patterns arose among a few extremely wealthy individuals at the turn of the twenty-first century. Led by American investor Warren Buffett and Microsoft founder Bill Gates, over eighty billionaires from around the world have signed a “Giving Pledge” to give at least half their assets to charity. For those of us without billions in assets, it is easy to be cynical about such a pledge: we’d be happy, we think, to keep half of a billion dollars for ourselves and give the rest away.

Of course the Giving Pledge is no vow of poverty, but neither was Jubilee. And to laugh off the public generosity of billionaires is to greatly underestimate the power of the false god of money. No one makes a billion dollars by accident. They make it by founding and tending enterprises that create wealth. And those enterprises and the wealth they create quickly become, for many who pursue them, false gods who ensure that their worshipers never, ever have enough. To give away money, in any substantial fraction of one’s assets, is to topple that false god. (If you doubt this is true, you can simply contemplate giving away half of your own assets. But I’m no billionaire! you may protest. True, but even with half your current assets you would probably seem as wealthy to the bottom billion of the world’s population as billionaires seem to you. Why would it be so hard to give away 50 percent?) The Giving Pledge is a sign of Jubilee—the privileged relinquishing their accumulated benefits, releasing them to the control of others so that others can tend and contribute to the world.

Money is just the most countable, fungible form of power. But even in a money-based economy, land, the focus of the biblical Jubilee, can still be significant. In many countries, especially the United States, the place where you live determines your access to perhaps the most important form of nonfinancial power in the world: primary and secondary education. School districts in the United States and many other countries vary drastically from one jurisdiction to another. Land in “good” school districts can command much higher prices than in “poor” school districts. Some children, through privilege, attend schools that are the envy of the world; others attend schools that teach little and only reinforce disappointment, chaos and failure.

What would Jubilee look like in a broken, geographically based educational system? I know more than one group of prestigious university graduates who have moved into urban neighborhoods with “poor” schools and are raising their children there. They could easily live in more affluent locations, but they choose to relinquish that option in order to make new friends, love new neighbors and contribute to the rebuilding of broken institutions. Similarly, I am told by reliable sources that a strikingly disproportionate number of successful candidates for Teach for America are motivated by their faith. They are investing their privilege—their elite educations and all the experiences and resources that equipped them to acquire them—in places where power seems distant and the world seems cruel. And every urban school has more than a few teachers and administrators who could easily find jobs elsewhere, but stay in difficult situations from a deep sense of calling.

These individual and communal decisions are remarkable. But if we are serious about Jubilee, we must ask what institutions and structures could be created or cultivated in our society to make it possible not just for powerful people to opt in to troubled places but for the less powerful to opt out. One of the most remarkable reforms in this area has been the ending of mass public housing in many American cities, replaced by “Section 8” vouchers that allow poor families to live in urban or suburban neighborhoods of their choosing. The demolition of huge apartment blocks of public housing has not been a simple matter, but it has had at least one beneficial effect: parents who once were limited to a single school district now have more choices about where their children grow up and go to school.

Such policies are never perfect, and the best policies are a poor substitute for transformed people who invest sacrificially in restoring the image in places where it has been lost. If ancient Israel was never able to obey the Jubilee laws, any more than it was able to worship and serve only the true Creator God, we will probably never see a full institutional expression of Jubilee in our own societies. But we can use our power, and surrender our privilege, in ways that anticipate the “acceptable year of the Lord.”