

# While on Vacation

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*A guilt-free guide to staying in love with God when taking time off.*

By Joe Graves

While on Vacation

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## Preface

Last year my wife and I took a vacation to a little town in Mexico. We went with nothing but an airplane ticket and a reservation at a little Airbnb apartment. As a pastor, I was hoping to leave behind all the busyness and stress that comes with the job. My spirit was longing for rest and a chance to enjoy myself. I wanted to sit on a beach, with a cold drink and enjoy the sunrise and sunset, and not be bothered by everything that fights for my attention every other day of the year. It was supposed to be a time to leave behind all my sermon preparation, writing assignments, prayer concerns, Bible study guides, and anything else that resembled work. I didn't want to read a book on church leadership. I didn't want to read a book on how to be a better Christian. It was time to take a break from Christian formation.

I wasn't in a bad place. I wasn't angry with God. I wasn't trying to run from God. I wanted to be with God—I just wanted a break from everyday life. Is there a way to keep our spiritual lives alive while leaving our work behind?

It's hard to separate one's spiritual life and work when they become intertwined. For example, whenever I opened my journal, I was reminded of all the chores I had been working on as a pastor—my sermon notes, small group ideas, and to-do lists. When I opened my bible, I was reminded of all the lessons I needed to write. When I prayed, I was consumed with all my church-related prayer requests. I wanted to grow more in love with God on vacation without feeling like I was working. I wanted to spend time with God every morning, but I wanted to be free from everything I had intentionally left behind. More than just a break from work, I wanted a break from all the pressure that comes with being a Christian.

While it's important to continually grow and become better people, I also believe God calls us—at times—to rest and enjoy ourselves and not worry about everything we need to be working on. I also believe that during times of rest and fun, God still wants to be a part of our lives. God isn't only interested in being with us when life is tough, or when we have issues we need to work on—God likes us even when we're having fun.

I began to long for a devotional that would capture this sentiment. I didn't want something that would give me the next five tasks I needed to work on or teach me some profound truth that I could preach from the pulpit. I wanted a simple journal that was free from the burden of everyday life but crafted in a way that I could enjoy the presence of God while I was away. I wanted a journal that helped me realize that God enjoys my vacations as much as I do.

I began to search the scriptures for places where God invited us to times of joy, rest, and fun, and turned these passages into the reflections that you will read. What follows is the devotional I wish I had the last time I was on vacation.

Enjoy,

Joe Graves

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## Introduction

Does God want us to have fun?

Scripture has a lot to say on a lot of topics. More than anything, it tells the story of God's relationship with God's people. We are fragile, selfish, and often stubborn people—so the story often follows the same cycle over and over again: we mess up, God tells us to do better, we feel bad, God tells us how much he still loves us. Nestled into this cycle is rich theology, conversations on suffering, hope for the future, and ultimately God's desire to make all things new. More than anything, it's a story of how much we need God and how much God loves us. This is the normal life cycle of our spiritual lives, and that's why most of Scripture speaks to some element of this cycle.

There is something missing from this, though. What about times when we just set aside everything we need to work on (including ourselves) and simply try and enjoy life with good food, fun entertainment, and relaxing evenings? What about times when we want to step outside the normal cycle and grind of our spiritual lives? Where does that fit into the story of God? Is there room in a biblical worldview for vacations? For time away?

While I believe the answer is “yes,” it's not as simple as that.

You see, we don't usually need God's help to enjoy ourselves. In fact, most of the ways we try to enjoy ourselves is futile and downright destructive. As such, the Scriptures tend to tell us to avoid these tendencies and focus on loving God and others. More often than not, pleasure, sleep, and play are viewed very negatively in Scripture because they are often exploited for selfish reasons. They are used to distract us from God, from each other, and from our ultimate purpose. They can be the catalyst for unhealthy behaviors and addictions. Yet pleasure, sleep, and play aren't always evil.

There are glimpses in scripture that suggest that play and pleasure are good things—enough glimpses to suggest that while we should spend most of our life striving to live more intentional lives, there are times when God just wants us to stop, rest, and enjoy ourselves.

At the heart of this conversation is the concept of *play*. What is play exactly?

Maybe you've heard it said that “The end does not justify the means.” While this might be true, we can reword this only slightly to come to a definition of play. Playing is when we focus on the means without any concern for the end. It's all about the journey, without any attention given to the end. Play is actually a subject some scientist study rather seriously. According to Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin in their book *Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation*, play is defined as this:

Apart from its many different colloquial usages, “play”—as used by biologists and psychologists—is a broad term denoting almost any activity that is not “serious” or “work.”

If we accept this definition (which seems good enough to me), then theologically we need to ask ourselves: Does God want us to always be seriously working? It would seem the answer is no. We have clear teaching on the importance of rest. God has written into the fabric of creation a day each week to cease our work, as well as weeklong festivals where the people gather together to relax, eat, and celebrate.

But what about being serious? Should our time away from work be somber?

This is a trickier question to answer. When we explore the historic Christian faith, we encounter many examples of very solemn views of rest. The most obvious example is found in an early expression of Christianity in America. The Puritans—who have played an integral role in shaping our American values—valued the Sabbath, but they also saw it as yet another day for serious time with God. They gathered on Sunday morning as a community, and with stern faces, listened to the preacher go on and on about the importance of work and the vices of idleness. As the famous Puritan saying goes, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” They worked very hard at keeping the Sabbath a time of serious devotion—and they seemed somewhat oblivious to the irony of it.

A number of strict rules (what became known as blue laws) were applied to the wider community. For example, Alice Morse Earle, in her book *The Sabbath in Puritan New England* shares a number of examples of ridiculous charges brought before people regarding these blue laws. Here are just a few historic cases:

In the latter part of the seventeenth century a wicked fisherman presented before the Court and fined for catching eels on Sunday; another "fined twenty shillings for sailing a boat on the Lord's Day;" while in 1670 two lovers, John Lewis and Sarah Chapman, were accused of and tried for "sitting together on the Lord's Day under an apple tree in Goodman Chapman's Orchard,"—so harmless and so natural an act. In Plymouth a man was "sharply whipped" for shooting fowl on Sunday; another was fined for carrying a grist of corn home on the Lord's Day, and the miller who allowed him to take it was also fined. Elizabeth Eddy of the same town was fined, in 1652, "ten shillings for wringing and hanging out clothes." A Plymouth man, for attending to his tar-pits on the Sabbath, was set in the stocks. James Watt, in 1658, was publicly reproofed "for writing a note about common business on the Lord's Day, at least in the evening somewhat too soon." A Plymouth man who drove a yoke of oxen was "presented" before the Court, as was also another offender, who drove some cows a short distance "without need" on the Sabbath.

From this perspective, it seems that God commanded we cease from our work, but that didn’t mean we should cease from taking ourselves seriously. Whether you agree with this stance or not, it’s safe to say that this attitude has in penetrated many of our Christian communities.

In the Old Testament, rest was viewed in a similar way. With many biblical restrictions, keeping the Sabbath became an oppressive law for the people of Israel to obey. In fact, the Puritans were acting in a very biblical way—in that they were pulling many of their expectations from the Old Testament. But when we turn to the New Testament, we see a different picture presented by Jesus. In fact, it’s one of the major points of contention between him and the religious leaders of his time (and would likely be a place of contention with the Puritans as well). He allows his disciples to do all kinds of “unlawful” activities on the Sabbath with no reproof. At one point, he even goes as far as to say, “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27, NLT).

Imagine Jesus showing up to a New England court case right when one of the blue law cases was being brought before the judge. He’s put on the stand as a professional witness, a Rabbi and scholar, and he says something like this in defense of the person who’s broken the blue law. I can only imagine what the judge would do!

Jesus didn't think we should take our rest very seriously because rest is a gift, and every good gift should be enjoyed. This is why Jesus attended weddings, and most of his ministry happened around dinner tables, with good food and sweet drinks. He engaged in these kinds of social events so often he even gained the reputation of being a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11:19). I am confident that he did not over eat or get drunk, but it does seem that he spent an enough time in situations that from a distance one could suggest he was. In other words, Jesus had fun, and he was having such a good time that some assumed he must be living in sin. How else could he be enjoying himself so much? It's true. It's possible to have so much fun that when others see you, they just assume you must be doing something vile. Jesus was that kind of rabbi.

There's an old prayer nestled in the ancient liturgy of the early church. It's a prayer to be offered before one goes on a journey, and near the end of the prayer, it asks God to allow the traveler to return home "rich in the good of this world and in heaven's blessings." I think this is a great prayer for any time of play. We hope to get away and encounter both the beauty and good the world has to offer. But this beauty would be nothing without God's blessing. We want to enjoy the stuff in this world that is good and beautiful, with God's blessing. We ask God to bless our fun so that we might enjoy ourselves all the more.

What follows is my attempt to capture how God wants us to enjoy ourselves. It's a devotional; it's vacation journal; but it's also an attempt at developing a theology of play.

We include sixteen devotions, one to read before vacation, one for after, and fourteen during. If you are taking a week off, you can read two devotions a day, one in the morning and one at night. If you're taking two weeks off, you can read one day. If you are taking three or more weeks off, you can read one every other day, or as you feel lead. Each devotional will reflect on what God has to say about having fun and enjoying times of rest. While it gives you permission to enjoy yourself, it will also remind you that joy was God's idea in the first place.

Near the beginning of this book there is a section for those who plan to travel as well as a section for those who plan to stay home. Both sections offer some tips and activities to help enjoy your vacation wherever it's taking place. At the back of the book you will find a place to rate your experiences, ample journaling pages, and a number of Sudoku puzzles. Along with all of this, we bookmarked the beginning and end of this book with coloring pages. In short, we hope to include everything you might want while taking time off.

This devotional is designed to be your companion for those times when you want to rest, enjoy yourself, have fun, and relish your time away from everyday life, but you don't want to leave God behind. Instead, you want to have fun *with* God. Whether you're on vacation, or—in the words of Bill Murray's character in *What about Bob?*—you just want to "take a vacation from your problems," then this devotional is for you.

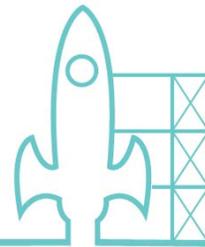
I hope you find this devotional to be the ultimate guilt-free guide for staying in love with God while you're taking time off from the world of everyday stresses.

# Preparing for Vacation

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“-tomorrow is our permanent address  
and there they’ll scarcely find us (if they do,  
we’ll move away still further: into now”

— E.E. Cummings, Selected Poems



**My vacation starts in t-minus \_\_\_\_\_ day(s), \_\_\_\_\_ hour(s), \_\_\_\_\_ minute(s).**

## Something to look Forward to

*Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?*

*Romans 8:24a, NRSV*

The panel of pastors filled the front part of the conference room just as you would imagine any panel in any conference room at any convention. What might be somewhat different is that they had been assembled to talk about the importance of rest and relaxation to a group of young clergy. We sat and listened to these pastor's stories of struggling to find balance in their life and ministry before the moderator finally opened it up for questions.

A young pastor sitting in front of me raised her hand eager to ask a question. When they called on her she began to talk about her difficulties at her church. In summary, the lead pastor had dropped a lot of work onto her plate, and she was feeling rather overwhelmed and overworked. The panel engaged with this pastor, asking questions and trying to figure out how to lighten her load. They threw out options and discussed possibilities for about ten ministries, but it became clear to everyone in the room that there was no helping this pastor. It's not that she didn't want to be helped, it's just that the things she had to do, had to be done. There was no way around it: she would have a couple of hard months ahead of her. There was no way to balance things out. She just needed to get the work done.

When the panel seemed exhausted of suggestions, the moderator offered his advice (who happened to also be my senior pastor). He looked at the young pastor and said with a kind of confidence that comes from years of experience, "Book a cruise."

There was a little bit of nervous laughter from his suggestion, but it didn't distract him.

"Seriously," he continued, "book a cruise, or a flight. Schedule a vacation for you and your family for a week or two once you're done with all this work. Some times work is hard and there's nothing you can do about it, other than plow through. So schedule something for when it's all done. Having something to look forward to will help you get through the tough times."

It was the only advice offered in this particular conversation that seemed to resonate with the room.

Life is hard, and sometimes we can't do anything about it. We schedule time off and plan great adventures or times to sit at home and nap, because we need something to look forward to. We need to be reminded that life will continue after all the work and exhaustion is done.

We need hope that good things will come again.

If you've started reading this devotional, then you likely have a vacation already scheduled. It could be tomorrow or a month from now. Either way, there's something beautiful about having special events to look forward to. Until your vacation starts, work hard. Plow through the hard stuff. But as soon as your vacation begins, let go and allow yourself to reap the joy that comes from taking time off.

# When Heading Out of Town

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“It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end.”

— Ernest Hemingway

## A Prayer for the Journey

O God, my own God, true and living Way:

as you went with your servant Joseph on his travels, so, Master,

Guide me, your servant, on this present journey.

Protect me against trying circumstances,

bad weather,

and every trick that may be directed against my welfare.

Give me peace and strength;

Grant me the prudence I need if I am to act, as I ought,

in accordance with your commandments.

Bring me back home rich in the good of this world

and in heaven's blessings.

For kingship, power, and glory are yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

now and always, age after age.

Amen.

Taken from *Early Christian Prayers* by A. Hamman, O.F.M.

# When Staying Home

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“If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own back yard.”

— L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

## A Prayer for Your Home

May God give His blessing to the house that is here.  
God bless this house from roof to floor,  
From wall to wall,  
From end to end,  
From its foundation and in its covering.

In the strong name of the Triune God  
All disturbance cease,  
Captive spirits freed,  
God's Spirit alone  
Dwell within these walls

We call upon the Sacred Three  
To save, shield and surround  
This house, this home,  
This day, this night  
And every night.

*From “Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals” by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro*

# My Staycation

*Here are some things to consider when taking your vacation at home.*

## My Staycation

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*turn on your  
email auto-reply*



*purchase groceries  
ahead of time*



*Clean the house  
ahead of time*



*Don't watch the news*



*Log off social media*



*Pay someone to  
clean the house*



*Sketch out your  
schedule*



*Make list of the  
movies you want  
to watch*



*Pamper yourself  
(fresh flowers, fine  
china, expensive  
treats)*



*Compile a vacation  
playlist*



*Light some candles*



*Get a massage*



*Prepare fresh linens*



*Make a list of  
the local places  
you've always  
wanted to visit*



*Order, borrow, or  
track down that book  
you always wanted to  
read.*



*Try a new recipe  
or make reservations  
at favorite  
restaurants*



*Hide, cover, or put  
away your clocks and  
watches*



*Have the post office  
hold the mail*

# Your Vacation Starts **Now!**

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*“The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.”*

*— Eleanor Roosevelt*



## Your Work Can Wait

*So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.*

*And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.*

*Genesis 1:27–2:2, ESV*

Throughout our history, Americans have had a love-hate relationship with vacation for a couple of reasons. As mentioned already, it was believed in the religious landscape that leisure time was an unholy practice. But it was more than just the religious culture that promoted this idea—it had a political element as well. America was forged as a protest of the ideal of Great Britain, and one of these values was the leisure lifestyle lived by the lazy upper class and royalty. Americans believed that their freedom was only possible from having a strong work ethic. This is how Cindy Aron explains it in her book *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*:

Vacationing generated fear and anxiety among the nineteenth-century middle class, because vacationers were people at leisure and leisure remained problematic. Work, discipline, and industry were the virtues that allegedly counted for the success and well-being not only of individuals but of the nation itself. Conversely, leisure and idleness could be sources of moral, spiritual, financial, and political danger. Reconciling their need and desire for extended periods of rest and recreation with their commitment to work remained a central struggle for middle-class Americans.

It's not hard to see how this mindset has played itself out in American culture. Talk to anyone who works full time, and they will likely resonate with the struggle of taking time off. On the other hand, talk to anyone with strong traditional values about what's wrong with America and they are likely to discuss the dangers of laziness. While it might be true that some generations are lazier than others, it's not fair to say that working harder and longer is going to produce the salvation we long for. When we look at scripture, we see a different picture presented.

When God created the world, he put men and women in it and said: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it . . .” (Genesis 1:8, ESV). In other words, right after their creation, God set them to work. The world was their canvas, and they had the job of shaping it. This happened on the sixth day—they were created and sent out to work in a world with unlimited possibilities and no end in sight. But on the seventh day, God rested, and commanded us to do the same. In other

words, God said to the first humans on the sixth day, “Okay, get to work. The world is yours! Go ahead and start exploring and plowing and building—there’s so much work to do! So get started with it!” And then the sun sets and the first two humans are still busy working in this new world, so God interrupts: “Yes, I want you to work . . . but today is a day of rest. Tomorrow—all that work you’re going to do can wait till tomorrow.”

When God invited the first humans to begin their work, there was clearly no end in sight, but that didn’t stop God from telling them their work could wait. If we go back to the birth of this nation, we might see work as the means to success, but if we go back to the birth of this world, we will see that it was only a balance between work and play that would produce the progress we long for.

There’s never a good time to get away from our work, but like Adam and Eve, we need to learn that the world will keep spinning even if we stop working. Maya Angelou explains it like this in her essay “Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now”:

Every person needs to take one day away. A day in which one consciously separates the past from the future. Jobs, family, employers, and friends can exist one day without any one of us, and if our egos permit us to confess, they could exist eternally in our absence. Each person deserves a day away in which no problems are confronted, no solutions searched for. Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us.

We should all work hard, but we should also take a break from our work. Time away is a chance to turn off our phones, refrain from checking our emails, and stop worrying about everything that has been left undone. When our vacation is over, our work will be waiting for us. Until then, let’s not worry about it.

*What part of your work are you having the hardest time letting go of?*

## Vacation was God's Idea

*Celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. For seven days celebrate the festival to the Lord your God at the place the Lord will choose. For the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.*

*Deuteronomy 13–15, NIV*

The Old Testament has a bad reputation. While it's true that God is often tough on his people, and the law does show us our weaknesses, it's also unfair to think of the entire Old Testament as angry and oppressive. For example, written into the law are a number of festivals that God told the people to observe. This might sound less exciting than it really is, so let me reword it a bit: the people were commanded to throw a party.

Imagine that your church is developing a policy for how the church will run, and one of your board members suggests: "Let's make it mandatory that every year we stop working and we throw a party, just because!"

It sounds like a strange policy for a church, but, honestly, I'd go to that church!

This is kind of what's happening in Deuteronomy. God commands his people to throw a number of different festivals throughout the year. One of them was called the festival of booths. It was to happen in the fall, right after the harvest was gathered and the wine was pressed. In other words, after the busiest season of the year, after everyone has spent long hours working in the fields, God commanded them to relax and have some fun. And because it was after the harvest, there was sure to be plenty of food to eat and wine to drink.

The festival was simple. In an attempt to remember the days, they wandered in the wilderness, they would live for a week in homemade tents and offer sacrifices. While some of the sacrifices couldn't be eaten, others could. In other words, the people would leave their homes, pop up some tents, light up a fire, open up a bottle of wine, and Bar-b-q for a whole week! While this might not be your dream vacation, I know a lot of people who would love it—and it was all God's idea! And just to be sure that there wasn't any confusion on *why* they were camping out for the week, God tells them: "be joyful at your festival." God wanted them to have a good time.

I love that God says to them "Be joyful at *your* festival." Often, God speaks of everything being God's, but this festival wasn't for God. It wasn't God's festival. It was a festival given to the people. It was *their* festival—a gift from God, and through this celebration, *their* joy would be complete.

It has always been God's plan for his people to escape the mundane busyness of life for a week of set-apart, joyous living. In other words, God invented vacations.

God wants you to take time aside, every once in a while, to leave the everyday pressures behind, and remember what it feels like to simply enjoy him with others.

*How would your attitude about your time away change if you viewed it as God's idea?*

## Stop Feeling Guilty

*Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”*

*The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”*

*Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*

*Nehemiah 8:10–12, NIV*

The Jewish people had returned from captivity and were tasked with rebuilding the temple and wall around Jerusalem. It was an exhausting time. They were under attack by enemies on all sides; faced famines, drought, and wildfires; and ended up rather discouraged. They did what we often do when we get tired and discouraged—they retreated to their homes. They gave up on the task at hand.

The prophets had to push them along. This was also a tough job. But finally—after all that they had gone through—they were done. As they gathered together, the priest read from the law. God’s words begin to cut to their heart, and the people were overwhelmed with guilt. They had a lot to be ashamed of—they had worked hard on building their own houses instead of God’s. They had been proud. They were guilty of living selfish lives. They were imperfect people, and God’s words struck them in that personal place between what they’d done and what they’d left undone.

The people hear God’s words read and they fall to their face in regret. In some ways, this was what was expected of people when God’s words were read, which makes Nehemiah’s response all the more surprising. He tells them to go eat choice food and sweet drinks. He has the priest calm the people, telling them to stop grieving.

They are face-first on the ground, bent over in regret and repentance, and it’s as if Nehemiah says, “Stop your crying. Get up. Eat some good food and enjoy yourself, *for the joy of the Lord is your strength*” (c.f. Nehemiah 8:10).

The people didn’t deserve a break. They didn’t deserve to eat and drink and have fun. They didn’t deserve a good time, but that’s exactly what they *needed*. They were weak—we all are. They weren’t perfect, but sitting in their guilt wasn’t going to help anything. Instead, they were told to take a day off. Have fun. Take a vacation. They needed to become stronger, and having time to enjoy life was one of the ways God would give them strength.

The people end up leaving to try and do what has commanded them, and it’s in the process of getting their party started that they “understood the words that were spoken to them.” You see, they were so busy feeling bad about their past behavior that they were unable to understand the Word of God.

Guilt might feel holy, but it can actually blind you to the truth of Scripture. Guilt can make it impossible to understand what God wants for us. If you want to really understand God's Word, be open to having a little fun.

In the very next chapter, Nehemiah will invite them into a season of repenting, but before they can do that, they need to find the joy of the Lord—for it's the joy of the Lord that will carry them through their repentance. In other words, you might have stuff you need to work on, but it's okay to take some time off from your problems. It's okay to leave your guilt behind for a season.

If we believe guilt is the road to the heart of God, we are severely mistaken. Joy is the road to the heart of God. As C.S. Lewis explains in his article "The Weight of Glory":

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

God has some good plans in store for you, so be courageous in how you seek joy. Look deeper. Seek further. Do not be easily pleased. Follow the advice of Nehemiah, and take a holiday. Eat some good food, drink some sweet drinks, and simply enjoy the Lord for a while. It's only then that you will find yourself able to get back to the hard work of growing into the person you were created to be.

*What kind of problems in your life do you need to put on pause so you can enjoy this time God has given you?*

## An Extra Layer of Joy

*Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday.*

*Esther 8:15–17, ESV*

Esther was a tale of survival. The Jewish people were living in Exile at the hands of their enemies and through a series of unfortunate events, they were soon to be exterminated by the empire. Thankfully, God had strategically placed Esther and Mordecai in a place of influence. Because of their crafty wisdom and bold courage, they were able to convince the king to spare their people.

When the people were finally safe, word began to spread. You can imagine how excited everyone was. The passage says that they were filled with gladness, joy, and honor. Wherever this edict reached, the people threw a feast and declared a holiday. They celebrated!

Joy is only natural when you've been through a tough season and you're finally living on the other side of it. Joy is a byproduct of celebration.

Often when we go on vacation, it's because we're celebrating something. It might be your honeymoon, anniversary, or way of treating yourself because you finally made it through a tough season in your life. My wife and I went on vacation when we graduated seminary, not only because we were in a desperate need of time away, but because we wanted to celebrate. I'm sure you've gone on vacations like this too.

When we make it past a milestone—all the more if the journey was difficult—we nearly always feel good celebrating on the other side. Celebration is something we see often in Scripture. God walks with us in the tough times so He can celebrate with us in the good ones.

It's possible to go on vacation without celebrating anything in particular, but why would you want to? If we stop and paused long enough, I'm confident we could nearly always think of something worth celebrating.

If you want to add another layer of joy to your time away why not dedicate your trip to something you're celebrating? If there's nothing obvious or monumental that comes to mind, why not do something simple? You can celebrate the fact that you made it through another year at your job or in your marriage. You can celebrate that your last check-up didn't reveal any cavities, or the fact that your friend finally gave their life to Christ, or after years of bitterness, your parents decided to go back to church. If you search long enough, you'll find something worth celebrating and when you do, your trip will gain an extra layer of depth.

For the Jewish people living during the time of Esther, their journey was far from over. They would have many more trials ahead of them, but that didn't stop them from celebrating the good they experienced in the moment. Your journey is far from over, and there are bound to be many trials

ahead, but there's nothing unholy about stopping every once in a while to give thanks for the good that has happened.

If you look long enough, you'll find something worth celebrating, and finding something to celebrate is just another way to ensure your time away has an extra layer of joy.

*What in this world do you find worth celebrating?*

## God's Wants to Give You Something

*Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*

*Genesis 2:1–3, NIV*

*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 your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 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.*

*Exodus 20:9–11, NIV*

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

*Matthew 11:28–30, NIV*

There are times in my life when I intentionally avoid certain people because I know if they see me, I will end up with more work to do. This started when I was a kid. I could get out of housework if I avoided being seen by my mother. If she didn't see me, then she might forget I'm around and one of my brothers would get lucky enough to do the dishes. I've tried similar tricks with some of the bosses I've had over the years. If I'm honest, I might have even tried this with my wife.

While it's usually just an immature and selfish thing to do, sometimes it stems from my innate desire to rest. I am often overworked to the point that I am legitimately afraid of what might happen if I add anything else to my list, so I avoid the people who have the power to add tasks to that list: my bosses, parents, spouses, children, coworkers, and friends.

I fear I do this with God as well. I wonder if you do too?

God often calls us to really hard work. He sends us on tough missions. He invites us to overcome overwhelming obstacles. So sometimes, when we're tired and just need to rest, we might avoid God. Sure, we still cry out to Him. We might even talk to Him—but we don't make eye contact. And we don't stop long enough to listen. We don't ask: “God, what do you have for me today?” because we honestly couldn't handle anything else.

This fear is reasonable but ultimately ungrounded. God does ask a lot of us, but He also worked days and seasons of rest into the very fabric of creation. Rest is one of the Ten Commandments! And as it says in Matthew, the prize Jesus promises to give to those who come to him is rest.

In other words, if you look God in the eyes and ask, “What do you have for me today?” there’s a one in seven chance God will say “rest.” Those are pretty good odds.

While on vacation, you might hesitate opening yourself up to the voice of God out of fear God might ask something more of you—and honestly, He might—but He might not. Either way, God knows you’re on vacation. God knows you need seasons of rest. In fact, God sees rest as one of the gifts he likes to provide to his children. So don’t avoid God out of fear that it might end up producing more work for you. Go to God, and he might give you so much peace and joy and contentment that you’ll experience a kind of rest that is far better than anything you’ve ever experienced on your own.

*What would it look like to go to God expecting Him to give you the kind of playful rest you long for?*

## Jesus Knew How to Throw a Party

*On the third day, there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."*

*John 2:1–10, NRSV*

Jesus and his disciples were at a wedding. It's notable that the writer of John takes the time to point out that Jesus attended this social function. Weddings during this time were more than just a one-day event—they often lasted for at least a week and would involve the whole community.

Later in his career, everywhere Jesus went all eyes would be on him. Even at a casual social event—like dinner with a tax collector—the tabloids would light up about the scandal! Jesus became rather famous, or infamous depending on your perspective. But unlike most of his stories, at this wedding Jesus is just in the crowd. He doesn't have some kind of profound lesson. He doesn't give a speech or even a wedding toast. He doesn't tell someone about the kingdom of God, or the love of God, or the truth of God—he's just at a wedding. Even when he performs a miracle you get the sense that it's not something he wants to do. And it's not something he uses later as a sermon illustration or profound teaching tool. He's just at the wedding, and he happens to turn some water into wine.

It's almost strange to imagine that there was a time in Jesus' life where he was just another person in the crowd. There was a time—at least in his early life—when he wasn't the center of attention. There was a time where Jesus just hung out with people for the sake of hanging out with them.

While at the party, they faced a serious problem. They ran out of wine! The servants weren't sure what they were going to do, but Jesus' mother had a plan. She asked Jesus to use his power to help them out. At first Jesus wasn't interested. Jesus was sure that it wasn't time for him to start his ministry. In a way, it's like Jesus was waiting for the perfect moment to execute his first miracle. But his mother wouldn't let up, and Jesus does the impossible.

This would be Jesus' first miracle ever recorded, and it's a pretty impressive trick to pull off at a wedding. Yet this miracle isn't the most impressive part of the story. The more impressive part is that people actually liked the wine Jesus made. In fact, they loved it! They considered it the best wine they had had so far that evening! Think about it: Jesus' wine wasn't just utilitarian wine; it was artisanal wine. Jesus was a craft winemaker. Jesus was a vintner.

Jesus, somehow, knew how to make good wine. It shouldn't surprise us since God invented the ability to taste and dreamed up the many healthy and delicious ways to enjoy life. Jesus—better than us—understands what hits the palate well, and so his wine didn't disappoint. It was delicious.

The first miracle Jesus ever performs is turning water into delicious wine. It didn't save someone's life. It didn't save someone from the fires of hell. It didn't save someone from doubt, storms, pain, suffering, or anything else, but it did save the party.

Jesus cares about the experience, even when the experience isn't dealing with eternal matters.

Jesus wants us to enjoy the good in life.

You're likely never to eat, drink, or experience anything quite as delicious as what Jesus could craft—even though there are some places I bet come pretty close. Thus, there's no greater person to bring with you when you're spending time away than the ultimate vintner, Jesus Christ.

Jesus doesn't want you to feel bad about enjoying yourself. He wants to hang out with you. He wants to help keep the party alive.

*Have you felt, tasted, seen, or experienced something beautiful that reminded you of the goodness of God?*

## How to Avoid a Purpose Driven Vacation (and Why You Should)

*I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.*

*I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;  
I refused my heart no pleasure.  
My heart took delight in all my labor,  
and this was the reward for all my toil.  
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done  
and what I had toiled to achieve,  
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;  
nothing was gained under the sun.*

*Ecclesiastes 2:1–3, 10–11, NIV*

Solomon longed for meaning. He was seeking a purpose-driven life. In his search, he went down the road of pleasure. He removed all boundaries and said “yes” to every form of pleasure. When he looked back on his life, he said it was meaningless.

Now, it’s only fair to suggest that he finds most parts of his life meaningless, so we can’t put too much weight in his words. But it’s true. Often, pleasure—untamed and without boundaries—is not only meaningless, but it’s also rather dangerous. It can ruin a life. Yet, some argue that even short-lived pleasure—like a good vacation—can also be meaningless. I sense that Solomon would agree. *Holidays are meaningless! A chasing after the wind!*

I’m tempted to argue because vacations actually have an important function in our lives. Yet, I think I’d rather explore the possibility that vacation is actually meaningless. I’ll submit to the notion that holidays are meaningless because I think that’s part of the point.

A number of years ago, Rick Warren released his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*. It was a best-seller not only because it’s a beautiful book with a powerful message, but because it seeks to answer a longing we all have, the same longing Solomon had: we want to live lives that are intentional. We want to live life on purpose. Enjoying pleasures doesn’t always fit into this view of life. They’re like chasing the wind. Solomon claims that “nothing was gained under the sun!”

What if instead we just stopped chasing the wind? Holidays are meant to be a break. Simply put, if you go on a holiday hoping to accomplish some great purpose in your life, you will be disappointed. You can’t catch the wind, and you won’t find your ultimate meaning in your time off. You can only find that kind of meaning in God.

The point of vacation isn’t to be an extension of your fast-paced, crammed, over-scheduled intentional lives. It’s a chance to relax. It’s a chance to stop chasing the wind, and instead, allow the

wind to blow on by while you enjoy a cold drink on a warm beach or a cup of coffee on the porch of a secluded cabin.

Why try and catch the wind at all when you can let it roll over you? Why not let the wind keep moving on down the beach? —it's not your problem, not while you're away. And it's okay, nothing will be gained under the sun (other than maybe a tan), but that's kind of the point: it's a chance to live life without the pressure of gaining more. Vacation can be a chance to empty yourself of the ever longing to accomplish more. For this moment in time, don't look to accomplish something meaningful.

If you want your vacation to mean something, don't go on a vacation; go on a mission trip. On the other hand, if enough of what you do throughout the year means something—if you live enough of your life on purpose—and you want a break from all that intentional living, then enjoy a holiday. Take a vacation. Take a day off. And sure, some of what you do might be of lasting value—but it might not, and that's okay.

Ultimately Solomon says pleasure is meaningless, but he concludes by saying, “A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God” (Ecclesiastes 2:24).

So relax. Eat, drink, and be merry. Vacation doesn't need to be another outlet in your life for some kind of purpose-driven madness of chasing after the wind—the rest of your year is for that kind of toil. Today, just relax and do something enjoyable—even if it is meaningless.

*Are you okay with doing something that is truly pointless while on vacation? Do you think God makes room for meaninglessness in your life?*

## There's a Time for Everything

*There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every activity under the heavens:  
a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance,  
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,  
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,  
a time to search and a time to give up,  
a time to keep and a time to throw away,  
a time to tear and a time to mend,  
a time to be silent and a time to speak,  
a time to love and a time to hate,  
a time for war and a time for peace.  
Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, NIV*

There's a time for everything—that's obvious. The problem is that we don't always have a say on what time it is.

This passage is often read at funerals and encouraged people during tough times. When life is hard, we want to know it'll get better again, which is probably why most people avoid this passage when life is going well. If life can get better when things are bad, then the opposite is also true.

When we're looking to relax and enjoy ourselves, we tend to set aside time for all the enjoyable parts of life. In fact, the perfect break from everyday life is when we can do everything on this list except for the bad ones. It's meant to be a time to plant, heal, build, laugh, and dance. It's a time to embrace, a time to mend, a time to love, and a time for peace. We just hope the opposite isn't true. We pray that it's not a time spent being consumed with weeping, mourning, tears, hate, or war. That's our expectation. Sadly, this isn't always true. And it's not what it means when it says, "there's a time and place for everything."

You see, these parts of life—the good and the bad—are tied together in a rather intricate dance, and we can't always say when or where one happens verses the other. Sometimes, when you take a break from everyday life, it doesn't work out as pleasantly as you hoped. You might be on vacation on a beach with your family when the sky gets overcast right at the same moment you realize the show you were going to that evening has been canceled. Or you might be sitting on your back porch with your warm cup of coffee, ready to take some much needed alone time, when your in-laws decide to stop by.

Time away might not be perfect. But trying to make it perfect isn't what time away is all about. It's less about how great life is, and more about your attitude toward it. There's no better way to ruin time away than to insist on everything being perfect. When we're tired, our plans are ruined, people are driving us crazy, or we hear some bad news, then all our hopes of having quality time can feel ruined.

Of course, we hope our vacation will be perfect—but let's be honest—it won't be. And I'm not sure they need to be. In fact, sometimes the most enjoyable moments are only after a struggle. As C.S. Lewis wrote in his novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, "Adventures are never fun while you're having them."

Adventures are by definition a mixture of the good and bad—the challenge and reward.

The trick to a good vacation—or any time set aside for the fun of it—is learning to take the good with the bad with a sense of adventure. Time away doesn't become worthless just because difficulties arise. Instead, it becomes worthless when we fail to accept unexpected hurdles with a sense of adventure. Without patience and grace, time away can quickly turn into a time of arguing, selfishness, hurt feelings, and dissatisfaction. But with patience and grace, even the most unexpected events will fall short of robbing us of the joy of the moment.

There's a time and a place for everything, and we hope that today is the time for more of the good, and less of the bad—but an adventure all the same.

*How will you respond with a sense of adventure when something doesn't go as planned?*

## Is it Childish?

*Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.*

*Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."*

*Matthew 19:13–14, NIV*

Stuart Brown, M.D. is a pioneer researcher on the role of play. In his book *Play: How it shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, he explains how we learn to play as children:

Nearly every one of us starts out playing quite naturally. As children, we don't need instruction in how to play. We just find what we enjoy and do it.

Children were created to play. It's how they learn, explore, and develop a sense of creativity and relationship skills. Play is an important part of a child's life. Yet, something happens as a child grows up. As Brown explains,

At some point as we get older, however, we are made to feel guilty for playing. We are told that it is unproductive, a waste of time, even sinful. The play that remains is, like league sports, mostly very organized, rigid, and competitive.

At some point, we tend to think playing is something for children. We come to believe, we live in a cold, hard world, and it's necessary for us to grow up and start acting like adults in order to survive.

Play is all about doing something that doesn't have a real essential result in mind. It's less about the end and more about means. But as adults, we need to be interested in the end product. We're not interested in whether our jobs are fun unless they also put food on the table. Which is why most of our play becomes competitive—we're more comfortable doing something for fun if there is a clear end result in mind.

If playing just for the sake of playing is childish, I think we all should be a little more childish. In fact, for kids, it seems like play is a very necessary part of their development. As the ever-friendly neighbor to America's youth, Fred Rogers once said,

Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.

You might not need to learn how to play, but you need to play in order to learn.

When I was a youth pastor, we played goofy games and had a lot of fun, but I also wanted to make sure they were going to be ready for the workforce, college, and everything beyond high school. I had to figure out how to help teenagers move from childhood to adulthood.

I wrestled with trying to explain how to balance our desire to have fun and the importance of hard work. Eventually, I decided that maturity wasn't so much a question of "what" as it was a question of "when." It's not about whether you have fun or you work hard, whether you make jokes or remain serious, whether you play or not—it's an issue of *when* you do one over the other. A mature person knows when to play and when to work hard. Maturity teaches us when to joke around and when to be serious. Maturity is all about learning the *when*.

It's not a matter of whether we should still play, but when. And if you've set aside time for rest and recreation, then the answer to *when?* is simple: *Now!*

God doesn't want us to throw out childish things like play. In fact, Jesus even goes as far as to say that the kingdom of God is for children and their childish ways (Matthew 19:14). It's for people who are willing to live with the security of a loving parent enough to know that it's okay, from time to time, to let your imagination go wild and enjoy yourself. Jesus gives us permission to be more like our kids—so why not let go a little and engage in some child-like play?

*How can you be more child-like today?*

## Beauty as Medicine

*And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.*

*1 Samuel 16:23*

Saul is a fascinating character in the Bible. He's the first king of Israel, and while it would be an honor he could be proud of, it didn't work out particularly well for him. Saul failed to trust God and decided to live by his own set of standards. Saul was also a clearly troubled person. Scripture tells us that he had an evil spirit that would bother him. It's hard to understand what this looked like, but from my experience with spiritual warfare, it's possible that this would be similar to what it feels like to have an emotional or mental disorder, like anxiety or depression.

Within the first year of our marriage, my wife was diagnosed with depression. Within that same year, I came to terms with the fact that I suffered from an anxiety disorder. I wonder if it wasn't similar to what Paul talked about when he said he had a thorn in the flesh. It certainly feels like a pesky little problem that there seems to be only momentary relief from. We both ended up on medicine and started to change some of our habits so we could get back on track. Besides medicine, most of the common prescriptions included exercise, rest, developing a hobby, and finding things we enjoy doing. What we see here in 1 Samuel gives us one more prescription we could add to the list. Saul fought back his demons with music. I don't think it was the music that helped as much as the fact that it was good music. It was beautiful music, and beauty has this strange ability to push back our demons.

Beauty is when our senses are overwhelmed with something good—whether it be our nose catching a glimpse of that perfect aroma, our mouth overwhelmed with the most delicious meal, our eyes in awe of a breathtaking sight or painting, or the touch of clean linens. Beauty—unadulterated, pure beauty can cure us of so many ailments. This is why people flock to the Grand Canyon, pay money to walk inside an ancient church, order a \$150 meal, or hike to the top of a mountain—we long for truly beautiful experiences. We want our senses to be overwhelmed with something good so that there's no more room for anything evil.

If you spend all of your days staring at the same walls, the same computer screen, the same phone, and the same streets, your soul will hunger for something more. Your soul might even become weak, and like a weak body, a weak soul is susceptible to diseases. While taking a vacation will not cure one's depression, and certainly not fix all our problems, the beauty we take in will make it all the harder for evil and brokenness to take root in our lives.

Allow your time away to be for your soul what David's lyre was for Saul's. Find something beautiful for your senses, and let it drive back all those things that tend to bring us down.

*Which of your senses (hearing, sight, touch, smell, or taste) have already been entertained during your time away? Is there something you can do to entice the rest of your senses with something beautiful?*

## Leisure Time

*Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.*

*These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”*

*They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.*

*The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”*

*Mark 6:6–13, 30–32, NIV*

The assumption with taking time *off* is that we’re spending the majority of our time *on*—that the rest of the year we are busy working to accomplish the mission of God. It’s true that God calls us to rest on the Sabbath, but written into this commandment is the assumption that we are working the other six days.

This was certainly true for the disciples. They had been sent out on a mission trip and were experiencing hands-on training. They were learning for themselves how to make disciples and accomplish the work of Jesus in this world. The ministry would be theirs when Jesus ascended, and they needed to be ready. The three years training with Jesus had to be exhausting. They had big shoes to fill!

When they returned from this particular mission trip, Jesus did something rather profound. He invited them to a quiet place away from the people, away from the work, and away from the mission so they could rest for a while.

What’s interesting is that Jesus does this because “they did not even have a chance to eat” (Mark 6:31). The Greek word for “have a chance” is *eukaireó*, which is rooted in the Greek word *eukairos*, meaning “to have a good time” or “to have an opportunity for leisure.” When it says they didn’t even have time to eat, what it is really saying is that they didn’t have time to sit down and enjoy a meal together. No matter how busy you get, you can always find time to eat—if only fast food. They surely had time to eat. They just didn’t have leisure time to eat. It wasn’t that their bellies were starving, it was that their souls were starving. They needed leisure time to enjoy each other’s company around a good meal.

Their work was consuming all of their energy and Jesus was taking them to a secluded space, not so they could simply nap or sit silently on a mountain to pray (although Jesus did that sometimes too)—he was taking them to a secluded place so they could enjoy themselves. They needed a break

from the work, a chance to enjoy each other's company. Maybe they shared stories, ate good food, told jokes, or simply sat around playing games. Regardless, the intention was to have leisure time.

If you read the rest of the story, you'll see that Jesus' hope for time away from everyone is spoiled by the crowds. They see where they're headed, and they follow them. Jesus ends up having compassion on them and stops to continue the mission. But Jesus doesn't forget his plans for his disciples to have time to sit and eat. With the crowds gathering around, Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two fish and he feeds over five thousand people. The disciples got their meal, just with a few extra guests!

The most people I've ever had over to eat at one time was a dozen or so, but Jesus is such a good host, he can handle more than 5000—that's quite a large table. It reminds me of an event in my hometown. Every year, to raise money for our local food pantry, our town closes off the brick-paved main street and sets up a table that seems to reach across town. Cooks from all the various local restaurants donate their services, and for the right price (\$75 to be exact), you can get a seat at this table. It's the longest table I've ever seen; you can hardly see all the way across it as it stretches for blocks. But as big as this table is, it's limited to 375 people. That's a lot of people, but then again, it's not 5000!

Even with feeding so many people, there was still food left over—twelve baskets: one for each disciple. They could use the extra food for a smaller, more private meal later on when they were finally able to get away from it all. It's as if Jesus was pointing out that there's room enough in Jesus' kingdom for *everyone* to stop and enjoy a meal together, with food left over, and it won't cost you a thing.

Jesus invites us to pull up a chair and have a seat at his table. There's room for everyone, even you.

*What would it look like to sit and enjoy a meal with Jesus and his disciples?*

## Time for a Nap

*Unless the Lord builds the house,  
the builders labor in vain.  
Unless the Lord watches over the city,  
the guards stand watch in vain.  
In vain you rise early  
and stay up late,  
toiling for food to eat—  
for he grants sleep to those he loves.  
Children are a heritage from the Lord,  
offspring a reward from him.  
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior  
are children born in one's youth.  
Blessed is the man  
whose quiver is full of them.  
They will not be put to shame  
when they contend with their opponents in court.  
Psalm 127, NIV*

We have a running joke in our home. It has to do with the amount of time my wife spends sleeping.

I was never a sleeper or someone who napped regularly, but after three years of marriage, she has me converted. It is not uncommon for us to sleep more than 8 hours every night. We're not especially lazy people. We just enjoy sleeping—and I love picking on my wife about this. In fact, right now as I type, Allyssa is napping on the couch. Months later, as I am editing this same devotional, Allyssa is asleep on the couch again. I can't help but laugh, but I'm trying to hold it in so I don't wake her up.

Throughout the Old Testament, much is said of laziness. The book of Proverbs especially ridicules the lazy. For example, Proverbs 20:13 says: "Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread" (ESV).

Let's just say this isn't a Bible verse we have memorized in our household. You won't find it laminated on our wall, or sketched out on our family chalk-board—because we love to sleep!

If we read this verse (and others) in isolation, you might think God wants us to spend our days busy at work with no time to relax or enjoy ourselves. While there's real danger in laziness, there's another side to the story. What isn't talked about as much in the Bible is the opposite of laziness: *workaholicism*. Maybe this is because *workaholicism* wasn't a word when the Psalms were written (I'm not sure it's a word today either). Either way, this makes Psalm 127 more interesting.

Nestled right in the middle of this Psalm is the simple truth that God gives sleep to those he loves.

As much as I joke about how we love to sleep, I have to be honest: we've had our share of sleepless nights. Of everything that keeps me up, there is one that reigns above all others: stress. If I'm

stressed, worried, or anxious, I don't sleep well. Like most people, I have plenty of things to be stressed, worried, and anxious about. I have bills to pay. Work to do. And a family to care for.

Psalms 127 actually talks about some of these issues. It's about building a house, protecting a city, working for your provisions, and protecting your family. While many of us no longer build our own houses, guard cities, or plow fields to provide for ourselves, we can relate to the underlying issues. Under all of these images is our longing for security. We want to know we have a place to belong that's safe from danger and filled with enough provisions to live comfortably.

If anything keeps me up, it's that I feel like one of these is in jeopardy: whether we have enough money to pay our bills, whether we locked the front door, whether I will get that project done at work, or whether I will really be able to provide for my family. In fact, when my wife got pregnant, my worries of being able to provide escalated!

I'm worried about having a place to safely belong. I'm anxious about being safe. I'm overwhelmed with the desire to be a good provider. This is what keeps us up at night, which is why this Psalm is so profound. Unless God build this house, unless God guards the city, unless God provides the food—it's all done in vain. In other words, we can't ultimately provide our own security, only God can.

There is one way to ensure you sleep well at night: trust that someone greater than you has everything taken care of. When we realize God has everything under control, we'll be in a place to accept the kind of peaceful sleep He offers.

Don't be lazy, but also don't assume you can gain a better life by working for it yourself. A good life is a gift from God. We don't get it simply by trying harder—we receive from God who gives far more than we could ever think or imagine. As Eugene Peterson explains in his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*:

Ambition is aspiration gone crazy. Aspiration is the channeled, creative energy that moves us to growth in Christ, shaping goals in the Spirit. Ambition takes these same energies for growth and development and uses them to make something tawdry and cheap, sweatily knocking together a Babel when we could be vacationing in Eden.

Don't allow your ambition to rob you of the joy of Eden. Look ambition in the face and tell it, "Ambition, you can go to hell." Stare it down and say, "You don't rule my life, God does. God is building my house. God is protecting my city. God is providing for my family. God's got this, and I'm going to prove that my heart is trusting in God by taking time away from the work that consumes me. I'm on vacation!"

Take time to rest and enjoy life with the kind of peace and security God alone can offer.

*Do you think you've worked hard enough to earn your vacation, or do you see vacation as a gift from the God who provides rest to those he loves?*

## A Humble Joy

*There the priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, "Long live King Solomon!" And all the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise.*

*Adonijah and all the guests who were with him heard it as they finished feasting. When Joab heard the sound of the trumpet, he said, "Why is the city in an uproar?" While he was still speaking, Jonathan son of the priest Abiathar arrived. Adonijah said, "Come in, for you are a worthy man and surely you bring good news." Jonathan answered Adonijah, "No, for our lord King David has made Solomon king."*

*1 Kings 1:39–43, NRSV*

King David had grown old, and there was much talk in the kingdom about who would be the next king. One of the people who planned to be king was a guy by the name of Adonijah. He decided on his own, even to the disapproval of his father (vs. 6). He went about creating for himself a ceremony to celebrate his new power but didn't invite any of the leaders who would disapprove. He had a nice private banquet.

On the other hand, there was Solomon. Solomon was chosen by King David as his heir, and the priests and leaders of the kingdom endorsed him. He didn't seek it for himself; it was given to him. And thus, unlike Adonijah, when Solomon was announced the next king, the people came out in large numbers and were excited to support their new king. It says they "rejoiced with great joy," even to the point that "the earth quaked at their noise."

You can imagine the kind of excitement it would take for the earth to quake with the noise. I imagine a parade, or maybe even a holy *Mardi gras*, with people coming out into the streets, shooting off fireworks, yelling, and celebrating.

They didn't celebrate when Adonijah declared himself king, but they did when Solomon was declared King. Why? There's subtle, but important lesson here.

Joy doesn't come when we try to grab it for ourselves. Adonijah tried to create for himself this kind of joyous experience, but he did it all the wrong way. He tried to grab it for himself and keep it locked up in a private banquet with only those people he respected. I'm confident he had a very good time cooped up there with his fans. As they were finishing up their private feast, they began to hear the joy following in from the streets. I wonder if Adonijah's heart didn't jump up for just a second, hoping that maybe, just maybe, word had gotten out that he had made himself king and now the people were excited. You kind of get that sense when, only a moment later, someone comes in and Adonijah says, "Come in, for you are a worthy man and surely you bring good news."

This guy wasn't bringing good news. He was bringing bad news. Solomon had been named king, and the people couldn't be happier. Adonijah's feast was for nothing. He grabbed for power and hoped for joy, but both were depleted.

You can't steal joy for yourself because joy is a gift that has to be given to you. There are some activities and habits that will fill you with joy for a season, but lasting joy is a gift from God. It's an attitude grounded in humility. Joy comes when we realize that every good thing in life is a gift waiting to be appreciated.

A humble person doesn't seek to grab stuff for themselves, but a truly humble person doesn't refuse to accept a gift when it's offered, either. This kind of humility sees every good thing as a gift, and joy naturally becomes the byproduct.

One of the best ways to relax while on vacation is to recognize that the world doesn't revolve around you. It might seem counter-intuitive, but it's true. Have you ever met those people who never seem happy with the service they are receiving? If you've traveled at all, then you've probably bumped into that couple before. They complain about the meal they ordered, feel the wait staff isn't being helpful enough, and might even get mad at housekeeping for making silly little animals with their towels. Nothing is ever done to their approval. They're so set on making sure their vacation is perfect that they end up having no fun at all. They're grabbing for something that can't be stolen.

The alternative to this is humility—to simply accept the good in life as a gift and forgive the mistakes as nothing to worry about. This is actually the healthiest way to find rest while on vacation.

God wants you to be happy—I have no doubt about that—but that doesn't mean you have to try and grab happiness like it's some product in a supermarket. Instead, humble yourself, and it will come much more naturally. It might start out slow, even small and subtle, but if you give it time, this kind of humble joy will overflow into the streets in ways you never thought possible.

*How can you be humbler while enjoying your time away?*

## It's All Part of the Plan

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,  
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze;  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,  
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.  
Isaiah 11:6–9, ESV*

There's something deeply interesting about play: it's something nearly every animal engages in. While it's more common in younger animals, even mature animals have been known to play. Dogs want to wrestle and fetch sticks. Cats want to hide and scratch. Animals of all sizes enjoy a good playdate—just go to YouTube and you'll find millions of adorable viral videos of animals at play.

While all animals play, they, like humans, eventually learn that the world is a cold place where only the strong survive.

Jack London in his book *White Fang*, paints a brutal picture of what it looks like to survive in the wild. What starts as a pack of wolves, dwindles down to a mother and father. They give birth, but end up likely dying of starvation, disorienting their cub. The little one is left alone to learn from instinct and hunger what it means to survive. His hunger drives him to hunt. His life become shaped by violence and the taste of blood.

The animal kingdom is a violent place, humans included, which is why this passage in Isaiah is so profound. God paints a picture of the preferred future as one of peace—free from violence. It's a world where the animals no longer have to allow fear, hunger, or violence control their lives. What's more, it's a place where these negative tendencies no longer have to control us. It says that in that day, animals and children will play without any fear of being hurt in the process. A place where play isn't something we have to grow out of.

One reason we stop having fun without any other purpose is that the benefits don't outweigh the risk. We might think to ourselves, "playing is too exhausting, too dangerous, or too irrelevant. Play does nothing to help us survive." This is not true. Studies of the animal kingdom suggest the reason animals play is because it helps them survive. Here's how Brown and Vaughan explain it in their book on play:

It shapes the brain and makes animals smarter and more adaptable. In higher animals, it fosters empathy and makes possible complex social groups. For us, play lies at the core of creativity and innovation.

God has given us the innate desire to play, not only because it helps us survive, but because it's the key to us thriving. It's one of the ways God helps his creation become smarter, more caring, and more innovative. Having the freedom to play around—freedom from fear, violence, and pain—is the ideal picture God paints of this world. This is why children playing is one of the images God uses to describe His perfect, future world. There's nothing more beautiful than for God to watch one of his children live a life free enough to simply play. When God finishes accomplishing his will in this world, he'll create a world so safe and so fun that play will be one of the few natural responses.

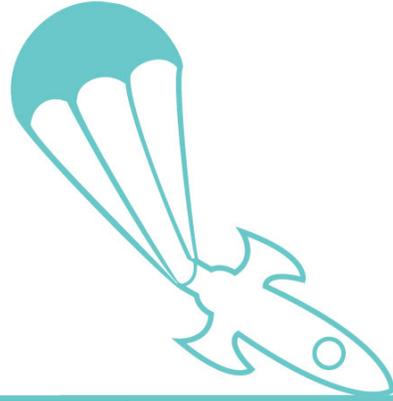
When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he told them to pray “Father in heaven, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” In other words, the disciples were to pray that God's perfect world (heaven) would be brought into this world (earth). If God's will is for children to be able to play, then not only should we pray for it, but we should help welcome it in.

Playing around isn't something that we do to distract us from the pain of life, it's something we do because we are in the business of ushering in God's kingdom here on earth. Which means that our time off is a small way to help bring God's kingdom here on earth. Your vacation had a purpose more divine and holy than you could ever imagine.

*Have you ever considered that your time away—that your time doing meaningless things for fun—has actually been a way to help usher in God's kingdom?*

# Headed Back to Work

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## Be Thankful

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

*James 1:17, ESV*

*Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

*1 Thessalonians 5:18, NRSV*

*Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*

*1 Timothy 6:17, NIV*

The other day I ran across a comic strip on Facebook. Like most posts on Facebook, I have no idea where it came from. Either way, I found its message rather profound. At the top, it said, “If you mean to say ‘thanks,’ then don’t say ‘I’m sorry.’”

What followed were a number of examples. Instead of saying, “Sorry for talking so much,” say, “Thanks for listening to me.” Or when you arrive a little late, don’t say “I’m sorry for being late,” if what you really mean to say is, “Thanks for your patience.”

It’s actually rather interesting advice. I’m not saying we shouldn’t apologize for when we hurt people—you should!—but I am saying that when we haven’t hurt people—we just think we have—it might be wise to start with gratitude instead of guilt.

It’s my hope that your time away has been a wonderful time. Whatever you spent your time doing, I hope it was amazing, and if it was, you’re sure to run into people who are at least a little jealous. Or you’re bound to think of better ways you could have spent your money, especially when your church starts their capital campaign or you’re invited on a mission trip. Or you might just feel sorry you went away, after you realize just how much you could have accomplished at home if you had stayed. You might feel bad because being away puts a lot of extra work on your coworkers. But, if at any point you start to feel this sense of guilt sneak into your life because you took time off from work and enjoyed yourself, try to refrain from saying “I’m sorry.” Instead, say “thank you.”

If you had a great time—if you ate good food, drank sweet drinks, or enjoyed the company of beautiful people—don’t apologize to God or others for it—thank them. Don’t apologize to your coworkers who filled in for you (unless they’re actually upset), thank them instead (and then offer to fill in for them when they go on vacation!).

God gives us good things, and we shouldn’t feel bad about receiving them—we should give thanks.

*What are you thankful for right now?*

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