

STRATEGY 8

YOUR PRESSURES

RECLAIMING PEACE, REST, AND CONTENTMENT



If I were your enemy, I'd make everything seem urgent, as if it's all yours to handle. I'd bog down your calendar with so many expectations you couldn't tell the difference between what's important and what's not. Going and doing, guilty for ever saying no, trying to control it all, but just being controlled by it all instead. . . . If I could keep you busy enough, you'd be too overwhelmed to even realize how much work you're actually saving me.

Pressure.

Pressure to keep up. Pressure to keep going. Pressure to stay ahead, stay afloat, stay relevant. Pressure to do for others what they maybe ought to be doing for themselves.

Pressure to plan for your retirement years. Pressure to lose weight and stay young looking. Pressure to take on another ministry project at church. Pressure to always be the one they can count on to say yes. Pressure to jam another activity for your kids into the schedule. Pressure to do a better job of keeping a journal, organizing your pantry and closets, getting your Christmas shopping done early . . . then posting your clever thoughts and carefully posed pictures on Instagram when you're finished.

Pressure to perform a certain way, look a certain way, dress a certain way, be interested in certain things. To be the perfect parent, the perfect wife, the perfect daughter, the perfect friend, the perfect employee, the perfect party planner, the perfect image of everything that everybody else expects you to be.

Oh, and the pressure not to be the first one who cracks.

Under the *pressure*.

Granted, there's a baseline level of pressure that's necessary to keep us from settling into laziness and self-absorption. Life without *any* pressure wouldn't be what's best for us. But life with *this* much pressure? From a nonstop pace? A schedule that never allows time for rest or refreshment or maybe actually *enjoying* the people we're staying so busy

with? Pressure from the unrealistic demands we place on ourselves through our perfectionism, obsession, control, the making of appearances? Pressure from the unreasonable demands that *others* place on us? Pressure that makes us feel like we might be wrong . . . or selfish . . . or coldhearted . . . or snooty to enforce margin and boundaries in our schedule so that we can actually maintain enough time to be obedient to what the Lord has called us to do?

I've noticed a few common threads running through pressures like these. And each of them leads back to a common source . . . leads back to someone who (as usual) is seeking to rob you of the most common ingredients to a fruitful life—a life of truly eternal significance—the life you were created by God to live.

First, consider this. Ever notice how many of the pressures in your life resemble *slavery*? Like you're just being bossed around, day in and day out? "Do this . . . go there . . . now come back over here . . . do it again . . ." Slaves don't rest. Slaves just work. They don't control their agenda for the day; the day's agenda controls *them*. That's the regular dynamic they've come to expect; it's what others expect of them as well.

The enemy's intention is always to enslave you. Primarily, of course, his stock-in-trade is keeping you bound up and bogged down by all the sins Christ has already died to set you free from. But when that doesn't work, when you defeat him on the normal temptation front, he's not out of other

ideas . . . because he's actually not biased toward limiting his temptations to *bad* things. He can enslave you to *good* things too. Your job, your ministry, even your recreational hobbies—nothing is so healthy and life-giving that he can't turn it into a cruel taskmaster, one that bosses you around and runs your life.

When God delivered the ancient Israelites from four hundred years of bondage in Egypt, slavery was all they'd ever known (Exod. 1:8–14). All night, all day, all work, no play. The rhythms and demands of slavery had been internalized within them from birth. Whatever their taskmasters said, that's what they did. Refusing wasn't a choice. Saying no wasn't an option. I'm sure they didn't like it, but what could they do about it?—till the Lord sent Moses and ten mighty plagues and delivered them from the iron clutches of Pharaoh.

Israel was free. They were no longer a slave people.

But being officially declared free doesn't automatically take the slave mentality out of a person's heart and mind, now, does it? God knew He would need to radically adjust their perspectives in order to get them thinking like people who weren't slaves anymore.

Enter . . . the Sabbath.

Think for a second how the introduction of Sabbath among the Ten Commandments must have struck the people who first heard it announced: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath

of the LORD your God; in it *you shall not do any work*" (Exod. 20:9–10, author emphasis).

Don't. Work?

These people had never heard these words before. Never been given that alternative. The whole idea behind this Hebrew word *shabbat*—"to cease, to stop, to pause"—was a totally foreign concept. All their background and training were built around going, not stopping. Working, not resting. Complying, not declining or decompressing.

So you'd think the prospect of being allowed (no, *told*) to take regular breaks from their weekly work would sound incredible, relieving, reprieving. Right? Think again. They balked against their seventh-day vacation allotment and went out to work anyway (Exod. 16:27–30).

Why does this concept of stopping, resting, shutting off, stepping away, pulling back, taking a deep breath—the biblical *command* of Sabbath—why was it so hard for them?

Same reason it's so hard for us.

Because to some degree, we're slaves just as they were.

The thought of deliberately choosing a rhythm of rest and margin around our full slate of activities feels almost unthinkable—because it lands on people who still think the way a slave thinks. People who've been trained through the years not to say no. People who are the unwitting servants to their master calendars. People whose own impulses, in conjunction with the ninety-mile-an-hour culture swirling around them, leave them feeling they don't ever have

permission to step out of line, to hop off the merry-go-round, to decide for themselves it's time to close up shop and go home.

That's a slave talking. Hear it? "I can't just . . . not . . . can I?"

No, you can't. Not if you're a slave.

But . . . you can if you're free.

And guess what? "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). Enough *can* be enough—not just on our calendars but in every area of our lives. Then we can sit back in the freedom that helps us start again tomorrow with our spirits rested, alert, and renewed.

Wonder what kind of shock wave would reverberate through enemy headquarters if a woman decided to take her stand on that kind of battle plan? What if you found the voice to utter that dirty little word—"no"—without shouldering the least bit of guilt or shame from it? Sure, we're called to serve, and serving often requires sacrifice. Not everything we're tasked with doing should be expected to fit conveniently into our day. But a free woman possesses the God-given ability to know when He is truly asking her to do something—as well as the God-given ability to know when He's *not*. Then she has the God-given discernment to know her limits and the authority to know when she needs "to cease, to stop, to pause"—accepting the gentle yoke of

Jesus instead of the tyrannical yoke of slavery. “For My yoke is easy,” He said, “and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:30).

Your Father just wants you to be you. And that means not having to be two of you to get it all done.

Jesus was the poster child for this kind of margin. Listen to Him: “The Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner” (John 5:19). Even Jesus—the Son of God—realized that *everything* wasn’t supposed to be *His* thing to do. He only did what He saw the Father doing. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Not every *good* thing is a *God* thing. Plain and simple. Because even good things can culminate in slavery.

Second, see how *fear* and *insecurity* come into play in your pressures. Those words always have an enemy ring to them, don’t they? Satan’s ploy is to make you believe your core value as a person is tied to how much work you do, how much activity you can accomplish, how much stuff you can accumulate, how much business you can generate. In order to possess any worth under this system—just like Israel under Pharaoh’s rule—you’ve got to be able to rattle off everything you’ve been doing, one by one, adding it all up into a big gob of bullet points and checklists that ought to impress anybody.

But why? Who’s drawing the measuring lines? And who’s declaring you deficient for not meeting them? Who’s

setting the bar and the benchmarks of your approval? Who's saying you're worth nothing more than the overall tally of your output?

You know *exactly* who.

He's not much unlike the brutal overlords who held the power of intimidation over the Hebrew slaves in ancient Egypt. Survival was totally dependent on avoiding the cruelty of these relentless taskmasters. And the only way to do it—the only way of gaining any semblance of favor—was through working and producing. Through unending activity.

It's the same brand of heavy-handedness that's still being perpetuated against us today—the kind of internal and external pressure that turns busyness into a badge of honor. Our insecurities make us fear what others will say or think of us (or of our kids) if we don't do everything they deem to be required of us or don't acquire enough to impress them. It's why we turn Christian living into legalism, for fear that God will be displeased if we don't rigorously stick to the program. It's why we don't know how to sit still. It's why we're so rarely satisfied with where we are or what we have. It's why we can't embrace the one thing we're doing now because of the dozen other things we're *not* doing while we're over here doing *this*.

It's intimidation. It's based totally on lies and fear. Fear that we won't have enough. Fear that we won't *be* enough. Fear that we'll fail and will no longer come off looking as perfect as we want to appear. Fear that somebody else who's

working harder and moving faster will get what was supposed to be ours.

But as a dear friend and wise mentor recently said to me, “God doesn’t want something *from* you. He wants something *for* you.” Your value is not in what you *do* (as if you could ever do enough) but in who you *are* (as if you could ever be more loved and accepted by Him than you already are).

This, too, is what Sabbath is meant to communicate. You don’t need to keep pushing, rushing, gathering, hustling. You’ve already received approval from the only One whose approval really matters. He has stamped *His* value on you, and that is enough. Even the activities He gives you to steward are not given to see how many balls you can juggle, but instead so you can participate with Him in staking a kingdom claim on the patches of ground where you live. Sure, there’s sweat involved. Sore muscles. Dirt under your pretty fingernails. But these endeavors and hobbies and accumulated possessions of yours are meant to bring joy, to enhance relationships, to develop your gifts, to swell you with His blessing and contentment. They’re not supposed to be nothing but *pressure*.

So if that doesn’t square with how you’re feeling very often at the end of the day, you’re being bullied by a liar. You’re being motivated by fear and insecurity. You’re being intimidated by your enemy’s cruel application of pressure against you. And you don’t need to put up with it any longer.

One additional thing, but a very important thing: pressure is often a mask for *idolatry*. Easy not to notice how every time Moses approached Pharaoh throughout the early part of Exodus, declaring God's words to the Egyptian ruler, he didn't just say, "Let My people go," like the lyrics to the old spiritual says. He said, "Let My people go, *so that they may worship Me*" (Exod. 9:1 HCSB, *author emphasis*). Said it about a dozen times. Look it up. There was a specific reason for their release.

The purpose of Israel's liberty from bondage—and the purpose behind your own liberty from the slavery of undue pressure—is not merely freedom for freedom's sake. God's purpose in giving you Sabbath spaces amid your full, productive life is to help you be uninhibited in your devotion, service, and worship of Yahweh. Margin keeps you from marginalizing God.

When our lives are packed to the brim with things that squeeze God to the periphery, it's a sure sign we've replaced our devotion to God with a love for something else. The pressure to perform, for example, often means you've made an idol of your reputation. The pressure to maintain a ridiculously jam-packed schedule: the idol of self-reliance. The pressure to maintain an impressive standard of living: the idol of achievement. The pressure to take on everything in which your kids show even the slightest interest: making an idol of your children. Our hearts can make idols of anything . . . yet sometimes be the last to realize it's happening.

The primary purpose of Sabbath margins—of saying no, when appropriate—is to diminish our devotion to all other suitors and crystallize our allegiance to God. The enemy wants other things and other people to replace God's preeminence in our schedule, in our mind, in our heart, in our home. He wants our loyalties lured away from our Creator and dispersed among a dozen others, without our even thinking about it.

Unmanageable, incessant pressure, then, is not just another nagging problem in your average day. It's an attack against your full devotion to God as your one and only Lord. It's a cosmic battle for your contentment, your peace, your rest, your sense of balance, health, and wholeness, your ability to worship attentively, to trust fully, to be free and satisfied in Christ, available to move at the invitation of His perfectly timed will. That's why alleviating these pressures is not merely fodder for self-help magazines and motivational speeches. It should also be a matter that's worth our serious prayer.

I think we've missed this connection for too long. We've been too tired and overwhelmed to see it. But now our eyes are open, and we can see the enemy's strategy is exposed. So let's use prayer, like a sharp pair of scissors, to help cut ourselves loose.

CALL TO PRAYER

This one life is all we've got. This one pass through the gauntlet of life's pressures and demands is our one chance to choose: Will we let them dominate and define us? Steal our hearts and devotion? Or will our service and adoration of the Father determine how we operate—determine what fills our plate?

Life will never stop being hard. I know that. And, yes, being our best and giving full effort is important in every area of our lives. But we have not been put here to be slaves to schedules that eat up every inch of margin from our families, our friendships, our worship, and our calling, nor to let others decide every day what our plans and priorities are supposed to be. We're not a "bondwoman" but a "free woman" (Gal. 4:31).

And it's time we started living (and praying) like one.

When we become strategic and focused in our prayer, God will not only begin the process of tearing us free, but He will weave new threads of peace, rest, and contentment into their place. And once we've experienced the radical difference these liberators can make, well . . . let's just see the enemy try taking them away from us again. He may get the best of us sometimes, but he'll at least know he's been in a battle.

Perhaps before collecting your Scriptures and developing a pointed prayer strategy in this area, you might want to

start by doing a little personal inventory. It might help you be more tailored in your praying. Try identifying the most common pressures and expectations in your life that cause you fatigue, fragmentation, distress—occasionally even an emotion that borders on despair.

- Check your schedule for patterns where you're allowing yourself to be enslaved to things that aren't truly as critical, important, or indispensable as they seem.
- Check your motivations for why you say yes to so many things and why you feel such guilt and loss of importance for saying no.
- Check to see if the places where you most typically overload your time involve people or goals or interest areas that you've elevated to the status of idols.
- Check how much emphasis you place on the current status of your wardrobe, house, car, job, fitness, education, and any external measure that causes you to feel defensive, pressured to keep up and compare.

Ask the Lord for real discernment here because some of these determinations can be subtle and hard to spot. Remember, your enemy is involved, so he's sure to try blinding you to what's really underneath it all. A close friend or family member whose wisdom you trust might actually be helpful in this process as well if you'll promise to consider

the validity of everything she says and reveals about you, even the things you don't quite agree with at first.

In some ways, committing to targeted prayer in this area might not feel as essential as some of the others we've addressed in this book. Pressure and busyness seem so pervasive and universal, with so little we can actually do about them. But, oh, yes we can. And, oh, yes we must. Rest and contentment are not stand-alone experiences. They trickle down through everything else that comprises your life. Without them a lot of other things go wrong and lose hope.

But by the Spirit's power helping you gain control of your schedule, creating spaces within which to breathe, obeying the principles of God's Sabbath, and establishing boundaries based on the truth of His all-wise Word, your destiny comes into clearer focus. Your worship blossoms into brilliant colors. And your day amazingly brightens into joy.

The enemy's going to hate this. Let's do it . . .

I am at rest in God alone;
 my salvation comes from Him.
 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
 my stronghold; I will never be shaken.
 (Ps. 62:1–2 HCSB)



From the end of the earth I will cry to You,
 When my heart is overwhelmed;

Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
For You have been a shelter for me,
A strong tower from the enemy.
I will abide in Your tabernacle forever;
I will trust in the shelter of Your wings.
(Ps. 61:2–4 NKJV)



He is not impressed by the strength of a horse;
He does not value the power of a man.
The LORD values those who fear Him,
those who put their hope in His faithful love.
(Ps. 147:10–11 HCSB)



You are my hope;
O Lord GOD, You are my confidence from my
youth.
By You I have been sustained from my birth;
You are He who took me from my mother's womb;
My praise is continually of You. (Ps. 71:5–6)



I, the LORD, am your God,
Who brought you up from the land of Egypt;
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. (Ps. 81:10)



If you . . . call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the
earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your
father,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

(Isa. 58:13–14 ESV)



You will know the truth, and the truth will make
you free. (John 8:32)



You shall remember that you were a slave in the land
of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out
of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched
arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you
to observe the sabbath day. (Deut. 5:15)



. . . being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.” (Heb. 13:5)



Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. (Matt. 6:33 HCSB)



Delight yourself in the LORD;
And He will give you the desires of your heart.
(Ps. 37:4)

Few things hold the potential to so drastically alter the landscape of your life as when you claim godly authority over the insane amount of unnecessary pressures you face. Be ready to see your eyes opened as you close them in prayer. One day soon a whole new kind of woman is going to be emerging from that prayer closet.

A free one. A rested one. A contented one.

