

Rest—Keeping Jesus Our Sabbath

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Sabbath in Creation

The Bible speaks of rest from the beginning of creation (Gen. 2:1-3), throughout recorded history, and unto final redemption (Rev. 14:13). And for as much as the Bible speaks of rest, it often seems like an abstract concept, highly subjective, and difficult to rightly apply. Rest is neither the cause of nor a synonym for slothfulness, idleness, or excessiveness, of which there are warnings and consequences (Prov. 12:27; 19:15; 20:13; 23:20-21).

The word שָׁבַת (*shavath*) as a verb translates “to cease”, “to end”, or “to rest”. The first occurrence of *shavath* and all three occurrences in Genesis have God as the subject (2:2-3; 8:22). God created for six days and then stopped creating. Then, on the seventh day, He rested (*shavath*).

*“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. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it **God rested** from all his work that he had done in creation.” — **Genesis 2:2-3***

The first one to rest in the entire universe, from the beginning of time was God Himself.

In the creation account of Genesis, we are neither given explanation nor practical instruction concerning rest. What was entailed in His resting is not made plain to us. However, all that resting and rest is finds precedent, meaning, and purpose in Him.

What God does He does with intention (Is. 46:10; 55:8; Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; Heb. 6:17). Therefore, when God stops doing something, He stops with intention. But He doesn't stop doing all that He does. For example: He doesn't stop helping, upholding, and sustaining (Ps. 54:4; 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6; Heb. 1:3); God never sleeps or slumbers (Ps. 121:4). If God *ceases* (*shavath*) all that He does, we and the universe would *cease* (*shavath*) to exist.

Practically, we conclude from the creation account that sabbath simply means to rest from, to stop, to cease doing an activity or activities. At most, we may infer that by ceasing one kind of work (i.e. *creating*) some other purpose is intended and being fulfilled. Something purposeful and significant must happen in rest. Though other work may be continuing or even possibly beginning, whatever rest is or may be for us, should be an image of God Himself.

Sabbath in Covenant

The word sabbath is a translation of the Hebrew word שַׁבָּת (*shabbath*). This noun form is likely derived from the above verb form (שָׁבַת *shavath*). The concept refers to a time of ceasing, a period of rest as it relates to time: a day, perhaps a week, or even a year (Lev. 23:15; 25:4).

A very brief survey of שַׁבָּת (*shabbath*) in various contexts outside of Genesis will help us better understand some of the intent in rest and as well as some significant implications. We will begin to see a clearer connection between the body and soul, the physical and the spiritual. We will see that the fabric of rest has been created by God with patterns, woven together with a very unique thread.

The first occurrence of sabbath as a period of rest, interestingly comes before the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus ch. 20). In Exodus 16, the nation of Israel had recently crossed the Red Sea. On the 15th day of the second month since their deliverance from Egypt, they started complaining of hunger while travelling through the wilderness. God provides quail in the evening (16:13) and after the dew of morning, He would provide a flake-like thing for them to gather and make a day's worth of bread ("manna" 16:15). On the sixth day of the week, they were instructed to collect a two-day allowance of manna because the seventh day would be a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. They were commanded not to seek and go out to find manna on that day (16:23). However, on the seventh day, some went out to gather but they couldn't find any. Here how Yahweh responded:

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws? See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place; let no one go out of his place on the seventh day." So the people rested on the seventh day. — Exodus 16:27–30

The verdict was that Israel was guilty of not keeping His commandments and laws. This tells us that the concept of rest, as it relates to a period of time and as a commandment, comes before the Mosaic Covenant, a.k.a. The Ten Commandments. Interestingly, the reason that some in Israel could not find manna on the seventh day was that Yahweh doesn't create it on that day. He rests from making it on the seventh day. God Himself was faithfully keeping the seventh day as holy—His people were not.

For Israel, the Sabbath Day under the old covenant, had a distinct purpose. In the plainest command: "Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy", an explanation is given:

*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, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. **For in six days** the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and **rested on the seventh day**. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. — Exodus 20:8–11*

We see distinction: "keep it holy." A pattern is outlined: "Six days you shall labor." Those six days involve a rhythm: "do all your work." We receive further clarity by way of contrast: "but the seventh day is a Sabbath." It is a time of ceasing, a time of rest.

The sabbaths, above all, were to be kept as a sign that Yahweh and Israel had a distinct relationship, one created and initiated by Yahweh, who is distinctly holy (Ex. 31:13). Keeping the Sabbath Day was to be seen as a covenant (Ex. 31:16). In that sense, keeping the Sabbath would be likened to the covenant sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:11). It was binding and permanent, a sign involving body and soul, imaging Yahweh as distinct, holy in every way.

Adherence to obeying the command was so significant that individual violators were to be put to death while the nation would incur God's wrath for profaning it and for failing to keep it distinct (Ex. 20:8-11 cf. Ex. 35:2; Neh. 13:17-18; Jer. 17:27). Treating the sabbaths as holy corresponded to treating God Himself as holy. Because God is holy, some periods of time should not be like others.

Herein is the crux of sabbath: Will we trust God? Will we trust Him to keep His own covenant, His integrity? Will we trust Him to keep His promise to provide, to uphold and sustain our lives and all that is important and vital?

There are periods of time in our lives, there are patterns and rhythms of life where conventional wisdom, common sense says: "You need to make hay when the sun shines." Though it is entirely appropriate that certain work, certain amounts of work, during certain periods of time require working more hours, exerting more energy, and using more resources, God commands we still stop that work for a period of time for His sake.

When the situation seems to demand the most, when not stopping seems reasonable and excusable is precisely the time when God often tests us. And because there is no one else like Him, because He is holy, reflecting His image will defy common sense. It will reveal who we trust.

Is there a certain time to plow the ground? Is it important to plow the ground? Does plowing require a certain amount of time? Could we not say that certain circumstances might make plowing the ground a matter of urgency? What about harvest time? Common sense would say that certain circumstances will demand doing whatever it takes, for however long it takes, to finish the job. God says, here is a test that will reveal who you trust:

"Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest. — Exodus 34:21

God does not stop being holy. He does not stop showing the world that there is no One else like Him. The greatest purpose of displaying His holiness is revealing His glory. There are certain times and situations where defying common sense is the means He chooses so that He alone will receive praise, He alone will be adored. Though *we bear His image*, the command to rest reminds us that *we are not Him*.

Even the demeanor of sabbath was distinct, which helps us to see more of the connection of sabbath involving body and soul, the physical and spiritual. The acts of abstaining and restraining (i.e. “afflicting themselves”) showed trust that they could live by more than bread alone (Lev. 23:32; Deut. 8:3-4; 29:5). Ceasing from the work of farming for a year was meant to prove trust in God and faith in His provision (Lev. 25:4-5; 26:35; Is. 24:8; Heb. 4:1-2). Abstaining from good routine activities and restraining good desires was a way of remembering greater freedom and satisfaction is found in belonging to a greater Master. Restraining and abstaining from proper pleasures and joys was a means of knowing greater pleasure and joy comes through being known by God. Ceasing from their work was an occasion for praising the works of God, to tell and sing of His many blessing (Ps. 92).

In keeping sabbath their souls would experience the absence of anything threatening and enjoy the blessing of covenant peace that comes through redemption (Lev. 26:6). In keeping the sabbaths their bodies would be refreshed and renewed (Ex. 23:12; 34:21). For a distinct period of time their whole life, body and soul, would be uniquely redirected and their patterns and routines reoriented.

Moreover, it was not just the people that would have rest and refreshment. Letting the land rest and lay desolate every seventh year was a visual reminder that the whole earth and its fullness belongs to the King of Glory, who is over all creation (Ps. 24:1-2). The ground lives under the curse and it too awaits its final redemption. Yahweh not only renews and restores His people in rest, but He also renews and restores His entire creation (Lev. 26 cf. Rom. 8:19-25).

We can conclude that sabbath is uniquely connected with covenant, the promise of blessing and curse. Obeying the command to rest images the eternal and distinct relationship Yahweh has with His people as well as all of creation. In part, His holiness is imaged by following the distinct patterns and rhythms rooted in God from the beginning of creation. In rest, the physical and spiritual life is renewed and refreshed. The body and soul are reoriented and redirected, preparing us to reenter service to our Lord as we await final restoration and redemption. All of which is distinctly found in the God of sabbath, who blesses it, provides it, and whose own pattern and rhythm we are to image.

Sabbath in Christ

In Jesus, we again see that rest does not mean an absence of doing, but very much involves a certain kind of doing. There is a kind of doing that proceeds from belief and trust and results in wholeness of body and soul, of blessing, peace, and fullness of joy. In Jesus, we see a pattern and rhythm of life that defies common sense while defining work and rest. In Jesus’ work and rest, instead of seeing conventional wisdom, we see convictional wisdom that will do nothing but the Father’s will.

It was in the wilderness that Jesus perfectly rested while resisting temptation for 40 days and afterward returned in the power of the Spirit (Lk. 4:14). It was to the desolate places that Jesus departed to rest (Mk. 6:31-32). It was in a desolate place that Jesus refreshed and renewed over 5,000 hungry bodies and declared Himself as the true bread from heaven (Mk. 6:32-44; John 6). In that same desolate place Jesus said that doing the works of God was believing the One whom he has sent (Jn. 6:29).

Jesus perfectly kept sabbath as His Father, ceasing from one kind of work while abiding in another kind. He declared Himself Lord of the Sabbath (i.e. *rest*) and that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mk. 2:27-28). The kind of work we see Jesus doing on the Sabbath is life-giving. It opens eyes to see the glory of God. It opens ears to hear the Word of God. It opens mouths to sing the praises of God. It is the work of restoration and renewal.

Many rightfully argue that what Jesus did on the Sabbath Day and taught concerning it, caused the most controversy in His ministry (see *Matthew ch. 12*). So much so, the religious leaders would level this blasphemous charge: Jesus could neither be of God nor sent from Him (John 9:16). They profaned the Incarnate Sabbath and sought to destroy Him (Matt. 12:14). Those same religious leaders placed burdens of sabbath keeping upon the people of which no one could find rest.

But Jesus offers those who labor and are heavy laden to come to Him and find rest. Since He is true rest personified, all that true rest is, can only be found in Him. So to trust and obey Jesus is to find rest (Mt. 11:28-30).

Jesus perfectly kept covenant and perfectly kept sabbath. In fulfilling all the commands of the Old Covenant, He was able to become the initiator of a New Covenant. While the Old Covenant commanded that the Sabbath Day be remembered, under the New Covenant, the Sabbath is kept by remembering Jesus, our true rest.

On the cross, Jesus secured entrance into eternal rest by ceasing from His work, declaring the work His Father gave Him to do was finished. The work of redemption is complete. All things are being made new and will be restored.

Sabbath in Coram Deo

Resting, keeping Christ as our Sabbath, shows we live *coram deo*, a Latin phrase meaning: “in the presence of God”, “before His face”. Herein lies the major significance for us and between body and soul: we are no less tempted to profane Jesus Christ every day, our true rest, than Israel was in failing to keep the Sabbath Day holy. How? By not ceasing from our work in a purposeful way, we fail to redirect and reorient our true work, enjoying God and being satisfied with His presence.

Yes, our bodies are wasting away and will waste away. They will perish, not because we worked too hard for too long, and not because work is bad, for God called all His work good (Gen. 1-2). The goodness of work has been marred by Adam's and our failure to trust God—to sabbath in Him and to cease from our unbelief.

How often do we fail to *commune* with God because we fail to stop from our routines and the things we do, day-in and day-out and be reminded that we are not God? If He stopped His work for purposeful rest, why don't we? Beloved, I believe this is the major reason why we so often do not pursue or live in *community* with one another. We are not *communing* with Him, we are not trusting Him, and therefore, we are consumed with ourselves.

We keep “collecting sticks” because we think God won't keep the fire going without our help. We take more than our share of “manna” instead of trusting the Bread of Life to sustain us with a double portion from yesterday. What are the implications of living like this and how do we learn to be still and know that *Yahweh is*?

If the purpose of rest serves as a sign of our relationship with God and a practical way of redirecting and reorienting body and soul, then what are the implications for not keeping rest? There are many, but two that I believe are most significant.

First, I think **our identity** before man as belonging to God becomes less distinct. Are we recognizable as those who belong to Him? Do we live in such a distinct way, delighting in Him and His commands that others recognize we trust God to live, move, and have our being? If we do, we will be a restful people and a people of purposeful rest.

Second, I think we become **more barren than bearing fruit**. Abiding in Jesus Christ (i.e. resting, taking sabbath, communing) is the key to bearing fruit. Jesus said that He was the vine, and we are the branches. If our lives do not include purposeful rest, it may be that we are living as though we are the vine, and He is just one of the branches. If so, we won't bear fruit, but become more barren. Others will not be built up and strengthened by the fruit God produces in us because there is little to feast upon and enjoy.

Those are two major negatives. But what about the positives? What are the positive implications of resting?

First, ceasing from certain work provides a **necessary diversion**. We are often blinded by the things that absorb our day-to-day patterns and rhythms. What we are absorbed by can often be an indicator of idolatry. Ceasing from certain work we enjoy and getting distance from it allows us to see what we really live on and what we can't live without.

Second, ceasing from certain work provides an occasion to be **more future oriented**. If the urgent absorbs us, then we have little opportunity for future mindedness, dreaming about and longing for what is most important and what is yet to come.

Rest, by faith, is what awaits the people of God (Heb. 4:9-11) and the Incarnate Sabbath is for whom we are waiting.

By faith, when our six days of work are complete here on earth, we will enter into our eternal 7th day, and there we will remain with our Lord.