



SABBATH: A TOKEN OF ETERNITY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Genesis 2:1-3

Fifth Message

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For the past four weeks we have been taking a sabbatical from our usual preaching routine. A few months ago, Brian Morgan expressed concern that he was tired—too tired to preach a series this Fall. These sentiments of weariness struck a chord with other staff members, and we became concerned lest we fall into the trap of merely “turning the crank.” After discussion at both staff and elder level, action was taken to preserve spiritual vitality. Brian was granted a sabbatical from both preaching and eldering. This is why for a few weeks this summer he was listed in the bulletin as “on leave” from the board of elders. Of course, now that he has returned from Romania he is full of life, energy, and vision. He is now back on the board, but his Fall preaching series on Mark has been postponed to next year, as has John Hanneman’s continuing series in Joshua. In their place we have substituted a series on getting back to the basics, on addressing areas of the Christian life where, as the saying goes, “the rubber hits the road.” Our desire is to give you a vision of God amidst the routine of your daily life: amidst your sexuality, your singleness, your marriage, your parenting, your work. We want to lift your gaze above the mundane, to give you a larger picture, to raise you out of the ruts into which you might have fallen. You have a Father who loves you, as John Hanneman has reminded us for three weeks from the parable of the prodigal son. This Father invites you to his party. We want to help you enjoy the party.

Today in our sabbatical series, we come to the topic of Sabbath. As I have reflected on this matter over the past few weeks, it has struck me that the words Sabbath and sabbatical evoke different emotions. A few of you are still fortunate enough to enjoy a paid sabbatical from work, a benefit that was once more common in this valley. Now, about the only people left with sabbaticals are academics and pastors. A sabbatical is not a period of doing nothing, it is a break from the normal routine. A university would take a dim view of a professor who used his sabbatical to stay home as a couch potato. No, he is given a sabbatical so that he can continue his work, free from the pressures of his usual mill of teaching, grading, and meetings.

A sabbatical is a welcome break, but Sabbath more often arouses guilt or resentment. Consider one of my favorite movies, *Chariots of Fire*, in which the hero, Eric Liddle, chides two young boys for playing soccer on Sunday, and says, “The Sabbath’s no a day for playing football.” Are those boys likely to be attracted by Sabbath?

Sabbath is a confusing issue for the Church. How easy it would be if the Apostle Paul had given us in one of his letters a convenient guide to Sabbath living. How are we to figure out how to live when we haven’t been given detailed instructions? Tom Wright makes a helpful analogy. Suppose we found a long-lost play of Shakespeare’s, but the final act was missing. How would we complete the play? Wright suggests hiring a troupe of the best Shakespearean actors, have them thoroughly immerse themselves in the existing acts, and then tell them to improvise the final act. In Scripture we have the

first few acts of the great drama of redemption. The first Act is Creation, the second is the Fall, the third is Israel, the fourth is Christ. We have a glimpse of the final Act, the New Heavens and New Earth, in Revelation 21-22. But Act 5, the Church, is rather sketchy. Wright proposes that we immerse ourselves in the acts that we do have, then improvise. Today I will seek to immerse you in the Acts of this Drama as they pertain to Sabbath. We start in Genesis 2:1-3, our primary text for this morning.

1. Sabbath the climax of creation

Genesis 1 describes how God created the heavens and the earth. He took a formless and empty earth, and spent three days forming it, then three days filling it. God formed the world by creating boundaries, by separating the light from the darkness, the waters below from the waters above, and the sea from the dry land. He imposed temporal and spatial order onto what had been an undifferentiated cosmos. On the second set of three days he filled these temporal and spatial realms with their appropriate creatures. Day and night he filled with the greater and the lesser lights. The waters above and those below he filled with flying and swimming creatures. The dry land he filled with livestock, creepy-crawlies, and wild animals.

There was temporal order with the orderly succession of evening and morning. There was spatial order with each creature in its appropriate realm. Each day the Lord saw that each component was “good.” On the sixth day he saw that the whole assembly, the whole cosmos was “very good” (1:31). The Hebrew word *tov*, “good,” means that something is functioning the way it is supposed to function. So in Gen. 1:31 we are being told that the cosmos that was called into being is exactly what God had in mind.

But 1:31 is not the end of the creation account; there is a stage beyond the very good. In 2:1-3 we read,

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. (Gen 2:1-3, NASB)

After the six days there is a seventh, a day of rest. But look how many verbs there are on this day. For One who was at rest, God had a busy day, such a busy day that many modern translators have tried to help him out by moving some of his work to the sixth day. So, both NASB and NIV state that it was “by” not “on” the seventh day that his work was completed. The Revised English Bible is more explicit: “On the sixth day God brought to an end all the work he had been doing.” But the Hebrew is quite clear: it was on the seventh day that God did all these activities. On this seventh day, four verbs are predicated of God: he completed, he rested, he blessed, and he sanctified. We’ll look at each in turn.

1.1 God completed on the seventh day

We've seen that many of the translations are afraid of attributing even the work of completion to God on the seventh day. But it is vital that this work of completion be on the seventh, not the sixth day.

What helped me understand how one can complete something on a day of rest was a book by the Norwegian theologian, Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*.¹ Boman argues that Hebrew verbs are dynamic whereas Greek verbs are static. The Western world with its Greco-Roman origins has inherited the static verb forms of the Greeks. Take, for example, the verb "stand." In static thought, the verb "stand" denotes the state of standing as opposed to the state of sitting or lying down. In a static frame of reference, God is either working or he is not working. If he is completing his work, then he cannot be resting, and it becomes difficult to conceive of God still doing something on the seventh day. Hebrew verbs, by contrast, are dynamic, that is, they are verbs of motion. The verb '*amad*, "stand," denotes not the state of standing, but the end result of a motion: the act of rising so that one is standing up. Likewise, "complete" is a dynamic verb of motion. It incorporates within it the activities of the first six days. It is on the seventh day that God brings his creation into the state of completion. Otherwise the seventh day becomes a mere appendage, rather than the climactic day that lends meaning to the other six.

1.2 God rested on the seventh day

Having brought his work into a state of completion, God rested. Again, we will have trouble if we conceive of this in static rather than dynamic terms. In static terms, rest is the absence of motion. Its extreme form is found at the temperature of absolute zero, the temperature at which all motion ceases. But as a dynamic verb, rest is the result of, not the absence of, motion. The OT uses two distinct verbs for rest. The verb here, *shabbat*, is temporal rest, rest in time. The other verb, *nuah*, is primarily spatial rest, rest in space. Each is the result of motion.

The spatial verb, *nuah*, is first used in Gen 2:15, "Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it." That verb "put" is literally "cause to rest." The verb cannot be interpreted statically, for God immediately gave this resting human two jobs to do, cultivation and keeping. A few chapters later, the verb is used of the ark landing—coming to rest—on the mountain tops (Gen 8:4). Later, God "landed" his people in the Promised Land. He brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, from a land where they did not belong, and he settled them in the Promised Land, where he gave them rest. Rest did not mean that they did no work, but that they lived out their lives settled in the place where they belonged.

It was when I saw *shabbat* as a temporal analogy of this spatial rest that I was finally able to make theological sense of Sabbath. God moved his creation through six days, and he "landed" on the seventh day. He is still active on the seventh day. If he were to stop his activity, this universe would cease functioning instantly. But he carries out his activity within the settled, landed state of the seventh day.

1.3 God blessed the seventh day

The third activity that God does on the seventh day is that he blesses the day. Previously he had blessed the sea and winged creatures on the fifth day (1:22), and man on the sixth day (1:28). In each case the word of blessing was, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." To bless is to endow with abundant and effective life. By blessing the seventh day, God

marked it as an arena of abundant and effective life.

1.4 God sanctified the seventh day

God's final activity on the seventh day was to sanctify the day. To sanctify means to make holy. The concept of holiness is fundamental to the Bible, but is frequently misunderstood. The Biblical worldview distinguishes between two realms: on the one hand is the ordinary, the common, the profane. On the other is the extra-ordinary, the sacred, the holy. Rudolph Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, reminds us that the fundamental idea of the holy is that it is "other."² God is Holy; therefore, God is Other. Genesis 1 shows that God is altogether other than his creation. By the end of the sixth day there are two fundamentally different realms: God the Creator in the realm of Other, and his Creation in the realm of the common. But on the seventh day God does something of enormous, but little remarked, significance. By sanctifying the seventh day, he transfers it from the realm of the common into the realm of the holy.

Ten days ago (Tuesday, Sept. 8), Mark McGwire broke what many consider to be the most important record in American sports. Passing Roger Maris' record that had stood since 1961, he hit his 62nd home run of the season. The very next day the ball, together with McGwire's bat and uniform, and even the uniform of his son, an honorary batboy, were taken to the Hall of Fame. They were removed from the realm of the ordinary, the common, and transferred to the realm of the uncommon, the hallowed. Never again will they be used in a baseball game. That would be to return the uncommon, the sacred to the world of the common, the profane.

The climax of creation is the consecration of time. This is unique, for all other ancient creation accounts lead up to the consecration of space. Like the ancient Babylonians, we exalt space over time. Abraham Joshua Heschel observes,

Technical conquest is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence.³

The seventh day is not only the day after the sixth day, it is also the stage beyond the very good. God had more in mind for his creation than just that it be very good. The seventh day is the *telos*, a word that means "goal, end, final purpose." The Bible is unique in having sacred time not sacred space as its *telos*. On the seventh day, God pulled part of the creation into the Other, alongside himself. Is this an indication that he intends to pull the other six days into the realm of the Other, to bring all Creation into this *telos*?

In a sense that is an imponderable, because the Fall got in the way and spoilt things. But, as we will see, there is plenty in Scripture to suggest that Sabbath must be interpreted teleologically, that is, that it must be seen as a goal towards which other things move.

2. Israel called to Sabbath observance

In Act Two, "The Fall," mankind, through his disobedience, threw the "very good" world out of kilter. Curse replaced Blessing. Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden, out of sacred space, and they forfeited their privilege of enjoying sacred time, of living in the seventh day.

But God is not content to leave his world out of kilter, and his image estranged from sacred time and sacred space. In

Act Three, he calls Israel to be a new human race. He gave her his law so that she might know how to live. He gave her Sabbath as a picture of the seventh day. Sabbath observance is the fourth commandment. In Exodus 20 it is based on Creation:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 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, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the 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.” (Exod 20:8-11)

But when Moses repeats the ten commandments in Deuteronomy 5, Sabbath observance is based on God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt:

“And 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)

So which is it? Is Sabbath observance based on Creation or upon Redemption? The answer must be both. It is predicated on Creation, because the seventh day is the *telos* of the six days of creation. But it is also predicated on Redemption, for fallen humanity must be redeemed if it is to be brought into the seventh day. Israel was to keep Sabbath because she had been both created and redeemed for the seventh day, for the realm of the Other.

The Sabbath was given to Israel as a picture of the seventh day. On the Sabbath, Israel was to fall into the pattern established by God when he completed his work and rested. This established a rhythm to the week: for six days the Israelites labored, then for one day they rested. Each week, the Israelites took a journey through time. The Sabbath was the goal of the week, the day that gave meaning to other six days. But after each Sabbath they had to start the journey over again.

This rhythm that Israel observed each week was itself contained within two larger rhythms. Every seventh year, Israel was to give her land a sabbatical year, a year of rest from being cultivated (Lev 25:1-7). After every seventh sabbatical year, i.e., every fiftieth year, Israel was to celebrate a Jubilee Year in which slaves were set free and land restored to its rightful owner (Lev 25:8-55).

These cycles of a week, of seven years, and of fifty years, were powerful reminders that there lay something beyond the mundane life of the daily routine. Beyond the common lay the sacred, the holy. Beyond the six days lay the seventh. Beyond the six years lay the seventh. Beyond the forty-nine years lay the fiftieth.

Alas, Israel rarely lived up to her calling as the new humanity, the people through whom God would restore blessing to the world. She rarely kept Sabbath. The two major reasons given in Scripture for Israel’s exile are her idolatry and her failure to grant the land its sabbatical rest every seventh year. While the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, the land enjoyed its backlog of Sabbath rest (2 Chr 36:21). The exile cured the people of both idolatry and Sabbath neglect. Neither has been a recurring problem in subsequent Judaism. Indeed, through the past 2500 years, Judaism has exalted Sabbath in two different ways: by intensification and by spiritualization.

1. *Intensification of Sabbath.* One strand of thinking, repre-

ented by the Pharisees, Rabbinic Judaism and modern Orthodox Judaism, sought to legislate Sabbath observance down to the level of minutiae. At Sinai, the Israelites were commanded, “You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day” (Exod 35:3). Twentieth century rabbis have been kept very busy transposing this verse into the world of electricity. They have determined that a Jew must not operate anything electrical on the Sabbath, lest a spark be caused, which would be the kindling of a fire. On my two visits to Jerusalem I have stayed in a hotel with a Sabbath elevator. Throughout Sabbath, it stops automatically at each floor and the doors open. The sparks are still being created across the electrical contacts, but no person is pressing the buttons and thus kindling a fire. Other hotels get around the problem by hiring a *goy*, a Gentile, to come in and push the buttons. This sort of attitude to Sabbath was prevalent among the Pharisees in the days of Jesus.

2. *Spiritualization of Sabbath.* Fortunately, not all Jews reduced Sabbath to casuistry. Some of the early rabbis came to see Sabbath as a “token of eternity.” Medieval rabbis looked upon Sabbath as a queen. Near sunset on Fridays, they would lead their followers out onto the hillside to greet the arrival of Queen Sabbath. A beautiful liturgy developed, extolling Sabbath. We get a glimpse of this liturgy in another of my favorite movies, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Here Sabbath is not the interruption to life that we saw in *Chariots of Fire*. For Tevye and Golde, Sabbath is the goal, the *telos*, toward which they have been heading all week. It is a day of heaven on earth, a token of eternity.

3. Sabbath broken by Jesus?

Jesus lived in a Jewish world much concerned about the proper observance of Sabbath. Why did Jesus choose the Sabbath for so many of his healing miracles, such as the one in Mark 2:23-3:6? Was it to thumb his nose at the Pharisees, to get them upset? Or did he see something else in the Sabbath day? We have seen that the Sabbath is to be interpreted teleologically. The seventh day was the goal toward which God moved his Creation, the day in which God brought creation into completion. The Sabbath was his gift to Israel, the goal towards which both creation and redemption moved. Surely then, Sabbath is the most appropriate day for Jesus to heal people, to lift them out of their pits in which they wallowed with their mangled arms and broken lives. Sabbath was the day for being made whole, made complete so that one could enter into rest.

4. Sabbath superseded in the Early Church

The first Christians recognized that with the death and resurrection of Jesus, something dramatic had happened to Sabbath. These Jewish Christians quickly moved their assemblies to the first day of the week. Paul, formerly the most fanatical of Pharisees, and therefore punctilious about Sabbath observance, came to realize that Sabbath was just a shadow of a reality that had now arrived. He told the Colossians,

Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col 2:16-17)

We have the fullest treatment of Sabbath in Hebrews. The writer to the Hebrews, in 3:7-4:13, engages in a lengthy discourse on Psalm 95:7b-11. This psalm is a call to Israel to worship Yahweh and to avoid the disobedient example of the generation that came out of Egypt. The psalmist urged the worshipers, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Ps 95:7b; Heb 3:7). The first generation had hardened their hearts, provoking God’s judgment, “They shall never en-

ter my rest” (Ps 95:11; Heb 3:11). The argument through the rest of Hebrews 3-4 is that, just as God appointed the seventh day as a day for himself to enter his rest, so he has appointed another day, which he has called “Today,” as a day for us to enter into his rest.

There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest... (Heb 4:-11)

5. Sabbath Expanded in the New Heavens and New Earth

In Revelation 21-22 we are given a glimpse of the final act of our play. In Act One, God differentiated time, and created the heavenly bodies as timekeepers. But in the final act, God will remove the timekeepers. In the new heavens and the new earth there will be neither sun nor moon (Rev 21:23), nor any night (Rev 21:25). This can only mean that all of time will be holy. The seventh day will have expanded to fill all of time. The whole cosmos will be in the realm of the Other. Furthermore, far from being the end of the play, we will find that this is just the end of the prologue. Only then will we fully enter the realm for which God has made us.

6. Living Sabbath Today

These are the Acts of the play that we have recorded for us in Scripture. In Act One, “Creation,” God pulled the seventh day into the realm of the other. In Act Two, “Fall,” mankind forfeited its share in God’s rest. In Act Three, “Israel,” God invited his people to act out in time the rhythm of the seventh day. In Act Four, “Christ,” Jesus made people complete on the Sabbath. How do we live out Sabbath in Act Five, “The Church”?

On the negative side, we observe neither Saturday nor Sunday as Sabbath, not even a Christian Sabbath. Sabbath has given way to Today, the day for entering God’s rest. How, then, do we observe Today? By making Today a picture of the seventh day, a day of completion, rest, blessing, and sanctification.

6.1 Day of Completion

On the seventh day, God made creation complete. On the Sabbath, Jesus made broken people complete. Today is the day for being made complete. This is true whether it’s Saturday, Sunday, or Tuesday. Today is the day for finally acknowledging that it is awfully wearying trying to make it on your own. Today is the day for accepting Jesus’ invitation, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). God has not made you to live out your life in the common world of the six days. He has made you for the seventh day, to live with him in the realm of the Other. Today is the day to enter that realm.

6.2 Day of Rest

Secondly, Today is the day of rest. It is not a Sabbath day, for the Sabbath was a copy of the seventh day. We must beware of falling into the trap of thinking of rest in static terms. It is not a day for not doing things. It is a day for living life in a different way. We cannot live life this way until we have been made complete. In making us complete, God gives us eternal life. “Eternal life” is an unfortunate translation, for it conjures up images of living forever, in which case salvation becomes a life insurance policy with no term. God’s salvation is not an insurance policy. Eternal life is literally “life of the ages,” the ages being the ages to come, i.e., eternity. God

gives us here, in this age, the life of eternity. This is rest. For all of our toys and our conquest of space, we are a restless people. Even if we have our own patch of real estate we are still looking for somewhere to land. God has made us to land in himself. As Augustine put it, “Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.”

6.3 Day of Blessing

Thirdly, Today is the day of blessing, the realm in which God gives abundant and effective life. Silicon Valley’s definitions of the abundant and effective life have nothing to do with reality. Surely there is more to life than the adage, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” The abundant life is life in eternity.

6.4 Day of Sanctification

Finally, Today is the day of sanctification. God has transferred Today to the realm of the Other. After each Sabbath, Israel had to leave the Other and return to the ordinary. But when God brings us into his rest, there is no end. He has expanded holy time to fill every day. Therefore, in seeking to live out the principle of Sabbath, we treat every day as holy.

The walls that demarcated Sabbath have been blown down. Unfortunately, too often the walls have fallen in the wrong direction. God has blown the walls outwards so that Sabbath has expanded to every day. But the evangelical world has not been very good at living with the walls blown out. In our desire to avoid Sabbath-day legalism we treat all days alike. But what usually happens is that the walls fall inwards so that the six days expand into the seventh. Rather than live every day as holy, we live all days as common. For all our conceit that we are living under grace, we are in a worse state than the Jews. At least they live one day in Sabbath.

Today is not Sabbath; it is what Sabbath pointed to. In turn, both Sabbath and Today point towards the Seventh Day that will fill all of time. Both are tokens of eternity. Sabbath was one day in seven. Today is seven days in seven. Go out today and live it as a token of eternity, but then carry on living that way on Monday and on through the week. Improvise however you see fit, but do so within the framework established by the rest of the plot. Then it will be a day of completion, of rest, of blessing, and of holiness. Sabbath is not the place we’re not allowed to play football, but the place where we enter God’s teleological rest through Christ, and live a foretaste of eternity.

Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty? How magnificent his strength! How inscrutable his wisdom! Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.

Augustine, *Confessions* i.1.

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1. Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York & London: Norton, 1970).

2. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford UP, 1923).

3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), 3.