

Sabbath-Keeping

By Bill Gaultiere

Keeping a Sabbath day to honor the Lord and for rest and renewal is the most repeated command in the Bible. And yet it is the most neglected by Christians today. We are missing out on God's blessing!

Sabbath Blessings

To take a Sabbath is to set aside a day to rest in God's provision, to stop your work and be "unproductive." Along these lines, sometimes the best thing you can do on a Sabbath is to *sleep!* (Read Psalm 127.) The Sabbath is a day to let go, to stop trying to control people and situations. It's a day to focus on what God is graciously doing all around you and respond to him rather than depending on your own abilities to make things happen.

Keeping the Sabbath teaches us to trust God and enjoy Him. It's God's way to set us free from worry and anxiety, ambition and anger, even loneliness. Because in the green pastures of Good Shepherd's grace and beside his still waters we discover that it's really true: "He restores my soul!" (Psalm 23:3).

During Sabbath rest I discover the reality of my life in God's kingdom: *I am not alone. Everything doesn't depend on me. Things don't have to happen my way. God is with me helping me and working all things together for my good so I can be happy no matter what!*

God Created the Sabbath

At the beginning of creation, even before Adam and Eve sinned, God gave to them the gift of Sabbath rest by showing them that Sabbath is creative work that it is part of his own nature. He blessed this day and set it apart as a holy a day for them to focus on enjoying his presence with them (Genesis 2:3).

Later, God put the Sabbath at the heart of his moral law, the Ten Commandments, teaching his people to "observe the Sabbath day" to "remember" that he is their Creator (Exodus 20:8-11; the first giving of the Law) and their Redeemer from slavery (Deuteronomy 5:12-15; the second giving of the Law).

Legalistic Sabbath-Keeping is Deadly!

But as time went on the Lord's people strayed from keeping the Sabbath and so again and again the prophets reminded them that the Lord gave the Sabbath to them as a blessing and as a sign of his precious loving presence with them (Isaiah 56:2, 6-7, 58:13-14, Ezekiel 20:20).

When Jesus' came on the scene most of the Lord's people, following the teaching of the Pharisees, observed the Sabbath, but they did so in a legalistic way that missed the whole point

of resting and rejoicing in their relationship with the Lord. They followed an extensive list of rules designed to prevent anyone from doing any work.

But people were so burdened with the work of trying not to do any work that Sabbath-keeping was obscuring the grace and healing of God that it was intended to offer! (Mark 7:8-13).

New Testament Sabbath-Keeping

Jesus shook things up when he pronounced: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28). Then he backed up his words by healing people on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-14, Luke 13:10-16, John 5:1-15) and teaching them how to come to him to find real rest (Matthew 11:28-30).

But none of what Jesus did or said was meant to do away with Sabbath-keeping!

God has created us such that we need one day in seven to do no work and to rest in God’s grace. Jesus himself followed the custom of honoring the Sabbath (Luke 4:16, Mark 6:1-2). And Jesus’ followers kept the Sabbath (Luke 23:56, Acts 16:13, 17:2). Even Gentile Christians observed the Sabbath (Acts 13:42-44). The fact is that God has intended that people should observe the Sabbath rest in God throughout eternity! (Isaiah 66:22-23).

Some people get hung up on which day to keep a Sabbath. The Jewish Sabbath has always been Saturday. The early Christians made Sunday the Sabbath to honor Christ’s resurrection. But as Paul teaches, any day can be used for a Sabbath (Romans 14:4-6). That’s a good thing, because Sunday is *not* a day that church leaders can rest!

The writer to Hebrews knows how prone we are to neglect to keep a Sabbath and to cultivate the disposition of resting in and relying on God rather than merely our own abilities. So he urges us to stop working and “make every effort to enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:11) so that we can hear God’s voice and respond to him (see Hebrews 4:1-13).

Understanding the Sabbath

Eugene Peterson offers a delightful and helpful understanding of what the Sabbath is all about:

The two biblical reasons for sabbath-keeping develop into parallel sabbath activities of praying and playing. The Exodus reason directs us to the contemplation of God, which becomes prayer. The Deuteronomy reason directs us to social leisure, which becomes play. Praying and playing are deeply congruent with each other and have essential inner connections...

What is it like to pray? To play? Puritan Sabbaths that eliminated play were a disaster. Secular Sabbaths that eliminate prayer are worse. Sabbath-keeping involves both playing and praying. The activities are alike enough to share the same day and different enough to require each other for a complementary wholeness (*Working the Angles*, p. 74-75).

The Sabbath Psalm

Did you know Psalm 92 is specifically designated as a Psalm to pray on the Sabbath? Have you ever done this? The notation at the beginning of the Psalm says: “A Psalm to be Sung on the Lord’s Day” (NLT). Take a Sabbath and spend some time with Psalm 92 – you’ll find it very helpful!

To explain Sabbath praying and playing Peterson draws on Psalm 92. This little known Psalm presents the Sabbath as a day to “give thanks to Yahweh” and to “play in honour of [the] Most High” (Psalm 92:1, Jerusalem Bible).

The Psalmist then provides us with three metaphors showing that the parallel Sabbath actions of praying and playing are like music (verses 1-4), animals (verses 10-11), and palm trees (verses 12-14). *Music? Animals? Palm trees?* Yes! Praying and playing need the musician’s combination of discipline and delight, the wild ox’s unrestrained and exuberant prancing, and the palm tree’s vibrant growth in the desert.

And because prayerful play and playful prayer are not meant to be detached from real-world-living the middle of the Sabbath psalm addresses the problem of evil (verses 5-9).

When we set aside a day to do no work so we pray and play we find that our souls are restored! We proclaim with the Sabbath Psalm-writer: “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock!” (verse 15).

I’ve had to Learn to Practice the Sabbath — Maybe you do Too! (More Soul Shepherding)

In my history I struggled to learn to be ruled by the peace of Christ (Colossians 3:15) instead of my hurry and my ambition.

“[Hurry Up and Be Still: Freedom From Adrenaline Dependence](#)” tells the story of how I got free of using adrenaline and overworking to compensate for my feelings of anxiety and inadequacy.

“[Slowing Down for a Sabbath Rest](#)” focuses on the role that keeping a Sabbath has played to help me stay in (or keeping getting back into!) Jesus’ easy yoke. I learned to practice the Sabbath by starting small and using some spiritual disciplines to help me to rest in God’s grace.

You too can begin with small Sabbath rests.”[Sightless Among Miracles](#)” includes a Jewish sabbath prayer and a few words to encourage you to rest in God.

“[Sabbath as Praying and Playing](#)” features excerpts from Eugene Peterson. These are the insights that God used to inspire his Sabbath transformation in me.