

Sabbath Rest

SCOTT HOEZEE

The famous Jewish scholar, Abraham Heschel, once made a memorable statement when he claimed that all across history, “The Sabbath has kept the Jews even more than the Jews kept the Sabbath.” Heschel’s comment reflects the deep truth that in the Bible, the Sabbath was woven into the very fabric of God’s creation. We human beings need sabbath, it turns out, almost as much as we need oxygen and nourishment. Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore the spiritual discipline of keeping Sabbath. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now the second program in the series on the spiritual disciplines. This is actually our second series on spiritual disciplines. There are quite a few of them. We did some of the more obvious ones in a previous series. So now we are going to do some that are a little less obvious. We just did a program on commitment...that was our first program...and now Sabbath.

DAVE BAST

Right; sometimes people might sit up and kind of take notice and say: Wait a minute; all right; I understand things like fasting and tithing or giving, or Bible reading and prayer. Those are spiritual disciplines that if we incorporate into the daily rhythms of our life will lead to growth—growth in our knowledge of God—our relationship with Christ—our obedience and service in the world; but now we are talking about things like commitment and keeping the Sabbath, and that seems a little farther afield, but actually, these are all wonderful habits of a godly heart, to quote a book title, which will produce a deeper life within us and a deeper relationship with God; and sabbath is an idea, Scott, that you meet all over the Bible; in fact, not just the Old Testament, also the New. In fact, it is almost the first thing we are introduced to as we open our Bibles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; you only get one chapter into the Bible and here is how it goes in Genesis Chapter 2, the first three verses. This rounds out, now, the creation account in Genesis 1. ¹Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. ²By the seventh day, God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

DAVE BAST

So, right off the bat we might be introduced with a puzzling idea. What? God was tired?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

He had worked so hard on these six days of creating the universe and culminating in the creation of human beings made after his likeness, made in his image, as male and female. Everything was good, good, good,

and on the sixth day it was very good; and then all of a sudden we read: Whew, God needed a rest? That is not really the point, I don't think, is it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; and you know, as a famous psalm says: God neither slumbers nor sleeps. God doesn't get tired. So what does it mean he rested? Well, what it meant was that God wanted to revel in everything that had been made in the first six days in the Genesis account. This rest was a chance for God to enjoy...to take delight in...what God had made. The Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has often pointed out. We often misread Genesis 1. It is kind of a dry account; you know, you just get these rhythms: Let there be, let there be, and God saw that it was good. He says that sometimes we think that good is like moral assessment, like, oh, you know, that is good. Brueggemann says no, it is an esthetic assessment. It is good in the sense that, you know, if your spouse is making some dish at the stove for dinner, and you say: Can I have a taste, and you get a spoonful, and you say: Oh, that's good...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's good, mmmm. That, Brueggemann says, is how you need to read all those God saw that it was good...it was *good*...God loved it...just *loved* it; and so the seventh day for God was a day to soak up what God had done.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is a wonderful idea of Sabbath as opportunity for enjoyment, pronouncing a blessing, a favorable verdict on. It is like I imagine God standing on the shore of a lake with the backdrop of the Rockies snow-covered and forested on their lower slopes and saying: That is good; that is really good; that is beautiful! So, God takes delight in his own creation and affirms it and invites us to do the same; and interestingly, we pointed out that human beings were created on the sixth day, and night comes on the sixth day and the very next day is the Sabbath. So, before they had done actually any work, they were told to rest.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; humanity's first full day of existence, if you will, was a day off, although sabbath is not finally just a day off. We will talk about that more in the next couple segments, but the first order of business was not business as usual. It was a day where Adam and Eve, created in God's image, we were told in Chapter 1 of Genesis, right? Now they have to do what God does, because they have been made in God's image, and that is revel in the creation—take time to enjoy the creation—slow down long enough to notice the things that maybe in our busyness we sometimes don't take time to notice, like sunrises and sunsets, and maple leaves, and ants and bees, the whole thing; and this resting is part of our spiritual DNA.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, I think the first important step to take in understanding Sabbath is to recognize what God does and why. So, God rests from his work of creation. That doesn't mean, as we have said, that he was tired or needed rest, nor does it mean that he stopped working. God is always working; in fact, Jesus said: My Father is always working, and I am working. He said that to justify healing on the Sabbath day. So, no; God doesn't take time off from his work of upholding the universe and ruling the creation and ordering his providence for the good and the flourishing of human beings. That is his purpose, and we can be involved in that, too, seven days a week, helping others to flourish; but, it begins for us with the act of recognizing that the creation is a gift and we are meant to enjoy it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and it is not as though we don't have work to do, right? The other thing that happened in Genesis 1 is that Adam and Eve, the human race, was told to tend and to keep the garden—to take care of the earth. So,

they did have work to do, it is just that they didn't do that work before they got a chance to enjoy Sabbath first of all; and maybe there is a connection there, too, Dave. Maybe we are more motivated to tend and keep God's good creation if we take time to delight in that creation in the first place, right? I mean, that is a good motivation. The underwater explorer, Jacques Cousteau...somebody once asked him: Why do you make all those documentaries? And he said: Because if people could only see what is underneath the waves, they are going to be more motivated to keep the oceans clean...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Once you see what is down there, now you want to preserve it because it is just so gorgeous; and that, I think, is the idea.

DAVE BAST

So, that is number one. We want to say why care about the Sabbath? Why try to keep the Sabbath yourself? Because we want to be like God, and God does that for the purpose, primarily, initially, of delight. But there is more to say about the Sabbath and the practice of keeping it, and we will ponder some of those things next.
Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program in a series on the spiritual disciplines, and in this program, Dave, it is the spiritual discipline of sabbath and sabbath keeping; and you just noted, Dave, at the end of the prior part of this program that creation is a gift, and doing the God-like thing on Sabbath of reveling in and delighting in that gift is itself also a gift; and so, you would think that you wouldn't need to be commanded to keep the Sabbath. I often use the analogy, you know, if you put a gorgeous hot fudge ice cream sundae down in front of a kid, you do not ever need to say: Okay, Jamal; I order you to eat that sundae. You don't have to order a kid to eat ice cream; they are going to dive right in without needing to be told. Well, if it weren't for sin, we wouldn't need to be ordered to keep Sabbath, we would delight in keeping Sabbath; but sin did come, right in the next chapter in Genesis. After Sabbath was established in Chapter 2, sin comes in Chapter 3. So, now we need to be ordered to do what ought to come naturally.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and we are ordered to do that, and most famously in the Ten Commandments. So, if you think about sabbath and the order to keep the Sabbath, you might think of the 4th Commandment; from Exodus 20, it goes like this: ⁸Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but 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. ¹¹For 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, this is part of the Ten Commandments delivered at Sinai not long after the exodus from Egypt, but also not long before the people rebelled. They don't trust God to help them take the Promised Land, and so God declares forty years of wilderness wandering; so they do. The next generation will be the one to go into the Promised Land. So, near the end of those forty years, when the next generation of Israelites were going to enter the Promised Land, Moses holds a massive review session, which is the book of Deuteronomy, right? Deuteronomy is basically one long sermon from Moses, where he reviews for the people everything that the first generation had learned, and that includes in Deuteronomy 5 a repeat of the Ten Commandments, but now listen. Here is the 4th Commandment in Deuteronomy 5:

¹²Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it, you shall not

do any work, neither you nor your son nor daughter...it is all the same...and then this: ¹⁵Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. Now, Dave, if you paid close attention to the 4th Commandment in Exodus 20, and the 4th Commandment in Deuteronomy 5, you are going to notice something.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and what is different is not the command itself but the reason given for keeping the command. So, in Exodus the reason given is creation. We have already seen that in Genesis. God rested on the seventh day, and therefore declared that it was holy or made it holy, which means fundamentally he set it apart as belonging to himself. He made it different, that is what holiness means in the Bible; but in Deuteronomy 5, the reason is redemption, because you were slaves in Egypt and God delivered you; therefore, you must keep the Sabbath day; and incidentally, that was a reminder, too, that in their old life in Egypt, they didn't have the opportunity for a sabbath.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They never got a day off; they were slaves. It sort of reminds me of some of the bumper stickers in the Vietnam era. People had bumper stickers that POWs never have a good day, right? You never have a good day when you are a prisoner of war in Hanoi or wherever you were in Vietnam; and so also slaves never have a good day, and they certainly never get a day off. But what is significant here, Dave, about the different reason for sabbath keeping between the two is that, as you said, Exodus is all about creation, Deuteronomy is all about redemption; and guess what? Creation and redemption...the two biggest themes of the whole Bible. So, that tells you that Sabbath has something to do with everything.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and keeping it is our way of rooting ourselves again...re-rooting in a weekly rhythm ourselves in those two great realities. Our world belongs to God; he is its creator. He has bought it back by redemption...by redeeming it. The creation itself is holy and belongs to him, and we are holy and belong to him in Christ, and keeping sabbath is the rhythmic way of living into both those realities again each week.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; in this series on disciplines, we are going to have a program a little way down the line on the discipline of worship; and one of the things we are going to say in that program, Dave, is that at its best, worship rehearses the whole story of God all over again. We remember every week in church, through our creeds, through our songs, through the sermons, through the prayers...we rehearse the whole story to remind ourselves once again of what is important; and one of the main things, therefore, we need to do Sundays now, you know...Christians have moved sort of sabbath keeping over to the first day of the week because that was the day of the resurrection...but we remember the great truths of what? Creation and redemption.

DAVE BAST

Right; I think it is really helpful to dig a little more deeply into this idea of the Israelites being slaves in Egypt when they were not allowed to have a sabbath, because in some ways our society has come to resemble that again. No, not literal slavery, but time has become commodified in our society. There was a very interesting essay recently, Scott, by Travis West, who is an Old Testament professor at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and he pointed out that the balance between work and rest is kind of out of whack in our culture. Some people don't have enough work...they have too much rest...they are just kind of sitting back; other people are forced to work maybe multiple jobs because the system is so hard, and they don't have enough income and they cannot afford to take a rest; and what we need is to somehow restore the social balance between work and sabbath so that we can flourish as we were meant to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; things are, as you said, Dave, they are out of whack; and we are going to think about that a little bit more as we close out the program, too, in terms of what keeping the Sabbath means, and might require of us as a discipline because we were saying sabbath keeping is a discipline; and I think that is so important to emphasize this reveling in and this reflecting on the great themes of scripture, creation and redemption; sabbath ties in with both of those things, and making that very specific thing; because, you know, one of the things that has happened in the modern era...and a lot of people don't realize this...but prior to near the end of the 19th Century there was no concept of the weekend. Nobody knew about a weekend. Now, we have a weekend. We have Saturday and Sunday. It was partly established as days off from work to honor both Jews and Christians—Jews on Saturday with the Sabbath—but what that means is we have allowed Sunday to become just half a larger whole called the weekend. Everybody is working for the weekend, an old song says, right? But that means...

DAVE BAST

TGIF.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; that means that if we just sort of let Sunday get co-opted into just another kind of Saturday...another day off...we are not keeping the spiritual component. So, we want to think about what it means to keep the Sabbath, and to keep it as holy. We will ponder that as we close the program in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee. We have learned so far on this program, Dave, that the concept of sabbath was woven into the very fabric of the original creation, and that even after the fall into sin made it necessary for God to command us to observe something we really ought to treasure just as a gift, right? We shouldn't need to be commanded to enjoy God's good world; and yet, we are commanded, and in the two places in the Old Testament where we are commanded, we just saw that it ties sabbath together with both the grand work of God's creation and the equally if not grander work of redemption.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so we want to talk a little bit about practical ways to keep the Sabbath in a wholesome and healthy and happy way; and we should perhaps begin by pointing out you can go off the rails in two different directions on this, and we see both of them in the history of Israel itself, because one of the major indictments God had against his people delivered through the prophets was that they failed to keep the Sabbath. Much like our culture, they were more interested in making money...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Than in doing anything else. So they just, you know, kept on working. They were very impatient if anyone tried to keep them from buying and selling on the Sabbath day. So, the prophets denounced that; so much so that after the exile, the tradition developed with the Pharisees of *over*-keeping the Sabbath, if we could put it that way. They were so filled with angst about breaking it that they came up with all kinds of rules, and it led them to criticize Jesus; and actually, one of the reasons they plotted to kill him was because he ignored their rules about the Sabbath, and instead was content to heal people on the Sabbath.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in the Christian tradition of Sunday observance, we have done the same thing; and some of us, alas, when we were kids we kind of dreaded Sunday because you couldn't do anything...you couldn't go anywhere, you couldn't play...you couldn't do anything. Boy, is that the opposite of what the Bible wants sabbath to be...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A day of delight in creation, a day of good food, of good enjoyment, of reveling in the creation.

DAVE BAST

A day of *re*-creation or recreation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

And Scott, you just reminded me of a great line from the Christian writer, Dorothy Sayers, who said the commandment God gave was: Thou shalt do no work. It was read as: Thou shalt have no fun...thou shalt not play; and God never said that about the Sabbath.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, what should it be? Well, put very simply, as the writer, Marva Dawn, has written in her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly...WHOLLY*, by the way...sabbath means stopping...just stop...stop your busyness. Now, this is very good for our emotional and physical health, right? Stopping and resting, we know, is healthy; but we are more interested, or equally interested, in the spiritual dimension. What does stopping mean? What does stopping our busy work and our striving mean? Well, a couple things: One thing, Dave, it means is that we remind ourselves that God is God and we are not.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God creates and maintains the world, not us. He might do it through us and through our work, and he helps provide for our families through our paychecks, but it is finally all God.

DAVE BAST

We are recording this program when we are still feeling the effects of and in the midst of COVID, and one of the weird things that has happened with COVID is that, again, some people have not had enough work and some people have been just overwhelmed with work; they cannot get away from it because they are working from home; there is no weekend to go to. They are bombarded every day of the week with messages and Zoom meetings. You know, there is no escape. Somehow, we need to fight through that and carve out the space that we can say belongs to God, and therefore also to us for our worship and recreation; because again, we can go off the rails on the other side and make Sunday, as you said, just another part of the weekend when it is all about sports or picnics or whatever it is and there is no time for corporate worship with the people of God, and that is to err in the opposite direction.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, we need time to remember that God is the one who is in charge. We like to be self-made individuals. We want to be independent. We have a *Declaration of Independence*, but sabbath...Sunday is a day to

remember our utter dependence on God, and that leads to a second thing, Dave; that we are to rehearse for ourselves by stopping long enough, and that is to realize we are saved by grace alone. We are not saved by our own furious efforts. We are saved by what Jesus did, not by what we do.

DAVE BAST

Right; and one of the great Sabbath passages in the New Testament reminds us of this. It is from Hebrews 4, where the writer says: ⁶Therefore, since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, ⁷God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” ⁹[Therefore] there remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. ¹¹Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is, of course, referring to Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness that prevented them for forty years from entering into the Promised Land; and so that makes a metaphor of what does it mean to enter into God’s ultimate rest, right? In one of the Reformed confessions called the *Heidelberg Catechism*, its reflection on the 4th Commandment on the Sabbath is that we start anticipating the eternal rest of God by one day a week ceasing our own efforts, you know, trying to combat our sin, remembering that we are saved by grace alone, and that is setting us up to enter into that final rest of God, which will be the kingdom when it fully comes; and that means fighting against our culture. I saw a bumper sticker a while back that said: Jesus is coming soon; look busy...the idea that busyness equals holiness or something. No; stopping, resting, reveling, delighting in the things of God and creation and redemption, that is what sets us up to enter God’s final rest.

DAVE BAST

Right; and it is resting from our works in the sense of works of self-righteousness and resting in his finished work for us in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We hope you will join us again next time as we study the scriptures to better understand the spiritual discipline of worship.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com. Tell us what *Groundwork* means to you or what you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs.

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