

SABBATH AS A RULE OF LIFE
Part 2 - The Rest of God in a World of Unrest

Genesis 1:26-2:3

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ June 28, 2020 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁹ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Genesis 1:26-2:3, NRSV)

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Just a quick reminder that we are looking at this practice of Sabbath in light of Jesus’ teaching from John 15, that he is the vine and we are the branches. Our purpose as branches is to bear fruit, what Paul in Galatians calls the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.¹ The way we produce this fruit, however, is by abiding in the vine, by making our home

in Christ as he has made his home in us. But like grape branches in a vineyard need a trellis to help them stay connected to the vine for maximum fruitfulness, Jesus has given us certain practices and relational rhythms in life – sometimes called a Rule of Life – that similarly help us draw more abundantly from his life. One of those practices is the practice of Sabbath. Though it is a practice which is widely neglected in our day, it is a gift which the church sorely needs to recover. My plan these next few weeks is to show you why. My prayer is that you will be willing to accept my invitation to receive, and then begin to practice, this gift of Sabbath.

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We were created last. Do you realize that? According to the Genesis account, by the time humans showed up on the scene all the creating was over and done with. I’ve always thought that was because God saved the best for last, which is probably true. Nothing else in creation was created in the very image of God. Only humanity. But I’ve begun to wonder if perhaps there was another reason God made us on the sixth day. Maybe God didn’t want our help those first five days, just wanted us out of the way. Maybe creating itself is never something humans were meant to do.

Do you know the old joke about the proud scientist who went to God one day and said, “Listen God, truth is we don’t need you anymore. These days we can clone people, transplant organs, re-engineer the genetic code. Basically, we can make people just like you used to do in the old days.”

“Okay,” God said, “let’s have a contest. Let’s see who can make a human being just like I made Adam all those years ago.” Eager to show God up, the scientist got right to work as he bent down to scoop up a handful of dirt. But God stopped him at once. “Hold on. Not so fast. You get your own dirt.”

It’s a mediocre joke that makes a brilliant point. God alone creates from nothing. We only receive creation as a gift. Of course, God does invite us to join him in

¹ See Galatians 5:22-23

managing and cultivating creation. A few weeks ago we talked about how the purpose of humanity on this earth is reflected in these verses. We are to subdue this world and have dominion over it. But because we are made in God's image, we are to reflect his purposes, his character, his desires as we do so. That makes our work in this life sacred and purposeful. No, we don't create, but we do get to wake up every morning and follow God into his creation to be used by him to shape what he has made. That's an enormous privilege and sacred calling.

With that in mind, there is something subtle but important that I want to point out in the creation account we just read. This took me years to notice. What happens on the first day of creation? Not the first day of *creating*, but the first day of creation. God finishes creating on the 6th day, a day at the end of which we are told **"the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude."** The next day then, the seventh day, is the very first day creation is, shall we say, open for business. God has given people their job assignment, they are to cultivate the whole world for his purposes. And so what happens that very first day of creation? Everybody rests. Right? God rests. Creation rests. People rest. Creation is all ready to go and the first thing God does is give everybody a holiday.

In the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation myth, the gods rest after creating the world because they are worn out from all the heavy lifting but they don't invite the newly created people to join them. Instead, they send humans out immediately to go and take care of all the administrative tasks of the world. From the beginning, humans are essentially cheap labor for the gods, slaves that can go and do the dirty work for them. In return, if the people do their jobs well the gods promise to build them Babylon and its temple as a reward.²

The Genesis creation account stands in such stark contrast. God sets us in creation and then directs that we begin our time in creation in rest. That's the first thing we were meant to experience, rest in a world that was already fully furnished when we showed up. That's what the word *Sabbath* means. Verse 2 says that God **"rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done."** The Hebrew root word for "rest" here is the word *shâbath*. It means literally "to stop" or "to cease". And again, it is the very first thing God decides to do after creation is complete.

Why? Does God need a break? Is God worn out, needs to refuel the tank, put his feet up for a while? Hardly. That's why we rest, because we're exhausted, worn out, running on empty. But God does not spend the seventh day in exhaustion, but in serenity and delight. Think about it this way. I'm sure you know the joy of having just completed a task well done. I just built some raised gardens in our backyard, nothing fancy but when they were built, and installed, and the blueberry bush and tomato vines were planted, you know what I wanted to do? I just wanted to sit there and delight in what I had made. Whether it's a freshly mown lawn, or a reorganized kitchen cabinet, or a newly waxed car, isn't there something in us that afterwards wants to just sit back and delight in what we have done. After every day of creation God looks at what he has made and delights in it. "It is good," he says. When creation is completed he says, "It is *very* good."

That's how I picture God on that first Sabbath, and not just God but his people as well. There is a time for creating and then there is a time for enjoying creation. Sabbath is a time for enjoying creation. God modeled this for us from the very beginning. Since we are made in his image we are to do the same, to rest and delight in creation as a gift. Sabbath rest is where we began in this world.

Let me give you a core truth that is so core it is central to everything God has ever taught us. *Grace is always previous and always primary.*³ Grace always comes first. It always is at the roots. We wake up in a world we did not make. It's a gift. It's grace. We are given salvation that we did not earn. Pure grace. Remember when God delivers the Israelites from slavery in Egypt he promises to take them and settle them in **"a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant."**⁴ What was true for the Israelites is true for us.

This is the gospel! Every good thing we have received is a gift. The created world around us, along with our lives in it, is a gift. The very life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the very hope of our salvation, is a gift. We did not earn or deserve it. Grace is always previous and always primary, and the creation accounts in Genesis teach us that this reality is hard-wired into the very fabric and rhythms of creation itself.

² Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 143.

³ I'm indebted to Eugene Peterson for this phrasing. *Working the Angels: The Shape of Pastoral Ministry* (Eerdmans, 1987), 67-70. His teaching here

and elsewhere on Sabbath has been enormously helpful to me and to others.

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:10-11. Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Notice how the first chapter of Genesis ends. **“There was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”** What comes first in the day, morning or evening? Evening comes first. Did you know that the Jewish day always begins at sundown? The turning of the earth gives us this rhythm of day and night and God builds into that rhythm rest and work. But the rhythm begins with rest. Grace is always previous and always primary.

By contrast, how does your day usually begin? With rest? The vast majority of my days begin the same terrible way, ripped from sweet slumber by the jarring and distasteful beep of an alarm clock. It’s often the worst moment of my day. It’s why we invented the snooze button, one of the greatest procrastination-enabling devices of all time. Comedian Jim Gaffigan points out that the snooze button allows us to say every morning, “As the first decision of this new day, I will go back to bed!” He wonders how many well-intentioned plans the snooze button has destroyed over time.⁵ When we finally stop ignoring the alarm and get up, most of us begin the day immediately being productive.

Admiral William McRaven gave a commencement speech at the University of Texas in 2014 which went viral because he told graduates that if they wanted to change the world they should start by making their bed first thing every day. “If you make your bed every morning,” he said, “you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task and another task and another task.”⁶

There is some truth to this. And I’m certainly all for making your bed in the morning. It’s actually a requirement in our household. But what are we doing to our souls when we reverse God’s order every day, beginning in the immediate accomplishment of tasks instead of beginning in rest and inactivity. What if God has ordained that each day we work out of our rest rather than rest after our work, often even as a reward for work. What if grace truly is previous and primary, so much so that we are to experience it at the beginning of every single day?

What if you recognized that tomorrow, Monday, begins this evening when the sun goes down, or at least when you lay down in bed tonight. What if sleep was your first activity this Monday and you spent the first seven or eight hours of the day in bed? How would that mindset changes things for you? You know, when we

sleep we accomplish nothing. We direct nothing, we master nothing. But that doesn’t mean nothing is being accomplished while we sleep. God does not sleep.⁷ In fact, even though we may be asleep, nothing else truly essential in the world stops in the meantime. In fact, marvelous things continue to happen. In the words of Eugene Peterson, while we sleep “the moon marks the seasons, the lion hunts its prey, the earthworms aerate the soil, the stars turn in their courses, the proteins repair our muscles, and our dreaming brains restore a deeper sanity beneath the gossip and scheming of our waking hours.”⁸

The Scottish preacher, George MacDonald, once suggested that sleep is God’s apparatus for giving us the help he cannot get into us when we are awake. How would things change for you this week if you began each day as each day begins at creation, with evening and with rest? Pope John Paul II used to pray this simple prayer every night before he went to sleep: “I’ve done my best to serve your church today, Lord, but it’s your church. I’m going to bed. You take care of it!” Could you pray a similar prayer tonight when the day begins: “I’ve worked hard today, Lord, but the day is over. As this new day begins I’m going to bed. I know you don’t need me. I know it’s not up to me. It’s your church. It’s your business. They’re your kids. It’s your world. Thank you for this new day. Thank you for letting me begin it in rest.”

In the same way that each day begins in rest, so does each week. The moon gives us another rhythm, in its orbit making a 28-day month, marked off by four phases of seven days, another rhythm of rest and work woven into the very fabric of creation. God didn’t ordain a 5-day week or a 9-day week. I don’t pretend to understand his reasoning, but I do believe that there is a 7-day rhythm in creation that, like all laws natural and spiritual, we ignore at our own peril. Just out of college I started using a paper Day-Timer calendar that shows only one week at a glance. I may be one of the few people on earth still using a paper calendar. But it’s intentional. Something about it is right for me. I can’t think of life in terms of a whole month. It’s too overwhelming. And one day seems too short-sighted for me. I think of life in terms of weeks, and something about that feels right. There is an ancient rhythm there which I have come to embrace.

From the very beginning, that weekly rhythm, just like the daily rhythm, begins in rest. Again, Sabbath is the first day of creation. It’s very American, very Western,

⁵ Watch his bit at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwWWcOJEM24>

⁶ Read the full speech at <https://jamesclear.com/great-speeches/make-your-bed-by-admiral-william-h-mcraven>

⁷ “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” (Psalm 121:3-4)

⁸ Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 69.

to think about your weekend or your day off as a finish-line reward for a hard week of work. We're all working *for* the weekend. But from God's perspective that's backwards. We were not made to work for our rest. That put's grace secondary and after-the-fact, sees it even as a reward, which means it ceases to be grace.

No, we were made to work out of our rest. God's creation is a gift; our efforts to cultivate it for his glory are our grateful response to that gift. Salvation through Christ is a gift, which means our efforts to live for Christ are not our attempts to gain God's favor (which we already have!) but a grateful response *to* God's favor. That's grace! And when we begin each week by taking a whole day to rest, to stop managing creation and simply join God in enjoying creation, we are humbly reminded that though God does not need us, he loves us and chooses us nonetheless. Can you see the rest in that?

But if Sabbath is such a gift, why do so many people ignore it. Most Christians I know really don't practice the Sabbath, not Sabbath in the joyful sense that God first modeled it. Why? We certainly can't ignore the daily rhythms of rest and work, at least for long. The world record for sleepless hours is 264, set by Randy Gardner in 1964 when he stayed awake for 11 days and 25 minutes. Most of us couldn't go 2 days without sleep, at least without serious consequences. Even after 48 hours awake the human brain begins to enter into brief periods of complete unconsciousness known as microsleep. We have no choice. We have to sleep. We can't ignore the daily rhythm of rest and work.

But Sabbath is another story. Or so we think. We imagine that we can ignore this weekly rhythm of rest and work, and we regularly do so. In fact, in our culture you are often looked at with admiration if you work seven days straight, or longer. You get promoted. You get rich. You get things done. And that's part of the problem, we have so much to get done. Many of us can't stop getting things done. Even on a 'day off' we find ourselves restless, wanting to accomplish something or connect to someone. Most of us have a very hard time being still. Wasting time, which is really what the Sabbath is about, is regarded as a good use of a day by almost nobody.

Canadian author and pastor, Mark Buchannan, in his brilliant book on the gift of Sabbath, says that we need to recover two essential orientations which most of us have lost.⁹

⁹ Mark Buchannan, *The Rest of God* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), 62. This is my favorite book on Sabbath. I like it so much I stole and adapted his title for this sermon.

¹⁰ See Matthew 6:25-34

¹¹ Psalm 62:1-2 (NIV)

First, we need to be reoriented *Godward*. We have to think ever-clearly about God. Specifically, we have to trust his sovereignty, to trust that the old song had it right, that he's got the whole world in his hands. Romans 8:28 declares, "**We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.**" Do you believe this? Jesus told us that we should never worry about our lives, that he takes care of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field and that he will take care of us as well.¹⁰ Do you believe him? David declares in Psalm 62, "**Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.**"¹¹ Do you live your life, each day and each week, as if this is true? We need to believe it's true, to be reoriented Godward.

But we also need to be reoriented *timeward*. We buy into the world's view that there is never enough time. How many days in your life have you felt like you had too much time, or even enough time, on your hands? It's usually the opposite. 24 hours in a day isn't enough. Neither is seven days in a week. We are so often in a rush, trying to fit too many tasks and opportunities into too few hours and days. How have we allowed this to happen? We serve a God who declares that to him a thousand years is like a day and day is like a thousand years!¹² Most of us live as if we are out of time while claiming all along to belong to a God who tells us we are heirs to eternity, unending time. Truth is, we are never short of days. Time is never scarce, always abundant. How do we miss this? Near the end of his life Henri Nouwen reflected, "My whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted until I discovered the interruptions were my work."¹³ How many of us can relate? How do we reorient timeward?

Sabbath is ultimately about trust. In ancient Israel the day wasn't so much a day of worship as it was a day of rest, a day to stop, to cease, to enjoy rather than manage creation. Do we have enough trust that God really is in charge, and that time really is abundant? Do we have enough trust to actually follow God's lead and stop to rest, not just at the end of the day or the end of the week, but at the beginning of both, before we have accomplished a single thing! That takes trust.

Biblical commentator Walter Brueggemann has this marvelous phrase in talking about our need to practice

¹² 2nd Peter 3:8: "**But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.**"

¹³ Cited by Mark Buchannan, *The Rest of God*, 79.

Sabbath, saying that our lives do not depend upon our “feverish activity of self-securing.”¹⁴ Ouch! That gets personal. Are we confident enough in God’s sovereignty and grace, ultimately in his love for us and his faithfulness to his promises, to rest. And can we begin to allow our rest, at the beginning of every day and the outset of every week, to remind us over and over and over again that God can be trusted? It’s not up to us. Grace is always previous and always primary.

I’m teaching my youngest, Bereket, to drive. I’ve got some experience in this role as she’s number four behind the wheel in our family. She’s a really good driver, especially considering she’s only had her permit for a few months. But she’s not good enough yet for me to doze off in the front seat. I stay pretty alert. That occurred to me recently when I was in the passenger seat with my son, Noel, who is now 20, at the wheel. I didn’t sleep when Noel had his permit either. But now I do. I have enough trust in him that I can close my eyes and relax, knowing that he doesn’t need my help to get to our destination safely. In time I know that I’ll be able to do that with Bereket as well.

You see, rest, Sabbath rest, is ultimately about trust. We can stop managing creation and simply enjoy creation because we know that ultimately the management of creation is not up to us. It’s in good hands. God is at the wheel and does not need our help. Sabbath is a weekly declaration that this world relies on God’s faithfulness, not our efforts. I know that might be especially difficult to believe these days when so much in our world seems so out of control. If God’s at the wheel, where is racial justice, where is healing, where is peace between nations, where is wise and compassionate leadership? There is so much unrest, how can we possibly rest? Do you see how much faith this requires?

But Augustine had it right, so right that I quote his words again and again. He prayed, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.” How restless are you these days? Honestly. Do you know how to rest in God? The invitation is there. Sabbath is about so much more than one day a week. It’s a weekly reminder, even a daily reminder, hard-wired into creation from the very beginning, that grace is always previous and always primary. It’s not up to us. Never has been, never will be. I am convinced that our world will remain restless, and you and I as a part of it, until we recover the gift of rest that Sabbath is meant to bring.

In closing, this cannot simply be an idea we consider. It must be a practice we embrace. So here’s my invitation.

If God has been speaking to you this morning and you find yourself drawn to receive this gift of Sabbath in your life, I want to ask you to join me these next three Sunday evenings for a Sabbath workshop online. It’s going to be intensely practical. You’ll be invited to incorporate Sabbath into your Rule of Life, your regular habits and rhythms, that it will help you better abide in Christ. We will meet at 7:00 tonight for about 45 minutes. I’ll give you some homework, homework I’m going to do as well. It will be an opportunity to not just be informed by God’s Word here today, but to allow ourselves to be transformed by what we have heard. I’d love for you to join me.

Let’s pray together.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Genesis 1:26-2:3 again. On the 7th day God rests. Why? Is there anything in the text that gives us a clue to why God made this decision?
2. The very first ‘activity’ God gave to humans once creation was established was rest. That is how we spent our first day. What is significant about this?
3. Jeff stated that in God’s creation *grace is always previous and primary*. What does this mean to you? Do you agree?
4. Do you feel restless in your life? How so? What is the root of your restlessness?
5. Is Sabbath, the practice of taking the first day of the week to rest, something you have intentionally incorporated into your life? Why or why not? If not, would you like to start practicing Sabbath?
6. How do you typically begin your day? What would change if you started each day in the evening and began your day with sleep? Would it make any difference?
7. How might the practice of Sabbath help us to better abide in Jesus (see John 15:11)?
8. Did you respond to the invitation to join the Sabbath workshop? If so, what did you learn?

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (John Knox Press, 1982), 35.

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday:	Exodus 13/Psalm 88
Tuesday:	Exodus 14/Psalm 89
Wednesday:	Exodus 15/Psalm 90
Thursday:	Exodus 16/Psalm 91
Friday:	Exodus 17/Psalm 92
Saturday:	Exodus 18/Psalm 93
Sunday:	Exodus 19/Psalm 94