

REQUIRED OF HUMANS: FAITHFUL REST

By Steve Zeisler

Every week in my pastoral ministry, it seems, I talk with people who are frustrated by their inability to have a quiet time with the Lord that is life-giving to them. I struggle with it in my own Christian walk. In our contemporary society, it is difficult for us to turn off all the demands to carve out the time for unhurried enjoyment of God's presence.

The non-Christian world, too, is acutely aware of the problem of busyness. We read often of the efforts by high officials in government or business regarding stress management. Seminars are offered and books are published dealing with how to handle the rat-race pressures and the physical deterioration that results. Newspapers occasionally will publish calendars of leisure activities. There is no such thing as leisurely leisure, it is always leisure "activities." Thus, even in the area of relaxation, we are caught in the system. We have powerful demands being made upon us at all times.

ENTERING GOD'S REST

Hebrews 4 makes a point that should be noted as we begin this study. Referring to the conquest of Canaan, the writer of Hebrews records an observation about Jewish history in 4:8-11:

For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. 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, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience.

Nothing in Jewish history brought about the full understanding or reception of the sabbath rest that God intended for his people. The rest of God remains to be entered into for those who hear the message of the the gospel. We must choose to join God in his rest, to become a people of faith so that there is peace and restfulness in every experience that we have throughout our week. A life filled with peace and the protective power of God is testimony to the sabbath rest of God.

In recent weeks we have been studying the decalogue, the Ten Commandments, that are found twice, once in Exodus 20 and then in Deuteronomy 5. These commandments delineate great themes that describe the heart of God and the purpose of human creation. Today we will study the fourth commandment which, stated simply says, "Remember the Sabbath Day [i.e. the seventh day], to keep it holy. Stop working."

THE SABBATH THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE

Writing about the pervasiveness of sabbath thinking in the Bible Paul Jewett said,

The sabbath (from the Hebrew root meaning, to cease, desist or rest) has been called the most outwardly visible, and in many respects, significant institution in Israel. The law of the sabbath is found in every stratum of the Jewish scriptures, a breadth of testimony allotted to no other Old Testament commandment.

We find this great theme in the law, the prophets, the history books, the Psalms, and throughout the New Testament as well.

Although the theme of sabbath is prevalent in the Bible, most contemporary evangelicals have limited experience with it. Our understanding of the Christian life does not lead us to regard one day above another, so

we do not often discuss the sabbath. We are thus contending with a biblical concept that is not an ordinary part of our parlance. We must now consider it in an age that is committed to activity, one that knows little of faith or rest in God. Neglected truths are usually those most in need of exposition. We live in an age that desperately needs to understand "entering into God's rest."

With those thoughts in mind let me offer one last preliminary observation by focussing on the words "joy" and "danger." Living in the rest of faith will mean both for us.

SABBATH JOY

Wilfred Stott has commented on the joyfulness of the sabbath in Jewish history:

The sabbath was welcomed with joy. It was to be celebrated at home as rest and refreshment and corporately in public worship. On the day before, the preparation day, everything was to be got ready, lamps lit as the sabbath commenced at sunset. A meal extra to the normal two was added, and the best clothes were worn. Guests would be invited. According to the Babylonian Talmud, half the day was to be spent in eating and drinking and half in the instruction of the things of God.

The sabbath day was eagerly anticipated for the experience of community, home, friends, more food than usual, and instruction in the things of God. It was intended to teach us that when we trust the Lord and live in dependence on him, we find our experience is filled with his presence and the rewards of his bounty. Isaiah 58:13-14 says:

"If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

SABBATH DANGER

The sabbath was intended to teach us to rejoice in the Lord, but it is also brings danger. Jesus' insistence that the sabbath was about God and man in proper relationship with one another was one of the issues that caused him to be executed. Jesus said, "My father is working still, and I myself am working (by healing on the sabbath)." Opting for dependence on his Father rather than abiding by man-made rules concocted for the sabbath was an affront to the religious people around him. If we will learn to live our lives given over to the call of God without the restrictions placed on us by religious institutions, then we too will clash with those who ascribe to legalism. A faith that fills a person's experience will be perceived as dangerous to man-made religion, and therefore risky to the man or woman of faith.

If religious people see our faith as dangerous, then the irreligious materialists will perceive us that way as well. Amos wrote about this:

"Hear this, you who trample the needy to do away with the humble of the land, saying 'When will the new moon be over so that we can buy grain. When will the sabbath day be over that we may open the wheat market, to make the bushel smaller, and make the shekel bigger, to cheat with dishonest scales so as to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of shoes, that we may sell the refuse of the wheat'" (Amos 8:4-6).

This passage expresses the impatience of the marketplace: When will the sabbath be over, when will the things of God be done out of the way so that we can get on about the business of making money? People who take God seriously will get in the way of selling the needy short and loving money too much. To the degree that we learn to live by faith we will be perceived as being dangerous by both the irreligious members of this society and by those who think religion means keeping the rules. It is a great joy to understand sabbath rest, but it

often results in trouble, as it did for the Lord. In every age, when authentic Christianity is evidenced, it is both delightful and dangerous.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Now let us turn to consider the fourth commandment in the two settings where the ten commandments are recorded. Exodus 20:8-11:

"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. "

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 says:

"Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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 or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. 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."

CREATOR AND REDEEMER

The two reasons given for keeping the sabbath are different from one another. In Exodus we are reminded that God rested on the seventh day. He finished his work in six days, and it could not have conceivably been improved upon. He accomplished all of his creative work, and he rested because it was finished. He is a great God who can look at his work and find no flaw in it whatever. The Creator rested, and in our service of this God we should rest as well.

Secondly, we are told in Deuteronomy to rest because our God is a Redeemer as well as a Creator. It is the mighty arm of God that was extended to save the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Not only did he set them free but he destroyed the Egyptian army who chased them into the desert as well. He is able to redeem us from our enemies, and thus can break the chains of our past. We no longer need to be afraid because we have a strong Redeemer on our side. Therefore, we can rest. He is both a God who creates and finishes his creation, and a God who redeems so that none can threaten his people.

For these reasons, the command went out to Israel to stop working one day a week. If the same command were given to us today it would mean one day every week we should not be thinking about getting prepared for the Monday sales meeting. It would mean that we do not pay our bills on that day. It would mean that on that day we do not train our children in any kind of worldly skill. It would mean that we do not do home repair. The call to the Israelites was that one day of every week they would deliberately cease from their labors and enjoy the world as they found it while learning the words of God.

In the new covenant, it is not the commandment to keep the sabbath that is reiterated, but the lesson of the sabbath. The Jews were to learn that productivity on their part was not the key to well-being. Once a week they were to deliberately stop being productive, precisely so that they could recognize that everything came from God rather than their own efforts.

What you do with your week is something you have to decide before the Lord. The lesson we must not fail to learn is that the key to our well-being is not our productivity but dependence on God who is both creator and

redeemer.

CREATION COMPLETED

Think about that for a moment. The God with whom we are in covenant and before whom we worship is the same God who created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. We also have the promise of Philippians 1:6, "he who began a good work in you will perfect it." If our Lord gets everything done he sets himself to do, and if he is determined to mature us, then it is not up to us to seize every opportunity, be always on guard, and always afraid that something will pass us by and we shall lose out.

A friend told me (perhaps in jest) about a salesman who recently got a second cellular phone for his car because the first cellular phone was connected to a fax machine that was regularly in use producing information. He needed a second one in order to have conversations with people. Do you see the terror? What if an opportunity is missed? What if something goes by that cannot be grabbed? We hear phrases such as "Seize the day," "You only go around once in life," "Make it happen." The emphasis is that the outcome depends on our actions, and all will fail unless you hustle.

Have you ever been in a social situation where you realize that the people with whom you are talking are sizing you up for what you can do for them? As soon as they have categorized you or used you to their advantage they go to the next person. There is a desperation in regarding people that way. There is no thankfulness, no real friendship, and no opportunity to appreciate the present circumstance.

People live that way because they do not believe that God finishes what he sets out to do. If we serve a God who rests in delight at the completion of his work in which nothing lacks, then we are free to be thankful. We can trust that the lessons that each day brings can cause us to be thankful because we can trust him. We can appreciate what God is doing for us, and we can be at rest. If something is necessary for our growth or our advancement, the Lord will bring it about in due course.

THE OUTSTRETCHED ARM OF GOD

If God is a Creator who finishes what he sets out to do, we can enter into God's rest, as Hebrews says. What about God as Redeemer? Deuteronomy highlights the frightening power of God to defeat his enemies by his strength and invincibility. Nothing can succeed against our God when he sets out to defeat the enemies who would destroy his people. We must learn those lessons because the other way in which restlessness regularly attacks the people of God is by our sense that we must always be vigilant or we will be overcome. We fear that the terrors on every side are so capable that if we should ever let our guard down we will lose everything. We fear we cannot trust God to fight our battles for us. In dealing with those things that frighten us we have to believe in the mighty power of God.

When I was young I read the story of Charles Lindbergh, the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. In his historic trip, the greatest point of danger for Lindbergh was when his sleep cycle came around and he was so desperately tired that he could not stay awake. When he fell asleep briefly, the plane nose-dived and lapped the waves. He would awake with a jolt. He was terrified, knowing that if he ever once succumbed to sleep he would lose his life. Through a period of an hour or two he fought to stay awake because one moment of sleep would bring his death.

I know Christians who live like they are in the Spirit of St. Louis flying across the Atlantic. They will not stop fighting on every front, and refuse to believe that the Lord is in control of the circumstances and will get them through it. These people can never once share a moment of intimacy, joy, or freedom because they are driven by fear. The truth is that we serve a Redeemer God who commanded us to quit our activity one day a week because our Lord has accomplished our redemption. We no longer need to be afraid.

The word sabbath comes from a Hebrew word whose root means "rest." We will not experience rest in our lives until we learn to believe in the greatness of God. For us to accept the call of the book of Hebrews to enter into rest we must give over our desperation and become people who so thoroughly believe God that we leave both opportunities and enemies to him.

PRACTICAL POINTS

Let me conclude with a couple of practical comments. First, we are not living the lesson of the sabbath when we take "a day off." A day off in common parlance is seen as a reward for hard work, a day to be spent on oneself. It can also be seen as a day to build oneself up so as to be more effective for the next day at work. The concept of the sabbath is exactly the opposite, however. A sabbath exists to teach us that our productivity is very unimpressive, that everything done in our own strength is valueless. Sabbath lessons teach us that everything comes from God. He is the One upon whom we depend, and thus he is glorified for what was accomplished. The focus is no longer on our work. Days off are useful in their own right, but when we quit doing anything for sabbath reasons we will be thinking about the Lord, not ourselves and our plans.

Finally, in my own life I cannot allow these issues to be theology only. The reason God gave the sabbath was to teach us to trust him. It is to make us dependent on him all seven days of the week, whether we are active or inactive. But, if I do not control my life by sometimes stopping a frenetic schedule, then it does me no good to say that I do everything depending on Jesus, rather than myself. I offer that to you as advice, too. It may very well be that in order to learn a dependent life 24 hours a day you need occasionally to do the risky thing by turning off the phones for awhile and quietly listening to the Lord. Although there is information that might be missed, or opportunities that are lost, my focus will be correct. In my experience it is not enough to intellectually understand a principle, I have to periodically do something to assign my body as well as my mind, to live out the truth.

There is no prescribed approach to learning the lessons of the sabbath. In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul says:

Therefore, let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink, 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.

The Old Testament convention was that one day in every seven, at the end of the week, all work should cease. That practice was a shadow to teach substantial lessons about dependence on Christ. Therefore, nobody can act as your judge regarding sabbath days or your life of faith. The issue is whether we are appropriating the substance, which is Christ. Are we more impressed with our productivity than we ought to be, of selling out what belongs to the Lord? Nobody can judge you as regards your lesson of learning to be faithful, but that does not mean that there isn't something to be learned.

God cannot remain at a distance in heaven or only be associated with days such as Christmas. Our work week matters to him. We ought to be a people of great thankfulness, joy, and freedom because we understand that our God finishes what he begins. Therefore it is not up to us to finish it. We understand that whatever enemies terrorize us, they are no match for the mighty arm of God. Therefore, we conclude this morning by hearing again the words from the writer of Hebrews:

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.

You enter the rest of God by giving up self-effort, just as God rested from his work.

Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience.

Take it seriously. Strive to enter the rest of God.

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