# The **POWER** of SABBATH RESERVENCE SABBATH

impactnations

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During the first week of January, in the middle of a series on the Mystery of Christ, I rather suddenly felt an urge to teach on Sabbath rest. Now I suspect I know why the Holy Spirit was prompting me about this.

As I write this, we are in the midst of an event that is without precedent in our lifetimes, or our parents or even grandparents—the coronavirus pandemic. No one knows how long this trial will last, or how far it will ultimately reach. (Ecc 8:7) Much is being written about the social and economic landscape that is changing by the hour. My purpose for writing this e-book is singlefocused: to remind us of the great power of Sabbath at both an individual and corporate level. Like it or not, we are in a season of Sabbath that we can (if we are being responsible) do very little about.

Some of what I have written about community and Sabbath may at first seem suddenly out of date or even irrelevant. However, all over the world, we are finding ways to be "alone, together". Because of our technology, we can go into one another's living rooms and offices in way that would not have been possible just a few years ago. Three days back, I "met" with twenty-three from our international community: people from Australia, Canada, Colombia and the US. In this context we shared life together—worship, prayer, testimonies, even the Lord's Supper. For many of us, this is the new reality, but it <u>is</u> a very tangible reality. I suspect that we can live and invite others into many aspects of the counter-cultural power of corporate Sabbath, even though we cannot physically preface

be close. In fact, like many of you, I am experiencing *more* contact with brothers and sisters than I did before the pandemic crisis.

For all of us as individuals, God has given an unprecedented opportunity to enter into the richness of Sabbath rest. Let us encourage one another to make the most of this time, to experience the rich gift that awaits us.

I want to acknowledge my debt to Walter Brueggemann's fine commentary on Genesis and Sabbath as Resistance. Both were invaluable in preparing this e-book. They are books that I have gone back to many times over the past several years. I join with many others in considering Brueggemann to be the foremost Old Testament theologian of our time.

# part one who do you trust?

This will age me, but when I was a boy, I remember a game show called *Who Do You Trust*. It was so long ago that it was hosted by Johnny Carson *before* he was on the Tonight Show. It wasn't much of a show, but its title has stuck in my memory for a long time.

Perhaps more than anything else, the significance of Sabbath revolves around the issue of trust. There are about 120 references in the scriptures to Sabbath, including 28 occurrences in the Pentateuch and 41 in the Gospels; Sabbath is obviously a major Biblical theme. It is interesting that its first mention (Ex 16:23) is about believing God's promise to provide, thereby linking holiness and trust. The decision to trust is based upon the character of the person we are trusting. So, we will begin this study on Sabbath rest by looking at how God's character is revealed in His creation.

This is an important first step, because we tend to compartmentalize our lives into spiritual and natural, often leading to rigid and limited ways of thinking and acting. Too often, we understand Sabbath based upon how we spend our Sundays. However, the implications of Sabbath are far-reaching, including the relationship each of us has with the Triune God and the Sabbath's profound socio-economic ramifications. Sabbath is expressed externally, but it is *lived* internally from a place of counter-cultural freedom and a deep commitment to the sacredness of community. Any study of Sabbath inevitably begins with Gen 2:3: "God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, for on it He rested from His work of creation." Rest is part of the holy character of God. Rest is a revelation of who He is. However, to better understand this, we need to take a step back and first look at the sixth day of creation.

"Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."<sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.<sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."<sup>29</sup> Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. <sup>30</sup> And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground-everything that has the breath of life in it-I give every green plant for food." And it was so.<sup>31</sup> God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day." (Gen 1:26-31)

This passage provides several keys for understanding the Sabbath and our relationship to it, to God, and to one another. It is important to remember that the Sabbath is not only a gift, but a revelation of the One who called Himself "the Lord of the Sabbath" (Mt 12:8).

#### THE IMAGE OF GOD

All of humanity was made in the image of God (*imago dei*). Over the past several years we have seen a steady rise in nationalism which stresses the differences between those who are "us" and those who are not. This is evidenced in a great rise in the number of refugees and asylum-seekers. For Jesus, there are not those who are in or out. (i.e. Mk 9:39; Mt 5:45 etc.) Since everyone was made in God's image, *all* are to be viewed with love and compassion and treated with dignity. What do these Genesis verses reveal about His image?

#### GOD AND HIS CREATION

God demonstrates His dominion over creation not by exploiting or lording over it; instead God enjoys, cares for, and secures the well-being of all creatures. He declares that all of creation is good. Sabbath is largely about choosing to trust the God Who in turn, trusts His creatures. From the beginning, God gives mankind power and authority over the Garden; this was not earned or gradually acquired—it was whole-heartedly given. God governs through self-giving and empowering others.

#### **GOD IS COMMUNITY**

God's likeness is both male and female. Any maledominated, one gender view of God is a distortion; not only is such a view incomplete, it is out of balance. The Gospel is radically inclusive because the Triune God is radically inclusive. This originates in the "let <u>us</u>" of Genesis. God is community. Made in His image, humanity is made for community, in fact we *are* a community. It takes a community to truly reflect the likeness of God. Later, we will see what a vital part of Sabbath rest this is.

#### **GOD DOES NOT GRASP**

Jesus is the full revelation of God (Jn 14:9; Heb 1:3). As Paul declares in the great hymn of Philippians 2, Jesus did not grasp. Walter Brueggemann has written, "God is the one who does not grasp...Grasping power cannot create... Creation is God's decision not to look after Himself, but to focus His energies and purposes on creation."<sup>1</sup> People who live according to His image within them, likewise do not grasp. Sabbath rest is about establishing this truth in our lives. To grasp is to live in opposition to God and the way in which He moves in all of the cosmos. Since it is antithetical to who He is, grasping can never bring either true life or creativity. Ultimately, it brings death, as the story of Genesis 3 so tragically reveals.

Sabbath is our ongoing reminder and declaration that we are part of a different Kingdom, that we are *in* the world but we are not *of* the world.

# part two the first sabbath contentment

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Gen 2:1-3)

Years ago, my wife and I were sitting in the living room talking, when we heard a strange *bump-scrapebump-scrape* sound. It was our three-year old son coming down the hallway, dragging my briefcase. As he did this, he kept repeating, "Gotta go to a meeting! Gotta go to a meeting!" Like most children, he was simply imitating his father. I wish my son's father had better known the ways of his heavenly Father.

As we saw, Sabbath is about *trust*; it is also about *peaceful contentment*. Now that we have looked at God's relationship with His creation, we can better understand the implications of the seventh day, when "He rested from all the work of creating that He had done". God blessed what He had created (vv. 22, 28) and now blessed the very act of resting (2:3), confident enough in His creation to rest.

God did not rest because He was tired; rather, His rest was an expression of His deep contentment. God's rest also flowed from His delight in what He had made. Throughout His creation process, He declared that what He had made was *good* (vv. 4,10,12,18,21,25,31). The seventh day is an expression of His deep satisfaction. Sabbath reminds us of God's favor and the pleasure He feels as He considers each of us.

Note that from the beginning, Sabbath was connected with *rest* and not *worship*. It seems, therefore, that any decision to move into faith-filled rest is an important expression of worship. After all, if the Sabbath is about the rest of God, and we are made in His image, then His rest is specifically a promise for all of us. Jesus made this clear when He said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Throughout scripture, rest and blessing are closely linked.

This of course challenges our traditional ways of expressing religious devotion. I have on a number of occasions spoken in churches where the people were strongly urged to attend various meetings and functions every day of the week; in one case they were taught that such attendance was a measure of spiritual maturity. But God <u>rested</u>.

Whenever I enter into a pastoring relationship with a leader, very quickly I address this issue of Sabbath rest. When I ask on what day they take their Sabbath, inevitably they tell me it is Sunday (of course!). After pointing out that Sunday is their busiest day when rest is least possible, I suggest that they pick a consistent day each week for Sabbath. Always, they explain to me that they are too busy to take a Sabbath. (In fairness, some of them have huge responsibilities.) And so I take them back to Gen. 2:3—Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of

#### creating that he had done.

God rested in His identity (Creator) and vocation (to create and care for). Sabbath is our tangible trust in *this* God. Perhaps more than anything else, when I choose to enter into Sabbath, I am declaring that I truly trust God and that I trust the way in which He has purposed His cosmos to function; the world is safely in His hands. When this penetrates deeply into our spirits and wills, we discover that the underlying sense of dread or mistrust that many of us deal with, begins to melt away. Sabbath "recalibrates" us, moving us away from concern about all that is going on in our world. Sabbath is essential for me to find balance and peace. There was never a more important time for this than now.

Sabbath is a prophetic declaration, and those who embrace Sabbath point to the "Age to Come", the Kingdom of heaven. This is because Sabbath is a foretaste of how all creation will be when God's Kingdom is fully established. Sabbath points to the end of injustice and exploitation (Is. 58) because its very nature declares the equality and worth of all people. How? Because we embrace Sabbath equally, regardless of wealth or need. (There is a corporate expression of Sabbath that needs to be explored as we learn to increasingly live life together. My friend once said to me, "When we eat together, no one is poor.") As we choose to enter into God's rest, we are announcing that the world relies on God and His promises to His creation, *not* on our efforts. God rested—in peace, in contentment, in satisfaction, He rested. Sabbath leads us into participation with His rest. It is our promise from God the Son: "I will give you rest."

# <u>part three</u> sabbath as freedom

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"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." (Ex 20:8)

The Ten Commandments, spoken to Moses on Mount Sinai, are the great moment of divide, from following Egypt to following Yahweh. Sabbath is profoundly counter-cultural; it shouts "No!" to the world system. In a very tangible way, Sabbath is *our* exodus.

The Egyptian system, like every world system that followed, was built upon exploitation, fear, and control; all of these reflect an even more foundational issue: *grasping*. The entire culture was trapped by an endless cycle of production. This need to build ever-more cities, buildings, projects and wealth controlled everyone, from Pharaoh to the lowliest slave. The system exploited the poorest and most vulnerable. It turned people into commodities.

On Mount Sinai, God insisted on a whole new way of life for His people: instead of being controlled by anxious productivity, they were to live a life built upon trust (see part one) and neighborliness. The fourth commandment is the pivot-point from how to worship God to how to care for our neighbors with respect, dignity and mutual security. As we saw in part two, God rested on the seventh day, confident and at peace with His creation. He is not a workaholic; the well-being of the cosmos is not dependent upon ceaseless activity. On Mount Sinai, His rest is offered to us as a life force. His restfulness stands in full opposition to the compulsive drive of Egypt.

The Egyptian system, from the beginning, was controlled

by the dark spiritual principalities and powers that Paul so clearly addressed (Eph 2:2; 6:12; Col 2:8; 2:20). Jesus had a name for the Egyptian system: Mammon. It is the ruling spirit over all world systems that demands full attention and adherence. ("You cannot serve God and Mammon." Mt 6:24). Like Egypt, Mammon demands the culture to live with a pervasive sense of anxiety, with everyone who is under its control living in fear of not keeping up.

Mammon fuels the endless desire for more, better, newer. This should not surprise us. Mammon survives because of endless productivity; without this, our present economic structures would collapse. This is a spiritual war whose stakes are incalculable. That is why the Powers use fear, guilt and shame to control us, and to blind us to the radical power and freedom of the Gospel of Jesus.

Without Sabbath, our lives are absorbed in the restlessness of Egypt. Sabbath rest is a declaration that we are *not* commodities to be sacrificed on the altar of endless production. I will develop what I mean by Sabbath rest more fully in the next chapter, but at this point there are two aspects that need to be articulated. A literal Sabbath is vital. It is not just an attitude, but a declaration that must be re-affirmed every week. My decision to engage in Sabbath is an act of resistance, proclaiming that I will not be defined by busyness (frankly, a challenge for us "type A" people) or the pursuit of more.

At the same time, Sabbath is not about legalistic adherence

to externals. (One of my oldest and closest friends used to tell me that when he was a boy, Sabbath meant not being allowed to play baseball, watch television, play cards or board games every Sunday. No wonder he called it the longest day of the week!) Such a rigid adherence to Sabbath-keep is not the issue, and, in fact may be more an expression of legalism than devotion. Rather, Sabbath is my weekly decision to pull aside from my activities and turn my heart and mind toward the Lord, being aware of, and entering into, His deep contentment and peace. Sabbath is intentional, experienced in a definite time and place; it is differentiated from the rest of my week (where, hopefully, I am also aware of His presence).

The Ten Commandments directed Israel in their relationships with God (the first three commandments) and neighbors (the final six commandments). Holiness calls for both dimensions. If Sabbath is my countercultural declaration that I am not a commodity, trapped in an endless system of productivity, then it also announces that my neighbors are valued simply because they are made in the image of God, and therefore have profound, heaven-sent value. Sabbath moves me from productivity and into community.

In Egypt, it is every man for himself, rewarding the ones who can keep up and bypassing the ones who fall behind. Sabbath is the corrective. It says that our lives are connected, that we help one another and remain faithful caregivers to one another. Sabbath is the antidote to Egypt. It is built upon both the confident rest of God and the eternal, interactive, mutual celebration found in the Trinity, which is both the example and the life-source of true community.

Practically speaking, if we are free from breathlessly running to keep up, we will have more time and attention for one another. We will discover that in counter-cultural community, we are being set free from burdens that we hardly know we are carrying. Sabbath is consciously walking away *from* Egypt/Mammon, instead declaring that community defines our lives. In the Lord's community of Sabbath rest, we discover that we don't have to *do* more, *sell* more, *buy* more, or *control* more. Like our Father, we can rest, content in creation.

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (Jn 8:32)

[For a fuller exposition of the gift and richness of community, you may want to read my latest book, <u>The First Church</u> <u>Restored.</u>]

[I also encourage you to read Walter Brueggemann's book, <u>Sabbath as Resistance</u>, from which I drew much of this chapter.]

# <u>part four</u> sabbath as abiding

So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. (Heb 4:9-10)

For some of us, when circumstances constrain us from keeping busy with work, we like Paul, find ourselves "kicking against the goads" (Acts 26:14). It is challenging on many levels to find our lives interrupted—and in these days of a global crisis, this interruption has directly and daily affected every one of us. The sudden change in activities, goals and priorities—the very rhythm of how we do life—can be deeply unsettling. However, what on multiple levels seems like loss, is in fact an opportunity to embrace the blessing and work of God in our lives that is found in His call to turn to Him in Sabbath rest.

Having looked at Sabbath as an expression of trust, contentment, and living counter-culturally, it is time to take a more intimate look; at its deepest level, Sabbath is about *abiding*. Sabbath, includes embracing a specific day (or at least a time) to pull aside; for all the reasons that have already been developed, a concrete expression of Sabbath is vitally important. But to dig deeper, Sabbath is an invitation from the Lord to discover the richness of intimacy with Him. In this way, Sabbath is a conscious decision to turn toward Him. Often this means quiet and prayerful contemplation of His presence; or, it may be a prolonged time in the scriptures. From the earliest writings of the church fathers and mothers, it is clear that all spiritual disciplines are built upon the foundation of solitude and quiet.

The rest that God calls us into (Heb 4:9-10) is an invitation to share in the rest that He enjoys in Himself, the contentment that He showed on the seventh day (chapter two). Sabbath rest is more than rejuvenation; it is an *exchange*: our life for God's. John saw this in his Revelation vision, where the great rest and calm of God was symbolized by a "sea of glass like crystal around the throne" (Rev 4:6). He is never weary, stressed, or frustrated. In Sabbath rest, the Lord is *not* telling us we have to try to be like Him; rather, He is continually inviting us to simply live from the reality that He is alive in us. He is inviting us to step aside, be still, and consciously turn to Him, the Triune God, and respond to His invitation.

I am convinced that His presence (which is what Jesus calls "blessed" in the Beatitudes) is His greatest gift. After all, to rest in His presence, His life, is our ultimate destiny; His presence will be our life source for all eternity. The invitation of Sabbath rest is to learn to live increasingly in that "blessedness" now. This place of rest centers our hearts; it brings the love, joy and peace of the Holy Spirit; and it protects us from being overwhelmed by our surroundings or situations.

Jesus called this abiding in the vine. This kind of abiding leads to eternal fruitfulness (Jn 15:5,8,16) because it comes from the eternal Sabbath rest of God. Paul described this rest as living in the Spirit. Again and again, Paul encouraged, exhorted, and warned the church to live in the reality of the Spirit—I believe *this* was Paul's central message in his letters. Why did he keep coming back to this? Because our enemy, manifesting as the spirit of Mammon (see chapter 3) knows the power of Sabbath rest and he does all he can to distract us and ultimately keep us from God's promise to enter His rest. (Heb 4:1)

Like Israel entering Canaan, Sabbath rest is an entirely different way of living, filled with the peace, contentment, and joy that have already been discussed. Therefore, a people who learn to live in Sabbath rest, who recognize its power to reflect the true life of God-the Beautiful Gospel-are a great threat to Satan and the Powers. That is why He assaults us with discouragement and distraction. It is why he tries to make us feel somehow inferior or lazy if we do not participate in the spirit of Egypt/Mammon with which he controls the world. As we learn to live from the "imago dei" (image of God), we become the salt, light, and leaven that Jesus called us. We become not only counter-cultural; we become dangerous to the powers. Who would have dreamed that such a seemingly simple thing as pulling aside would be so powerful in our lives and in our world?

"Let us then make every effort (labor, be diligent, strive) to enter that rest." (Heb 4:11)

#### CONCLUSION

Sabbath rest reflects the reality of who God is and how He relates to His creation. But it is a reality that stands in stark opposition to the world around us. This opposition is cultural, but even more, it is spiritual warfare, standing against the spirit of the age. As the author of Hebrews tells us, the pressure against us living in Sabbath rest is so strong that we must *strive* for it. We must let it change our priorities, our values, and our lifestyle, resisting the push-back that comes from the world around us and our own interior lives.

Sabbath is about our life together, communities that reflect the freedom, hope and joy we have because of our shared experience of Christ. It is a life that reflects the cosmic truth of the Triune God: that He is always *for* us; He is always *with* us. He is always secure, content and at peace. To embrace Sabbath rest, with all of its prophetic, counter-cultural, and paradigm-challenging implications, we will need each other. Sabbath is much more than our rest; it is the proclamation that the world relies on God and His promises, <u>not</u> on our efforts. Sabbath is our declaration that the world is safely in His hands.

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