

Sabbath 1 – Ceasing
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Introduction

Come let us welcome the Sabbath in joy and peace!

Like a bride, radiant and joyous, comes the Sabbath.

It brings blessings to our hearts....

In its light all our blessings are enriched, all our griefs and trials are softened...

So begins the Kiddush ritual for Sabbath eve.

Full of anticipation and appreciation; it gives a real sense of the importance of Sabbath, and, of course, for the Jews, it is important, *really* important!

For ancient Jews, the observance of S. was a key distinguishing feature.

In crisis times, such as the exile, it was the observance of Sabbath, that preserved their identity, their unity, their perspective and hope.

*We can affirm without any exaggeration, writes Jewish essayist Achad Haam, that **the Sabbath has preserved the Jews more than the Jews have preserved the S.** If the S had not restored to them the soul, renewing every week their spiritual life, they would've become so degraded by the depressing experiences of the workdays, that they would've descended to the last step of materialism and of moral and intellectual decadence.*

It's a sobering comment,

it's comments like this that shed light on why life in the West, including life for many Xns, is so driven, so stressful, so frustratingly unfulfilling.

Over the next month it is my pray that we will grow in our understanding and appreciation of one of God's most fundamental rhythms, that we'll grasp what it means to *remember* the Sabbath, to keep it holy, that we'll come to a point where increasingly we *welcome* the Sabbath, rather than powering on as if it never existed.

It's my hope that these sermons will stir us to incorporate more Sabbath *customs*, more Sabbath *freedom*, more Sabbath *delight*, more Sabbath *spirituality* into our lives.

So where do we begin?

How do we approach a topic that for so many is almost totally foreign?

What I propose to do is to explore 4 different dimensions of Sabbath keeping—ceasing, resting, embracing, feasting.

So today, ceasing.

In Genesis 2:1 we read: *And God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy, because on it he **ceased** from all the work of creating that he had done.*

Ceasing...

First and foremost the Sabbath is God's invitation to *stop*, to cease our labour in order to enter into a completely different mode of being.

The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew *shabbat*, which means 'to cease or desist.'

On the Sabbath we cease from *our* labours, just as God did from *his*.

Deliberately and prayerfully we let go of the need (*compulsion*) to accomplish, to be productive, to be useful, to be busy.

On the Sabbath we think about *being* rather than doing.

On the Sabbath we remember that our identity comes *not* from what we do, but from who we are.

These days our society finds it increasingly hard to stop.

We are forever pushing the boundaries.

When night falls well, we flick on lights and keep going.

If we can't work at work, well then we bring it home.

Many businesses, many shops are now open 24/7.

Battery hens are tricked into laying twice a day. Cattle are fed on hormones in order to grow twice as fast.

On and on it goes.

The whole world is under constant pressure to achieve, to produce, to perform.

Most of us have more time saving mod cons than any generation before us but do we have time...? Are we relaxed? Content? Do we actually enjoy this so called 'freedom'..?

Friends, the Sabbath is an invitation to stop!

To step *out* of the rat race and reconnect...with our soul, with our community, with our God...

*The Sabbath is a sign forever between me and my people, says God, in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was **refreshed!** (Ex 31:17)*

Are you tired of the constant grind in your life, do you wish it were different?

Try keeping a Sabbath...

Ahhh, but, hang on, you say,

*that's fine for God, God finished his work, I **can't** stop, there's far too much to do!*

If that's how *you* feel—and I *often* do—then your need for the Sabbath is even greater...

A first symbol for a successful Sabbath is a full stop.

we cease *from* our work, our possessiveness, our anxious striving,

we cease *for* our God, our refreshment, our renewal and restoration.

If we think we *can't* stop, then our sense of our own importance is too high...

You see *that's* the danger, *without* the Sabbath we end up thinking that it all depends upon us, we end up acting as if *we* are God.

The S is an invitation to cease, to let *God* be God.

I'm *not* saying it's easy,
I'm not saying there isn't a cost involved, pressures and issues to negotiate, there are!
But is this reason for giving up?
Friends, the Sabbath is a gift, a blessing, an invitation into freedom.

As Jacques Ellul noted poignantly: Jesus never called anyone to *work*,
he calls us to *follow*, to obey, to glorify.
It's not that work is unimportant, our work is *very* important,
that's why we do it six days a week.
For six days—paid or unpaid—our work *is* our worship.
On the seventh day, it is different,
on the Sabbath day we are commanded to switch off our machines and lay down our
tools and embrace *grace, life, love, laughter!*
To work on *this* day brings *no* glory at all and no benefit.
All it does is wear you down and alienate you from the true meaning of life.

When we break, truly break, from our workday week, we are refreshed.
The anticipation of a break keeps us working well, right up until we stop.
And then, having taken time out, we return—with energy, with new insight...
Paradoxically, by ceasing for a time we actually achieve more.

When I was at uni I was struck by the faithfulness of a friend in this area.
Chris was studying for his medical finals, it was flat out and full on,
he needed every minute, and yet, despite this, he always *kept* a Sabbath,
not legalistically, no, he really got into it!
He continued to worship, continued with his SS class, continued to pray *and play*.
I was amazed.
He passed, of course, with flying colours.
But you know *more importantly* from my perspective, he showed me it was possible.
No matter how busy, we *can* keep the Sabbath.

Parents/leaders, when it comes to living trustingly and faithfully,
when it comes to keeping work in perspective,
when it comes to Sabbath obedience, what are we modelling for our children,
for our fellow brothers and sisters?
If they were to take their lead from us (and believe me, they do!) what will they believe
is the normal way to live???
We pay great attention to the commandments not to murder and steal
(we see these as *terrible* sins),
but what of the Sabbath? When did the 10 commandments suddenly become 9?

Ceasing: it's a sign of obedience, but it's also a sign freedom and trust.

You know the first *holy* thing in Scripture?
It wasn't a mountain or an altar or an object...it was a *time*, it was the Sabbath day.
*And God blessed the seventh **day** and made **it** holy.*

*The Sabbaths, [these] are **our** great cathedrals,* says Hershel.

While other religions sanctify place and thing, we sanctify time.

*Be careful...how you live, says Paul...make the most of **the time**. (Eph 5:15)*
And that includes *Sabbath* time.

We enter these Sabbath cathedrals by ceasing,
by calling a halt to the ever-pressing activities of our working week.

It'll require preparation:

we'll need to *clean* and *tidy* and *shop* and *cook* beforehand.

To avoid distraction we'll need to put away those menacing symbols of unfinished work
—the books, the bills, the lists, whatever they are.

For 24 hours we may need to *shut* a few doors and *shut down* a few computers.

At this point I find an ancient form of prayer very helpful, it's called *the prayer of relinquishment*.

As I deliberately and prayerfully *hand over* my work, my anxieties, my fears,
so I experience the Lord giving me peace...

As I relinquish care,
I find the Lord *caring for me*.

As I renounce possessiveness, my need to control,
so the sovereign Lord possesses me... and I feel safe, and light, and free.

I recommend the prayer of relinquishment.

Conclusion

When we cease on the Sabbath we are not avoiding our problems and responsibilities,
we're actually putting ourselves in the place where we can receive *grace* to *face* them.
Remember the Kiddush promise: *in the light of Sabbath all our blessings are enriched,*
and *all our griefs and trials are softened...*

If we've lost our sense of *holy* time and rhythm, then while there *is* time, let us regain it.
If we've profaned the Sabbath, then by God's grace let us redeem it,
and be redeemed *by* it.

A return to Sabbath keeping is not nostalgia or an attempt to return to an age that is pre-Enlightenment, pre-Industrial, and pre-Darwinian, says Marva Dawn, rather, it is a return to the spiritual dimension that haunts us.

In an age that has lost its soul, Sabbath keeping offers the possibility of gaining it back.

So come my friends, let *us* welcome the Sabbath, the Sabbath month...
let *us* cease from our labours, our meetings, our frenetic activity,
and let *us* be refreshed...