



God is in Control

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If you've got your Bibles with you this morning—and I hope you always do—open them to Genesis 2. We'll be looking at the first three verses this morning. But let me point out: We're starting a new chapter, but this is *still* the same text that we've been looking at in Genesis 1. Remember that the chapter and verse breaks in our Bibles are not part of the inspired text; they were added in the Middle Ages to make the Bible more user-friendly. For the most part that's what they do, but occasionally they break up the text where they shouldn't. This is one of those unfortunate chapter breaks—it cuts Day Seven off from Days One through Six. The natural break actually comes with verse 4, which we'll get to next week. So remember, we're still dealing with the Genesis 1 account of Creation here. And remember that Genesis 1 (and the first three verses of Chapter 2) serves not just as an introduction or prologue to the book of Genesis, but to the whole Bible. Genesis breaks down into a dozen books or chapters that tell the stories of Adam and Noah and Abraham on through to Joseph, but this is the prologue that sets the scene and gives us the foundation on which the rest of the story is built. And as I pointed out when we started, we need to be looking through the right lens when we read Genesis 1. We need to read it and understand it as the ancient Israelites would have read and understood it. To impose our modern Western mindset on Genesis is to abuse the text. As we've seen over these last four weeks, that means we need to understand that this isn't a materialistic account of origins. It's a story of Creation that explains things from the standpoint of *function* and *purpose* and that does so, not in scientific language, but in a sort of liturgical language that describes God's creative work in terms of his building a cosmic temple.

Before God created the earth was a dark, watery abyss. It was formless and void; it had no function and no purpose. And then over the course of six days, God first gave form to what was formless—forming a temple for himself out of the uncreated elements over the first three days—and then he filled what was void—he filled the temple with the instruments and functionaries of his worship. We saw that the creation of human beings was the culmination of God's creation—creatures made in his image that we might know him, that we might worship him as his priests, and that we might give him glory in his temple. This is the foundation for the rest of Scripture; this is the “worldview” on which the Bible is built.

But suddenly we get to Day Seven and the story changes gears. Look at verses 1 to 3:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

For six days we've seen God working; now he stops and rests. If we take Genesis 1 as a materialistic story of Creation, Day Seven seems out of place, especially in light of all the teaching about the Sabbath we see in the rest of the Old Testament. God's been working, making, creating; now the text switches to telling us about something theological. From a materialistic standpoint it's anticlimactic. For six days God did these amazing things, commanding the cosmos into existence! Oh, yeah...and then he took a nap on Saturday. But, brothers and sisters, that's not how ancient people would have understood this. They knew this was a temple text and if there was any doubt about that being what this is, Day Seven cinches it. In fact, if we see this as a story about God building himself a temple, Day Seven isn't just an epilogue or an afterthought; Day Seven is actually the *most important* day in the story. This morning we'll look first at

what it means for God to “rest” in his temple, and then we'll look at what this means in practical terms for us.

So, first, what does the text mean when it tells us that God rested? There's a lot packed into these words that we miss in our English translations. Verses two and three actually tells us *twice* that God rested and they use the Hebrew word *sabat*—it's the word from which we get *Sabbath*. But what does it mean? When you and I think of “rest” we usually think in terms of disengagement—of doing nothing. Those of us who aren't retired spend our weeks working. When the weekend comes we're often tired and so we leave our work behind, we go home, and we unplug. We do all sorts of things, from taking a nap to playing sports to spending time with family, but the key point is that we disengage from “work”. Stay-at-home mums spend their days looking after children and taking care their homes. For Mum to rest means to disengage from housework and childcare. When our work is *finished* for the hour or for the day or for the week, we disengage. That's how most of us think of rest. And *sabat* tends to carry that sort of meaning: On Day Seven God rested in the sense that he completed the work that he had done on the other six days.

But *sabat* isn't the only word at work here. God *completed* his work and that leads him into a *new* activity. In Exodus 20 God gives the Ten Commandments to Moses and in verse 11, when he explains the Sabbath to the Israelites God says this:

For in six days the LORD made heaven and 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.

Exodus 20:11 also describes God resting on the seventh day, but this time it's not *sabat*, it's the Hebrew word *nuha*. *Nuha* describes entering into a state of safety and security and stability. *Nuha* is a verb; when it's formed into a noun it describes the *place* where safety, security, and stability are found. The idea is that in *sabat* God rested by ceasing or completing his work and then he moved into a fuller kind of rest—

nuha—represented by stability and security.

But this goes further. *Nuha* happens in a certain place. We see this in Psalm 132:7-8 and 13-14, which describe this second kind of rest in terms of the temple in Jerusalem.

**“Let us go to his dwelling place;
let us worship at his footstool!”
Arise, O LORD, and go to your *resting*
place,
you and the ark of your might.
For the LORD has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his dwelling
place:
“This is my *resting* place forever;
here I will dwell, for I have desired
it.**

God’s dwelling place is his temple. When Solomon completed it, God’s presence descended to rest on the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies. The temple was his footstool, it was his resting place. Psalm 132 pulls all these ideas together: God’s rest, his temple, and his sitting on his throne. His “ceasing” (*sabat*) in Genesis 2:2 leads to his “rest” on the seventh day, described in Exodus 20:11, and his “rest” takes place in his “resting place” here in the psalm, which also shows us that God’s resting place is his temple. God created the cosmos as a temple for himself and when it was finished, he took up residence in it and from it he reigns and rules—that’s his “rest”. Rest in this sense isn’t about disengagement or doing nothing, it’s about ruling over and sustaining what God has made.

We also need to ask what this biblical idea of rest looks like when it’s applied to human beings. To see that we can look at God’s promise to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 12:10:

But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety.

Defeating your enemies will certainly allow you time to relax and disengage,

but more importantly, Israel’s defeat of her enemies means that her people can go about their lives in peace, safety, and stability. It’s hard to raise a family or plant crops during a war, but with God having ended the war and brought peace—with him looking out for you—you can get on with your life and your worship of him.

That’s what this kind of rest is about. It’s *engaged* rest, not *disengaged* rest. It’s about God reigning in his temple as sovereign over Creation. And that answers the old question: What did God do on the eighth day. If we look at Genesis 1 as an account of material origins we’ll tend to see these seven days as all being in the past: At some point, a long time ago, God created the cosmos and then took a break. But if we understand Genesis 1 from the standpoint of function and purpose we see that this isn’t strictly telling us about what happened in the past; it’s showing us God’s continuing care and sustenance of his Creation—his continuing engagement in it. Brothers and sisters, this is the setup for the rest of what we’ll read in Scripture. This is what makes sense of the whole story of redemption: *God never disengages from what he has made.*

Now, if Day Seven is about God resting in his temple, and if that rest is about God ruling and sustaining and engaged with his Creation, what does that mean for us? More specifically, what does it mean for us to observe the Sabbath?

We looked at Exodus 20:11 earlier. That’s part of the text in which God gave Israel the Fourth Commandment:

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 to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and 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. (Exodus 20:8-11)

We see the commandment to keep the Sabbath reiterated throughout the Old Testament. Later on, God gives the Israelites rules detailing how to keep the Sabbath and how to punish those who fail to keep it. By the time of Jesus the rabbis, whom we have to credit for at least being zealous in their desire to keep the law, had made up a whole host of strict rules to help people to observe the Sabbath—rules which Jesus condemned as adding to the law and making it a burden. And yet we see that Jesus, as a good Jew, observed the Sabbath. At the same time, we note that of all the Ten Commandments, the keeping of the Sabbath is the only one not said to be binding on Christians in the New Testament. In Colossians 2:16 St. Paul warns Christians not to judge brothers and sisters based on whether or not they observe Jewish dietary laws, observe the Old Testament feasts, or keep the Sabbath. The conclusion for us is that while the command to keep the Sabbath is no longer binding on Christians, there’s also a Sabbath *principle* here that goes all the way back to Creation and that teaches us something about our relationship with God and our worship of him.

The Sabbath principle reminds us every time we rest from our labour that our God, the Creator of the cosmos, is in control: that he sits on his throne, that he is sovereign over his Creation, that he’s engaged with that Creation, and that he cares for it. We read that as he created, he declared his creation “good”. Why? Because his goal was to create a race of priests who would live in his presence and worship him. Every step of his creative work that brought things closer to the point of sustaining the life of those priests was “good”. In that sense the focus of Creation is humanity so that humanity’s focus can be on God and giving him the glory he deserves. Creation teaches us that God sees what we need and that he never sees without providing. And his own Sabbath reminds us that his provision wasn’t simply part of his creative act long, long ago, but that as long as he sits on his

heavenly throne, as long as he rules his Creation, he is always engaged with it—with us—and will never fail to provide for us.

In that sense, for us to observe the Sabbath principle is to exercise our faith in him as Creator and Sustainer. It's similar to the tithing principle. God commanded the Israelites to contribute one tenth of all their produce and all their revenue back to him. That money went to support the ministry of his priests and his temple, but the point in giving it wasn't so much that God needed it for his ministry, but to teach his people to exercise faith in his provision and to remind them that one hundred per cent of everything they had came from him in the first place. To give back that ten per cent was a statement of faith that said: "God, you are my Creator; you are my Sustainer. Everything I have comes from you and I trust you to provide for everything I need, and so I'm giving back to you a tenth of what is already yours and I trust you to continue to provide." Even when times were hard and income was low, the tithe was still commanded and it was in those times that giving back that produce or that revenue of God was a strong statement of faith in his provision.

In a very similar way, the Sabbath principle teaches us to trust in God for our sustenance as well. Consider that there was no such thing as a "weekend" in the ancient world. Most people worked seven days a week in order to meet their needs. It was a radical idea for God to tell the Israelites to work only six days. You and I live in a culture where a five-day work week is the norm. Our tendency is to see the Sabbath simply as a much-needed break from work—a day of rest. But, brothers and sisters, in the ancient world, to take one day off each week was a statement of faith in God's promise of provision. To observe the Sabbath is to declare faith in God our Provider.

Like the tithe, the Sabbath principle is no longer binding on Christians. The New Testament teaches us to give, not just ten per cent, but to give generously

and proportionately. And similarly, the New Testament teaches us that *all* of our days belong to God: our rest days *and* our work days. No longer are we tied to a legalistic observance of a specific day of the week as our Sabbath. In fact, New Testament Christians took this release from a strict observance of a seventh-day Sabbath to declare the first day of the week to be a sort of "Christian Sabbath" in honour of the Resurrection of Jesus.

The first Christians understood very well what we sometime forget: Jesus is the key to understanding the Sabbath. The Gospels tell us how Jesus and his disciples were berated by the Pharisees for picking some grain on the Sabbath. That's when Jesus condemned their legalistic Sabbath rules and gave us those words: "The Sabbath was created for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath." But more importantly, in his dispute with the Pharisees he declared that "the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath." Jesus has fulfilled the very idea of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is about our resting in the security of God's care and provision. Brothers and sisters, you and I can rest secure in God's care and provision in the *fullest* sense when we rest—when we place our faith and trust—in Jesus Christ. Not only is he the Word of God who was there as Creation was spoken into existence, not only is he the one who gave life from the beginning, he is also the Saviour and Redeemer who has come back to restore us to the life we rejected when we chose to sin. He is the one who has come to give up his own life because he has seen our need of redemption and the only way to provide for that need was to take the just wrath of God upon himself, taking our place on the Cross.

So the Sabbath is about observing God's provision. It's a statement of faith that we trust God to provide. This is why Christians gather on the first day of the week. We gather to read the Scripture and to recall the mighty acts of God in providing for our redemption, we sing and pray to praise God and to thank him for having provided for us—for our daily bread, for forgiving our sins, and

for giving us new life—and we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. At the Table God gives us a tangible reminder that he has given his very self, his body and blood, to give us new life, but he also gives us hope, because this Table here points us to his heavenly Table and to that great banquet where Creation will be fully restored from the effects of sin. The Table here points us to a time when there will be no darkness and no abyss, when sin and death are defeated, when pain and suffering will be gone and every teary eye dried, as we sit forever before the face of God—to a time when we, his once wayward priests, will be restored to our original purpose and will worship in his presence eternally.

When our service is ended we're dismissed with the words "Go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord." Brothers and Sisters, that is our Sabbath. As we gather here as God's people we're reminded of his provision—as we receive the Word Written in the Scriptures and the Word Incarnate in the Sacrament. From this place we go forth refreshed and assured of God's provision that we might *rest* secure in Christ, as we go about our daily business and ministry in his kingdom, knowing that God is forever seated in his temple, that he is forever in control, and anticipating that great day when Jesus Christ brings us to complete and everlasting rest in the New Jerusalem.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for your gracious provision. Help us to remember that all our days belong to you. Let us live our days not as our own, but as belonging to you. Let us truly rest in your provision, both for our daily bread and for the forgiveness of our sins, that the world might see our faith in you and give you the glory you deserve. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.