



# Introduction to the Sabbath

Arguably, there is no greater identity marker for Seventh-day Adventists than the Sabbath. And it could also be argued that the Sabbath is the most theologically dense topic that is found in Scripture. It has things to say about our identity and value as people. It talks about good ways to live, not just individually but collectively. It talks about equality, about justice, it even has something to say about economics. Sabbath is a beautiful reality that God creates, sanctifies and gives as a beautiful gift to humanity in the very beginning, and it's a reality that other portions of Scripture tell us will be there even after the end.

And because Sabbath is there at both the beginning and the end, Scripture has much to say about it in so many different capacities. The Sabbath in creation is a statement about God's intention for his creation. The Sabbath in Exodus is a statement of the worth and dignity of God's people as they come out of slavery. The Sabbath in the prophets expands its definition to comment on the worth and dignity of all people, even those who have previously been excluded. And then Jesus' acts of healing on the Sabbath reveal much about God's intentions for the beauty and reconciliation bound up within the concept of the Sabbath.

As we dive into the beauty of the Sabbath over the next few weeks, may we not only find our faith and identity reaffirmed, but may we also see that God has more in store for us in and through the Sabbath than we previously realized.

Author: Pastor Geoff Crowley  
Bell Branch Seventh-day Adventist Church  
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# Week 1 Day 1

## Read Genesis 1:1-2

The opening words of the Bible are some of the most famous, but also some of the most disputed words in the world in which we live. Far from asserting that creation itself is a result of random events, these words assert that all of creation was the result of purposeful intent and purposeful action on God's part; that existence, and our place within it, is not random, meaningless, or left to the odds, but rather that it all happened with great intention.

And far beyond that, when God begins the process of creation, he does so with the end in mind for what kind of place and experience this will be for the ultimate crown jewel of his creation; human beings. John H. Sailhamer writes that the beginning of the creation account "...shows the condition of the land before God's gracious work has prepared it for humanity's well-being."<sup>1</sup> Sailhamer goes on to demonstrate how the beginning of the creation story also mirrors Deuteronomy 32, where Israel is waiting to enter into the land that God has promised and prepared for them.<sup>2</sup> In other words, God's act of creation was something that was performed with the specific goal of providing humans the perfect environment in which to flourish.

And in the beginning of the discussion about the Sabbath and its place within creation, we begin with the point that God desires and takes action for the benefit of human flourishing. This means that the Sabbath is not something that is necessarily of benefit to God, but a good gift that is part of the good creation that God has designed for our well-being.

## Reflection

What difference does it make, in your opinion, that creation is the result of God's purposeful action rather than something that happened by coincidence?

Do you think that creation is specifically for the benefit of human beings? Why or why not?

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

# Week 1 Day 2

## Read Genesis 1:3-25, 2:2

Often when we read the Bible we come to the text, often unknowingly, with our own cultural baggage and cultural lenses. We read the Bible and we fill in various aspects of the text with our own assumptions, with our own ways of seeing the world and our own imaginations. And there's a large degree to which this is inescapable, because we are all incapable of completely removing ourselves from our own cultural contexts. And it speaks to the beauty of the Bible that despite the differing cultures that have found Scripture valuable over the past 2,000 years it continues to remain valuable.

But in the creation story, it's helpful to recognize that our cultural eyes may not grasp quite what the text is trying to say. Because the creation story is constructed in what is called *chiastic* form, which was a very typical Jewish way of telling a story. In this form, each element of the text corresponds to another element of the text, leaving one isolated element that stands on its own which is the main point of that story or text. When it comes to the creation story, Gerald Klingbeil describes the chiastic pattern as that of "forming and filling."<sup>3</sup> On day 1, God creates light which corresponds to day 4 where he creates the sun, moon and stars as sources of that light. Day 2 God creates sky and water and on day 5 he creates birds and aquatic life to fill the things which he has created. On day 3, God creates dry land and on day 6, God creates land animals and humans.

This means that the element of the text that stands on its own, that has no corresponding element is the Sabbath that God creates on day 7. And if creation was accomplished for the good benefit of human beings, then the main point of the creation story is the sacred space that God has created for humanity to enjoy all that creation, life and God have to give.

## Reflection

How would you put into words the significance that Sabbath seems to be the main point of creation?

If Sabbath is the main point of creation, how do we maintain a belief in Sabbath as a gift to humanity rather than humanity as servant to the Sabbath?

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald A. Klingbeil, *Genesis*, Andrews Bible Commentary: Old Testament (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2020), 141.

# Week 1 Day 3

## Read Genesis 1:27-31

It could be argued that every part of the creation story bears specific weight and importance as it is a direct result of God's action. But no part of the creation story is quite as personal as God's creation of human beings. Where everything else was a direct result of God's speaking it into being, humanity is the product of God's own hands and is enlivened by his own breath. And certainly this speaks to the value of human beings, not just within the creation story, but also within all of God's creation in general. Commenting on this text, Walter Brueggemann writes that "this man and woman are not the chattel and servants of God, but the agents of God to whom much is given and from whom much will be expected."<sup>4</sup>

And besides the significance that God assigns human beings, he also gives them rulership and dominion over the rest of his creation. Brueggemann is again helpful, noting that "the human person is ordained over the remainder of creation but for its profit, well-being, and enhancement. The role of the human person is to see to it that the creation becomes fully the creation willed by God."<sup>5</sup>

The point of all of these things taken together is that quite simply, within the creation story and the overarching interaction of God with his creation, humanity occupies a lofty place and has specific value. In a world where human life is cheapened by violence and prejudice, and human value is called into question by new technological tools, Christians who believe themselves to be part of the good creation by the good creator have to constantly find new ways to have the conversation about human value and human dignity.

## Reflection

Why do you think that human beings occupy a more lofty place than the rest of creation according to this text?

How do we speak about the value of human beings in the world that we live in?

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

# Week 1 Day 4

## Read Genesis 2:1-3

Maybe you've experienced a time in your life, whether it was at work, at home, or in preparation for a special event where there was so much to do that you didn't feel like you were able to rest. Any time you would try to stop to regain a little bit of strength and sanity, you didn't feel like you were able to truly rest until the thing was done. And often, we find ourselves still full of the task when the thing itself that we were working toward is happening. All of this is because often, regarding our own work, there is a specific kind of anxiety.

And this is actually the exact opposite of the picture that is presented of God in the end of the creation story. Here we see a God who rather than frantically checking that everything is still working the way that it's supposed to, is able to sit back and rest and enjoy his creation. Walter Brueggemann notes that "God does not spend the seventh day in exhaustion but in serenity and peace. In contrast to the gods of Babylon, this God is not anxious about his creation but is at ease with the well-being of his rule."<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the Sabbath as God intended it and as God practiced it is *supposed* to exist as a weekly rhythm that reminds us that we are not defined by the anxiety of our work, our busyness or our projects. In fact, God invites us this one day a week to let go of our constant productivity and the worry about how much we'll accomplish and how well we will do things in order to focus on the goodness of the life that he has given us.

## Reflection

Why do you think there is such an anxiety around the concept of work? And how does Sabbath as part of God's design of his creation fit into that?

Do you have trouble letting go of your exhaustion and anxiety on Sabbath? Why or why not?

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 35.

# Week 1 Day 5

## Read Genesis 2:8-14

At times it can be confusing to read Genesis 1-2 because they can seem like two separate creation accounts. However, the consensus amongst the scholarship of our own denomination is that rather than being two conflicting accounts, they are complimentary chapters that narrow the scope of the goodness of creation.<sup>7</sup> And upon reading this chapter, it's clear to see that this is what this chapter is all about.

Genesis 2 details God's intimate creation of humanity, compared to his speaking the rest of creation into existence (vss. 5-7). This chapter details the beauty of the place that God had given to humanity in which to live (vss. 8-15). Genesis 2 details the closeness of marriage and sexual relationships and God's description of them as good (vss. 20-25). But perhaps most important theologically for this chapter, the description of God changes from the generic '*Elohim* (God) in chapter 1 to *YHWH 'Elohim* (The LORD God) in chapter 2. Jacques Doukhan notes that this change shows that "He is presented as a personal God in close relationship with humans."<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the purpose of this chapter is to show the good creation, the good world, the good intentions and the good relationship that God created for the enjoyment of humans. Where we would be in close relationship with him, close relationship with one another, close relationship with the beautiful natural world. To put it simply; the purpose of God's good creation was for the benefit of humanity.

## Reflection

What does it say about this God that the purpose of creation was to benefit humanity, God's crowning jewel of creation?

How do we balance God's good intentions for creation with what it has become as the result of human action?

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<sup>7</sup> Klingbeil, *Genesis*, 143-144. Jacques B. Doukhan, *Genesis*, Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary (Nampa: Pacific Press, 2016), 72.

<sup>8</sup> Doukhan, *Genesis*, 72.

# Week 2 Day 1

Read Exodus 1:8-14, 2:23-25

Outside of the incarnation of Jesus, the Exodus is the foremost event in Scripture of God intervening in human history and demonstrating his power. And as such, the Sabbath is a capstone on the activity of God in liberating his people from slavery. But in order to see the significance of Sabbath at the end of this journey, it's helpful to go back to the beginning of the journey.

In this case, the story begins with the fear of the Egyptians over how numerous the Israelites have become. And far from being the suspicion of one group against another, the Bible actually frames this as a theological question. The fact that the Israelites were in Egypt in the first place was an act of God to rescue them from famine (Gen. 47-48). The fact the Israelites have grown so numerous is a fulfillment of the promise that God made to Abraham that he would be a great nation (Gen. 12:1-3). The writer Terence Fretheim attributes this to God's creative power, noting that "into the midst of God's extraordinary creative activity enters a major effort to subvert what God has done... A sign of blessing for Israel is a disaster for Pharaoh. *The new king of Egypt counters God's life-giving work with death-dealing efforts...* This is no minor subversion, having only local effects; it is a threat to undo God's creation."<sup>9</sup>

In other words, what happens in this Exodus story, between Pharaoh's oppression of the people, God's liberation with them, and then God granting them his covenant, including the Sabbath *is a statement on the way that God values his creation*. And if God responds to the subversion of his creation with the idea of rest, then it says something not only about the value of creation, but the value of rest for the people that God has rescued.

## Reflection

If God placed the Israelites in Egypt and had grown their numbers, both in accordance with his promises, how do we deal with the suffering that they received when they were in a situation that God had specifically put them in?

How do you think that the Sabbath is a statement on the value of God's creation when it is threatened?

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<sup>9</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press 1991), 26-27.



# Week 2 Day 2

## Read Exodus 3:1-22

Often when we talk about the 10 commandments in Exodus 20, they're framed in such a way that we see them as God's requirement of his people. And because they're often disconnected from the rest of the Exodus narrative, they show up in something of a vacuum with very little context. But when they're included in the context of the rest of Exodus, it changes the way that they're perceived and read. And a key piece of this context is God's appearance to Moses in a burning bush in Exodus 3.

Terence Fretheim comments helpfully on this passage, noting that "the emphasis throughout is on the *divine initiative*. It is God who confronts Moses and calls him to a task. Moses does not prepare for the encounter, nor does he seek it."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the story of Exodus is not the story of a people who go in search of God, it is the story of a God who responds to his people and goes searching them out. This passage is God's response to the last passage where Israel groaned in slavery. But it should be noted, in their groaning there is no direct appeal to God to free them from slavery. It is an initiative that God takes on his own to respond to them.

Thus, the Exodus, the miracles in the wilderness and even eventually the 10 commandments that God gives to his people are not the result of God telling his people what they need to do to keep him happy, but rather it all happens in the context of a God who has *already* acted to liberate and redeem them. And perhaps something like the Sabbath takes on a different tone when it is not seen as a requirement for God's good favor, but rather a joyful response to his already completed saving activity.

## Reflection

How does the story of the Exodus and all that follows, including the 10 commandments, change when viewed through the lens of response to God rather than the initial encounter of God?

Do our thoughts surrounding the Sabbath change when we view it as a joyful response to God's activity rather than a preliminary requirement to be in his good graces?

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<sup>10</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 56.

# Week 2 Day 3

## Read Exodus 5:1-14

An often under-appreciated aspect of the Exodus story is the transition that Israel goes through regarding who will be their primary master. Up to this point in the narrative, it's been clear that Pharaoh is their master whether they like it or not. And there have been a few instances of resistance against Pharaoh up until now, with the Hebrew midwives (Exod. 1:15-21) and Moses' parents (2:1-4), but for the most part, Pharaoh has so completely become their master that they have even forgotten God's ability to confront Pharaoh (5:19-21).

But as Terence Fretheim displays, the crux of chapters 5 and 6 of Exodus is the question of who Israel is going to serve.<sup>11</sup> And in this case, the text purposefully shows us what kind of master Pharaoh is. In order to assert his control and authority over the Israelites, he makes their lives more difficult, requiring the same brick quota from them while now requiring them to source their own materials. They are expected to work harder to maintain their same output. And far from showing the kind of human that Pharaoh is, this story is designed to show what kind of master Pharaoh is. He is a master who rules through fear and punishment. He doesn't lighten the loads of his people, he adds to the load.

And it's against this backdrop that the story of Exodus will begin to show God as a better master. In the stories that follow, God doesn't require Israel to fight for themselves at the Red Sea, he fights for them. He doesn't tell them to go search out their own food in the desert, he provides it for them. And eventually, when the Sabbath command comes in Exodus 20, he has shown himself to be a master that doesn't delight in backbreaking burdens, but one who cares for the well-being of his people and gives them rest.

## Reflection

Do you think that the picture that some people have of God is more like Pharaoh than it is God?

When the Sabbath command is read in light of God as an alternative master to Pharaoh, does it change the way that we think about and approach the Sabbath?

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<sup>11</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 83.

# Week 2 Day 4

## Read Exodus 16:4-30

My grandparent's generation grew up during the Great Depression, and like many of their generation, that experience shaped the way they viewed not only their possessions and finances, but the way that they thought about their resources in general. That generation is famous for saving random things "because you'll never know when you need it." And this is an experience that is common to people who have been through times where they had to do without certain resources or adapt other resources to fit a need that they had.

And as we saw in the last passage that we explored together, this was the experience of the Israelites. In response to God's claim of ownership over his people, Pharaoh's response was to try to display his own ownership of them by forcing them to work harder and gather their own resources for brick making while not changing the brick quota. Undoubtedly this experience shaped the way that they thought about their resources, and that shows up in this current text. The first thing to notice in this famous story of manna from heaven is that they do not need to find their own food in the wilderness, *God is providing it for them*. Already, he's showing himself to be a different master than Pharaoh. While Pharaoh required more of them, God gives to them. But built into God's gift to them is an invitation for them to trust him, in not taking more than they needed each day, but then by taking extra on the sixth day, before the Sabbath. Rather than being seen as a "test," perhaps its more helpful to view this text as God demonstrating to his people that he was not a master that was going to deprive them of resources.

And central to all of this was the Sabbath. The Sabbath, in this text, functions as God's reminder to his people that he is not going to trick them, be cruel to them, or force them to work harder. Rather, he invites them into a trust relationship with him where they can rest in the knowledge that he will continue to provide for them.

## Reflection

How does the conversation change when we talk about Sabbath as God's invitation to trust him, rather than God's test of us?

In your own life, is the Sabbath a sign of God's promise to provide for you?

# Week 2 Day 5

## Read Exodus 20:8-11

There are few texts that are more meaningful to our own faith family than the Sabbath command of Exodus 20. In this command we find identity, meaning, mission and a glimpse into God's revelation of himself to us. And often, rightfully, we make much of the fact that this command contains elements that point back to creation.<sup>12</sup> However, what we don't often have eyes to see is the way that the Sabbath command functions internally within the Exodus narrative itself.

The Sabbath command is one of only two commands that does not begin with "you shall" or "you shall not," and the other one that does not begin this way implies it. The Sabbath begins with the call to "remember." And presumably, this is because at this point in their journey, Israel is becoming reacquainted with God as their master as opposed to Pharaoh. And Pharaoh, as a master, required total work from them. Thus, the call to "remember," in the context of the Exodus story itself, is a call to remember that God is not the master that Pharaoh is. As Walter Brueggemann says, "for the God who rests is the God who emancipates *from slavery* and consequently *from the work system of Egypt* and *from the gods of Egypt* who require and legitimate that work system."<sup>13</sup> For this group of former slaves, used to no days off, and used to having to hoard their resources, God graciously asks them to remember that their value is in the fact that they are his creation, not his resources.

And for those of us who follow this commandment today, it is also a reminder that we are not resources and that our work does not define us. We are God's creation that he has liberated and delivered.

## Reflection

What kind of "master" does the Sabbath commandment show God to be?

Why do you think we're so tempted to follow other masters that require more work from us than God who encourages and wants us to rest?

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<sup>12</sup> Michael G. Hasel, *Exodus*, Andrews Bible Commentary: Old Testament (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2020), 219-220.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 2.

# Week 3 Day 1

## Read Isaiah 1:10-18

Most of the time when we hear the word prophet, our minds immediately latch onto pictures of fortune-tellers or people who can see deep into the future. And often we take those images and impose them onto the prophets that we find throughout the Bible. And while there is what we would call predictive prophecy in Scripture, much of the prophecy we find in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is what we would call classical prophecy. And classical prophecy does not contain any predictive elements but can best be described as God's message, mediated through a human God has called, for a particular time and place.

And the first part of Isaiah is a good example of classical prophecy. There are no predictive elements in Isaiah 1, but what we do see is God speaking to his people through his prophet. And in particular, God is addressing the fact that this group of people think that if they keep all the rituals that God has laid out for them carefully enough, they will be in good standing with God.<sup>14</sup> And at the center of these rituals in vs. 13 we find the Sabbath, with God's assertion that he cannot "bear your worthless assemblies." This is quite a thing for God to say about the Sabbath. And the reason for this, we find in vs. 15 is that this is a group of people who have blood on their hands, and whom God is inviting to repentance. But the connection here is clear for what we will explore this week: *there is a moral dimension to the Sabbath*.

The Sabbath is a beautiful day of rest, and it says much about our identities and the worth that we have in God's eyes. But the Sabbath is also a commentary on the value that God places on all people.

## Reflection

What immediately comes to mind when you think about a moral dimension of the Sabbath?

How do you feel about God calling the Sabbath "a worthless assembly" in this passage? In your mind, what would make the Sabbath a worthless assembly?

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<sup>14</sup> John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, The NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 77.

# Week 3 Day 2

## Read Amos 8:4-8

The bible scholar Walter Brueggemann tells the story from his childhood of attending the church where his father was the pastor and how every Sunday, the two grocers would attend church and sit in the front row. However, every week, the grocer and his wife would leave during the last 5 minutes of the sermon, because the Lutheran church in the same town let out 30 minutes earlier, and he needed to go open up his store for those that decided to do their shopping on Sunday.<sup>15</sup> As Brueggemann describes it, “he was worshipping, even while he kept an eye on the clock for the sake of trade and profit.”<sup>16</sup>

And that’s largely what this passage in Amos is doing as it describes the Sabbath, albeit on the seventh day rather than the first. For this group of people, the Sabbath is merely “a fake occasion, an official act of work stoppage...”<sup>17</sup> The Sabbath is merely the mandated break that they must take in order to get back to their true passions of “skipping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales” (vs. 5). And in this sense, much like we saw in Isaiah 1, the Sabbath is a mere ritual rather than the life-giving day of rest and identity that God instituted at creation and reaffirmed in the Exodus. As the Sabbath command reminded the former slaves in the Exodus that they were more than commodity, and that they were the treasured creation of God, now the descendants of these slaves have begun to look at others around them as commodity. And in doing so, the prophet speaks for God in telling them that they have forgotten what the Sabbath is truly for.

The Sabbath, as it did for the former slaves in Exodus 20, also reminds us in the prophets that human beings are not commodity, but the crowning jewel of God’s creation. And as we will see in Isaiah, the prophets use the Sabbath to push this idea even farther.

## Reflection

Have you ever thought about the Sabbath in connection with how you treat other people?

What do you think of the concept of the Sabbath being more than just “work-stoppage?”

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<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 58-59.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

# Week 3 Day 3

## Read Isaiah 56:1-8

There have been times in my journey with the Sabbath where I have seen it used to narrow the scope of who is welcome in God's kingdom and who is not. And while faithfulness to God as he has revealed himself in Scripture is always important and shouldn't be diminished, it seems that the Sabbath as it is presented in the moral vision of the prophets expands the scope of who God wants to welcome into his kingdom rather than narrowing it.

In this passage of Isaiah, God, speaking through the prophet, controversially welcomes two specific groups of people who had previously been excluded from Israel's worship of God; foreigners (vs. 3) and eunuchs (vs. 4). For foreigners, they had not been welcomed into the outer courtyard of the temple, reserving that space only for Jewish men. And eunuchs, on the basis of Deuteronomy 23, had been restricted from even entering the temple space because of the impossibility of circumcision. Both of these groups struck at the heart of how God's people defined themselves, ethnically descended from Abraham bearing the physical mark of God's covenant with their people. But the beautiful reality that the prophet points to in Isaiah 56 is that both of these groups are welcomed into God's house and God's kingdom *on the basis of the Sabbath*. They are given places and names better than native born sons and daughters *on the basis of the Sabbath*. The writer Sigve Tonstad describes this as an inclusive vision, in which the Sabbath has been given a conspicuous role.<sup>18</sup>

The moral vision of the Sabbath, at least as Isaiah sees it, welcomes and includes those who have previously been excluded and discriminated against. And perhaps Sabbath keepers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need this prophetic reminder that the Sabbath is a tool and a reality that welcomes those who have previously not been welcomed far more than it is a test to determine unfaithfulness.

## Reflection

How would you describe the Sabbath as inclusive?

How do we balance faithfulness to God in keeping the Sabbath and calling others to do the same, while also recognizing it as a tool that welcomes those who have previously not been welcomed?

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<sup>18</sup> Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2009), 152.

# Week 3 Day 4

## Read Isaiah 58:3-14

When I was a kid, there were times that I dreaded sundown on Friday night and couldn't wait until sundown on Saturday night because all the things that I enjoyed – watching TV, playing classic rock songs on my guitar, and playing sports weren't allowed during those hours. And the text that was always given to me by my faith community to justify this stance was Isa. 58:13 – to keep yourself from doing as you please on God's holy day. And while I do think that there is a place for Sabbath practice that includes out of the norm activities, one of the things that I've discovered over the years is the way that this particular text has been misused and abused. And in fact, it says far more about a moral vision of the Sabbath than it does about "prohibited activities" on the Sabbath.

Far from "doing as you please" referring to non-sacred activities on the Sabbath, in the context of this chapter itself doing as one pleases is literally and explicitly defined as "exploiting all of your workers" (vs. 3). And this speaks in a very profound and powerful way to a group of people that were former slaves who were themselves, exploited. Indeed, as we saw last week in this study guide, the Sabbath is a reminder to former slaves that they are not a commodity, but the crowning jewel of God's creation, worthy of resting from their work to enjoy the goodness of the life that God has made. And now later in their history, it is God reminding them themselves through the prophet that just as they are not commodity, *neither is anyone else*.

Part of the moral vision of the Sabbath is not just learning see our identity as God's valued creation, made to enjoy the goodness of his presence and the rest of the world he's created, but also learning that every other human is as well. Just as we find our identity in God, so God wants all people to find their identity in him. And rather than using the Sabbath as a way to reinforce who finds their identity in God and who does not, God invites us to rest, and remember that the Sabbath is a statement on human dignity.

## Reflection

Why do people have the tendency to treat other people as commodity, even if we've been treated as commodity ourselves?

How do you think that the Sabbath can practically help us to see the dignity and identity of other people as valued members of God's creation?



# Week 3 Day 5

## Read Isaiah 66:22-23

One of the beautiful things about the place of the Sabbath within Scripture is its orientation toward both the beginning and the end. Sabbath in the creation story is a statement on the value of creation and God's intent for the things that he has made and called good. Sabbath in the Exodus is a reminder to God's people that they have value and that they are more than commodity because they are part of his creation. And in the moral vision of the Sabbath found in the prophets, the Sabbath is expanded to show God's chosen people that ALL people created by God are more than commodity and find their identity and dignity as part of God's creation. And now, in the closing chapter of Isaiah, Sabbath is oriented toward the end.

John Oswalt notes that these two verses in the last chapter of Isaiah "is the goal of all that God has done on earth – that we, his creatures, may have fellowship with him."<sup>19</sup> And as has been seen throughout the rest of Isaiah, God's creatures are more than just his chosen people, but all who choose to follow him. And this is precisely why the Sabbath is mentioned in this closing chapter. It's a reminder that not only is the dignity and worth given to humanity in the beginning enduring, but God's desire to be present with and enjoy his creation also endures.

## Reflection

What do you envision a heavenly Sabbath to look like?

What statement do you think it makes that Sabbath endures *past* the end?

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<sup>19</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 697.

# Week 4 Day 1

## Read Luke 4:14-30

Most who are familiar with the ministry of Jesus are familiar with the way that he taught and healed. But a key aspect of Jesus' ministry, especially in the Gospel of Luke is the way that he taught and healed on the Sabbath. And this begins in Luke on a Sabbath in the synagogue, as Jesus talks about the "sabbath year" in the book of Isaiah.

The story has a familiar Jewish setting - a synagogue, *on the Sabbath*, where Scripture is being read and discussed. When given the opportunity, Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 where the Suffering Servant of the Lord, understood to be the Messiah, declares the year of Jubilee, initially called the *Sabbath* year in Leviticus 25 for all of the oppressed of God's people. After reading this passage in the synagogue, Jesus declares that this text has been fulfilled. And interestingly, those attending the synagogue have no problem with this statement initially. They even marvel at his words and are encouraged by what he has to say. However, when he begins to mention that in the past God favored certain Gentiles in great stories of the Old Testament like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, the congregation becomes enraged to the point that they try to kill Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

It's enlightening that Jesus' words of comfort for those who considered themselves to be downtrodden, oppressed and captive were met with great receptivity. However, when he pushed the envelope further to encompass God's plan for the liberation and salvation of all humanity, it was enough to make the residents of his own hometown try to kill him. But Jesus' intention seems clear: to continue the prophetic call of the Sabbath that was begun in the prophets. And he will use his ministry to display in the flesh, what the goodness of the Sabbath looks like when it upholds the dignity of all of God's people.

## Reflection

What do you think the concept of a "Sabbath year" has to say about the weekly Sabbath that we celebrate?

Why do you think there is hostility when Jesus announces that the Sabbath year is for more than just his own people?

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<sup>20</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 270.

# Week 4 Day 2

## Read Luke 4:31-44

This section of Luke begins a portion of Jesus' life that most are familiar with - his healing ministry of casting out demons, healing the loved ones of those close to him, healing all who came to him to be cured as he preached to them the Kingdom of God. What is often not so evident is that this portion of Jesus' ministry is simply a fulfillment of what he proclaimed earlier in Luke 4 in the synagogue; that the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed would experience relief from their condition. And as such, it's no coincidence that in that text where Jesus announced the Sabbath year, in the very next story when he begins to bring that reality to fruition, it happens *on the Sabbath*.

Undoubtedly this is a very physical aspect of Jesus' ministry that bears itself out in the concrete world that humans experience every day. Indeed, each of the conditions that Jesus heals in this collection of stories are not primarily spiritual in nature. When humans experience hardship, we experience such trials in the real, concrete world.

However, when much of Christianity speaks of Jesus today, he is often mentioned in the abstract. That is, Jesus is the price of salvation, the perfect moral example, the shining beacon of wisdom, among many other things. And though all of these things are true, when Jesus is spoken of in primarily abstract terms, what is missed is the impact that Jesus made and continues to make in the real world. Jesus did not just cure these people spiritually from whatever they happened to be experiencing, Jesus healed their suffering in the real world.

When we consider what Jesus has to say to us today or the impact that he can still make in our world, we don't often consider the fact that Jesus made a physical impact on the physical world in which he lived, and he did so on the Sabbath as a commentary on the Sabbath. And the call remains for us today who keep the Sabbath to do as Jesus did, and to make a real mark of goodness on our real world because of the goodness that God shows us through the Sabbath.

## Reflection

What is the difference between believing in an abstract Jesus and believing in a concrete Jesus?

In what ways does the Sabbath make a real-world, concrete difference for good in the lives of people?

# Week 4 Day 3

## Read Luke 6:1-11

Stories such as the two provided in this except of Luke provide Sabbath-keepers with the comfort that debates over proper Sabbath practice have been going on for centuries. And to be sure, the issue at hand in these stories is Sabbath-keeping. In the first story, the disciples are not accused of stealing when they pluck the grain from the field that belongs to another, rather they are accused of doing something that is unlawful on the Sabbath. And in the second story, no one accuses Jesus of doing something improper by healing an afflicted person, but rather he errs by healing this afflicted person *on the Sabbath*.

And Jesus' response is one that still rings today. "Is it lawful to do good or harm on the sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9). Because at root in this conflict is the issue of proper law-keeping surrounding the Sabbath. As Fred Craddock notes, "the law gave specific instruction to cover many contingencies (as it related to Sabbath-keeping), but as others arose, tradition provided precedent and interpretation."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the dominant rules regarding Sabbath keeping were not those contained in the law given to Moses, but rather, the rules which had been developed to safe-guard Sabbath keeping.

And at particular issue here is the fact that these traditions of Sabbath-keeping prevented humans from caring for not only the common good as it related to the disciples "working" in order to eat, but it also prevented Sabbath-keepers from caring for those in specific need. In fact, absent from the passage is any notion that Jesus questions the Sabbath as an institution.<sup>22</sup> Rather, Jesus is condemning the practice of Sabbath-keeping that harms humans rather than helps them. And herein seems to be the crux of the issue.

As Sabbath-keepers who live 2,000 years after these interactions that Jesus has with the religious authorities concerning the Sabbath, we need to continue to ask the same question that Jesus posed. Is the Sabbath for doing good, or for allowing evil to perpetuate because of our unwillingness to do the "work" that goodness sometimes requires on the Sabbath? And if Sabbath activity according to Jesus is interpreted by its potential of goodness, does our "Sabbath imagination" become rich with new possibilities as we live as envoys of God's established and coming kingdom? Or do we remain stagnant on the basis of tradition?

## Reflection

What does it mean to "do good" on the Sabbath?

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<sup>21</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Bible Commentary (Knoxville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 82.

<sup>22</sup> This is often suggested in the commentaries of this particular passage. Ibid.

# Week 4 Day 4

## Read Luke 13:10-17

Though there are many stories throughout the Gospels that document the controversies over Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, this particularly story is unique to Luke. And where other stories portray Jesus making a general point to the "crowds" after he is condemned for breaking the Sabbath, in this story we find Jesus particularly blunt in his direct response to the "hypocrites" (vs. 15). It is interesting to note that in this story, the woman that Jesus heals never approaches Jesus asking to be healed. This is notable because the accusation that the ruler of the synagogue makes is that people came to the Sabbath service where Jesus was attending specifically to be healed (vs. 14). However we find no evidence of this in the text itself. Indeed, the faith of the woman herself is not even mentioned. Thus it is safe to assume that she merely came to the synagogue on the Sabbath to worship and Jesus, who was also worshipping, took pity on her and healed her.<sup>23</sup>

What follows is a theological argument that is usually misconstrued about what the Jewish law permitted and what it didn't. However, the force of the argument goes much further beyond that. In Greek, Jesus specifically plays on the word that means "to loose." When he heals the woman he "looses" her from her disability (vs. 12) which brings criticism from the ruler of the synagogue, who Jesus then says sees no problem with "loosing" his animals on the Sabbath (vs. 15). As this implies, Jesus is telling the ruler of the synagogue that he values his animals more than a fellow child of God and Israel who has been bound not by human hands, but Satan himself (vs. 16). And as Jesus notes, it is completely appropriate for her to be "loosed" from her bondage on the Sabbath, while for the rulers of the synagogue, it was seen as inappropriate.

The argument that seems to be at hand centers on the purpose of the Sabbath. As Jesus sees it, the Sabbath is inseparable from doing real, concrete good within the world. However, for his opponents, the Sabbath is merely a formality in which worship and spirituality occur. The question for those of us who continue to keep the Sabbath today is will we follow Jesus, or will we follow his opponents?

## Reflection

What does it mean to do real, concrete good in the world on Sabbath?

Why is there a temptation to make the Sabbath purely a "spiritual" experience while it is evident that Jesus saw the Sabbath as being inseparable from the idea of physical, concrete good?

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<sup>23</sup> Craddock, *Luke*, 170.

# Week 4 Day 5

## Read Luke 14:1-6

For the second time in two chapters, Luke includes a story about Jesus healing someone on the Sabbath. And this particular episode is very similar to the last one as well. Jesus is again in the presence of the religious authorities, Jesus again heals someone who has not asked him to be healed and Jesus' actions again prompt suspicion from the religious leaders. In fact, it has been noted that Luke includes so many similar stories of healing on the Sabbath as a commentary on the continuing tension around proper Sabbath-keeping in the early church.<sup>24</sup>

However, there are a few key differences in this particular story from the previous story of Jesus healing on the Sabbath. That story took place in a synagogue. This story takes place in the house of a Pharisee. This small detail reveals quite a bit about the dynamics of the situation. In the world of Second Temple Judaism, table fellowship was a sacred and respected rite that was only extended to those that the owner of the table or home saw as deserving of such fellowship.<sup>25</sup> This is the reason that Jesus was often criticized so heavily for sharing fellowship with sinners and tax collectors (Luke 5:29-39). Thus, what seems to be happening in this particular story is the Pharisees offering an olive branch of peace to Jesus and those who follow him, inviting not only Jesus to the table but also those who were in need of healing.

Yet this olive branch again becomes a source of concern and conflict as Jesus takes the extra step that none of the Pharisees seem willing to take; relieving the suffering of a fellow son of Abraham even on the Sabbath. And again, Jesus questions the worth that the Pharisees assign to animals in comparison to fellow Jews. Even though the Pharisees may have grown a little after hearing Jesus' rebukes and are willing to invite some into table fellowship that they would have previously excluded, they haven't gone far enough to actually relieve the suffering of that person. Upon examination, what Jesus seems to be doing is questioning the motives of the Pharisees. They see it as acceptable to invite those in need of help to their table for fellowship, but have trouble actually serving them in beneficial ways. Thus, the person in need of healing has become an accessory to religious grandstanding. The question remains for us today; do we follow the example of Jesus or the Pharisees?

## Reflection

With the Pharisees seemingly having grown a little bit in this story, do you think it speaks to the fact that there is an element of reconciliation in the Sabbath?

Why do you think there is still a hesitancy to help in concrete ways on the Sabbath?

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<sup>24</sup> Craddock, *Luke*, 176.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

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