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CHAPTER 2

Rest for Strength

A Sabbath Priority

In preparation for “*great tribulation*”, Jesus issued an unusual prayer request.¹ He emphasized the severity of the situation by saying, “*Unless those days had*



Western Wall in Jerusalem 2014

been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”² Planning for perilous times, “*such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will,*” Jesus prescribed a curious prayer.³ He urged His disciples to “*pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.*”⁴

Of all the topics that Jesus might target for prayer before extreme tribulation—the season and the Sabbath topped His list. The focus of His prayer request elevates the importance of the Sabbath beyond conventional wisdom or Jewish tradition. Apparently, observing the Sabbath remains an ongoing priority for Jesus. He considers it worthy of prayer and valued in practice until the end of the age.

Hebrew tradition tells us that Adonai said to Moses, “I have a precious gift stored away in my treasury and its name is Shabbat”. Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word *Shabbat*, which means rest. Our Heavenly Father advocates rest

¹ Matthew 24:21 NAS

² Matthew 24:22 NAS

³ Matthew 24:21 NAS

⁴ Matthew 24:20 NAS

with compelling authority. He emphasized its importance before the first week ended by drawing an unmistakable border between working and resting. After working six days to create the universe and everything in it, God devoted an additional day for refreshing Himself—or more literally, for catching His breath. He said this day was,

*“a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He **ceased** [shabath] **from labor** [not in the Hebrew text], **and was refreshed** [naphash].”* (Exodus 31:17 NAS)

The Hebrew word *naphash* literally means that God “took a breath”; He inhaled or inspired. The NIV renders this phrase, “*He abstained from work and rested*”.

After creation, Almighty God was not intellectually drained, emotionally fatigued, or physically exhausted. He does not grow tired or weary and He neither dozes nor snoozes.

*Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. **He will not grow tired or weary**, and his understanding no one can fathom.* (Isa 40:28 NIV)

*Behold, He who keeps Israel **shall neither slumber nor sleep**.* (Psalm 121:4 NKJ)

Creation was not a burdensome feat involving ‘laborious toil’ (*amal* and *yaga’* in Hebrew).⁵ God fulfilled His task through ‘willing service’ involving skills and benefits (*melawkaw’* in Hebrew).⁶ Using almighty power and all-knowing wisdom, God worked to accomplish His goal, and then He stopped in an exemplary way.

*And on the seventh day God **finished his work** (Hebrew, *melawkaw’*) that he had **done**, and he rested [shabath] 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 [shabath] from all his work that he had **done** in creation.* (Genesis 2:2-3 ESV)

The Hebrew word *shabath* emphasizes the absence of work. It means to cease, desist, abstain, and by extension, to rest. Originally, *shabath* meant to rest from creative labor. Later, it was applied specifically to business, commerce, or an oc-

⁵ Wilson's OT Word Studies, p. 241.

⁶ Wilson's OT Word Studies, pp. 488-489.

cupation. Orthodox Jews strictly prohibit 39 categories of creative activity on the Sabbath, mainly pertaining to food, garments, and dwellings.

From the start, God arranged our Solar System to accommodate well-defined intervals of time. After each of the first six days, He paused to regard and then to evaluate His work, i.e., *“God saw that it was good”*.⁷ On day seven however, He established an important precedent. God introduced a work/rest model in a ratio of 6:1. He blessed one special day out of seven specifically for times of refreshing.

God “put” Adam in the Garden (Genesis 2:15)

The word “put” comes from the Hebrew verb *nuah*, which means⁸

- Absence of movement
- Absence of spatial activity
- Being settled in a particular place
- The presence of security

Adam and Eve began life in a state of perfect rest. They launched out from a place of security to perform useful, productive, and fulfilling work. Originally, God put Adam and Eve where they could function together in a measured work/rest rhythm (as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had done in creation). By divine design, we function best when life follows this deliberate work and rest pattern.

Heedless ambition, pride, and disobedience destroyed humanity’s initial state of rest. Willing effort and productive service degenerated into a sweaty struggle, burdened with laborious toil. God told Adam:

*“Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ Cursed is the ground because of you; through **painful toil** [Hebrew `itsabawn] you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By **the sweat of your brow** you will eat your food until you return to the ground....”* (Gen 3:17-19 NIV)

Essential Rest

The Fourth Commandment conveys God’s heart concerning the Sabbath.⁹ It summons us to abstain from work so we might focus our attention on Him. Honoring the Sabbath honors our Creator and affirms His authority over our life.

⁷ See Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31

⁸ Wilson's OT Word Studies, p. 562

Therefore you are to **observe the Sabbath**, for it is holy to you. **Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death**; for whoever does any work (Hebrew, *melawkaw'*) on it, that person shall be **cut off from among his people**. For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a Sabbath of **complete rest, holy to the Lord**; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall surely be **put to death**. (Exodus 31:14-15 NAS)

Our life depends on times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. Violating the Sabbath under Mosaic Law warranted the death penalty. The severity of this sentence emphasized how highly God regards rest. Taking a break and catching our breath are vital to our existence—they are indispensable.

For six days work (Hebrew, melawkaw') may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy day, a Sabbath of complete rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. (Exodus 35:2 NAS)

We affirm each of the Ten Commandments but in practice we often take this one lightly, yet it is extremely important.¹⁰ Under the Law, abstaining from work held priority over life itself. By stopping to catch our breath, our soul catches up with our body in a sacred repose where *being* takes precedent over *doing*.

Each week God offers a gift of rest dedicated to our well-being.

It is to be a Sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute. (Lev 16:31 and Lev 23:32 NAS)

Keeping the Sabbath reinforces our dependence and trust in God's provision.

An Everlasting Covenant—Celebrated beyond the Law

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. [John 1:17 NAS]

God instructed the Israelites to “**celebrate the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant**”.¹¹ He blessed them with a special day to celebrate their special relationship with Him. God does not require us to work and toil seven days a week, laboring to get it all done—especially not to gain His approval or earn our salvation. Our greatest need is not to perform better, accomplish

⁹ The Jewish Talmud, Greek Septuagint, and Reformed Christian Theology list the Sabbath Commandment as Fourth while Roman Catholics and Lutherans list it as third.

¹⁰ Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21 state the Ten Commandments issued to Moses on Mount Sinai in 1280 BCE.

¹¹ Exodus 31:16 NAS

more, or accumulate more stuff—our greatest need is to connect permanently with God’s passionate love.

At the end of each week God grants us permission to stop generating profits, to cease solving problems, and to abstain from enterprising pursuits. He approves when we change directions, limit distractions, and experience times of refreshing in His presence.



*Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, **that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord**, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. (Acts 3:19-21 ESV)*

Since Jesus fulfilled the Law, we no longer live under its obligatory command. Instead, we gain enlightening insight from God’s intended purpose. Our connection with Christ emancipates us to celebrate the Sabbath under a New Covenant, free from legalistic consequences. The death penalty no longer exerts its punitive sting. Paul asserts with deep conviction that we “*are not under law but under grace*”.¹²

*And God spoke all these words, saying, “**I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.**”
...“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. (EXO 20:1-2; 8 ESV)*

We “*remember the Sabbath*” by pondering its meaning and contemplating its value.¹³ We “*observe the Sabbath*” by celebrating its significance and respecting its distinction.¹⁴

Because God has restored our familial relationship through the sacrifice of His son Jesus, we celebrate the Sabbath in a “*new and living way*”.¹⁵ He invites us to consecrate an entire day each week for remembering and observing our connection with Him. He bids us to extend our rest beyond the law, and to celebrate the

¹² Romans 6:14 ESV

¹³ Exodus 20:8 ESV

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 5:12 ESV

¹⁵ Hebrews 10:20 ESV

Sabbath “*as a lasting covenant.*”¹⁶ After heaven and earth pass away, the Sabbath will continue accommodating worshipers as they reverently bow before the Lord.

*“For as **the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me**, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and **from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship** [bow down, NAS] **before me**, declares the LORD.”* (Isaiah 66:22-23 ESV)

The Lord of the Sabbath

Jesus defined the Sabbath as a generous provision offered by our Creator. He said:

*“**The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.**”* (Mark 2:27-28 NAS; also Matthew 12:8 and Luke 6:5)

We are not required to serve this day as a slave would serve a rigid master. God established the Sabbath as a gift—it serves us with anticipated blessings and recurring benefits. Sabbath days offer protected time for rejuvenating our strength and connecting with God in Holy Communion.

Jesus went out of His way to restore strength to those in need of healing on the Sabbath. He healed a man with an infirmity lasting 38 years (John 5), He healed a man born blind by anointing him with wet clay (John 9), He healed a man with a withered hand (Matthew 12), and He cast out an unclean spirit (Mark 1) all on the Sabbath day.

In word and deed, Jesus proclaimed the truth about God and the truth about this day. He set an example for doing good and helping others during the Sabbath. When confronted by the religious Pharisees, Jesus said:

*“Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So **it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.**”* (Matthew 12:11-12 ESV)

Jesus faithfully celebrated the Sabbath, “*as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.*”¹⁷ Furthermore, Jesus permitted His disciples to harvest grain on the Sabbath to satisfy their immediate

¹⁶ Exodus 31:16 NIV

¹⁷ Luke 4:16 ESV

hunger. When legalistic Pharisees accused them of violating the Law, Jesus stated biblical facts from Israel’s history. He said:

“Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?”
(Matthew 12:1-5 ESV)

Though trained as a teacher of the Law, Paul affirmed Christ as “*Lord of the Sabbath*”.¹⁸ He taught us to rest in God’s love and to rely on His grace. As we humble ourselves to embrace God’s will, we honor Jesus as Lord, and we deflect legalistic condemnation.

*Therefore **let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.*** (Colossians 2:16 NAS)



Pre-Sabbath Celebration 2012 in Jerusalem

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¹⁸ Mar 2:28; also Mat 12:8 and Luk 6:5