

Breathe – Sabbath Year
May 22, 2022

The creation narratives in Genesis give us a remarkable insight into the plight of humanity. Why things are the way they are. Including why we're so exhausted and anxious all the time.

The story goes like this: after God creates galaxies and waterfalls and trees, he creates humanity - *Adam* - and gives him a job as a **gardener**.

To steward a place of great abundance. He works, but it's a **fruitful, bountiful kind of work**.

I imagine he's pruning apple trees and harvesting tomatoes and helping the **squirrels and pigs** negotiate a minor disagreement about a pile of acorns they found.

It's not backbreaking labor, because the Creator himself is there making life spring up everywhere you look. *He* makes the trees fruitful and the rain consistent, and so on. It's *his* abundance. Adam's just stewarding it.

So Adam is in paradise, but he's got just one rule to follow...

Genesis 2:15-17

The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. But the LORD God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."

I prefer to call it the tree of the knowledge of good and *bad* (that's what the Hebrew word *ra'* literally means). It's not so much about morality as about the **quality of a thing**.

Up until this point, God has been the one declaring what is good and bad. He calls his creation *very good*. He says it is *not good* for man to be alone so he creates the woman.

For humans to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad is for them

to **decide for themselves** what is good. To make up their own minds about what is bad. They try to become gods by taking that fruit.

And in the story, of course that's exactly what they do. They eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, and they suffer the consequences.

The relationship between the man and the woman breaks down. Things start falling apart. **A curse enters our world.** God tells Adam this:

Genesis 3:17-19

And to the man he said,

*“Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree
whose fruit I commanded you not to eat,
the ground is cursed because of you.*

*All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it.
It will grow thorns and thistles for you,
though you will eat of its grains.*

*By the sweat of your brow
will you have food to eat
until you return to the ground
from which you were made.*

*For you were made from dust,
and to dust you will return.”*

The ground is cursed because of you. You've got to sweat and scrape to survive.

And the earth's going to put up a fight. **Thorns and thistles.** It's a war. Your work is going to grind you back into the dust from which you were made.

And flowing out of that struggle - that curse, we see all the brokenness of the world on full display. Murder, theft, injustice...

Think about this. In Eden, **everyone is equal** because they all depend on God's provision. No one gets more than anyone else because there's always more than enough.

But in this world of the curse, when humanity is at war with the earth, inevitably some people have **good years**. Others have **bad years**. Some have

full barns and others have empty stomachs.

So right out of the gate the possibility exists for **wealth and poverty** to separate people. Injustice can now exist. Grinding people to dust.

And one more thing. It may seem like a small detail, but it's important in the story. A bit later in Genesis, after the flood, God tells Noah one final bit of the curse.

Genesis 9:2

All the animals of the earth... will look on you with fear and terror.

In Eden, humanity ruled over and shepherded and cared for the animals of the earth, but now they're terrified of us. Even that relationship has broken down.

So get this picture in your mind. **Humans and the earth are at war**, grinding each other into dust. Humans are at war with each other. There's injustice and pain.

Life in Eden now seems like **an impossible ideal**.

THE SABBATH YEAR

Until, God calls a people - the Israelites. He calls them to be **holy** - set apart, different from the rest of humanity. And he calls them to live a very different way.

We talked about this a couple of weeks ago, but God commands the Israelites to rest - to *stop* their work - every seven days. It's called **the Sabbath day**. And that's what Sabbath means - literally, "*stop*."

Once a week the Israelites are supposed to **stop their grind for survival** and trust that God will provide for them. One day a week to live free of the slave masters that want to keep the people in chains. The slave masters of greed and work and survival.

And although we as Christ-followers are not bound by the specific Sabbath commands, we are invited, and even *expected*, to live **a Sabbath kind of life**.

As Tim talked about last week, the concept of biblical Sabbath rest is a gift. If

we trust and stop the grind, God will provide. We trust him and we'll find order in our lives and space to breathe and rest for our souls.

Today, we're going to explore another angle on this whole concept - another type of rest the Israelites were commanded to take... Not just a Sabbath *day*, but a Sabbath *year*.

Grab a Bible and turn with me to **Leviticus 25:1-7, Page _____**.

Leviticus 25:1-7

While Moses was on Mount Sinai, the LORD said to him, "Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. When you have entered the land I am giving you, the land itself must observe a Sabbath rest before the LORD every seventh year. For six years you may plant your fields and prune your vineyards and harvest your crops, but during the seventh year the land must have a Sabbath year of complete rest. It is the LORD's Sabbath. Do not plant your fields or prune your vineyards during that year. And don't store away the crops that grow on their own or gather the grapes from your unpruned vines. The land must have a year of complete rest. But you may eat whatever the land produces on its own during its Sabbath. This applies to you, your male and female servants, your hired workers, and the temporary residents who live with you. Your livestock and the wild animals in your land will also be allowed to eat what the land produces.

Wow. So the entire people of Israel are supposed to just *stop* - to Sabbath - for an entire year, *every seven years*?

We went from the idea of one day of rest a week - which was already pretty extreme - to something verging on the ***ridiculous***.

What, a whole *year* of *no work*? Everyone just sitting around enjoying their time, eating whatever the land produces? All the while letting wild donkeys and rabbits just gorge themselves in the fields?

But wait, there's more. Because in another place in the law, it includes *this* as a part of the Sabbath year:

Deuteronomy 15:1

At the end of every seventh year you must cancel the debts of everyone who owes you money.

Alright, what? Who wrote this thing? A bunch of hippies?

What in the world is going on here? A release of debts? A Sabbath rest for the *land*? Why would God ask this of the people?

Well, let's imagine for a moment **what the Sabbath year would be like** if we were Israelites.

First of all, for one year out of seven, there **wouldn't be a struggle with the earth** to survive. We'd just be eating food off of trees, the grain that the land gives us. We're not slaving away in the fields.

Also, the **inequality** of wealth and poverty kind of goes away. If you've fallen on hard times, your debts are forgiven. You're not ground into dust by money.

Even the **livestock and wild animals** are resting. Look at verse 7. They're eating their fill. The pigs and squirrels are back to arguing about acorns. They're not fleeing in terror.

You know what all this sounds like to me? It sounds like Eden again.

Or at least **a rehearsal** of what it would be like to *return* to Eden. No longer being ground into dust, but enjoying the abundance that God provides.

And practicing what it will be like when God makes all things new. When our Sabbath rest is eternal.

The Sabbath year was a taste of New Creation.

It was a return to Eden. Once every seven years. A practice the Israelites could demonstrate to show the world that there's another way to live.

A MATTER OF TRUST

Which sounds great. There's just one problem. The Israelites aren't living in

Eden. They're still living in the land of thorns and thistles. They're living in the curse. Trying to survive.

Why should they risk living into this utopian fantasy? When a year without work could lead to their ruin?

Well, yet again **Sabbath is a matter of trust**. Trusting that God meant what he says in the very next chapter of Leviticus.

Leviticus 26:3-5

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you the seasonal rains. The land will then yield its crops, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit. Your threshing season will overlap with the grape harvest, and your grape harvest will overlap with the season of planting grain. You will eat your fill and live securely in your own land.

Quick world behind the text. Grain in Israel was harvested at the beginning of summer, grapes were harvested in late summer, and sowing grain happened in late fall/early winter.

What God is saying here is: "if you trust me and actually stop when I ask you to stop, you're going to have **so much to harvest** you're not even going to have time to gather it all before the next harvest begins."

"If you trust me with the Sabbath day - if you trust me with the Sabbath year - I am going to knock your socks off with abundance. But you have to trust..."

So did they? **Did the Israelites trust God** and practice this utopian Sabbath year? Did the land rest and all the creatures within it eat their fill?

It doesn't seem like it. There are no indications that the Israelites ever even tried it.

In fact, just the opposite. Not only did Israel fail to trust God, but this nation that was called to be set apart, to be holy - become **no different than their neighbors**. They wrenched profit from the earth. It became a land of injustice, and violence, and scarcity, and war...

Until God finally had enough and allowed his chosen people to be carried off into **exile in Babylon**. The consequences of their choice to keep eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad and saying, “God, we know better than you.”

That’s when, as the Chronicler says,

2 Chronicles 36:21

The land finally enjoyed its Sabbath rest, lying desolate until the seventy years were fulfilled...

One year in exile for every Sabbath year they ignored.

The way I see it, the Sabbath year was one of the greatest missed opportunities of all time.

NEW CREATION IN JESUS

So why are we talking about it today?

Well, because I believe the opportunity of profound, radical *rest* is being offered to God’s people once more through Jesus. Jesus, who took the curse of humanity on himself and ended the war between us and creation.

Colossians 1:20

Through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.

Jesus, who taught that we no longer have to be ground to dust by survival...

Matthew 6:25

[Don’t] worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear.

Jesus, who taught us to release others from debt...

Luke 6:35

Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid.

Jesus who asks us to ensure the abundance of others...

Matthew 25:35

I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home...

And Jesus, who taught us to trust that God will provide...

Matthew 6:33

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.

You see, the Sabbath year that Jesus invites us into is not just about letting our fields lie fallow. It's about living a lifestyle of trust that God will take care of us.

In the New Creation - in the return to Eden - Sabbath rest is eternal. In Christ, we are invited **to start practicing that truth right now**. To be a people who are set apart from the world.

GETTING PRACTICAL

So let's get practical. What does this look like for us? How do we practice the Sabbath year as a *lifestyle*?

Deuteronomy 5 says that the Sabbath *day* is a chance to let your children and servants and oxen and donkeys rest. The Sabbath year, as Leviticus 25 says, is like it.

It's rest for you of course, but look at verse 6. It's rest for your **servants**, your hired workers, the temporary residents in your land, your livestock, the wild animals, and even the land itself. In other words:

The Sabbath year is an invitation to ensure *rest and refreshment* for all that is under our sphere of influence.

Now, we may not have grain fields and grapevines, but we all have **a sphere of influence**, don't we? Let's dream together.

Some of you manage **employees**. What would it look like to not just *offer* them time off, but to actively protect it for them? To identify the obstacles standing

in the way of them resting and then *you* knocking those obstacles down?

I'm working on this with one of our staff members. They're struggling to take time off with their workload. So I asked them to do an exercise. To get a **sheet of paper** and one side write their heart's desire if they took time off. What would they do? What would refresh them?

And the on the other side of the paper I asked them to write all the reasons why those things aren't possible. When they're done, I'll look at that side of the list and see what I can take care of.

A Sabbath year was meant to be rest for the people of Israel. But it was also rest for those they employed. **Can I help protect rest and refreshment for my team?** Can I help them *stop* the grind?

Now, you may not have employees, but there are plenty of people who work for you. What about retail employees or servers at a restaurant or Amazon delivery drivers... Can you in some way help *them* rest or be refreshed?

Imagine if we as a church lived in such a way that everyone who served us in any way got a taste of Eden. A taste of New Creation... Imagine if Grace Church became a champion of rest in this anxious time...

What else is under our sphere of influence? What about our **family**? I talked about this last time, but if your tendency is to fill every hour of your kids' schedule with sports and extracurricular activities, what would it mean for you to let them rest? To *sabbath*. To *stop*.

Could you protect their **unstructured play** time this summer? Could you take a week to just *rest* together? A **staycation** where you don't do anything productive. You don't even post about it on social media. You just spend time together as a family.

I know for some of you that probably sounds like torture (especially you teenagers!). But I'm going to say this again. **Sabbath is a matter of trust**. Do you trust that if you really took time to *stop* as a family, that God would make it a week that restores your family's soul?

Again, the Sabbath year is an invitation to ensure rest and refreshment for all

that's under our sphere of influence. I'm just trying to spark some ideas here.

Now, there's a lot we could dig into with this whole idea of **the land itself resting** on the Sabbath year, of wild animals eating their fill, of oxen getting a break from their labor.

I think there are significant ramifications for how we think of our **footprint on the earth** as stewards of God's creation. Is our lifestyle destroying the earth or helping it flourish? Israel went into exile so that the land they neglected could rest.

I could think of all kinds of application points about reducing our waste or protecting pollinators or caring for animals or pursuing clean energy, and I invite you think about that.

But there is a bigger concept with the land resting that I think we all need to wrestle with. Because it has to do with our posture towards life itself. It goes right back to the Eden story in Genesis.

What is our posture?

Are we constantly trying to wrench profit from the earth - fighting the thorns and thistles with sweat on our brow, or are we content with a **lifestyle of enough?**

Are we grinding ourselves down as slaves to greed and money? Or are we living **content in the abundance God provides?**

Are we at war with the earth or are we **returning to Eden?** Because we can't do both. Sabbath invites us to make a choice.

To let the land rest. To let *yourself* rest. To trust in God's provision, not your own.

The Israelites missed their chance to experience the Sabbath year. What if our story was different?