

Soul Spa

I thought I'd reward myself with a foot spa this morning. For a quiet January, there have been a few things on this week – Arwen turned three on Monday. Jeff Orr began. Getting sorted for the year ahead. Then sermon prep always hang over my head.

I feel like I'd reward myself with a foot spa – give some nourishment to these feet that have upheld me over this past week. It feels good... might just leave them in here for a few minutes.

You know, it seems like our desire for massages, spas, and retreat centres is escalating year by year. Just look at how many relaxing therapies and massage places are around today that weren't there 20 years ago. We all seem to have this quest for a break, a longing to alleviate the muscle tension that we feel all over our body, along with the anxiety that we experience in the recesses of our mind. Not just our minds and bodies – but our souls seem to yearn for a soul spa.

I while back I stumbled across an old Time magazine from the 1960s. It was predicting the changes that would take place 20 or so years from then. So, these changes were meant to take place by 1980. I'm sure they would have said they would have happened by 2010. In this Time magazine the writer cites expert testimony that was given to a government subcommittee on time management. The essence of it was that because of advances in technology, by 1980 or so people would have to radically cut back on how many hours a week they worked, or how many weeks a year they worked, or else they would have to start retiring sooner. The great challenge, they said, was what people would do with all their free time. Yet fifty years later, I don't see many people asking what they can do with all their free time!

Rather, our lives are dictated by the watch. We dart here and there. We grab fast food on the way. There is this frenzy of activity, a desire to get things done 1440 minutes of each day, 168 hours a week. In the midst of all this pressure to produce, our souls yearn for a soul spa, for nourishment.

Thankfully, God is one step ahead of us. I mentioned last week that the life of the original faith community wasn't life in balance but life in rhythm. Their lives tended to follow the phases of the moon in annual, monthly and daily cycles. There was another rhythm that God set up for them – it was this seven day thing called a week with every seventh day a Sabbath as a spa for the soul.

This Sabbath is a bit strange though.

For one, it is completely independent of the movement of nature. The other cycles all tended to revolve around the cycle of the moon and earth.

Not just that, but nobody had a seven day week and definitely not a break once a week. It was wholly different to other cultures. There was no such thing as a Sabbath day for any culture of that time.

But God is up front with the faith community that they are to take a day off. In fact, he wrote it into one of the 10 commandments – number 4. It wasn't some tack on after-thought. It's number 4. Not, 'oh, by the way, take a day off.' It had the same weight as 'don't covet,' 'don't commit adultery,' 'don't murder.' 'Take a day off.' Not just you but your whole family, those who work for you, even your livestock. This is extreme. This is what we read:

8 "Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 You have six days each week for your ordinary work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. (Exodus 20:8-11) NLT

Your response might be – well, it was good for then. They didn't do anything else. They could afford a day off every week. Not me. I need to be on call and active 24/7.

But, it's not like that. No other culture of their day had a Sabbath so this was completely counterculture. What's more. Most of these people worked every day in order to put food on the table for that day. If they didn't work, they didn't eat. There is no refrigeration. There is no 4 square to get some supplies. In some ways, you might think this was insensitive of God. "A Sabbath? Yeah right! How in the world are we going to do that!" You might feel the same way they did when God gave this instruction.

When most of us here it, we tend to think of something negative - a list of don'ts/ a bunch of prohibitions. You might have stories from the past when it was a stern thing that was held rather than a life-giving soul spa. It was like the like the Sabbath was to be kept for Sabbaths sake – *rather than for our sake.*

After all, when religious leaders protested to Jesus about his grabbing and plucking some grain on the Sabbath when he was walking past, Jesus responded "And He was saying to them, *"The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath."* (Mark 2:27)

So, Jesus says that this Sabbath idea is a good idea. It was actually made for us. It is not something that is meant to be a burden. Rather, it is something for our benefit. It is there to help us. It is there for our good.

Today, I want us to look at three ways that the Sabbath is actually meant to our souls experience a soul spa.

1. Sabbath helps us look up

In Exodus 20, we read about the need to remember the Sabbath (vv 8-10) and then we're given a reason:

11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy. - Exodus 20:11

In other words, Sabbath helps us look up. It is rooted in God and creation. Back in Genesis we read, on day one, God created... day two, God created... day three, God created, ... Then:

2 On the seventh day God had finished his work of creation, so he rested from all his work. 3 And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because it was the day when he rested from all his work of creation. – Genesis 2:2-3

We keep Sabbath because that's what God does. There is this irony here, isn't there: ***we mimic God in order to remember we're not God.***

Mark Buchanan writes, "*We mirror divine behavior only to freshly discover our human limitations. Sabbath-keeping involves a recognition of our own weakness and smallness, that we are made from dust, that we hold our treasure in clay jars, and that without proper care we break.*" (*The Rest of God*, page 87)

The Sabbath helps me look up – to God. As I do so, I realize that he is God and I am not. Rather, I am a creature in desperate need of him.

I have limitations. I burn out, break down, get sick and suffer injuries. The Bible says that God made us from dust. We're never too far from our origins. The apostle Paul writes, "*...we ourselves are like fragile clay jars...*" (*2 Corinthians 4:7*). We're like clay pots. We're dust mixed with water, passed through the kiln. We might feel hard and tough at times – but we're very brittle too. Sabbath helps remind us of who God is and who we are. It puts mortar into our joints.

God is different from us. He never sleeps, nor slumbers. He runs no risk of breakdown, burnout, exhaustion, injury. God doesn't need Sabbath. He doesn't

need a good night's sleep to think straight or stop his hands shaking. God is not hanging out for the weekend.

But, God took a day off – not for himself but to show us what to do and to help our souls receive what they need.

Ilust. When my daughter Arwen gets to a stage where she really needs an afternoon nap but will not go down by herself, one of the things that Robyn and I might do is lay down on the bed next to her. We don't do it because we need a nap (even though we tend to nod off pretty quickly). We do it because she needs a nap and we're modelling to her what to do.

I think that's what God is doing here in Genesis. He wants us to mimic Him and in the process realise that we're not Him. As I rest on the Sabbath, I effectively look up and as I do, I remember my limitations and my need for God.

As we get caught up in a frenzy of activity in our 24/7/52/365 days a year world, we can actually begin to think that we are invincible. We start to credit ourselves for what happens. We might develop the attitude of Bart Simpson. Just before a meal, he was asked to give grace and said, "We paid for all this stuff ourselves so thanks for nothing!" Now, that's sarcasm, but it can capture what we can do without a pause to realize that this is all from God's hand.

Think about the things that happen in life that occur regardless of how many hours you work. We don't control the weather, seasons, people's attitudes. Even in business, you might think your success is due to how hard you work but you can't control the economy or the decisions of customers. A lot of business success is that chance meeting, the advice you received, the seasonal breaks you got. Ultimately, it all comes from God's hand.

You might say, 'maybe the sabbath was a thing back then when they had a lot of time on their hands. I can't stop. Everything depends on me. Was fine for them but not today.' So what was it like back when these instructions were given? This was a culture that worked 7 days a week in order to survive. If you didn't work all that time, you may not eat. There was no refrigeration. The culture around them took no days off. You worked.

So, this wasn't any easier back. To keep Sabbath requires a trust in God to keep life ticking and to supply all our needs. In doing so, we are saying, 'God, I need you to take care of me, and my family and my business. You're in control so I express my trust in you on this day.'

It was the same 4000 years ago when this commandment was penned. It was needed then as it is now. It was just as hard then as it is now. It goes against everything we know – but it is exactly what we need.

For in keeping the Sabbath, *we to mimic God in order to remember that we are not God*. We are creatures in need of our creator.

There's another reason that we keep Sabbath. Sabbath not only helps us look up. It helps us look back.

2. Sabbath helps us look back

We read about the ten commandments in two places in the Old Testament. The actual commandments are the same but when it comes to the need to keep Sabbath, there are actually two different reasons given.

“Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 You have six days each week for your ordinary work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.” Exodus 20:8-11

12 “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. 13 You have six days each week for your ordinary work, 14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your oxen and donkeys and other livestock, and any foreigners living among you. All your male and female servants must rest as you do. 15 Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out with his strong hand and powerful arm. That is why the Lord your God has commanded you to rest on the Sabbath day. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (NLT)

Exodus grounds the Sabbath in creation. Deuteronomy grounds it in liberation. Exodus remembers Eden. Deuteronomy Egypt. In Exodus, it is mimicking God and remembering we are creatures. In Deuteronomy, it is taking hold of divine deliverance. Exodus looks up. Deuteronomy looks back. Exodus gives theological rationale for rest, and Deuteronomy historical justification for it. One reminds us that we are God's children, the work of his hands, the other that we are no one's chattel, no one's slave.

The Israelites had once been slaves in Egypt. There was a day when they had no choice about their time. Rest? Work? There was no option. If they forgot they were slaves under Pharaoh's rule, the taskmaster soon reminded them about it! Out came his whip to ensure they never slacked off for an hour or day. That's what life had been like for them in slavery in Egypt.

What did God do? He rescued them– with plagues of hailstones, flies, frogs, and a collapsing wall of sea. He went to extravagant lengths It's like God is saying to the people, 'are you really wanting to go back to Egypt where you were slaves. Don't place yourself under any yoke. I drowned the taskmasters. Why resuscitate them? I redeemed you. I set you free. Don't bind yourself in slavery to anything again.'

One of the reasons we keep Sabbath is that it helps us look back. We are not in Egypt any more. But, like the Israelites freed from slavery, we can quickly place ourselves in bondage to other things.

One thing we can do is put ourselves in bondage to the time taskmaster. We can live as though the taskmasters still hover, ready to thrash us for the smallest sign of slowing down.

There are taskmasters in our minds that bark with authority: 'what do you think you are doing?' 'uh, just taking a few minutes to rest.' 'you're taking some time to sit down? How quaint. Don't you realize that there are a million and one things still to be done. Get off your lazy backside and get busy!'

There is this pressure on us to be available 24/7 and to keep producing. We try to cram as much activity into these 1440 minutes of each day and the 168 hours of each week. We go from task to task to task. Responsibility to responsibility. Fastfood to fastfood.

Apparently, the Swahili word for white man – 'mazungu' – literally means 'one who spins around.' That's how East Africans see Westerners – turning themselves dizzy, a great whirl of motion without direction. Flurries going nowhere.

Yet, Sabbath invites us all to stop turning around and around. It invites us to remember that we are not slaves in bondage to time.

You might say, "But my job isn't finished? I can't rest until I'm done." That's the taskmaster speaker. There is always something more to do, something that could be done better, something that is not quite right.

Mark Buchanan puts it this way, *“Sabbath is not the break we're allotted at the tail end of completing all our tasks and chores, the fulfillment of our obligations. It's*

the rest we take smack-dab in the middle of them, without apology, without guilt, and for no better reason that God told us we could.” Burchanan, *The Rest of God*.

To refuse Sabbath is in effect to spurn the gift of freedom. Slaves don't rest. They can't rest. They have no freedom to rest. Rest is a condition of liberty.

As we keep Sabbath, we look back. We remind ourselves of our identity, our past, God's gracious work in us. We forget all this and we become unhinged from our story and forget who we are.

God calls us to live in the freedom that he won for us with his own outstretched arm. As we keep Sabbath, ***we kill the taskmaster and remember that we are free.***

Another way we might place ourselves in bondage is legalism. Ironically, we can even do this with Sabbath keeping.

We read, *“On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien [foreigner] within your gates...”* – Deut 5:14 (NIV)

So – you are not to produce anything. Includes you, your family, your servants, your animals (ie factory), and even your foreign labourers.

What did they do? How did they get around it? They didn't want to stop production so they contracted out to foreign labourers and had them go OUTSIDE the gates! Like us, they were progress driven and missed the point and enslaved themselves to legalism.

15 years ago, I went on a tour in Israel. One day I came out of my hotel and got on the elevator. It stopped at each floor. Nobody was there to get on. But at each floor it stopped. When you're going down 7 floors, that can be really exasperating. It did it again on the way up. And on the way down again! I found out later that it was the Jewish Sabbath. Many hotels program their lifts to stop at each floor automatically because conservative Jews are not meant to press the elevator button. Stories like that make the Sabbath seem really odd.

Over time, many religious leaders developed all kinds of rules ensuring that people keep the Sabbath.

[Talk from the Mishnah. It contains all kinds of rules from what you are not meant to wear; what you cannot carry; what you cannot do; what you can cook and not cook. (Give examples).]

You get tired just reading the pages. The Sabbath became this incredible burden for people. “Do I do this? Oh know, I forgot to get this done yesterday. Now, what are we meant to eat?” They began to come up with schemes that got around some of the laws so that they could carry on with things.

But all this was not the way God had designed it. In so doing they missed the whole point and actually put themselves back in bondage again – of legalism. The irony is that the Sabbath is meant to remind us to kill the taskmaster (or form of bondage) and seize freedom.

There is one other reason we're to keep the Sabbath . . .

3. Sabbath helps us look forward

We are so bound up in time, aren't we? I check my watch and cellphone often to see what time it is. If I have 2 extra minutes, I use it to squeeze something else in. I jump in the car to dart away to another appointment. I find myself rushing the kids to get somewhere on time. Time is such a part of my life.

Yet, there is another time beyond what we see on our watch and clocks [watch]. It's eternal time. Sabbath reminds me that this time-bent world is not all there is. There is an eternal clock ticking. There is something other than this world.

That's why the early church changed the original day of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. They changed it to Sunday because Sunday was the day of resurrection. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and in doing so, had finished his work of providing salvation. Having Sabbath on Sunday reminded them that they a community that anticipated the eternal rest that was available through what Jesus did on their behalf.

That rest is spoken about in Hebrews 4: **9** *So there is a special rest still waiting for the people of God.* **10** *For all who have entered into God's rest have rested from their labors, just as God did after creating the world.* **11** *So let us do our best to enter that rest.* Hebrew 4:9-11

There is something other than this world. As we take time out from our usual comings and goings, we are able to look forward. We are able to look forward to an eternal rest in a day to come.

Mark Buchanan writes, *“Sabbath isn't eternity, but it's close. It's a kind of heaven. A well-kept Sabbath is a dress rehearsal for things above. In finding the rest of God now, we prepare for the fullness of God one day. In Sabbath, we anticipate forever.”*

It's good to think about whom these words were originally written too. The original audience were Christians struggling amidst persecution, loosing their jobs, loosing their homes and families... and they were tempted to throw in the whole God thing. Give up. Hebrews reminds them that there is an eternal rest coming. To keep going. To keep trusting God.

The writer reminds them that there is another Sabbath coming that makes it all worth it.

Sabbath is more than leisure. One of the mistakes we make when we talk about Sabbath is to equate Sabbath with leisure: *"Leisure is what Sabbath becomes when we no longer know how to sanctify time. Leisure is what Sabbath bereft of the sacred. It is vacation—literally, a vacating an evacuation."* Buchanan.

We can all fantasise about some holiday on a cruise boat, at the beach, where we are healthy and well away from our current situation. Sabbath doesn't require that.

It is not a rest from our situation. It is actually rest in whatever situations we are.

You can be going through difficult times. You're circumstances might not change. But, in Sabbath, we rest in God despite our what is happening around us. We see that in the Psalms: *"1 Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. 2 Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken. 3 How long will you assault me? Would all of you throw me down— this leaning wall, this tottering fence. . . . 5 Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him."* – Psalm 62:1-5 (TNIV)

The Psalmist is in a dire situation. Yet, he finds rest in God. Sabbath is not rest from everything going on but rest in God in the midst of our world. It's a time where we

In Sabbath, we look forward and we get a taste of the world to come.

That's why Jesus' activity on the Sabbath is consistent with Sabbath keeping. His work he did was kingdom related – healing a man who couldn't walk so that he could experience life with his legs once again; providing sight to blind eyes so that they could see again. Jesus gives life. While this was work by some definitions, it was life-giving. That's what Sabbath is about. We embrace that which gives life. We cease from what is necessary.

The Sabbath helps us look forward. **As we keep Sabbath, we give life to our souls and anchor them into eternity.**

Why not?

I can think of a few reasons people might give for not keeping a Sabbath:

1. "I need to be available."

The bottom line is that we think we're indispensable. That's precisely why we need the Sabbath. It's helps us look up. *We mimic God in order to remember we're not God.*

2. "I haven't finished my tasks."

Yet, we never will be. That's precisely why we need the Sabbath. It's helps us look back. *We kill the taskmaster and remember that we are free.*

3. "I'm not in the right space."

Sabbath does not require a moving away from our circumstances. The people to whom Hebrews 4 was written to were struggling in all sorts of ways. They're reminded of the eternal rest that God provides. In keeping the Sabbath, it helps us look forward. *As we keep Sabbath, we give life to our souls and anchor them into eternity.*

How?

This morning, I've stayed away from the how-to's and tried to laid out a case for why the Sabbath is important. I want you to come up with what this means for you – without placing yourself or others into binds of legalism. If you're married, talk about it as a couple. What does it look like for you?

I'm asking that you would set aside a day for resting, feasting, worship, play, giving life to others. It doesn't have to be Sunday. Many people have to work Sundays in our culture – medical practitioners, pastors. Even though the early Christians changed their Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, many still had to work on that day – so they came to a service early to find rest in God and go on their way. They looked for ways where this Sabbath principle could be kept.

In my life, I have this pressure on Sundays. The rest of my life – sermon, sermon, sermon, expectation to have something to say... I am learning that I need to shut off my work, whether I am done or not... When I left this Thursday afternoon, I prayed, 'God, I have done the best with my time this week... I have worked... I am entrusting what I have done and what will be done to you for you to be faithful. I leave it all in your hands as I take a day off to enjoy you, my family and rest.

VIDEO: Take some time now to think... God's invitation to us to rest in him.