

This series of Bible studies can be used by individuals or small groups. It can be used in three parts or one extended study. Their purpose is not *information* but *transformation*. They are designed to help lead you into actually keeping a Sabbath! May God bless you in this undertaking, as I have discovered Sabbath to be such a blessing, such good news, to both myself and my family.

Study 1 . Sabbath: a day of Freedom.

Opening: *reminisce about a time when you were deeply anxious or weighed down or burdened by something, and the burden was suddenly lifted or removed. How did that happen? How did it feel?*

Getting into God's word

The very word 'Sabbath' is unusual and unfamiliar to most Christians. What does 'Sabbath' mean? What does it look like to 'keep a Sabbath?' Those are the questions this study will help to answer.

In order to help us understand what Sabbath is, we need to go right back to the beginning: to the Genesis account of God's creation.

Read Genesis 1:1-2:3.

Now go back and read again the following verses: **ch1 v4-5, v8, v13,v19, v23,31**

What do you notice about these verses, particularly the word order?

Insight: evening and morning

For the Hebrew people, the writers of Genesis, the *evening is the beginning of the day*. We stop – and God works. We rest – and God begins his work on us. In the Hebrew conception of time, *rest* comes before *work*. God's work of renewing and refreshing and recreating us comes before our work. *Grace* is prior to *activity*.

Discuss or journal:

What is the difference between a Hebrew and a modern (or Greek) conception of time? What comes first in each?

What difference would holding a Hebrew understanding of the evening-morning rhythm make to the way you view time?

What difference would it make to your theology?

In the Genesis 1-2:2 account of creation, what does God do on the seventh day? Does the seventh day come to an end?

Read Revelation 14: 13 and Hebrews 4:1-3, 9-11.

What part does 'rest' have in God's plan for human beings?

Insight: Sabbath

Sabbath – the Hebrew word *Shabbat* – means quit. Take a break. Do nothing. Do no work. Stop. Take a holiday. It's that simple.

'God's plan for humanity begins and ends with rest. God weaves Sabbath into the very fabric of creation – not just human life but the cosmos itself. People are designed (and commanded) by God to rest, one day in seven.'

Discuss or journal:

What does the word 'rest' evoke for you? If you were to describe your ideal 'day of rest,' what would it involve? What would you take delight in *doing*? What would you delight in *ceasing*, or *not doing*?

Write some ideas here...

I would delight in *doing*...

I would delight in *not doing*...

Sabbath: a day of Freedom

Jesus himself kept the Sabbath – he worshiped with God’s people and delighted in resting from anything that seemed like ‘work.’ What he did *not* delight in – and challenged very strongly – was any legalistic interpretation of Jewish Sabbath law. For Jesus, the Sabbath was a day of *liberation*, not a day of *legalism*. Anything that kept people bound or imprisoned was to be done away with.

Read Luke 13:10-17.

What is the essence of Sabbath for Jesus in this passage?

What does Jesus free the woman from?

How does Jesus welcome the woman back into the community?

Satan has many ways of keeping people bound and imprisoned. He tries to tie us up, too.

Discuss or journal:

What are some of the things that weigh us down, keep us in bondage?

(Such things might be...anything that instead of *servicing us* can *control us* instead; anything that can become an *idol* and thus take the place of God.)

Write some ideas here...

Things that weigh me down/tie me up

If you look at your list, you will find also a list of things that Jesus would like to set *us* free from on and through the keeping of a Sabbath day. For Jesus (and for the woman in the synagogue, and for us today), Sabbath is a day for life-transforming liberation and life-giving freedom.

How might the keeping of a Sabbath – a day of rest, on which we *stop* our work and busyness, help to set *you* free from the things that bind you and weigh you down?

What things would you place in Jesus’ hands on the Sabbath?

Getting practical:

Think of some practical ways liberation from what binds us could happen in your life. Be specific. For instance, if you wrote ‘technology’ as one of the things that binds you or controls you, then you might put ‘Turn off the TV and computer. Answer no emails. Let the telephone go to the answering machine.’

What binds me...

How I might be set free...

Spend some time in prayer for each other or yourself, praying for Jesus to bring you to freedom from what binds you, on and through the Sabbath.

Study 2: Sabbath as a Day to Play: a Holiday

Opening: Share memories of a time when you had FUN, when you entered fully into a time of playfulness and sheer enjoyment.

Or reminisce about 'the best holiday' you ever had. What made it so good? What sticks out in your mind about this holiday?

Getting into God's word

Surprisingly, one of the Biblical reasons given to celebrate and keep a Sabbath day is simply to *play*. To do no work, to take a holiday.

Do you find this hard to believe? **Read Deuteronomy 5:12-15.**

In this passage, what is the *reason* behind the command to keep Sabbath (verse 15)?

Discuss the following quote. What surprises or interests you about this quote?

The Deuteronomy reason for Sabbath-keeping is that our ancestors in Egypt went four hundred years without a vacation (Deut 5:15). Never a day off. The consequence: they were no longer considered persons, but slaves. Hands. Work units. Not persons created in the image of God but equipment for making bricks and pyramids. Humanity was defaced.

Lest any of us do that to our neighbour or husband or wife or child or employee, we are commanded to keep a Sabbath. The moment we begin to see others in terms of what they can do rather than who they are, we mutilate humanity and violate community. (Eugene Peterson, Working the angles, p71)

Do you agree that our society and culture often see people in terms of what they *can do* rather than *who they are*? Why or why not?

In what ways does *our* society dehumanise people through measuring their worth by their productivity?

How do you think keeping a Sabbath – a complete holiday, a day for doing absolutely nothing productive – a day to play, in other words – can guard against this tendency?

Look back at what you wrote under the topic of 'rest.' What did you say you would delight in doing? In not doing?

Insight: non-functional time

'A day to play' means a day when nothing '*has to*' be done. There are no *shoulds*. What is done is done for sheer *delight*. It's a day to rest from work, from housework, from study, from technology, from stress, from buying and selling, from being productive in any way.

Read the following quote.

The technology of Sabbath-keeping is not complex. We simply select a day of the week (Paul seemed to think any day would do as well as any other; Rom. 14:5-6) and quit our work. Having selected the day we also need to protect it, for our workday instincts and habits do not serve us well. It is not a day when we do anything useful. It is not a day that proves its worth, justifies itself. Entering into empty, non-functional time is difficult and needs protection, for we have been taught that time is money. (Peterson p80 (my emphasis))

If your Sabbath was partly defined as a 'day to play' – a holiday – what things would you include?

How would you use that time for embracing your family, your friends, for enjoying the fact that you are a human being, not a human doing? (thought starters: go to the beach, have friends over, play board games)

with your kids, look your children in the eye, have a long conversation with your spouse, write letters to friends, take a walk in the rain...)

Write some suggestions...

If I had a 'day to play' I would...

When we practice Sabbath as a holiday – a day to play - we find out that the world does not come to an end when we don't answer emails, the telephone, turn on the tv, or even do dishes. Our daily work is not indispensable in making the world go. What a relief!

Insight: planning and intentionality

Being free of any 'shoulds' or 'have tos' in order to have a 'day to play' takes discipline, intentionality and preparation – not just to have a 'day off' but to actually prepare for the Sabbath – prepare meals, prepare to embrace one another, prepare to delight, prepare to worship, prepare to rest, prepare to pray.

Read the following quotes.

Obviously, it can't always be such 'sweetness and light'. All kinds of things go wrong. All sorts of hindrances block our Sabbath freedom. Yet the meaning of the Sabbath as a ceasing and a resting day frees us from being too hassled by such things. We can learn good lessons from the troubles we encounter and seek to prevent them in the future by making better preparations in the days before the Sabbath.

(Marva Dawn, Keeping the Sabbath Wholly, p82)

One of the most important aspects of Sabbath keeping is that we embrace intentionality. That phrase emphasises the value of taking care how we do what we do... Sabbath keeping says clearly that we are not going to do what everyone else does. We are going to be deliberate about our choices in order to live truly as we want to live in response to the grace of God. (Dawn, p103-104)

If you were to truly have a 'holiday' every week, what are some of the things you would intentionally have to plan to do, to prepare in advance in order to minimise the 'have tos' of the Sabbath day? How would that happen?

To have a holiday, I would have to plan... That would happen by...

So, what's stopping you?

Take some time now to plan your Sabbath into your next week.

Spend some time in prayer for planning your weekly 'holiday' – Sabbath as a day to play.

Study 3: Sabbath: a Day to Pray: a Holy Day

Opening:

Share about a time when you experienced the presence of God in a non-usual way. Or tell others about a way of praying that you have found to be life-giving.

Getting into God's word:

In the Bible, God gives two quite different reasons for his command to keep Sabbath. We looked at one of the reasons in the last study. It was to have a 'day to play' – a holiday.

Now read Exodus 20:8-11 and compare with Genesis 2:1-3.

In the Exodus passage, what reason does God give for his command to keep the Sabbath day?

Consider the words 'holiday' and 'holy day'?

Why do you think this close connection exists between the words? What connections can you discern between a 'holy day' and a 'holiday'?

Insight: Holy Day

Sabbath is a day *set aside* for worship, for hearing God's word, for gathering as God's people, encouraging one another, for being transformed by the Holy Spirit. Thus it is a *holy day*.

Sabbath is a day to pray. Of course prayer means far more than merely 'asking God for things.' Prayer is more about being in God's *presence*, letting ourselves 'be still and know' that he is God, and *listening* to his still small voice. And his still small voice is almost impossible to hear in a head that is full of a whirl of busyness, millions of things to do, millions of things to worry about. That's where Sabbath-keeping comes in to prayer.

Read the following quotes.

Sabbath: Uncluttered time and space to distance ourselves from our daily work and see what God has been doing. If we do not regularly quit work for one day a week we take ourselves far too seriously.

Sabbath-keeping: Quieting the internal noise so we hear the still small voice of our Lord.

[When we keep Sabbath,] We get the rhythms right. And with the rhythms right, we realize that without directly intending it, we have time to pray. (Peterson p83)

Martin Luther picks up on this aspect of Sabbath particularly in his Small Catechism.

You shall sanctify the holy day. What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.

Discuss or journal about a time in your life when you knew in some way that you heard 'the still small voice of God.' When and how did that happen?

How long does it take for you to 'quiet the internal noise' in your mind? How do you best do that? What aspects of communal worship do you most enjoy? What aspects help you most in your relationship with God?

In what ways do you pursue human intimacy?

How would you go about pursuing intimacy with our Heavenly Father? What would be some of the practical things that would help that relationship grow in your life? (Get specific!)

Practices that would help me grow in intimacy with God...

How could keeping a Sabbath help to serve those practicalities?

What does the word 'prayer' evoke for you? If you were to describe an ideal 'prayer time,' what would it look like? Where would you go? What would you take with you? (a bible, a notebook, some quiet music on a CD, an icon or image,...)

Write some ideas...

Things that would help me pray...

If you were to set aside Sabbath as a day to pray, what would you make sure happened so you got 'unhurried time with God'?

(This is not to deny the public worship or play aspect of Sabbath!)

Get specific! (For parents especially, this can be a challenge. One of the wonderful things my wife and I have begun to do on our Sabbath day (which happens to be a Friday) is to give each other an hour or so each to 'get away from it all' in order to pray. One parent is often involved in playing (with the children) while the other prays (with God!))

Spend some time in prayer, asking God the Holy Spirit to show you how Sabbath can become a 'day to pray' – a holy day.

Resources: Some more quotes on Sabbath – and verses for further study

Jesus said, 'The Sabbath was made for the sake of people, not people for the sake of the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.' (Mark 2:27)

Psalm 92: A psalm 'For the Sabbath day'

Isaiah 58:13-14: True worship – justice and sabbath

Marva Dawn, in her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, suggests that the Sabbath includes the following four aspects: *ceasing* (eg from work, worry, etc), *resting* (Spiritual rest, physical rest, emotional rest, intellectual rest, etc), *embracing* (intentionality, planning, generosity, etc), and *feasting* (really making this a day of celebration!). How do those aspects relate to what you've already learned about keeping the Sabbath?

It is not our theology that is deficient, but our technology – Sabbath keeping is not a matter of belief but of using a tool (time), not an exercise of heart and mind but of the body. Sabbath-keeping is not devout thoughts or heart praise but simply removing our bodies from circulation one day a week.

(Peterson p72-73)

I opened my eyes after leading my congregation in intercessory prayers and saw my infant son crawling across the centre of the sanctuary in pursuit of a ball he was playing with while I and the congregation were praying. My initial response was one of embarrassment. I later repented. Was his playing less to the glory of God than my praying? (Peterson p 76)

Praying and playing share this quality: they develop and mature with age, they don't go into decline. Prayerfulness and playfulness reverse the deadening effects of sin-determined lives. They are life-enhancing, not life-diminishing. They renew us, they do not wear us out. Playing and praying counter boredom, reduce anxieties, push, pull, direct, prod us into the fullness of our humanity by getting body and spirit in touch and friendly with each other. (Peterson p78)

Quotes are taken from

Eugene H Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*© 1987, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, Michigan (reprinted 2000), especially the chapter 'Prayer time'

Marva J Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing Resting Embracing Feasting*

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