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*Issues: How to Keep the Sabbath*

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“Father in Heaven, we are here today, gathered in Your name. And You have promised in Your Word to be with us – for that we are most grateful. We have come here to be with You, to hear from You. And we are asking by Your grace, through Your love and mercy that You will speak to us as we open Your word. We pray Heavenly Father that Your spirit will be so prevalent and powerful in our midst that all of us will know we have been with you. And we pray for life changing, heart changing experiences as we seek to understand You in Your Word. Lord I pray that everyone here will be affected in a most wonderful and remarkable way by the message that You have for them today. I pray that for awhile, all the burdens that they carry in life will be forgotten and that they will just be rejoicing in Your presence for a time while we have Your Word open. And we ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Please be seated. Those of you who are regulars recognize that we are in the midst of a series of sermons that we’ve entitled, “Issues.” These are not my issues necessarily, but they are issues that you, the congregation have given to me, either through the church office or you have handed them directly to me. We have been dealing with questions. And for the last five weeks we dealt with the Sabbath in the New Testament. Can you actually find the Sabbath in the New Testament? Today we continue a new series about the Sabbath, but it’s a different direction. It is about how to keep the Sabbath. Questions have been raised about how do you keep the Sabbath?

When I was baptized in 1976, about two weeks after my baptism, I was invited to attend a Sabbath afternoon at the family’s house. They would have a meal, and I was excited. I was twenty one, single and hungry. And so the invitation was mighty nice to me. I went there, and you know, those of you who are raised Seventh-day Adventist, it’s a different world when you come into it, if you haven’t been raised into it. And you sit down at the meal, and you wonder what it is this time? They always say, it’s made out of soy-beans, you’ll like it. But there are some textures that take a while to get used to when you chew them, like a chopplet. When you chew it, it just, it doesn’t seem like it’s real. It seems like it’s rubber that is chewable. But you have nothing to relate to it if you are a carnivore up until that time. But anyways, overtime, we get accustomed to your meals and they are lovely.

But that day I was hungry, and I liked the meal. And it was good. Afterwards, the family gathered around and one of the little girls there played a couple of songs on the piano that she had learned, and everybody applauded her, and it was encouraging to her. And then, they said, ‘you know, it’s a beautiful day, let’s go down to the lake.’ They lived on a lake, and they had a pontoon boat. So we all got on the pontoon boat and we went for a ride around this beautiful inland lake there in Northern Minnesota. Well, I was in the coastguard, so being on the water, I just loved it. I was on the water every day during that time of my life; I was station there at Duluth. And so I was enjoying myself, you know. We weren’t going very fast, that was okay. I had gone slowly before. And the conversation was fine.

But then, grandpa – I don’t remember his name, in fact, I don’t remember the family’s name, but I remember the experience. Grandpa, he was the oldest one. He had been the Seventh-day Adventist all his life. And he said to me, “So, what do you think about riding around on a boat, on the Sabbath?” Well I didn’t want to appear dumb, so I said, “Well, I don’t think there is anything wrong with it.” And he said,

“Ha! I don’t either! But there are people in the church that are upset with us because we do this.” And then he went on and talked, and talked and talked about keeping the Sabbath. I couldn’t relate. I didn’t know, I didn’t understand.

About two weeks later, I was with the young lady, her name was Pam. And we were going to someone’s house; it was on a Sabbath afternoon. And they were going to have a little get together and sing happy birthday to this person. I think somebody had prepared a cake and it was going to be there. So when I found out it was a birthday gathering, we were driving pass some shopping center and I said, “Hey, could you pull in there real quick, I’ll run in and get a card at the drug store.” She said, “No, we can’t do that.” I said, “We can’t?” She said, “No, we don’t buy or sell on the Sabbath.” “Oh!” Well, thus began a journey into Adventist culture and Sabbath keeping. And I will tell you, it’s an intense journey because people are really concerned about how you are supposed to keep this day, the Sabbath!

And so, when this question came to me, I could relate. And so what we are doing now, we are beginning a journey. And it’s going to take us a little while, but that’s okay because we will be centered in the Word of God. What does the Bible actually teach about keeping the Sabbath? What does the Bible teach about keeping the Sabbath? Well, today we are going to turn to the very first Sabbath that was ever kept and it was kept by God Himself. And let’s see what He did and what happened. Let’s go to Genesis chapter 2, we’ll be reading verses 1, 2, and 3. “Thus the heavens and the earth and all the host of them were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”

“Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.” The word “work” is used three times in that passage. That’s an interesting word. It is interesting that God ended His work. Now, I read probably a minimum of thirty commentaries regarding that passage. And I couldn’t find an answer to what that passage actually means. Because they would say things like, you know, this was the first Sabbath and those who want to keep the Sabbath keep it this way or whatever... and they never really dealt with a passage itself. What does this passage mean? And so I was forced to just do it in old fashion way, and that is, take a Hebrew dictionary and go word by word by word through the passage and see what did it mean in Hebrew? And see if we can get some traction and understanding about what it means in English?

So, I started with the word “ended” in verse 2. “And on the seventh day God ended His work.” What does it mean, “He ended His work?” Is there anything unique? Is there anything special about Him ending His work? So here is what I learned in the Hebrew dictionary. The word in Hebrew that is translated, “ended” means completed, accomplished, finished, it means ended. Okay, so, it’s just like it says, “He ended it.” He completed it, He was finished. But what about work -- what is the work that God did? So, you go to the Hebrew dictionary and you discover that the word in Hebrew can be translated “occupation.” All right, so try that. So, “On the seventh day God ended His occupation.” It doesn’t work. Employment? All right, “On the seventh day God ended His employment.” Not working. Another one is, “ministry.” “And on the seventh day God ended or finished His ministry.”

Now that's interesting. That's got something to it. That's pretty fascinating really when you think about it. That God's creativity, His creative works was called 'ministry.' And then of course, the word in the Hebrew can be translated "work." So pretty much, what I came up with is that this part of the passage means, "On the seventh day God finished His work which He had done," He completed His ministry of creation. Okay? He completed His ministry of creation. He had created the heavens and the earth, he had created man and woman in His image, and now He rests. But what does it mean that He rested? I don't believe anyone here saying, "Well, God must have been really tired. Wow, that's got to be exhausting!" No, I don't believe God gets tired. I don't think He was exhausted by creating the heavens and the earth and mankind. I don't think so. There is something about Him resting that goes beyond just being physically tired.

So, what happened to God when He rested? Why did God rest? Does the Bible tell us anywhere what that rest involved and what happened to God when He rested? Now to me, those are intriguing questions because if we can find an answer or get a picture of what that rest meant to God, then we can begin to understand what the Sabbath rest is supposed to mean to us. Well long behold, the Bible does address that. Look at Exodus chapter 31. In Exodus chapter 31, we'll find God speaking here in verse 17. He's talking about the Sabbath. It says that, "...it is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever! For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed." "...He rested and was refreshed!" Wow! Now that adds another picture to it. "...He rested and was refreshed."

So, naturally, you have to, if you want to understand things, you want to look up the word "refreshed." What does "refreshed" mean? What did it mean in the Hebrew language? Well some of you are pretty scholarly and you will recognize right away this word, "naphash." Now I am spelling it here according to the Hebrew dictionary, "n a p h a s h." That is very close to the word, "nephash," n e p h a s h. And naphash is the word that is used in the Hebrew to describe God's spirit, or the wind, breath! And we call a living soul, "a naphash kyea," a living soul. But this is, "naphash," spelled with an "a" yet, its root is the same as "nephash." It is talking about to breathe, to be breathe upon, it is refreshed as if by a current of air. It is describing the experience of somebody who has been hot all day, and in the evening they sit down in a cool place, with a cool breeze, and it's refreshing them.

Another way we could say is that God rested, He took a breather, and He was refreshed. God was refreshed! The NIV says, "He abstained from work and rested." The New American Standard Bible says, "He ceased from labor and was refreshed." Okay, so now in our study, we've got "refreshed" added to "rest." God was refreshed. We've learned that "refreshed" is referring to like a cool breeze blowing on somebody. But is there a description anywhere in the Bible where somebody was refreshed like that? Is that word or that expression used anywhere in the Word of God that we can look at it and say, "Aha, now I see it in action!" Well there is. Look at Genesis 18.

Genesis, chapter 18, it's the story of Abraham. And he sees three men walking down the road in front of where his tent is. Now, he doesn't know that one of them is Jesus, and the other two are angels. He doesn't know that. He sees three men. And he wants to invite them into his abode. And he says, "...that you may refresh yourselves." It will be during this time that Jesus will tell Abraham that his wife, Sarah

will have a son within the next year. Sarah will be listening through the tent flap and start to laugh. You remember that story? And it is during this time, this is the story where God will identify to Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah are going to be destroyed. And Abraham will plead on behalf of that city.

Well let's go to 18 verse 5. Abraham is inviting them in, "...and I will bring a morsel of bread that you may refresh your hearts, after that you may pass by in as much as you have come to your servant." And they said, "Do as you have said." Abraham says, "I will bring you a morsel of bread that you may refresh your hearts. After that, you may pass by." The King James says, where the word 'refresh' is used, "Comfort your hearts." The Amplified Version says, "Refresh and sustain your hearts." The New American Standard Bible says, "Refresh yourselves." NIV, "so you can be refreshed, then go on your way." And so you have a picture of people on a journey, and for awhile they stop. And in that stopping, they are refreshed and able to do the journey more strongly or more happily than would be able if they didn't stop and get refreshed.

And that my friends, is a beautiful picture of the rest that God is inviting us into. We are on a journey, and for awhile we can stop and be refreshed, and then continue in the journey. Look at Genesis 2 verse 2, it says: "And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done." God rested and was refreshed. The refreshing was like a cool breeze, it was a pleasant stop before continuing on the way. The rest is associated with comforting and sustaining of human hearts. It is through the Sabbath that God invites us into this rest. It is a rest that helps us physically. It is a rest that helps us spiritually. It is a rest that helps us emotionally and in our relationships. It is a rest that is to deliver us from busyness. It is a rest from the normal stresses and pressures of life. It is a rest that calms the nerves and clears the mind.

If you take a glass, a clear glass of muddy water, you can do all you can to separate the mud and the water and you will be unable to do it. But if you just set that glass down, over time, the water and the mud will separate themselves and you'll have clear water there. The Sabbath helps human beings sort things out. It is a time to stop and in the swirl and rush of life to settle down and clear the mind, clear the body, get in tuned with God spiritually and with family members relationally. It is a time to refresh ourselves in the presence of the Lord.

But here comes the question: How are we supposed to keep it? The minute the question is asked, it diminishes the refreshing. The minute the question is asked! Let me describe for you by a... well, just follow along. Boys or men, this is for you! Suppose you meet a girl and you ask her for a date. She says, "Yes," but you have to be at her house at exactly 6:30 in the evening. If you are late, she will be upset. If you are early, you'll have to wait. When you come, make sure the car is clean and filled with gas. While on the date, you will not be able to talk about current events, politics, sports, movies, your employment or anything else that is not of a religious nature. The date cannot involve the exchange of money, physical exertion or be generally happy. If we happen to end up near water, you can only lay it up to your ankles. The date must be solemn, serious and spiritual in every aspect. If you don't date her this way, she will tell her father and he will punish you.

Ladies, suppose you meet a guy and he asks you for a date. You agree and then he informs you how it will be. He tells you he is expecting to be at your house at exactly 6:30 in the evening. If you are not ready, he is going to be upset. The house has to be completely clean and show ready. He expects the great meal the next day, but it has to be ready that evening. You will not be allowed to wear makeup, jewelry, or clothing that flatters your figure. Don't expect any excitement or fun. You will have to wear a dress regardless of where you go, and all conversation must be solemn, serious, and spiritual in nature. In fact, most of the date will be discussing what you can do on dates together. If you don't date him this way he will tell his father and he will punish you.

It's not very appealing is it? It just doesn't draw us in. There is no future in a relationship like that. And God is into relationships. You see, I thought about using this as an illustration, offering to the ladies that I would write a manual for every man in here on how to treat a woman they are courting or how to treat the woman they are married to. And tell every man here they'll have to do it that way. Now initially, some of you women would say, "Ha, it's about time." But then upon reflection you would say, "But wait a minute. I might not like the way the pastor is saying, you know, a man is supposed to treat a woman and how he is supposed to love her. I might not like that" because this manual will be very specific.

And I will tell you fellows, if you have any understanding about women at all, you will know that each one of them is different. And when you dated Suzy, and she like that, you can't necessarily say, "But surely, Suzy loved that..." not going to work. She is an individual. You are an individual. And ladies you can't date a man the way you dated all the other men, they are individuals. They respond differently, they are wired differently. And what says "I love you" to one, does not say "I love you" to another. And that's the way it is with us and God. God does not write in His book, "One size fits all." Or like a hat I got a couple of years ago, it says: "One size fits most." That's weird. You wonder who is excluded from that, you know.

So the Sabbath, we were never told in the Scriptures how to keep the Sabbath in any detail at all. It's not there. There are stories that talk about the Sabbath, but you will not find the detailed list of what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath. It is not there! Now the emphasis on how to keep the Sabbath erodes its purpose of blessing to us from God. God wants you to enter into His rest. Let's look at three passages really quickly. Exodus 33 verse 14, God is speaking, it says: "And He said, My presence will go with you and I will give you rest." Jesus came along in Matthew chapter 11, one of the most famous passages that He spoke. In Matthew 11 verse 28 Jesus promises the same thing. He says, "Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Now after the first service this morning an individual showed me from their iPod how this passage and the next two verses are translated in the Message Bible. And it is so beautiful, I asked the fellows and they worked it all out, and we are going to read that to you now. This is from the Message Bible. "Are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion? Come to Me! Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me, watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly, in charge of the Sabbath." Isn't that fascinating? It's beautiful!

Well look at Hebrews chapter 4, there is a promise for us even in our day, verses 9 and 10. We are told, "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His." No detailed account given as to how to keep the Sabbath in the Bible. The reason for that is that God is into relationships. And, some of you might not be prepared for this, God is the author of romance. And He likes the intrigue and the thought of two lovers planning how they can get together and how they will spend time together. And He wants you to be creative. He wants you to know Him and to understand Him, and to meet Him where He is at. And He will give you rest, and He will give you refreshing to your whole being.

Now during this study this last week, I looked up different ways that the Sabbath has been kept down through the years. And I kind of know how Adventists do it, and how some do and some don't and what we fight over, and stuff like that. So I didn't have to read anything about that. But I thought it would be interesting to read about the Jewish people. You know they've been doing this Sabbath thing a lot longer than we have. And I discovered that there are kind of two approaches to the Sabbath among the Jewish people. There was a group who kept the Sabbath. They didn't allow electricity to be on. So the furnace and the lights were off. In the summer it was hot, in the winter it was cold. They spent the day solemnly contemplating, and I read some comments from the children who grew up in those types of homes. They likened the Sabbath to being a 24 hour dungeon.

There was another group of Jewish people who celebrated the Sabbath. One group kept the Sabbath, one group celebrated the Sabbath. And this group, every Friday evening the father would take the children to the synagogue with him. Mother would be at home. And while the children and father were gone, she would light the Sabbath candle and set the table with the best meal of the week. It was the best meal of the week. When the father and children came home, he would gather the family together around the table. There would be this wonderful meal waiting for them. And the father would have a prayer of blessing upon his family. He would place his hands on each child and on his wife. He would thank God for each one of his family members.

And then he would pray that God would give each one of them a happy life. That God would bless each one of them, and that He would watch over them and care for them. Then, they would eat a meal. The talk at the meal would be lively, happy, engaging. And after the meal, they would sing songs together, songs of praise and celebration about their Creator and their God. After the children were asleep and in bed, mom and dad every Friday, it was scheduled, would spend time together intimately. And by the way ladies, if you have a husband that doesn't want to keep the Sabbath, there are some traditions that will get him there. (audience laughing...) And they would enjoy each other. And they would enjoy being refreshed in the Lord.

God rested and was refreshed on the Sabbath. He is inviting us to have a relationship with Him. He is inviting us to spend time with Him. It is like lovers, planning on being together. How are we supposed to enter into His rest? It probably depends on our concept of God. And I will tell you, the way you keep the Sabbath is a direct reflection on who you think God is. Our concept of God will determine how we keep the Sabbath. Watch this: if God is gracious, kind hearted, merciful, loving and caring, spending time with

Him will be a delight. But, if God is strict, arbitrary, exacting, judgmental, and hard to get along with, spending time with Him will be like the dungeon.

The Sabbath is the one day in the week when you can sit down in the middle of the day and do nothing, and not feel guilty. You don't have to do anything on that day. You can sit there and talk with family, let the 'to do' list wait. It doesn't matter. You've got all these assignments in school, work or whatever, not that day! Not that day! It should be a guilt free day, spent with God, being refreshed. It is a time to let the muddy water of life settle until things are clear again. Now we would read all the Bible passages that allude to or talk about how to keep the Sabbath. And as mentioned earlier, there aren't many and they aren't very specific. But today, I want you to begin thinking of the Sabbath as a time for rest, and a time to be refreshed by God. It will mean different things to different people, and I think that is what God wants. As you seek Him, you'll find Him. He always honors those who seek to honor Him.

In Genesis 2 verses 2 and 3, if you'll turn back there again, the Bible says: "And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done." And so God rested and was refreshed. Next week, we will deal with verse 3, "Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it." What does that mean? What did it mean then? What does it mean now? What does it mean for us? My hope for you is that you'll spend the rest of this Sabbath being refreshed by God. Let's invite the sisters up again to sing for us.