

Enjoying **the Sabbath**



by **Gordon Mursell**

Why bother with the Sabbath? Isn't it an old-fashioned idea best left to devout Jews? And anyway, how can it possibly have any relevance in a 24/7 society like ours? Well, as with everything else in Scripture, the teaching on the sabbath may have more relevance than we first think.

The Bible opens with the famous account of creation in seven days. And it was on the seventh day, later called the 'Sabbath' (which just means 'stop' or 'pause for breath'), that God's work of creation was finished (Genesis 2:2). But wait a minute: the Bible also tells us that on the seventh day God did . . . absolutely nothing at all. How could He have finished His work on that day if He didn't do anything? Or is that precisely the point? God is not just a God of doing: He's a God of being. His work is incomplete when it consists of nothing but activity: it is, in some profound sense, finished only when He catches His breath for long enough to delight in what He has done. The same should be true of us: we are made for more than work, or activity, however creative – and our activity will not bear its fullest fruit until we take proper time to rest, press the 'pause' button, and reflect on what we have done. The costs of unreflective activism are all around us – in workaholism, broken relationships, and many other places too.

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other six days. The life of every creature, if it is to be worthy of its Creator, needs a right rhythm, a healthy balance between work and rest. And, in the Old Testament, sabbath means more than rest: it also means restoration. In the great 'holiness code' of Leviticus 19, which sets out what is involved in living a holy life, only one commandment is mentioned

twice: the keeping of the sabbath. The Sabbath is also the crown and climax of the Ten Commandments, accorded more space than any of the others (see Exodus 20: 8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–14). We are not to be defined by busyness, or by what we do, but by the quality and balance and rhythm of our lives.

Yet this still begs the question: why bother with the Sabbath today? Let me briefly suggest three reasons. First, sabbath-keeping is subversive of the culture around us. There is some evidence to suggest that, in the Old Testament, the keeping of the Sabbath only really became widespread when the people of Israel were taken into exile in Babylon. They could take their teaching and their stories with them into exile; but they couldn't take their buildings. So holy space (temples, synagogues and so on) came to be replaced by holy time. There are many places of exile in our own society – places where people are not at home, and not in control: hospitals, prisons, refugee camps, and so on. You can't take your church building with you

to these places. But you can take the Sabbath: you can mark one day (for Christians this should normally be Sunday) as special, a day to be defined by being rather than doing; and when you do this, you are quietly but powerfully protesting against the prevailing values of the world around you. The Roman Catholic Church's Catechism describes the sabbath as 'a day of protest against the servitude of work and the worship of money' (para.2172).

The Sabbath is subversive in other ways too. It isn't a reward for hard work: it's part of the God-given rhythm of the creation. Many Jews still observe the sabbath every week, beginning with a special meal on Friday evenings, and continuing through until bed-time on Saturday. To keep the sabbath, not simply when we feel like it or deserve it, but just because we are commanded to do so, reminds us that we are not saved by our own efforts. Like everything else in life, it's a gift; and to receive that gift, week by week, is not only to be refreshed and renewed, but to throw down a challenge to a society obsessed with status and outcomes.

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The Sabbath achieves nothing – which is exactly why it matters. It's a day for play as well as worship, for engaging in activities entirely for their own sake – and for loving God just because of who He is. And every time we keep it, we are reminded that the things which the world counts as useless (like adoration, or 'wasting' time with someone just for the pure pleasure of doing so) turn out to be the most important things of all.

Secondly, the Sabbath is not just for us: it's for all creatures, including the land. Leviticus 25, which speaks of the importance of sabbatical years in which the earth gets a rest from endless cultivation, reminds us of this. Psalm 92, which is described in Scripture as 'A Song for the Sabbath Day', gives us a vivid picture of how we might spend the seventh day: giving thanks

to God, praising him, enjoying all that He has done – and then seeing how a renewed creation and a renewed humanity belong together: righteous people will flourish 'like the palm tree', and in old age will still be 'full of sap'. Keeping the Sabbath should include some kind of exploration of, or reflection on, the world around us: a good walk helps us to open our eyes to what God is doing around us, and of the real but fragile beauty of the world He made.

Thirdly, the Sabbath is (as an ancient Jewish mystical text puts it) 'a mirror of the world to come'. This gives us the clue to Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath. When he describes the Son of Man as 'Lord of the Sabbath' (Matthew 12:8), or declares (when healing the man at the Bethzatha pool on the Sabbath day) that 'my Father is still working, and so am I' (John 5:17), Jesus is not breaking the Sabbath. He's restoring its original dynamism, rescuing it from a tired set of religious rules, and showing how (as we have already seen) sabbath-keeping begins the process of restoring our lost wholeness, by receiving afresh the free gift of God's saving and unconditional love, and remembering that we aren't justified by work. When Jesus healed people, He didn't restore their past: He restored their future, gave them back a hope the world had denied them, and released in them the God-given potential that illness or prejudice or exclusion from respectable society had denied them.

So on the Sabbath day we are invited – indeed we are commanded – to step out of our me-centred, work-obsessed busyness and see everything in a new light. If we can't or won't do this, we are unlikely to enjoy the eternity God longs for us to share, for that eternity is described in the Letter to the Hebrews as 'a sabbath rest' (the Greek word is *sabbatismos*), which 'still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God did from His' (Hebrews 4:9-10). By keeping the Sabbath, we catch a glimpse of all that is yet to be – of the world as God always intended it to be, and of the unique potential and future that each of us can experience when we live by grace and not by work alone. Above all, then, sabbath-keeping should be fun – and far too much modern church life is curiously devoid



Our Cover picture, 'Auschwitz Rose'

was taken by Allyson Krieger, an amateur photographer, blogger and avid traveler currently based in New York City. She took this photo at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Poland while traveling around the world with her husband in 2006. You can read more about their experiences at www.runonsentence.com/allysonandbryan.htm

of fun. G K Chesterton said that the reason angels can fly is because they can take themselves lightly; and sometimes, when we too become stuffy and self-important, obsessed with status and busyness, we would do well to remember that.

The Sabbath is, as an ancient rabbi used to say, 'a palace in time' no less beautiful than any cathedral or shrine. You can keep it anywhere. All you have to do is to stop doing whatever counts as 'work' for you – to enjoy activities, or inactivities, that are engaged in purely for their own sake; to worship God for no other reason than because of who He is; to spend time with those closest to you just for the sheer pleasure to be gained and shared by doing so. And when you do this – surprise, surprise – everything else looks different. The world is full of wonder and mystery and beauty. You have become a child again, and can delight in all that is, and in all that is yet to be. **r**

about the writer

The Right Revd Gordon Mursell became Bishop of Stafford in 2005. Before that he was Dean of Birmingham Cathedral. He has also been in parish ministry in Liverpool, London and Stafford and a tutor at Sarum Theological College. His wife, Anne, a consultant psychiatrist is a Roman Catholic. Bishop Gordon took early retirement in June 2010 following voice surgery, and is now living in southern Scotland, but hopes to continue with a ministry of writing and study as well as some preaching and teaching.