



# RHYTHM OF LIFE

## GOING DEEPER

### DISCUSSION GUIDE

October 30, 2016

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## Discussion Guide

### Rhythm of Sabbath

#### CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

#### GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- Do you have a regular rhythm for taking a break from the normal activities of life? What might that break look like?

#### DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- Using the notes, discuss the background and context of Sabbath.
- Read Exodus 20.8-11 aloud.
- What did God command regarding the Sabbath?
- What forms, if any, have you seen these commands take?
- Read Exodus 16.21-30 aloud. Read the text once more seeking to be present as someone who experiences the events described.
- As you experience this text, what, if anything, does the practice of Sabbath teach you about God? About the nature of life as God intends it to be lived?
- Considering the ways people typically seek to honor Sabbath, what would you say that their honoring of Sabbath says about God and the way he intends life to be lived? Is this the same or different from what you see in Exodus 16? Could you elaborate?
- It has been said that the honoring of Sabbath gives us a glimpse of an Edenic way of life, one in which we live like God and experience his wonderful provision. Why might this be important in the mind of God? What importance might this place upon the honoring of Sabbath?

- Do you think it would be easy or difficult to honor Sabbath if it was about glimpsing an Edenic way of life? Could you elaborate?
- What, if anything, might help you develop a Sabbath rhythm?
- Consider closing by discussing what a Sabbath-rhythm experiment might look like for your group.

## **CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**

### **SABBATH**

The Sabbath is a day set aside by God as a day of rest. The theological grounding for the Sabbath is found in the creative actions of God Genesis. After laboring for six days, God rested from his creative activity on the seventh day (Genesis 2.1-3). It is difficult to understand that such a rest came because God had grown weary as this would imply limitations to God's creative power and strength. Rather, it is better to understand that God's nature led him to live in a natural rhythm of work and rest.

The first honoring of the Sabbath by people is witnessed in Exodus 16. Having come out of their bondage in Egypt, the Israelites found themselves in the wilderness without food and water. God met this need by promising to provide food, quail in the evening and manna in the morning. However, according to God, this provision of manna would only occur six out of seven days. On the sixth day, God would provide enough manna for two days which would allow the Israelites to have a day of rest on the seventh day. The purpose of this Sabbath/manna arrangement seems to have been two-fold. First, in honoring the Sabbath, the people of Israel discovered they were under a new master and under his guidance rather than under Pharaoh (Exodus 16.28). Second, the Sabbath/manna instructions made space for the Israelites to experience the abundant provision and protection of God which sharply differed that of Pharaoh (Exodus 1; 5.1-21).

The honoring of Sabbath was codified with the giving of the Law through Moses, the honoring of Sabbath forming the fourth of ten commandments (Exodus 20.8-11). This commandment is the longest of the ten indicating not necessarily its

importance but the need for explanation. In this command, God made it clear that the Sabbath was a day set aside as a special day, one which was intended to turn the Israelites to God (Exodus 20.10). The means of turning involved the cessation of work which was a direct imitation of God's cessation from work in creation (Exodus 20.10-11). In this command, one must hear the echo of God's creative intentions through the lens of the exodus experience. God had originally intended people to experience life a specific way, a way in which people experienced life as God experienced it, a life marked with marvelous provision (Genesis 1.29-30). However, this life had been lost to the Israelites (and others Genesis 3.17-19) as they had become slaves under a hard master who withheld from them the gift of provision (Exodus 5.1-21). However, God's creative intentions for people remained. He longed for people to share his life which involved the experience of marvelous provision. The Sabbath points to this creative intention. In the keeping of the Sabbath, people not only tasted the life of God by living in rhythm as he lived in rhythm, but they also experienced his wonderful provision by ceasing from their work in order to discover that, unlike Pharaoh, he would meet their needs. That the honoring of Sabbath was important to God is underscored in the pronouncement of death penalty for all who did not honor it (Numbers 15.35). This importance makes sense when one recognizes that in the Sabbath one steps closer to the creative intentions of God.

The Sabbath is less emphasized in the New Testament, but it does not disappear from view. In the years before Jesus, two rabbinic schools of thought had emerged regarding the Sabbath: one involving a strict observance of the Sabbath and one involving the honoring of Sabbath as a day of internal or spiritual rest. Six encounters between Jesus and the former school are recorded in the Gospels. Five involve questions about healing as working on the Sabbath (John 5.1-17; 9.1-34; Mark 3.1-6; Luke 13.10-17; 14.1-6) and one involves a question about picking grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2.23-26). In these controversies, Jesus never questions the command to rest but rather he questions the appropriate use of the day. Through

his actions and in his words, Jesus seems to emphasize the importance of human need and freedom from bondage, both which carry forth themes from Exodus.

Outside the Gospels, the issue of Sabbath observance is difficult to find which leads to the question of whether Christians should honor the Sabbath. Passages like Paul's note about Jewish days serving as a shadow of greater truth (Colossians 2.16-17) have led some to argue that the honoring of Sabbath is a non-issue for Christians. Others have pointed to passages like Hebrews 4.9 which speak positively about the Sabbath noting that the honoring of Sabbath was never negated by Jesus. What is apparent is that the day of worship for Christians shifted from the Sabbath day to Sunday because it was the day of Christ's resurrection (Revelation 1.10), but it was only in later centuries that Sunday and Sabbath observance were equated. It is probably best to state that the honoring of Sabbath as a principle has strong Scriptural evidence if not the honoring of a Sabbath day. One might also argue that the honoring of Sabbath is of special import for those who find themselves overworked and overextended in this twenty-first century world. In the honoring of Sabbath, one opens herself to the experience of God's creative intentions. This might be seen in that with the regular rhythmic honoring of Sabbath one takes up the life of God as witnessed in the person of Jesus and she opens herself to the experience of his provision which is both spiritual and physical; that is, in the honoring of Sabbath one discovers that she is no longer a slave but has moved closer to the Edenic life intended by God.

## **THE TEXT**

### **EXODUS 16.21-30: *THE FIRST SABBATH***

The first observance of the Sabbath by God's people is found in Exodus 16. In this passage, the people of Israel find themselves freed from the bondage of slavery but in the wilderness without food and water (Exodus 15.22-16.3). In response, God promises to provide both quail and bread (Exodus 16.4), but he has specific instructions for how the people are to receive his provision. The

people of Israel are to gather the heavenly bread for five days but on the sixth they are to gather twice as much because the seventh day was to be a Sabbath (Exodus 16.5,23).

The people did as God commanded and on the sixth day discovered that God provided an abundance so they might gather twice the normal amount of heavenly bread. Moses commanded the Israelites to prepare what they had gathered as they wished but also to set aside the seventh day as a special day, a day of rest which pointed them to God. Interestingly, some of the people went out looking for the heavenly bread on the seventh day. This is not surprising given their experience as slaves in Egypt. They did not have experience with a reliable master nor did they have the experience of a day of rest. Slaves do not get days off! Seeing the people looking for the heavenly bread led the Lord to ask Moses how long the people's disobedience would continue. In the context, this is most likely a question about how long it would take for the Israelites to recognize they were no longer under the command of Pharaoh and therefore to stop acting like slaves. The Lord reminded Moses that the Sabbath was his gift to his people, a gift which made space for them to recognize and receive his provision; that is, the Sabbath was God's gift to remind the people that they were no longer slaves but people for whom God would richly supply.

### **EXODUS 20.8-11: *HONOR THE SABBATH***

In Exodus 20, we find the ten words of God, the general outline of the life God wished his people to live. These words (guidelines?) were important because they are the first formal guidance the people of Israel have in understand what life as free people under God was to look like. Interestingly, the honoring of Sabbath is central to this life as free people. In keeping with God's command, the Sabbath was to be honored as a special (holy) day unlike other days. It was to be made special by setting it aside as a day meant to turn people's attention to God. This was to be accomplished by refraining from work. Explicitly, this turning to God involved the taking up of God's rhythm of work and rest as witnessed in his creative activity. However, implicitly, this turning to God involves the opening

of oneself to God's abundant Edenic provision instead of laboring under the delusion that one must labor to provide for himself.

### **REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:**

Sabbath. I hated the word growing up because in my context it meant a day of no fun. Growing up in West Texas during the time of the "Blue Laws" meant that every Sunday almost everything was closed. You couldn't go to the movies, buy gas, or anything which was not food-oriented. Not only were things legally closed but my parents' Baptist tradition shut down anything which a young boy might consider fun, limiting the entire day to church activities and napping. For me, Sabbath was God's way of punishing active little boys by shutting them up and shutting them down. Maybe the Sabbath was God's way of taking a break from little boys.

How far I have come in understanding Sabbath since then. It has been quite a journey, one which began with a complete rejection of Sabbath to a hungering and pursuit of it once more, this time in a way that is very different from the Sabbath of my youth. As a teenager with a newly minted driver's license in the liberal city of Austin I made sure Sabbath (Sunday in my context) was as full as possible. It was, after all, the last day before you went back to prison, I mean school. I carried that way of being on into college and then Seminary and then young married life as a pastor. However, it wasn't long before life itself began to feel really full and with that fullness a heaviness set in. I was growing tired but I needed more than a nap. I needed to just stop and have someone else take over for a while. I needed to know that I could just stop from the many tasks and they would carry on without me. I needed to know that I could stop engaging with people and my relationships would grow without my investment. I needed to know in countless ways that I could stop but life itself would continue on. However, I didn't know how that could be reality. There was always something to do and how was it to get down unless I did it? So I did it, until I couldn't anymore. It was at that point that I rediscovered Sabbath. In my rediscovery of Sabbath, I found more than a break. I found a way that life could go on without my continued investment. You see, in Sabbath, God promised that if I would stop, he would ensure that everything else carried on. He would provide if I would stop striving. So I began to pursue Sabbath. Mind you, I don't do it perfectly, and I certainly don't do it on Sunday. I have a thing

or two to do on Sundays! However, I have sought to carry the principle of Sabbath into all of life, seeking to develop a regular rhythm of putting things down. In so doing, I have found more than rest. I have found glimpses of a wonderful and abundant life which is possible not by working harder but through the wonderful giving presence of God.

### **REAL LIFE WITH YOU:**

Work. There is always more of it to do, so taking a break seems to be something of a luxury, and yet, this is exactly what God encourages us to do. He encourages us to take a break. Not just once. He encourages us to create a rhythm of breaking. We find this encouragement in the commands to honor Sabbath and in the life practices of Jesus. But how do people who live in a twenty-first century connected world find the time to take a break? Simple. You just do. You put things down and stop. I know. Breathe. It sometimes helps the nausea if you put your head between your knees. Better? Ok. Let's get back to talking about taking a break. One of the most important practices we can engage in is the practice of Sabbath because Sabbath is about taking a break. Taking a break is important, not just because we get to rest, but in those rhythmic breaks we catch a glimpse of life as it was intended to be lived. In our breaking we live in a rhythm that God himself has lived since the dawn of creation. Not only do we catch a glimpse of God's rhythm of life and thus take up that life created in God's image but we discover the Edenic life of provision because in our breaking God provides, our break making space for us to stop long enough to realize that God's abundance is there for us. This week I encourage you to consider taking a break, a real one. Pick a day or a part of the day and unplug. Put your phone in a box. Turn off other electronic forms and do something life-giving. This could be anything from reading a book to going for a jog. Open yourself to God doing what you normally would be doing and see what happens. You might consider doing this experiment in the context of community as a means of having the encouragement to step toward Sabbath. Consider journaling your thoughts.



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