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THE SABBATH IN THE FIRST CREATION ACCOUNT

From a careful reading of the first book in Scripture, it is clear that God intended the Sabbath to be the crowning event of the Creation week.

The seventh day of the week, the Sabbath, plays a dominant role in the first Creation story (Gen. 1:1–2:4). The first Genesis creation account is written in a beautiful literary structure that naturally falls into seven parts, according to the seven days of creation.

This literary structure is built around two Hebrew nouns. One of these designates “without form” or “formlessness.” The other denotes “void,” “empty,” or “emptiness.” Both are found in the second verse of Genesis 1: “The earth was formless and empty” (NIV). Each of these two crucial expressions draws to itself a clus-

ter of three creation days. The “forming” idea is closely linked with the first three days, when God created light and various spaces, represented by the left column in the table on page 46. The “filling” process, which appears in the right column, involves the next three creation days. Thus, three pairs of days are formed—first and fourth, second and fifth, and third and sixth—which correspond to one

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another and parallel one another.

The first, second, and third days are related to the forming activity of God; the fourth, fifth, and sixth days are related to the filling activity of God. This literary structure demonstrates the beauty, balance, and unity of the biblical text.

God first created space, and then He filled it with inhabitants. On the first day, God created light, and on the fourth day, He put lights or luminaries (Sun and Moon) in their place as “inhabitants” of the light element. On the second day, He separated water from water by creating an expanse; and on the fifth day, filled the waters with fish and the sky with birds. On the third day, God formed dry land and the vegetation on it; and on the sixth day, He filled the land with the inhabitants He cre-

ated—first a variety of land animals and creatures, and finally humans. He then gave humans and animals vegetation for food.

As a final and climactic act of His creation, God made the seventh day—separating it from the other days of His creation and making it holy. Sabbath is a palace in time. God created/formed a very significant temporal space, but—much more than that—He also filled the time with His holiness. Thus, in the creation of the Sabbath, both columns of the chart meet and find their culmination point—forming and filling kiss each other. The Sabbath is the only day where forming and filling are put together.

The literary structure of the first Creation story may be captured as follows:

The Literary Structure of the First Creation Account

Forming The unformed is formed Space	Filling The unfilled is filled Inhabitants (content)
1st Day: Light—Division Day Night	4th Day: Luminaries Sun Moon
2nd Day: Light—Division Water Sky	5th Day: Inhabitants of Water and Sky Fish Birds
3rd Day: Dry Land—Separated From the Sea Earth Vegetation	6th Day: Inhabitants of Land Animals; Humans (man/wife) Food for humans and animals

7th Day: Sabbath—God in Relationship With Humankind

A day of rest is formed and filled with *holiness*

From the literary structure of the first Creation story, it is evident that the creation of the Sabbath is paramount; humans are not the ultimate point of this account. Humans are penultimate, but the seventh day is the climactic apex of the story. Significantly, the Genesis account mentions each day of Creation only once (1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), but the term “seventh day” is used three times. And these three occur approximately in the middle of each of three consecutive sentences. Each sentence consists of seven words in Hebrew (2:2a, 2b, 3a). It is purposely designed in this magnificent way.

The Sabbath not only has a unique place in the biblical Creation account, but “as an institution is unparalleled in the ancient world.”¹ Nichola Nigretti points out that the seventh day “concludes, brings to perfection and overcomes the preceding six days.”² This is a great surprise, maybe for some even a disturbing fact, because one would expect to have the creation of humans as a culmination point of this Creation account. Why is it not so?

Theologians stress that humans are the crown of creation. Nevertheless, the creation of human beings is not at the peak of the Genesis story, even though man and woman are perceived as the crowning act of God’s creative activity. “The conclusion of the Genesis creation story

indicates that just as man is the crown of Creation, so the seventh day, the Sabbath, is the final goal of Creation.”³

Why is the Sabbath and not humans the crux of God’s creation activity? Humans were the last of the physical objects God created during the Creation week. God first made the physical world, formed space, and filled it with different physical inhabitants like fish, birds, and animals—and finally He created man and woman. They came to the fully prepared natural world as a final masterpiece. Wenham emphasizes that the creation of humans in the image of God is “the climax of the six days’ work. But it is not its conclusion.”⁴

The creation of the Sabbath is of another kind. You cannot see or touch the Sabbath, because time cannot be seen or touched, but only experienced. It’s of a different character than the physical; the Sabbath is a spiritual and temporal reality, spiritual in nature but nevertheless reality. The Sabbath is a time for fellowship in the context of rest.

Humans were created in the image of God, but needed to maintain this image. Humans were made to the glory of God and for fellowship with God and other humans. They were created in total dependence upon God. They will always be creatures—for eternity; they will never become God. Only in main-

taining this status can they fully develop their humanity, flourish, live bountifully happy and satisfying lives, and fully grow in all their potential. The Lord not only made humans (on the sixth day), but He also put them into a special relationship with Himself (on the seventh day). The whole Creation story is thus God-centered and not human-centered. Without Him, human beings degrade and are doomed to perdition and death. Humans without a relationship with God will stay only on the level of animals. (They were created on the same day as the animals.) Every time humans try to become gods, they behave like wild beasts.

God made a special provision so that humans may stay truly human and humane: He created the Sabbath and set it apart as a special and irreplaceable gift for the first couple and for all following generations so they might stay in a right relationship with Him and thus live honestly and nobly. The Sabbath is a gift of God to humanity, allowing men and women to maintain their true human value. Sabbath is in essence God in relationship with humanity. God is offering Himself for fellowship. This personal involvement is perceived as an act of His genuine unselfish love, because He is a God of relationship. If humans will live in dependence on God, everything will be all right. Should they start to act

autonomously, they will become tyrants. They will lose the sense of sacredness, then nothing will be sacred to them—they will think they can do anything. Sabbath is therefore a safeguard for humanity and a wall against idolatry.

The climax of the first Creation story is thus not the creation of humans but putting human beings in close intimate fellowship with God! In other words, the culmination point of God's creative activity is not the sixth day (humans as a crown of God's physical creation), but the seventh-day Sabbath (humans in a vivid mutual relationship with their holy Creator, worshiping Him). This climax teaches us that the Sabbath is the most important, not humnas per se, but only humans in relationship with God; this is what counts. Sabbath is first of all about a relationship of beauty and splendor, of God with humans and humans with God. In a palace the most important being is the king. But a king needs his people as much as the people need their king. In that sense, when we rupture our relationship with God, we break the Sabbath.

Gerhard Hasel identified four activities associated with the seventh day in Genesis 2: "(1) God 'had finished' His creative work on that day; (2) God 'rested' from all His creative work on that day; (3) God 'blessed' that day; and (4) God 'made it holy.'"⁵

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The Creation Sabbath passage (2:2, 3) is written in a chiasmic structure. Kenneth Strand draws it in the following way:

A God finished His work (vs. 2)

B And He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done (vs. 2)

C So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it (vs. 3)

B Because on it God rested from all His work which He has done (vs. 3)

A In creation (vs. 3).⁶

This means that in the center of the Genesis account about the Sabbath is God's blessing and God's act of making it holy.

When God is the subject of blessing, it means He is giving His presence; He grants prosperity, well-being, and future. His favor extends to every aspect of life, and His gracious blessings are even warranted by covenant. God also made the Sabbath holy. "The first thing God consecrates in this world is not a thing

or a place, but a moment in time."⁷ This unique recognition of sanctifying time and not a specific physical temple strongly suggests that humans can have fellowship with God at any place. This universal aspect of the relationship with God is in focus; it is a crucial function of the Sabbath. The author of the Creation account does not consider the seventh-day rest "as something for God alone but as a concern of the world."⁸ Thus, at creation God's presence and blessing is not concentrated on a special chosen place. (This visible manifestation of God's presence among His people will come later with the inauguration of the tabernacle in the wilderness [Ex. 25:8].)

What is God's holiness performing? *Holy* means to set apart, to separate, but it also means to have the experience of awe. The holy Creator is an awesome God. His holiness, first of all, means His presence. The Sabbath rest is uniquely a work of God. Sabbath was formed and filled

When humans participate in the observance of the Sabbath, they are participating in God's creative activity, and they are demonstrating their respect for their Holy Creator. This observance helps them to develop abilities to choose in everyday matters of life what is right and reject what is wrong, and helps them to make right decisions.

with the holy presence of God. Sabbath is lived correctly only if the Person of God is worshiped through maintaining on that day of rest a living relationship with God. "The day derives its special character solely from God." God not only made the Sabbath holy, but He also wants humans to keep it holy (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:12).

The Sabbath without God is missing its target and its goal. The reason lies in the Hebrew understanding of time. The biblical concept of time is always closely identified with its content. The same is true with the concept of holiness, because there is no holiness apart from God. "The Sabbath is holy because God fills it with His presence; therefore, the Sabbath is not just a day; but a Person!"¹⁰

The Creation week is about separation and division, and this principle is deeply rooted also in the Sabbath—the wonder of God's creative activity and His offer to humanity.

Creation is a process of separation, division, and distinction. The word for "separate" or "distinct" is used five times in the Creation story itself (Gen. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18). This phenomenon is very important, considering that in the Pentateuch itself this expression is used only 20 times. One-fourth of these occurrences relate directly to God's creation activity, which reflects intentionality and design. God separated light from darkness, day from night, the heavens from the waters (sea), land from water, the Sabbath from the other six days.

The same separating activity must be involved in the decision-making process when we separate/distinguish between holy and work days. "The sanctification of the Sabbath constitutes an order for humankind according to which time is divided into time and holy time, time to work and time for rest."¹¹

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participating in God's creative activity, and they are demonstrating their respect for their Holy Creator. This observance helps them to develop abilities to choose in everyday matters of life what is right and reject what is wrong, and helps them to make right decisions. "God's Sabbath is not a withdrawal from the world and its operations (e.g., 'My work is done, it's all yours now; good luck!'); instead, it represents his taking his place at the helm."¹²

Creation is about the establishment of order. God sets boundaries, and living creatures of different species and different kinds are expected to keep them. The Sabbath preserves that Creation order and respects those boundaries.

Jesus Christ gives the best commentary on the first Creation account in Mark 2:27, 28; it contributes to our understanding of the Creation story and shows that our interpretation is correct. There Jesus confirms that the Sabbath was created as a special gift for all humanity. This crucial gift serves humans as a safeguard, helping them live in dependence upon God. Its original intent was joy and benefit.

Jesus states: "The Sabbath was made for man [notice an all-inclusive, universal language of Creation, i.e., the whole humanity is in view], not man for the Sabbath" (vs. 27, NIV) and further comments, "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the

Sabbath" (vs. 28, NIV). Only when we worship the Lord of the Sabbath can we enjoy a fulfilling life of abundance. Trying to keep Sabbath without Christ leads to a misunderstanding of the true purpose, meaning, and intention of the Sabbath. Only Sabbath lived with Christ can bring genuine joy, peace, and satisfaction.

The religious leaders at the time of the first coming of Jesus failed to understand this vital concept, leading to a great tragedy: the killing of Jesus on Friday in order to keep the Sabbath holy (John 19:31–42). We need to live the Sabbath and not only keep it. We need to learn to celebrate it. To lie down in bed and do nothing but sleep is not a proper observance of the Sabbath, even though there would be no transgression of the law.

The seventh day is first of all about fellowship, fellowship with God and then fellowship with other human beings. The Sabbath has this irrefutable implicit social dimension. Even though the Sabbath was not given for entertainment, it's not all about worship but also about spending meaningful time with others. The seventh day is about the very presence of God; it is about His holiness in action. It is possible to experience an empty time, to live time without a content, selfishly. Such time is not holy but a ruin, a loss.

The time of the seventh day is sacred. By our behavior we should

The Sabbath is thus also a wall against “workaholism”; it has an anti-stress dimension. Sabbath is a divine protection for our tendency to work without stopping. We need to learn to enjoy fellowship and not performance. Relationship is what matters, not achievements.

Sabbath is a deep lesson that we as humans need to be God-oriented and people-oriented beings and not thing-oriented or work-oriented. Sabbath helps us begin every week refreshed, to start anew.

maintain its content. We should “become Sabbath for one another.”¹³ Being Sabbath means to be and live in a close relationship with God, to grow in love, care, responsibility, and friendship. These qualities of life can only grow in time. We need therefore to rediscover and restore, according to Muller, the sacred rhythm of life, of rest; i.e., to establish the correct rhythm between work and rest.

The Sabbath is teaching us to stop, to finish our work as God finished His, with a pause (Gen. 2:1–3). The idea about finishing is stressed four times in the biblical text. Sabbath is about ceasing; work needs to be stopped. “In the Bible ‘rest’ really means more than ‘having a rest.’ It means rest after the work is accomplished, it means completion, it means the perfection and peace in which the world rests, it means transfiguration, it means turning

our eyes absolutely upon God’s being God and toward worshipping him.”¹⁴ God is entering into His rest, and He makes it possible for humans to rest. “The divine Sabbath is seen as the cause of the human Sabbath.”¹⁵ When we pause, we participate in divine rest; we rest in Him. Karl Barth explains it precisely by pointing out that God’s rest day is man’s first day, that man rests before he works—man’s life therefore begins with the gospel, grace and not the law, in freedom to celebrate with joy the seventh day and not with an obligation to work.¹⁶

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There is a creation power in holiness. Those who observe the Sabbath participate in God’s holiness; they are strengthened and transformed so they can bring God’s presence into real life and perform creative work as well. This is the meaning of God’s blessing of the seventh day. By living Sabbath, believers are showing total devotion and respect to the holy Creator. □

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