



# Sabbath as Resistance

## SESSION 2

*Sabbath obedience is an entry point for the faithful in enacting an alternative to the great temptations of our time and place.*

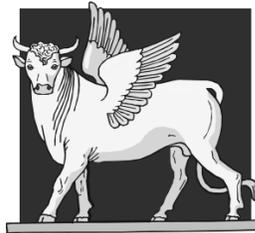
### Real Security

At Sinai Israel made a defining choice. It decided to trust the God who made heaven and earth (Exod. 20:11), to rely on the guaranteed reliabilities of the creation, and to eschew the anxiety that comes from loss of confidence in the sureness of the creator and the goodness of creation.

That defining choice, however, was not easy to sustain. The oath of allegiance to YHWH is sworn in Exodus 24. But by Exodus 32, when Moses had been gone from Israel for forty days and nights (see Exod. 24:18), the God of the covenant seemed remote, and the people fell back to anxiety. The God who was their guarantor against anxiety was nowhere to be represented by Moses.

And so they acted in their acute anxiety. They gathered their gold; their precious earrings; their most treasured, coveted commodities; and they made for themselves their own god. They imagined that with a rightly honored commodity they could “purchase” security in a world that seemed devoid of the creator. “God making” amid anxiety is a standard human procedure!

But of course such god making of ersatz gods evoked great anger on the part of the creator of heaven and earth. As a consequence of such anxious behavior, Moses broke the tablets of Sinai and the covenant was dissolved. Israel was for an instant hopeless, and Moses was bereft. In Exodus 32–34, Moses bargained with YHWH, prayed, and postured. In response to Moses’ insistence, the God who nullified the covenant committed an enormous act of forgiveness. Even beyond Israel’s disobedient anxiety, YHWH is prepared to begin again:



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He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the LORD; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. (Exod. 34:10)

Pursuant to a new covenant with this anxious people, YHWH does not here reiterate the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 but instead offers a new regimen of commands (Exod. 34:11–26). Of the new commands, there is only slight overlap with “the Big Ten.” But among those that overlap, notice this reiteration:

Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest. (Exod. 34:21)

Here there is no mention of the creator God. It is a command given without encouragement or motivation. But notice as well, the Sabbath here commanded pertains especially to “plowing time” and to “harvest time.” That is, it concerns the human work of exercising “dominion” over the earth to cause it to produce (see Gen. 1:28). Sabbath is in the context of the productive, food-producing creation system in which human beings must participate. They must participate, but they are to trust the land—creation—enough to rest, even in the busy agricultural seasons of sowing and reaping;

human life is to conform to the rhythms of creation. And when human persons are in sync with that, they can rest and be free from anxiety.

## Temptations of the Promised Land

Then, with the broken covenant restored and Sabbath continuing to be a core commandment, Israel left Sinai. Eventually they came to the Jordan River, ready to enter—at long last—the promised land. But it was a long time since Sinai. And so, Moses stops at the Jordan—in the book of Deuteronomy—and gives Israel instruction for the new land, an instruction that lasts for thirty chapters. Moses speaks so long because he regards the move into the new land as a high-risk venture. He wants to be sure that Israel understands that the old, desert covenant still pertains to the agricultural territory they are about to enter, a land that is claimed as well by other gods who are inimical to YHWH. Moses regards the land of Canaan, it being so fertile, as an enormous temptation and a huge seduction to Israel. Moses knows that the affluence that the land is sure to produce will create a crisis in covenant faith.

The new land will work so well that the people of Israel will think they can manage on their own. They will be tempted to autonomy, without due reference to YHWH. And the reason they will be tempted by autonomy is that the new land will make them inordinately prosperous. Moses knows that *prosperity breeds amnesia*. He warns Israel about amnesia:

Take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 6:12; see also Deut. 8:14)

The Israelites might forget where they came from, the circumstance they had departed, and how they had gotten away. They might forget that they had lived in a system of unbearable coercion wherein they had to meet impossible production schedules of more bricks. Moses anticipates that if they are not alert to the God of emancipation, they will end up right back in another system of coercion. Because the land is fertile, its produce will make Israel safe and happy. And if Israel can increase its produce, it will be safer and happier. And Israel will discover that the sky is the limit! The fertility of the land and the productivity of the system will

make Israel acquisitive; Israel will come to think that the goal of its life is to acquire and acquire and acquire. And in order to acquire, Israelites must compete with their neighbor. The system will turn one's neighbor into a competitor and a threat and a challenge. Moses warns Israel to watch out! . . . or the land in its productivity will transform Israelites into producers and consumers and will destroy the fabric of the covenantal neighborhood.

Moses understands, as do the prophets after him, that being in the land poses for Israel a conflict between two economic systems, each of which views the land differently. On the one hand, the land is regarded as property and possession to be bought and sold and traded and used. On the other hand, in a context of covenant, the land is a birthright and an inheritance, one's own land as a subset of the larger inheritance of the whole people of God. If the land is possession, then the proper way of life is to acquire more. If the land is inheritance, then the proper way of life is to enhance the neighborhood and the extended family, so that all members may enjoy the good produce of the land. It is clear which of these perspectives was appropriate to Sinai. But in its amnesia, Israel may forget its covenantal frame of reference and generate an economy that is antineighborly in order to have more and more.

And so, in his great interpretive maneuver, Moses asserts:

The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. (Deut. 5:2-3)

Moses remembers the ancient covenant of Sinai (Horeb) made to a previous generation in Israel. But then, in a series of words that Moses piles up—"all of us," "here," "alive," "today"—the covenant is said to be immediately contemporary for the new generation. This is the core argument of the book of Deuteronomy, the center of covenantal teaching in the Bible. The economy is not a rat race in which people remain exhausted from coercive goals; it is, rather, a covenantal enterprise for the sake of the whole community. Even in a new circumstance of agricultural possibility, the old desert covenant is defining. Moses expects Israel to reject the acquisitive culture of its neighbors for the sake of a covenantal alternative.



Remember the exodus! Remember that the brick quota was declared null and void.

## Sabbath Encourages Equality

To this end, Moses articulates the commandments, moving from “no other gods” to “do not covet” (Deut. 5:6–21). The commandments are the same as the Sinai recital in Exodus 20, with only slight variation. The actual Sabbath commandment is the same as that voiced at Sinai.

Even in this part of the command, however, there is one noteworthy change. As in Exodus 20, all are to rest: sons and daughters, slaves, oxen, donkeys, livestock, immigrants. But a phrase is added, “that they may rest *like you*.” Sabbath is the great day of equality when all are equally at rest. Not all are equal in production. Some perform much more effectively than others. Not all are equal in consumption. Some have greater access to consumer goods. In a society that is defined by production and consumption, there are huge gradations of performance and, therefore, of worth and significance. In such a social system everyone is coerced to perform better—produce more, consume more, be a good shopper! Such a valuing, of course, creates haves and have-nots, significant and insignificant, rich and poor, people with access and people denied access.

But Sabbath breaks that gradation caused by coercion. On the Sabbath

- you do not have to do more;
- you do not have to sell more;
- you do not have to control more;
- you do not have to know more;
- you do not have to have your kids in ballet or soccer;
- you do not have to be younger or more beautiful;
- you do not have to score more.

Because this one day breaks the pattern of coercion, all are *like you*, equal, equal worth, equal value, equal access, equal rest.

In the motivational clause for the Sabbath command, there is a momentous variation from the Sinai version of the command. We recall that at Sinai it was a command to rest, for the creator rested on the seventh day. But not here. Here the motivation for Sabbath is not creation. Rest, says Moses in Deuteronomy:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut. 5:15)

Remember the exodus! Remember that the coercive system of Pharaoh was disrupted. Remember that the brick quota was declared null and void. Moses warned the Israelites: If you forget this, you will give your life over to coercive competition. But if you remember this, you will know that Pharaoh and all like agents of coercion have been defeated. You do not need to meet expectations of your mother or your work or your boss or your broker or anybody else. You are free from the quota—if you remember, if you situate yourself in the covenant memory.

In Deuteronomy Moses is very big on remembering, because he knows that forgetting is a huge temptation in an affluent environment. Read 7:18, 8:18, and 16:3. He knows that the aim of the market ideology (as of the casino) is to have us forget our rootage and our identity and let ourselves be defined by alien expectations.

- Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes (16:12).
- Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this (24:18).
- Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this (24:22).

Remember that the pattern of coercion has been broken. Do you, when you wake up in the night remembering what you were supposed to have done, vex that you did not meet expectations? Do you fall asleep counting bricks? Do you dream of more bricks you have to make yet or of bricks you have made that were flawed?

We dream so because we have forgotten the exodus!

Well, Sabbath is the break, regular and public, that permits us to remember. Sabbath is the opportunity to recall Egypt and Pharaoh and then to remember YHWH and exodus. Sabbath is the day to dance and sing, “Free at

last, free at last," "Nobody gonna turn me around!" Those who remember and keep Sabbath find they are less driven, less coerced, less frantic to meet deadlines, free to be rather than to do. Because Sabbath is the great festival of freedom, when Pharaoh and all coercive expectations are dismissed and there is free bread and free water and free milk and free wine:

Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price. (Isa. 55:1)

And then, in light of such free gifts, the poet asks the dreaded question:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not  
bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food. (Isa. 55:2)

Why indeed? Because Pharaoh looms large in our imagination. But he need not! The free time lets us redecide about coercion.

## “Seven” Our Lives

Moses, in Deuteronomy, imagines that Sabbath is not only a festival day but also is a new social reality that is carried back into days one through six. People who keep Sabbath live all seven days differently. So the task, according to Moses, is to “seven” our lives. We may identify two aspects of the new life made possible when patterns of coercion are broken by the faithful observance of Sabbath as a day of deep freedom.

First, in Deuteronomy 15:1–18, Moses enunciates the most radical extrapolation of Sabbath in the entire Bible. Every seven years, in an enactment of “the sabbatic principle,” Israel is enjoined to cancel debts on poor people. The intention in this radical act of “seven” is that there should be no permanent underclass in Israel (15:4). Moses, in this instruction, anticipates resistance to the radical extrapolation of Sabbath, that Israelites may be “hard-hearted” and “tight-fisted” (15:7). But that is because they have fallen into coercive patterns whereby the poor are targeted as objects of economic abuse rather

than seen as Sabbath neighbors. Moses counters such resistance, however, precisely by appeal to the exodus memory (15:15). It is on the basis of that Sabbath memory that Israel is invited to “give liberally” (15:10) and “provide liberally” (15:14).

Second, the great “triad of vulnerability” in the book of Deuteronomy identifies widows, orphans, and immigrants as needy members of society who are without protected rights. The tradition of Deuteronomy is particularly attentive to their needs:

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. (Deut. 24:17–22)

It is no stretch at all to see that on Sabbath day these vulnerable, exposed neighbors shall be “like you,” peaceably at rest.

In this interpretive tradition, Sabbath is not simply a pause. It is an occasion for reimagining all of social life away from coercion and competition to compassionate solidarity. Such solidarity is imaginable and capable of performance only when the drivenness of acquisitiveness is broken. Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms. Whereas Israelites are always tempted to acquisitiveness, Sabbath is an invitation to receptivity, an acknowledgement that what is needed is given and need not be seized.

## About the Writer

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