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WHAT'S IN A DAY?



SHABBAT

Many of the Old Testament festivals are given several names in Scripture. Each name is meant to capture a particular aspect of that festival. The Sabbath, however, is known only by one name: *Sabbath* in English, and *Shabbat* in Hebrew (pronounced to rhyme with “a cot”).

The name Shabbat derives from a Hebrew verb, *shavat*, which means “to cease.” It is used seventy-three times in the Old Testament in verses such as these:

As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never *cease* [*shavat*]. (Genesis 8:22)

Then Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are *stopping* [*shavat*] them (literally, *making them cease*) from working.” (Exodus 5:5)

For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses (literally, make the yeast in your houses *cease* [*shavat*]), for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel. (Exodus 12:15)

Shabbat is therefore a day of ceasing, a day when things stop. Though the word is not found until Exodus 16:23, the concept is found as early as Genesis 2:2–3:

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested (lit. ceased, *shavat*) from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested [*shavat*] from all the work of creating that he had done.

Shavat is commonly translated as “rested” in these verses, but a more accurate meaning would be that God ceased His work. After all, the God of the universe doesn’t need to rest as do His creatures!

The word *shabbat* is commonly used by Jewish people, including those who do not speak Hebrew, to refer to the Sabbath day. You may also hear the word *shabbat* pronounced as *shabbos* (rhymes roughly with “mob us”) by older Jews. This is the pronunciation in Yiddish, which in past generations was the language of most Jews of Eastern European origin.

SHABBATON

A word related to *shabbat* is the Hebrew term *shabbaton* (rhyming approximately with “bob a tone”).

Besides the weekly seventh-day Sabbath, the opening and closing days of certain Old Testament festivals are also times when things cease or stop. *Shabbaton* is used in the Bible specifi-

cally for those “stop days” during Rosh Hashanah (the Feast of Trumpets¹) and Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles).

How does *shabbaton* differ from *shabbat*? According to the biblical text, on *shabbat* no work at all may be done, but on a *shabbaton* only laborious work is prohibited. The specific difference between “any” work and “laborious” work was later delineated in Jewish law; the Scripture itself provides little detail on the differences.

Unlike *shabbat*, the word *shabbaton* has not retained its original meaning. Today, outside the land of Israel, *shabbaton* refers to a Sabbath weekend retreat, typically sponsored by a youth group or synagogue. In Israel, however, *shabbaton* refers to a sabbatical from one’s regular work.

SHABBAT SHABBATON

The two words are sometimes combined in Scripture to make the phrase *shabbat shabbaton*. When *shabbaton* is added to *shabbat*, it gives added emphasis—as TV cooking host Emeril used to say, “it brings it up a notch.” So *shabbat shabbaton* could be paraphrased as “the Sabbath rest of all Sabbath rests,” calling for the highest degree of “ceasing.” This combination phrase is used when referring to Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement, on which no work may be done) and sometimes is also applied to the weekly Sabbath.

THE SEVENTH DAY

If the Sabbath is the day of ceasing, what exactly stops on that day? Many people would probably answer, “Work is what stops.” While that is true, to leave things there is to miss the positive emphasis of the Sabbath day. In order to appreciate the beauty of the Sabbath, we have to go back to creation itself.

People commonly speak of the “seven days of creation.” Yet

as we read through Genesis 1, it becomes clear that God actually did His creative work in six days. The seventh day was different—not a day of creative activity but a day when the work of creating ceased.

In the account of creation (Genesis 1:1–2:3), the words *create* and *make* each occur seven times. In Genesis 2:2–3, the phrase *seventh day* is used three times, each time within a seven-word phrase. The repetition of these “sevens” underscores through literary artistry the wholeness and completeness of the creation.

When creation was completed, God did not merely stop working, as though He were a factory worker punching out at five o’clock. He did something far more positive, as Genesis 2:1–3 describes:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested (lit. ceased, *shavat*) from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested [*shavat*] from all the work of creating that he had done.

In these verses we find three interrelated concepts: (1) the seventh day; (2) cessation from work; and (3) the sanctification of the seventh day (“made it holy”), meaning to set it apart. God not only *ceased* His creating on the seventh day, but He *blessed* the seventh day and made it holy. Having brought His creation to its intended goal, God set the day apart for Himself. Moreover, when God gives a blessing elsewhere in Scripture, He gives it to people or animals. Blessing the Sabbath *day* is a unique exception, emphasizing the special character of the day.

The descriptions of the first six days all end with, “And there was evening, and there was morning—the (first, second, etc.) day.” The seventh day is the only one that does not conclude that way. It is not said of the seventh day that there was evening,

and there was morning. Because of this, the seventh day appears to be an endless day that was never meant to come to a close.

So God sanctifies the seventh day (Genesis 2:3), and there follows the description of life in the Garden of Eden before the fall of Adam and Eve. The seventh day is therefore the context of life in the garden; it is the setting for humanity. It is not simply a negative “rest from work,” since work was not laborious in Eden. For Adam and Eve before they sinned against God, the seventh day was life lived under God’s blessing and in fellowship with Him and with each other.

In essence, “Sabbath” is the condition characterizing life in Eden.

Had Adam and Eve not sinned, their life and fellowship with God would still be ongoing—an eternal Sabbath day.

LIFE IN THE GARDEN

What characterized the fellowship between God and mankind in the Garden of Eden? To put it another way, what did an eternal “Sabbath life” look like for Adam and Eve? What did their experience tell us about God’s intentions for humanity?

Gift

The very existence of Eden, as well as the fact that Adam and Eve found themselves living in such an environment, depended solely on God. God planted the garden, and He put the man there:

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:8, 15)

Just as newborn children have done nothing to deserve their entrance into the world, so Adam and Eve did nothing to

deserve either their very existence or their surroundings. These things were bestowed out of God's love; they were divine gifts.

There is a well-known prayer in Jewish tradition called the *Shehecheyanu*. In English, the prayer is:

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has kept us alive, and has sustained us, and has enabled us to reach this season.

This prayer thanks God for the gifts of life and sustenance. It is often recited when a Jewish holiday begins, when someone observes a Jewish ritual for the first time, or even for any first-time event such as the first snowfall of the year. Creation was full of "firsts"! In our imagination we can picture Adam and Eve reciting the *Shehecheyanu* prayer in gratitude for their lives and for the sustenance the Lord provided for them in Eden.

Purpose

All of us need a purpose and goals toward which to strive. So it was in Eden, where the purpose of Adam and Eve was not simply to worship God by praising Him and singing songs. God gave them tasks to do:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:28)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15)

These tasks have sometimes been misunderstood. This was not free rein to selfishly dominate the environment. Rather, Adam and Eve were to bring both the garden and the world out-

side the garden under God's rule. Yet Eden was not the extent of the world. Genesis 2:8 tells us that the garden was planted "in the east, in Eden," implying that there was more to the world than Eden alone.

But in its *character* Eden was a place separate from the rest of the world, and Adam and Eve were the gardeners. Eden was the *model* for what the entire world could become, and humanity was meant to be the *vehicle* to accomplish that. This original task of stewarding the garden is sometimes called the "creation mandate."

Although we are not told in detail what this creation mandate entailed, the fact that God entrusted humanity with such a responsibility suggests we were made to lead active and purposeful lives. Since the fall, work has become laborious. But in and of itself, work is something good that has been part of human life since the beginning.

Life with God

Some years ago, a book called *Life Is with People* was published about Jewish life in the Eastern European *shtetlach* (villages). The book became something of a classic; its title was designed to convey the intense sense of community experienced by the inhabitants of those villages.

People were made to be with other people, as is made clear in the creation account. In a delightful story (Genesis 2:18–24), Adam pages through God's animal catalogue, inventing names for each creature. Yet by the end, he is still one of a kind. His need for companionship is met only when God creates Eve.

Important as other people are, underlying that is the need for a foundational relationship with God. And so we find that even though God is omnipresent, He dwells in Eden in a special way. The garden is the place where God walks with Adam "in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8). Life with God meant, among other things, that He was personally present with His people.

OUT OF THE GARDEN

No sooner do we read the account of creation than we find Adam and Eve making choices that ripped them asunder from God—and affected us, their descendants, as well. Humanity is expelled from Eden, its entrance now perpetually guarded by cherubim and a fiery sword.

No longer will people experience life as a never-ending Sabbath. That, at least, is the disheartening ending of Genesis 3.

Yet God's judgment is tempered with mercy. In His grace, He immediately turns His attention to redeeming humanity, a subject that will occupy the rest of the Bible. Despite the absence of an eternal Sabbath, God will institute a weekly Sabbath that reminds His people of Eden and simultaneously shows them the way back to life with God. There is yet hope!