

Forced Sabbath

By Randy Reynolds

We have the Coronavirus pandemic and it is having an effect on America and the world like I have never seen before! Businesses shut down, government, and schools as well as churches it is unprecedented in my life time.

What does this mean? Does it have any meaning that is behind the obvious? Is there an existential meaning to this pandemic and the ensuing economic consequences of this medical threat?

It seems like a forced shut down-a ceasing from labor and activity. That is not the way we usually live our lives! We are definitely in a weird time where the way it was is not the way it is!

So, what does this mean?

In the Old Testament a Sabbath was a time to disengage from one's everyday life. To get out of the personal rut and see things from a different perspective, often God's view of life. It was like putting on new lenses that give us vision and help us to see. It slowed down the "hurry up" part of us. What we think is so important: our work, family, church or whatever contributes to personal significance and security as well as our personal identity is put on hold. A forced Sabbath may also have an element of pain, threat, and perhaps sorrow in it that forces reflection or even prayer for relief. In a Sabbath, there is a time of disengaging and a new self can develop; one that expands and enlarges you.

The Sabbath is a time to turn our attention to God. Sometimes we are so busy doing even good things that we need to be uprooted in order to be able to reflect and wait on God. A client of mine got sick and was isolated in a hospital for six months. He said all he did was talk with God and "Got a lot of things straightened out." Another client of mine ended up in jail in solitary confinement for three months, guilt had overwhelmed her. She lost her children over taking drugs and was suicidal. She read her Bible every day and the shame she was experiencing began to diminish by His grace. Nelson Mandela tried to free his people from South Africa's Apartheid and ended up spending almost thirty years in prison for inciting violence against the government. Then he was able and ready to fulfill his role as a liberator of his people and did it without the violence.

Sometimes we are forced to move out of our life with its noble purposes, even if the life seems good and right to us. God promised Abraham that he would be "The father of a great nation," but when he attempted to pull it off, he couldn't even get his wife pregnant. So, he thought having a baby with his wife's handmaid would fulfill God's promises and his deep desire. It only created conflict between his wife and her handmaid and eventually he lost Hagar the handmaid and his only son. He was powerless! Abraham experienced a waiting period where hope of God's promise being fulfilled appeared impossible, a dark night of the soul.

Moses was obviously appointed by God to live in the Pharaoh's household and be a prince in Egypt. His dream, call or destiny was to be the deliverer of his people from oppression. His first attempt to deliver his people exiled him from his life in Egypt. He failed and ended up fleeing Egypt to become a sheep herder for the next forty years, out of town so to speak. Was his exile to the desert a Sabbath that God

designed to bring him into a more intimate relationship with Himself or a consequence of killing the Egyptian abusing his people? Did Mandela try to do God's will without considering God's way? These are individual stories of forced Sabbaths but could they relate to our forced Sabbath? Knowing our powerlessness helps turn us to God. Those are individual forced Sabbaths but Israel also had times where they were trapped, by oppressive forces beyond their control. These were corporate Sabbaths, more in line with what we are experiencing.

Joseph in the Old Testament was given two dreams by God, they were prophetic and told how he would rule over his older brothers and family. Because he shared his dreams in an arrogant adolescent way he was exiled to Egypt by his brothers, and rejected by his family. He lost his position, a favored place in the family, given to him by his father. Was that God's plan or a consequence of his youthful sin, his father's favoritism, or his brother's jealousy? Could it be all of that and more? Was God preparing Abraham, Moses, and Joseph for the fulfillment of His plan in their lives, even though it involved sin on their parts? Maybe their falling short was youthful, naïve and innocent, but there still were difficult consequences that they probably grieved over. Is there anyone who is without sin, and its consequences that journeys through life? Some people, in difficult times, will act out and make their lives worse rather than come to terms with their new limitations. Israel had a pattern that is best represented in the book of Judges. It seems Israel would lose their connection with God and "Each person would go their own way." Isaiah 53:6 Then God would allow them to be taken captive by other nations, who would oppress them. Were their heart's desires only to be fulfilled as they learned to surrender their desires to Him or as they had their dreams die in distant lands, where they were held captive? Does emotional and spiritual maturity take difficulty and brokenness to develop, so we will call out for God? How does this work in our lives? How do we grow up spiritually? How do we find redemption in times of loss where our dreams are crushed, our lives seem ruined, our relationships broken and our identities challenged?

All three of these leaders-heroes of the faith, experienced forced Sabbaths as preparations for greater things. The scriptures are also full of narratives of corporate forced Sabbath that the whole nation of Israel experienced. Today this maybe the whole world. In the book of Judges there is a pattern where Israel turns from God. Judges 3:7 says, "The Israelites did what was evil in the Lord's sight. They forgot about the Lord their God..." Sounds like a nation which was founded on faith and turned to secularism! When that happened as a pattern the Lord allowed them to be oppressed until they called to God for help. Then God demonstrates His heart to love and save the lost. He raised up Boshiah (deliverers), heroes that brought back a faith in God and delivers them from worldly entanglements and oppression Judges 6-7. These judges were spiritual leaders, who like Deborah, a prophet and a judge, helped the people turn back to God and maintain a faith in God. This story of wayward hearts and turning back to God is an age-old pattern. Leaders are essential to free people from oppression, but it is a corporate call to seek God through prayer, calling out for God's help. "Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways. I will forgive their sins and restore their land" 2 Chronicles 7:14. God listened and responded through new leadership which led Israel into times of peace or welfare that related to times of disease or plagues and economic hardship-famines, where Israel experienced deliverance. Is that what we need today? Maybe this is not just arbitrary disease and a consequential downturn but a call to turn our hearts to God. Forced Sabbaths do something to our hearts.

For believers forced Sabbaths or times of breaking are not endings but times of purification that lead us to a deeper walk. Only grief and lament proceeds change and victory. Times of knowing our powerlessness and humbling ourselves and admitting our need for God. The Lord was going to use Abraham, Joseph, and Moses but they had to lose their dreams, passion, and purpose first. This was a part of God's work in their lives. Sure, they played a part in their journey and the roads they followed but God was also at work. A. W. Tozer says, "It is doubtful that God has ever used a man greatly until He has first hurt him deeply." In times of testing we often experience powerlessness and find we cannot make life work the way we think it should. We rest because we can't fight anymore. Surrender is a natural consequence. Their own power was insufficient to create a son, bring deliverance, or create a position of leadership and respect. However, like with these patriarchs God is at work and still intends to bless. Through faith, promises and patience, He brings a child to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham not only becomes a father of the great nation of Israel but the father of faith to Jews, Christians and Muslims. To Moses who knows his powerlessness, He brings the power of God to defeat the most powerful nation on earth and deliver an oppressed people through some of the greatest miracles ever demonstrated on earth. To Joseph, He established his dream in a way that was far beyond his wildest dreams as he not only ruled over his family but all of Egypt. From Israel's brokenness a suffering Savior-a Deliverer is birthed who brings deliverance to the whole world, a new kingdom of peace and joy. Forced Sabbaths are not endings but often transition times between endings and divine new beginnings.

Difficult times bring people together and bring out the best in many people. In times of crisis there are many roles and responsibilities that people will fulfill, like the amazing health care workers who are committed to their divine calling. New leaders rise up and old ones come out of retirement. There will be people who serve and help make things better and others who will be contributing to the problems. There are many godly people making significant sacrifices in many domains. We will arise stronger than before but will need to grieve our losses and comfort those who are hurting. God is doing something in the midst of our fears and threat.

What is that in your life? How are you contributing to the solution and not the problem? Does this have any meaning beyond the immediate? Can you find that meaning? Are you seeking to understand this bizarre forced Sabbath?

QUESTIONS

1. What potential loss are you facing?
2. Are you caught up in guilt, disillusionment or depression because of the way your life has turned out?
3. Are you angry and bitter and blaming someone for your losses or failures? Who? What was your part?
4. Could it be that God is still sovereign and has some redemption yet in front of you?
5. When have you gone through an experience where you felt powerless and broken?

BIBLE STUDY – Discuss or journal on the questions. Take your time and be still and reflect in prayer!

1. Read Judges 3:7-15 Corporate Sabbaths and oppression
 - a. What caused the Israelites to lose sight of God?
 - b. How did they get back to God?
2. Read Judges 6:25-31
 - a. How did Gideon as a “Mighty Hero” spiritual leader turn Israel back to God?
 - b. How did God deliver His people through judges-spiritual leaders=deliverers?
 - c. How did the Judges demonstrate God’s heart to deliverer His people when they were suffering?
3. Read Genesis 22:1-19 Abraham and the testing
 - a. How did Abraham surrender his son to God? What do you think Abraham went through emotionally in struggling with this potential loss?
 - b. Why did God ask this of Abraham? Does He ask us to let go of important good things that He gives us? Give us an example in your own life?
 - c. How was God a protector and provider in the midst of this trial and imminent loss of what was most dear to him?
 - d. How is Abraham’s proclamation a sign of a strong faith?