



Exploring Christianity:

Finding Rest in a Restless World (Sabbath for Pre-Christians)

iFOLLOW

Meeting with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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Finding Rest in a Restless World

Sabbath for Pre-Christians

This presentation is designed for people who have not yet come to a point in their spiritual journey where they have decided to become a follower of Jesus.

Learning Objectives

1. Recognize the stress and turmoil of life
2. Discover a way to find a harbor of stillness that comes back like clockwork
3. Learn how to enter a spiritual rhythm of life

Content Outline

1. Introduction
2. A harbor of stillness
3. God's rhythm of life
4. An invitation

Background Material for the Presenter

A group of researchers studying the effects of stress used twin lambs as subjects of an interesting experiment. For the first part of the experiment, one of the lambs was placed in a pen all alone. Electrical pulsing devices were hooked up at several feeding locations in the pen. As the lamb wandered to each feeding station in the enclosure, the researchers gave the lamb a short burst of electrical current. Each time this happened, the lamb would twitch and scamper to another part of the pen. The lamb never returned to the same location once it had been shocked.

This was repeated at each feeding station until the frightened lamb stood in the center of the pen shaking uncontrollably. He had no place to run. There were shocks everywhere. Completely overcome and filled with anxiety and stress, the lamb collapsed in a nervous breakdown.

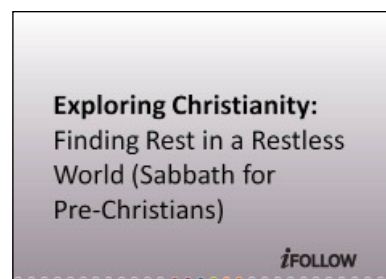
The second part of the experiment involved the first

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lamb's twin brother. The researchers put him in the same pen. Only this time they put his mother in the pen with him. Presently, they shocked him at the feeding station. Like his twin brother, he immediately twitched and ran, only he ran directly to his mother. He snuggled close to her while she grunted softly in his ear.

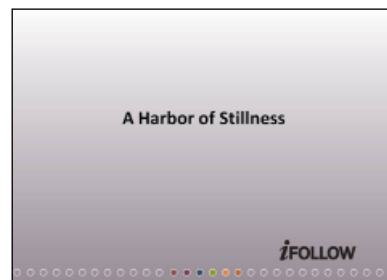
She apparently reassured him because the lamb promptly returned to the exact spot where he was shocked the first time. The researchers threw the switch again. Again the lamb ran to his mother. Again she snuggled with him and grunted in his ear, and again he returned to the same place.

This happened over and over, but as long as there was a safe place, a reference point for the lamb to return to after each shock, he could handle the stress. He was able to cope.

We live in a world that is filled with the shocks of life; stress, anxiety, fear, danger, failure, hurt, pain, brokenness. The list is long. We are surrounded by forces that drain us, damage our dignity, and call into question our identity. Each year seems to bring with it a faster and faster pace of life, more demands on us, more things to do to just keep up and survive, not to mention what it takes to go beyond maintenance to the increasingly impossible dream of actually thriving. If there's ever a time when we need a safe place, a secure point of reference in the middle of the rat race, a sanctuary in which we can stop and regroup, be refreshed and reassured it is now!

A Harbor of Stillness

The respected Jewish philosopher and theologian Abraham Heschel described one such reference point: "In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil there are islands of stillness where man may enter a harbor and reclaim his dignity. The island is the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs as well as attachment to the spirit ... The seventh day is the exodus from tension, the liberation of man from his own muddiness, the installation of man as a sovereign in the world of time." (Heschel, p. 29)



Notice the significant and relevant phrases in that statement. **"The tempestuous ocean of time and toil."** Do you ever feel like a little boat being thrown around and battered by the winds and waves of life? Your boss with her incessant demands is someone you can never please. The politics at work drain you. Your kids' activities seem nonstop and wear you out. Your bills pile up, your bank balance plummets. You wonder how you'll ever stay ahead. Your life seems to be passing away right in front of you and you still don't feel like you've accomplished many of the things you wanted to when you started out. Life often feels like a tempestuous ocean.

Imagine being able to enter **“a harbor [of] stillness”** in the midst of the storms. A place where you can **“reclaim your dignity.”** Picture yourself steering your battered boat out of the hurricane winds, behind the strong breakwater rocks and boulders and solid pylons. The water becomes smooth and placid. You tie up in one of the secure slips. Your boat is still. You sink back into the couch in your cabin. Your heart begins to slow, your mind stops racing, the adrenaline ebbs away, your muscles relax as you lean your head back on the cushion. Time seems to stop as you sip a hot drink. An island of stillness, a safe harbor.

You start thinking about your life. What are those forces that so often attack you and steal your sense of dignity, those people or frequent circumstances that batter your sense of security and confidence in who you are? Those places in time when you begin to doubt yourself, when you're challenged and fought against and humiliated and disrespected. Those times when you get huge dents in your armor and you feel like nothing or nobody.

Imagine finding a place in the midst of all that chaos where you're empowered to “reclaim your dignity.” A place where you rediscover what makes you a person of worth and value. How does that happen? You enter a day, a space in time, where you “detach from things, instruments, and practical affairs.” In other words, by carving out some boundaries for this time, you remind yourself that you are more than simply a consumer, production-maniac, protector and stockpiler. You are more than what you do. You are more than your failures and successes, the busyness of your life, your activities. Your value and worth are not based upon what you produce or consume or protect or stockpile but based simply upon who you are as a human being.

But it's not only a time of detachment. It's also a time of attachment to the spiritual. You carve out this space in time to reconnect with the eternal, the divine presence, your deepest, most core values that drive who you are as a human being. The gift of stopping the rat race for this period of time enables you to spend priority time, to engage in intentionality about the deep issues of your life, who you really are, who God is, where you're heading, how aligned your behavior is to your core values. It affords the opportunity to reengage with the people most important to you, to rekindle the significant relationships, to reestablish and rebuild love and compassion and service to others.

This Harbor is “the exodus from tension.” Think of all the things in your life that produce tension. Think about how you manifest tension, your body response, your emotional symptoms. Experts tell us that 80-90% of all visits to physicians are over symptoms that end up being primarily stress-related. Dr. Archibald Hart, dean-emeritus of the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, states that each person has a physiological weak link that gets triggered when the body is under high stress, especially for a prolonged period of time. In other words, the body breaks down in specific places (different places with different people) when experiencing great stress.

So imagine experiencing an “exodus from tension” on a regular basis. Heschel is using an

intentional biblical metaphor especially significant to Jews when he refers to an “exodus.” The Jews were held in bondage and slavery by the Egyptian kings (pharaohs) for 400 years, oppressed, maligned and victimized mercilessly by their masters. Then God had mercy and stepped in to intervene. He called Moses, a Hebrew slave raised by the pharaoh’s daughter as her very own child but then banished from the empire over an act of violence. And Moses became the liberator of his people as he led them out of slavery and bondage, across the vast desert and wilderness, into the promised land. A literal exodus from tension.

So Heschel uses this story to convey the powerful reality of hope and liberation afforded by the Sabbath, every seven days one enters this sacred space, this special day carved out intentionally from the stress and tension of the other six days of work and labor, to experience God’s peace and a liberation from the bondage of our relentless responsibilities, from the hype and noise of our culture which demands our loyalty and buy-in, from the temptation to see ourselves as simply consumers and products.

Imagine spending one day every week slowing down, allowing your body and mind to experience peace and quiet, reconnecting with the deepest part of you (your soul and spirit), and spending intentional time realigning yourself to your highest values. Imagine taking time to build your most important relationships, to pay attention to not only your own heart but the heart and lives of those closest to you.

Imagine placing yourself regularly in a space where you’re reminded who you really are instead of who the culture says you are. Heschel calls this “the liberation of man from his own muddiness.” Experts point out that we are living in an age of profound identity confusion and crisis. People are being confronted incessantly with conflicting paradigms. The marketing gurus through infinite advertisements say one thing (we are what we buy and consume), our employers say another (we are what we produce), our inner tapes shout others (we will never measure up or be good enough, we need to perform better, our failures define us, our successes aren’t enough). And the bombarding messages continue unabated. No wonder we live in such confusion and conflict! And because we’re so busy trying to succeed or survive, we never stop long enough to question or push back on those identity messages.

But imagine what the Sabbath can provide, an uninterrupted day in which we confront the truth about ourselves by reminding ourselves of where our true worth and value reside. And herein lies the powerful beauty of this Sabbath gift. Heschel refers to the origin of this weekly experience. Here’s how it came about.

A Spiritual Rhythm of Life

The Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of origins in the book called “Genesis.” The first several chapters describe God as the creator of cosmic, terrestrial and human life and existence. In six days God brings the diversity of life into reality, including the creation of

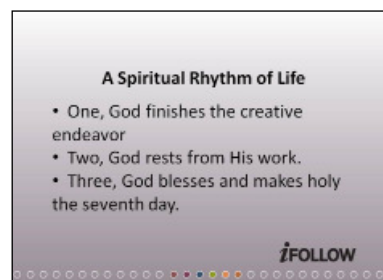
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humanity, man and woman, Adam and Eve. And then here's what the account describes as taking place next. "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." (Genesis 2:1-3, New International Version)



Notice the rhythm of life God institutes at the end of the creation week. It's a weekly cycle revolving around work and rest. God works for six days and then rests the seventh. But it's obviously not a seventh day rest because of the physical exhaustion from his work week (God certainly doesn't get tired and so need to rest). The story describes God changing the nature of his activity from the six days to the seventh.

One, God finishes the creative endeavor after six days. He completes His task.

Two, God rests from His work. That word translated "rest" is "Sabbath" which literally means "to stop, to cease." In other words, God is stopping his creative labors because they're all done. But he's also stopping in order to do something else. Look at what comes next.

Three, God blesses and makes holy the seventh day. He's infusing something special into this final day of the weekly cycle. In Hebrew Scriptures, whenever God is described as blessing and making holy something, it means He is bringing His presence into it in order to make it authentically spiritual.

So what is God doing here? He is carving out this seventh day as a special time for spiritual encounter—a holy God comes to His created world to bring His holiness into that life—to infuse life with holiness, to express value in that creation by desiring to be with that creation and bring himself into experience with that creation.

Imagine the profound paradigm here. Unlike the pagan gods of those early cultures who create humans to serve their every whim and fancy, who require humans to reach up to them if they want to get connected, this God of the Genesis story creates life in an act of admiration and respect and value and institutes a day every week to express that special purpose and value. This story shows God coming to His creation, serving His creation with love and compassion. It's a monumental reversal in paradigms from the pagan culture of its time.

In the parallel pagan story God rests because human beings make it possible. In the Bible story it is the other way around: human beings rest because God makes it possible. God created the seventh day as a day of rest. In fact, the seventh day is the first full day of life for the human beings. And what does God give them for their first full day? A day of rest.

A day to encounter God in meaningful ways. A day of sacred space because it has been blessed and made holy by the God of creation.

The eminent Protestant theologian Karl Barth wrote: “God’s rest day is man’s first day. Hence man’s life begins with the gospel [the good news of grace], not the law, in freedom to celebrate with joy the festal day of God, not with an obligation laid upon him to perform some task, to labor and toil. Man rests before he works.” (Barth, pp. 56-57)

An Invitation

Imagine entering every seventh day as an opportunity to experience sacred space, time to encounter the divine presence and time to extend this grace to all our other relationships. Heschel calls this Sabbath rest “the installation of man as a sovereign in the world of time.”

Every seventh day we are given the gift of taking control of our time, those hours that seem to get away from us during the rest of the week in the midst of the rat race and busyness. Time seems to control and dominate us. We always feel behind or under the clock, as it were. But on Sabbath, we’re in charge, we’re “sovereign,” use Heschel’s word. We choose to enter into God’s rest, and by so doing we experience spiritual peace, God’s presence and compassion, the spiritual value that He has chosen to press into this sanctuary in time.

Imagine taking this kind of time for your personal, relational and spiritual life every week! Would it be helpful to you? Could it give you a significant point of reference in the whirlwind of life?

Remember those twin lambs in the experiment? The lamb that survived the shocks of daily life best was the one who had a place of retreat, a safe place to be nurtured and cuddled and empowered. Perhaps a weekly Sabbath could help facilitate that point of reference for you; a time for your spiritual nurture, to get close to God and the significant others in your life. It might be worth experiencing!



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Handout in this Package

1. Participant's Notes



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Additional Resources

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Bradford, Charles E. (1999). *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*. Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. (A truly fascinating book about the Sabbath in Africa, where there are Christian groups who have held onto the concept of the Sabbath from the founding of Christianity in the time of Christ.)

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Dawn, Marva J. (1989). *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

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Nelson, G. P. (1999). *A Touch of Heaven: Finding New Meaning in Sabbath Rest*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

Ringwald, Christopher D. (2006). *A Day Apart: How Jews, Christians and Muslims Find Faith, Freedom and Joy on the Sabbath*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

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Wibberding, James Richard (2006). *Sabbath Reflections: A Weekly Devotional*. Telford, PA: Big Fish Publishing, Inc.

Wirzba, Norman (2006). *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.

Video

McLarty, John (1997). "A Park in Time." Los Angeles: Voice of Prophecy.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the word “Sabbath” bring to mind? Do you have positive or negative response to it? Or, both or neither?
2. What is your reaction to Heschel’s description of the tempestuous sea and the safe harbor?
3. What are some things you could envision doing on a day set apart as a Sabbath; things that reclaim your dignity, that detach from material things and attach to spiritual things, and so on?
4. What insights do you gain from contemplation of the Genesis story of beginnings?
5. What are the difficulties and obstacles that would make it difficult for you to set aside a whole day every week for personal, interpersonal, and spiritual growth?
6. Is this concept of Sabbath something that you need in your life?

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Group Activities

Purpose: To experience a Sabbath and see what it feels like.

Preparation: There are several ways this experience could happen. The simplest might be to find a local Jewish synagogue, Seventh-day Adventist church, Messianic tabernacle, etc, and take a group field trip. But the worship service is only part of the whole Sabbath experience. It would be best to create a one-day retreat. You could find a retreat center, or take your group to almost any natural setting where the glories of creation could be visible. Include music, silence, discussion, presentation, a feast, and solitude in your day. Then finish with a work of service of some kind, to people in need.

Assignment: Find a time when a group could do this together and make your plans. Go on a Sabbath Day Retreat of some kind, even if it's just worship and an afternoon potluck and fellowship time.

Debrief: No matter which way you choose to experience this day, be sure to gather at the end of the day, the next day or a few days later for discussion, sharing, and debriefing.

Time: Time is the whole point of this exercise! Do it for 24 hours, if possible. Do at least a morning to late afternoon. The more time that is invested the more the participants will get out of it. Frankly, if your participants are reluctant to devote 24 hours to this exercise, remind them that they really will not get the authentic experience unless they participate from sundown to sundown.

Remember this exercise is not the same thing as “come visit my church on Saturday morning.”

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Handout

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Participant Notes

1. The Experiment with Twin Lambs

How would you apply this experiment to your life? What life dynamics does the research suggest?

2. Abraham Heschel, Jewish philosopher and theologian

“In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil there are islands of stillness where man may enter a harbor and reclaim his dignity. The island is the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs as well as attachment to the spirit ... The seventh day is the exodus from tension, the liberation of man from his own muddiness, the installation of man as a sovereign in the world of time.” (Heschel, The Sabbath, p. 29)

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3. A Spiritual Rhythm of Life

“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 from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” (Genesis 2:1-3, New International Version)

A.

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4. Karl Barth, Protestant theologian

“God’s rest day is man’s first day. Hence man’s life begins with the gospel [the good news of grace], not the law, in freedom to celebrate with joy the festal day of God, not with an obligation laid upon him to perform some task, to labor and toil. Man rests before he works.” (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III, pp. 56-57)

5. Personal Reflection

A. How might doing Sabbath impact your life in meaningful ways?

B. What benefits would there be for you?

C. What is one take-away for you from this study?