

In 1949, a missional movement began among a core group of women in Horseshoe Bay: Connie and Marjorie Pope, Elsie and Nellie Lamb, and Margaret and Ellsworth Troop. These women had a burden for the children in their neighbourhood and they began a Sunday School to teach them about Jesus; a few years later, the average attendance was over 100.

As Jesus worked through these women, and among the children, adults began to follow Jesus too, and over time it led to the creation of a church we now know as North Shore Alliance. In 1982, a congregation of 70 people were moved by God to build a facility that would support hundreds; they envisioned a church reaching out to the entire North Shore.

Nearly 40 years later, North Shore Alliance is reaching out, both locally and globally, with the good news that Jesus transforms lives. Moments ago you heard from Greg, Sofia, and Mark; their work in food delivery is one of the many ways we continue to share Jesus with others.

Some people think of history as being dull and distant; history is what happened to people a long time ago, in a land far, far away. If you think this way about history, I want to encourage you to adopt a different script. Future history books will tell the story of our day and time, and while you

and I may not be named, our stories will be included—what we believed, what we did, how we lived.

This Sunday I am launching our Summer preaching series entitled, *Wilderness Wanderings*. We are going to explore the story of an immigrant people, descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They began as a large family who immigrated to Egypt, but within 400 years this family had become an enslaved people group.

Egypt's fear of these immigrants ultimately led to the adoption of state policies of genocide. Exodus tells the story of God rescuing these people (Israel), leading them out of Egypt, and towards a land of promise.

Exodus through Deuteronomy tells a story but it's not a work of fiction; it comes to us in the form of theological history. Theological history reveals what happened in a way that highlights God's presence, power, and provision. Our Summer series will explore biblical texts that tell the story of a God who is in relationship with people, a God who is good, a God who loves, a God who initiates and intervenes in history.

And what do we hope to gain from this study? The God we discover in the pages of Scripture is eternal; He does not change like the shifting shadows.¹ Our situation might be

¹ James 1:17.

radically different from these ancient Hebrews, but their history reveals the same God who seeks to commune with us. As we reflect on Him, I believe we find Someone we can centre our lives around.

The text I've chosen for today can be found in Exodus 23:10-17, and it comes to us in the genre of law; God prescribed a series of laws that were meant to guide Israel's life and practice.

So let's get to the text. **10** *"Plant and harvest your crops for six years, 11 but let the land be renewed and lie uncultivated during the seventh year. Then let the poor among you harvest whatever grows on its own. Leave the rest for wild animals to eat. The same applies to your vineyards and olive groves.*

12 *"You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but on the seventh day you must stop working. This gives your ox and your donkey a chance to rest. It also allows your slaves and the foreigners living among you to be refreshed. 13 "Pay close attention to all my instructions. You must not call on the name of any other gods. Do not even speak their names.*

14 *"Each year you must celebrate three festivals in my honor. 15 First, celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread. For seven days the bread you eat must be made without yeast, just as I commanded you. Celebrate this festival*

annually at the appointed time in early spring, in the month of Abib, for that is the anniversary of your departure from Egypt. No one may appear before me without an offering.

16 *"Second, celebrate the Festival of Harvest, when you bring me the first crops of your harvest. "Finally, celebrate the Festival of the Final Harvest at the end of the harvest season, when you have harvested all the crops from your fields. 17 At these three times each year, every man in Israel must appear before the Sovereign, the Lord."*

When it comes to studying the Scripture, we tend to focus on the "what" question: *What does the text say? What does it mean?* Answering the "what" question is important, but it's not the only question to ask, or answer. This morning I want to encourage you to join me in exploring the "why" behind the "what".

For example, why, after rescuing His people from years of slavery, does God painstakingly prescribe the sabbath in the Ten Commandments and then do it again 3 chapters later? Why did God ask all of Israel to gather together three times a year, in one central place, to experience a multi-day-sabbath, knowing that it would require that people travel across vast geographical distance? Why is Sabbath so important to God, and, for His people?

The answer to these "why" questions reveals the heart of God's intention for His people both then and now.

Let's begin by addressing *what* sabbath is. In vs. 10 and 12 we discover that sabbath is based upon a particular 6+1 rhythm. In the case of human beings, there are 6 days for work and one day for rest. A similar rhythm also applied to the land; six years of planting, followed by one year where the land was granted rest.

The sabbath principle is grounded in the life and work of God. Genesis 1 provides a creation account of the world, and we discover that at the end of each day God paused from His creating work. The question is, why did God pause? Was God tired and in need of a rest? No, God didn't rest because He was worn out.

God paused from His work to look upon what He had made; the text says, "*And God saw that it was good.*" Perhaps you've never thought about God in this way before; He paused in order to enjoy what He had made. Paul Stevens writes, "Sabbath seems to be a waste of time, but in reality it is the redemption of time."²

Darrell Johnson writes, "We were not created to handle pressure, tension, and stress...day in and day out. We will burn out. Nor were we created for constant leisure. We will 'bore-out.' We are 'sabbatical creatures'...who...work hard; but who must stop every seventh day to rest, reflect and

worship. To violate this rhythm is to violate our essential nature".³

Think about Adam and Eve. Humanity was created by God on the sixth day, they went to sleep that night, and what did they awake to? Off to work? 9-5? No, Adam and Eve awoke to the gift of Sabbath. Sabbath is much more than resting from work, it's an invitation to behold and enjoy God, others, and creation.

I think the language of invitation is important; sabbath is both a gift and an invitation. The gift is perhaps the easiest part to understand—rest—a temporary reprieve from our work, but the invitation is surely the greater part of sabbath. Implicitly, through Sabbath God invites us to centre our lives around Him, and when we do, blessing comes to us and to those around us.

Allow me to explain. At the practical level of our lives, many of us live as though God were absent. We act as though we are on our own, that it's up to us, that we must take care of ourselves. When this is our posture, we seldom pray and we worry constantly; we do break from our work but we are never rest. Sabbath shifts the attention from what needs to be done to what God is doing; from what we can accomplish to what God can accomplish. Sabbath requires

² R. Paul Stevens, *Seven Days Of Faith: Every Day Alive With God*, 209.

³ Darrell Johnson, *Jealous For Our Freedom*, 35-36.

trust; we can stop working and worrying because God can be trusted to sustain the world and provide for our needs.

Vs. 12 is very specific. As land owners put their trust in God, ceasing from work to remember and enjoy Him, those in their care—servants, even work animals—would also be given rest from their work. Centering our lives around God brings manifest blessing to those around us.

In vs. 10-11, long before agricultural science was established, God prescribed a sabbath-rest for the land. We know today that by allowing a field to “rest,” nutrients in the soil are replenished, allowing for future fruitfulness. And while certainly care about land, and it’s ongoing sustainability, the focus in our text is less on the land needing rest and more on the needs of the landless. Sabbath for the land meant provision for the poor. Even in a fallow year, the land will yield a crop, and those without land were invited to harvest the crop, and in so doing, receive what they needed.

Because God is Provider we don’t have to live with a “me” mentality. Farmers don’t need to squeeze every bit of profit out of the land, they can trust God, let it rest, and share what it produces with those who have need. But we don’t have to be farmers to centre our lives around God. As business owners centre their lives around God, they don’t need to squeeze every last bit of profit out of their companies; they can share resources with others who have

need. And it’s not just business owners that God calls to centre their lives around Him—it’s all of us. *What would it look like for you to centre your life around God?*

Vs. 14-17 outline three festivals where all of Israel was invited to cease from their work, gather together, and rehearse God’s faithfulness.

- The Feast of Unleavened Bread was connected to the Passover and Exodus. Once a year, Israel was to gather together and rehearse their personal history; they had been slaves in Egypt and God has set them free. One week a year was devoted to celebrating the truth that God was, and is, the God Who Saves;
- The Feast of the Harvest (or Weeks) was connected to the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. One week a year, Israel gathered to remember that God is the God of revelation; He speaks, He guides, He instructs—He has made Himself known.
- The Feast of Ingathering (or Booths) was an opportunity to thank God for the harvest, and to remember that God is a provider. While Israel wandered in the desert, and there was not harvest to speak of, God provided them with food and drink.

Each of these festivals invited the nation to gather physically, and re-centre their lives around the God who Saves, Reveals, and Provides. This was a God worth building one’s life, one’s family, one’s nation around.

Application: In the remaining moments of my sermon, I want to turn your attention to a single point of application.

In these last days I have realized, with some internal alarm, how few weeks I have left as a pastor at North Shore Alliance Church. I have preached over 500 hundred different sermons at NSA since I began; after this morning, I only have two sermons left to preach.

But if I were to go back through all of those previous sermons and distill the most often repeated themes, one would be this: *Centre your life around God.*

I have preached this theme over and over again, so often in fact that I wonder whether I've been preaching primarily to myself. Jesus is the source of wisdom, the source of strength, the source of love. Colossians 1 reminds us that all things were created through and for Him, and in Him all of creation holds together. You were created through Him and for Him, and in Him—and Him alone—your life will hold together.

Here's the thing, we can centre your life around almost anything: our strengths, reputation, or successes; our friends, spouse, or children; around adventure, a job, or the freedom to do what we want. We can centre your life

around almost anything, but, Jesus is the one centre that is secure.

Jesus once said that the person who listens to His teaching and puts it into place is wise, like one who builds their house on solid rock. Building on bedrock ensures that our house will stand in the heaviest of storms. But centering our lives around something—or someone else—is as dangerous as building our house on sand. Without the right foundation, it's just a matter of time before the house collapses.

Following Jesus doesn't guarantee a life free from trouble, but, the Apostle Paul reminds us that it's possible for things to be falling apart around us and *still* be inwardly renewed—by Jesus—day by day.⁴ Let me ask you this morning, is your foundation sure? Is Jesus at the centre? It's not too late, it's never too late; make today the day you centre—or re-centre—your life around Jesus. He will never fail you.

Prayer

Worship

Benediction: In just a moment I will speak a final word of blessing, but first, I want to let you know that our prayer ministry team—Anne Thicke and Cathy Leyland—would love

⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:16.

to pray with you this morning.

Now for the benediction...