

Humanity: Clay-Footed

In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 4

Genesis 2:1-3, 7-9

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Jonathan Malesic finally made it to his dream job: tenured college professor. But it turned out not to be what he'd hoped. Soon he experienced burnout and resigned. In his now largely open schedule, he began to reflect upon and research the idea of burnout. His findings are published in his new book, *The End of Burnout*. Interestingly, Malesic discovered that the real cause of burnout is not overwork. It's not a matter of needing to take more vacation or time off. Rather, he writes, burnout is "the experience of being pulled between expectations and reality...."¹ He uses an illustration to clarify: a person walking on stilts. One stilt represents expectations, the other stilt represents reality. As long as these are aligned, equilibrium is maintained. But when the stilt of expectations outpaces that of reality, you grow exhausted, wobbly, and eventually collapse.

This is an interesting take on burnout. It's not merely about taking breaks or vacations. Burnout is rooted in the dissonance between expectations—what we think we can do, what we think we should do, what we assume life should be like—and reality. We tend to think our stress is rooted in an inability to live up to the standards of reality, when in fact our stress may be rooted in mistaken false-expectations for reality.

One of the root causes of false expectations is the misunderstanding of human nature. We don't expect a human to fly, breathe underwater, or lift ten-thousand pounds. But we do expect that a human being should be able to procure their own happiness, control their life, make positive things happen, find deep meaning in their work, cultivate wonderful relationships, look deep within themselves and discover who they are to then bring this true self to expression. We may not expect to bat our arms and take flight, but we do put very god-like expectations on our very finite human shoulders.

In turning again to the biblical account of our creation, today we will reckon with our limits. We are created in the image of God, yes, but we are also made from the dust of the ground: "then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground" (Genesis 2:7). We possess a unique dignity and

responsibility in God's created world, but we do so with two feet firmly planted on the ground. In the image of God, yes, but we are clay-footed creatures.

Two facets of the account of our creation speak of inbuilt, hardwired, limitations. To be human is to have limits, but these limits need not be bad news. I want us to see what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (2:9) and the Sabbath (2:2-3) say about our limits.

I. The Tree and Limits to Human Freedom

First, we'll consider the Tree and what it tells us about the limits of human freedom. After the Lord fashions Adam from dust (2:7), He makes a garden and puts him there (2:8). In that garden, there are many plants, and we learn of two specific trees—the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (2:9). We'll take up the tree of life another Sunday when we get to Genesis 3. Today we consider the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil because it comes with a prohibition—a limit.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

What exactly is this tree? Why does God put a so-called fence around it? There are a few ideas about what the tree represents. It seems to me that the best explanation is that the tree represents *wisdom*.² The knowledge of good and evil speaks to the ability to distinguish between what is right and wrong.

Why the prohibition to not eat of it? The tree isn't there to be a perpetual tease, as though its fruit will never be tasted. The prohibition says something about how wisdom is to be acquired—it speaks to the source and arbiter of truth and wisdom. Adam will only receive the fruit of Wisdom on the terms of God providing it—God will feed him this knowledge. In reaching and taking from it himself, Adam effectively usurps God as the source of wisdom and becomes himself that source.

Bruce Waltke, in his wonderful commentary on Genesis, explains the tree and this tension well:

The knowledge of good and evil represents wisdom and discernment to decide and effect 'good' (i.e., what advances life) and 'evil' (i.e., what hinders it). Unless we know everything,

we only know relatively; unless we know comprehensively, we cannot know absolutely. Therefore, only God in heaven, who transcends time and space, has the prerogative to know truly what is good and bad for life. Thus, the tree represents knowledge and power appropriate only to God. Human beings, by contrast, must depend upon a revelation from the only one who truly knows good and evil (Prov 30:1-6), but humanity's temptation is to seize this prerogative independently from God (see 3:7).³

The point of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is as simple as it is profound: **God, not humanity, determines truth.** Just as the Creator set the laws of nature, so too, He sets the laws of morality—what is required of humanity to flourish and honor their Maker. The issue at hand, then, with this tree, has to do with human freedom and its limits. To be human, says Genesis, is not to be entirely free. Rather, to be human is to live within the limits of what God determines is right and wrong.

This has never been an easy idea for humans to accept. One of the twentieth century's most famous atheists, Jean-Paul Sartre, found that conforming to another's norms suffocated authenticity. He found "the idea that God 'determined Adam's nature' as something in itself incompatible with human freedom."⁴ In 1952, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas summed up the burgeoning view of human freedom well when he wrote, "The right to be left alone is the beginning of freedom."

To be free, we surmise, means to be free from any constraints and limits—free to determine and be whatever we want. This view of freedom misunderstands the relationship between something created and its Creator. We were made with a design, and freedom will only come in living along the grains of that design.

Once while in a rush, I clumsily filled my gas tank up halfway with diesel. Midway through pumping, I wondered why the nozzle wasn't fitting into my tank better, only to realize to my horror that it was the diesel pump. I stopped with the tank filled only halfway. My car was designed for gasoline, not diesel. So, for several days it sputtered and didn't run right. For my car to be free, it must align carefully with the laws of how it was made. This is true for all things made to work according to designs and rules. Think of a football team playing at its peak. Their offense is smooth, effortless, beautiful. They cannot be stopped as they march down the field. Their quarterback throws a beautiful, high arching pass that seems to effortlessly fall into the outstretched arms of the receiver. People speak of the teams as

playing free from constraints—there is a freedom in how they play. Why? Because they have fastidiously kept certain rules: rules of preparation, rules of blocking and running routes, and holding high the elbow when throwing and guiding the ball into one’s hands without taking the eyes off it. The effortless play was actually under the incredible constraints of hundreds of laws that were obeyed perfectly—any good coach knows this.

Later in Scripture, we will read, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7). This means that reverential obedience to God is wisdom—that is being fed by God from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, on His terms. Love of God and adherence to the Laws of God is what brings freedom. If our expectations in life are that we go our own way, decide what is right and wrong for ourselves, we are horribly out of step with reality. As Thomas Cranmer says so well in an old Anglican prayer:

“O God ... [in] whose service is perfect freedom.”⁵

Humans know freedom, only when they adhere to this limit: freedom is found in surrender to God.

That’s the insight into our limits from the Tree. Let’s consider next the Seventh Day, or Sabbath.

II. The Sabbath and the Rest We Require

In Genesis 2:1-3, we read of the conclusion to God’s act of creating:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation (Genesis 2:1-3).

Twice we are told that upon completion of His works of creation, *God rested*. God did not rest because He was fatigued but finished. Just as an artist, after the final and perfecting last stroke, puts down their brush and steps back to admire, so too God finishes His work and calmly turns to enjoying it.

The verb translated, “rested,” has the same root as the word we later translate as “Sabbath.” As the culmination of creation, God creates—within the order of time itself—a call to rest. The Sabbath will

become integral to God's people. It's the fourth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15):

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work ... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

God orders that humans rest. Apparently, we really need it. In the days of Jesus, the essence of the Sabbath had become bogged down in legalism. The New Testament makes clear that Christians don't need to observe the Sabbath fastidiously in order to find favor with God. Christians are under a New Covenant, made by Jesus' blood, not human effort. This is why Paul says the following to early Christians:

Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17).

But Christians should not dismiss the *essence* of the Sabbath. After all, Sabbath is not just a law presented to Israel at Sinai—Sabbath was part of God's design of creation. It is important that Christians bear in mind something Jesus says while debating religious leaders about the rules and idiosyncrasies of the Sabbath. Jesus declares: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Jesus is looking back to Genesis—the Sabbath was *made* for man. The essence of the Sabbath—what it's ultimately about—is a gift for man. Sabbath tells us that God did not make us ultimately to work, but ultimately to rest and worship Him. Sabbath still speaks to the human need for physical rest and spiritual reorientation—and we can enjoy its essence even now. The Bible paints a picture of ultimate rest as something we enter fully into at the consummation of history—when God fully redeems and restores the heavens and the earth (see Hebrews 4:9). However, the Bible also pictures Jesus as "the Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). And Jesus, having lived a perfect life and having been received by God—has entered into this perfect rest—this perfect peace with God (see Hebrews 4:9-10, 14).

With the remainder of our time, I want to consider what Sabbath rest means for Christians today—for those who would enter this rest in Jesus. This rest involves ceasing—stopping our normal activities of work and labor. But it’s about far more than merely resting our brains or muscles so we’re ready for work again in 24-hours. There is a deeper rest Sabbath is about.

1. Rest from the torrent of time

Sabbath rest is when we draw close to God and experience rest from the torrent of time. As mortal creatures, time is something we have a hard time with. It’s like a clock always ticking—ticking away opportunity, our bodies, our very lives.

Abraham Heschel, in his fascinating book of *Sabbath*, writes,

Indeed, we know what to do with space but do not know what to do about time.... Most of us seem to labor for the sake of things of space. As a result, we suffer from a deeply rooted dread of time and stand aghast when compelled to look into its face.... Shrinking from facing time, we escape for shelter to things of space. The intentions we are unable to carry out we deposit in space; possessions become the symbols of our repressions, jubilees of frustration. But things of space are not fireproof; they only add fuel to the flames.⁶

The mortal human being can only sing with Isaac Watts:

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.⁷

If a human being is going to truly rest, we need rest from the torrent of time.

God does something very interesting to time by blessing the Sabbath. Whereas other deities in Israel’s day associated their presence with concrete objects—Temples, lands, or sacred objects—God associates His presence with *time*. By doing so, God is declaring that He is not only sovereign over the spatial world, but also the temporal world: He is Lord not only of creation but also *history*.

This is why God's people commemorate, not so much places, but *events*. Israel would celebrate the Day of Atonement, the Passover, the Exodus, the Manna in the Wilderness. Christians celebrate the incarnation, the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Christians await Christ's return. All these are *holy moments in time*—they are part of history. God is the God of Time—He is sovereign over history. Even as He brought about His purposes with the created world, so too He will do so with history. The Sabbath also becomes a sign of God's *eternal covenant* with Israel (see Exodus 31:16). The Sabbath, in a sense, exists outside of time—it's timeless.

It is interesting that the formula, "and there was evening and there was morning," does not appear after the seventh day. This formula is stated after each of the previous six days—but not the seventh. I think this conveys that God has entered a permanent, eternal rest—not that God is not still active (He's governing things, providing, hearing prayers; see John 5:17ff.)—but that the aim of God's creation is not endless work, but eternal rest.

When we set aside time to be with God—stepping away from the work and cares of regular life—we are in fact stepping into another dimension of time. We are with the eternal God. It is as though the rushing river of time runs up against the shores of eternity. And for a moment, an evening or morning stroll, we stand on that permanent continent that is life with God. We stand with Christ—we feel the truths that in Christ, we will be alive forever; in Christ, all will be well. We feel that eternal, "*All is well*," and a deep rest comes over our weary souls. We say with the Psalmist, "our times are in your hands" (Psalm 31:15).

2. Rest from the servitude of false gods

The rest God invites us into is also about a reorientation towards right worship. God sanctifies the seventh day, making it holy (2:3). This means it's set apart for the worship of Him. Humans are glory-creatures—bound to worship something. Much of the striving, over-working, and worrying that bog down life are the results of idols we are serving.

Are you exhausted? Are you sick of feeling guilty about all the things you haven't accomplished today? Maybe you need rest from the gods of human opinion and material success.

Are you weary from checking social media? Weary from trying to look perfect before the watching world? Weary of wondering what other people think? You need a rest from the gods of beauty and popularity.

On the Sabbath Jews put down their plowshares in order to lift up their prayers. Observance of Sabbath is “a confession that Yahweh...is Lord and Lord of all lords. Sabbath-keeping expresses man’s commitment to the service (and worship) of his Lord.”⁸

3. Rest from warfare

And finally, Sabbath rest is when we can taste our final rest from battle, from war. So much of the Christian life can feel like a battle—battling doubts, temptations, divisions. We are called to a faithful role in what God’s doing, yes, but we are not called to win the war.

As the Father conducted His work of Creation, so the Son conducts His work of redemption. And at the culmination of Jesus’ work of saving us, as He was dying on the cross, He said something similar to the words concluding the work of creation. Jesus lifted His voice one last time and said, “It is finished.” (John 19:30). The word “finished” could also be translated as “completed.” It’s the same verb that’s used in the Greek version of Genesis to say that God’s creation was “finished/complete” (συντελέω and τελέω).⁹ It’s the word *telos*—something that has come to its appointed completion. The work redemption, just like the work of creation, is complete, is finished. In this completion is our rest.

Sabbath rest for a Christian is when we remember Christ has defeated our enemies already—the war has been won. Despite the nagging persistence of temptations and trials, we can know a deep rest because in Christ we are forgiven, justified, accepted, and loved. Practice the Sabbath. Set aside time that will be sacred to you. Time when you put down your plowshares, put down your idols, put down your weapons of war. Time when you lean against the chest of Christ and rest in the eternal declaration that *all will be well*.

When God made humanity, He made us in His image—but He also made us from clay. We are glorious and clay-footed. Let us beware of the false expectations that we are free only when we can be and do anything we want. And let us beware of the false expectations that we are self-sufficient and self-sustaining. Let us live within our limits—let us learn the restful realities of humble obedience to God, and sweet Sabbath rest in Christ.

Endnotes

1. Jonathan Malesic, *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives* (University of California Press, 2022).
2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Zondervan: 2001), 86; see also Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One*, 113.
3. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Zondervan: 2001), 86; see also Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One*, 113. See also the thought of the late Italian historian and professor of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One*, 113, who says the following about this tree and man's taking from it: "Man transgressed the prohibition, like a child that disobeys his father, who warns him for his own good.... He was not content with what was given to him, and desired to obtain more. He did not wish to remain in the position of a child who is under the supervision of his father and is constantly dependent on him; he wanted to learn by himself of the world around him, and to act independently on the basis of this knowledge; he aspired to become in *knowledge*, too, like God."
4. See Jean Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*, 622; referred to by Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, (Ignatius) 179. See also the words of Milton's Satan, who abhors the idea of submission to God as an affront to one's dignity: "To bow and sue for grace with suppliant knee.... That were an ignominy and shame beneath this downfall." (*Paradise Lost*, Book I. 106-114).
5. "Collect for Peace," *Book of Common Prayer*.
6. Abraham J. Heschel, *Sabbath*, 5. Another writer, Nicolai Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, 134, says, "Time is an evil, a mortal disease, exuding a fatal nostalgia. The passage of time strikes a man's heart with despair, and fills his gaze with sadness."
7. Isaac Watts, "Our God, Our Help."
8. Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon: 2006), 39
9. The Greek version of the Old Testament reads, "Καὶ συνετελέσθησαν ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ καὶ πᾶς ὁ κόσμος αὐτῶν" (Genesis 2:1, LXX). The main verb is συνετελέω. The Greek of John 19:31 reads, Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· τετέλεσται." Here the verb is τελέω. συνετελέω is simply a compound version of τελέω, meaning to complete, or finish.