

I Will Give You Rest

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 31:12-18

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I Say Sabbath, You Say Sunday

Our topic for this morning is the Sabbath. We're still talking about the tabernacle, but it's really interesting...at the end of the instructions God gives Israel for building the tabernacle, he reiterates the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath. Then, after the incident with the golden calf, right before Israel begins construction on the tabernacle, God *again* calls Israel to keep the Sabbath. So, the Sabbath is at the very center of the tabernacle. It must be really important. And it's somehow bound up with God's plan to reside among his people. But how so?

Also, how does the Sabbath command apply to us today? That's a question I've been wrestling with for months. Many of you know that I took a three-month sabbatical this summer. This was a tremendous blessing. I experienced rest in the Lord. I was refreshed and renewed in my relationship with him and with my family. But I'm the type of person who wants to make sure I have a good reason for doing whatever I do. And so, when I began to write my sabbatical report for the elders, I wanted to ground my sabbatical in theology. I wanted to show how my sabbatical fit within a larger theology of Sabbath. But I encountered a problem. I didn't have a working theology of Sabbath. So, I started to read.¹ Some of the guys I read (and greatly respect) believe the fourth commandment should still be kept by Christians today. Although in the new covenant the day has changed from Saturday to Sunday (or the Lord's Day) and the way we keep it has changed, it's still a holy day, set apart for the Lord. Others, like Don Carson, believe that the fourth commandment is no longer required for believers in the new covenant. And they see no explicit connection between the Sabbath and the Lord's Day.

I was stuck. I finished my sabbatical still confused. I didn't know what I believed. I know that rest is good. I've been really blessed by taking a day off every week. And my sabbatical seemed to be really valuable, not just for me but for the church as well. But if we hold to the authority of the Bible, then we must not only ask what works; we must ask "What does God say?"

Lindsey Ayres taught on the Sabbath in Tuesday Connection earlier this fall and her work has been really helpful to me. In her lesson she tells a story of traveling with her family. One day when they were driving, it was time for lunch, so they stopped at their favorite place, Chick-fil-A. But when they pulled into the parking lot, they noticed it was empty. It was Sunday and Chick-fil-A is closed on Sunday.

So, Lindsey asked the question. Is Chick-fil-A keeping the fourth commandment by being closed on Sunday? And was she breaking it by attempting to eat there on Sunday? She basically concluded that the question is all wrong. And most of our associations with the Sabbath are all wrong.

Let me illustrate. When I say Sabbath, you say what? "Sabbath, Sunday; Sabbath, Sunday." When we think of Sabbath, the first thing that comes to our mind is a day. But that shouldn't be the first thing that comes to our mind. There may be legitimate reasons to observe Sunday as holy. But when the

¹ See Charles P. Arand, Craig L. Blomberg, Skip McCarty, and Joseph A. Pipa, *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views*

first thing we think of is a day, we've missed the larger point of the Sabbath and we've robbed it of its richer meaning.

So how does the Sabbath apply to us today? That's the question I want to try to answer this morning. And this is how I'd like to proceed. I want to begin with looking at the Sabbath and Israel. And ask the question, "Why did God emphasize the Sabbath in the instructions for the tabernacle?" Then I want to look at Christ and the Sabbath and see how the Sabbath is developed when Jesus comes at his first advent. After we come to some conclusions here, I think we'll be ready to determine how the Sabbath applies to us today.

THE SABBATH AND THE ISRAELITES

Let's begin with Israel and the Sabbath.

Exodus 31:12-18²

¹²And the LORD said to Moses, ¹³"You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. ¹⁴You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. ¹⁵Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. ¹⁷It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.'"

¹⁸And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

This is the Word of the Lord

Notice how this passage begins. The Lord says, "Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths." There's a sense in which the Sabbath is the most important of the Ten Commandments. And it's obviously important in the tabernacle instructions or it wouldn't be at the center of it all. But why was it important for the Israelites to keep the Sabbath, and how does it apply to God's larger design in the tabernacle? I think this passage teaches us two things.

New Creation

First of all, God's plan to reside requires a new creation. Where do I get this? Notice in verse 12 it says, "And the LORD said to Moses..." This seems like a throw away comment, but it's not. This is the seventh and final time this phrase is used in the tabernacle instructions. Some commentators believe this shows that the tabernacle constitutes a new creation.³

In Genesis 1-2 we read about creation. On the first five days God created the heavens and the earth. On the sixth day he created two people, Adam and Eve, and placed them in the garden to work it. Then on the seventh day God rested from all his work.

In Exodus 25-31 God speaks to Moses seven times. The first five have to do with the creation of the tabernacle. The sixth shows him placing two people, Oholiab and Bezalel, in position to work on

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

³ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary

the tabernacle. Then the seventh is a call for Israel to rest from their work. We're even told that their rest on the seventh day corresponds to God's rest on the seventh day of creation (v. 17).

What's the significance of these observations? Well, in the garden God established a special place to reside with his people. They're called to live in relationship with him in his presence, under his rule and blessing. But all of that is messed up in Genesis 3. In the fall, God's people rebel against God's rule and are therefore alienated from his presence in the garden and now live under the curse.⁴

But when God redeems Israel, he reestablishes a relationship with his people. So, it makes sense that he would also establish a place to reside with them—a new Eden if you will. The tabernacle is a place for his people to live in relationship with him in his presence, under his covenant rule and blessing. The tabernacle is a new creation.

Covenant

But how can Israel stay in God's presence and not get booted like Adam and Eve? Well that leads me to my second point. God's plan to reside requires a covenant.

We're told explicitly in the middle of the passage that keeping Sabbath is keeping covenant (v. 16). But there's something implicit that's just as significant. At the *beginning* of the passage we're told that keeping Sabbath is a sign between the Lord and Israel (v. 13). This is repeated at the *end* of the passage (v. 17). It was a sign that Israel was set apart as the people of God.⁵ They were his treasured possession, a holy nation (Ex. 19:5-6). God had entered into covenant with them.

The covenants God established with his people always had a sign attached to them. With Noah, it was the rainbow. The Abrahamic covenant had the sign of circumcision. And the Mosaic covenant had the sign of the Sabbath. As Israel kept the Sabbath, people would know that they belong to God. As they worked six days and rested on the seventh, it was a sign that they were living in a relationship with God like Adam and Eve did in creation, under his rule and blessing.

In the ancient world, covenants between a sovereign king and a vassal state were written on both sides of two stone tablets (cf. v. 18). One copy was for the sovereign and one copy was for the vassal. On the front side of the tablet, usually at the bottom, the king would place his sign or seal. It was usually an image of the king. It was a reminder that the king was sovereign and the vassal was submissive.⁶

But the sovereign God cannot be represented with any image. His people are his image. Are you seeing where I'm going? As Israel rested on the seventh day, they imaged God who also rested on the seventh day. As they kept Sabbath, they were his sign and seal of the whole deal. And so, like the ancient covenants, the Sabbath sign was placed in the middle of the Ten Commandments, at the bottom of the first side of the tablet.

The Sabbath was a microcosm of the covenant.⁷ That's why in verse 13, it says, "Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths." That's why in verse 16, we're told keeping Sabbath is keeping covenant. And so, failure to keep the Sabbath was failure to keep the whole covenant. It meant they were in rebellion

⁴ See Vaughn Roberts, *God's Big Picture*

⁵ Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage*, The Bible Speaks Today

⁶ Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, 18-19, cited in Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*, PDF edition, 39-40

⁷ Ratzlaff

against God. But keeping the Sabbath would show that they had no other gods and they would not take the name of God in vain.

So, do you see why the Sabbath is so important in Exodus, and why it's at the center of the instructions for the tabernacle? It was bound up in God's plan in creation to reside in relationship with his people. The Sabbath was bound up with the old covenant. But how does it develop when Christ comes and brings the new covenant?

THE SABBATH AND CHRIST

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt. 5:17). The Ten Commandments are a microcosm of the whole Law. They are often referred to as the covenant. And since the Sabbath command is the sign and the center of the old covenant, then obviously Jesus came to fulfill the Sabbath.

If the Sermon on the Mount doesn't convince you of this, let me draw your attention to another passage. In Luke 4, Jesus stands up in the synagogue on the Sabbath day and reads from the prophet Isaiah (vv. 16-17). He reads the passage that speaks of Messiah coming to bring in the year of Jubilee (vv. 18-19). The Jubilee year was a full year of Sabbath.

You see Israel was not only called to observe holy time on the Sabbath. They also had a number of other festivals that signified holy time. There were the annual feasts. And there was the Jubilee, which was the apex of all Sabbath observance.

And after Jesus reads this passage from Isaiah about the Jubilee, he "rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (vv. 20-21). Remarkable! Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath year. How much more the Sabbath day!

But with that being said, how does Jesus fulfill the Sabbath command? There's much that could be said here and much I still don't understand, but one passage in particular I think is critical. In Matthew 11:28-29, Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Then following this statement, Jesus enters a debate with the Pharisees that concludes with him saying, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath" (Mt. 12:8).

Jesus provides Sabbath rest. Jesus fulfills the Sabbath which is at the center of the old covenant. He fulfills all of the law. Israel broke covenant with God. Israel broke Sabbath. They, like Adam before them, rebelled against God's rule and were eventually banished from his presence. God's presence left the temple and then the temple was destroyed. But not only was the temple destroyed, Israel was also exiled from the land where they were supposed to experience God's rest. They no longer lived in God's holy place and no longer lived within holy time.

But then Jesus comes and he's faithful where Adam and Israel failed. He keeps covenant. But he also dies for our sins so that we can be forgiven of sin and given eternal life. And what is eternal life? It is to know God (cf. Jn. 17:3); to be in relationship with him.

So when Jesus says, “Come to me and I’ll give you rest,” it’s a loaded invitation with all of this stuff behind it. He’s saying that he is the way to a restored relationship with God. It’s only by coming to the person of Jesus that we can enter God’s rest.

Remember where we started? So often when we think of Sabbath, we think of a day. “I say Sabbath, you say day; Sabbath, day, Sabbath, day.” And that may be a legitimate secondary association, depending on your theological convictions. But hopefully you see now that when we think of the Sabbath, we should primarily think of a person, not a day. “I say Sabbath, you say Jesus; Sabbath, Jesus, Sabbath, Jesus.”

Jesus is the only way we can be restored to a right relationship with God, which is why we exist. And that’s what the Sabbath *always* pointed to (cf. Col. 2:16-17).

THE SABBATH AND US TODAY

So, we’ve seen what the Sabbath meant for Israel and how it was fulfilled in Jesus. But we’ve yet to answer our beginning question. How does it apply to us today?

The first application is hopefully obvious and undisputed. We need to come to Jesus for rest. If you haven’t yet placed your trust in Christ’s finished work on the cross, today is the day. He’s established a new covenant in his blood so that we can draw near to God. We can be made clean. So, the first application is to come to Christ in faith. Repent of your sins and rebellion and receive Jesus as your sovereign Lord.

Now that said, there are still practical points of application from our text today. For one, we should be baptized and take the Lord’s Supper. For Israel, circumcision and Sabbath were the signs of the covenant. For us it’s baptism and the Lord’s Supper.⁸

Next, we should endure in the faith. Where do I get this? Israel was called to keep Sabbath forever as a way of keeping covenant. And remember, God’s promise to reside with them—to give them rest—was dependent on them keeping Sabbath.

For us, God’s presence with us is not dependent upon our works. Christ has accomplished everything for us. But the author of Hebrews says that we must remain faithful to Christ all the way to the end of our lives if we want to enter God’s eternal rest. It’s not that our works save us. But they prove our salvation.

You see even though we have rest in Christ *now*, we have *not yet* fully experienced God’s rest. At Christ’s first coming he reconciled us to God. We have relationship with God *now* and he resides with us, by the Spirit. And he’s defeated the enemies of sin and death. But we are *not yet* fully experiencing his rest. We don’t see him face to face now. We still wrestle with sin. Sickness and death still plague us. And these things may tempt us to compromise our allegiance to our sovereign king!

But Hebrews 3-4 tells us that there’s still an eternal rest to come. When Christ returns, at his second advent, our struggling and striving will be over! And we’ll enter his perfect and eternal rest.

⁸ Ratzlaff, 295

So since there remains an eternal rest, we're called to persevere in faithfulness to the king all the way to the end. We can't be like Israel who fell away and forfeited their rest. That's what we remember during Advent!

But how do we endure till the end? I want to offer two practical points. For one, we need to gather regularly for corporate worship. That's one way the author of Hebrews helps us know how to endure in the faith.

In Hebrews 10:23-25 we read, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

How do we hold fast without wavering? By stirring one another up to love and good deeds. And how do we do that? By meeting regularly for worship.

In the New Testament, Sunday is called the Lord's Day, because on Sunday Jesus rose from the dead. And we see evidence in the New Testament that the church gathered for worship on the Lord's Day. And that's led many to say the Lord's Day is now the Christian Sabbath and we need to keep the Lord's Day holy, like the Sabbath. But there's no indication in the New Testament that the Lord's Day was seen like the Sabbath or that it was a particularly holy day. Now don't get me wrong, it is holy. But it's holy because the holy people of God are meeting, not because the day itself has any inherent holiness. And there's no command to worship on Sunday. It was simply a day that made sense to the church and it makes sense to us as well.⁹

The main reason we gather on Sunday is to remember the one who gives us rest. We remember Jesus through preaching the Word and observing the ordinances. We meet together on this day not because it's a particularly holy day. It's so we can encourage one another to persevere until the last day, the Day that's drawing near, when we'll enter our final and eternal rest.

The next thing we can do to help us endure is seeking physical and spiritual refreshment. This involves things like taking time off work, getting good sleep, and making time to be with the Lord.

Now some of you may be thinking this sounds a lot like keeping Sabbath. But here's the big difference. I'm not talking about taking a certain day off of work. I'm not even necessarily talking about taking a whole day off. That's what I do and that's what many people do. But in Christ, the requirement to take a specific day off is no longer in play. That said, I do still think there's a sabbath principle that's helpful for us to think about.

In the Old Testament, Sabbath is grounded in creation and redemption. Sabbath reminded the people of God that he creates and he saves; we don't. So, taking time off was a good way to remind God's people that they're not God. And it's good for us as well. But again, it's not grounded in law.

It's actually grounded in Jesus' example.¹⁰ We read in the Gospels that Jesus would regularly depart from the crowds to a lonely place to pray (cf. Lk. 4:42; 5:16; 6:12). And he even called his disciples to do the same. Once he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest for a

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, "Good-bye and Hello: The Sabbath Command for New Covenant Believers," in Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies*

¹⁰ Ratzlaff, 303

while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. So they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves” (Mk. 6:30-32).

We’d do well to follow their lead! We live in a world of busyness and chaos. It’s a world that is still littered with sin. In the midst of the crazy, we need to occasionally stop and get away and remember that we’re not God. And we need to spend time waiting for the one who gives us rest. It’s Advent. It’s a time for waiting. A time for waiting for the return of the Savior who will give us rest.

Psalm 62 is instructive on this point. In verse 1, David makes an assertion: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation” or “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him” (NIV84). Then in verse 5 he gives his soul a command: “For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him” or “Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him” (NIV84).

He moves from saying how *it is* to saying how *it ought to be*, from celebration to exhortation.¹¹ The reason we need to take time away from the crazy is to remember the way that it is. We *have* rest in Christ; he has saved us. And we also need to tell ourselves the way that it ought to be. Even though we live in a crazy world, we should have hope because Christ is coming again. So, let us wait for him in hope.

¹¹ Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God*, 66