

The Sabbath Principle

Exodus 23:10–13, Hebrews 4:1–10

Ever have a particularly good night's sleep? Ever wake up in the morning brimming with energy, ready to tackle the day's responsibilities?

Sleep is a gift from our loving heavenly Father. The Bible says, “It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he *giveth* his beloved *sleep*.”¹ The believer—knowing that his sins are forgiven, washed away by the blood of Christ; knowing that he is accepted in the Beloved; knowing that the Father looks at him, seeing not his sins, which are many, but the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ which alone fits a man or woman for heaven—can sleep well at night, knowing that he is in the arms of his Beloved. This is the “peace that passeth understanding” that is the basis of a good night's sleep. It is what our elders desire for every member of the flock.

Our text for exposition and application this morning is Exodus 23:10–13. The theme is Sabbath (שַׁבָּת) which means *rest*. (The noun “Sabbath” does not occur in this morning's text, but the related verb שָׁבַת, meaning *to rest*, does occur in the phrase “on the seventh day *you shall rest*” (v. 12). *Rest* is relaxing or ceasing to engage in strenuous or stressful activity. This is something the children of Israel had never experienced up to this time.

When Israel was in Egypt, the Israelites were held in the cruel bondage of pagan chattel slavery, which did not recognize the innate worth of the human being created in the very image of God. Slaves were considered the legal property of their master. They had no rights. They were forced to work seven days a week. They never experienced rest.

Can you imagine never experiencing rest, never being given a day off, never being able to take a break from your labor to come worship God with his people? Such was the lot of the Israelite slaves in Egypt for 400 years.

The sabbath laws of the Pentateuch announce the Jews' deliverance from slavery. The emphasis is on *rest*, being able to take off one day in seven to rest in the Lord, to learn to *give* the gift of rest to those under their authority. In chapter 21 God had specified, “If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing.” As time would go on, some of the Israelite slaves delivered from Egyptian bondage would become wealthy and have their own indentured servants, helping brothers in the faith to become responsible workers and citizens. Indentured servants in Israel would work hard but would also enjoy a weekly day of rest.²)

¹ Ps. 127:2

² See the sermon “Poverty and Property” on the text Exodus 21:1–6. https://all-of-grace.org/sermon_manuscripts/2025-03-02_Ex-21-1_Poverty-and-Property.pdf

I have three points this morning: (1) The sabbatical year; (2) The weekly sabbath; (3) The purpose: refreshment. First,

1. The sabbatical year

Our text begins: “Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove.” Clearly, this text has to do with agriculture.

What is this about the *land*—letting it rest and lie fallow every seven years?

Think about it. Where did God intend for man to live? On the *land*. His Hebrew name, *Adam*—man—is derived from a word meaning *to be red*. The first man was called Adam because he was formed from the red earth, such as is found in the Middle East.³

Land is composed of countless living organisms. Land needs rest in order to be refreshed. God knows about this and provides for it in his law. Under the Mosaic law, even the land was to rest. To restore the land and keep it healthy, it was to be left fallow one year in seven.

God had specific instructions for his people regarding farm work! This teaches us that God’s law concerns *all* of life—not just worship and church attendance. God’s law is all-encompassing. It is applicable to everything we do, not just a subset of what we do. Humans are eaters. We have to get our food from somewhere. Millions of American children think that food comes from fast-food restaurants, take-out and grocery stores. Now while we’re thankful that we have many options, food-wise, we need to remember that eating a healthy diet depends on healthy farming. Now while the Bible doesn’t teach that environmentalism is the proper province of civil government, God does want us to be good stewards of the earth. (More on that in a moment.)

While we don’t hear much today about the “Green New Deal,” there are people who believe that life on earth as we know it will come to a sudden end unless man curtails his consumption. But God plainly says, “While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night *shall not cease*.”⁴ Here is a promise to preserve life on earth until the Second Coming and Final Judgment. The hearts of those who don’t know Christ are prone to fail them for fear.⁵ But we who *know* him, while we do not panic with all the talk of imminent catastrophe, *are* called to be stewards of the earth. We should do our part to protect the environment and leave a healthy planet for our children. It is part of the creation mandate, given to man in the Garden of Eden: “Be fruitful, and

³ Easton’s Bible Dictionary, *man* (Logos Bible Software)

⁴ Gen. 8:22, emphasis added

⁵ Luke 21:26

multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”⁶

In our day, conventional farming typically relies on herbicides, genetically-modified crops, and chemical fertilizers, enabling fields to grow the same crop, year after year. This practice is called monoculture. It has become the dominant paradigm in modern agriculture. The result is a degradation of soil health and biodiversity, a prioritizing of short-term yields over long-term sustainability and environmental health. There has been some pushback by advocates of regenerative farming, a method that emphasizes conservation, rehabilitation, and topsoil regeneration in an effort to increase biodiversity, improve the water cycle, and enhance the ecosystem.

God says, “Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow.” In ancient Israel, all the land was to rest simultaneously. In Leviticus 25 God anticipates an objection: “If you say, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, since we shall not sow nor gather in our produce?’ Then I will command My blessing on you in the sixth year, and it will bring forth produce enough for three years. And you shall sow in the eighth year, and eat old produce until the ninth year; until its produce comes in, you shall eat of the old harvest.” What a marvelous promise!

Israel was to keep the sabbatical year—one year of every seven—as a step of faith. Imagine, the whole nation of Israel stopping their farm work for a whole year. All their neighbors kept farming. Maybe some of them said, “What’s going on? Are you folks going to eat this year?” If you had lived in ancient Israel, what would you have thought? The people had sent Moses up the mountain to receive God’s law and pass it on to them. Is this what they were expecting? Eating is pretty important. God’s people didn’t yet have the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Nor did they have the explicit promise “my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” They didn’t yet have the Psalm, “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” But here they were, gathered around Mount Sinai. They had heard God’s audible voice, “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” God had miraculously brought them out of Egypt and fed them in the wilderness. Would this be enough to buttress their faith when reason was crying out, “This is a stupid idea, it’s insane.”

Brothers and sisters, God wants us to have a strong faith. He has given us many precious promises. He has given us historical examples. He has surrounded us with

⁶ Gen. 1:28

a great cloud of witnesses. The consistent message of Scripture is: “Walk by faith, not by sight.” Will this steel you in the face of temptation? Will you turn down unnecessary Sunday work to worship him by faith? Will you obey when the going gets tough? We are to be men and women of faith.

Another reason God’s people were to keep the sabbatical year and let their farms go fallow was “that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat.” God cares for the poor. He wants them to be provided for, not by compulsory taxation, but by the generous, voluntary gifts of people he has blessed. Let me speak plainly: if he has blessed you, then he wants you to help the needy. Begin with the household of God. “As we have . . . opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”

“Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest” is part of the ceremonial law which was abrogated with the death of Christ. It is no longer obligatory for the church. It was tied to the land promise. “When you come into the *land* which I give you, then the *land* shall keep a sabbath to the LORD” (Lev. 25:2). The land promise was an anticipation of the church’s heavenly inheritance. Yet though this ceremonial aspect of the law is no longer obligatory, the moral principles of caring for the environment, caring for the soil, living by faith, and caring for the poor are still valid and ought to be practiced by God’s people. We are not saved by our personal obedience but by the obedience of Christ. Yet, trusting in Christ for salvation, we are to bring forth fruit unto God, and the kind of fruit described in this text is appropriate and God-glorifying.

We have considered the sabbatical year. Let’s turn our attention now to point 2, **2. The weekly sabbath**

God says, “Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female servant and the stranger may be refreshed.”

We have now moved from “six *years* . . . but the seventh” to “six *days* . . . and on the seventh day.” Here is the sabbath principle applied to the *week*—the *weekly* Sabbath. When we think of the Sabbath, we usually mean the *weekly* Sabbath. The prototype for this was the creation week. God himself established the pattern of six days of labor, followed by a day of rest.

Now God is almighty. He never tires, never grows weary, never slumbers. The older we grow, we begin to slow down. We don’t have the same energy we had when we were younger. Scripture speaks of this. “He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run,

and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa. 40:29ff.). Yes, even youths faint and grow weary. It doesn’t happen often, but it does happen.

I have passed my mid-seventies. I am usually a high-energy person, but I do notice that I am slowing down a bit. I don’t go on as many long-distance bicycle rides as I used to. But I had the opportunity to do a 40-mile ride the other day. It was wonderful! Two of my grandsons wanted to do the ride with me. It wasn’t my fastest time. We battled a constant headwind. As the miles wore on, I started to tire. But then the grandsons would pass me and speed ahead as if to say, “Come on, Grandpa, you can do it.” When we finished our ride the boys went out in the backyard to play lawn games. They seemed to have boundless energy. They were not faint and weary—far from it!

But the God of heaven *never* tires, never grows weary, never slumbers. “He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps. 121). So why, during creation week, did he work six days and rest one whole day? Not because he grew tired, but because he was trying to teach humanity a lesson. He was establishing a *pattern*—part of his moral law—the fourth commandment: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.”

This is God’s moral law, rooted in his holy character. Based on Christ’s example the church now keeps the first day of the week as a reminder of the resurrection—a truly new, defining moment at the very center of history. But the pattern remains: “Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest”—six days of labor followed by a day of rest. And “rest” does not mean sprawling out on the couch to watch football. In its biblical context the “rest” that is referred to is “rest unto the *LORD*”: “Tomorrow is the rest of the holy sabbath *unto the LORD*” (Ex. 16:23), “Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, *holy to the LORD*” (Ex. 31:15), “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest *to the LORD*” (Ex. 35:2). Rest to the LORD involves attendance at public worship in a faithful church, unless providentially hindered, enjoying God’s presence, hearing his word proclaimed, responding in faith, singing Word-infused Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, observing the holy sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper, receiving his benediction, etc.

And just as the sabbatical year was a blessing, not just to obedient Israelites, but also to others—the land itself, the poor, the beasts of the field; so the weekly Sabbath is a blessing, not just to the worshipper, but also to others—farm animals,

hired servants, and strangers (sojourners, aliens). How so? Because the faithful follower of the Lord, knowing the supreme importance of public worship, would encourage his servants, and others under his authority, to worship *with him*. In other words, God's people would practice *evangelism*, inviting friends and neighbors to experience the beauty and joy of public worship. We do not want to keep the truth to ourselves, but also want to introduce it to others. Here is a foretaste of the New Testament church, where "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: [but all are] one in Christ Jesus."⁷ Is this *our* attitude? Do we long for others to know Christ and experience the joy of public worship? In two weeks we are planning a visitors Sunday; will we pray about whom we can invite? There is an old definition of evangelism: one beggar telling another where we can find food. We invite others, not because we feel superior to them, but because we are profoundly grateful for our own salvation and desire that others experience it as well.

Farm animals, having labored hard for six days of the week, need their physical rest; God's people, having endeavored to serve him for six days, need their physical and spiritual rest that typifies the eternal rest that the saints will experience in the presence of the Lamb—rest that never ends but is experienced in the presence of our Lord and Savior forevermore, ever learning more and more about our great salvation. Worshipping Christ, sitting at his feet, learning his Word, singing his praises and drinking deeply from the well of salvation, is deeply fulfilling to the hungry and thirsty soul. Just think how wonderful eternity will be! Don't you want to share it with others? An easy way to do it is to give a copy of our church tract, with a photo of the church and simple gospel message, to friends and neighbors, and invite them to come on visitor Sunday. Don't forget to bathe your evangelistic efforts in prayer!

Thirdly,

3. The purpose: refreshment

Consider the ending of verse 12: "the son of your female servant and the stranger may be refreshed." The word for "refreshed" is a verbal form of the noun meaning *soul* or *life* (נַפְשׁוֹ). It is the Old Testament equivalent of our Lord's tender invitation in Matthew 11:29, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find *rest* unto your souls." Soul-rest—that's what everybody needs! We come to public worship battered and bruised from the labors and disappointments we have experienced throughout the week, and what we need is to hear our Savior's voice: "I will give you rest, take my yoke upon you, and ye shall find *rest* for your souls." There is only one place to get that rest—

⁷ Gal. 3:28

that refreshment—and that is from Christ, as we experience him in public worship. There are no shortcuts.

Remember: the people to whom these commands were given were former slaves, delivered by our covenant-keeping God from the power of their Egyptian taskmasters. They were only a couple months out from bondage. They had never experienced rest before. How they must have looked forward to a weekly day of rest!

But we, living in a world of plenty—a world of labor-saving machines—sometimes view the Sabbath as a burden. Sometimes we think, “Nuts! It’s the Sabbath. That means I can’t do any fun stuff.” To think that way is sin—selfishness. It is to be self-deceived and think that soul-rest can be found elsewhere—in possessions, in devices—and that the Lord’s worship keeps me from experiencing true good which I obtain elsewhere.

A lot of Christians don’t understand that it’s not a matter of worshipping or *not* worshipping. Worshipping is *inescapable*—it’s a matter of *whom* or *what* you worship. Worshipping anything other than the God of heaven, through the mediation of Christ, is idolatry.

Dear brothers and sisters, Christ is our *life*. He is life itself. Apart from him is death. Fellowship with him is *true* refreshment—rest for our souls. Look to Jesus! Amen.