

Exodus 20:8-10

“Remember the Sabbath Day”

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (ESV)

Distinguishing marks

One of the great things about our church is that we have such a variety of people from different nations. We have people from China, Australia, Korea, the United States, and a number of other places. Now I want you to stop for a moment and ask yourself what it is that distinguishes people from your country.

What are the marks that distinguish people from your country?

It is their skin colour, their customs, their attitudes, their approach to life, their political views, the language, their culture (or lack of it), or is it something else?

What are the distinguishing marks of someone who is Chinese?

What are the distinguishing marks of someone who is American?

What are the distinguishing marks of someone who is Korean?

What are the distinguishing marks of someone who is Australian?

If you were wandering around London and met someone who was Australian, would you be able to tell?

How would you be able to tell?

What would set them apart?

What would make them uniquely Australian?

Now I want you to ask yourself what you think would be the marks of someone who was Jewish?

If you made a friend of someone who as a Jew, how would you be able to tell that they were a Jew?

What would set them apart?

What would make them uniquely Jewish?

Well, let me tell you that for a large part of Jewish history there were some very clear markers that would enable you to tell if someone was a Jew.

There were some very definite distinguishing marks of Jewishness.

The first one was one that was not very visible in daily life.

It was the fact that the practice of male circumcision.

Since the time of Abraham, Jews have circumcised their sons.

A circumcised penis was a distinguishing mark that you were a Jewish man.

However, as I said, this is not a distinguishing mark that is all that obvious in everyday life.

There are some other distinguishing marks of Jewishness.

What are they?

Well, one is the fact that Jews have special food laws.

They are not allowed to eat certain meats and when they do eat these meats they have to be slaughtered in particular ways.

The other distinguishing mark of Jewishness is the observing of the Sabbath.

And the theme for today's sermon is the very passage in the Bible where God gave his people the law about observing the Sabbath day.

Exodus 16:22-26 indicates that Jews had already begun to observe the Sabbath day.

However, this passage is the one where God give the law about Sabbath observance.

It is the place where God explains what it is about.

So, let's have look at what this passage says.

Exodus 20:8-11 – What it says

Let's read Exodus 20:8-11

8 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

The first thing I want to explain is that this verse plays around with the number seven.

For example, in Hebrew the letter that starts the verse is the seventh letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

The day to be observed is the seventh day of the week.

And the list of people who are not to do work consist of seven groupings – you, your sons, your daughters, your male servants, your female servants, your livestock, and the sojourner.

Second, I need to explain some words.

For example, the word 'to remember' doesn't simply mean to recollect or bring something into your mind.

No, it means some concreted demonstration of remembrance.

When God remembers Israel in captivity he acts to rescue them.

When his people are told to remember the Sabbath they are meant to show their remembrance in action.

And I think the way they are to remember or act is by keeping the Sabbath holy.

Keeping it holy means treating the day as separate or different to any other day.

The other six days are normal days.

Day seven is a set apart day, a special day, a holy day.

The other six days are days for working and doing all the things that are the normal part of daily life.

Day seven is a set apart day, a day when normal work is not done.

And this day is a day for everyone.

It is even a day for those who normally have restricted rights.

Even the menservants, the maidservants, the livestock and the stranger or sojourners are to benefit from this day.

It is a day for everyone.

Having said all of this, God then refers his people back to his own activity in creation.

He says that this pattern of work and rest is found in the way he himself set up the world.

With this in mind, I want you to come with me back to Genesis.

We are now going to take a survey of what the Bible as a whole has to say about the whole idea of rest and Sabbaths.

So turn with me to Genesis 2:1-3

The Bible, Sabbath, and Rest

Genesis 2:1-3

- What is said

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. 2 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. 3 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. (ESV)

Now I want you to remember what has happened immediately before we get to Genesis 2.

In Genesis 1 we see God at work.

He works and his work is energetic, joyful, innovative and creative.

And we are told that the results of his work are good.

However, in these verses we are told that his work has a purpose or goal.

The purpose or goal of his work is not more work, but rest – a seventh day of rest.

The Hebrew word that is used here is the word *shabat*.

It is the word from which we get the word 'Sabbath' and it means 'to desist from labour' or 'to pause'.

Literally, therefore, the passage says that God ceased from his labour.

But there is a problem with this, isn't there.

After all, the rest of the Bible is clear that God has not ceased from his work.

He is still working at saving, rescuing, remembering, and so on.

Jesus himself notes this in John 5:17 when he says, 'My Father is still working...'

So I suspect that what is meant here is that God paused or took a break from his creative work.

By doing what he does, God therefore makes the seventh day different from every other day.

Day seven is a different day.

And this ordering of six days plus a different day is part of the order of creation.

And this order is good.

Now, I need to make a very important point here.

- What is not said

I want you to notice what is not said.

You see, when we talk about this principle of one day in seven we are not talking here about sabbath with a capital 'S'.

No passage in Genesis talks about Sabbath with a capital S.

There are no stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or anyone else in Genesis keeping the Sabbath.

God is not putting in place Sabbath observance here.

The law of the Sabbath does not come in Genesis.

It comes in Exodus 20.

Reasons for keeping the Sabbath

Okay, having said this we need to take a look at the reasons God gave for telling his people to keep the Sabbath.

Various passages in the Old Testament explain why God instituted the Sabbath:

- Exodus 20:8-11

Exodus 20:8-11 (quoting Genesis 2) says that the Sabbath is a day for ceasing (pausing) from work (and therefore being refreshed – Exodus 23:12).

- Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 says it is a day for remembering God's act of rescue/redemption.

- Exodus 31:12-17

Exodus 31:12-17 says that the Sabbath is a day that functions as a sign to Israel and God.

In other words, just as God sanctified the day of rest and sewed it into the nature of the cosmos, so too he sanctified Israel and made it part and parcel of his purpose in the world.

I want you to notice the common thread in all these references.

Notice what God is saying to his people.

He is saying that the Sabbath is a day FOR humans.

It is for human good.

It is for the benefit of humans.

Rest and Sabbath in the rest of the Bible

- Joshua 21:43-45 and 1 Kings 4:25

Let's now move on to the rest of the Bible.

You see, the idea of rest is developed as we move through the Bible.

And the word 'rest' can be seen to have a meaning separate from the idea of Sabbath.

For example,

- In Joshua 21:43-45 (cf. Joshua 1:13,15) 'rest' is used to talk about the situation where all the promises of God to Israel are fulfilled (where they have the land and there are no more enemies or wars).
- In 1 Kings 4:25, rest is the situation where every Jew can sit down under their vine and their fig tree and reflect on what God has done for Israel. Rest here means ceasing from waiting and striving to enter the promised land. It is living in peace in the land of God's choice and under the loving rule of God.

- Psalm 95

One particular reference that is interesting is Psalm 95.

Psalm 95 is an extended meditation on the idea of rest as it applies to entering the promised land.

Psalm 95 tells us about the wilderness experience of the people of Israel before they entered the promised land.

It reminds us that the people of God were hard hearted.

That is, they did not trust that God knew what he was doing and had their best interests in mind.

And the end result of their hard heartedness was that the generation that rebelled weren't allowed to enter the promised land.

- Matthew 12:28-30

In the New Testament Jesus also talks about rest.

Take a look at Matthew 12:28-30

Here Jesus observes people struggling with the weight of living in the world and he calls out to them to rest.

The rest that he invites them to is not a one in seven day rest, but the sort of eternal rest that God spoke about in Genesis 2.

Jesus doesn't talk about ceasing from labour.

After all, he tells them he wants them to carry his yoke which means his cross.

Rather, he tells them about shifting their burdens.

The rest that Jesus is talking about is a resting in God.

It is a rest of substance.

Resting in the book of Hebrews

But there is one passage in the New Testament that spends a lot of time talking about rest.

This book is the book of Hebrews.

Now the book of Hebrews is a book about the superiority of Jesus.

It constantly compares Jesus with Jewish institutions and people.

And it constantly says that Jesus is beyond comparison with anything that has gone before.

Now, in Hebrews 4, the writer takes a look at Joshua and the rest that God gave Israel through him and he compares this with the rest found with Jesus.

Have a look at Hebrews 4 with me.

Look at Hebrews 4:4.

Here the writer makes the point that Genesis 2 says that rest existed before the promised land.

He then reflects on some verses from Psalm 95 and reminds us that Psalm 95 was written some time after entry into the promised land and yet it still urges people 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'

The writer appears to be saying that if God still urging people to enter God's rest then God's rest wasn't completed by entering into the promised land (Hebrews 4:8ff).

In other words, God's rest can be entered today.

This rest is the same sort of rest experienced by God – the ceasing from work as God ceased from work (4:10).

When we read the rest of Hebrews we get some idea of what the writer is saying.

You see, the rest of Hebrews appears to say that the works being talked about here are the works of trying to make yourself pleasing to God by staying in the Jewish system of keeping and doing laws.

This would explain verse 3 where the writer says that 'we who have believed enter that rest.'

Then, in Hebrews 3:16 the writer makes a final plea about rest to those who are reading his book.

Look at what he says.

He urges people to 'make every effort to enter that rest.'

When you think about it, it's a strange way of speaking, isn't it?

Strive, make every effort, to enter God's rest.

The writer is urging these people to go against the tide that says that the way to find peace with God is to keep rules and regulations and traditions.

Rather, the way to find rest is to believe in Jesus, to cast all our burdens upon him, to cast off the yoke of the law and take on the yoke of the cross where Jesus met all God's requirements for us.

Tying everything together

Summarising where we've been

Okay, we have covered a lot of ground today, haven't we.

We started with looking at Exodus 20 and what the verses actually meant.

We saw that Exodus pointed us back to Genesis 2 and the idea of rest.

We then saw that the idea of Sabbath and the idea of rest were linked but that the idea of rest from work was the primary idea.

When we moved through the Bible we saw that the idea of rest became resting in what God has done for you.

So, the Israelites could arrive in the promise land and rest in what God had done for them in winning the land for them.

In the New Testament it meant resting in what Christ has done in the cross rather than trying to make it yourself into relationship with God.

We need to rest in Jesus.

This is the rest that will last into eternity.

Now let's see what all this means for us practically.

I have a number of points.

A rest we MUST enter

Point 1: There is a rest we MUST enter – God's rest.

This is the rest of accepting God's work and rejecting our own.

It is the rest of receiving what God has done for us.

We enter this rest by believing in Jesus.

By accepting what he has done for us on the cross.

Notice what I am saying.

You see, it is not the Sabbath that is the important thing.

In Exodus 20 God pointed us back to Genesis 2.

The Sabbath points to Genesis 2.

It tells us that the rest spoken of in Genesis 2 is what really matters.

And this rest is entered into through Jesus.

This rest is the rest of having eternal relationship with God.

It is the rest of having eternal security with God.

It is the Genesis 2 and Revelation 22 sort of rest.

Sabbath observance in the Old Testament was a shadow of this reality.

You see, the Sabbath rest is fulfilled in Christ.

And so, the vitally important thing for us is this rest.

What really matters is the rest we have in Jesus rather than any rest we observe on Saturday or Sunday.

But let's not forget Genesis 2

However, there is a Point 2.

Let's not forget what is said in Genesis 2.

Genesis 2 tells us that God has made the world in a particular way.

The way he has created it is six days of work followed by a seventh day of rest.

God has sewn into our nature a cycle of life that we ignore to our peril.

We are people who need rest – God has made the universe and us this way.

And the nature of the rest we need is clear – to cease from work.
The rest we need is a day free from work, a day of not doing the things that I do every day.
So, we learn from creation by taking a pause in our normal activity.

But we don't just learn from creation.

We also learn from redemption.

You see, as redeemed people we know that true rest is found in dependence upon God, in faith in Christ.

For this reason, I take it that we should follow the example of the Jews when we take a day off and make sure that one of the principal things we do is reflect on God and his salvation.

Perhaps this might mean taking the advantage of extended times of more relaxed prayer or Bible study or meditating on Scripture.

Or it might mean taking a walk in God's world with your family and rejoicing in what God has given you in Christ.

Avoiding the literal

A third point is that since it is the principle that is set by Genesis 2 (6 days work + 1 day rest), and not the specifics I'm not sure that we need to be concerned about being too literal.

Rather, perhaps I could suggest that the principle be work plus rest in godly proportions, in godly doses, and in regular bursts.

Sometimes modern work demands long stretches of work – commensurate breaks should be taken.

Sometimes accumulated years of work need special leave (e.g. my 9 months off).

We should major on the principle rather than depending on law.

A final point

However, there is still one thing that needs to be said on the issue.

Unless I'm mistaken, the Sabbath is the only one of the 10 commandments not repeated in the NT.

As I've indicated, I think that this is the case because this commandment is clearly fulfilled in Christ in a particular way.

And so I'm saying that I'm convinced that we are not under the Old Testament law of Sabbath observance.

We do not have to keep the Sabbath.

However, having said this, we need to remember Romans 14.

Romans 14 indicates that the early church had problems – some people kept special days, some didn't. The point is that different Christians did have, do have, and will have different practices with regard to this issue.

Some will keep the Sabbath strictly.

Some will be rigorous about 1 in 7.

Some will say that they don't want to keep any days strictly.

Each of these options seems to be okay from Scripture.

Nevertheless, not all these options are healthy.

Not all are wise.

Not all are theologically astute.

But all are okay.

God has given us freedom in this area.

We are not under law but grace.

Therefore we should act like it and not judge our neighbour as though we were under law.

As Paul urges us on this very issue, let us accept each other as Christ has accepted us (Romans 15:7).