

Keep the Sabbath Day Holy?

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[0 : 00] Lord and heavenly Father, we pray that you'd open our eyes, that we might behold the wondrous things from your word, that you'd soften our hearts, that they might receive that word, that you'd transform our wills, that we might be doers of it, and loose our tongues, that we might proclaim it.

And we pray this for the glory of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen. Oh, please sit down. Now, friends, one of the great things about our church here at Holy Trinity is that we have such a variety of people from such a variety of nations.

We have, for example, people from Australia, China, India, Malaysia, Korea, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Iran, South Africa, Israel, and countless other places.

It's a great church for such diversity. I want you to stop for a moment and ask yourself what it is that distinguishes people from some of those countries. Perhaps even your own country. What are the marks that distinguish people?

Is it their skin colour? Their customs? Their attitudes? Their food? Their approach to life? Their political views? The language they use? Their culture or lack of it?

[1 : 14] Or is it something entirely different? That is, what are the distinguishing marks, for example, of someone who's Chinese? Who's Aussie? What are the distinguishing marks of someone who's an Indian?

What are the distinguishing marks of someone who's Korean? Iranian? Someone from Lebanon? If you're wandering around London, for example, and met someone who is an Australian, would you be able to tell?

How? Apart from the accent. But the accent itself is important, isn't it? That is, what would set Australians apart? What would make them uniquely Australian?

And now I want you to ask yourself, what do you think would be the marks of someone who was Jewish? If you made a friend of someone who was a Jew, how would you be able to tell if 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 be able to tell if someone was a Jew.

[2 : 23] There are some very distinctive, distinguishing, definite marks of Jewishness. The first one was not very visible in daily life. It was the fact of the practice of male circumcision.

Since the time of Abraham, Jews have circumcised their males. A circumcised penis was a distinguishing mark that you were a Jewish man. However, as I said, this is not very distinguishing in the sense that it's not very obvious in everyday life.

What are some of the other distinguishing marks of being a Jew? Well, one is that they have special food laws, isn't it? They are not allowed to eat certain meats.

And when they do eat those meats, they have to be slaughtered in particular ways. The other distinguishing mark of Jewishness is observing the Sabbath. And that is the theme for today's Bible talk.

Because we are working our way gradually as I preach to you in the evenings, I'm working my way through the 10 words or, as is more commonly known, the 10 commandments. And the one we've got to today is the Sabbath day.

[3 : 32] And Exodus chapter 16, verses 22 to 26, indicates that Jews had already before this time, before Exodus 20, they had begun to observe the Sabbath. However, this passage is the one where God gives the law of the Sabbath.

And of Sabbath observance. It's the place where God explains what it's all about. So let's have a look at what it says and what it is about. Let's read it again. Exodus 20 to 11.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all that you... Sorry, I'm remembering now the prayer book version. So let me just go back to the NIV.

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, neither you nor your son or your daughter, nor your male servant, your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them. But he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

[4 : 35] Now, the first thing I need to explain tonight is that this verse plays with the number seven. Let me explain. In Hebrew, the letter that starts the verse is the seventh letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

Hebrew people love all this sort of stuff. It probably doesn't do much for you, but it did lots for them. The day to be observed is what day? Well, of course, the seventh day. And the list of people who are to do work or not to do work consist of seven groupings.

You, your sons, I've got to make sure this works. Your sons, your daughters, your male servants, your female servants, your animals, and the foreigner. Seven. Second, I need to explain some words here.

For example, the word to remember doesn't simply mean to recollect something or bring something back into your mind. No, it means some concrete demonstration of remembrance.

So when God remembers Israel in captivity, he will do something. He acts. When his people are told to remember the Sabbath, they are meant to do something.

[5 : 36] They're to show their remembrance in action. And I think the way they are to remember or act is by actually keeping it holy. Keeping it holy means treating the day as separate from every other day.

There are six ordinary normal days. Day seven is a day set apart, a special day, a holy day. The other six days are for working and doing all the things that's normal for normal life for you.

Day seven is a set apart day. Day seven is a day. It's a day when all the normal things are not done. And this is a day for everyone. It is even a day for those who normally have restricted rights.

Even men servants, maid servants, livestock, strangers, sojourners. They are all beneficiaries of this day. It's a day for everyone. Having said all of this, God then refers his people back to his own activity in creation.

And with that in mind, let's go back to what he's talking about. We're now going to take a survey of what the Bible as a whole has to say about the whole idea of rest and Sabbath.

[6 : 44] So turn with me back to in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 2. Genesis 2, 1 to 3. Easy to find.

Second page of the Bible. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day, God had finished the work he'd been doing.

So on the seventh day, he rested from all his work. And then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. Now, I want you to remember what has happened immediately before Genesis 2.

In Genesis 1, God has been at work, hasn't he? He has worked energetically, joyfully, innovatively and creatively. And we're told that the results of his work are good.

However, in these verses, we're told that his work on days 1 to 6 had a purpose or a goal, if you like. The purpose or goal of God's work was what? Well, not more work, but rest.

[7 : 49] A seventh day of rest. The Hebrew word that is used here is the word Shabbat. It is the word from which we get Sabbath. And the word itself, the Hebrew word Shabbat means to desist from labor or even, if you like, to pause, to take a pause.

Literally, therefore, the passage is saying that God ceased from his labor. But there's a problem with that, isn't there? Think about it. What's the problem? The rest of the Bible is clear that God has not ceased from his work.

Isn't that true? Because he's doing his work now, we hope, as we listen to the scriptures explained. God is still at work. He's saving, rescuing, remembering and so on.

He does that from that point on. He's still working on doing those things. Jesus himself tells us in John 5 verse 17. 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. And by doing what he does, God, therefore, makes the seventh day different from every other day.

[9 : 00] Day seven, even for God, is different. And this ordering of six days plus a different day is part of the order of his creation.

And that order is good. Now, I need to make a very important point here. 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 about Sabbath with a capital S.

You see, think about it for a moment. There is no passage in Genesis that talks about the Sabbath with a capital S. There is no stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or anyone else in Genesis keeping the Sabbath.

God is not putting in place Sabbath observance in Genesis 1. Or two. The law of the Sabbath does not come in Genesis. It comes in Exodus.

In Exodus chapter 20. That's a long way down the track. Having said that, 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 did it.

[10 : 09] Why God instituted the Sabbath. Now, you might like to flip back to Exodus 20 now. So go back to Exodus 20 verses 8 to 11. Now, verses 8 to 11 says that Sabbath is a day for ceasing or pausing for work and therefore being refreshed.

If you want to see the reference to being refreshed, it's in Exodus 23 verse 12. So that's the first thing. The Sabbath is about stopping. It's about resting.

It's about ceasing. About pausing. Now, if you were to look at another verse, Deuteronomy 5 verses 12 to 15. It says that it's a day for remembering.

So first of all, a day for ceasing. Next, a day for remembering. Remembering what? Well, God's act of rescue and redemption. Exodus 31 verses 12 to 17 says it's a day that functions as a sign to Israel.

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

[11 : 21] Do you notice there's a common thread through all of this? Do you notice what God is saying to his people? He's saying that the Sabbath is a day for humans. It's not a day for him necessarily.

It's a day for humans. He is saying that it's a day for you. It is a day for your good. It is for the benefit of us as humans.

Now, let's move on to the rest of the Bible. We are taking a flying run through the Bible tonight. And you might like to check up some of the references. They're there in your outline. 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 itself. For example, let me give you some examples. In Joshua 21 verses 43 to 45, rest is used to talk about the situation where all the promises of God are fulfilled.

That is where Israel has the land and there's no more enemies or wars and they can rest knowing that everything is okay. In 1 Kings 4 verse 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 them.

[12 : 35] It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? There you are. Everything's just bearing fruit. The vines are, you know, producing their wine and so on or the grapes that will turn into wine. And you've got fig trees almost, you know, figs almost dropping into your mouth.

And while you do that, you can reflect on how God has made all his promises come about. Rest means, therefore, ceasing from waiting, ceasing from striving to enter the promised land and getting rid of all the enemies that are there.

It is living in peace in the land of God's choice under the loving rule of God. It's wonderful. Psalm 95 is this is a particularly interesting reference.

It's an extended meditation on the idea of rest as it applies to entering the promised land. And Psalm 95 tells us about the wilderness experience of the people of Israel before they entered into the promised land.

And it reminds us that the people of God before they entered into the promised land were hard of heart. That is, they didn't trust that God knew what he was doing and that he had their best interests in mind.

[13 : 40] And the end result of their hard heartedness was that the generation that rebelled against God in the wilderness weren't allowed to enter into the promised land. God stopped them for 40 years.

He gave them no rest for 40 years while they wandered in the wilderness and were not in the present land with no fig trees and vine trees and vines that were feeding them and so on.

Now, in the New Testament, Jesus talks about the idea of rest as well. I want you in your Bibles to turn to this Matthew 12, 28 to 30. First one to find a page reference, yell it out.

Matthew 12, 28 to 30. 977. 977. Thank you. And here Jesus observes people struggling with the weight of living in the world and calls out to them to rest.

Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And the rest he invites them to come into is not a one in seven day rest.

[14 : 46] But it's a sort of eternal rest spoken about by God in Genesis 2. See, notice Jesus doesn't cease, talk about ceasing from labor. He does tell them he wants them to carry a yoke, which means his cross.

So he's not telling them to stop from laboring. But he talks to them about shifting their burdens. The rest he's talking about is a rest in God.

It's a rest of substance. But there's one passage in the New Testament that spends a lot of time talking about rest. And it's the book of Hebrews.

Now, the book of Hebrews is a book that is largely about the superiority and uniqueness 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 him. Now, in Hebrews 4, the writer takes a look at Joshua and the rest that God gave Israel through him and compares that with the rest found in Jesus.

[15 : 51] Look at Hebrews 4 with me. So flip to it again, a page number when someone finds it. Hebrews chapter 4. 1-2-0-6.

The writer makes the point that Genesis 2 says that rest existed before the promised land. Does that make sense? So rest in the promised land, but rest had existed long time before that.

He then reflects on some verses from Psalm 95 and reminds us that Psalm 95 was written sometime after the entry into the promised land.

And yet it still urges people today. If you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. What the writer is saying or appears to be saying is that if God is still urging people in Psalm 95 to enter God's rest, then that must mean something, mustn't it?

It must mean that God's rest wasn't completed by entering into the promised land. That wasn't the end of God's rest. Hebrews 4 verse 8. In other words, God's rest can be entered now.

[16 : 57] In the time of the New Testament and in our time as well. And that rest is the same sort of rest experienced by God himself. The ceasing from work, just as God ceased from work.

You can see that in chapter 4 verse 10. And 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 within the Jewish system of keeping and doing laws.

And that would explain verse 3 here, where the writer says, we who have believed, that is believed in Jesus, enter that rest.

Then in chapter 3 verse 16, the writer makes this final plea about the rest for those who are reading his book. Look at what he says. He says, make every effort or strive to enter that rest.

That's a bizarre way of speaking, isn't it? If you're resting, you're not striving, are you? So how can you strive or make every effort to enter rest?

[18 : 08] Something's wrong with that. The writer is urging the people, I think, to go against the tide that says, the way to find peace with God is to keep rules and regulations and traditions. Rather, he's saying the way to find rest is to believe in Jesus, to cast all your burdens upon him, to cast off the yoke of law keeping and to make the yoke of Christ and to take on the yoke of the cross where Christ met all requirements for us.

That's a lot of ground we've covered, isn't it? We've gone from page one of the Bible to, you know, half a dozen books from the end of the Bible. That is a lot. Now, we started looking at Exodus 20.

We looked at what the verses meant. We saw it pointed us back to chapter two of Genesis. We saw that the idea of Sabbath and of rest is developed all the way through scripture. And 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 promised land and rest in what God had done for them. He brought them into the promised land. He had rescued them out of Egypt. He had won the land for them.

In the New Testament, it means resting in what Christ has done in the cross rather than in trying to make yourself into bring yourself into relationship with God. We need to rest, friends, in Jesus.

[19 : 31] This is the rest that is going to last for eternity. That is the rest we will enjoy in heaven. And resting from all our own efforts and enjoying what God has done in Jesus.

Now, let's see what that means practically for us, because after all, we need to see the commandments were designed for practice. I've got a number of points. So here they are.

Point number one. Friends, there is a rest that we must enter. God's rest. That is the rest of accepting God's work and rejecting our own.

It's the rest of saying, I receive from you, God, what you have done for me. We enter that rest by believing in Jesus, by accepting what Jesus has done on the cross.

Please notice what I'm saying. You see, it's not the Sabbath that is the most important thing. In Exodus 20, God pointed us back to Genesis 2.

[20 : 36] The Sabbath points to Genesis 2. And it tells us that the rest spoken of in Genesis 2 is the one that really matters. And that rest is entered into through Jesus.

That rest is the rest of having eternal relationship with God. It's the rest of having eternal security with God. It's the rest of Genesis 2 and the Revelation 22 sort of rest.

Sabbath observance in the Old Testament was a shadow of a reality that has come in Jesus. You see, the Sabbath rest is fulfilled in Christ.

And so the vitally important thing for us is to enter that rest. What really matters is the rest we have in Jesus rather than the rest we observe on Saturday or Sunday or whichever day you choose.

Can you see that, hear that? It's very important. The fulfillment of Genesis 2 and even of Exodus 20 is found in believing in Jesus and entering God's rest in him.

[21 : 43] There is a point too though. Let's not forget what was said in Genesis 2. Genesis 2 tells us that God has made the world in a particular way. And the way God has created it is six days of work followed by a seventh day of rest.

Six days of work followed by a seventh day of rest. God has sown into the nature, into our nature, a cycle of life that we ignore at 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.

And the rest we need is a day free from work, a day of not doing the things that we 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 learn from redemption as well. You see, as redeemed people, as people saved through Jesus, we know that true rest is found in dependence upon God and in faith in Jesus.

[22 : 52] And for that reason, I take it that we should take the example, follow the example of the Jews. When we take a day off to make sure one of the principal things that we do is to reflect on God and the salvation he has won in Jesus.

Because that's what we're going to be doing in our rest in eternity. Thanking God for that and living in the light of it. So what might that mean? It may mean taking advantage of extended times of more relaxed prayer or Bible reading or meditating on scripture.

On that our day off. Or it might mean taking a walk in God's world with your family and rejoicing in what God has given you in Christ. A third point to make.

Is that since it is the principle that is set out in Genesis 2. Six days work. One day rest. And not the specifics.

I'm not so sure we need to be concerned about being too literal. Now before you take me wrong. Let me explain myself. Rather, perhaps I should suggest that the principle be work plus rest in godly proportions.

[23 : 59] In godly doses. And in regular bursts. Sometimes modern work demands long stretches of work. But if that happens, commensurate breaks should be taken.

In the sorts of proportion God outlines. Sometimes accumulated years of work need special leave. That is a long period of leave.

We should major on the principle, I think, rather than depending on law. However, there's one more thing to be said on this issue. And then a confession.

Unless I'm mistaken, the Sabbath is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the New Testament. And as I've indicated, I think that's the case.

Because this commandment is clearly fulfilled in Jesus in a particular way. And so I'm saying that I'm convinced that we are not under Old Testament law or Sabbath observance.

[25 : 01] We do not have to keep the Sabbath like Jews have to. However, having said that, we need to remember Romans 14.

Romans 14 indicates that the early church had some problems. Some people did keep 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. That is not the Sabbath, but a day off, a day of rest and so on. Some will be rigorous about one in seven.

Some will say that they don't want to keep any days strictly. Each of those options, I think, is probably okay from Scripture. Nevertheless, not all options are healthy.

Not all are wise. Not all are theologically astute. All are okay. God has given us freedom in this area. We are not under law, but grace.

[26 : 05] Therefore, we should act like it and not judge our neighbor as though we were under the law. Paul urges us on this very issue. Let us accept each other as Christ has accepted us. So there's my practical advice.

And now comes the confession. In the three years I've been here, I've not been very good at this. That is, I've not been very good at the one in seven.

So I confess that to you today. And I've been grappling with it these last weeks and months. And it's not right. And it's not right. And it would be hypocritical of me to give you advice I couldn't take myself.

So I give you permission in the next six months to ask me how it's going. Okay? So I'm going to try to be regular about it because I think it's a principle that God has sown into us.

We need it. That means I can keep you accountable too. But we need to be doing it. I need to be doing it. So you can pray for me that I might find a way to make sure this is set right.

[27 : 15] And you can. I give you official permission to ask me how it's going. Although not all on one night. Thank you. So let's pray. Father, we thank you that you are our maker.

And that in making us, you have made us for you. And our hearts will not find rest until they find it in you and in your son.

Father, in our world, which is so consumed with work and labor, please help us to find rest. Primarily in Christ, but also rest from that horrendous, crazy busyness that we find ourselves in.

Please help us to do as you've made us. That is to reflect the way that you've made us in our normal cycle of life. And Father, when we do take rest, please help us to reflect upon your created order and to reflect on what you have done for us in Jesus.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.