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THE GIFT OF SABBATH REST

BY Diana Postlewaite

When you think of the Sabbath Day or the Lord's Day, do you think of REST? Or perhaps you think of a day packed with responsibilities at church or a day to catch up on household chores. Some view the observation as a legalistic day that drains the weekend of fun, while others label it an Old Testament relic to be cast aside. Perhaps, like me, you sometimes feel guilty because your observance of the Sabbath doesn't measure up to the ideal you have in mind. The purpose of this study, however, is not

to promote legalistic “musts and must-nots” or to provoke feelings of guilt. The purpose is to examine the Sabbath's biblical foundation, reflect on how Jesus Himself observed it during His earthly ministry, and consider some ways we can make the Sabbath what God intended it to be—a Gift, a Celebration, a Feast!

WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR THE SABBATH?

The Sabbath began at the beginning.

Before Eve listened to the ser-

pent in the garden, before the first sacrifice was offered on an altar, and even before the Ten Commandments were etched on stone tablets by the finger of God Himself, a precedent was set. “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 2:2-3, ESV). God consecrated a holy day of rest not because He was weary but because He knew we would need a day of restoration and rest.

Around 2,500 years after Creation and just three months after the children of Israel had been miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt, God called Moses to meet Him on Mt. Sinai. There, He first spoke the Ten Commandments and then inscribed them onto stone tablets. It was a dramatic scene with smoke, lightning, thunder, and trumpet blasts

witnessed by the multitude below. The fourth of the commandments was “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8, ESV). The purpose was to remind the people of God’s work of Creation and His provision of rest for mankind. “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” (v. 11). The command to rest from work, given to a people who had been laboring seven days a week in Egypt, served as a reminder that their true dependence was not on their own efforts, but on the Creator who sustained all of creation.

THINK ABOUT IT

Does the way I observe the Lord’s Day reflect my recognition that I am totally dependent on the Lord for the provisions of life, including the very air I breathe?

At the close of the 40 years of wandering in the wilder-

ness, Moses repeated the commandments in a farewell speech before he died. “Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you” (Deuteronomy 5:12, ESV). This time, however, the commandment is related to their years of slavery in Egypt. Verse 15 says, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath Day.” Thus, they were to observe the Sabbath to remember their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

THINK ABOUT IT

What has God delivered me from that should result in my willingness to devote one day a week to resting in His presence?

The fourth commandment received the additional significance of being one of seven

feasts that God instructed the Israelites to observe throughout the year. Leviticus 23:1-3 (ESV) describes them.

“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the LORD that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts.”

Verse 3 speaks specifically of the allocation of the Sabbath as the first of the appointed feasts:

“Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the LORD in all your dwelling places.”

The feast of the Sabbath is not just a day of solemn rest but a “holy convocation.” This would indicate a gathering together for corporate worship and fellowship.

Bible scholars tell us that the word translated “sabbath” in the English Bible is derived from the Hebrew verb *sabat*, which means to stop, to cease,

or to keep. God was serious about ceasing from labor and resting in Him. Old Testament Jews viewed the keeping of the Sabbath as a mitzvah, or duty, for which one could receive the death penalty if found guilty of profaning the day (Exodus 31:14, 35:2, and Numbers 15:32-36, ESV). Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets pointed to idolatry and Sabbath-breaking as the primary reasons Israel and Judah were taken captive.

The Sabbath, however, is not simply a day when labor is to cease. It is to be a day of joy and delight (Isaiah 58:13-14, ESV). Charles Spurgeon said, “Time is a ring, and these Sabbaths are the diamonds set in it. The Sabbaths are the beds full of rich choice flowers.” Yes, the Sabbath includes a cessation of labor, but it is also a day to delight in the goodness of God.

Some might argue that we no longer need to observe the Sabbath Day because Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament Laws. His own keeping of the Sabbath and His teachings about the

topic during His earthly ministry seem to support the intention that all generations are to participate in observing the Sabbath.

HOW DID JESUS OBSERVE THE SABBATH?

He attended the synagogue.

The Gospel of Mark is widely accepted as the first of the four Gospels to be written. One does not have to read far into the first chapter before encountering Jesus on the Sabbath. “And they (Jesus and His disciples) went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching” (Mark 1:21, ESV).

Jesus made it a habit to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath Day throughout His earthly ministry. Luke 4:16 (ESV) records, “And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.” The Gospels record many occasions when Jesus entered the synagogue on

the Sabbath.

He read the Scripture and taught.

The New Testament depicts Jesus attending the synagogue and actively participating. On at least ten occasions, He read Scripture and taught. Sometimes, He would read a passage from one of the Old Testament prophets and proclaim that He was the fulfillment of the prophecy. Luke 4:16-21 (ESV) records one such occasion when Jesus read about the coming Messiah from Isaiah 61 (ESV), rolled up the scroll, sat down, and proclaimed: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Other times, He answered accusations. Once when Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, a man with a withered hand was there. Noticing the man, some Pharisees asked Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus replied with a question about what they would do if one of their sheep fell into a pit. He concluded, “Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:1-12, ESV).

On another occasion, some Pharisees criticized Jesus’ disciples for picking and eating grain on the Sabbath. After recounting two occasions when revered Old Testament leaders seemed to have broken the Sabbath, Jesus taught a profound truth: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28, ESV). Notice that His words were not “The Sabbath was made for Jews.” He, who is lord of the Sabbath made it for all people of all generations.

He healed and did other good works on the Sabbath.

The New Testament records seven miracles of healing performed by Jesus on the Sabbath:

Simon Peter’s mother-in-law

Mark 1:29-31

A man with a withered hand

Mark 3:1-6

A man born blind

John 9:1-16

A crippled woman	Luke 13:10-17
A man with dropsy	Luke 14:1-6
A man with an evil spirit	Mark 1:21-28
A lame man at the pool of Bethesda	John 5:1-18

Brandon Rhea, a Baptist pastor and avid student of Charles Spurgeon's sermons shared the following viewpoint: "Spurgeon did not view the Christian Sabbath as a day of inactivity. Rather, a person should rest from his normal labors to labor for the Lord.... The sum of our Lord's teaching was that works of necessity, works of mercy, and works of piety are lawful on the Sabbath." ("Spurgeon and the Sabbath: A Theological Conviction," founders.org)

When we serve others on the Sabbath, we are following the example of Jesus.

HOW CAN THE SABBATH BECOME A FEAST TO DELIGHT IN?

I am certain that most of us truly desire to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" and to accept the Sabbath as a gift, celebrating it as a feast unto the Lord. If you are a pastor's wife or a church leader in any capacity, Sunday can be the busiest day of the week. How can we possibly make it a day of rest and worship? Below are suggestions and ideas I gleaned from several sources and my own meditation on the question. By seeking to implement some of them, I pray we can affect our mindset in a way that will lead to true worship and service.

- Prepare your heart throughout the week. Look forward to Sunday as a gift from God. Determine to make it different from the other days and anticipate it as a holiday to be celebrated.
- As much as possible, leave tasks of cleaning, laundry, and job-related assignments for other days. One article said, "Rest in knowing that whatever you accomplish in six days of work, inside and outside the home, is enough."

- Play worship music while the family is getting ready for church.
- Worship together and/or serve together in church.
- Abstain from social media and news, but connect one-on-one by calls or texts with loved ones and people you seek to encourage or mentor. (Our oldest granddaughter attends Christian College several hours away, FaceTimed us on a recent Sunday afternoon, and we talked, laughed, and shared for an hour. What a priceless gift!)
- Write notes of gratitude or encouragement.
- Read for your own enjoyment and inspiration. Read aloud with children, grandchildren, or with older adults. Everyone enjoys a good story!
- Spend time praying or writing out prayers of thanksgiving.
- Practice hospitality to a new family in church or the neighborhood. It does not have to be fancy or expensive.
- Visit older people or entertain the children of a young mom who desperately needs a nap.
- Nap!

