

Sabbath and the Law

Ps 92: recite together

A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night...
For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

The righteous flourish like the palm tree...
They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God...
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Intro

I'm old enough to remember the Keep Sunday Special campaign in the UK when we were at Uni.
To keep in law prohibition on shops opening.

Example - students at university - as a group of Christian friends we would stop studying/revising
on Sundays, even in exam time, and go to church and then relax, go punting on the river, while
everyone else was working feverishly. Which stood out.

But were we right to? Were Christians right to campaign to keep one day a week different in wider
society? Were we right to stop studying? And should we encourage one another as Christians to
do the same?

And underneath those kinds of questions are the questions we're considering over the course of
this module.

Should Christians keep the Sabbath? Should wider society?

But ultimately, what I really hope we all get out of this module is the rest that all of us need and
that we're only ever going to find in Christ.

Recap From Last Week

In our current culture we can be caught up in a life of accumulation and accomplishments. But
within the creation account God has woven a pattern of work and rest. And in the words of
Michael Morales, in the Genesis account, "Strikingly, humanity is not the culmination of creation,
but rather humanity in Sabbath day communion with God."¹ The account doesn't end with the
creation of men and women, but with the Sabbath - a day given over to rest and worship. A day
blessed for fruitfulness - the fruitfulness of rest and worship.

A day that points to the ultimate rest we receive in Christ, that because of his work, we can put
down our own work.

Ok, but if that's what creation tells us, what about God's Law?

Sabbath and The Law

Small group DQ - why might God command people, in his law, to obey the Sabbath?

¹ Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?, 47:

The Sabbath is rooted in creation and yet **it takes on special significance for the people of Israel**. And as we'll see in a moment the first place it's explicitly laid down in a command is in the 10 commandments at Sinai.

And yet, before that, there's an interesting episode that sheds light on the people of Israel's relationship with the Sabbath before the law and commandment was given.

A Pre-10 Commandment Case Study: Ex 16:22-30

16:1 tells us they are about 1 month out from the exodus, heading to mount Sinai where they receive the command to obey the sabbath. And for food God provides Manna

In small groups:

What do you notice?

The pattern - with the seventh day as one of rest - mirrors the creation narrative. They are not to do their usual work of gathering food. God will make up the lack. It is holy.

But it's also interesting that it sort of appears out of nowhere - it assumes prior knowledge of the Sabbath on the part of the people. Some degree of familiarity.

Which begs the question, was the creation ordinance passed down through the patriarchs in some way?

However, the fact that people went out to gather on the 7th day says it wasn't being upheld. And God is not happy about that - and the way he says it implies a persistence in not keeping it over the years.

But then we get to Sinai:

Sabbath in the 10 Commandments

Background: Ex 19:4-6:

God has redeemed the people of Israel from Egypt to be his special people - a set apart people, to represent God to the nations - words that are now referred to the church of Jew and Gentile in 1 Peter.

What follows are the 10 Commandments - written on stone by the finger of God. They're the foundation on which all the subsequent laws are based. They contain one on the sabbath:

Ex 20:8-11 4th commandment

Question: What do you notice?

1. Unlike the others, it doesn't begin with a prohibition (a do not), but with a do - remember.

Question: What does it mean to remember? To keep in mind, they must not their observance of it lapse.

2. They must remember to keep it **holy**.

Question: What does holy mean? Set apart for God. Sacred. And what they do on the day should fit with that.

Question: it's not fleshed out in the command, what might it entail to set the day apart for the Lord? To worship him, enjoy him, think about him.

3. There is a positive command to labour - work is good, as anyone unemployed will tell you.

4. Everyone in the household should put their work down - including animals, including the sojourner within their gates.

Question: What's the implication of including foreigners who live among them temporarily?

All nations are called to Sabbath - to enter the Sabbath rest of God, to worship, so the sabbath is pointing forward to that ultimate goal when gentiles are brought into the people of God and all find rest in Christ.

5. It gives grounds for doing it - it grounds it in creation. In God's own pattern of work and rest. By doing so it reminds God's people to live in the grain of creation.

But, generally, it also tells Israel that their time is not their own. As their creator, God makes demands/sets limits on it/what they do.

It's Position within the Ten

Think about where it stands in relation to the other commandments. **Does anything strike you?** It's a bridge - it both looks back to commandments 1-3, and honouring/worshipping God, but it also looks forward to 5-10 and how we treat others.

It looks back to the first commandments that reminds us that Israel's God, YHWH, is not like the gods of Egypt - the gods who constantly demanded their slave labour. As Walter Brueggemann says: 'God is not a workaholic' like the other gods, he is not driven or restless. He rested. The God of Israel is a sabbath keeping, sabbath giving God. And so at the centre of their communal life is going to be **restfulness** and not **restlessness**.

But it also looks forward to commandments 5-10 as it draws in all the other members of the household, family, servants, animals, even foreigners - and they too must rest. **And so, as well as helping God's people love God, it also enables them to love their neighbour** - as Jesus said, the two greatest commandments.

But later in Israel's history, that commandment gets restated:

Sabbath on the Doorstep of Canaan

On the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses reminds the second generation of the 10Cs and so we get the sabbath command again.

Read Deut 5:12-15

Small Groups - how does this differ from the commandment as given in Ex 20?

- Animals expanded
- Emphasis on servants
- The call to remember that they knew what it was like to be slaves.

So in Exodus 20 the Sabbath was grounded in creation, but here it's grounded in God's redemption of them from slavery: You're not a slave any more! I've redeemed you from that. You can rest!

Their experience in Egypt was anything but rest. As slaves it was work, work, work.

But through their redemption by God in the exodus, there has been a regime change; **they're under new management**. And God is not pharaoh, or one of pharaoh's gods.

Instead, the sabbath gave space to remember, every week: God is not a slave master like all the other gods. Instead, he has freed his people for freedom!

And so, in their sabbath day worship, as well as remembering God as the creator God, they will remember he's a liberating, redeeming God.

And that, of course, gave a glimpse of the coming redemption that Christ would accomplish at the cross - from the slavery of sin, as well as the slavery of works.

Question: But what's the implication of this emphasis on servants being able to rest, and remembering they were once slaves?

Everyone gets to rest. You don't work them harder so you can rest. Even servants/slaves - they too are image bearers.

So God's people facilitate the rest and worship of others.

Social justice.

But, of course, as they enter the Promised Land they are going to move from a slave labour economy to an agrarian one - to growing crops. **What pressure might that put on Sabbath keeping?**

Ex 34:21 - even in plowing and harvest. Even when you think, yes but I've got to work! 'The manna has stopped, I've got to provide for myself now.' And they get sucked back into the work, work, work mentality. And forget to trust God for daily bread. To think it all depends on them.

But the sabbath wasn't just an ordinance in creation, or a reminder of redemption...

Read Ex 31:12, 16-17

Question: How does God describe the sabbath?

As a sign

Sabbath as a Sign

Question: What's it a sign of? That God has sanctified the people of Israel, set them apart, made a covenant with them.

OT Covenants have signs:

Covenant with Noah - sign = rainbow (Gen 9:13, 17)

Covenant with Abraham - sign = circ (Gen 17:11)

With Mosaic covenant = sabbath

A sign that he sanctifies them: He *has* set them apart, but through worship and rest on the sabbath he continues to sanctify them.

A sign of God's own pattern of creation/work and rest, and that as God was refreshed so Israel will be in covenant with him.

Sabbath and Sanctions

Read: Ex 31:14-15 - Question: What's the punishment for sabbath breaking?

capital punishment and cutting off.

Read Num 15:32-36 - the penalty is implemented.

Question: What do you notice?

1. God takes the sabbath seriously in his people Israel.
2. It carries the sentence of death
3. The penalty happens 'outside the camp'. The person is cut off from the people - outside the blessings of the covenant. That is, the place of curse.

But if that's what the law teaches us, the gospel teaches us that:

- Christ redeems us from the curse of the law - **Gal 3:13**.
- And he was cut off for us - Is 53:8
- And he suffered outside the gate - Heb 13:12 - he was exiled so we would never be

So, if the Sabbath was a sign of the Old Covenant - the Mosaic covenant, and as Christians we are under the new, and if Christ has taken our punishment for law breaking, are Christians obliged to keep the Sabbath?

This is something Christians and churches have disagreed on, and we'll look at this more in later sessions.

But the command to keep it as a sign of the covenant obviously disappears with the new covenant - but not because it's cancelled, but because it's fulfilled in Christ.

Briefly: in **Col 2:16-17** (Heb 10:1 law generally) - Paul says the sabbath is a shadow of the realities to come in Christ.

So, the sabbath was pointing to Christ and the true rest we find in him.

In **Romans 14:5-6a** - 'One person esteems one day as better than another' - and that of The sabbath that carried the death penalty.

Paul's point in what follows is that food laws etc are no longer valid for Christians in the new covenant. The implication is, the same is true for the Sabbath - that all days are the same.

And when there is growing tension between Jewish believers and newly converted gentiles and the **Jerusalem council** is called (Acts 15), and the issue of what of the law Gentiles are to follow they are **not** told, 'tell them to keep the sabbath because that was given at creation'.

However, the fact that the shadow is fulfilled in Christ tells us there is some continuity from the old to the new:

- in the new covenant all days **are not precisely the same** - the NT speaks of **the Lord's day**, Sunday, the first day of the week, when Christians would gather to worship - but it was probably also a day they had to work, and it didn't become a day of rest until Constantine in 321.
- and **the creation order** of work and rest still stands, but takes on a new significance in **the new creation** that's begun with Christ's resurrection on the first day of the week. So it makes sense that our day of worship (and rest) falls on the first day of the week.

So, where does that leave us?

Calvin: **The three uses of the law:**

1. **The knowledge of sin/Pedagogical:** It teaches us God's righteousness and our sinfulness - we cannot keep it, and so it drives us to Christ. So, with the Sabbath - our struggle to put our work down and rest tells us where we're getting our significance from/idolatry and our need for Christ.
2. **Civil:** It restrains sin in society. Sabbath - greed, covetousness; enforced labour of others.
3. **Moral:** It teaches believers how to live under God's grace. That there is great wisdom in setting a day aside for worship and rest, to live in the grain of creation.

Maybe more than ever we need to rediscover the rest - physical as well as spiritual - from all our working that only Christ can give us. And setting a day aside a week to do that is a great help.