

Sabbath Reflections

By

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Big Fish Publishing Inc.

Telford, PA 18969

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Published By

Big Fish Publishing Inc
51 West Summit Avenue
Telford, PA 18969
www.BigFishBooks.com

Cover Photography

istockphoto

Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 0-9777982-5-9

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To Dad, who taught me the work ethic
that made this project possible. And, to Mom,
who taught me to love Sabbath.

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This section explores the basics of how the Bible describes Sabbath, as separate from the guidelines for its observance. It explains where Sabbath gets its meaning and what it means to God and his people.

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Introduction

As a lifetime Sabbath-keeper, I have long been familiar with the biblical reasons why Sabbath matters. The community of scholars has demonstrated its biblical roots and its relevance impressively. Yet, even amidst this mountain of books and pamphlets, I have often felt that something was missing.

Those who revere Sabbath can readily make a biblical case for *why* they keep it but usually fall back on tradition for *how* they keep it. For years, I have done the same.

What I share in the following pages is a log of my own journey through Sabbath in Scripture. Developing the much-needed biblical case for how to *experience* Sabbath as God intended is best done through *experience*, (an experience guided by Scripture).

That is the reason for the devotional format of this volume. Sabbath-keeping, after all, is no abstract theology. Biblical Sabbath-keeping is a way of life. So, I invite you to join my fifty-two-week journey through Sabbath in Scripture and glimpse God's vision for this special time.

I pray that you are eager to begin but, before you do, please take a few suggestions for getting the most from your journey. Although you could certainly benefit from reading this book through in a couple of sittings, I strongly suggest that you restrict yourself to one chapter per week.

You may wish to read the book twice—once quickly and then week by week. That is fine. But, whatever your plan, don't skip the slow-read experience. The *experience* is the real goal of this book.

You may also wish to keep a "Sabbath Reflections" journal. As you meditate on the chapter of the week, ask yourself the following questions and answer them in your journal.

First, what new insights have I gained to enrich my Sabbath experience? Second, what creative plans will I make to remind me of this insight or put it into practice? Third, how did my creative plans from last week work out and what can I learn from that experience?

I am praying for you. Even as I write this, silent prayers are ascending for all those who read these words hereafter. If you take from this journey as little as a tenth of the treasure I have unearthed, it could revolutionize your walk with God.

Yet, I am awed to think that some who join in this journey will be caught by God's Spirit and carried to much greater heights of Sabbath joy than I will ever attain (this side of those pearly gates). May your Sabbath journey carry you far beyond the pages of this book.

The Basic Sabbath Concept

(Section One)

This section explores the basic ways Scripture describes Sabbath, as separate from the guidelines for its observance. It explains *where* Sabbath gets its meaning and *what* it means to God and his people.

*“By the seventh day God had
finished the work he had been
doing....”*

(Genesis 2:2)

Beginnings

WEEK ONE

Creation is the one reason God deserves my worship. The fact that I exist, I think, I walk, I love, I choose—because God chose to make me—is enough to earn him my worship. We have a generous heavenly Father who gives us thousands of gifts to enjoy, but these only prove his love. They do not earn him worship.

Perhaps you can think of a giving friend, who has given you much. Yet, even if they gave you a thousand times more, would you feel compelled to worship that friend as your sovereign master? I imagine not. Indeed, Creation is the one *act* of God that merits him *our* worship.

Maintaining the proper relationship between creature and Creator is *the* essential ingredient for harmony in this universe. When God's guardian cherub (Ezekiel 28:16) said to himself, "I am a god" (verse 9) and "I will

make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14), he became the devil. And, when he won Eve to the same philosophy, promising, “you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5), she and her offspring became tormented and miserable shadows of God’s original dream.

Restoring and living that relationship will bring back order and joy to human lives. It is certain to work. Why? Because it depends on God. History has proven that we creatures are unreliable and destructive when we try to rule our own lives. But, history also demonstrates, relentlessly, that our Creator can be trusted.

You probably don’t question the need for strong bonds with God. Your desire for that relationship is the reason you read this book. Instead, the challenge is to gain a deeper knowledge of what it means for daily life and to stop long enough to *feel* your need for it.

The Bible introduces Sabbath with the idea of stopping. The very first words that describe it read, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing...” (Genesis 2:2). He stopped.

The Hebrew word for “Sabbath” appears in the second half of this verse, but as a verb instead of a noun. As a verb, it usually translates “rest,” as in “God rested.”

But, we could say, “God sabbathed.” He sabbathed after he “finished the work.”

That word “finished” is also interesting to translate and is linked in thought to the verb “sabbathed.” It ranges in meaning from “finished” to “accomplished” to “stopped.” By the seventh day God stopped the work he had been doing. It was time to reflect and relate to his new creatures.

It’s doubtful that the Bible says God stopped because we wouldn’t know if it didn’t say so. Instead, the Bible uses these verbs to say this pause matters. Since it is the one detail emphasized, it is the *most* important fact to notice.

This new bond between creation and Creator, creature and Creator, merits time to pause for reflection. The importance of this pause is the first fact God tells us about his Sabbath. He is saying, “My child, please *stop* for this one day to consider my plan for you. I offer you hope and a future.”

*“So on the seventh day he rested
from all his work.”*

(Genesis 2:2)

Rest

WEEK TWO

Why would a God who works at all times—with unlimited power, strength, and stamina—choose to rest? This question gets asked a lot but is not often answered. Maybe it's one of those questions you only ask when you've missed the point—like asking what color glass is when it has no color. When the text says “rested,” is it talking about the same thing I do after a hard day's work?

You might say this can't be the *same* “rest” because God doesn't get tired like I do; and you would be right. But, is this Sabbath rest different only for God? It's true that his work was different but that may not matter here. Please remember he wasn't resting from fatigue.

Yet the Bible says, “he rested on the seventh day and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:17 NLT). God's “rest” was

not just a formality; it “refreshed” him. The Hebrew word for “refreshed” can also mean, “to take a breath.”

After creating us, God took a breath. Perhaps it was like the gasp when you first see the Grand Canyon. I like to think that the refreshment God had that first Sabbath was sitting back to enjoy time with his creatures.

Sabbath is a special rest, designed for building the bond between creature and Creator. This means it is more than physical rest. It is mental rest—rest from business, rest from productivity, rest from restlessness. But, this mental rest is not *only* so you can stop thinking about your troubles. It is to help you focus.

The word “rested” is the Hebrew verb “sabbathed.” Observing how this word translates in other texts colors in its shades of meaning. The next place it appears (after Genesis 2), the verse reads, “As long as the earth endures... day and night will never cease” (Genesis 8:22). It is translated “cease” about 20 times in Scripture. This confirms that Sabbath contains the idea of stopping. But, I’m suggesting it’s more than stopping.

The next idea carried by this word says something new. One example reads, “I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety” (Ezekiel

34:25). Literally, it says, “I will sabbath the land of wild beasts.” The word is translated this way almost 20 times in Scripture. The Sabbath hours are meant to *exclude* certain distractions.

From the ideas of Sabbath as a time of stopping and Sabbath as a time without distractions, the picture of unrestricted time begins to emerge. This may seem an odd idea in light of all the rules for Sabbath-keeping. But, the things stripped away from Sabbath are those things that imprison our minds in the mundane.

Sabbath is a time to remember that life is so much more than basic survival and dealing with troubles. Sabbath helps you see that an unlimited God has plans for your happiness. He offers rest from uncertainty, rest from anxiety, and rest from self-preservation.

*“I will test them in this to see
whether they will follow my
instructions.”*

(Exodus 16:4 NLT)

Test

WEEK THREE

Tests measure achievements and achievements come by hard *work*. So, why does God make his day of *rest* a test? And, what achievement does he test for? When God got ready to miraculously feed the newly freed Israelites, he told Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions” (Exodus 16:4).

His instructions were simple: prepare for the Sabbath by gathering extra manna the day before (verse 5). We begin to see how this might be a test, especially when we know the people’s experience up to this time.

First, they were certain they’d starve to death (verse 3). After God sent food, they violated his instructions to gather *only* what they needed each day. The result was

rotten food (verses 19-20). Now comes Sabbath. Their experience has shown them that manna needs to be gathered daily because it spoils by the next. God is asking them to trust him to make it last.

We're beginning to understand the nature of God's Sabbath test. God tests whether they will trust *him* above their own experience and wisdom. In turn, the Sabbath becomes a test of our own trust. Will you trust God to provide for you even when you skip a whole day of work? Will you trust that God's time management plan is better than yours?

When some of the Israelites didn't trust him enough to bet their Sabbath meals on it, God expressed himself as one who was confounded. "Some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none" (verse 27). Then, God turned to Moses and said, "How long will these people refuse to obey my commands and instructions? Do they not realize that I have given them the seventh day, the Sabbath, as a day of rest?" (verses 28-29 NLT).

God plays like he doesn't get it to make a point. "Do they not realize that I have given them the seventh day, the Sabbath, as a day of rest?" In other words, "Don't they

know they could be having fun instead of working?”

They're trading gold for gravel.

How is God's instruction about Sabbath any less of a test for us? The issue still centers on whether we trust God enough to accept his gift of Sabbath. Do we trust him to provide for our needs while we take the day off? Do we trust him to know what will make us happy? Do we trust him enough to give him charge of our time? It's still a choice between gold and gravel.

This test is rooted in the need to recognize our place as creatures of a supreme Creator. When we are asked to observe Sabbath, we are being asked to trust our Designer to know the best operating procedures.

*“The Sabbath was made for man,
not man for the Sabbath.”*

(Mark 2:27)

Gift

WEEK FOUR

When a friend offers you gas money for giving her a ride to town, do you take it? Probably not. And, when your friend insists, you get uneasy. If the roles were reversed, *you* would be the one foisting the gift of “appreciation” while your friend fought off your advances.

Or, maybe you are one of the few who don’t practice this gifting ritual but, no doubt, you’ve *seen* it take place. Why on earth do people play this game? And, why do they push the issue so often when it’s clear their friend doesn’t want the gift anymore than they would?

It is about making *yourself* feel good. Something about *receiving* a gift threatens us. And, something about failing to *give* a proper gift threatens us too. Why? It’s anchored to a fear that runs much deeper: I am afraid that I’m worthless. So, any hint that I haven’t measured up

(however small it is) comes too close to confirming that fear. This emerges even in the petty things, like paying for gas or refusing pay.

It makes us afraid to receive gifts unless we have some way to return the favor, to *equalize* the relationship. Even on Christmas, getting a gift from someone that *you* didn't buy a gift for makes you a bit sheepish. Most people would argue that they just want the other person to know they care. But, I'm not so sure. I've seen the contortions people perform to give such gifts to unwilling receivers.

This was exactly the Pharisees' problem. They were well meaning people, for the most part—very unlike the demonized figures we think of today. But, they managed to turn God's gifts into things they fought to *deserve*. We can watch them at work in Mark 2:23: "One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain."

This violated the Pharisees' *Mishnah* law. It didn't matter that the disciples would be miserable for the day without food, just that this was too close to doing harvest work on the Sabbath. For them, deserving the gift was more important than receiving it.

They appealed to Jesus to keep his students in line. "The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing

what is unlawful on the Sabbath” (verse 24)? With their paradigm of needing to deserve the gift, they hardly saw it as a gift. They saw it more as a requirement or a step toward holiness.

Jesus says what he can to challenge that assumption: “He answered, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions’” (verses 25-26).

In other words, there is a higher principle than *deserving* the gift. And, Jesus’ punch line reveals that higher principle. He says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (verse 27).

If God gave Sabbath as a gift to make his people happy, then any way of observing it that makes a person unhappy violates God’s will. This doesn’t justify complete freestyle, and total freestyle won’t satisfy anyway, but it does reveal that Sabbath is more about joy than pain. It is a gift.

*“You must observe my Sabbaths.
This will be a sign between me
and you for the generations to
come, so you may know that I am
the LORD, who makes you
holy.”*

(Exodus 31:13)

Sign

WEEK FIVE

Have you ever tried to think *without* words? Maybe you can but it's tough, isn't it? Now try thinking without pictures, feelings, or words. Any luck? Probably not. It is impossible to think without using some kind of symbol, something to mark your thoughts. Symbols help you see meaning. In some cases, symbols even create meaning.

When God promised Abram a nation of descendents, he gave him a symbol of that promise. The symbol was something he told Abram to do. God promised, "I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers" (Genesis 17:2). As an act of faith in the promise and as a reminder of that promise, "You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you" (verse 11).

The promise regarded offspring, so God had each man put a physical “sign” on his reproductive system to show faith in the promise. God’s signs have very direct meaning. Later generations mistakenly thought the sign itself had power to insure them a part in the promise.

In response, Paul advised, “a man is a Jew [i.e. a covenant benefactor] if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Romans 2:29). The sign marked an awesome promise and the faith in God shown by performing the sign helped insure the promise. But, the sign alone did nothing.

Take an example. In America, a marriage license carries deep significance. A couple that starts living together without one is deemed illegitimate. Yet, even with its great importance, that legal document, signed by two witnesses, has no power to make a marriage prosper. Instead, it is intended as a sign of the commitment that will help the marriage thrive. So it is with God’s signs. They direct us to what really matters and serve as symbols of our commitment to God and his devotion to us.

With this background, we are better prepared to understand verses like, “Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us” (Ezekiel 20:20). But, a sign of

what? Twice the Bible answers that question. Speaking about his people in Ezekiel 20:12, God says, “I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.” And, in Exodus 31:13, he says, “You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.”

Sabbath is a “sign” that God is changing you, making you holy. By observing the sign, you show faith in his promise to change you. God uses the same phrase to describe how to treat the Sabbath as he does to describe what it means.

He says, “Keep my Sabbaths holy” and then explains that you should do this “so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.” Observing the Sabbath doesn’t make you holy but it puts you in contact with the God who does.

*“The Israelites are to observe the
Sabbath, celebrating it for the
generations to come as a lasting
covenant.”*

(Exodus 31:16)

Covenant

WEEK SIX

A contract forms when two parties reach an agreement that benefits both sides. In most cases, each party leaves hoping they got the better deal. That is just how covenants work. But, from this angle, it can mislead us to read that God's people must celebrate the Sabbath "for the generations to come as a lasting covenant" (Exodus 31:16).

At first glance, God seems to say, "You do something for me and I'll do something for you." He called the Sabbath a "covenant" and we all know that a covenant is a mutual contract by which both parties acquire something they want. That is not entirely false in this case but its implication could be grossly deceptive. To understand correctly, we must count a few more facts.

Who gave the Sabbath in the first place? The question hardly needs asking. You know the text: “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (Genesis 2:3). Sabbath is God’s gift to us. With that in mind, pay close attention to the wording of Exodus 31:16.

It says to “observe the Sabbath.” The Hebrew means, “to observe, keep, guard, preserve;” nothing about creating or giving or adding to. The most demanding message we can take from it is to care well for the gift God has given. But, that doesn’t sound like it benefits him.

It’s a great deal for us but not fair to God. His part of the deal is to give us the blessing of Sabbath and our part is to preserve his gift to us so we may have its rewards. What’s in it for God? In human contracts, each party tries to get the upper hand and win the sweeter side of the payout. The party that gets the short end gets laughed at. But, it just won’t do to say that God got duped. Something else is going on.

God’s covenants are always one-sided. After all, what do you and I have to give the master of the universe? Notice how he described his covenant to Abraham: “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4). There’s nothing about an equal return, just a promise. If we scour the story for any

hint of Abraham's obligation, we find nothing except a call to follow God's instructions (verse 1) and a required act of faith in God's promise (verse 10). God gain's nothing tangible from the contract and Abraham gives nothing that doesn't involve retrieving his payout.

Realizing the lopsided nature of God's covenants, we are better equipped to understand the words, "observe the Sabbath... as a lasting covenant." The title "covenant" means that God is doing something for us. He simply made it so *you* could be happy. What does he gain from the proposition? The same thing you do; your happiness. Making you happy makes him happy. So, this Sabbath, enjoy God's gift of happiness. That's your part of the contract.

*“Her priests do violence to my
law and profane my holy things;
they do not distinguish between
the holy and the common... and
they shut their eyes to the
keeping of my Sabbaths, so that
I am profaned among them.”*

(Ezekiel 22:26)

God

WEEK SEVEN

When the president of the United States gets involved in heated world affairs, people somewhere in the world will protest. Whether he's right or wrong, they will protest. And, these protests often include a likeness of the president, an effigy, on which protesters vent their raucous emotions. Because the protesters rebel against his policies but can't get at the man, they settle for a stand in. They attack him by attacking his effigy.

With this in mind, it is sobering to read that God identifies his Sabbath with himself and treading on it with treading on himself. He complains about his own priests, saying they have "shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them" (Ezekiel 22:26). He doesn't say, "the Sabbath is profaned" but "I am profaned" by their Sabbath-breaking.

Then, he gets more explicit, stating clearly, “They have also done this to me... desecrated my Sabbaths” (Ezekiel 23:38). Human rebellion against God reveals itself in how you and I treat his Sabbath. How you treat the Sabbath is how you treat God.

What does this dizzying thought imply? In both of these verses, the Hebrew word for the violence done to Sabbath is the same. It ranges in meaning from “fatally wound” to “pierce” to “pollute” to “dishonor” to “make common.” But the explicit idea given to it in this context is having made “no distinction between the holy and the profane” and having “not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 22:26).

In other words, violence is done to God when we fail to recognize his elevation above common things. When we treat his Sabbath as common, we do him the same dishonor we have done to it. God is at the center of Sabbath and it has everything to do with his relationship to us. It was born as a reminder that he created us and as a connecting point with him.

Violence to Sabbath is violence to God. The sobering reminder is there because rebellious humans need shaken awake to search their hearts for evil. Yet, a down side always implies an up side. The circumstances in these

verses require a rebuke but a right situation might evoke a smile from God, based on the same principle. If dishonor of Sabbath is dishonor of God, then honoring Sabbath honors him.

So, when you plan your Sabbath time, see it as an effigy of God. If God came visibly each week, how would you prepare? What would you fill the time with? What might be trivial enough to exclude? Think of all the creative ways you would show your regard for him. According to the prophet Ezekiel, you have that opportunity each Sabbath. Truehearted honor lavished on God's Sabbath is honor lavished on God.

*“Each of you must respect his
mother and father, and you must
observe my Sabbaths. I am the
LORD your God.”*

(Leviticus 19:3)

Sovereignty

WEEK EIGHT

“Because I said so” is a phrase that never sets well with children. It is a parental tact designed to end discussion on the matter in conflict. By appealing to his or her authority over the child, a parent hopes to avoid the arduous task of explanations, arguments, and counter-arguments. But, for the child, it inspires defiance.

Our childhood memories, along with the same spark that made us revolt then, can cause discomfort when God is pictured as an authority figure. It helps to know why we resist authority and to ask whether it is fair to pin that on God.

When I argued as a child, I was usually fighting some perceived injustice. Of course, we know that God is the paragon of justice, (except when he extends to us his

unmerited grace). So, perceived injustice is not likely our problem.

The fairness barometer isn't quite enough to explain the common response to authority. Instead, it harks back, again, to the sin problem. Sin is, essentially, me rejecting God as master of my life and trying to serve as god to myself (Genesis 3:5-6).

This is a point at which Sabbath directly confronts sin. After all, God did say, "You must observe my Sabbaths," with no other justification than, "I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:3). In part, Sabbath is a call to submit to God's authority, to renounce your rebellion.

What God says just before this appeal to his authority adds force to the message: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (verse 2). The Hebrew word for "holy" is the same word used to describe Sabbath (Exodus 20:8). It also translates as "separate." In the same way that Sabbath is separate from other days, God's people are separate from the sinful masses.

How are they separate? They reject the popular rebellion against God's authority, so separating themselves from God's enemies. For his faithful, it is enough that *God said* to honor the Sabbath. For them, the compelling reason

to protect this day is the claim, “I am the LORD your God.” When I keep the Sabbath, it is a homage I pay to him as king of the universe. I am pledging my loyalty.

Sabbath observance as a tribute to God’s sovereignty has profound implications for how we choose to keep it. It means, first, that it’s not entirely a matter of how *we choose* to keep it but how *God says* to keep it. This means, the exact day does matter. This means, you should follow his Sabbath guidelines. And, it means that all we do between the first moments of Sabbath and the last, we should do in the full awareness that it speaks of our loyalty to the King.

When God says, “You must observe my Sabbaths” and follows with the compelling reason, “I am the LORD your God,” he is calling you to choose him as *your* God. His is an appeal to reject mastery of your own life. He says, “Pledge your allegiance to me and you will have hope. Show your resolve by keeping the appointment I set with you.”

*“The Israelites are to observe the
Sabbath, celebrating it for the
generations to come as a lasting
covenant.”*

(Exodus 31:16)

Perpetual

WEEK NINE

“Happily ever after” ends many a great fairy tale. Fairy tales are the best that human minds can imagine of perfect happiness. Their plot lines carry common threads: The beautiful princess languishes in misery, awaiting her prince to arrive (along with “happily ever after”). The author may not understand the meaning of their own creation but each time human hearts reach for a better life, it is a plea for redemption. We want our own “happily ever after,” which, so far, has eluded us.

This plea for redemption, this groping after a brighter day, this fairy tale dream is just what God has in mind for Sabbath. He wants to heal our restless dissatisfaction with the “delight” (Isaiah 58:13) of twenty-four hours peace. And he wants it to last forever, happily ever after, in a new world (66:22-23).

To the leader of ancient Israel, God tried to paint his dream to a nearsighted and dreamless people when he said, “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant” (Exodus 31:16). The word translated “lasting” is the word for “eternal.” Just like “eternal life,” Sabbath is eternal. But, this only makes sense. If God wanted time with his creation before they broke the bond, why wouldn’t he want to spend that same time with a race that he sacrificed so much to redeem?

The appeal of fairy tales is the appeal of hope. We hope for a time when something is certain. Certainty fails us in a fragmenting world, and with certainty goes peace. But, God has written his own “fairytale,” the one that inspires all the others, whether their authors know it or not. In this fairy tale, there is a prince and there is a bride. The now languishing bride is really the home of God’s people (Revelation 21:9-10) and the prince is Jesus (Acts 5:30-31).

The promise is spectacular: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:2-3).

The promise is not just for the arrival of a prince, which would be wonderful enough to outdo many a well-crafted tale. The promise includes a more beautiful bride, a better home for God’s children.

Creation will happen again and with it will come a new glory for the day that commemorates the works and the God of Creation. It is from the perspective of a new creation that the promise comes, “‘As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,’ declares the LORD, ‘so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,’ says the LORD” (Isaiah 66:22-23).

Sabbath is a key ingredient in this new creation. And, it is the part of the promise that we have now. Its glory is marred by sin and a human race that desecrates it, but it remains an eternal reminder of the God who made us and plans to remake us. It is our own piece of a fairytale—our link to the prince and happily ever after.

*“As the new heavens and the
new earth that I make will
endure before me, ’declares the
LORD, ’so will your name and
descendants endure. From one
New Moon to another and from
one Sabbath to another, all
mankind will come and bow down
before me, ’says the LORD.”*

(Isaiah 66:22-23)

Reward

WEEK TEN

I want my efforts to count for something. There is a magnetic pull to earning your own way. It makes you feel on top of things, capable, able to do what it takes. Even the get-rich-quick schemes are not about the boats, cars, mansions, and exotic vacations. Neither are they really about laziness. They are about feeling you have achieved impressively. To hold the fortune that so many scramble after their entire lives, and never gain, charges the self-esteem.

But, this high-octane desire is born of a deep frustration. The very fact that I work so frantically to achieve means I have *not* achieved... yet. I might score ten million dollars on an infomercial and drive a Lamborghini but I'll wake up the next morning still chasing the dream. Why? It is that same missing piece, that same sin problem,

that same separation from God (Genesis 3:9). I don't need a Lamborghini to feel good about myself; I need God.

When I read the Sabbath commandment, the desire to have my efforts count kicks in: "A rule.... Yes! Measurable results. I can do this. Here's one way I can know that I *have* achieved." And, naturally, I expect a reward for a job well done. I want to hear God say, "Because you kept my Sabbath, 'as the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me... so will your name and descendants endure'" (Isaiah 66:22). "I ought to get heaven for this."

But, this is scrambled thinking. First off, the real hole in our happiness is the heart's distance from God, not our lack of achievement. Even if we could earn a reward as beautiful as heaven, it would not make us happy.

Please remember that the angel who became Satan was not content even in heaven because he separated his heart from God (Isaiah 14:12-14). He wanted more and thought a place on God's throne would please him. His was much the same as our own sense that achievement secures happiness. But, clearly, it won't—not even in heaven.

Instead, Isaiah 66 names the Sabbath a reward. It's not the means to a reward but part of the reward itself. God promises, "As the new heavens and the new earth that I

make will endure before me... so will your name and descendants endure” (verse 22).

He makes the promise before he paints the picture of this eternal utopia. And, the best picture he can paint of that utopia is eternal Sabbath: “From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me” (verse 23).

Do you see it? The reward for Sabbath keeping is the gift of Sabbath for eternity. There is no way to cheat the system. God rewards those who seek time with him by giving them more time with him. God wants to spend eternity with anyone who *honestly* wants to spend it with him.

Yes, this makes Sabbath a huge test of loyalty and love, which plays a role in separating the lost from the saved (Matthew 7:21), but it also hints at assurance that anyone who would *like* eternity with God will have it.

Expanding the Sabbath Concept

(Section Two)

This section broadens the Sabbath's meaning beyond the basics by reviewing various applications and associations the Bible makes. It explains the finer points of Sabbath's meaning and what they teach us about how to honor it.

*“It was Preparation Day, and
the Sabbath was about to begin...
On the first day of the week, very
early in the morning, the women
took the spices they had prepared
and went to the tomb.”*

(Luke 23:54; 24:1)

Prototype

WEEK ELEVEN

When a carmaker plans a new model or concept, they build a “prototype.” This prototype represents a new way of doing cars, after which thousands of others will be molded. But, as good as the prototype is, most production cars that are based on it won’t be just like it. They’re adapted to specific needs and purposes. Yet, the flare and intent of its prototype is deeply impressed on every car.

This is what God did with his people and their Sabbath. When he began to form the ruffian mob of escaped slaves into a people “called by [his] name” (2 Chronicles 7:14), he began with Sabbath as a weekly reminder to trust him.

You may recall the story of the bread from heaven that didn’t come on Sabbath but doubled on Friday. It was to test the Israelites’ trust (Exodus 16). This was only the

prototype. God's people are called to trust him, not only one day per week but every day and in every part of life.

In fact, we already find hints of prototype in this manna story. Because Sabbath had to be kept, Friday was also shaped by it. It became a Preparation Day for the Sabbath, requiring the wandering Hebrews to gather their Sabbath food before Sabbath came. So, Friday, too, was shaped by the prototypical trust-day, also becoming a day to show trust.

By the time of Christ, Friday was known as the "Preparation Day" (Luke 23:54) for this very reason. It had the flare and intent of its prototype deeply impressed on its identity. It was not the Sabbath, the real prototype, but it borrowed from what Sabbath means. It drew the mind to the great principles behind Sabbath.

Sunday was marked in a similar way. Luke 24:1 records that, two days after Jesus' death, "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb." The English translation "first day of the week" conceals an important idea.

If our English Bibles translated the Greek literally, they would read, "one from Sabbath" (in Greek, "mia ton sabbaton"). That is the Greek way of saying, "the day after

Sabbath.” And, the same expression repeats throughout the New Testament (Mark 16:2; John 20:1; Acts 20:7). Sabbath was the reference point for every day of the week (first day after Sabbath... second day... third day...).

Not only days of the week are patterned after Sabbath but also religious festivals (Leviticus 23:16), agricultural practice (Leviticus 25:2-4), financial policy (Nehemiah 10:31), servant obligation (Leviticus 25:8-10), and salvation experience (Hebrews 4:1-13). The list goes on. Something about Sabbath makes it the prototype for God’s interaction with his people.

Why is this? Maybe it’s because Sabbath reminds us of our Creator. Maybe it’s because Sabbath helps us to rest, as we trust our Maker. Maybe it’s because Sabbath tests our loyalty (so it must expand to test every part of life). Maybe it’s because Sabbath is a gift and a covenant sign. Maybe it’s because Sabbath represents a piece of who God is. Maybe it’s because it points to God’s sovereignty or our eternal reward. Or, perhaps, it is all of this. Sabbath is the prototype for living.

*“Speak to the Israelites and say
to them: ‘When you enter the
land I am going to give you, the
land itself must observe a sabbath
to the LORD.’”*

(Leviticus 25:2)

Land

WEEK TWELVE

By now, it must seem reasonable to take a weekly Sabbath rest (Exodus 20:8-9). It even makes sense for animals to rest (verse 9), at least for physical reasons. And, we might not have too much trouble explaining why God “rested” on the Sabbath of Creation week (Genesis 2:2). But, why does land need a rest? Is it just an agricultural technique to build the soil? Or, can this fact broaden our understanding of Sabbath? If so, what does it tell us?

We’ve explored the idea of sabbatical prototyping. This “sabbath to the LORD” for the “land” (Leviticus 25:2) is an example of that. The land-sabbath demonstrates at least two sides of Sabbath. First, it shows that God wants the Sabbath’s creature-dependence concept in all parts of life. Second, it shows that all creation must honor its Creator, whether by intelligent choice or passive ascent.

The more emphatic of these ideas is the view that creature-dependence should saturate life. The words of God thundered from Mount Sinai, “When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD” (Leviticus 25:2).

The land-sabbath hinges on the phrase, “land I am going to give you.” Giving the land is an act of creation because God is forming a new nation with it. The *logical* approach to land ownership is to farm it and provide for your own needs. Instead, God calls for trust in him to provide.

This trust exercise is explicitly based on the weekly Sabbath. God explains the idea in terms that echo the Sabbath commandment of Exodus 20:8-11: “For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards... Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you—for yourself, your manservant and maidservant, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you” (verses 3,4, 6).

In a phrase, let God provide. Yet, the picture is not complete with only the trust concept. The idea that God’s

entire creation must honor its Creator adds depth to our understanding. It reminds us that everything Sabbath teaches shines from what God has made.

We can look to the lessons of nature to enrich our Sabbath rest. When we do, we see that grace is worked through it all—God’s Sabbath grace gained by trust. A seventh year land-sabbath taught the Israelites not to exploit the land but to learn from it as a symbol of its Creator.

For ancient Israel, God prescribed a course of action that would bring these lessons to mind. Today, the application of these principles remains largely for us to decide, (since few of us are farmers). So, sit down with a piece of paper and brainstorm a list of things you could do to draw your mind to the lesson that God’s Sabbath grace can saturate life.

*“Six days you shall labor and do
all your work, but the seventh
day is a Sabbath to the LORD
your God.”*

(Exodus 20:9-10)

Backdrop

WEEK THIRTEEN

The Sabbath commandment says almost as much about work as it says about rest. After starting with, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8), God begins his *description* of “keeping it holy” with the words, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (verse 9).

It is tempting to think that God mentions the six days of work as a formality or to illustrate how to count the sevens. But, he does mention them *twice* in this one commandment. The repetition hints at something more. The text’s argument for work goes like this: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (verse 9) because “in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them” (verse 11).

Our work is rooted in God's work, which he marked with Sabbath. That much is clear. But, what is the nature of this link and what does it have to do with keeping the Sabbath holy?

It is no accident that the commandment mentions sky, land, sea, and their contents. These words hark back to God's work of Creation but they also allude to the first work God gave humans. He said, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28).

The Lord "made" sky, land, and sea; and we humans are to "subdue" and "rule" it. Rest is nothing if not in contrast with work. How can I "stop" as the Hebrew word "Sabbath" implies if I am not already doing something? Sabbath is a hollow concept without the experience of work for the first six days. But, how exactly does this work of subduing and ruling what God has made look in modern life?

No doubt, sin has altered the way it plays out now. But, the commandment from Sinai shows that God still expects us to work with his creation and that work is still the backdrop to a meaningful Sabbath.

The pattern is like clockwork: God creates and humans interact with his creation. It is as if God wants his people to trace his footprints and, by them, learn as much of his heart as they can know. He poured himself into planting “a garden in the east, in Eden” (Genesis 2:8), and then he “took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (verse 15), to know it thoroughly.

He “formed... all the beasts... and the birds,” then “brought them to the man to see what he would name them” (verse 19). God wanted him to know his handiwork well enough to name it. The list goes on.

After sin, this interaction with God’s workmanship continued but became more difficult. Before sin, “the Lord commanded man, “You are free to eat”” (verse 16) and after sin, he said, “through painful toil you will eat” (Genesis 3:17).

Before sin, God said, “Be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1:28) and after sin, he said, “with pain you will give birth to children” (Genesis 3:16). Yes, with sin, it is more difficult to know God through our work with his creation but no less necessary.

Only after we have drawn closer to God’s mind and personality through six days of work in his creation do we

know what we have to celebrate on the day of remembrance. Every kind of work is foreshadowed by God's first work. And, every object of work is born of that first work.

The difference between meaningless labor and spiritual work, which is rooted in God, rests in individual minds. Do you seek to know God through your work with the work of his hands? When you do, you can also begin to know his Sabbath rest.

*“Six days a week are set apart
for your daily duties and regular
work, but the seventh day is a
day of rest dedicated to the
LORD your God. On that day
no one in your household may do
any kind of work....”*

(Exodus 20:9-10 NLT)

Work

WEEK FOURTEEN

Hard work is a virtue. It provides for basic needs. Paul, Silas, and Timothy even sealed it in law, saying, “Whoever does not work should not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10 NLT). The preamble to this maxim comes with even more force, claiming to rest on Christ’s authority.

It reads, “And now, dear brothers and sisters, we give you this command with the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ: Stay away from any Christian who lives in idleness and doesn’t follow the tradition of hard work we gave you” (verse 6 NLT).

With such a strong appeal to work, along with similar advice in Proverbs and Genesis, where work had a place in God’s perfect creation (Genesis 2:15), it does seem strange that God requires one-seventh of our time to be

idle. The idea is familiar, so it might not feel as strange as it really is. But, there is quite a paradox here.

Maybe it would be less strange if God were less strict about stopping work for the day. In fact, if he weren't God, his regulations would be downright petty. For example, why does he care if your ox or your donkey works on Sabbath (Exodus 23:12)? Why did he place a death sentence on anyone who worked on that day (31:15)? And, why does he bother to specify details like, "Do not bring a load out of your houses... on the Sabbath" (Jeremiah 17:22)? There must be some deeper reason for all this.

Work is associated with strength and capability. We gain self-esteem from knowing that we've worked hard for what we have. And, on a more spiritual note, we can learn about God through our work in his creation. But, work is really about providing for our families and ourselves. To understand the meaning of God's no work policy, we should know that humans didn't always depend on their own work to live.

In the perfect world that God created, he put man in Eden "to work it and take care of it" and he told him, "You are free to eat..." (Genesis 2:15-16). This implies that man's work was of a kind that didn't directly produce the

fruit, since God gave special permission to eat it. God spoke as if he was the provider.

Then, Adam and Eve fell for the devil's promise that they could "be like God" (3:5) and the nature of their work changed. God spoke about the change in their work directly, saying, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (verse 19). The human had to try providing for himself.

Before we humans began the still popular tradition of trying to "be like God," he was the unquestioned provider for life. Today, God is still the provider but he gives us a taste of what we asked for when we asked for his job.

We work in "painful toil" (verse 17) for six days to provide for ourselves. Then, once a week, God has us stop and notice that we haven't given ourselves all we need. If we didn't stop to notice that, we would sink deep into self-deception and actually think we were making it alone. Sabbath highlights our need for dependence. It reminds us that we are always better off when we let God be God.

*“There are six days when you
may work, but the seventh day is
a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred
assembly. You are not to do any
work; wherever you live, it is a
Sabbath to the LORD.”*

(Leviticus 23:3)

Social

WEEK FIFTEEN

It has been said that the two great institutions founded at Creation are Sabbath and marriage. It should also be said that sin challenged the spirit of each. Marriage was the highest human link. Sabbath centered on an intimate bond with our Creator. Both fell apart when sin entered the picture.

The call of God that echoed through a silent Eden sums up the tragedy: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9-10). The connection was broken. Marriage depends on the creature/Creator relationship and is the apex of all human relationships. Sin scuttled this too, stirring discord (verses 12, 16).

The post-sin Sabbath is our link between broken ideals and hope. Connecting with our Creator is not easy like it was in Eden but Sabbath is the window through

which we see a better future. Building trust with fellow humans is a steep road but Sabbath is the path that promises smoother traveling. It is right that our post-sin Sabbath should offer hope amidst the pain for *both* broken relations—the one with God and the one with others.

God made this link explicit to Moses when he restated his Sabbath command in Leviticus 23:3. With almost the same words we find at the heart of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11), God said, “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD.”

Please note the addition. Sabbath is “a day of sacred assembly.” God has drawn together time for relationship building with him and reconnecting with each other. In this way, Sabbath offers hope for the reversal of sin’s damage.

It is often said that salvation is a one on one convention, between God and you. On one level this is true, since each person makes his or her own choice (Joshua 24:15). But, we must ask, “What is salvation?” It means being saved *from* sin (Romans 6:22), the very sin that breaks down relationships.

And, it promises restoration to a pre-sin state (Acts 3:19-21), which means it restores those connections. If one

views salvation as a process that begins now (1 Thessalonians 5:23), and not just as an end-time rescue (verses 16-17), Sabbath's role of restoring relationships with each other (as well as God) makes perfect sense.

This flies in the face of American individualism. It means that true Sabbath keeping requires social time with other human beings, human beings that draw closer to each other as they draw closer to God. This does not imply that you need other people in order to be saved but it does reveal the profound fact that social time is part of the Sabbath grace experience.

So, next time someone with bad hair and inane social habits sits in the pew next to you, remember that they are a part of God's Sabbath gift to you and try your best to receive that gift with pleasure. When you feel like sleeping through Sabbath study and lazing around the house during worship service, keep in mind that you are missing a good share of what Sabbath means. And, next time you find yourself warmed to the toes by a friendship at church, send up a prayer of thanks for this wonderful Sabbath gift.

*“Observe my Sabbaths and have
reverence for my sanctuary. I am
the LORD.”*

(Leviticus 19:30)

Sanctuary

WEEK SIXTEEN

Associations mean a great deal, especially biblical ones. If you hear a friend mention someone named Rachel each time he speaks of his brother Kevin, you know there's a link between Kevin and Rachel. Associations like this can imply volumes. Maybe Rachel is Kevin's girlfriend, his wife, his daughter, his mother, or just a close friend. The possibilities are many but the importance of their relationship is unmistakable.

With this in mind, carefully ponder the words of Leviticus 19:30: "Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD." What associations do you see? Now, compare Leviticus 19:30 with Leviticus 26:2: "Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD." Ditto. When Scripture repeats something, it's important. But, what does it mean?

Now, Compare Ezekiel 23:38 with the two Leviticus texts. It reads, “They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths.” This one... two... three... punch hammers out three times in Scripture. In all three verses, the cadence pounds into our brains that God himself is intrinsically tied to Sabbath. But, these verses also show the inseparability of God, his Sabbath, *and his sanctuary*.

Further evidence cements these associations. For example, the first time God is recorded as the actor of the Hebrew verb “to sanctify,” Scripture says, “God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it” (Genesis 2:3—KJV) and the next time, he says, “I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation” (Exodus 29:43-44—KJV), which was his first earthly sanctuary. So, the first two times God is described in the rare act of sanctifying something, he designates the Sabbath and then the sanctuary.

What do these associations mean? How are Sabbath and sanctuary connected? If Sabbath is our *special time* with God, the sanctuary is our *special place* with God. When he gave his sanctuary blueprints to Moses, God said, “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). Like Sabbath, God’s

sanctuary is for being with God. Both institutions serve a common goal.

Later in Scripture, three separate verses echo the phrase “I am the LORD who sanctifies you” (Exodus 31:13; Leviticus 20:8; 22:32), signaling that God also sanctifies his people. This matters because the Hebrew verb “to sanctify” is the very word from which the sanctuary gets its name. In fact, it is the same word in the form of a noun instead of a verb. The sanctuary is a place for being sanctified. So, by association, the Sabbath is a day for being sanctified.

To be sanctified means to be “set apart” from this world, just like the Sabbath is set apart (“sanctified”) from the other six days and the sanctuary is set apart (“sanctified”) from other places. Sabbath sets you apart (“sanctifies”) from common sin. Because it puts you in contact with God, it is a means through which God makes good his promise, “I am the LORD who sanctifies you.” Let him use Sabbath to separate you from the world.

*“This is what the Sovereign
LORD says: The gate of the
inner court facing east is to be
shut on the six working days, but
on the Sabbath day and on the
day of the New Moon it is to be
opened.”*

(Ezekiel 46:1)

Access

WEEK SEVENTEEN

“Family time” is a resurging concept in today’s culture. After a generation of neglected kids, many young couples have vowed to do things differently. Family time gives children access to their parents. It is not as if these parents pay no attention to their kids at other times or as if the children can’t access their parents when they need to. Family time is just more intense, protected relationship time.

In the ancient Hebrew sanctuary, the inner court is where the altar of sacrifice stood. There was an outer wall that marked off the sanctuary complex, and then a smaller fenced in area (the inner court). This smaller area housed the sanctuary itself, where God revealed his presence. The whole sanctuary concept is a case of measured contradiction: God asked them to build it to give people

access to him (Exodus 25:8). Then, for their protection, he restricted that access.

When God entered the wilderness sanctuary, his presence was so intense that even Moses could not enter (Exodus 40:35). God made this separation to preserve the balance between his closeness and human safety (sinful humans cannot stand in God's presence but don't have hope without him). The people made their own separation from God that preserved neither his closeness nor human safety, by constructing shrines to idols. Finally, because of all this, they ended up a captured people in the province of Babylon.

The prophet Ezekiel was there among his people when God showed him a vision of future restoration. In that vision, he saw God visibly return to the temple at Jerusalem, signaling that God would give Israel another chance to live with him. Ezekiel records, "The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east" (Ezekiel 43:4). In the vision, God penetrated the outer gate, the gate to the inner court, and all the way to the inner sanctuary (verse 5).

Does that *east* gate ring a bell? For whatever symbolic reasons God chose the *east* gate, he adds meaning to it by this act of entering it. It now represents God's

presence, so it must never open except when *God* plans to enter (44:1-2). When *does* God plan to enter there? He gave Ezekiel his schedule: “The gate of the inner court facing east is to be shut on the six working days, but on the Sabbath day... it is to be opened” (Ezekiel 46:1).

Sabbath is a time of special access to God. This is an honor and a warning. Those who enter God’s presence in defiance invoke his anger (Leviticus 10:1-2) but those who come humbly gain his blessing (Exodus 34:28-35).

This message makes Sabbath greater for us than it ever was for the Israelite. Back then, only the priests entered God’s presence. Now, every believer is a priest (1 Peter 2:9), giving us full access to God. Every day, we can spiritually enter before the altar of sacrifice and have our sins forgiven. But, only on Sabbath are the gates flung open for the fullest revelation of God’s presence (Exodus 29:42-46).

*“Count off seven sabbaths of
years... and proclaim liberty
throughout the land to all its
inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee
for you; each one of you is to
return to his family property and
each to his own clan.”*

(Leviticus 25:8, 10)

Salvation

WEEK EIGHTEEN

Salvation is liberation. When Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein, finally fell to invading forces, Iraqis cheered in the streets. Sadly, the citizens of Iraq soon fell captive, for a time, to other fears and the violence of would-be oppressors. But, for a few precious weeks, the world saw what salvation looked like written across glowing faces, wrinkled and smooth alike.

The liberation of an oppressed people stirs our deepest feelings because we all suffer bondage, in our love-hate relationship with sin. Paul tells the redeemed that they "used to be slaves to sin" (Romans 6:17), past tense. But, in a very real sense, sin is still this world's tyrant. Under sin, "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (8:22).

Salvation is liberation *from sin*. The results of human hearts wandering from their Maker are vividly portrayed in the history of Israel, but so are God's rescue plans. Isaiah spoke doom for apostate Judah but then promised restoration through the coming Messiah.

He writes, "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus later applied this to himself and his salvation (Luke 4:17-21).

Sabbath is liberation. Let me explain. The scene Isaiah rubs into the canvass of the future is one of Jubilee, when Israel must "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Leviticus 25:10). This is fascinating because the year of Jubilee is intentionally drawn from Sabbath. It is first explained to Israel as something built from the weekly Sabbath (verse 8), which means its full-blossomed liberation springs from a seed already found in the seventh-day of each week.

Sabbath is salvation. That is the seed that blossoms into a full year of Jubilee. Drawing from the day that is the symbol and substance of God's link with his people, he

instructed, “Count off seven sabbaths of years... and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan” (Leviticus 25:8, 10). Jubilee effectively reversed the common socio-economic hardships.

Sabbath is not salvation because you earn merit for keeping it. Sabbath is salvation because it puts you in touch with your Savior, who reverses your sin-muddle. After quoting Isaiah’s prediction of the Jubilee Sabbath, Jesus presented himself as the embodiment of that promise (Luke 4:17-21). The same role makes him both Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28) and Lord of salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

Sabbath is much like liberation day in Baghdad or Paris on D-day, except this celebration happens every week and it signals a liberation that will never reverse or dampen. Sabbath means salvation. It means good news for the poor, bound wounds for the broken hearted, freedom for captives, and release from darkness for prisoners (Isaiah 61:1)—all because of whom it points to.

*“Six days do your work, but on
the seventh day do not work, so
that your ox and your donkey
may rest and the slave born in
your household, and the alien as
well, may be refreshed.”*

(Exodus 23:12)

Refreshment

WEEK NINETEEN

Energy is more precious than time. Even with twenty-four hours in a day, the average human spends eight hours renewing their energy through sleep, another two hours consuming potential energy in food, and four hours in rests (scattered through the day) to restore mental and emotional strength. That leaves just ten out of every twenty-four as useful time. It also makes energy more precious than time—I can't use my time without energy.

Perceptive people transform our energy needs into dollars, selling everything from energy bars to energy drinks to energy pills to sugar highs. And, what party thrives without “refreshments”? We humans have to recharge or refuel often. This energy deficit can be traced to human banishment from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-

23) but all is not lost. There is something of refreshment still within reach.

You guessed it. In a devotional about Sabbath, you know what's coming. But, do you *think* of Sabbath as refreshment? One way to answer that question is to examine your memories of recent Sabbaths and try to recall how you felt at the end of the day. For many people, Sabbath has become a drain instead of a charge. Whether it's the mind-numbing effect of sitting idly all day or the pressure-cooker of another day packed too full, a draining Sabbath is not a biblical Sabbath.

Humans starve for refreshment and that is just what God offers. But, our rigidity gets in the way. Moses writes that, "on the seventh day [God] rested and was refreshed" (Exodus 31:17 NKJV). We will probably never comprehend how a God without physical limits could feel "refreshed" but we *can* know what refreshment is to us and that it flows from Sabbath. The Pharisees of Jesus' day made Sabbath a dry ritual that dehydrated the soul. And, Jesus fought relentlessly to put the life back in it (Mark 2:27). Sabbath must be refreshment or it's not Sabbath.

You may recall that the Hebrew word for "Sabbath" means, "to stop"—stop worrying and stop working. The Hebrew word translated "refreshed" is only used three

times in the Bible, twice in reference to Sabbath (Exodus 23:12; 31:17) and once as the remedy for exhaustion (2 Samuel 16:14). Sabbath and refreshment are parallel ideas; Sabbath *is* refreshment. But, this link goes even deeper.

The Hebrew verb for “refreshed” is closely tied to the word for “living being”. The two words are even spelled with the same letters. Semantically, it is something like the parallel between “life-giving” and “life” in English. The verb “life-giving” is the process of imparting “life”.

Likewise, the Hebrew noun is what man became when “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7)—the event which Sabbath commemorates (Exodus 20:11). Sabbath “refreshment” is God renewing what he made man to be (a “living being”).

It is a re-creation of life force. Sabbath is when your Maker recharges your spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical energy. Keeping the appointment is a good use of time. Remember, energy is more precious than time.

*“It will be the duty of the prince
to provide the burnt offerings,
grain offerings and drink
offerings at the festivals, the
New Moons and the
Sabbaths....”*

(Ezekiel 45:17)

Cost

WEEK TWENTY

The more you pay for something, the more you love it. You might get more pleasure from a piece of chewing-gum than from your treadmill but you'll value and protect the treadmill more because you paid more.

This makes our age of freebees a strange phenomenon. Advertisers offer free gifts to promote their products because the gimmick works. But, the best way to destroy a product's value in the eyes of the public is to offer it free.

We come to expect it, then discard it. Most people happily take the freebee but how many free things do you really love? At best, there is a burst of excitement then a loss of interest. (The one exception, perhaps, is the gift of salvation but the ability to cherish it is also a divine work.)

If given the choice between two identical houses, one free and the other expensive, almost anyone will take the free one. But, measure the joy of the one who worked for their home against that of the one who got it free. Then, compare the condition of each house after ten years. In both cases, the one with personal investment will fair better.

This explains an otherwise puzzling rule for Sabbath keeping. The ancient Hebrews offered sacrifices of all kinds to God, for every purpose from thanksgiving (Leviticus 7:12) to purification (12:6). In their economy, the English word “sacrifice” paints an accurate picture of what these offerings meant for the household budget.

A faithful Hebrew man had to plan ahead to afford the sacrifices required for him and his family. Of course, a blood offering for sins is always necessary but you might expect God to ease the burden of *extra* sacrifices on the Sabbath. Instead, he ups the requirement.

We could say it’s because Sabbath is religious and sacrifices are religious so they should go together. But, somehow, that doesn’t explain it. We could analyze the nature of each sacrifice proscribed to extract the meaning. But, that is likely to leave most readers well slept and unenlightened. Rather, we should ask, “What is the big idea?”

To answer this question, we need to understand what sacrifices are *really* about. The first sacrifices described in the Bible are those of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:3-5) and they hint at a key idea. Cain was a farmer, so he brought produce to God. Abel was a shepherd and he brought a lamb. But, for sin, God required a blood sacrifice. Cain knew this.

The story is bursting with lessons but one edges to the surface: Cain was unwilling to undergo the *cost* of buying a lamb from his shepherd brother (although, it had more to do with the cost in pride than in assets). He wanted all the gains of sacrifice without the cost.

God knows that we value what we invest in. That is why he asks us to make extra expense to honor Sabbath. If we invest in it more, we love it more. For 21st century, post-cross Christians investing in Sabbath no longer comes through ritual sacrifices. But, with a little creativity, one could plan ways to invest in Sabbath. Whether it's a special way to invest your time, your talents, your money, or your heart, it will pay off. The more you invest in Sabbath, the more you'll love it.

*“Now you are stirring up more
wrath against Israel by
desecrating the Sabbath.”*

(Nehemiah 13:18)

Wrath

WEEK TWENTY-ONE

It's easy to see God angry. It is the image built up for centuries, often used to coerce people into religious behavior. Today's collective Christian conscience increasingly resists these ploys. We seek to paint over this picture of an angry God. Rightfully so, we champion God's love and mercy, wanting to bring back the truth of his character. But, reactive correction is always imbalanced. God is a whole personality and not immune to something Scripture calls his "wrath."

We all understand wrath. Have you ever been slapped in the face? How did you feel? Have you been slapped in the face by a person you just gave a gift to? Maybe you have never been slapped, physically. But, were you ignored when you said, "I love you"? How did *that* feel?

Rarely, if ever, is wrath provoked by anything less than a threat to your heart. Wrath is the heart's defense. Pacifists wage an emotional battle to defend human life. Militants pour out their wrath to defend their brand of peace. You don't get mad unless something you love—whether an idea, a person, your self-image, or something close to your heart—is threatened.

This perspective helps us understand God's heart, and his wrath. Once upon a time, "Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah."

The prophet Nehemiah saw this and he says, "I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath'" (Nehemiah 13:16-18).

Here, in Nehemiah's story, God's wrath is provoked because something he loves is threatened—namely, Sabbath time with his people. Scripture teaches that God made Sabbath for no other purpose than to build a good relationship with his creatures. This slighting of his love

must be the reason for his wrath. God feels it because his loved ones have rejected his offer of time together. God said, “I love you” and they slapped his face.

But, take caution. Comparing God’s emotions to ours is like comparing the Taj Mahal to dust. His feelings are pure, uncompromised by dark motives, so much more developed, and much more complex. Yet, God chose to give us a glimpse of his heart through the shadowy, narrow scope of ours. We must take his word at face value. When Scripture cites God’s “wrath,” we must take its word as the best our minds can know of God’s emotion.

Even when God expressed anger by killing, it was to protect those who could still be saved from sin’s destructive work (Numbers 26:10). Love and wrath are not opposites, even though their expression can be separated in flawed humans. When God is angry, it is a protective wrath, like that of a soldier defending his homeland.

He is furious precisely because he loves. In this case, he loves Sabbath time with his children because he loves his children. Threaten that time and you provoke his wrath. At least one fact is clear: God loves Sabbath more than we can know.

*“For six days, work is to be done,
but the seventh day is a Sabbath
of rest, holy to the LORD.
Whoever does any work on the
Sabbath day must be put to
death.”*

(Exodus 31:15)

Penalty

WEEK TWENTY-TWO

“Surrender or die!” That was the message the United States sent the Japanese Empire when President Truman ordered two atom bombs dropped on Japan. When God called his people to surrender one day in seven, he issued a warning that sounds very much the same: “Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death” (Exodus 31:15).

This is no isolated statement. God issues similar alarms throughout the Bible. His warning is graphic in Jeremiah 17:27: He warns, “If you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day... then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses.”

In Ezekiel 20:13, God complains that his people “utterly desecrated” his Sabbaths, so he vowed to “destroy them in the desert.” And, Nehemiah records that God

brought “calamity” on Israel for “desecrating the Sabbath” (Nehemiah 13:18).

This sampling of texts paints a very stern picture of God. It also sparks the question: Why such harsh penalties for Sabbath-breakers? God vows nothing short of death. Suddenly my own poor Sabbath-keeping begins to interrogate my stuttering conscience. “Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death.” Ouch! Who could withstand the scrutiny?

It is right that this death penalty should sober us. But, if Sabbath has been part of your life for long, you are probably acquainted with its somber side. Parents and pastors have often projected their own grim fears about God’s sternness onto the portraits of God in our minds, so we are well aware of a consequence for stumbling.

But, the messages sent are contradictory: God wants to spend time with you because he loves you but, if you don’t do it, he’ll kill you! A piece is missing from the puzzle. We are not wrong about God’s love for us (1 John 4:16). We misunderstand his discipline.

There is a question that can clear the cobwebs of fear from the archives of your Sabbath experience: Is death for Sabbath-breakers the penalty or the result? This is not the question of whether God kills. It is simply to

distinguish between retribution and result. It is possible for God to *execute* the result and it still be the *result*, in the same way a paperboy gives you a newspaper when you pay him or the phone company cuts your line when you don't pay them.

Love never destroys a loved one when angry, but neither does it rob them of the right to choose badly. God is our only way out of this doomed planet but he can only take those who know and love him, or he would doom all his creatures.

If you want to spend time with God and choose salvation, he's calling you. If you don't, your future is death. The prophet Nahum explains that God destroys so "trouble will not come a second time" (Nahum 1:9). God destroys to protect those who choose him.

This is less like dropping a nuke to force surrender and more like calling people to evacuate the spiritual danger zone. Your time with God is your protection against the death sentence required by sin. You were doomed already. God's "penalty" for Sabbath-breaking points not to his anger but to his salvation.

*“Then Jesus said to them, ‘The
Son of Man is Lord of the
Sabbath.’”*

(Luke 6:5)

Jesus

WEEK TWENTY-THREE

Sabbath means many things but, like all things, it shows its full weight at one point. In a word, Sabbath's key figure is Jesus. While on earth, Jesus redefined Sabbath for a generation that had lost the vision (Mark 2:27), he set the example for regular Sabbath worship (Luke 4:16), and he wrestled with minds to make it the blessing it was meant to be (Mark 3:2-4). But, these efforts only make him a hero in Sabbath's defense, not *the* face of Sabbath.

Others, like the prophets Nehemiah and Ezekiel, also called God's people back to Sabbath but only Jesus is "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5). By what right does he claim this badge and what does it mean? After Jesus' time, Sabbath is called "the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10) but this only recognizes him as Lord. It doesn't explain why.

A more helpful line of thought is to recall that Jesus is “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36), which naturally makes him “Lord of the Sabbath”. But, even this is a shallow wade in an ocean of truth.

The story that invoked his claim to be “Lord of the Sabbath” offers a clue to why the title fits. It all started when “Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them” (Matthew 12:1). This didn’t set well with the fastidious Pharisees and they promptly cited them for a Sabbath violation (verse 2).

Jesus’ response is fascinating. He offers two Bible examples to expose their slim view of Sabbath. Example one: David’s survival mattered more to God than his holy Sabbath bread, preserved for the “temple” priests (Leviticus 24:5-9). Example two: the temple service mattered more than not working on Sabbath (Matthew 12:3-5). Then Jesus drops the bomb: “I tell you that one greater than the temple is here” (verse 6).

The temple was the place on earth where God met his people (Exodus 25:8). The only one greater than the temple was God himself. That is the claim Jesus makes for himself; he is God. With this fact established, he claims to be “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8).

Jesus is master of Sabbath *because* he is the God who made it (and the Creation it commemorates). This draws to the person of Jesus all its links with Creation (John 1:1-3), the covenant (Luke 22:20), rest (Matthew 11:28), and every aspect of Sabbath. Christ is the apex of Sabbath's greatness.

Contrary to popular belief, Jesus did not come to destroy Sabbath but to complete its power for a fallen world (Matthew 5:17). Sabbath reminds you that God created you (Genesis 2:3) but, in Jesus, it also points to a re-creation through his blood (2 Corinthians 5:17), in which the first Creation is restored (Galatians 6:15). It is not *less* meaningful since Christ died but *doubly so*.

Sabbath is the *avenue* for a saving relationship and Jesus is the *person* of salvation. So, next time you begin to wonder if Sabbath is worth the time, counter with the question: Do I need Jesus? It is no wonder God so fiercely protects Sabbath. It is his point of contact with a race he longs to save and our best connection with hope—Jesus.

Mature Sabbath Observance

(Section Three)

This section surveys what the Bible reveals about those who have the deepest Sabbath experience. It also paints a picture of the mindset that is most able to receive a Sabbath blessing.

*“Remember the sabbath day, to
keep it holy.”*

(Exodus 20:8 KJV)

Perseverance

WEEK TWENTY-FOUR

Boundaries bug us because they control us. We humans don't like restriction, so we blur the lines where we can. The Sabbath commandment offends this sensitivity; God made its edges anything but soft. When he blazed in stone, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (KJV), he meant we must fight to keep it distinct. At all costs, be sure it isn't sucked into the whirlwind of passing time.

The business of living is too often a mindless busy-ness, a monster that eats away our short lives. Our self-centeredness repels us from giving time to God and this busy-ness doesn't know the language of stopping. So much in human nature militates against Sabbath rest. No wonder God had to say, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy."

God chose two words to inspire perseverance toward Sabbath. The first recalls its permanence and both tell how to relate to it now. They implore us to preserve the Sabbath—one in thought, the other in deed.

“Remember” is the English translation of a word that describes mental attention. It means everything from “commemorate” to “think about.” God is saying, “Commemorate the Sabbath, remember the Sabbath, call the Sabbath to mind, pay attention to the Sabbath, think about the Sabbath.”

Our first line of defense against the eroding effects of daily life is simply to “think about” Sabbath, to contemplate this time with God. He doesn’t say how to remember, just that we must. The details are left to our creativity. Perhaps it would serve God’s intent if you planned each day with Sabbath in mind.

At first, this rigor might sound extreme. But, is it? When you’ve been separated from a friend longer than you like, don’t you anticipate a reunion? When you talk on the phone, it ups the anticipation. Each of the six working days is another day away from your special day with God. And, each day’s devotional time is like a phone conversation, designed to increase your anticipation of that Sabbath reunion.

The second Hebrew word suggests more in the line of action. It translates as the four English words, “to keep it holy.” It is the same word used to describe the fence of *separation* that kept the people off God’s holy mountain (Exodus 19:23). It can mean both “to *keep* it distinct” and “to *make* it distinct.” Any way we look at it, there is a call to protect the Sabbath time. Living that call takes perseverance.

*“Blessed is the man who does
this, the man who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath without
desecrating it, and keeps his hand
from doing any evil.”*

(Isaiah 56:2)

Diligence

WEEK TWENTY-FIVE

The average teenage girl looks in the mirror dozens (maybe hundreds) of times per day. Why? Image matters. For many, at this time of life, their strongest wish is to be worth something to somebody. Society measures value by looks, so girls obsess about them.

Like adults of every generation, parents complain of their kids' laziness. It is true that young people often get priorities out of line but, if you stop to consider, the *diligence* shown by these young beauty queens is impressive. When something matters deeply, you will slay giants to secure it.

Sabbath-keeping is linked to spiritual *diligence*. The Bible says, "Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil" (Isaiah 56:2). The

Hebrew verb for “hold fast” is from the root word for “be strong,” meaning you should apply your strength to the task. In this case, the task is to “maintain justice and do what is right” (verse 1) and the specifics are to keep “the Sabbath without desecrating it” and to keep your “hand from doing any evil.”

At first glance, diligence seems a strange companion for Sabbath *rest*. It makes perfect sense for a workman to be diligent in his work—but diligent rest? On closer examination, diligent rest is no contradiction.

Have you ever taken your business cell phone on vacation? Even if you haven’t, those with complex jobs know how hard it is to keep the worries of work from creeping into personal time. And, if you work at home or study at home or do the housekeeping, you have probably found yourself doing work when you had planned to rest. Protecting your rest time requires a certain level of diligence.

God says, “hold fast” to “my righteousness” and the first task toward this goal is keeping the Sabbath. The word for “hold fast” is the word for “strength” and the word for “righteousness” is the word that describes a perfect state of being—harmony with God.

To paraphrase his message, God is saying, “Pour the best of your strength into protecting Sabbath, because it is part of living in perfect closeness to me.” Applying the best of yourself to guarding Sabbath might mean planning ahead, drawing boundaries, or putting known distractions under quarantine for twenty-four hours. Deep down, *you* know what draws you away and what draws you close. However you do it, be diligent to guard Sabbath.

You can pour the best of yourself into looking good or making money or gaining honor. These wants will inspire diligence because every one of us *still* longs to be worth something to somebody. But, each of these ploys for worth implodes. You might look good for a while but age conquers quickly and fashion is fickle. You might make money but you will only be valued for what you have and not for who you are. Honor, too, is selective and fading.

Only as you see the infinite worth God placed on you, paying no less than *all* of himself to redeem you, then you will be confident of your worth. Time with God will fix it in your mind and teach it to your heart. The prospect is enough to make Sabbath diligence worthwhile.

*“If you keep your feet from
breaking the Sabbath... if you
call the Sabbath a delight... and
if you honor it by not going your
own way and not doing as you
please or speaking idle words,
then you will find your joy in
the LORD....”*

(Isaiah 58:13-14)

Delight

WEEK TWENTY-SIX

Think back to the last meal you truly enjoyed. Do you have it in mind? I'm talking about the kind of food that makes it possible to smile and chew at the same time. It is so good and refreshing, you almost feel like you never want to stop eating.

Words like "aftertaste, heavy," or "too..." anything flee from your mind. And, they get replaced with "fresh, pleasant," and "perfect." Flavors burst in your mouth just right and you feel *content*. This picture is a great definition for the word "delight." It describes unencumbered, lighthearted joy.

With this joy in mind, we can grasp what God means by, "call the Sabbath a delight" (Isaiah 58:13). The Hebrew word for "delight" etches a similar scene, with a

range of meaning that includes “daintiness, exquisite delight” and other synonyms.

Scripture uses it to describe dainty women (Deuteronomy 28:54), a person’s “delight in the Almighty” (Job 22:26), the delight that comes from “abundant prosperity” (Psalm 37:11 NAS), and many other joys. These shades of meaning tint the canvass, giving color to Sabbath. They enrich our picture of what God means when he says to “call the Sabbath a delight.”

It is awesome to think that we can enjoy Sabbath with as much lighthearted joy as we do our favorite delicatessen. But, if you have lived long with knowledge of the Sabbath, the verse leaves questions. It also implores the reader to “honor [Sabbath] by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words.”

That does look like a heavy list of don’ts. It also speaks of your solemn duty to treat Sabbath as “honorable”—a Hebrew word that can mean “heavy.” And, some take the text’s forbiddance of “doing your pleasure” (NKJV) to mean that pleasure has no place in these sacred hours.

The case looks strong for a somber Sabbath until we recall that God still said to “call the Sabbath a delight.” The delight and the don’ts must harmonize since God

champions both. Actually, the solution is simple. God's don'ts are *your* pleasure and *your* ways and *your* words (or, topics of discussion).

To put it plainly, God asks you to give up your version of pleasure and your version of right and your version of good conversation because your version of Sabbath carries none of the "delight" that his version does. The reason for the don'ts is so "you will find your joy in the LORD" (Isaiah 58:14), so you *don't* miss the delight.

Return to that perfect peach or marinara sauce or your ideal food. Let the smile curl back into your eyes. Maybe you're not big on food. Instead, make it the freedom of skydiving or a motorcycle ride on a warm evening. Whatever stirs that unstoppable smile of contentment, let it fill your mind. This is "delight." Attach the word to your best emotions. Then, your heart will know what God means when he calls the *Sabbath* a delight.

*“It is to be a sabbath of solemn
rest for you, that you may humble
your souls; it is a permanent
statute.”*

(Leviticus 16:31 NAS)

Humility

WEEK TWENTY-SEVEN

“Break the will of the British people!” That was Adolf Hitler’s charge to his Luftwaffe chief, Hermann Göring. What followed was the most intense bombing campaign history had known. It leveled much of London. Hitler’s call was, “Humble them!” and this merciless pounding is what he had in mind.

Humility is usually achieved by force from outside. Empires have beaten down the will of their subjects and dictators have reduced mavericks to servants. We say, “They humbled them.”

In church talk, “humility” carries different connotations. The word has been sterilized and anesthetized, making it a little dopey and very soft. Every ounce of real humiliation has been wrung from it. In many cases, its meaning is twisted until it’s a status to ascend to

instead of describing the downtrodden. “I am just a humble man,” someone will say and people praise him for saying so. What a contrast with Scripture! Receiving human praise is foreign to biblical humility.

The Hebrew verb for “humble” can also mean, “mishandle, afflict,” or “weaken” and it sustains images of military defeat and slavery. Regarding the Day of Atonement, a time when God’s people searched to know if God would accept them, this word is spoken. The Day of Atonement is a “sabbath,” modeled on our weekly Sabbath. So, it shows a more developed picture of an idea that is embryonic in the weekly Sabbath—humility.

Speaking of this day, God says, “It is a sabbath of rest, and you must deny yourselves” (Leviticus 16:31). That phrase “deny yourselves” translates literally as, “afflict your souls” or “humble your personhood.” In plain English: “Beat yourself down.”

This is strange to the human mind. People get humiliated against their will, by force from outside. It’s not the kind of thing people do to themselves, by choice. It militates against the selfishness of sinful human nature. Ahh, perhaps that’s the point.

Humility is about you submitting to someone stronger than you. In God’s case, he won’t force you, so he

asks you to submit by choice: “Humble yourselves and serve God.” When phrased that way, this doesn’t sound so foreign to what we know about Sabbath. It just intensifies the contrast between creature and Creator to remind you of your place in this relationship.

But, there is more. The implications of a rectified relationship with God are explicit in the text: “Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins” (verse 30). The humility asked for by those who want a full Sabbath blessing is the kind that humbles the selfish nature—to the point where God is God in your life and your sins fall away like so many enemies conquered.

So, take Paul’s example when you approach Sabbath. He says, “I beat my body and make it my slave,” a slave faithful to God (1 Corinthians 9:27). Humility does come from an outside source. God humbles our hearts, so we can serve him (Deuteronomy 8:3). But, the choice to be humbled is ours: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:10). Humility is the posture and lifting up is the promise of Sabbath.

*“Stop bringing meaningless
offerings! Your incense is
detestable to me. New Moons,
Sabbaths and convocations—I
cannot bear your evil assemblies.”*

(Isaiah 1:13)

Integrity

WEEK TWENTY-EIGHT

After making Sabbath a spiritual monument, fiercely defending it, and installing a death penalty for Sabbath-breakers, why would God say of Israel, “I will stop all her celebrations: her yearly festivals, her New Moons, her Sabbath days” (Hosea 2:11)? Stop the Sabbath days? Then there are his words in Isaiah 1:13: “New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies.” God calls Sabbath an “evil” assembly, which he cannot bear?

It is true that these are probably references to the festivals that only borrow their meaning from the *weekly* Sabbath. But, that fact doesn’t solve the riddle. In these verses, God frowns on the whole Sabbath idea—time to spend with him. He lists all the ways that people approach

him and he spits out words of disgust. What is this all about?

Perhaps the parable of the pesky parrot will unravel the riddle. Pesky was great at mimicry. He could pick up whole sentences after hearing them just a few times. His owners were newly married, so he collected quite a repertoire of “sweet nothings” in just a few months.

But, Pesky had a problem. Or, you might say, his owners had a problem. Pesky didn't like people. Their mannerisms and sayings he loved, but not so their presence. If anyone made the unfortunate mistake of leaning too close to his cage, he'd sink in his peak and take a chunk of flesh. Then, almost always, you would hear him coo, “I love you. You're so beautiful.” Empty words.

God dislikes lip service. He wants his people to go through the motions only if they mean it with their hearts. Honoring Sabbath is one way of telling God, “I love you.” It is like saying, “I love you” by planning a fancy date or spending an afternoon with the one you love. But, the nature of these gifts changes when love is not in the picture. A date without love is miserable, especially if love is one-sided.

Jesus appeals to the same ideal in Matthew 23:23, when he says, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and

Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.” “Hypocrite” is the Greek word for “actor.” These same people took their *act* to its natural conclusion, feigning to keep Sabbath while crucifying the Lord of the Sabbath (John 19:31).

Integrity demands that your heart be behind your actions. God wants *integrity*. After calling the Sabbaths “evil assemblies” in Isaiah 1:13, God presents the solution: “Stop doing wrong [and] learn to do right” (verses 16-17). The offenses he lists center on social injustice, which includes looking the other way when someone suffers (verse 17). That’s why God says Sabbaths and rituals “have become a burden to Me” (verse 14). There is no heart behind the action.

The list of wrongs is the very reason he distains their acts of worship. Their “worship” is not worship at all. How can you praise and honor him while hurting or neglecting those he loves? But, he says, “If you consent and obey,” you will have my blessing (verse 19). So, don’t be like Pesky. Worship God in the one way that is true worship—with integrity.

“On the Sabbath day, make an offering of two lambs a year old without defect, together with its drink offering and a grain offering... This is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.”

(Numbers 28:9-10)

Repentance

WEEK TWENTY-NINE

You double the medicine only if you have twice the pain. In the Israelite sanctuary service, blood sacrifice was the prescribed medicine for sin (as it looked forward to Christ's death). In the Christian dispensation, faith in Christ's blood is the same. When the relational nature of Sabbath is fully grasped, the separation sin creates would feel twice as painful on that day. But, this "medicine" is not a magic formula that scientifically cures the sin virus. Instead, it is a *symbol* of repentance. Repentance? What does repentance have to do with Sabbath?

Repentance softens the barrier that separates you from God. By faith in God's forgiveness and power, you say, "I want a better way of life. I want to change." That's repentance. The Greek word for "repentance" means "a change of mind." Your *spiritual* condition hangs on your

intellectual decision. Repentance means a *new* way of looking at the world and a *new* way of decision making. It is a reversal of life direction—sending you toward choices that draw you to God.

With the backdrop of repentance in mind, it carries more weight to see that the daily sacrifice, offered in community repentance for sin, was *doubled* on Sabbath. The priests were told to offer, “two male lambs one year old without defect *as* a continual burnt offering every day” (Numbers 28:3). But, on Sabbath, they were to offer two more lambs “in addition to the regular burnt offering” (verse 10). God prescribed a double dose of medicine.

Could it be that hatred for sin is twice as strong on Sabbath? Or, maybe treating sin matters more on Sabbath? Whatever the case, it is clear that God doesn’t want anything separating him from his children on his day. Every sin is a little act of rebellion. We rebel against God as our Master, casting aside his directions toward happiness, thinking we can do better. We edit his rules. We redirect the worship he deserves toward ourselves. And, we distance ourselves from him so we can live as we choose.

Connecting with God demands repentance and Sabbath is for connecting with God, making Sabbath a practical call to repent. Good. So, how do you repent? First,

Jesus offers hope, saying, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). If you’re struggling, that doesn’t keep you from God’s grace. Your struggle is the reason Christ came—so you could experience a repentant life.

This verse also says that Christ initiates repentance. And, your need to repent doesn’t make you second-class. Jesus says, “there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).

Good. But, again, we ask: how do you repent? Acts 5:31 says that “God exalted [Jesus] to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins” to his people. Did you catch that? Jesus will “give repentance.” Like the forgiveness that comes after repentance, Jesus *gives* you a repentant heart. Go to him. We have come full circle. Going to God is the *reason* for Sabbath and, also, *how* to keep it. Sabbath is the perfect time to repent.

*“The prince... shall offer his
burnt offering or his fellowship
offerings as he does on the
Sabbath day.”*

(Ezekiel 46:12)

Friendship

WEEK THIRTY

Sometimes we must state the obvious. More than once, my industrious and inquisitive friend has taken apart an electronic device to “fix it.” After inspecting its inner workings and testing its circuitry, he discovers the problem... Its batteries are dead. Sometimes the obvious is so obvious that we’re oblivious. Sometimes the obvious needs to be said. So, here it comes: Sabbath is for friendship with God.

We can marshal as evidence for this fact all that came before, in this book, and all that comes after. But, Ezekiel 46:12 draws it out uniquely. We find, amidst various regulations for restoring Israelite worship (after the Babylonian exile), a passing mention of Sabbath. Simply this: “The prince... shall offer his burnt offering or his fellowship offerings as he does on the Sabbath day.” In the

last chapter, we explored the burnt offering as a call to Sabbath repentance. But, what about these “fellowship offerings?” What do they teach us?

The Hebrew noun for “fellowship” offering is a form of the word “peace.” In ancient Near Eastern culture, the “peace offering” was a sacrifice for building alliances or friendships. In this case, the friendship formed is with God. And, it is something the prince “does on the Sabbath day,” not exclusively but *specifically*. He is instructed to offer it as a part of his Sabbath observance.

This draws out from Sabbath an obscure vein of sweetness. It shows that Sabbath warrants this coming to “peace” with God. Peace is a beautiful word in English but much more so in Hebrew. Hebrews came to greet friends with a wish of, “Peace!” (“Shalom”)—it was the one word to include all the goodness and blessings of Yahweh God. “Shalom!” A cool breeze on a warm day brought thoughts of “shalom.” A bumper crop of wheat meant the “shalom” of Yahweh had come. So, the “shalom offering” was a concrete way of recognizing and receiving God’s “shalom.”

The prince should offer his fellowship offerings “on the Sabbath day.” In other words, “On Sabbath, connect with all God’s goodness—make friends with God.” Is that an obvious truth about Sabbath? Yep. But, when was the

last time you thought of it that way? When was the last time you planned your Sabbath schedule with this truth in mind?

Take a few minutes to think it through. How will you plan next Sabbath around your friendship with God? It might be easier to start with another question: If you wanted to connect with a close friend on earth, what would you do? You might just sit and talk. You might walk together, without even saying much, just to enjoy your friend's presence.

You would probably clear your schedule of any conflicting engagements. But, most of all, you would reserve some emotional energy to invest in your time together. You wouldn't come to the appointment exhausted—not if you really wanted to connect with that friend.

When Sabbath is seen as friendship time, it's more demanding but its guidelines do make more sense. All those apparent restrictions become freeing. You are free from all distractions so you can pursue a friendship, a shalom relationship, with God. In this context, Sabbath becomes the ultimate expression of shalom.

*“One Sabbath, when Jesus went
to eat in the house of a prominent
Pharisee, he was being carefully
watched.”*

(Luke 14:1)

Fellowship

WEEK THIRTY-ONE

Love's first moment becomes the pattern for every loving moment that follows. The first date, the first kiss—these are the moments that starry-eyed companions work to recreate, re-experience, or somehow return to throughout their lives. Love's first taste is the sweetest, though not the deepest. It is a universal rule, which hints that God wrote it. God's own act of resting on the first Sabbath (Genesis 2:2) shows he uses firsts to set patterns.

The first human relationship—their first day together, their first kiss, their first sharing of dreams—set the pattern for all human relationships. Adam and Eve had romance, yes, but also deep affection, which reaches beyond romantic love. They set the pattern for *all* human fellowship. And, God saw to it that their first day together would set that pattern right.

Their first full day together was Sabbath (Genesis 1:27-2:3). This simple fact is rich with implications. It is true that it proves nothing, since many explanations could be made for the “coincidence,” but later history confirms the importance of this link. Sabbath reflects God’s eternal desire to be “with” his creatures (Exodus 25:8; Mark 3:14) and his time with them improves their bonds with each other (John 13:35).

This first Sabbath set *two* relational patterns—human relationships with God *and* with each other. This link underlines the truth that humans relate best together when they are with God. Jesus even said others would know his followers by it. He said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). It follows that the best fellowship time between people is their special time with God—Sabbath.

By contrast, those who love religion but don’t love God have often twisted Sabbath to the opposite effect. Jesus was most bitterly attacked on the Sabbath for the good he did. One example finds Jesus engaging in the perfect Sabbath activity—fellowship. And, his attackers hope this act is a chance to destroy him.

Luke reports: “One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being

carefully watched” (Luke 14:1). This text, and every other Sabbath attack, shows a gross twisting of this holy relational time. It’s a tragic perversion any time Sabbath is used to tear people down. It more than misses the point—it contradicts it.

Ahh, but we still haven’t *proven* that Sabbath should be spent in fellowship. We’ve only worked from hints. There are many ways to “prove” this point but more helpful than proving it is challenging ourselves to live out a principle that will lead to the same conclusion.

1 John 4:20 says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” And, Jesus reminds us that our two prime duties are to love God and love people (Mark 12:28-31).

It goes two ways. It’s only possible to experience unhindered fellowship with God if our love for others is strong. And, it’s only possible to have pure fellowship together when our link with God is strong. Thus, the two meet in Sabbath. “Let us not give up meeting together” (Hebrews 10:25).

*“This bread is to be set out before
the LORD regularly, Sabbath
after Sabbath, on behalf of the
Israelites, as a lasting covenant.”*

(Leviticus 24:8)

Objects

WEEK THIRTY-TWO

Tuxedos, prom dresses, veils, feather pens, birthday cakes—what pictures do these words bring to mind? These are objects associated with familiar *events*, so they trigger memories and emotions. Mementos, keepsakes, or souvenirs evoke a similar response. Because of their associations, these *objects* not only remind you of former events but can fill a new event with meaning. What is a birthday without a cake or a wedding without a wedding dress? Yes, the events can have meaning without them but these objects add emotional impact.

The first example of an object that amplifies Sabbath is the bread from heaven in Exodus 16. Moses instructed God's people, "Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on

the seventh day; no one is to go out” (verse 29). The bread served as a mental trigger of when Sabbath was and served to refresh in their minds that God was the source of their survival. By faith, they had to follow God’s instructions on how much bread to gather each day or they would end up with rotten bread or empty stomachs.

Building on this tradition, God made bread a permanent object of Sabbath ritual. He instructed his people on how the bread should be laid out in the sanctuary, then said, “This bread is to be set out before the LORD regularly, Sabbath after Sabbath, on behalf of the Israelites, as a lasting covenant” (Leviticus 24:8). By this directive, God shows that having a special Sabbath object can help you keep his Sabbath.

But, there’s more. There’s Jesus, who said, “Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then he drew an application: “I tell you the truth... the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Then, he explained his role more explicitly, saying, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:31-35).

By these words, he claims to be the person behind the Old Testament bread symbol. The bread not only reminds you of Sabbath but also the “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8). This safeguards our use of Sabbath traditions, helping to avoid the Pharisaic use of them (Matthew 12:1-2; Mark 7:8) by letting Sabbath objects remind us of the day *as well as* the reason—knowing Jesus. Traditional Sabbath objects, whether a special toy for children or a designated Sabbath candle, serve us well if they prompt us to step back and remember *why* this time is special.

There were other Sabbath objects in the land of Israel besides the bread, including special offerings (Leviticus 23:38) and a designated Sabbath gate or canopy (2 Kings 16:18). This teaches that Sabbath traditions are right and helpful. God used objects to trigger spiritual meaning. And, as in the case of the Sabbath gate, he didn’t always choose the objects. So, build your own Sabbath traditions to serve as mental and emotional triggers that prepare your mind for Sabbath, much like a birthday cake triggers the happy emotions of a birthday. After all, Sabbath is the birthday of this world. Maybe a cake is not such a bad idea.

*“Every Sabbath he reasoned in
the synagogue, trying to persuade
Jews and Greeks.”*

(Acts 18:4)

Location

WEEK THIRTY-THREE

Your surroundings are bound up with mental cues. When you enter a grocery store, you think of food. The ball field might inspire you to spit. And, your living room will pull you into the mode of whatever you usually do there. A specific place can draw your mind toward good or bad, depending on the memories and habits tied to it. But, however a place affects you, surroundings are a powerful force to influence your choices.

God has a long tradition of marking out special *places* for connecting with him. After the Exodus from Egypt, God had Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:11-12). Then, there was the wilderness sanctuary (25:8). Later, Shiloh was the place to seek the Lord (Joshua 8:1). And, we must not forget the many permanent altars of sacrifice (1 Kings 18:30) or Jacob's encounter at Bethel (Genesis 12:35:14-

15) or Abraham's sacrifice on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2).

And, before you think this is just an Old Testament phenomenon, "on the Sabbath day [Jesus] went into the synagogue, as was his custom" (Luke 4:16. See also Mark 1:21; 6:12; Luke 6:6). The disciples later followed a similar pattern by listening (Acts 13:14), preaching (verse 42), and evangelizing (18:4) on Sabbath—all in the synagogue.

There are certainly practical reasons why they did this—it was a central gathering place and the people were in the habit of coming. But, who's to say similar practical reasons didn't figure into God's plan when he began the practice of marking places for worship? The need for gathering is certainly a spiritual concern in the New Testament (Hebrews 10:25). But, there is also this business of psychological cues. What could be more practical than a mechanism to help focus scattered minds?

In the freestyle world of this 21st century, the need to gather for Sabbath worship seems marginal at best. Many would file it in the same folder with "paper or plastic". But, God did designate a place for Sabbath worship, Jesus preserved the practice, and the Bible never says God changed his mind. In Leviticus 23:3, God calls Sabbath "a sacred assembly," again highlighting (among

other things) that God wants his people to have a *place* of worship.

Let us separate the ideas of fellowship and the benefits of corporate worship from the concept of place (to be sure we don't miss it). It is about what the special place does to your mind when you enter it. It's like the case of Jacob at Bethel, where he dreamed of a ladder to heaven and, when he "awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the LORD is in this place...'" (Genesis 28:16). God later called on that memory and told Jacob to return to Bethel to renew his courage and spiritual strength (35:1-3).

Preserving a special *place* for regular Sabbath worship is no less powerful.

God used the mystique of the Israelite sanctuary to draw his ancient people into the mindset of Sabbath. What special place has God given you? For everyone, he offers the great houses of worship that follow in the tradition of Moses' sanctuary and the synagogues of Jesus and his disciples. But, for you, there could be something more. Has God given you a Sabbath Bethel ("house of God") just for you—a place where you have experienced him in a special way? If so, this Sabbath, return to that place for courage and spiritual strength.

*“When will the New Moon be
over that we may sell grain, and
the Sabbath be ended that we
may market wheat?”*

(Amos 8:5)

Value

WEEK THIRTY-FOUR

How much do you think of your toothbrush? What about your shoes? Common things diminish in wonder, even though the first toothbrush was an object of deep admiration and the first modern shoes the pride of their owner. Then, there are the big things.

When was the last time you sat in awe of the collective innovations that comprise your home or the incredible technology that allows you to speed down the road with simple controls? Yes, you know where this is going. What about Sabbath? Have you stopped to admire it lately?

Amos 8:5 has God's people so lethargic about Sabbath that they're counting the minutes on their sundials until it's over. With a little imagination, you can almost feel their groan in your gut: "When will the... Sabbath be ended

that we may market wheat?” It smears the mood like a child’s whine, “Are we there yet?” dragging down the moments as they inch past. It’s a little like watching the clock at work on Friday afternoon. You don’t want to be there. You could think of a hundred better things to do. You just do it because you have to. Sabbath drags like this for too many.

But... why? It can’t be its reprieve from a stressful week. I doubt it’s the reminder that God loves this human race. It’s probably not the family time or the relaxation or the assurance that we have a Creator who still plans a bright future for us. Then, why do you languish at the borders of Sabbath as if it was the wilderness and the stress of the new week was your Promised Land? Yes, *you*. Oh, now, be honest with yourself. If you have kept the Sabbath for more than a few months, you have done your share of clockwatching. Why?

What was that about the toothbrush? Ah, yes, familiarity fosters contempt. Because Sabbath comes every week, it is too familiar to seem dazzling—even though it envelops *all* of the Christian hope. The kid complaining of a long car ride won’t even look out the window to see what she’s missing amidst her whining. Two hours from closing time on Friday, the workman doesn’t remember all that he

likes about his job because he thinks too much of escape. And, you may not feel deeply about your car's technological wonders when you're hoping to trade it in for a new one. These things haven't lost their value. It is simply overlooked.

But, Sabbath is too great to miss. Sabbath engraves your character with love for God. It is God's time to write on your heart. The fact that perplexed Amos was the way people strained to carry out the letter of the Sabbath law as they waited to violate its purpose when the sun dropped behind the hills. God said Sabbath was for growing in love for him and each other but they were "skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver..." (Amos 8:5-6).

It was this conflict between their nominal Sabbath observance and their hearts of greed that caused them to wish for Sabbath's end. For them, Sabbath was empty. They had lived their Sabbath habit so long they forgot its purpose. It had no value to them. For those who want to build the bonds between themselves, God, and others, Sabbath is an awesome tool. But, you can only value Sabbath if you value its purpose. That's a choice. *Choose* to love it for what it is and it will be a blessing.

*“Then I commanded the Levites
to purify themselves and go and
guard the gates in order to keep
the Sabbath day holy. Remember
me for this also, O my God, and
show mercy to me according to
your great love.”*

(Nehemiah 13:22)

Protection

WEEK THIRTY-FIVE

The economy is strained, energy prices are shooting up, and someone comes up with a plan. “The people of God should prosper,” they say, “so why not take the opportunities God has given?” Their scheme sounds good. It’s an online retail business that requires several church members to maintain it for just an hour each day but there’s one catch: it must be run seven days a week or the whole deal is off. The supplemental income promises to help a number of saints out of a bind and it will make the much needed church addition possible. What would you do?

Nehemiah, the exiled prophet, who had just returned from Babylon to Israel, found himself in a similar fix. He reports, “I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other

kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day” (Nehemiah 13:15). They were nation building and had to survive. Would God begrudge them the work needed to survive?

Then, the ethical complexity compounded: non-believers got involved. Certainly they couldn't be required to observe the religious beliefs of Israel. They should be accommodated. Well, Nehemiah didn't think so. He writes, “Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah.

“I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, ‘What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day...?’ When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day” (verses 16-17, 19). There was no flexibility on this point. No situation ethic was as important as honoring God as Creator.

But, Nehemiah took it another step. He reports, “Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them

and said, ‘Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.’ From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy” (verses 20-22a).

Did Nehemiah go too far? It’s true that his reforms on many matters were stricter than those of other Bible prophets. But, perhaps that was because the situation was worse. Nehemiah’s reforms appeal to larger principles, beyond his time and place. In this case, he fought to protect the Sabbath because it is a mark of God’s sovereignty—the one observance that directly highlights his creatorship.

So, what would you do? It’s just an hour online each Sabbath, for the good of the church. Nehemiah might ask: Which is better for the church—money or the blessing of God? You may not choose to station the pastor and elders at the members’ computers all Sabbath but please do remember that Sabbath should be protected.

*“...All who keep the Sabbath
without desecrating it and who
hold fast to my covenant—these
I will bring to my holy
mountain and give them joy in
my house of prayer....”*

(Isaiah 56:6-7)

Profanity

WEEK THIRTY-SIX

The same act can be rude or polite, depending on your company. For instance, calling a close friend “Doctor” when he’d rather be called “Bill” might offend him. While, addressing a revered doctor as “Bill” is disrespectful for a stranger.

This is quite the same as when God instructs, “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...” (Exodus 20:9-10). God is displeased if you are lazy for six days (2 Thessalonians 3:10) but even more displeased if you work on the seventh day. And, of course, we must state the positive too: he is pleased when you follow his instructions.

The prophet Nehemiah helps focus the issue. He reports, “I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them,

‘What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day?’” (Nehemiah 13:17). What does it mean to “desecrate” the Sabbath?

The prophet Isaiah highlights the same word: “And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer” (Isaiah 56:6-7).

Okay, there is ample motivation to avoid “desecrating” the Sabbath but what do these Bible prophets mean by the word? It sounds bad. Words like “decimate” and “defile” come to mind. Actually, it’s a subtler concept. Another way to translate the original is “to profane.” In common English, “profane” means “ordinary.” These prophets warn us not to make Sabbath “ordinary.” Keep it special. It was set apart from the other six days and God is simply asking that we keep it separate.

The practical implications of this go beyond a list of things to do or not to do on Sabbath. It’s a mindset. Is Sabbath ordinary in your mind or do you choose to call it spectacular? And, what do you do to keep it from the realm of ordinary, to keep it spectacular? Here’s the key: honor Sabbath in your *mind* and you will naturally treat it special.

This principle of the mind plays out in other realms, so why not with Sabbath? A baseball player's belief that he will hit the ball is his strongest defense against striking out. That's probably why the cocky guys play best. A student will remember the facts for a test much better if she *believes* she will.

In other words, what you think in your mind directly determines what you do. When you have trained yourself to stand in awe of Sabbath and all it represents, you will act in the ways your heart knows best to honor it. Your heart has its own, unique language to express such honor.

It's clear that it dishonors God to make Sabbath commonplace. Nehemiah and Isaiah framed their warnings against Sabbath-breaking in these terms. But, God is also *pleased* by our reverence for it. What does your heart say will foster love and respect for God's great day?

Maybe it relates to how you prepare for it or what you plan for Sabbath time or how often you speak of its wonder. However you honor it, make it spectacular. Shy away from the ordinary. There is nothing ordinary about our Creator or his love.

*“He went to Nazareth, where he
had been brought up, and on the
Sabbath day he went into the
synagogue, as was his custom.
And he stood up to read.”*

(Luke 4:16)

Custom

WEEK THIRTY-SEVEN

Habits are helpful tools. For instance, a habit of always putting your keys the same place makes you less likely to lose them. Habits take necessary tasks out of conscious thought so you do them automatically. On occasion, you might choose to break from habit but that is likely the day you lose your keys.

Habits can be good or bad and there is no avoiding them. They are the tasks you assign to your auto-response system because your conscious mind can't do it all. This is risky because it allows unconscious rules to guide your actions. But, it is a wonderful thing if those unconscious rules are healthy. The trick is to consciously evaluate your habits from time to time.

How do your habits serve Sabbath? You *do* have Sabbath habits—everyone does, just like they have them

for other times. Do your habits honor God's holy day? Jesus had his own Sabbath habits. One was so strong that it got noticed and recorded by history. Even amidst a nation in which all were expected to honor Sabbath, Luke had to note that, "on the Sabbath day [Jesus] went into the synagogue, as was his custom" (Luke 4:16). A "custom" is a consciously chosen habit.

Where have your Sabbath habits come from? If you are not sure or haven't reflected lately, start by borrowing a habit from Jesus. That is what the apostle Paul did. Acts 17:2 records that, "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures." Paul is described in almost the same words as Christ, and Scripture is very much a part of the picture for both of them (Luke 4:16-21).

Make your choice. Don't be guided by the *de facto* patterns of this sinful nature. Choose your customs. Start small, with something like a special Scripture reading or regular church attendance, depending on where you are in life. Then, after you have one new custom, choose another habit to form or reform. As you build good habits, you will begin to *feel* better about your Sabbath, your relationship with God, and yourself.

Imagine a cold winter day with the blue light of evening settling over the snow. The last rays of sunlight filter through the tree branches, sparkling on ice crystals. But, you take it in from the warmth of your freshly cleaned living room. Warm light flutters against your sweater and melts the tension from your week as you light your special Sabbath candles. All the while, the familiar sound of your favorite Christian album sings in the background. It's your custom. Sabbath has come.

Now, picture a warm fall sunset with a soft breeze stirring the leaves around you. You rose early that morning and read a story from the life of Christ, like you do every week. After a healthy breakfast, you took a brisk walk in the morning mist. Late morning found you wrestling in Scripture with fellow believers, making discoveries and mining nuggets to help with future discoveries. You spent the afternoon lounging in the shade with friends and now you sit in this same place again, the place you come to every week, to bid farewell to another Sabbath and seek God's grace for another week. It is your custom. How do you feel?

Practical Sabbath-keeping

(Section Four)

This section marries the meaning of Sabbath to specific applications for its observance. It explores how to plan for meaningful Sabbath observance.

*“At once the man was cured; he
picked up his mat and walked.
The day on which this took place
was a Sabbath, and so the Jews
said to the man who had been
healed, ‘It is the Sabbath; the
law forbids you to carry your
mat.’”*

(John 5:9-10)

Practical

WEEK THIRTY-EIGHT

“I would like to keep the Sabbath but it’s just not practical.” Too many sign off their Sabbath blessings for a job or to-do list. They have bought into the twenty-first century, Western idea that a person’s first responsibility is to productivity. If productivity suffers, self-esteem suffers, reputation suffers, and the luxuries of status diminish. The logic sounds something like this: “I don’t think God wants my family to suffer from the loss of my job just so I can do church.”

What about practicality? It’s a valid question. Does God want us to stagger under the weight of the Sabbath burden? Hardly. The words Jesus cast at the Pharisees, trying to correct their views on the subject, could probably fill a book (judging by the frequency of such encounters in the short gospel records).

When Jesus healed a certain lame man on Sabbath and told him to carry his bed home, “the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat’” (John 5:10). And, in the case of a lame woman, the synagogue leader was “indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath” (Luke 13:14).

In the later case, Jesus answered by saying, essentially, “Be practical!” Read his words: “You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Verses 15-16). Be practical.

Please don't miss the key to this issue. “Practical” is a word we use to say that a choice will serve our purpose well. My shoes are practical if they serve the goals of comfort and looks. Your car is practical if it serves your goals of cost and function. Jesus argued for a practical treatment of Sabbath because he wants Sabbath to serve the goals it was set up to serve—salvation, restoration, building love for God, building love for others, and learning to submit to God's authority.

This implies that your Sabbath plans are never truly “practical” until they serve the goals of Sabbath. Maybe it serves *your own* goal, practically, to work on Sabbath. Let me suggest that you change your goal. The Western god of productivity can never bless you the way the God of Creation will. Nor can the human god of legalistic observance fill your life with the joy our God of love does. So, make your choice. But, be practical.

Envision the choices that reach out for God. For some it means discarding notions of rigid observance that are done to earn merit. For others it means taking the Sabbath as a sieve to filter out the rough parts of life, (like paying homage to the gods of money and self-sufficiency). These are masters that never serve you. Sabbath frees you from them as it trains you to trust in a greater God.

Envision peace of mind, even when money seems short. Imagine a day that draws out love and never condemnation. Picture yourself with a clear conscience, stress free, and deeply in tune with your Maker. Can one day really offer this? There is one way to find out. Choose the path that infinite wisdom chose for you. Now, that’s practical.

*“In those days I saw men in
Judah treading winepresses on
the Sabbath and bringing in
grain and loading it on donkeys,
together with wine, grapes, figs
and all other kinds of loads...
Therefore I warned them against
selling food on that day.”*

(Nehemiah 13:15)

Commerce

WEEK THIRTY-NINE

A rule makes a lot more sense when the reason behind it is clear. Nehemiah does seem strict when you read how he badgers people for their disregard of Sabbath. In the 13th chapter of the book with his name, we hear him warning “against selling food” on Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15). Unless you are familiar with the idea, it doesn’t make sense.

It is easy enough to understand why you shouldn’t work on Sabbath. Work keeps your body from rest and your mind from complete focus on God. But, the simple act of giving money to someone in return for food hardly appears wrong. Is God worried about the exchange of money on his day? If so, this would mean you shouldn’t give money to the church on Sabbath either.

It might also be argued that, in our day, paying a restaurant to feed you makes for much less Sabbath work than preparing, or even warming, your Sabbath meal. In a situation like that, is God really concerned about the exchange of money? This may be a question that each person must answer in his or her own mind (Romans 14:5). But, that doesn't mean there is no Bible guideline.

Take another look at Nehemiah 13:15. It begins with a list of Sabbath violations: "In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath." This does sound very much like work, because it is—which God had strictly forbidden (Exodus 20:9-10). For these Israelites, *commerce was work*. "Therefore," Nehemiah responds, "I warned them against selling food on that day."

But, the restriction on Sabbath commerce goes deeper. Back in Nehemiah chapter 10, he says: "*If the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath*" (verse 31). Respect for Sabbath excludes both selling and buying. The reasons why selling violates Sabbath are spelled out. We can only assume the same

reasons apply in the other direction. There may also be something in the fact that God said not to make others work for you on Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11).

What do you think? Can making commercial transactions harmonize with the idea of undistracted time with God? I didn't think so. It's tempting to look at such restrictions as restrictions on your freedom. But, it is more accurate to view them as restrictions on what keeps you from God, granting you freedom to know him. The purpose of commerce is self-preservation. Sabbath reminds you that God preserves you. It teaches trust.

What do you do on Sabbath that smacks of self-preservation? Whether it is physical preservation, social preservation, financial preservation, or one of the many other forms of self-preservation, God ask you to leave it alone for one day. Let yourself bask in the assurance that he will preserve you. He will keep you healthy. He will bring you genuine friends. He will secure enough money to cover your needs.

*“The Lord has appointed
tomorrow as a day of rest, a holy
Sabbath to the Lord. On this
day we will rest from our normal
daily tasks. So bake or boil as
much as you want today, and set
aside what is left for tomorrow.”*

(Exodus 16:23 NLT)

Preparation 1

WEEK FORTY

When God created the world, he made it from a formless, purposeless mass (Genesis 1:2). It was to commemorate this mighty act of Creation that he marked out every seventh day as Sabbath. With this in mind, it's intriguing to see what he did when he chose to create a holy nation.

After twenty generations of mindless servitude in slavery to the pharaohs, the sons and daughters of Israel had built a strong tradition of insignificance. When Moses, the son of Israel turned prince of Egypt, tried to lighten the slave burden, the Hebrews weren't too hot on the idea of changing status quo and he was forced to flee the country (Exodus 2:11-15). Their eyes were not trained to see hope.

Like the mass from which he sculpted earth, God had plans for this formless, purposeless mass of people.

Lifetimes of slavery had reduced them to near animals. They did the work of animals, were effectively contained and herded like animals, and lived mostly to survive—not to prosper and do great things. Although students of ancient history may quibble over just how harsh their conditions were, slavery of any kind is dehumanizing. But, when God shaped the first humans from dust and gave them life, he made them to be his friends. This was the reason for Sabbath—that his children might know him.

It shouldn't surprise us, then, to see the first thing he did after creating his new nation—he taught the people of his creation to keep Sabbath. At the Creation of earth, humans were sinless and undistracted, so making his Sabbath appointment with them was all God needed to secure the time. Now, he adds to his instructions *preparation*. Sinful people are easily side tracked from their God, so they need to plan ahead for Sabbath.

God's first act of nation building was to save his people from their animal existence and let them be human again but people don't change their entire worldview in one month. For quite some time afterward, their main worry remained survival—food and water (Exodus 15:24; 16:3). It is in this context that we find God re-consecrating the Sabbath.

In fact, his instructions for preparing have to do with their drive for survival. Moses said, “‘The Lord has appointed tomorrow as a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. On this day we will rest from our normal daily tasks. So bake or boil as much as you want today, and set aside what is left for tomorrow.’ The next morning the leftover food was wholesome and good... Moses said, ‘This is your food for today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord. There will be no food on the ground today. Gather food for six days, but the seventh day is a Sabbath’” (Exodus 16:24-26 NLT).

This pattern of Sabbath preparation must have continued a whole forty years because the manna continued that long (verse 35). God’s idea that his people should plan ahead to protect their Sabbath time with him was more than a passing thought. In fact, by Jesus’ time, his disciples were still calling Friday “the preparation day” (Luke 23:54).

Really, Sabbath preparation involved planning common concerns out of the schedule—even survival needs. These activities were in no way bad but that wasn’t the standard of measure by which to exclude them. The goal should be to prepare by doing as much common fare in advance as possible so you can have more time with your Creator.

*“It was Preparation Day, and
the Sabbath was about to begin.”*

(Luke 23:54).

Preparation 2

WEEK FORTY-ONE

News has just come that you will have lunch with your favorite celebrity tomorrow. How does the news change your day? To start, you spend the rest of it with a smile squirming just under the surface. Mental preparation kicks in and you give serious attention to your clothes. Then, there are thoughts of what to talk about.

Now, raise the stakes. Your hero is coming *home* with you after lunch. This adds to the list of preparations. You finally sort through those scattered papers on your desk. The coffee table gets dusted and you even clean off the top of your fridge. Preparation is a serious matter with such a prospect.

Forget celebrities. Imagine you've had no quality time with your sweetheart all week but a date is coming up. You are more relaxed than you would be with that

Hollywood hero but you still prepare for the event. You still give some thought to your appearance, to the order of the house, and to your frame of mind. Preparation is still necessary and flows from your desire for the date to thrive.

Then, there is God—part celebrity, part love companion, and so much more. How do you prepare for your weekly date with him? After six days of minimal contact, what can be done to seize the moment? A simple statement in Luke 23:54 points us to an entire philosophy. It says, “It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin” (see also Mark 15:42). Preparation Day? A whole day? It just might take a whole day to bridge the gap five days of stress can put between you and God.

This is more than an offhanded comment. God dramatically established, or re-established, the Preparation Day when he freed his people from Egypt. First he rained manna from heaven then scheduled Sabbath off from food gathering (Exodus 16:26), which meant the day before was Preparation Day. On that day, he instructed them to prepare twice as much food.

God describes it in detail: “This is what the LORD commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep

it until morning” (Exodus 16:23). Then, Moses explains again for good measure: “Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days” (verse 29).

The whole idea ups the anti. Now, we don’t have just one day to set aside but two. Yes, indeed, but it doesn’t end there. Here, in Exodus 16, Preparation Day is called “the sixth day” and is later named “Preparation Day” (John 19:31). In similar fashion, the New Testament often designates the “the first day” of the week with the Greek expression “one after Sabbath.” Scripture is telling us that the whole week centers on Sabbath. Every day matters because it counts up to Sabbath.

Is it going too far to see every day as a day for Sabbath preparation? It does sound a bit radical. But, since when does Jesus not call you to radical living. Let us rephrase the question so we can see it for what it is. Is it going too far to see every day as a day to invest in your relationship with God? Put that way the answer is obvious. But, the two questions are the same. Sabbath is the crown jewel of your time with God, so every day spent in preparation for that time is a wise choice.

*“There are six days when you
may work, but the seventh day is
a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred
assembly.”*

(Leviticus 23:3)

Gathering

WEEK FORTY-TWO

The aroma of nutmeg and spiced cider floats through a room of laughing eyes and family chatter. One of the moms whips mashed potatoes in the kitchen. Kids scamper under foot. And, a few men gather around the television to watch a snowy football game from the warmth of the living room. Why do we anticipate holidays like this? Because experience has taught us that they are good. The anticipation floats on the memories of past gatherings.

There is something magical about “family” assemblies because the joy of deep bonds fills them. Thanksgiving isn’t nearly as thank-filled for a girl with no memories of warm cider and friendly smiles and Christmas has less magic for a boy who has never received a gift from mommy. This illustrates how Sabbath gatherings enrich with the practice of participation.

Scripture calls Sabbath “a day of sacred assembly” (Leviticus 23:3). This later *application* of the call to “rest” on God’s day fills out the idea of resting. Nothing will make you feel more secure than comfortable relationships. Nothing will give you rest from the insecurities of a self-reliant workweek better than a “holiday” (or, “holy day”) with friends.

“But,” you might say, “I don’t get that feeling at church.” Maybe you don’t but why not? Those who love holidays didn’t love their first one the way they loved their last one. They love each one more than the last because they have invested their heart in so many and been rewarded. Invest your heart in Sabbath gatherings and the dividends will compound with each passing week. If you don’t invest much, the payoffs are slim.

Perhaps this is what Paul had in mind when he said, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing” (Hebrews 10:25). Build your history with the family of God, invest in relationships, and collect memories to enrich every Sabbath to come. For the sake of your *experience*, it will be worth the investment.

Hopefully, enough has been said to get you nodding your head at the page. “Yep, ‘tis true. I should do that.” But, agreement isn’t enough. Begin to think up ways to

practice the discipline of relationship building. The social element adds to the spiritual worship experience.

Otherwise, God would ask us to stay home and praise him alone. But, the social element means a lot more when friendship is already strong.

To have the most joy and experience the warm comfort of worship in the family of God, take time outside of “church” to build those bonds. Invite someone from church home for lunch or out to golf. Or, maybe you could form a group around a common hobby. Make the effort. Your Sabbath worship will be that much richer.

Envision the change. For too many, church attendance feels like work. You scramble through the morning trying to look “acceptable.” Then, there is the pressure to be on your best behavior. At times, it can feel like you are under inspection by semi-foreign eyes. Not so when the church is your family and some of the people you have the most fun with are gathered around you to worship God. You can almost float on air, being lifted by the smiles of your friends.

*“When the Sabbath came, he
began to teach in the synagogue,
and many who heard him were
amazed. ‘Where did this man get
these things?’ they asked.
‘What’s this wisdom that has
been given him, that he even does
miracles!’”*

(Mark 6:2)

Instruction

WEEK FORTY-THREE

Resting is different than vegetating. Have you ever slept all day? How did you feel afterward? And, how long do you enjoy a vacation that involves nothing but lying around? It feels empty and rarely rejuvenates. With this in mind, we see that God is merciful to ask for more than stopping things on Sabbath.

The biblical snapshots of Jesus' Sabbath time are anything but tame. Intellectual stimulation is one of his favorite Sabbath adventures. Mark pictures him stirring the sludge in his listeners' minds to depths it had not been stirred for a long time. "When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue" (Mark 6:2). If only Mark recorded all he said that day.... Those who heard were blown away and began asking, "Where did this man get

these things?” and “What’s this wisdom that has been given him?”

Such encounters are a Sabbath norm for Christ. Almost wherever Sabbath is mentioned in the gospels, we find Jesus challenging people toward spiritual intelligence. Whether he is defending a Sabbath healing with good theology (John 5:1-18) or simply applying Scripture (Luke 4:16-21), Sabbath was a choice time for Jesus to expand his listeners’ minds.

Developing your spiritual intellect—what form might that take for you? As nice as it would be, you don’t have Jesus here to preach your Sabbath sermons or challenge the remnants of small thinking. Or... do you? Yes, it might seem like it would be easier to sit at Jesus’ feet on a Judean hillside and watch him point to the flower and expound its lessons. But, has he really left you like an orphan without his guidance?

The answer hangs on a strange comment he made. Speaking of his return to heaven, he said, “It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). The context makes it clear that he speaks of the Holy Spirit (e.g. verse 13). For whatever reason, Jesus blatantly says the Spirit’s presence will serve

his followers better than his own. Then, he describes the Spirit as the revealer of truth (verses 8-14).

Similar wording in John 14 appears to say that Jesus' presence is made possible through the work of this same Spirit. There he promises, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (verse 18). You can still sit at Jesus' feet and be taught. It may not be on a Judean hillside but the promise of his presence and his truth storms its way off the pages of Scripture to take shape in your life and to form your Sabbath experience.

We still haven't answered the question: What form might that take for you? That is left to your discretion and the Spirit's influence. But, you have in Scripture some scripts from Jesus' sermons and you have in your heart the Spirit of God. You can learn at Jesus' feet this Sabbath. That is how Jesus would have it. He will challenge you. He will rebuke you. He will love you. His vision for Sabbath is that you expand your mind in your search to know him deeper.

*“Moses has been preached in
every city from the earliest times
and is read in the synagogues on
every Sabbath.”*

(Acts 15:21)

Scripture

WEEK FORTY-FOUR

Scripture is the intellectual gathering place for the people of God. It is God's means for setting our confused minds back in line with his. It should be no surprise, then, that his people have always turned to Scripture for Sabbath reading.

"The law and the prophets" is the New Testament title for Scripture (Matthew 22:38-40). In Acts 13:27, Paul remarks that the "prophets... are read every Sabbath." And, in Acts 15:21, James reports that "Moses... [the law] is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." Then there is Jesus. It was his custom to teach Scripture each Sabbath (Luke 4:16).

The case is not hard to make but the full benefit of Scripture and just how to receive it is tougher to explain. There is no experience to compare with the closeness to

God that Scripture can bring. You have to live the wonder to know it.

Many show frustration at how little time they find in the week to study as they “should.” The beauty of Sabbath emerges once again—twenty-four hours for nothing but God. Scripture can certainly find its place in that time. In fact, during Sabbath, you have time for nothing else until you’ve made time to learn from God. The keys to unlock the wonders of Scripture are your resolve to seek them and God’s Spirit.

How might it change your life if you made time to search Scripture each Sabbath? For those who want to study deeper, you could easily learn the original languages of Scripture if you spent two hours in them each Sabbath. Whatever your interest, dream outside the box. Your understanding of, and peace with, God can be so much more.

Like all adventures, exploring Scripture means more when you have a partner. Find an adventure companion but, first, spend time alone with the sacred text. God may wish to guide you in paths that you must tread alone. Give him the chance to do so.

There are many ways to immerse yourself in Scripture. The books of the Bible were first penned to be

read aloud. Though you may not be able to hear it in the ancient Hebrew or Greek, reading the text aloud, hearing someone else read it, or listening to a recording can bring it to life. You might also use a concordance to explore a key word in Scripture. You might listen to recorded Bible lectures or compare several translations on a given text.

One of the best ways to study Scripture is to take a whole book or Bible story and dig for the core of its message. Many don't realize the Bible is mostly stories about what others have learned from God. Its verses have more weight when you know the stories behind them. It is fun too. Hearing stories is rarely laborious, especially when you give rein to imagination.

However you do it, give the written word of God its share of time in your Sabbath schedule. God made flesh is called the *Word* of God (John 1:1, 14) because Christ's presence communicated God's heart to a suffering world (John 3:16-17). Scripture is called by the same name because it too speaks of God's heart (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Let Scripture speak this Sabbath. Let God's word shape your heart.

*“When evening shadows fell on
the gates of Jerusalem before the
Sabbath, I ordered the doors to
be shut and not opened until the
Sabbath was over. I stationed
some of my own men at the gates
so that no load could be brought
in on the Sabbath day.”*

(Nehemiah 13:19)

Service

WEEK FORTY-FIVE

The Sabbath command first says to keep the Sabbath holy. And, close behind comes the stern warning, “Don’t work.” First things first: “Keep it holy” and “Don’t work.” It is unthinkable, then, to do any work on Sabbath. Right? *Wrong.*

You know those words. They seem clear: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 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...” (Exodus 20:8-10). Can there really be any question?

The demise of Sabbath work seems sure when we read what Christ’s grieving followers did on the night of his death: “Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to

the commandment” (Luke 23:56). It was Sabbath and embalming the dead is work. If his disciples wouldn’t lift a finger to embalm their Messiah on Sabbath, then *all* work must be out of the question. Wrong again.

God put the restriction on “*your* work” and he did so for the compelling reason that it was *his* day. Yes, the technically minded reader may note that he said, “you shall not do *any* work” on Sabbath. But, this is a reference back to “your work,” leaving us free to do God’s work on Sabbath. As for the disciples’ example on the night of Jesus’ death, we should note that they failed to grasp many truths in the pre-resurrection world.

When Jesus healed a man on Sabbath and certain Jews threw the Sabbath command in his face, he shot back, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working” (John 5:17). One can hardly believe he meant to ridicule Sabbath. He meant to clear things up. His words justify some manner of Sabbath work. But, the commandment still condemns it. What gives?

It is that line between God’s work and yours. In the Old Testament, priests and others take up guard duty on Sabbath (2 Chronicles 23:4; Nehemiah 13:19). Jesus argues that, “on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent” (Matthew 12:5). He uses the fact

to justify how his disciples gathered food on Sabbath (verses 1-2), which suggests that suffering the misery of stale hunger isn't a good way to spend Sabbath. You do better to relieve it. But, that is another study. Now, we see that working in service to God is Sabbath appropriate.

It makes sense. Common work wraps you up in self-preservation while Sabbath reminds you that God provides. By contrast, God's work lets you partner in his purpose. It is tough to work long in God's gloves and not be changed. His whole work with mankind is to save them. When your heart joins him in this work, however small your part, your heart beats for others. God invites you to step outside of yourself and the petty world of self-preservation and work for something so much bigger. That's good Sabbath work.

*“On the Sabbath we went outside
the city gate to the river, where
we expected to find a place of
prayer.”*

(Acts 16:13)

Prayer

WEEK FORTY-SIX

Distraction hinders prayer. Mental fragmentation scatters your thoughts in a hundred directions and you can't keep a thought long enough to pray about it. If only you could escape the distractions long enough to *concentrate* on God, you might have a real conversation with him. In our churning world, it is tough to find that sanctuary in time but Sabbath is your prime opportunity.

Even Jesus' disciples faced distraction. In Acts 16:13, they report, "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there." Another time, on their way to this place of prayer, a demon-possessed girl accosted them (verse 16). Distraction is always present.

Jesus' disciples set the example, persistently seeking a place for prayer. Yes, distraction came but they kept trying. Keep up the effort. Though it may not *always* pay off, the sure way to fail is to quit. You may recall that the ancient sanctuary's entrance for God was opened special each Sabbath (Ezekiel 46:1-3). This hints that God makes himself more accessible on Sabbath. If so, what better time for prayer?

We must not conclude that God is unavailable the other six days—only that Sabbath is a special opportunity for deeper connection. Let God's famous words echo in your mind all six days but especially the seventh: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). Prayer is seeking God and Sabbath is the best time for it.

There are six days each week when you are *immersed* in distractions. But, the reason for the many restrictions on the seventh day is so you can escape these distractions and place your full attention on the Creator. Yes, you may still struggle to stay focused amidst the many things pulling you but at the center of Sabbath-keeping is the resolve to set these things aside, one by one. The choice to keep Sabbath is a choice to persevere in this resolve.

Paul reminds us to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Ephesians 6:18). Then, in Hebrews 4, he makes Sabbath a metaphor of the Christian’s bond with God, concluding, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (verse 16). For Paul, Sabbath is the ultimate symbol of your link with God. It is prayer in action.

James draws the issue close to the heart by casting a vision of what prayer can be. He calls Abraham “God's friend” (James 2:23), and then warns, “friendship with the world is hatred toward God” (James 4:4). But, for James, that friendship shows up in the prayer life. His letter is a call to godly living and he concludes it with a call to pray for godliness. Finally, the promise: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). It’s almost a no-brainer—one of the best ways to spend your relationship time with God is in conversation. Open your heart to him as to a friend.

*“A psalm. A song. For the
Sabbath day. It is good to praise
the LORD and make music to
your name, O Most High.”*

(Psalm 92:1)

Music

FORTY-SEVEN

Every love-scene throbs to the notes of a choice song. If a movie lacks music, the emotional impact of the scene deflates. Poetic lyrics and the heartbeat of melody tug at your heartstrings like nothing else can. Music is powerful. Music is emotional. Music is God's invention.

Many Christians have inhibitions about music in worship because the world uses its power to stir impure emotions and to draw people toward wickedness. The key here is what music does—it speaks the language of the heart. Your analytical, logical side guards the gate to your feelings. God planned that too. You need a tool to protect against nomadic emotions (Ephesians 4:14). But, please don't forget that the same God who gave you emotions also gave you music with which to stir them.

Some would, either by argument or practice, rather leave this wonder-tool in the devil's hands than risk its power over them. This is an awful mistake. Music is more fluent in the language of emotion than anything (besides God's Spirit). To let the devil speak his message through it and not allow God's message through it is crazier than choosing to quit speaking at all because others have said bad words.

Others, perhaps the larger group, would have us emasculate music—tone down its emotional content. Music is emotional. Shall we only accept it when it becomes less of what God made it? There is a feeling that, if it moves the heart “too much,” it's the devil creeping in. Must we feel that God's greatness should *not* inspire us to shout with joy? Must we say that true praise can only be logical and low-key? Must we conclude that bubbling excitement is unworthy of God? Absolutely not—on all accounts!

King David wrote a psalm “for the Sabbath day” (Psalm 92:1) in which he describes both why and how to praise God through music. And, we must carefully note that the music he describes is Sabbath music. He says, “It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the ten-stringed lyre

and the melody of the harp. For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD; I sing for joy at the works of your hands” (verses 1-4).

According to David, Sabbath music should be joyful, instruments should intensify it, and it should praise God for all he has made and done. Its special link with Sabbath anchors in the belief that God deserves honor for creating us. Sabbath observance grows from a *logical* choice to put the Creator first (Exodus 20:8-11). Sabbath music is the *emotional* side of that same choice. Music draws out the other side of your personality to join in worshipping God. Music evokes and expresses the *heart* of worship.

So, by all means, throw your heart into praising God. Don't hold back your emotions, *if they reflect pure love and admiration for God*. Sabbath is the perfect time for this depth of praise. It is the appointed day to give him honor. Let it also be the day you give him your heart. For God's sake, and yours, give him your *whole* heart. Throw yourself at his feet. Don't be timid like a schoolboy with his Valentine. There is no need. Don't emasculate your heart expression. God deserves better. Let the music stir your love for God. He is your *Creator*.

*"It is good to praise the LORD
and make music to your name, O
Most High, to proclaim your
love in the morning and your
faithfulness at night."*

(Psalm 92:1-2)

Praise

WEEK FORTY-EIGHT

If it feels good, do it. That is the logic of a godless world. But, it is also the logic of good king David. No, this isn't another one of his spiritual hiccups. He writes down this thought, puts it to music, and sings it to God. In English, his words sound like this: "It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High" (Psalm 92:1). "It is good" first looks like instruction but David is addressing God, so it can't be instruction. He simply means; it *feels* good to praise God. In this verse, its pleasure is the reason for doing it.

This is a psalm "for the Sabbath day" (verse 1), so we should take it as directive for Sabbath-keeping. But, the question begs asking: What is praise? If it is good, if it feels good to praise the Lord, then we must learn what this good thing is. Judging by the rest of the psalm, it involves

ecstatically rehearsing God's goodness. Praise, in this case, is enthusiasm for God set to music. And, according to David, it includes indulgence in pleasure—constructive pleasure.

Here lies the difference between the world's philosophy and David's. Destructive pleasure tries to replace our sense that God is missing. Constructive pleasure comes by reaching for God with energy and pathos. If we've driven God out, we seek sin after sin to quench our draught. But, sinful pleasure is no substitute for the pleasure of knowing God. Indeed, "it is good to praise the LORD," to reach out for him. It feels good, so do it.

Our espresso-loaded culture has us all wound up as tight as a rubber band, making it easier to indulge in a quick pleasure fix than to invest time in the slow process of knitting our hearts to God's. Sabbath can help. In his psalm "for the Sabbath day" David also says, "It is good... to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night" (verses 1-2). Sabbath praise is an all day experience—enough time for serious pleasure.

You may still find discomfort in the idea of praising God because it feels good. It is true that God deserves your praise whether you feel it or not but David's sales pitch highlights pleasure. His words remind you that, since you

will seek pleasure somewhere, praising God is a good way to find it. All things, including praise, must be done God's way but, to those who would take Isaiah's warning *against* "doing your pleasure on My holy day" as a command to be sullen, we must recommend the next clause in that verse: "And call the Sabbath a delight" (Isaiah 58:13 NKJV).

The difference between the two kinds of pleasure hangs on the point of focus—either self or God. The pleasure of praise does not start with a desire for pleasure. This could only end in the isolated misery of self-fixation. Praise begins with joy for God's goodness and that joy multiplies with each retelling of the story.

David gives the reason for his praise: "For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD; I sing for joy at the works of your hands" (Psalm 92:4). Let the vast goodness of God rise in your mind like a mountain peak, pushing out the clutter that fragments your thoughts. When you dwell on God this Sabbath, you will have abundant reason for joy. It is *good* to praise the Lord.

*“There remains, then, a Sabbath-
rest for the people of God; for
anyone who enters God's rest also
rests from his own work, just as
God did from his.”*

(Hebrews 4:9-10)

Presence

WEEK FORTY-NINE

In the beginning, God created habitat, marriage, and Sabbath. When our first parents sinned, God spoke solemn words about the future of marriage and he laid a curse on the earth. What about Sabbath? He never touched it. To Eve, he warned, “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). Marriage was not the same anymore. To Adam, he said, “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life” (verse 17). Their habitat changed too.

Sabbath is different because its strength hangs on God. He created the world and, as long as he is Creator, Sabbath goes untouched. The first sin involved the earth’s produce, so the earth is cursed. Marriage turned to discord, so it is damaged too. But, the virtue of Sabbath is tied to God’s undamaged virtue.

The implications are dizzying. The violation of Sabbath is strictly on our part. By human choice, we have lost the ability to see God's face but he's still present. You may not see it—he may not enter your sensory register—but he is very much there. God keeps his Sabbath. We don't. Every week, he draws close but our hearts are absent.

You might ask, what is the practical good of this? If one person sees and hears while the other does not, it is no more than spying. But, this *is* different. We are *told* that God is there, that we can speak with him, we can hear him speak, and we can see his face. It's no secret. But, we must see, hear, and feel him by *faith*. Faith is the gift that takes us beyond the confines of sin. It connects us with God's continuing Sabbath.

It is telling to see how Sabbath appears as a metaphor in the New Testament. In lament for Israel's poor faith, God resolved, "They shall never enter my rest" (Hebrews 3:11). The reason was unbelief (verses 18-19), prompting a warning: "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (verse 12). Divine rest, the essence of Sabbath, is grasped by faith.

“Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it... Now we who have believed enter that rest” (4:1, 3). So, in part, Sabbath is a state of mind. The choice to exclude certain forms of entertainment or work or subject matter from Sabbath helps that state of mind. As you cease from all things that reek of self-preservation, your one remaining hope is faith in God. This standard of faith serves as a guide for Sabbath-keeping.

To receive Sabbath rest, you must choose to see what you can't see, choose to hear what you can't hear, and fix your mind on a presence you don't feel. This is faith (11:1). Through faith, “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest” (4:9-11).

The Old Testament reveals that Sabbath is the one element of Creation untouched by sin. And, the New Testament explains how we, who are more than touched by sin, can taste that perfect Sabbath rest. Rest is a state of mind and a mind assured of God's provision and protection is restful. Sabbath-keeping means giving God your life, and trusting in his presence.

*“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.”*

(Exodus 20:11)

Faith

WEEK FIFTY

There is no reason for a seven-day week, outside of Scripture. The pattern exists only because God made all things in six days and rested the seventh. Silently following a pattern we see no evidence for should make us ask why. The masses do it passively. The pattern is there, and always has been, so they follow. But, for Sabbath enthusiasts, every day builds toward the seventh and the seventh day points to God.

First, keeping Sabbath shows faith that God made you. That is the reason God gives for keeping it. He says, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy... 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” (Exodus 20:8, 11). Every nod to Sabbath is an act of faith, and each slight shows disbelief.

This faith factor is more emphatic when Sabbath returns to Israel after their flight from Egypt. God sends food from heaven but says don't gather it on Sabbath. Just trust me (Exodus 16). This bread-from-heaven story appeals both for Sabbath-keeping and for faith, and it hangs them on the same choice.

The use of Sabbath as a metaphor of God's grace in Hebrews 4:1-13 also deepens the faith notion. Speaking of unbelievers (Hebrews 3:19) and their tragic failure to receive God's grace, Paul writes, "Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith" (4:1-2). In other words, God's grace, symbolized here by Sabbath (verse 9), requires faith to receive it.

The fact that Paul sees Sabbath as a symbol of grace and says it takes faith to enter that grace strongly suggests that it takes faith to receive Sabbath too. But, that was already implied in the commandment. After all, any command is a call to put faith in God's wisdom. But, the Sabbath command strikes at the core of the issue, like no other. Sabbath is an appeal to show faith that God exists

and that he made you. Several others commend us to follow *his wisdom* but the Sabbath calls us to believe *in him*, period.

Now, *you* must wrestle with application, just you and God, because faith takes a different shape in each person. Perhaps, you could begin with the obvious. If keeping Sabbath shows faith in who God is, then keeping the boundaries he sets for it shows trust in his wisdom. It is one way to show your faith. But, there is more to it.

Take this faith principle deeper. Paul once commented to Christian friends, “We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). In the structure of this comment, he placed faith, love, and hope in parallel to each other.

This combination of terms may ring a bell (1 Corinthians 13:13; Colossians 1:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:8). Faith in God is impossible for those who don't love him and hope springs from faith. This faith/love link shows that your ability to keep Sabbath hangs on your love relationship with God. Nurture it and your Sabbaths will improve.

*“At that time Jesus went
through the grainfields on the
Sabbath. His disciples were
hungry and began to pick some
heads of grain and eat them.
When the Pharisees saw this,
they said to him, ‘Look! Your
disciples are doing what is
unlawful on the Sabbath.’”*

(Matthew 12:1-2)

Needs

WEEK FIFTY-ONE

How can you strike a balance between sacrificial obedience and practical comforts? At what point does your need supercede God's command? That *appears* to be the question Jesus raises when his disciples pick grain on Sabbath. But, he's really driving at something else.

Picture a more extreme case. A child is trapped amidst blood and twisted steel. He can be saved if someone cuts him free from his mangled prison. But, here comes the quandary. Every day of the week, except Sabbath, a good friend of yours operates heavy machines. He is the only one around with skill enough to run the Jaws of Life and free the child. Your friend asks you what he should do—should he work on Sabbath to save the boy? What would you say?

Most people know what to say immediately. Clearly, you save the boy's life. There is biblical precedent

for it. To justify his own choice of healing on Sabbath, Jesus said, “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it” (Luke 6:9)? But, the choice is easier when someone else is at stake. By contrast, what happens when you put yourself in the disciples’ place? What if you are faced with working for your own comfort on Sabbath?

In such a case, you may wonder if your desire is selfish—if you are too quick to dismiss God’s commands for convenience. These are good questions but they are not the ones Jesus raised in the grain field. He means, instead, to define the Sabbath commandment itself. He argues that his disciples have not broken God’s law—what they have done is in harmony with God’s vision for Sabbath.

In response to the allegation of Sabbath-breaking in the grain field, Jesus shows that laws are not one-sided (Matthew 12:3-5) then concludes, “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (verse 6). He means to question the *reason* for law.

Jesus’ critics place a false tension between God’s commands and the good of people. God’s commands are not meant to destroy us but to preserve us. Could the disciples really stay focused on their Sabbath connection

with God while languishing in hunger? No. According to Christ's logic, we might conclude that picking grain was not only permissible but actually helped them keep God's Sabbath.

The question of need is at the center of this story but need is not in conflict with Sabbath. It is the reason for it. You need a day of focused time with God. In that case, eliminating hunger strengthens your Sabbath experience.

This story does not teach that all laws for Sabbath-keeping are worthless. Instead, it draws the target those directions should aim for. In fact, the principle that Sabbath fills your need should inspire you to erase every distraction possible. But, when you find that some need stands in your way, remember that God wants your needs met. The very reason these small needs should not crowd the Sabbath is that they matter less than your great need of God. Don't let small, unmet needs keep you from Him.

“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day,’ and the darkness he called ‘night.’ And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.”

(Genesis 1:3-5)

Timing

WEEK FIFTY-TWO

Through the eyes of Scripture, we gaze on a primordial mass, called “formless and void” (Genesis 1:2). What do you see? That is hard to grasp. The moment I read “formless,” the *form* of a hideous mass gathers in my brain. But, that’s not what the text says. It doesn’t say, “hideous form.” It says, “formless.” There is nothing to it. It is of no consequence. There is no purpose to its existence, if it can be said to exist at all.

Form suggests purpose and meaning. A hammer works because it is shaped like a hammer. You are human because your brain and eyes and face and limbs take human form. The text means to show that, before God shaped it, the earth was a meaningless mass—a place without a purpose. Scripture also calls it “void”—nothing to see here. Like a worthless check, its place in the cosmos has the

letters “V-O-I-D” scrawled across it. When God gives something shape, he also gives it meaning. Until then, it’s meaningless.

But, the lack of God’s touch has also left darkness. Even if there were some form, we could not see to comprehend its meaning. The mass awaits the touch of purpose *and* a spark of illumination. Through the eyes of Scripture, we see “the Spirit of God... hovering over the waters” in excited anticipation of what is about to happen (verse 2).

Then, all creation can sense God stirring as he takes first things first: “Let there be light” (verse 3)—a command no photon can ignore. The light has no source but God himself—the sun has not been made. By introducing light, God has introduced himself to the scene.

Like letters taking shape on a page, God’s fingers craft a message from the mass. The message speaks of him. It tells of his presence—there is form and light. It tells of his nature—beauty, warmth, happiness, and love. But, then the Creator does a strange thing—he puts back darkness.

It can mean only one thing: he wants all creatures to experience his glorious introduction of light to darkness and form to formlessness fresh each day. There is no question that his command, “Let there be light” introduced

himself to earth. The choice to reinstate evening makes a replay of morning possible. He plans to reintroduce *himself* each morning.

As a golden sun rises in the eastern sky, it slowly unveils the shadowy shapes of created things. It is a skit, a drama, a pageant—no, an epic—that replays Creation. To glory in the morning, evening must come first. So, he makes each day by that pattern: “evening and morning” (verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Though his light is never completely absent again (verse 16), he veils it at night so his creatures will never forget that first morning.

As the climax of the week, it is only right that Sabbath should begin with night. As the sun sets on the Preparation Day, God invites you to see yourself as formless and void without him. Then, as the morning rays rouse you to life, your Creator comes to reintroduce himself. You are invited, once again, to glory in his presence.

