

Exodus 20:8-10. Time to Put Your Feet Up? Sabbath rest for today

I need a rest. There are 20 million people in Australia. But 5 million are retired, leaving 15 million to do the work. But 5 million of these are in schools and colleges, leaving just 10 million to do the work. But 1.5 million are unemployed and 6.5 million are employed by the Government leaving 2 million to do the work. Of these, 100,000 are in the armed forces, 200,000 in local councils, 1.5 million in hospitals and 179,998 in prison. This leaves just 2 people to do all the work and there you are listening to me while I do all the work. No wonder I need a rest!

What do you normally do on a Sunday? Obviously, all of you here today go to Church. What else do you do? Would you go to a movie after church? Would you do your washing? Or cook lunch? Would you watch TV? Or read a novel? Or spend the day in prayer? Are your kids allowed to play sport on a Sunday? Or do homework?

In church history, when Christians have treated Sunday as their replacement Sabbath, sometimes severe penalties have been suffered by Sabbath-breakers. In 1820 in Durham, England the *Durham County Observer* reported: "On Saturday night a boy was exposed in Bishop Auckland, for breaking the Sabbath; and on Saturday last two boys were similarly punished for the same offence." Being "exposed" is being put in the stocks on a Saturday night for doing things on a Sunday that were against the law.

The New England Puritan Cotton Mather (1663-1728) was one of America's most influential religious leaders. He rebuked his contemporaries for Sabbath-breaking. He quoted Nehemiah 13:18: "*Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.*" He then appealed to his contemporaries asking,

"And have [we] not seen the wrath of God correcting profanations of the Christian Sabbath, with rebukes of thunder and lightening? And, indeed, some intelligent persons have noted it, that the dreadful storms of thunder and lightening, which have killed many among us from year to year, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah; they have mostly happened on or near the Lord's day; as an intimation, that breaches of the Lord's day have procured the firing of the great artillery of heaven upon us, for the violations of the sacred rest which he has appointed for us.

Mather spoke of other disasters occurring on the Lord's day and of how some criminals, before their execution, "in those last and sad minutes of their lives", had cried out that their imminent execution was God's judgment on them for breaking the Sabbath. Mather believed that when Christians do things on Sunday they should not be doing, they are liable to be killed by God. Consider Exodus 31:14: "*Anyone who desecrates [the Sabbath] must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people.*" See verse 15: "*Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death.*" Look at Exodus 35:2-3: "*Whoever does any work on [the Sabbath] must be put to death. Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day.*" Indeed, in Numbers 15:32-36 on God's direct orders, a man was stoned to death for gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Given such strict statements didn't the religious leaders of Jesus' day have sound biblical warrant for wanting to put Jesus to death?

In approaching the highly controversial subject of the Sabbath let's first take to heart the teaching of Romans 14:5:

One man considers one day as more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Dedicated Christians are divided on the issue of whether Sunday should be treated as more sacred than other days. Some Christians are deeply convinced that Sunday for Christians replaces the Jewish Sabbath. Many Christians call Sunday the "Lord's day." Many Christians don't hesitate to call it the Sabbath. On the other hand, some Christians believe Sunday is no more holy than any other day of the week. They go to church on Sunday just because that happens to be the day that Christians meet as church.

When it comes to Christians having different views, Paul gives us a good example in Romans 14. Paul was up front about what he believed about eating food many regard as unclean. He tells the Roman Christians he has no personal problem with eating *any* food, since he is fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. However, he does *not* insist that other Christians must share his conviction. Let me too be up front.

That magnificent statement of doctrine, the Westminster Confession teaches that Sunday is the "Lord's day", replacing the Jewish Saturday Sabbath. Having been taught this as a young Christian, I avoided doing shopping, washing or anything that might normally be considered as work. However, I am now fully convinced that no day is more sacred than any other. But some of you may well have strong convictions that Sunday is to be regarded as the Sabbath. Given Romans 14, I will not use this sermon to argue that I am right or you are wrong. In Colossians 2:16 Paul says, "*Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.*" If you believe strongly that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath please do not judge me for holding a different conviction.

But do not assume from this provocative introduction that I consider the Sabbath command defunct, obsolete and of no continuing relevance to Christians. Consider the fourth command in the Decalogue as stated in Exodus 20:8-10:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.

Please note that the Jews observed the Sabbath prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 16:21-30 we read how the Israelites gathered manna every morning but had to gather twice as much on the sixth day to avoid gathering and cooking on the seventh day, a Sabbath to the Lord. In verses 27-30 we read:

Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? **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." So the people rested on the seventh day.

This is the first Old Testament reference to any kind of seventh-day or Sabbath day observance by people. The Jewish nation did not observe the Sabbath in Egypt. As the Christian apologist Tertullian emphasized in 200 AD none of the patriarchs observed the Sabbath. Some Christians argue a Sabbath was observed by the ancient Babylonians, but scholars rightly dismiss such claims. We only have evidence of observance of some seventh days by the ruler, not by the common people. Further in ancient Mesopotamia the seventh day was a day of ill omen, not a day of blessing.

Sabbath observance is first associated with the provision of manna in the desert. Exodus 16 begins with the Israelites complaining to Moses that in Egypt they “sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death” (v4). So the Sabbath is God’s way of forging a contrast with the way he provides for his people and the way they were treated in Egypt. In Egypt food was reluctantly given to them as slaves for labour that served the empire and its interests. By contrast God treats his people with wonderful grace. The key statement is in verse 29: “*Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath.*” For the Jews to rest on the seventh day is a wonderful gift of God, “the sweet sauce of labour”, to quote Plutarch. But to enter into this rest they must trust God, trust him to provide sufficient food to cover both Friday and Saturday and also trust that, unlike other days, the manna they collect on Fridays will not rot overnight but be just as fresh on the Saturday. Helen Hayes quipped, “If you rest, you rust.” But Exodus teaches, “You rest when you trust.”

This idea of the Sabbath being God’s gift to his people ties in with the reason for the Sabbath command as stated in verse 11: “*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.*”

This takes us back to Genesis 2:2-3. The first creation account, Genesis 1:1-2:3, attacks other ancient ways of thinking about ultimate reality. Mesopotamians believed the gods created man to work for them as their slaves so that the gods might rest and be provided with food by people. An ancient Mesopotamian document, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, like Genesis, portrays an earthly paradise and a great flood. This myth says that, aside from some people rescued by the boat of a man named Utnapishtim, the gods decided to destroy humanity. Why? Because people were making too much noise, making it impossible for the gods to sleep by day or night. On the seventh day the raging waters became calm, the sun came out and the earth was in stillness, peace and quiet and on this seventh day the gods at last can enjoy their rest.

But in Genesis God rests after the creation of humanity not because people will work for him as his slaves but because they are the pinnacle of his work, created in his image, sharing in his glorious rule. So the Sabbath command emphasises the dignity and Godlikeness of God’s people. The command states, “*Six days you shall labour and do all your work.*” When God rested at creation it was because he had finished his work, he had completed all he intended to do on those six days, not because he felt lazy or needed leisure time. The Israelites were commanded to model this same pattern - to spend six days completing their work and then devoting the seventh day to enjoy a rest of completion. This implies that work should not be just work for work’s sake. Work should be purposeful. Horace Greely said, “The word rest is not in my vocabulary.” Workaholics like Greely seldom have a sense of completion. The seventh day should be a day for celebrating what has been successfully completed on the prior six days.

The Old Testament Israelites refrained from work because the Sabbath was a day devoted to God. That’s what it meant to ‘*keep it holy*’ (v8b), remembering that the LORD himself has “*blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy*” (v11). In verse 10 the seventh day is described as “*a Sabbath to the LORD your God*”. They were to think of the day as God’s Sabbath, as God’s rest, and so by refraining from work, symbolically they were to enter God’s rest. In Exodus 31:12 the Lord explained to the Israelites, through Moses, that observance of the Sabbath “*will be a sign between me and you for*

the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy." The Sabbath is a day for coming to terms with God as he has revealed himself. How does the Decalogue begin? "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery*" (Ex 20:2). What is the foundation of the whole of the Ten Commandments? The knowledge of God as "the LORD", Yahweh, that is, "I AM WHO I AM." The Sabbath is a perpetual sign for the Jewish people to help them come to terms with who God really is; to help them realise that it is only their knowledge of this God that makes them holy, that is, a unique, distinctive and extra-special people.

This is why in the four Gospels we see the Jewish religious leaders get such a hammering over their legalistic views of the Sabbath and their animosity towards Jesus for supposedly working on the Sabbath. For Jesus is the great I AM. The whole point of the Sabbath is to know God as he has revealed himself. And God reveals himself supremely in Jesus. Yet instead of rejoicing in Jesus and entering the rest of Jesus -- the whole point of the Sabbath -- they are preoccupied with the matter of Sabbath-breaking and the death penalty required for this in Old Testament law.

The closest the New Testament comes to matching the dire consequences of Sabbath-breaking in the Old Testament is in Hebrews 3-4. This great passage, picking up and developing language from Psalm 95, is concerned with the matter of Christians entering God's rest. Of course, six days of completed work come before the seventh day of rest so, accordingly, the writer to the Hebrews explains and exhorts in this way:

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 [that is, work wholeheartedly] to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (Heb 4:9-11).

Did you note the implicit warning in this text - a warning reiterated over and over again in this sober letter? We must make sure that we do not follow the example of disobedience set by the people of Israel during their desert wanderings when, upon hearing God's voice they hardened their hearts. If we, unlike them, are to enter God's rest, it will be because we work hard to "encourage one other daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of [us] may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Heb 3:13).

This reworking of Sabbath in Hebrews 3-4 is consistent with the reworking of the second command of the Ten Commandments - "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath*", etc. Paul says greed is idolatry and Kevin often warns us against the idolatry of loving money and being materialistic. The second command against idols is primarily concerned with guarding God's self-revelation and not seeking to understand him in an illegitimate way. For in the ancient world, as in Buddhist and Hindu and animistic societies today, idols necessarily express a distorted perception of divinity. Observe the last words of 1 John, where having just stated that Jesus is "the true God and eternal life", John ends by saying, "Keep yourselves from idols", that is, from false views of Jesus.

Christians differ as to how the Sabbath command has been reworked in Christ. But we have seen that the Old Testament Sabbath day was the day which celebrated God's own rest as LORD, Yahweh, the great I AM. Jesus is "the Lord of the Sabbath", so the Sabbath is his day and therefore the Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ when we find our rest in him as he said in Matthew 11:28-30, immediately before being attacked for supposed Sabbath-breaking:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

In the Philippines a man was driving his wagon to market. He came across an old man staggering under a heavy load. Taking compassion on him, the driver invited the old man to ride in the wagon. The old man accepted. A few minutes later the driver turned his head to see how the old man was doing. To his astonishment he saw the old man standing in the back of his wagon, still straining under the heavy weight.

Jesus' words are to be taken seriously. Accepting Jesus' invitation does not mean we stand in the back of the wagon still carrying the burden on our shoulders. It means letting him take the crushing weight off us.

No matter what your convictions about the Sabbath and what you do on Sundays might be, I encourage you on the basis of Hebrews 3-4 and these great words of Jesus to find your ultimate Sabbath rest in Jesus. This involves keeping soft, responsive hearts which listen to God's voice and obey him. It involves working hard to encourage each other as long as it is called "Today" and not just on Sunday. It involves coming to Jesus and pouring out our hearts to him, with all their burdens. It involves asking him to teach us his way. It involves taking his yoke upon us, that is, ironically, doing whatever work he sets us to do.

May the Lord enable each one of us to find rest in Christ.