

The Lord's Day

Devotional Reading: Psalm 118:19–24

Background Scripture: Genesis 2:2–3; Matthew 12:1–14; 28:1–10

Today's Scripture: Exodus 20:8–11; Romans 14:4–6; Revelation 1:10

I. The Sabbath Day Exodus 20:8–11

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ 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 male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 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.”

8. “Observe the sabbath” is wording that will appear in Exodus 31:14, 16; but the main verb of the verse before us is *remember*. Since something that is *holy* is set aside for God’s use, the Israelites must give attention to *the Sabbath day* for the purpose of reserving it for God to use.

But exactly what does it mean to remember a day and, in so doing, consecrate a day for God? We find the answer from the origin of Sabbath, which is explained by two related contexts. First, Sabbath, the last of a seven-day week, caps off and concludes the activity of God’s creation of the universe. Second, Sabbath observance recalls God’s rescue of the Israelites from oppres-

sion in Egypt, where rest was not allowed. Thus, the imperative *remember the Sabbath day* invites people to credit God for his supreme work of bringing order to creation and his deliverance of his people from “rest-less” oppression. Only God can give order, purpose, and freedom, both to the cosmos and to the covenant people with whom he dwells.

9. The kind of remembrance that retains Sabbath for God’s use is not just “remember that Sabbath exists” or “remember that Saturday comes after Friday.” God provides a framework that will require active preparation during the *six days* before each Sabbath. Each of the six days that are not Sabbath are also set aside, but for *labor*.

To the ancient audience, an incentive to work is already obvious. For tribal nomads, work is always at hand. And to anyone who does not tend livestock or work in an agrarian economy, the labor of ancient Israelites would seem endless: tarry long enough, and animals will suffer; fail to gather firewood, and your family might freeze; stop producing fabric, and you will soon have no clothes. But because the work of living is endless, the radical invitation of this verse is to restrain from work. The invitation is a generous gift.

10. To be deliberately unproductive for a day each week is an act of trust. It requires extra work in advance so that

the Sabbath is not a day without food or water. Yet God knows that humans will look for loopholes. God prevents the redistribution of duties onto others, a temptation to maintain the mere appearance of observance while making everyone else's life harder. The call is for a total cessation of labor, from the highest to the lowest, even during the busiest seasons of harvest.

The concern for any *foreigner residing in your towns* is explained later in Exodus 22:21, which recounts the experience of God's people as foreigners in Egypt. The inclusion of the foreigner is an extension of the gift of Sabbath. Whereas Pharaoh oppressed the Hebrews (foreigners to the Egyptians), the Israelites shall invite foreigners to share in Sabbath and find respite from work.

11. This verse explains the basis for Sabbath: God's ordered cosmos began with an ordered creation. The very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, describes the creation of *the heavens and the earth*. God is the creative maker who separates, orders, and gives purpose to each domain: *earth, the sea, and all that is in them*.

God *rested on the seventh day* from the work of creation, not because he had grown tired or needed a break from strenuous activity. That might be why humans rest, but not why God rests. God rests because creation is his kingdom, and he sits enthroned above it all. Just as God finds rest in his temple on Mount Zion (Psalm 132:13–14), God rests on the seventh day as the grand finale to creation.

II. Honoring Special Days

Romans 14:4–6

⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ One person considers one day more

sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

4. Many centuries after the Sinai covenant, the apostle Paul writes to Christ-followers gathering in Rome (Romans 16:5). He faces a new situation. Instead of speaking to an exclusively Jewish audience, Paul writes to Jews and Gentiles together—all those who have given their allegiance to God's Messiah, Jesus. The Gentile Christians have neither become Jews nor adopted all their practices.

Paul cannot point to stipulations of the Sinai covenant as if these are agreed-upon foundations for universal behavior, but neither shall Paul say that any part of Scripture is irrelevant or outdated. To that he would say, "Not at all!" or "Certainly not!" When necessary, Paul is unafraid of demanding strict adherence to a code of conduct. But that is not how Paul regulates the observance of sacred days for the mixed-ethnic communities of early Christianity.

Paul asks a rhetorical question: *Who are you to judge?* We know that Paul wants his audience to avoid a particular kind of judging here since there are other times when he speaks of judging in a positive sense. Paul does not say to give up discriminating right from wrong. But he wants his audience to give up acting like a final authority over things that call for individual discernment, certain topics he calls "disputable matters" (Romans 14:1). If we condemn others for these we risk condemning ourselves when we fall short.

5. In his letter to the Romans, Paul first mentions diet as a matter of personal decision, and here, he adds calendar

observances as another way that individual habits may differ. Observance of special days would, naturally, include the Sabbath. The word translated *considers* is the same as the word translated “judge” in the previous verse. The difference is, whereas Paul is against judging people by these matters, here he presumes that his audience will judge the days.

Paul does not specify the identity of those “whose faith is weak” or “who are strong.” These labels do not appear to neatly divide Jewish from Gentile Christians, since only Jewish Christians would have any history of Sabbath practice and observing food laws. Instead, Paul generalizes: some have set aside Sabbath and food laws while others keep them. But the standard is the same for all, Jewish or Gentile. Each is accountable before God.

The phrase *each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind* speaks to individual discernment and confidence before God. Paul permits differences within the churches.

6. Because all servants should be submitted before their mutual *Lord*, Paul precludes any from issuing judgments or blanket demands on other faithful servants, those who maintain a different religious calendar or diet. If a person *regards one day* as sacred to the Lord, the decision comes by heartfelt devotion. Because honoring Sabbath means respecting God’s rule over space and time, Paul allows that some may deem “every day alike” (Romans 14:5, above), thereby signaling devotion to the creator of each day. The repetition of *to the Lord* conveys the sole criterion for faithfulness in these matters.

Paul’s allowance for individual discernment is harmonious with Christ’s words: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27–28). Jesus defends a freedom for his

disciples to go about their mission without hindrance, at his command. Because Jesus is Lord and ruler of creation, he is free to judge the manner in which his disciples shall honor him.

Paul pairs together the issues of revering days and observing dietary restrictions, showing that he has a greater goal in mind. Paul’s desire is for the peace and unity of Christian communities—and unity does not mean uniformity. He advises selfless consideration before others, giving no reason for any to find offense. In the end, what matters is life together under Christ’s rule.

III. The Lord’s Day Revelation 1:10

¹⁰ On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,

10. Another early Christian writer, John, uses a phrase that comes to distinguish the weekly observances of Christians: *the Lord’s Day*. On this occasion, John describes being *in the Spirit*, meaning a trancelike state of prayerful meditation before God.

The phrase *the Lord’s Day* appears here alone in the entire New Testament. But elsewhere, Christians are already said to be gathering on “the first day of the week” to share a meal (Acts 20:7). The Gospels all say Jesus’ resurrection occurred on “the first day of the week”—that is, Sunday.

Christians of the first and second centuries developed a reputation for meeting before dawn on Sunday, the resurrection morning that began God’s new creation. Because the Sabbath is a practice that honors the Creator, it is only fitting that Jesus—who was with the Father from the beginning, coequal, and responsible for all that was made—is honored in this observance.

Involvement Learning

The Lord's Day

Into the Lesson

What does *rest* mean to you?

Today we're going to study what God has taught his people regarding the need for rest. We'll review how that teaching connects with our practices of worship.

Into the Word

Read Exodus 20:8–11. What did God command of his people and what rationale did he give for this command?

Read Romans 14:4–6. Does Paul forbid making one day of the week special? Why or why not?

Read Revelation 1:10. How, if at all, does this verse help us determine our day of worship?

What are the significant differences between the Old Testament command to honor the Sabbath and the practice of Lord's Day worship in the New Testament church?

What are the significant similarities between the two?

Key Text

"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

Into Life

List ways we like to rest.

List ways we like to worship.

List ways you can combine rest and worship in the upcoming week.

Thought to Remember

All our time should be devoted to God.