

REST OR DEATH

Series pt 17: Exodus 31:12-17
Stonebrook Sunday AM, 11/24/23, Matt Heerema

Please turn in your Bibles to Exodus chapter 31.

As a pastor one of the more frequent questions I am asked, especially by young believers trying to figure out how to live out their faith in Jesus in obedience to His scriptures, and maybe especially by busy college students trying to figure out how to best manage their time (and by the way the Venn diagram of those two groups overlaps quite a bit) - is something like "Pastor Matt, the Bible says I am supposed to remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. What does that mean, and how am I supposed to do that? I have a lot of homework."

They are referring, of course, to the fourth commandment. First found in Exodus chapter 20, and which we touched on briefly five weeks ago. I'm sure you all remember very clearly from back then (*wink*) that I said that this was the only command of the ten not repeated in the New Covenant (the New Testament), and that while we should definitely take a day off each week and rest, the Sabbath commandment, for followers of Jesus, primarily points us to the rest we can find only through Jesus.

Beause of today's passage, I get to spend a little more time on the subject. Our passage today is Exodus 31:12-17. Let's read it and as we do I want you to notice the word Sabbath, and the word Rest. In the English translation here, we have two different words, Sabbath and rest, but in the Hebrew it is the same word: "Sabbat." Let's read the passage and see if we can't shed some light on how God wants us to understand the Sabbath.

Exodus 31:12-17 (CSB)

12 The Lord said to Moses, 13 "Tell the Israelites: You must observe my **Sabbaths**, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, so that you will know that I am the Lord who consecrates you. 14 Observe the **Sabbath**, for it is holy to you. Whoever profanes it must be put to death. If anyone does work on it, that person must be cut off from his people. 15 Work may be done for six days, but on the seventh day there must be a **Sabbath of complete rest**¹, holy to the Lord. Anyone who does work on the **Sabbath** day must be put to death. 16 The Israelites must observe the **Sabbath**, celebrating it throughout their generations as a permanent covenant. 17 It is a sign forever between me and the Israelites, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, but on the seventh day he **rested**² and was refreshed."

¹ "Sabbath of complete rest" in Hebrew: שַׁבַּת שְׁבִטָה – *Sabbat Sabbaton*

² Literally: "He sabbathed"

DEFINING SABBATH

Ceasing.

What does *Sabbath* mean? Quite simply the word "*sabbat*" means "to **cease**". Sometimes it is translated that way directly. Sometimes it is translated as the word "rest" in which case the context tells us that the word *cease* is being used relative to the idea of "work", so "cease work". In fact, this is the only sense in which the word sabbath means "rest" - so when you think Sabbath, don't think "nap", think "put down the shovel... the plow... the pen... the phone... the laptop..."

In our passage today, and others like it when God is talking about *the Sabbath Day*, almost as if it was a proper noun, the word is referring to the **seventh day of the week**, the final day of the week, Saturday. And as we see in our passage it was to be a day where you stopped working.

What does our passage say the purpose is? It's purpose is that it is a **sign of the covenant**. The Israelites were to cease working on the seventh day as part of their covenant deal. Like circumcision, the Sabbath Day was something that **reminded** the Israelites and their neighbors, that "we are in a covenant deal with *Yahweh Elohim*, the Most High God." It was part of the deal. Yahweh would be their God, and as a sign of that, they would cease working on the seventh day.

And because it was a sign of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, it was a **big deal**. Israel was to observe, or to keep, the Sabbath day **holy**, or special, different, set apart. That's why the intense punishment for neglecting it.

Refreshment.

See verse 17, God "sabbathed" (ceased working), and was refreshed. A Hebrew word "Naphesh" is used here that is used throughout the old testament, and the concept continues into the new. The word translated here as "and was refreshed" means something like "dwelling securely" or "breathe easily" or "take a deep breath" or "a sigh of relief or contentment. You can see it in the statement in verse 17: "God rested and was refreshed" - "God ceased working (sabbathed) and breathed a sigh of contentment."

We see the same word later Genesis 2, "God placed Adam in the Garden" the word "placed" is the same word, "dwell securely" "breathe easily" – you can almost get the picture of God placing Adam in Eden and Adam stretching out his arms and taking a deep breath. Safe, secure, in the presence of his creator and friend, Yahweh.

And now we are starting to paint picture of what the Sabbath is about.

And that brings us to the question of the purpose of the Sabbath day. Why does God command a Sabbath day? The answer given in the text refers back to Genesis **because God rested**, so let's continue our study on the Sabbath there.

THE SABBATH IS PART OF THE CREATION ORDER

Genesis 2:1-3 (CSB)

1 So the heavens and the earth and everything in them were completed. 2 On the seventh day God had completed his work that he had done, and he **rested** on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. 3 God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, for on it he **rested** from all his work of creation.

We see here that the Sabbath, the ceasing of work, comes before the law, before the fall of man. In fact, the idea of Sabbath and Naphesh, rest and refreshment, come even before the fall of mankind into sin.

We were created for Sabbath. Created to be able to put down our work and spend a day dwelling contentedly with our creator and with each other. Not in worry or fear about everything that has to be done. God will take care of that. I can breathe easy and secure here today.

THE SABBATH IS PART OF THE LAW

But when God gives Israel His good law, His covenant deal, His instructions on how to live together in a way that brings thriving, He, out of concern for their wellbeing, and knowing their propensity to workaholicism and worry, requires a day of rest, under penalty of death so that they listen up and do it.

In addition to the law about the sabbath day at the end of the week, God also declared two more sabbaths, every seventh year was to be a sabbath year, and every seventh sabbath year was extremely special.

Sabbath Year

Leviticus 25:1-7 (CSB)

1 The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: 2 "Speak to the Israelites and tell them: When you enter the land I am giving you, the land will observe a Sabbath to the Lord. 3 You may sow your field for six years, and you may prune your vineyard and gather its produce for six years. 4 But there will be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land in the seventh year, a

Sabbath to the Lord: you are not to sow your field or prune your vineyard. 5 You are not to reap what grows by itself from your crop, or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. It is to be a year of complete rest for the land. 6 Whatever the land produces during the Sabbath year can be food for you—for yourself, your male or female slave, and the hired worker or alien who resides with you. 7 All of its growth may serve as food for your livestock and the wild animals in your land.

Every Seventh year, God would remind his people of the beginning state in the garden of Eden, and the end state in eternity with him: for that year, they would not need to work for their food: God would ensure that the ground produced everything they needed to eat, just like in the garden!

Year of Jubilee (a sabbath of sabbath year).

And then another sabbath is given: The Year of Jubilee.

Leviticus 25:8-10a (CSB)

8 "You are to count seven sabbatical years, seven times seven years, so that the time period of the seven sabbatical years amounts to forty-nine. 9 Then you are to sound a trumpet loudly in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month; you will sound it throughout your land on the Day of Atonement. 10 You are to consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim freedom in the land for all its inhabitants.

Every seventh sabbath year was a reset. Debts forgiven, slaves released, lent property returned, family heritages reestablished. Not only a reminder of their state in the garden of Eden, but resetting their inheritance in the covenant, and reminding them of the coming eternal perfection in the new heavens and new earth.

The sabbath laws were set up as a way for Israel to practice for the eternity of Sabbath and Naphesh, rest and refreshment, that was to come to all of God's people.

But the law could only ever be practice. Could only ever be preparatory. It could never bring them the rest and the salvation that they needed.

The Sabbath laws were designed, as part of God's plan, to point us to the one who would be the final, real Sabbath, and the final, real Jubilee. They were designed to point us to Jesus.

THE SABBATH POINTS US TO CHRIST

Jesus is the Jubilee

Jesus announced His Jubilee when he started his ministry.

Luke 4:16-21 (CSB)

16 He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As usual, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. 17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written: 18 The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. 20 He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 He began by saying to them, "Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled."

This passage that Jesus chooses and reads refers to the Jubilee year. In fact it so strongly refers to the Jubilee year that some New Testament scholars have tried to use this declaration by Jesus to try to place this announcement by Jesus on a Jubilee year. The problem is that this throws off other known historical markers (the names and dates of Roman officials that Luke gives). It wasn't the Jubilee year, and that is what makes this declaration by Jesus so weird and extraordinary.

He's telling Israel that the laws and the feasts were not the important end game. They were only pointers. He has come to fulfill and change things. A new covenant for Israel is here, one that does away with the old one, and includes the whole world.

Come to Jesus, The Lord of the Sabbath, for Rest

Matthew 11:28-30 (CSB)

28 "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

And the very next thing Matthew records, is Jesus correcting everyone's understanding of the Sabbath. Jesus says in 12:8 "The Son of man is the Lord of the Sabbath." - He's saying, I created it, I own it. It was my idea in the first place.

It is not about the observance of a random law. It is about preparing us for the rest that Jesus brings. This was scandalous and revolutionary to Israel. The accusations against Jesus by the Jewish leadership, their reason for wanting him killed, revolved around two big issues: first, his claims to be able to forgive sin, which functionally made him God's equal (because He is..) and second, His claiming authority over what is right and wrong on the Sabbath.

What are we Christians supposed to do with the Sabbath? We are to come to Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, to find the rest we've been designed to live in.

I once had the opportunity to ask one of my favorite theologians a question in person. Something I was trying to wrap my head around at the time was the fact that we are saved by grace alone, and not by our works (Ephesians 2). I was trying to match that with the fact that we are believe in Jesus in order to be saved. We are to place our faith and trust in Him for salvation.

So my question to this pastor and theologian, who had written several books on the topic was this: "How is it that our placing our faith in Christ for salvation is not a work that earns us salvation." I thought that was a pretty good question.

His answer was simple and brilliant. And it has to do with what we're supposed to do with the sabbath.

His answer: "Because of what it is your are doing when you are placing your faith in Christ: you are *stopping working*."

When you place your faith in Christ for salvation, you are not doing a work, you are stopping working. You are sabbathing.

You are stopping trying to do enough good. Be good enough, spritual enough, wise enough, holy enough, kind enough. You are stopping trying to pray the right prayer, or prayer the prayer right.

You are acknowleging that you can't do anything to win his love or favor or forgiveness, that you already have it because of what Christ did for you.

That's what sabbath is about. Stop trying to work for your salvation. Trust Jesus's work for it.