

¹² “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ 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 ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. ¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath is a proper name that comes from the Hebrew word “Rest.” In the Old Testament, there were specific things that God’s people were to do, I guess more correctly, not do on the Sabbath Day. Throughout the week, for six days, you were to do your work, to weave and weed, to trade and toil, sweat and sew. But on the Seventh, the Sabbath, you stop. It is a day to stop the grind and give rest to the enslaved person and the free, land and beast, men and women.

And it wasn’t just a suggestion; it was a command. You will rest from your work. You will keep this appointed seventh day as a separate day. And in the desert, God made it a point of emphasis that he was serious about it. That’s why he commanded the people to gather twice as much manna on the sixth day because there would be none for you even to attempt to collect on the Sabbath.

It was a wonderful thing; it forced God’s people to slow down one day a week to relax and recharge. It protected the poor and the laborers from overwork by demanding work. It allowed the animals to eat, drink, and recuperate from a long week of work.

But that wasn’t the primary purpose of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was framed around God and his actions and attitudes toward his people. It points back to the world’s creation when God rested on the seventh day and the rescue that God had given to them in Egypt. “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” The Old Testament Sabbath was a day that the Jewish people were supposed to reflect on God and what he had done for them. All while resting from their work. The Sabbath wasn’t meant to be a burden but a joy. A particular time that God had set apart for his people to reflect on their relationship with him and forgo the world’s busyness.

It wasn't very long after that, though, that what was meant as a blessing and break for God's people became a burden. As time went on, the strictest sects in Judaism added rule after rule of what was forbidden to be done and what qualified as 'work.' By the time that Jesus was born, certain groups forbade you not only from working but talking about work, pouring water into a cup, taking a lid off of a jar, picking up a child, and walking at the same time, cooking at all, even placing limits on the number of steps that you can take that day, and commanding that if you need to rescue someone, you have to make sure you don't use a ladder or any tools, otherwise "sinner." No wonder the Pharisees were upset that Jesus' disciples were eating grain from a field and that Jesus was healing the sick on the Sabbath.

Over time, the people had gotten more concerned about what they were doing for God than what God had intended, which was to offer something to them. Rest. Rest for their bodies and rest for their souls gathered around God's Word. Instead, it became another task that accomplished neither of the things God had intended. And in their selfishness, they ended up despising the Sabbath.

And we understand that we aren't required, like the Old Testament believers, to strictly observe a day of rest on precisely the seventh day of the week. Because Jesus' fulfilled the Sabbath perfectly. But the Sabbath Day is still crucial to us as well. And something that we all too often despise. Because the emphasis for our Sabbath is the same as it was for the Old Testament. To hear, to reflect on, to study God's Word.

For us, neglecting the Sabbath in our hearing and learning of God's Word is effortless. With a schedule that flies and changes, it can become easy to say, well, it's just going to be a little too hard to get there this week. With all of the obligations and monumental tasks that vie for our attention, it can seem like it's just one of the many things to do. It really doesn't seem to be about the things I have going on as a struggle with at this moment in my life. Or perhaps I don't think it's that big of a deal.

Just like Old Testament believers, we can get lost in the externals, that the pews are the most comfortable and that it's too hot or too cold. I don't like the 'dress code' either off-putting or too uptight. Or even the services are at the wrong times, or parking is too difficult.

I want to get back to why God issued this commandment. It's not something that he wants for us to do for him, but something, a blessing that he wants to give to all of us.

There are certainly times that we have to beat our old Adam into submission and drag ourselves to church even though the sinful nature tells us we are too tired, busy, or could be using our time better elsewhere or to look past all the externals.

But there is another reason we come, and we gather. And it's not because of those external things like the seats, or the location, or parking, or the temperature, or the stained glass windows, or the color of the robes, or the style of music that we play. Because if it were about those things, we would not be here.

Because even thousands of years ago, the people of God met for years in a tent in the middle of the heat of the desert of Sinai, the people of God met crammed in their yards and in their houses in Asia Minor. God's people gathered in the catacombs under Rome in secret because they feared for their lives. God's people walked for hours to meet in a field with benches on the frontiers of America. God's people gather in the remote villages in the hills of Laos in the pouring rain. God's people gather in crater-filled cities in Ukraine. Why? It's not because of those external things. It's not because it's something that we do for God. It's because the Sabbath, time around God's Word, is something he does for us. It's because the new man, the justified, the redeemed, the sanctified self, loves it. Craves it. Desires it more than all else. We, God's people, love the Sabbath. We, God's people, love time with the Word, our God, and the foundation of the Sabbath.

We, as God's people here, love the Sabbath. Because it is here on this Sabbath that fellow Christians get to sit together and hear selections from God's Holy Word, from the most extraordinary true story that has ever been told. Where we get to hear about God's plan of salvation accomplished.

It is here that we as a body get to witness miracles. When a tiny baby or adult man or woman is baptized. And we, at that moment, see as their sins are drowned in the water and the word that individual is joined to Christ's death and resurrection, creating and strengthening faith.

It is here that poor wretched sinners stand and confess the things they have done wrong, the most shameful thoughts they have thunk, the most regrettable actions of our hands, and through the voice of a minister, we hear Jesus speak that because of His grace, we are forgiven.

It is here that human beings gather around the most special of meals. Where Christ's own perfect body and blood are present, and specially and individually, God gives you the forgiveness of sins in a way you can touch. Joining in fellowship and unity with others who believe and receive the same.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; We Love the Sabbath

It is here. That our souls, dog-tired, oppressed by the world, and satan on every side throughout the week, receive needed rest. Draw deeply from the word of God. Are strengthened by the work of the Holy Spirit, through the message of Christ that is read, studied, and proclaimed, where we get the strength to fight, to endure, to continue in our race that ends at the golden gates of heaven itself.

And it's not just here. It is anywhere that God's Holy Word is read, is learned, is preached, and is studied. There is the Sabbath; there is the new man strengthened and reinvigorated for the earthly struggle.

Dear Christians gathered to rest for Sabbath. Keep going back to rest. Continue to gather. Continue to read God's Word privately. And I promise you because God has promised you that you will find rest for your souls. Amen.