

Sabbath: A Day of Freedom



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 16:16–18, 20:8–11, Deut. 5:12–15, Matt. 12:9–13, Lev. 25:1–7.*

Memory Text: “And He said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.’” (*Mark 2:27, NKJV*).

God created the Sabbath as the final act of the Creation week. It has been said that on the seventh day, God not only rested, but He created rest as an integral part of the way that the world was to be. The Sabbath was a demonstration of how we were created to interact with God and with each other.

So, it is hardly surprising to find the Sabbath, as one of the commandments in God's plan for His people, appearing early on in the establishment of the new Israelite nation. It was to have a pivotal role in the life of the Hebrews.

Often when we talk about the Sabbath, the conversation quickly moves to how to keep it. What are the things that we should not do, and the like? However important these questions are, we need to understand the integral role that the Sabbath was designed to play in the world and in the lives of God's people as a symbol of God's grace and provision.

As Jesus said, the seventh-day Sabbath was created for all humanity. When we truly “remember the Sabbath day,” it will change us every day of the week, and—as Jesus demonstrated—it can be a means of blessing others, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 20.

Manna Enough

After generations of slavery and the social degradation that such a condition could inflict on His oppressed people, God sought to lift up the newly freed Israelites, pointing them to a better way of living and giving them laws for the best ordering of their new society. But one of the first parts of this process came in the form of a practical and instructive object lesson.

Continuing for the full 40 years of their wilderness wanderings, this rhythm of life, visible evidence of God's provision and practiced unselfishness, should have become part of the culture of Israelite society. It came in the form of manna, a food that appeared each morning on the ground around the Israelites' camp.

Read Exodus 16:16–18. What do you think is the significance of the specific measure for each person emphasized in these verses?

In 2 Corinthians 8:10–15, Paul references this story as an example of how Christians should give: “At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality” (2 Corinthians 8:14, NIV).

The lesson for the Israelites, and us, was that God has provided sufficiently for His people and His creation. If we take only what we need and are prepared to share our excess with others, all will be cared for and provided for. Taking only enough for the day required the people to trust that there would be more the following day. Oppressed people, such as the Israelite slaves, tend to focus on their own survival, but God wanted to demonstrate to them a life of trust, generosity, and sharing.

But there was also another, more remarkable, dimension to this practice. Each Friday a double portion of manna appeared on the ground, and on that day—and only that day—the people were to collect the extra manna in preparation for the Sabbath. The special provision for the Sabbath became an additional way for them to learn to trust the Lord for all their needs. This extra portion of manna, an act of grace on God's part, enabled them to enjoy even more fully the rest that God had promised them on the seventh-day Sabbath.

What can we do on Fridays that will help us better enjoy what God offers us on Sabbath?

Two Reasons for Sabbath

Read Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. How do these two versions of the fourth commandment complement each other?

Remembering is an important part of the relationship that God seeks to reestablish with His people, a relationship centered on the fact that God is our Creator and Redeemer. Both roles appear in the two versions of the fourth commandment and are thus linked closely with Sabbath and its practice.

Coming out of a land dominated by so many false gods, the Israelites needed to be reminded of the true God’s role as the Creator. The Sabbath was a crucial way to do that, made all the more significant in the context of the weekly cycle of providing extra manna on Friday, a powerful example of His creative power. In the Exodus 20 version of the fourth commandment, God as our Creator is revealed most clearly.

By contrast, their rescue, redemption, and salvation is the focus of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5. This was a story that the Israelites were to retell regularly; they could reconnect with it especially every Sabbath. Their first story was one of actual, physical rescue from slavery in Egypt, but as their understanding of God and His salvation grew, Sabbath also would become a weekly symbol and celebration of their spiritual salvation.

Both of these motivations for Sabbath were about restoring the relationship between God and His people: “ ‘I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy’ ” (*Ezek. 20:12, NIV*). And, as we have seen, this was never about this group of people only. On the foundation of this relationship, they were to establish a new kind of society, one that was kind to outsiders and a blessing to the wider world.

“ ‘Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day’ ” (*Deut. 5:15, NIV*). By keeping the Sabbath as a way of remembering and celebrating both our creation and redemption, we can continue to grow in our relationship, not only with the Lord but with those around us. God is gracious to us; therefore, we need to be gracious to others.

In what ways should Sabbath keeping make us better, kinder, more caring, and compassionate people?

A Day of Equality

One of the things obvious from a quick reading of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 is that the fourth commandment is the most detailed by far. Whereas some of the commandments are recorded in as few as three words in some versions (in the Hebrew some can be expressed in only two words), the fourth commandment gives space to the why, how, and who of *remembering* the Sabbath day.

Read Exodus 20:8–11. What does it say about the servants and strangers, even animals, and what does it mean?

Notable among these Sabbath details is the focus on others. Sigve K. Tonstad argues that this kind of command is unique among all the cultures of the world. The Sabbath commandment, he explains, “prioritizes from the bottom up and not from the top looking down, giving first considerations to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Those who need rest the most—the slave, the resident alien, and the beast of burden—are singled out for special mention. In the rest of the seventh day the underprivileged, even mute animals, find an ally.”—*The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), pp. 126, 127.

The commandment has a special focus on urging that the Sabbath is a day to be enjoyed by everyone. In the light of the Sabbath, we are all equal. If you are an employer during the week, you have no authority to make your employees work on Sabbath. And that’s because God gave them, too, a day of rest. If you are an employee—or even a slave—for the rest of your days, the Sabbath reminds you that you are equally created and redeemed by God, and God invites you to celebrate this in ways other than your usual duties. Even those outside the Sabbath-keeping people—“any foreigner residing in your towns” (*Exod. 20:10, NIV*)—should benefit from the Sabbath.

This idea would have been a remarkable change of perspective for the Israelites, fresh from their own experiences of slavery and marginalization. Now that they were to be established in a new land, God did not want them to adopt the habits of their former oppressors. As well as giving them detailed laws for their society, He gave them (all of us, actually) a weekly reminder, in a powerful way, of just how equal we all are before God.

How can you share the Sabbath in your community, meaning how can others in your community benefit from your Sabbath keeping?

A Day of Healing

While the original vision for the Sabbath and Sabbath keeping was broad and inclusive, the Sabbath had become something quite different for many of the religious leaders by the time Jesus came to earth. Instead of a day of freedom and equality, Sabbath had become a day of human, traditional rules and restrictions. In His day, Jesus stood up against such attitudes, especially as they were imposed on others.

How interesting that He did this most significantly by performing a number of healings on Sabbath. It seems that Jesus intentionally performed these miracles on Sabbath, as opposed to any other day, to demonstrate something important about what the Sabbath should be. Often in these stories, Jesus made comments about the appropriateness of healing on Sabbath, and often the Pharisees used His statements as an excuse to further their plots to have Jesus killed.

Read the stories of Jesus' Sabbath healings in Matthew 12:9–13, Mark 1:21–26, 3:1–6, and John 9:1–16. What are the most significant things you notice in these stories?

Jesus confirmed that the Sabbath is important. We need to put boundaries around Sabbath time to keep it special and to allow this weekly time to be an opportunity to grow our relationships with God, our families, our church, and our community. But Sabbath keeping should not be selfishly about just us. As Jesus said, “‘It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath’” (*Matt. 12:12, NKJV*).

Many church members do much good work to care for others. But many of us also feel that we should do more to help. We know God cares about those who are hurting, oppressed, or forgotten, and that we should care, too. Because we are commanded not to pursue our regular work and are freed from the pressures of the week, on Sabbath we are given time to focus on this concern for others as one of the ways of true and active Sabbath keeping: “According to the fourth commandment the Sabbath was dedicated to rest and religious worship. All secular employment was to be suspended, but works of mercy and benevolence were in accordance with the purpose of the Lord. . . . To relieve the afflicted, to comfort the sorrowing, is a labor of love that does honor to God’s holy day.”—Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, p. 77.

What do you do for the good of others on Sabbath?

Sabbath Rest for the Land

As we have seen, Sabbath was an ingrained part of the life cycle of the Israelite nation. But the Sabbath principle was not just about a day each week. It also included a special rest each seventh year, culminating in the year of jubilee after seven sets of seven years, meaning each 50th year.

Read Leviticus 25:1–7. What is remarkable about this kind of instruction? In what possible ways could you incorporate this kind of principle into your life and work?

The Sabbath year allowed the farmland to lie fallow for the year. It is a remarkable act of stewarding the land, and the wisdom of this as an agricultural practice has been recognized widely.

The seventh year also was significant for slaves (*see Exod. 21:1–11*). In the event that any of the Israelites became so indebted as to sell themselves into slavery, they were to be freed in the seventh year. Similarly, outstanding debts were to be canceled at the end of the seventh year (*see Deut. 15:1–11*).

Like the manna God provided to the Israelites in the wilderness, not planting crops for a season was an act of trust that God would provide enough in the previous year and from what the ground produced by itself in the Sabbath year. Similarly, to release slaves and cancel debts was an act of mercy but also an act of trust in the power of God to provide for our needs. In a sense, the people needed to learn that they didn't have to oppress others in order to provide for themselves.

The principles and pattern of the Sabbath were to be closely tied to the structure of the Israelite society as a whole. Similarly, contemporary Sabbath keeping should be a spiritual discipline that transforms all our other days. In a practical sense, the Sabbath is one way of living out Jesus' instructions to seek first His kingdom: " 'Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs . . . and he will give you everything you need' " (*Matt. 6:32, 33, NLT*).

What difference should keeping the Sabbath make to the other six days of your week? After all, if you are greedy, selfish, and uncaring from Sunday through Friday, what does it really matter if you are none of these things on Sabbath? (Or truly can you *not* be those things on Sabbath even if you *are* that way the rest of the week?)

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “From the Red Sea to Sinai,” pp. 295–297, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Sabbath,” pp. 281–289, in *The Desire of Ages*; Sigve K. Tonstad, “The Social Conscience of the Seventh Day,” pp. 125–143, in *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*.

“Jesus stated to them that the work of relieving the afflicted was in harmony with the Sabbath law. It was in harmony with the work of God’s angels, who are ever descending and ascending between heaven and earth to minister to suffering humanity. . . .

“And man also has a work to perform on this day. The necessities of life must be attended to, the sick must be cared for, the wants of the needy must be supplied. He will not be held guiltless who neglects to relieve suffering on the Sabbath. God’s holy rest day was made for man, and acts of mercy are in perfect harmony with its intent. God does not desire His creatures to suffer an hour’s pain that may be relieved upon the Sabbath or any other day.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 206, 207.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In what ways have you experienced the Sabbath as a demonstration of your trust in God? Have you had a manna-like experience in your life, where God has provided in response to your trust in Him? If so, share it with the class and tell them what you have learned.
- 2 As we have seen in the fourth commandment as found in Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15, God emphasized different aspects of Sabbath. What is the one aspect of Sabbath that you most appreciate?
- 3 In class or individually, brainstorm some ways you can share the blessings and benefits of the Sabbath in your community.
- 4 What are some of the ways the Sabbath changes your life? Are there other parts of your life in which the patterns and principles of the Sabbath should have a greater impact?

Summary: God gave the Sabbath as a way of remembering Creation and Redemption, but it also has many practical benefits. It teaches us to trust in God’s provision for us; it teaches us to practice equality; and it can become a spiritual discipline that can transform all our relationships. Jesus demonstrated His ideal for the Sabbath by healing the sick and emphasizing the Sabbath as a day to benefit those in need.

Snakebite Transforms Village

By WILSON MEASAPOGU

Sundar Rao, a 27-year-old farm worker, was intrigued when a white man showed up at his Indian village and read about a Creator God from a black book on Saturdays. Sundar was attracted to U.S. missionary Theodore R. Flaiz's Bible stories and decided to follow his God. Sundar's employer was furious when he didn't go to the field the first Sabbath. His anger grew as Sundar kept refusing to work on Saturdays.

At home, Sundar angered his relatives by no longer participating in family religious festivals, including the worship of Naga, a snake god.

After a time, Sundar sought peace by building a house just beyond the brook that marked the village's border. Soon he got married and had a daughter. One day when Sundar was 29, his employer asked him to work on a Saturday. "After your worship ends on Saturday, come and help count bales of hay," he demanded.

Sundar reluctantly obeyed. He arrived at the field after sunset but before darkness had set in. With help from others, he counted the bales. Noticing a small bale off to one side, he kicked it toward a larger bale. In a split second, a young cobra sprang from the bale, struck him on the leg, and fled.

No medical help was available, and Sundar knew he would die soon.

The villagers had no doubt that Naga was punishing him.

"Naga is very angry at you," one said.

"It's because you disobeyed all the village gods," said another.

Sundar started to sweat. Formerly estranged family members gathered around him and wept. The village waited for him to close his eyes and die.

But nothing happened. A snakebite specialist was summoned to check his leg. He was astounded at what he found. He declared that the cobra had struck Sundar with the top of his mouth, not with the poisonous fangs and had fled in fright without trying to bite a second time.

The next day, the villagers were amazed to see that Sundar was healthy and happy. "The protection of the white man's God has saved him from the cobra bite," they said.

From that moment, in 1957, many villagers joined Sundar in keeping the Sabbath. Five years after the snakebite, I was born to Sundar. Today, Gudem



Madhavaram is an Adventist village. It has produced 40 pastors and Bible workers and many educators and health professionals. On Saturdays, the whole village stops to worship the Creator God. This is the power of the God who turned a snakebite into a blessing.

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Part I: Overview

The seventh day of the Creation week—Adam and Eve’s first full day of life—was a day of rest. “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day *from all his work which he had made*” (*Gen. 2:2, emphasis supplied*). The Sabbath is a monument that honors God as our great Creator. The reiteration of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:15 ties Sabbath observance to God’s work of Redemption. Therefore, God intended the Sabbath as a memorial of His creative and redemptive work. It is not designed to be a reward for our own work and toil throughout the week.

Teacher’s Aims:

- Remind your students that God performed a manna miracle for 40 years before Moses reiterated God’s law on the borders of the Promised Land (*see Deut. 4:1, 5:6–21*). This miracle included a daily provision of manna (Sunday through Friday), as well as a Sabbath provision given on Friday.
- Note that the fourth commandment calls God’s people to accord the universal, *equal* privilege of Sabbath rest to all people, including slaves and aliens. God’s injunction for Sabbath rest extends to our domestic animals too. Our belief in the equal privilege of Sabbath rest for all people and domestic animals must govern our thinking, our attitudes toward others, and our personal activities on the other six days of the week, as well.
- Remind your students that even the land under the control of the Israelite nation was allowed to rest every seven years.
- Draw your students’ attention to Jesus’ attitude toward healing on the Sabbath. Remind your students that Jesus’ attitude toward healing must govern their attitudes and actions on the other six days too.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration: “Eat your dinner! There are children in other parts of the world who are starving!” This parental cliché has been heard in many a home to prevent food waste. There is a spoonful of truth in this familiar rebuke. In the United States, for example, more than 35 million tons of food are thrown away every year, which constitutes 40 percent of all the food bought annually by that nation.

The story of the manna exemplifies the principle of taking only what we require of our God-given food supply to meet our needs, thereby avoiding waste. This principle should govern the way we meet all our

other needs too. The Israelites had trouble trusting this principle at first. Rather than believe that God would repeat the miracle the next day, some people hoarded extra manna that they did not need, exchanging God's miracle for maggots. This lesson from the manna distills a biblical precept that is repeated over and over in other contexts throughout Scripture. For example, invite the class to read Leviticus 19:9, 10 and Mark 6:34–44.

Discuss: What is the Lord, in Leviticus and Mark, asking us to leave behind for the poor? Is it food? Money? Time?

- How does God view hoarding? (*See Luke 12:16–21.*)
- What additional Sabbath principles do we see demonstrated in the provision of manna for the Sabbath?
- How does the absence of manna on the Sabbath day, and the lack of maggots in the extra provision of manna collected before the Sabbath, teach us lessons of (1) trust in God and (2) the importance of preparation for Sabbath?
- How does God's mandate for His people to rest from regular labor on the Sabbath reinforce the principle of equality?
- What other biblical principles does the absence of manna and the lack of maggots teach us?

Scripture: Creation and Redemption go together. The Bible connects Christ's creative activity with His redemptive activity. Hebrews 1:1–3 describes Christ as the One who “made the universe” (*Heb. 1:2, ISV*). Immediately after this assertion, Paul mentions Christ as the One who “made purification of sins” (*Heb. 1:3, NASB*). Colossians 1:16, 20 presents a similar pattern, presenting Christ as Creator and Redeemer. To top it off, Paul called the Christian “a new creation” (*2 Cor. 5:17, NRSV*). Truly, Redemption is a creative act.

Deuteronomy 5:15 presents redemption from slavery as the reason for keeping the Sabbath. For slaves, that is fabulous news! They no longer need to work for their former masters, and freedom is part of their lives forever. Slaves cannot skip a day of work, but free people can. To keep the Sabbath is to exercise one's freedom. Thus, on the Sabbath, freedom from work means freedom from bondage.

Discuss: How do you exercise your freedom on the Sabbath? What guidelines do you use? What is the difference between principles and rules? Share in class some Sabbath observance principles and some rules that can derive from these principles. Share and evaluate some rules that are not based on principles. How effective or good are these rules?

Illustration: Yes, the Sabbath is a day of healing. Seven of Jesus' healing miracles take place on the Sabbath. The Gospel writers record

these miracles as a testament to God’s intention for the Sabbath to be a time for healing. (See *Matt. 12:9–15; Mark 1:21–28; Luke 4:38, 39; 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:1–18; 9:1–41.*) Through these healing miracles, Jesus makes a point of reeducating the minds of His people about Sabbath observance. His holy day had become a day plagued by the burdensome rules imposed on it, a day infected by the attitude of the rule-inventers.

Jesus also healed people on other days that were not recorded as Sabbath days. The Sabbath sets the tone for the work He did—and that He calls us to do—for the rest of the week. Abraham Joshua Heschel says, “The Sabbath is the inspirer, the other days the inspired.”¹ The healing peace of the Sabbath flows into the new week, permeating our attitudes and our way of life.

Below are some illustrations that portray the reality of true Sabbath observance.

1. The Jewish Havdalah ceremony marks the closing of the Sabbath. In addition to lighting the Havdalah candle, with its twisted multi-wicks that symbolize Sabbath family togetherness, the worshipers place a goblet in a saucer and pour wine or grape juice into the goblet until it overflows. This act signifies the belief that the Sabbath has overflowed with joy and blessing for the family. It also symbolizes overflow of the Sabbath influence into the new week.

2. Then the family passes around a special Sabbath box filled with a mixture of spices called *besamim*. (One can be made by filling a small decorative box with cinnamon and cloves.) The *besamim* represents the fragrance of life that the family experiences with one another during the Sabbath. As family members pass the box to one another, they might say: “May the fragrance of the Sabbath remain with you throughout the coming week,”² or something to that effect.

3. The Sabbath is like orange juice concentrate when mixed with water. When we concentrate on Jesus on the Sabbath, we receive a concentrated dose of Him. As we go through the week (whose days are symbolized by the water), we mix the “Sabbath concentrate” into our work, activities, and interactions with people. In this way, the weekdays take on the flavor of the Sabbath.³

Discuss: How does the Sabbath’s healing fragrance, or flavor, affect how

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), p. 22.

² May-Ellen Colón, *From Sundown to Sundown: How to Keep the Sabbath . . . and Enjoy It!* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press®, 2008), pp. 150, 151.

³ May-Ellen Colón, *From Sundown to Sundown*, p. 108.

we relate to the people around us every day? Read 2 Corinthians 2:15 for further insights.

Scripture: The Three Sabbaths

1. *The Weekly Sabbath:* Leviticus 23:3 echoes Exodus 20:8–11. Leviticus 25 shows us that the sabbatical concern extends from weekly Sabbaths to sabbatical years: the Sabbath of years and the jubilee.

2. *The Sabbath of Years* follows the pattern of the weekly cycle of six days, followed by the Sabbath rest day, extending the pattern to a cycle of seven years. The land, and not only the tenants, were included in the Sabbath rest. In the Sabbath of years, the pattern of the weekly Sabbath shows up again, for the weekly Sabbath “prioritizes from the bottom up and not the top looking down, giving first considerations to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Those who need rest the most—the slave, the resident alien, and the beast of burden—are singled out for special mention.”⁴

3. *Jubilee:* The year of jubilee joins the sabbatical year and provides care for the land and concern for those who are underprivileged. (This Sabbath was covered in lesson 2.)

Discuss: As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, how successfully do we apply the principles of the “Three Sabbaths” idea to our lives today? Is this question meant to suggest that we must observe all three Sabbaths literally? Why, or why not?

Part III: Life Application

God commands us to rest on the Sabbath from our weekly labor and to cease pursuing our own interests, financial or otherwise, during these sacred hours. Yet, the pen of inspiration tells us that, even on the Sabbath, we are beholden to God’s continuous sustaining power in our behalf:

“God could not for a moment stay His hand, or man would faint and die. And man also has a work to perform on this day. The necessities of life must be attended to, the sick must be cared for, the wants of the needy must be supplied. He will not be held guiltless who neglects to relieve suffering on the Sabbath. God’s holy rest day was made for man, and acts of mercy are in perfect harmony with its intent. God does not desire His creatures to suffer an hour’s pain that may be relieved upon the Sabbath or any other day.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 207.

⁴ Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), p. 126.

How do the “acts of mercy” we perform on the Sabbath harmonize with Jesus’ teaching that the Sabbath was made for humankind (*Mark 2:27*)? Invite class members to share testimonies in which they put Jesus’ teaching into action. Perhaps, in their experiences, your students encountered people in need or in an emergency—people who were in the “ox in the pit” scenario (*Luke 14:2–5*). How did your class members maintain the sacredness of the Sabbath as they sought to alleviate the suffering of others on this holiest of days?

Notes
