



# Essential Practices for Sabbath

## *Introduction to Sabbath*

### introduction

The doctrine of Sabbath is central to our understanding of who we are as children of God. It calls us away from the earthly rhythms that entrap us in a vicious cycle of production and busyness and frees us to experience the sacredness of time found in our embrace of holy rhythms. Put differently, we do a lot of stuff during the week just to keep life moving; Sabbath invites us to stop living in survival mode and to instead engage in rest, play and the practice of dwelling in time set apart. But, before you dive into the practices, let's take a closer look at what Sabbath is and how it forms us.

### why sabbath matters

It's no secret that Sabbath means different things to different people. For a lot of Christians, it simply boils down to making sure you go to church on Sunday. For others, Sabbath points to a time of rest and recreation, which may or may not fall on Sunday and may not even occupy the entirety of a day. For many, this could be taking a much-needed nap, going for a hike in the forest, or another form of rejuvenation. While these understandings of Sabbath, no doubt, reflect the spirit of Sabbath, they don't always tap into the Biblical and theological promise found in practicing Sabbath.

The literal meaning of *Shabbat* in Hebrew is "to cease." While this ceasing can be realized during a Sunday worship service or a restful walk through the woods, there is more to it than that. Observing the Sabbath means ceasing from those activities that are linked to our subsistence on this earth in order to experience a different kind of reality. Think about it for a minute. How much of your week is simply about trying to get through life and provide for yourself and your loved ones? While most of us are not out plowing fields or trying to forage for berries, we do spend a considerable portion of our time just trying to make sure life continues.

Sabbath is meant to break that rhythm and offer us a holy freedom. It's meant to say that our everyday labor to survive was not what God intended. We see strong evidence of this in the wilderness narrative. In Exodus, we find the Israelites wandering in the desert, complaining that they don't have enough to eat to survive. Yahweh answers their prayers by providing a dew-like substance called *manna*. It had to be collected every day and turned into a kind of simple bread. But the Israelites weren't allowed to save the manna for future use. Instead, they had to collect it every day. Any that they saved would rot by morning.

But there was one exception to this daily miracle. Every seventh day, they could collect enough for the next day and it wouldn't rot by morning. God instated this seventh day as the Sabbath and asked that the Israelites keep that special day set apart. The Sabbath was meant to be reserved for holy rhythms. For that one day, they could set aside their daily labor and engage in holy practices that connected them to God and to one

another. This exchange is central to how we understand these practices. Put simply, we understand Sabbath to be *an exchange of our daily rhythms for holy ones*.

Sabbath is time made holy— “set apart.” In this way, holiness isn’t about perfection, rather it points to those things that are different. It’s the temporal abandonment of those earthly things that entrap us and betroth us to our worldly existence and the subsequent embrace of a way of being that reminds us of why God created us. For some theologians, it’s a reminder of the paradise garden in the creation narrative.

For six days, God created all that is in existence, but on the seventh day, God rested. But God didn’t reset because of weariness or because God needed a break, the seventh day rest had a specific purpose. Humans were the last of God’s creation and they were uniquely bearers of God’s image. After declaring them “very good,” God wanted to dwell with all that God created and thus established a day of rest. This is so significant because it means that the very first thing Adam and Eve did after being created was dwelling with God. The first thing humans did was dwell with their creator and it was out of that dwelling that they began their earthly work of tending the garden, naming the animals, etc.

In large part, this is why Sabbath is so important for us (and all of creation). It is a reminder of the paradise that we lost in the Fall. When we participate in Sabbath and the holy practices that characterize it, our beings are drawn back to that restful dwelling that God intended for creation. Even more, the paradise we lost – before sin and death entered the world – was the prototype of the future paradise we’ll experience when the new heaven and earth are established after Christ’s return. In this way, each time we celebrate the Sabbath, we’re both reminded of the paradise that was lost, and we’re given a foretaste of our future paradise.

When we think of Sabbath in this way, it becomes a day set apart to dwell with God, rest from our earthly labors, engage in joyful play, and celebrate the communal bond we have in Christ. The activities and practices we choose to participate in during each Sabbath ought to reflect the restful, joyful, playful dwelling for which we were created.

## **sabbath in scripture**

### **Seventh Day Rest–Genesis 2:1-3**

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*

In this passage, we witness God’s institution of a seventh day rest. God ceased the creative process to dwell with creation. Though this passage does not mention the word “Sabbath,” the essence of Sabbath is found within it. Moreover, it becomes the prototype for the Sabbath commanded in the wilderness narrative.

### **Bread from Heaven—Exodus 16:22-26**

*On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, “This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.’” So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.”*

This passage is the first mention of the word Sabbath, as well as the first mention of a seventh day rest (since the creation narrative). The Israelites had been in Egyptian captivity for over 400 years and now find themselves emancipated, yet prisoners of a wilderness without food and water. God provides manna for them and establishes every seventh day as a Sabbath, a ceasing of their earthly labor for the purpose of establishing holy rhythms and furthering their identity as God’s chosen people.

### **The Ten Commandments—Exodus 20:8-11 (also found in Deuteronomy 5)**

*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

To further form the Israelites as God’s chosen people, Yahweh gives Moses the Ten Commandments, which include the observance of the Sabbath. Following the pattern of creation, God’s institutes every seventh day as a holy day of rest, in which the Israelites ceased their work and engaged in sacred practices. Note that this was not only a day of rest for the Jews, but also for their servants, livestock, and the land.

### **Jesus Redefines the Sabbath—Mark 2:23-28**

*One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”*

As the disciples gathered food on the Sabbath, they drew the criticisms of the Pharisees. Jesus used the opportunity to redefine the purpose of the Sabbath for the authorities, offering more freedom than was traditionally observed. He brings his sentiments home in verse 28, reminding the Pharisees that Sabbath was instituted by God as a gift to humanity, intended to provide relief from the curse of earthly labor to sustain life. The Sabbath was designed so that humanity, in a fallen state, might still dwell with their creator through holy practices.

## sabbath in action

In an ideal expression, Christians would still reserve one day a week to gather and celebrate their identity as a Sabbath people. But given the busy lives most folks live, that's easier said than done. In many of our ministries, getting people to stick around for a couple of hours on Sunday mornings seems like an arduous task. That said, the benefits of gathering together in a festive and joyous spirit as God's chosen people are countless. When we frame our times of communal gathering as Sabbath, it helps folks understand the importance of stopping so that we might dwell with God and one another.

If you would like to learn more about Sabbath, we recommend Abraham Joshua Heschel's book, *Sabbath*. It not only echoes the theology found here, but further emphasizes the absolute importance of observing the Sabbath in our present-day context.

## notes