

WEEK 5: REMEMBER/ OBSERVE THE SABBATH DAY

FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15



The Place of the Passage

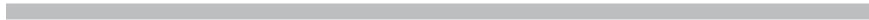
The fourth commandment continues the Decalogue's opening series of commandments concerning one's love for God. Following twin commands on worship (the first and second commandments) and a command to bear God's name truly (the third), the Sabbath commandment teaches the importance of setting aside holy time for growing one's relationship with God. The Sabbath trains God's people to frame all of their labors in relationship to him. God's people are to work six days and then to cease every seventh for "a Sabbath to the LORD your God." This weekly cadence upholds something important about God's relationship with his people. God calls them to pursue their work, whatever their vocation, with frequent pauses to thank and honor him as their benefactor. There is one striking difference between the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of this commandment. Exodus roots the Sabbath in the creation week while Deuteronomy links it to Israel's release from Egypt. Both events—the creation and the exodus—demonstrate God's power to deliver his people from trouble and give them rest in a fruitful place (Gen. 1:29–31; Deut. 11:10–12). And both events point ahead to the eternal rest God will finally provide for his people (Heb. 4:9–11).

The Big Picture

God calls his people to labor with hope for his reward, a lesson learned by keeping the Sabbath.

Reflection and Discussion

Read the fourth commandment from both Exodus and Deuteronomy, noting the similarities and differences. Use the following questions to help you consider its meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 176, 340; online at www.esv.org.)



A Weekly Holy Day (Ex. 20:8–9; Deut. 5:12–13)

Exodus begins the fourth commandment with the word “Remember.” Deuteronomy begins the commandment with a different verb, “Observe.” How do these slight variations bring out different aspects of what it means to keep the weekly Sabbath?

Israel was told to uphold the Sabbath by “keeping it holy.” Israel was given the tabernacle¹ (and later the temple) as a holy place—a place set apart for meeting God. What does it mean to have a specific time each week designated as “holy”?

The word “Sabbath” comes from the Hebrew verb meaning “to cease” or, literally, “to sit down.” How does the notion of ceasing work and sitting down capture the spiritual significance of this weekly holy day?

A Community Celebration (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14)

The Sabbath commandment is longer than any of the others in the Decalogue. What contributes most to its length is its list of those included in the command. Seven groups are listed in the Exodus version and nine in Deuteronomy, with both lists stretching from one end of the household hierarchy to the other. What does this emphasis on community-wide celebration suggest about God’s gift of rest? What does it suggest about our responsibility to others regarding this day?

The rights of sojourners²—that is, immigrants and refugees—to participate in the Hebrew festivals are remarkable. Other ancient religions typically provided only for one’s own people. Israel’s law includes repeated exhortations to welcome sojourners in worship celebrations and feasting (Deut. 16:11–12, 14). What does this teach about God’s gift of rest?

The participation list even includes livestock. In fact, it is this category that the Deuteronomy version expands. Exodus simply states “livestock,” but Deuter-

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onomy elaborates “your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock.” What does this concern for household animals teach about God’s gift of rest?

Creation and Exodus (Ex. 20:11; Deut. 5:15)

In Exodus the fourth commandment is tied to the creation event. In the creation week God brought the barrenness of the unformed world to fruitfulness and good order for the blessing of humans and all the world’s creatures. Then he “rested” (Gen. 1:1, 28–31; 2:2–3). How does the pattern of creation inform our weekly labors and rest?

In Deuteronomy the Sabbath commandment is tied to the day God brought Israel out of its slavery in Egypt. With “a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” God delivered Israel from oppression and carried his people to a land of milk and honey. How does the exodus history inform our weekly labors and rest?

A Gift (Ex. 20:11; Deut. 5:12, 15)

Most of the commandments state things not to do (prohibitions). Only two express things to do (positive commands): “observe the Sabbath day” and “honor your father and your mother” (the fourth and fifth commandments). These

positive statements emphasize the special nature of these provisions—the Sabbath and parents—as gifts from God to help us. How is the Sabbath to be viewed as something gained, rather than a requirement to give up some things?

Israel often failed to appreciate the gift of the Sabbath. Read, for example, Amos 8:4–6. Amos preached during one of Israel’s wealthiest periods. Rather than finding greater reason to rest and praise God in their plenty, however, the people grew to despise the Sabbath, when they had to pause income production. How does Israel’s struggle with the Sabbath instruct us today?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

RESURRECTION. The creation and exodus events are both demonstrations of God’s resurrecting grace remembered each Sabbath. In creation God took the watery barrenness of an unsurvivable world (Gen. 1:2) and transformed it into a realm (1:3–10) of fruitfulness (1:11–13) and life (1:14–31). The exodus further shows God’s continuing work of resurrection, raising up his people from their enslavement to new life in a fruitful land (Ex. 19:4–6). In the New Testament the final demonstration of this grace is revealed in the resurrection of Jesus on the morning after the Sabbath (Matt. 28:1–6).

JESUS KEPT THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT. By New Testament times the Sabbath had become burdened with unwarranted strictures that made it a day of rules rather than blessings. But Jesus renewed the Sabbath's function as a day of rest and restoration, even feeding his disciples (Matt. 12:1–8) and performing healings (Matt. 12:9–13) on the Sabbath despite the opposition of the religious leaders. Jesus did not neglect the Sabbath; he showed its proper purpose. In doing so Jesus perfectly kept the law, including the fourth commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

Whole-Bible Connections

SABBATH AS SIGN. The Sabbath is a “sign” of the relationship between God and his people (Ex. 31:13; Ezek. 20:12). Throughout Israel's history, the quality of the people's relationship with God could be gauged by their attitude toward the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23–30; Lev. 26:34; Num. 15:32; 1 Chron. 9:32; 2 Chron. 2:4; 36:21; Neh. 10:31; 13:15–22; Isa. 58:13–14; Jer. 17:21–27; Amos 8:4–6). In the New Testament Jesus chastens those who impose stringent lists of nonbiblical Sabbath restrictions, and he restores a proper attitude toward the day as one of life and joy (Matt. 12:1–12; Mark 3:2–4).

COMMUNITY FEASTING. The fourth commandment extends an invitation for everyone to participate in God's Sabbaths, from the heads of each household to the children and servants and livestock of each house, as well as those who were outside the households of Israel but were sojourning in the land. This theme of wide-open hospitality, offered directly from God's mouth in the fourth commandment, finds repetition and application throughout the Old Testament (Ex. 6:4; 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 22:18; Deut. 16:11–12, 14; Josh. 8:35; 2 Chron. 30:25; Isa. 14:1; Ezek. 47:22) and especially in the worship and missional endeavors of the New Testament church.

Theological Soundings

PROGRESSIVE MODELS OF REST. The Exodus Decalogue was given at Mount Sinai, when Israel was in the wilderness. The greatest example of God-given rest at that time was the creation itself. Thus the Sabbath commandment at Sinai was rooted in the creation event. But the Deuteronomy Decalogue was given on the border of the Promised Land, as Israel's wilderness wanderings were concluding. A new model of rest was then at hand. The exodus narrative became the pattern of Sabbath rest in the Deuteronomy Decalogue. Centuries later, Judah was taken into captivity in Babylon. At that time, Jeremiah proclaimed a promised return from exile.³ According to the prophet, that return would eclipse the exodus as a new pattern of rest (Jer. 23:7–8). How much

more, many generations later, did the apostles find the resurrection of Christ to eclipse all other demonstrations of God-given rest! Thus the Old Testament Sabbath on the seventh day was transformed into the New Testament Lord’s Day on the first day of the week (Luke 24:36–50; John 20:19–23, 26–29; Acts 1:3; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10).

SABBATH AS GIFT. In Exodus the Sabbath commandment ends, “Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex. 20:11). A blessing is a gift bestowed by a benefactor upon someone in need. The Sabbath is set apart as a period of blessing for those who enter into it. In Deuteronomy the same concept of gift is indicated by framing the Sabbath command with this repeated phrase: “As the LORD your God commanded you. . . . Therefore the LORD your God commanded you” (Deut. 5:12, 15). Here the word “commanded” has the sense of “authorized,” not merely “required.” God “authorized” his people to enjoy the Sabbath. He put this release from work into law as a gift enabling all the people to rest before him. The Sabbath is a gift.

EQUALITY. The Sabbath was to be a day when the whole community shared equally before God. The reality of social hierarchies is acknowledged by the naming of roles such as householder, son or daughter, servant, and sojourner. But the Sabbath was to engage all members as equals in celebration before God. This emphasis on equity is brought out in Deuteronomy. After listing nine kinds of participants, the list ends with this purpose statement: “that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you” (Deut. 5:14). Householders clearly had an extra responsibility to ensure that those in their charge were able to rest as much as their masters were. This has implications for how we today ought to refrain from forcing others to work for us on the Sabbath day (that is, on Sunday, the Lord’s day).

Personal Implications

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue’s fourth commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15

As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first through fourth commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.

Definitions

¹ **Tabernacle** – The tent where God dwelled on earth and communed with his people as Israel’s divine king. Also referred to as the “tent of meeting” (Lev. 1:5). The temple in Jerusalem later replaced it.

² **Sojourner** – One living as a non-citizen in a foreign land. In OT times, sojourners had few rights and were especially vulnerable to mistreatment. The law of Moses protected sojourners and encouraged the Israelites to include them in community life (see Ex. 22:21; Num. 15:15).

³ **Exile, the** – Several relocations of large groups of Israelites/Jews have occurred throughout history, but “the exile” typically refers to the Babylonian exile, that is, Nebuchadnezzar’s relocation of residents of the southern kingdom of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC. (Residents of the northern kingdom of Israel had been resettled by Assyria in 722 BC.) After Babylon came under Persian rule, several waves of Jewish exiles returned and repopulated Judah.