



Sabbath continues to be observed in a number of ways today, from strict adherence by both Jews and some Christian groups, to less stringent interpretations of the idea and purpose of Sabbath. A related Old Testament command, the observance of a Sabbath year doesn't get as much attention because of its agricultural roots, but it provides some perspective for understanding Sabbath.

Leviticus 25:1-7 sets aside the seventh year of growing for "the land to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord" (4). In that year the farmer is not to sow, tend, or harvest a crop. He is to let it sit fallow, allowing whatever might grow to grow on its own. They are not to harvest crops, but "whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food" for the household (6-7).

This might sound reasonable at first, but would it be sustainable for the Israelites essentially to function as gatherers rather than farmers? God anticipates the question, "You may ask, 'What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plan or harvest our crops?' (25:20). The answer is his generosity, "I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years" (21). The Sabbath Year anticipates the modern practices of fallow years and crop rotation, but the command is motivated primarily by how God expects his people to relate to him.

God's expectations of Israel begin with the understanding that "the land is mine [God's] and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers" (25:23). Healthy observance of the Sabbath Year recognizes God's ownership of the land, acknowledges his generosity towards his people, and demonstrates their trust in him as their God. It also contributes to the people's ability to obey many of the Ten Commandments. Trusting God for their provision means the Israelites won't worship the fertility gods like Baal, and gratitude wards off temptations to steal and covet. Developing the disciplines required for observing Sabbath years (moderation, contentment, foresight, etc.) further adds to the character and integrity of God's people.

Economic activity apart from agriculture was already increasing by Jesus' day, and today American farmers make up only 1.3% of the workforce, so a Sabbath Year for the land has become difficult, if not impossible, for most people to observe. Having said that, observing a weekly Sabbath rather than a Sabbath year is still manageable in a non-agrarian economy and will develop many of the same values and provide similar benefits as a Sabbath Year.

Discussion Questions

What can Sabbath say about us as human beings and worshipers of God? What does observing Sabbath say about how we can and should relate to God?

What are some of the things that can make observing Sabbath difficult? What can Sabbath observance potentially cost us?

What benefits might we expect from observing Sabbath? How can the ways we do Sabbath demonstrate that we trust God, want to depend on him, and are grateful for his provision?