

Rest
Exodus 20:8–11
September 20, 2026

To begin, let's consider something *else* Moses wrote—a passage we know well, maybe *so* well we've stopped asking questions. It's a passage at the close of Genesis 1, leading into Genesis 2: **God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.**

As I said, familiar. None of you were surprised by what God did, that is, rest from His work on the seventh day. But maybe because it's *so* familiar, the question we no longer think to ask is simply this: "Why?" In Exodus 20 we're told *why* the Israelites were to rest every seventh day. In Exodus 20, they could go *back* in the story, know what the One who made them modeled, and then imitate Him. But in Genesis 2, you can't really go *back* in the story. There's nowhere further back to go. So, why did the One who spoke stars into existence *rest*? The One who never slumbers, did *He* need a break?

That *can't* be true; it's *not* true. He's never grown weary (Is. 40; Ps. 121).

It's not insignificant that He rested, of course. In fact, it's because He did that every week of our life has unfolded within a seven-day structure. Not because of the stars, not because of the tide, nor because of the revolutions of the earth around the sun, but because of what God did at creation—what *He* did on the seventh day.

As we begin our consideration today, it's worth pausing to ask, "Why?"

My hope, by the end of this sermon, is that we've answered it—not *only* from Exodus but from the entirety of the Bible.

And while we're talking about questions, we'll consider this text with three of them. They're quite similar to the three we asked when we considered the first commandment: (1) **Why did God command rest in the Mosaic Covenant?** (2) **How did Jesus follow and fulfill this commandment?** (3) **How do we, in the New Covenant, rest?**

1. Why did God command Israel to rest in the Mosaic Covenant? (Ex. 20:8-11)

Before we dig in, we might zoom out quickly, to consider the ten commandments in two sections. As you might've noticed, commands 1–4 hang together quite nicely. So will commands 5–10. To be more specific, we might say that commands 1–4 center on instruction concerning the importance of worshipping God. And then commands 5–10 will speak to how those that worship this God are to relate to those around them. Or as Jesus would later say, summing it *all* up: **on these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets** (Mt. 22:40).

To be clear, that *doesn't* mean those categories don't overlap. That is, to give two categories is *not* to also build a wall between them. The Law of God is perfectly integrated. In fact, 1 John emphasizes that loving others is actually *how* we show that we love God.

Nonetheless, there *is* something of an emphasis on how we relate to the Lord in the first four commandments. The first told us not to have any other god—to worship Him alone. The second told us not to construct, visually or otherwise, any *lesser* versions of Him. To do so would be to worship wrongly. The third command concerns worship as well, imploring us that *when* we speak of Him—when we consider and declare His name—we're to do so carefully. And *all* of that is

connected to the fourth command, when the Lord gave Israel time to do all that He's already commanded.

Maybe you're thinking, "I thought the sabbath was only about things we're *not* to do." If you walk out of this room *still* thinking that, I will have failed. My hope today is that we see and hear this command *not* as a burden, but as something that eases our burdens—not as something that *takes*, but as Yahweh's gift.

In fact, the command doesn't begin with what we're *not* to do, it begins with something we're to make sure and do. The first word is this: "Remember."

As we've seen, the book of Exodus is *full* of things God institutes to help us remember, not because He loves "busy work," but to guide men and women oft prone to forget. The Passover was one such institution, set it up as a memorial, to prompt the mind.¹ It was a rhythm for remembering. The same kind of thing happens in Exodus 16—with manna being stored—to remind the Hebrews that God provides. And then a chapter later—in Exodus 17—a memorial was set up to remind the Hebrews that God delivers.

The LORD *remembers* that His people forget. I've quoted it before, but this sentence seems to capture it, "The Christian life is a combination of amnesia and déjà vu, as in, 'I know I've forgotten this before.'"² Because we keep forgetting God *keeps* instructing us to remember. And because we keep forgetting He institutes things that *keep* us remembering. They're gifts to us.

And the fourth command was one of those gifts He gave the Hebrews, commanding them to: **Remember the sabbath day.** Keep in mind that these are former slaves, instructed to labor day after day, even to make bricks without straw. Further, straw or not, should they fail to meet quota, they would've been summarily beaten for it. That *kind* of labor marked the Hebrews' *entire* existence—generation upon generation.

But *after* they're delivered, when God is telling them *how* they're to live as His people, He gives them a day—an entire day—something they've *never* had before. Verse 9: **Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.**

Heard rightly, that's a gift. God tells His people that there *is* a time for ceasing labor. Which is not a lesson exclusive to Exodus 20. In fact, sabbath observance is mentioned more than any of the other commandments.³ God, as Creator, knows His creation. In essence, He makes plain: "You, as a creature, have certain limitations." In fact, one could argue He purposed them. It's certainly something He's communicated to us over and over again, every evening of our lives, when our body says, "no more," and slumbers horizontal for hour upon hour. God, knowing His creation, directs His people toward their good.

So many things are communicated by this fourth command. And the applications are abundant. But let me *first* say that the sabbath was far from an excuse for laziness. In fact, the command *commanded* that the *other* six days they would work. We occasionally need the reminder, maybe on the day before we head back to the office, that the idea of work—of cultivation and vocation—actually *precedes* the fall. It is part of what God's called us to do in His world. And teaching them to sabbath in Exodus 20 did not negate that in the least bit.

However, the LORD *is* saying, in distinction from the Egyptian rulers, "Your life is about more than merely your labor. You are *more* than what you produce."

¹ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 133.

² Quoted in Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 335.

³ Kevin DeYoung, *Ten Commandments*, 65.

Further, in acknowledging their limitations—and pausing from their labor—they were to look *outside* themselves, to the One who has no limitation. We might recall that this sabbath principle actually precedes Exodus 20. In Exodus 16, when God gave them manna, they were commanded to gather for only six days—and forbidden to do so on the seventh. Why? Every week He called upon them to trust.

Because not only were they commanded to remember the sabbath, they were commanded to **keep it holy**. Meaning, this day was set apart—not *merely* for their good—but for the Lord’s good purposes.

In fact, this day was set aside to remind them that they *exist* to honor Him. They were to put aside their earthly load, *so that* they might give that day’s energy to Him. Leviticus 23 speaks to this.⁴ As does Numbers 28.⁵ Because for the Old Testament Hebrew, a day of rest and a day of worship could not be distinguished or separated. One *implied* the other, in fact.⁶ On that set apart day, they were to stop; and they were to keep it holy.

And if you’d like to see evidence of this reality, Psalm 92 might be helpful. It’s a Psalm we’ve sung here many times, even preaching it last year. It’s a song that begins with these words, **It is good to give thanks to the LORD and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High** (Ps. 92:1). That sounds like *every* other Psalm, of course. So why bring it up? Because above that first verse, the superscript—the purpose of that song was this: “a Song for the Sabbath Day.” The sabbath was to be kept as holy. It was rest for the purpose of worship.

Why ought they rest and worship? Moses takes us back to creation in verse 11: **For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day**. Again, the Law reveals God’s character to us. But not *only* that, the Law also tells *us* how to live. Which is—in essence—to live as God would. So, simply, He did it. He certainly didn’t *have* to. Yet verse 11 indicates that He did so, in *part*, to model something for us.

And of course, resting is not the *only* thing He did on that seventh day. Verse 11 goes on: **therefore, the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy**. He made it holy, *first*. That’s why *they* were to do the same. Having set it apart, He blessed it. Recall what Genesis said about this blessing. Genesis 2:3: **Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made**.

So, if He didn’t rest because He was weary, why did He? He rested because the work of creation was finished. And He paused in order to delight in it. By the way, was humanity around yet? Absolutely. God fashioned His image-bearers the day prior. And having seen all that He made, having said it was *very* good, He then rested from His work and blessed it.

God’s people were *never* to forget this. They were to look back to it, remembering it weekly.

Further, if we look elsewhere, we learn that it was not *just* creation the Hebrews were to remember. In Deuteronomy 5, Moses gives the commands a second time. But after the fourth command, he says this: **you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day** (Deut. 5:15).

The sabbath day was to concern itself *both* with God’s creation *and* with the Hebrews’ redemption. Neither significance negates the other.⁷ In fact, Psalm 92—the Song for the Sabbath—sings about the God we learn of in the Exodus. After singing that it is good to sing praises to God’s name (command 3!), the Psalmist writes that it’s good: **to declare Your lovingkindness in the**

⁴ As the sabbath *also* being a day of holy convocation—an assembly to the Lord (Lev. 23:3).

⁵ When sacrifices were offered on the sabbath (Numb. 28:9-10).

⁶ Sam Waldron, *The Lord’s Day*, 79; Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 457.

⁷ DeYoung, 67; Waldron, 61.

morning and Your faithfulness by night (Ps. 92:2). Morning and night—that *day*—they were to delight in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, truths *just* mentioned in the second command, truths that will be reiterated in Exodus 34. Sabbath by sabbath they rested from their labors and rejoiced in God’s deliverance.

There’s more I could say, of course, but that’s a good transition into our second question:

2. **How did Jesus follow and fulfill this commandment?** (Luke 6:1-11, etc.)

Years back, when thinking about one of Jesus’s interactions with the Pharisees, I concluded that there are only three conclusions we can arrive at when trying to square Jesus’s life with the fourth commandment. Loosely borrowing from Lewis, He was either a legalist, He was a lawbreaker, *or* He’s actually Lord of it—*over* it.

And we’re forced to come to something of a conclusion because His relationship to the commandment is *not* something the Gospels try to hide—at all.⁸ In Luke 6 Jesus’s disciples are walking through a field on the seventh day. Along the way, they pluck some corn and eat it. The Pharisees, always lurking—seemingly stalking—then ask, **Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath?** (Luke 6:2). A few chapters later, Jesus visits one of the Pharisee’s homes for a sabbath meal. While there, a man with dropsy is, quite suddenly, dropped right in front of Him. Luke records this set up. He includes it in His Gospel, on purpose. Jesus, not unaware of their ploy, and knowing the answer to the question, asks immediately, **Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?** (Lk. 14:3)

Before we briefly answer those questions, we should *first* say clearly that Jesus observed the sabbath. Luke 4 makes it quite plain: **as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath** (Lk. 4:16). Jesus grew up—as any faithful Jewish man—obeying the fourth commandment. And in the Gospels, He continued to do so. In fact, He obeyed it better than anyone *ever* has. Because He—the Law’s author—knew the true nature of it.

For example, in Luke 6 the Pharisees’ accusation concerning the disciples actually *did* have some merit to it. It could be argued—at least in that day—that the disciples *had* broken *a* law. But the question is this: whose law was it?

Because in Jesus’s day, the Pharisees took the commands in the Old Testament—including the fourth—and added and added and added to them, with specifics found nowhere from Genesis to Malachi. For example, some taught that on the sabbath one could take 5 steps, but then he or she must take a break. It sounds ridiculous to say this out loud, but some taught that women couldn’t wear a bow in their hair on that day because that *might* be construed as carrying a burden.⁹ That’s the context of the Gospels. And it’s that *kind* of religious leader that accuses the disciples. Because they’d broken *their* law.

But when they ask *why* the disciples broke the law, Jesus doesn’t respond by saying they *hadn’t* broken God’s law. He could have. He didn’t. Nor did He say, “It doesn’t matter what people do on the sabbath.” Instead, He clarifies its purpose.¹⁰

And like Moses, Jesus goes *all* the way back to creation, saying this: **the Sabbath was made for man** (Mark 2:27). What was its point? The good of humanity.

Which He then puts on vivid display in Luke 14, when He meets the man with dropsy. And to make sure they don’t miss the point He’s making, right before He does what He does—on that

⁸ By the way, the Gospels are written *years* after the inauguration of the New Covenant. That’s not insignificant. See Waldron, 66.

⁹ See Alistair Begg, <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/jesuslord-of-the-sabbath/>

¹⁰ Phil Ryken, *Luke*, 242.

sabbath day—He asks the “experts” in the law: **Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?** (Lk. 14:3) Yet again, though the Torah did not *actually* prohibit this, the rabbis had all kinds of additions and interpretations of the fourth commandment.¹¹ Such as, if the man was dying, ok—*maybe*. And if not, better not.

Jesus asks the questions in order to question their interpretation—both of the Law, as well as its purpose. And so, maybe we’d be right to consider: do we think—implicitly or not—that God made laws just to have a few? Just to keep us on our toes? Have we *too* misunderstood the purpose of the law, turning something God gave us for our *good* into a burden?

The sabbath was made *for* man. And on this sabbath day, before Him was a man who needed the kind of rest only *He* can give. So, what *else* would Christ do on *that* day? Over and over again, on sabbath after sabbath, He restored and restored.

The Pharisees would’ve certainly wondered what gave Him the right to question their interpretation of the Law. He would go on to say, more than once, without equivocation: **The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath** (Lk. 6:5).

He is no law-breaker. And in these narratives, He’s not the legalist. He, as the Law’s author, is also its Lord.

That means, not *only* does He know what the command for rest means—because He spoke it—but also that He’s the One who gives it. So, for those who’d misunderstood the command, He clarified it. By obeying it perfectly, He fulfilled it. And through *His* work, He now gives His people the rest to which this command always pointed.

Which is why we began the worship service reading the passage we did in Matthew 11, when Jesus says this, **Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest** (Matt. 11:28).

3. **How do we, in the New Covenant, rest?** (Hebrews 4:1-11, etc.)

To answer that question, there’s no better place to go than the book that explains the New Covenant in the most detail—the book of Hebrews. And in *that* book, there’s no better place to go than in the chapter that speaks of rest—Hebrews 4.

I bring that up, in part, because it’s not *only* Moses that appeals back to creation when speaking of sabbath, nor is it *only* Jesus in the Gospels, it’s *also* the book of Hebrews. In fact, the only citation of Genesis 2:2 in the New Testament—the verses we began this sermon with—is in Hebrews 4.¹²

And in that context the author of Hebrews describes rest as God’s rest. Meaning, the rest we’ve been considering, the rest He *Himself* enjoyed on the seventh day. Not because He was weary, nor because He needed it, but a rest prompted by a finished work. It was a rest marked by delight, a Creator pleased with His creation. So, when Hebrews says “rest,” *that’s* what it’s referring to—*God’s* rest.

And then, in a sentence that can hardly be believed, Hebrews says *this* rest—God’s perfect rest—is a rest He invites His people into. In fact, Hebrews 4:9 reads: **there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God** (Heb. 4:9). How might *that* be true? How might that invitation be extended to us?

¹¹ Don Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” in *From Sabbath to the Lord’s Day*, 70.

¹² Richard Gaffin, “A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God,” 39.

Because of everything *else* Hebrews tells us—even in its very beginning. It's true because the One who spoke all things into existence—the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of His nature—He put on flesh. And He—the One who upholds all things by the word of His power—**when He had made purification of sins, He sat down** (Heb. 1:3).

And the connection *not* to be missed is this: He didn't sit down because He was tired, but because the work was finished.

What Christ accomplished is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's purposes—in creation, and *for* creation.¹³ And the point Hebrews goes *on* to make is this: *because* He accomplished that work, we can rest in Him.

Now, does that have *anything* to do with our gathering on Sundays? Of course it does. Hebrews 4 isn't the end of the book. Again and again, the author implores those resting in Christ to, “draw near.” And then, at the very peak of his argument, he applies that reality to a group of Hebrew Christians, admonishing them to draw near together: **let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together** (Heb. 10).

So, however one nuances the fourth command and the Lord's Day gathering, the Scriptures are clear in asserting that the New Covenant is a corporate reality. Hebrews 8 reads: **I will be *their* God, and *they* shall be My people** (Heb. 8). So that, not *only* do we find Him to be our sabbath rest, we love others that have done so as well. Which is, of course, how Jesus Himself summed up *all* the Law—that is, to love God *and* others (Mt. 22). And in the New Covenant, that's the kind of Law He's written on our hearts.

And *if* we'd like to know *how*, we'd be wise to consider the example of the early church. Because wherever you land on the scores of questions, it's clear what God's people did. In the book of Acts, on the *first* day of the week, believers gathered together to consider God's word and break bread (Acts 20:7). Elsewhere the Apostle Paul instructed *multiple* local churches that gathered on the *first* day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2). And even later, in Revelation, the Lord's Day is spoken of as if it's common knowledge among the first-century churches (Rev. 1:10).

And the immediate question might be, “Why?” How could something so long established, something begun at creation shift so quickly, and so drastically, from the seventh day to the first? The most natural explanation is that God's people came to understand that Jesus of Nazareth—the Lord of the Sabbath—not *only* brought about a new covenant, but that He ushered in a new creation.

And that He'd done so early on a Sunday morning. So that, from that Sunday on, God's people would gather to celebrate resurrection. And they would do so knowing that another resurrection is coming, one that will bring about eternal rest. It's a day—and then another day—an *unending* day blessed and made holy by God.

Conclusion

We began this sermon asking the question: “Why did God rest?”

We might end it asking this question: “Have I?”

Or: “Am I *now*, resting—in Christ?”

¹³ Gaffin, 40.