



Peninsula City Church

Remember...

Sabbath

Michael Podhaczky

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Contents

Remember... Sabbath	3
An Introduction.....	3
1. The Sabbath, what's it all about?	4
a. A historical perspective.....	4
2. Going deeper.....	8
i. The ziggurat.....	8
ii. The Garden of Eden and beyond	9
2. The Sabbath as a Christ-follower	11
a. Christ and the first Christ-followers,.....	11
b. The letter to the Hebrews	12
c. The new temple of God	14
Some concluding thoughts.....	15

Remember... Sabbath

Q. How does a Christ-follower relate to the Sabbath today?

An Introduction

In the Tucson News, it was recorded that a woman received a \$284 billion electric bill,

"Mary Horomanski went online earlier this month to check her electric bill and was stunned to see she owed \$284,460,000,000.

My eyes just about popped out of my head. We had put up Christmas lights, and I wondered if we had put them up wrong." That was Mary Horomanski's reaction when she went online to check her electric bill and discovered that she owed \$284,460,000,000.

The electric company graciously allowed her to defer the full amount until November 2018, but her minimum payment for December was \$28,156. Her son called the company and was told that the amount was an error. Her statement was soon corrected to \$284.46.

Mary says that after getting the \$284 billion bill, she told her son she wanted a heart monitor for Christmas."¹

Now that would give anyone a heart jump. Have you noticed how much of society live in a place of needing a heart monitor? There is a tendency to live in a place of high stress and anxiety. Some may even find themselves in a depressive state. It is almost as if many need to take time out and get away from the pace of life for a while. Interestingly some,

"Contemporary studies try to make sense of the Sabbath as a day of rest for the overworked, stressed-out, and consumption-oriented human being, for the marginalised and oppressed, and for the suffering environment."²

As a society, we seem to have lost the idea of rest. It is as if we need a sabbath as mentioned in Exodus 20:8-11,

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (ESV).

But wasn't this section of Scripture given to Israel? Yes, historically this true but, could there be more to the matter of the Sabbath that we as Christ-followers have overlooked or forgotten? Or as it has been asked,

"Can one say for sure that God has abrogated (done away with) the command to keep the Sabbath?"³

This appears to be one of the Ten Words (Commandments) that we have overlooked, or not known what to do with it. In reviewing this issue of the Sabbath, firstly we will briefly assess the biblical context. Then secondly, we will explore the matter from the perspective as Christ-followers.

¹ "Woman receives \$284 billion electric bill." http://www.tucsonnewsnow.com/story/37136365/woman-receives-284-billion-electric-bill?utm_source=Cultural+Commentary&utm_campaign=516b2ab16e-Jim%27s+Daily+Article+%2812%2F26%2F17%29&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_51f776a552-516b2ab16e-273163213&mc_cid=516b2ab16e&mc_eid=10852936bd (27th December 2017).

² Frey, Mathilde. "The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: an Exegetical and Theological Study." *An Unpublished Paper*. Andrews University, (2011): 272.

³ Borland, James A. "Should We Keep the Sabbath?" *Christian Research Journal*, Vol 26. No 2 (2003): 7.

1. The Sabbath, what's it all about?

Q. What is the context of the Sabbath?

To begin with, it needs to be said that, the keeping of the Sabbath has been a point of contention throughout church history. On one side there have been those who say yes, Christ-followers need to keep it, while on the other side there are those who say they should not. Where do you stand on this matter? How would you help a new Christ-follower who raises this matter with you?

It has been said that,

“Believers today continue to dispute whether the Sabbath is required. The Sabbath was given to Israel as a covenant sign, and Israel was commanded to rest on the seventh day... The paradigm for the Sabbath was God’s rest on the seventh day of creation (Gen 2:1–3). So, too, Israel was called upon to rest from work on the seventh day (Ex 20:8–11; 31:12–17).”⁴

On this matter, it has also been said that,

“A common error in the Sabbath-keeping debate is the concept that the Sabbath was the day of worship... The Sabbath command was to do no work on the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8-11). Nowhere in Scripture is the Sabbath day commanded to be the day of worship.”⁵

Therefore, the Sabbath has frequently been misunderstood. One would think that if one group has it right, it would be the Jews. However, remarkably, there has also been some disagreement regarding the Sabbath between the various Jewish stances. For instance,

“Modern Jewish theology stresses law, reason, and history of the Sabbath. Orthodox Jewish scholars consider the Sabbath as a witness to the authority of God. Observing the Sabbath becomes the epitome of Orthodox existence and a symbol of God’s authoritative rule. In Reform Judaism, the Sabbath represents the means to spread monotheism and universal ethics.”⁶

So, it is important to survey the use of the concept of the Sabbath and survey its usage within the biblical record.

a. A historical perspective

So, firstly, from a historical biblical perspective, the original contextual understanding of the Sabbath is fundamental. The reason being, if we are to understand it and its observance, then we need to know its origin and historical progression. As a matter it has been said that,

“The Sabbath is central to Jewish religious thought and practice. As the most vital institution in Judaism, it is at the very heart of Jewish life, determining its religious character and, indeed its essential nature. As reflected in prayer, in observance, and in its teachings, the Sabbath represents, as well, the fundamental principles of faith, and the eternal ideals of Judaism... The Sabbath is principally a testimony to our belief in God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe... In the Ten Commandments proclaimed at Mount Saini, God commands that the Sabbath should be a sacred day, free from all manner of work, to commemorate the Sabbath of Creation... Apart from the theological significance of the Sabbath as a memorial of creation, of vital importance to all mankind, the Sabbath is of paramount national import to the Jewish

⁴ Schreiner, Tom. *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 209.

⁵ “Does God require Sabbath-keeping of Christians?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/Sabbath-keeping.html> (20th December 2017).

⁶ Frey, Mathilde. “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: an Exegetical and Theological Study.” An Unpublished Paper. *Andrews University*, (2011): 8.

People as a sign of God's eternal covenant with Israel, His Chosen People. This is clearly stated in the Torah, Ex 31:16,17.”⁷

It has been suggested regarding the etymology of the word ‘Sabbath’ that,

“The root שָׁבַת (cf. Isa. 14:4, 24:8) in its transitive⁸ form means ‘to sever, put an end to’; in its intransitive⁹ form ‘to desist, come to an end, be at an end, be complete’ (Arabic, ‘to cut off, intercept’). The grammatical form of שָׁבַת, according to some, suggests a transitive sense, ‘the divider’, i.e. apparently the day that divides the month, the 15th or the day of the full moon. Meinhold (ZATW XXIX, 101) takes it in the intransitive sense and argues for שָׁבַת the meaning ‘the complete, the full’ moon... The idea of rest is a later meaning that was read into the word.”¹⁰

This is an interesting theory, which is based on the word having a Babylonian origin predating the Bible. However, if one holds to the book of Genesis predating the Babylonian flood record (The Epic of Gilgamesh), then its first usage was in Genesis chapter two. The first time that the word and idea was mentioned in the Bible is in Genesis 2:3-4 and not in Isaiah. So, it may be suggested that it also carried both the idea of ‘put an end to’ the work of creation and ‘rest’. It is here that we read,

³ “So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it God rested (*sabat*) from all His work that He had done in creation. ⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens” (Gen 2:3-4 ESV).

This idea of ceasing from work and resting was built on the premise that as God reviewed His creation, He saw it as being extremely good or perfect. Hence it was “very good,” (Gen 1:31). The Jewish Prayer Book has pointed out that; on the day that God rested He created “Tranquility, composer, peace and quietude (calmness).”¹¹

Within this context is the point that God made this day holy. What needs to be noticed here is that God hallowed this day, this period of time and not a place. This holy Sabbath was not dependent on their being a sacred space, area, or building, since; it was God who is holy. Therefore, it was His presence that hallowed the rest. It has been said on this matter that,

“One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word *qadosh*, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine.”¹²

A challenging thought leading out of these passages is that this scene had to do with God resting. Although God had created humans, this section of Scripture does not immediately focus on them but only on God Himself. He had completed the creation over six days with their evening and morning, but here as He entered Sabbath there is no evening and morning to punctuate the

⁷ Appel, Gerson, Rabbi. *The Concise Code of Jewish Law: A Guide to Prayer and Religious Observance on the Sabbath*. Vol. 2. (New York, NY: Ktav Publishing House, 1989.), 3, 4, 5.

⁸ “A transitive verb is one that is used with an object: a noun, phrase, or pronoun that refers to the person or thing that is affected by the action of the verb. In the following sentences, admire, maintain, face, and love are transitive verbs.” “Transitive and intransitive verbs.” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/grammar/transitive-and-intransitive-verbs> (10th January 2018).

⁹ For Example, “Intransitive verbs An intransitive verb does not have an object. In the following sentences, cry, work, laugh, and talk are intransitive verbs “Transitive and intransitive verbs.” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/grammar/transitive-and-intransitive-verbs> (10th January 2018).

¹⁰ Meek, Theophile James. “The Sabbath in The Old Testament: Its Origin and Development.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 33. 1914: 203-204.

¹¹ *Siddur Lev Chadash: Services and Prayers for Weekdays and Sabbaths, Festivals and Various Occasions*. (London: United Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, 1995), 242.

¹² Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. (Santa Fa, NM: Aurora, 1998), 9.

Sabbath period in which He was on this day. So, this endless time focuses on God and not humanity. It has correctly been said that,

“Genesis 2:1-3 contains no explicit command for human beings to keep the Sabbath, although the reference to God resting on the seventh day would have provided an ideal opportunity for such a command to be given.”¹³

Although the word here in Gen 2: 2 is *sabat*, it later was written as Sabbath. It is usually translated in the various translations as rest or rested (but as we have seen above), it can also carry the meaning to cease, stop, be at a standstill, or stop working.¹⁴ This day in which God entered into a holy Sabbath was set aside by Him. This then is the first use of the word holy in the Bible, and importantly it is about the time of the Sabbath of God. On the matter of the significance of the day, it has been pointed out that,

“The unique form of the creation Sabbath becomes evident on the basis of four significant characteristics stated in Gen 2:1-3: (1) On the seventh day God’s creative work was ‘finished’; (2) God ‘ceased’ from all His creative work; (3) God ‘blessed’ the seventh day; and (4) God ‘made it holy.’ These four characteristics bear significant meaning for ongoing human life and worship. In light of the Pentateuch as a whole, the creation Sabbath represents the archetype for the other Sabbath texts in the Pentateuch...”

The perfect form שבת (*sabat*), ‘he ceased,’ marks the seventh day and signifies a different kind of separation than that which occurred throughout the weekdays: A part of time is set apart from the other days. Furthermore, the verb שבת is closely linked to the verb קדש (*qadosh*, i.e. holy), ‘he sanctified’ (vv. 2, 3). Both verbs together seem to signify the intention of all of God’s creation activity because it is only when God ceases from all His work that there are no other objects mentioned, no other elements in sight, and God is fully present by Himself. In other words, when God ceased He delineated a unit of the worldwide dimension of time for Himself. Thus God’s ceasing on the seventh day presents the theocentric character of the creation Sabbath.”¹⁵

In the book of Exodus the mention of the Sabbath is the longest of the Ten Words, but for many, it seems to be the least understood. This day is to be kept holy or separated from every other day and usage. The reason for this is that it is a Sabbath to the Lord. Notice how this passage referred back to Genesis 2:2-3 as the pattern for the Sabbath. It has been said that,

“Keeping the Sabbath holy honours God by emulating His actions at the time of creation.”¹⁶

That is why He said to Moses to convey to Israel to,

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” ⁹ Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex 20:8-11 ESV).

¹³ Cole, Ross H. “The Sabbath And Genesis 2:1-3.” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vo. 41, No. 1 (2003): 8.

¹⁴ Pearl, Chaim. & Brookes, Reuben. *The Guide to Jewish Knowledge: A Concise, Encyclopaedic Handbook of Jewish Festivals, Customs, Religion, History, and Literature*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 9.

¹⁵ Frey, “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: an Exegetical and Theological Study,” 3, 33.

¹⁶ Gruber, Mayer. “Exodus.” In *The Jewish Study Bible*. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 1999), 150 n. 11.

It is also restated in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 for the generation that are about to enter the Promised Land. Where the Exodus passage begins with “Remember” or recall (Ex 20:8); in Deut 5:12 Moses starts with the word “Observe,” i.e. keep or guard.

So, the Sabbath day is a holy day that needed to be remembered, kept and even reflected on as a sacred day. However, keeping the Sabbath was not dependent on a sacred space, as there is no mention of a place or space in the Ten Words.¹⁷ However, from a Jewish perspective, the Sabbath has been called “a palace in time which we build.”¹⁸ This day (time) stands separated or hallowed from other days within Israel’s calendar since it was the Lord who sanctified it. On this matter, it has been said that,

“The significant link between Sabbath and holiness shows that unlike the Passover, where the people are reminded of their actual experience of servitude and of the bitterness of their life in Egypt, the Sabbath aims back at creation times, a dimension of life that the Israelite never experienced in the reality of his life. Sabbath holiness has its beginnings long before oppression and death, even before freedom from oppression. Even more, Sabbath holiness reaches beyond human existence in the sense that it originated in God.”¹⁹

Another usage of the Sabbath observance was what is known as the Year of Jubilee. It was a kind of divine resetting of the order of things to a certain degree. It has been said that this Sabbath Year was to “to sanctify Israel’s internal economy.”²⁰ It reads,

⁸ “You shall count seven weeks (Sabbaths) of years, seven times seven years so that the time of the seven weeks (Sabbaths) of years shall give you forty-nine years. ⁹ Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement, you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. ¹⁰ And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you when each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his clan. ¹¹ That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it, you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. ¹² For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field” (Lev 25:8-12 ESV)

There is no biblical evidence that Israel ever did this, or has done it since. However, it was to be a Sabbath to the Lord.

So as part of the development of the Sabbath Day over time, Sabbath Day prayers were introduced. One of these is the *Kiddush*, which is a prayer of sanctification over the wine or bread in the lack of any wine. It has been said that,

“In the Kiddush, the prayer of sanctification recited on the Sabbath day, the social importance of the day is found expressed by the phrase – ‘A memorial of the departure from Egypt’ when Israel was redeemed from slavery. Its religious significance is pointed to by the designation of the day as – ‘A memorial of the Creation’ of the Universe by God who is the creative power behind all that exists.”²¹

The short version of the Kiddush is along these lines,

“Blessed are You, God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.”²²

¹⁷ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 79.

¹⁸ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 14-15.

¹⁹ Frey, “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: an Exegetical and Theological Study,” 151.

²⁰ “The Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25).” <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/leviticus-and-work/the-sabbath-year-and-the-year-of-jubilee-leviticus-25> (21st December 2017).

²¹ Pearl, & Brookes, *The Guide to Jewish Knowledge*, 15.

²² “Shabbat Blessings for Friday Night.” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shabbat-blessings/> (21st December 2017).

While the more traditional longer version is,

“Praise to You, *Adonai* (Lord) our God, Sovereign of the universe who finding favour with us, sanctified us with *mitzvot* (commandments). In love and favour, You made the holy *Shabat* (Sabbath) our heritage as a reminder of the work of Creation. As first among our sacred days, it recalls the Exodus from Egypt. You chose us and set us apart from the peoples. In love and favour, You have given us Your holy Shabbat as an inheritance. Praise to You, *Adonai*, who sanctifies Shabbat.”²³

A sobering part of the Sabbath Day prayer states that,

“More than Israel has kept the Sabbath; the Sabbath has kept Israel.”²⁴

So, from this brief historical overview, we can see something of the importance of the day. The importance of this day continues to now amongst the Jewish community and for some fringe Christian groups. However, is this all that there is to the Sabbath, or could there be more to the matter?

2. Going deeper

What we have seen to this point is the usual understanding of the Sabbath. However, there is something that is generally missed within this discussion that needs to be examined. That is, the obvious historical associations between Israel and the Ancient Near East (ANE), and then with God within the Garden of Eden context. It has been suggested that,

“In the literary world of the Ancient Near East, the gods create humans, who then build a temple for the gods to rest, which brings order and stability to the cosmos. Seen from that perspective, John H. Walton understands the biblical Sabbath to convey God’s rest in a cosmic temple where He takes control and authority over the created world. The human being, in turn, is asked to rest by acknowledging that God is the one who is in control, not by imitating God in his Sabbath rest.”²⁵

i. The ziggurat

What stands out when studying this matter of the Sabbath within (ANE) setting, is that there are some similarities and some differences between Israel and the Sabbath. This is especially the case within the Mesopotamian and Babylonian kingdom. When one surveys the religious buildings and especially the pyramid-shaped buildings known as a Ziggurat so interesting matters arise. It has been said that,

“Temples were originally built on platforms. During the third millennium B.C., these were made higher and bigger. Eventually, it was decided to build even higher temples on platforms which were stepped. These stepped towers we call ziggurats. By 2000 B.C. mud-brick ziggurats were being constructed in many Sumerian cities. Later, ziggurats were constructed in Babylonian and Assyrian cities.”²⁶

These ziggurats existed as sacred spaces that were intended to bridge between the gods who live in the pure heaven (or the cosmos) and the earth, the supernatural and the natural and a place of

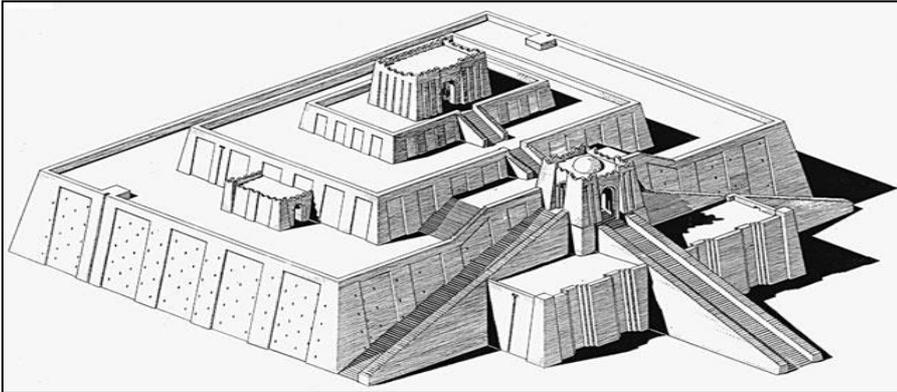
²³ “Shabbat Evening Blessings: Kiddush - Blessing over Wine.” <https://reformjudaism.org/practice/prayers-blessings/shabbat-evening-blessings-kiddush-blessing-over-wine> (21st December 2017).

²⁴ *Siddur Lev Chadash*, 244.

²⁵ Frey, “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: an Exegetical and Theological Study,” 261. Cf. Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 78-86, 146-47. Plus Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 158.

²⁶ “Ziggurats.” http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/ziggurats/home_set.html (2nd January 2018).

rest for the god and the people.²⁷ There were staircases, which were for the gods to descend to earth and not for people to ascend. These staircases were, in reality, symbolic of the god coming down from the heavens to earth. On top of these structures was a smaller building where it was believed that the god rested after completing their work or from a victorious battle over another rival god.



Somewhere close to the ziggurat there was a smaller temple building, which was for the people to come and worship and to bring offerings to the god/s. These temples were managed by the priests, who took the offering from the people and offered it or burnt it before the god as their food. They were the only one who could enter this temple (usually the high priest, but sometimes the king was also the high priest), but even then, they were not allowed to ascend the stairway of the ziggurat to the god, except on the very holiest of occasions.

Around the ziggurat and the temple precinct was lovely gardens and trees; there were also flocks and herds of sacred animals. These were representative of the blessing on the land by the god as it reflected the god's fertility. The fruit and harvest that were grown in the garden and the animals were then offered to the god as food.²⁸ Consequently, the god created the people to serve them and bring them food from what had been provided. One other thing that stands out here is for there to be such a rich abundance of fruitfulness in the garden there needed to be an abundant source of freely flowing fresh water. Usually, the temple had water flowing out from its midst, which was a redirected river, stream or some other water source. It has been said that,

“The idea of four streams flowing from the temple or palace to water the four corners of the earth is represented graphically in a couple of places.”²⁹

ii. The Garden of Eden and beyond

So, what has all of this got to do with God and getting a deeper understanding of the Sabbath? Well if we now turn to the pages of Genesis and especially chapters one and two, it soon becomes clearer in light of what has been mentioned so far. We have seen that God created the heavens and the earth finished His work and then rested,

^{1:31} “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day. ^{2:1} Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it God rested from all His work that He had done in creation” (Gen 1:31-2:3 ESV).

²⁷ Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 25, 114.

²⁸ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 122.

²⁹ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 122.

Some of the similarities between the ANE and Genesis 1 and 2:

- They both had a place where the god / God came to live; in Mesopotamia, it was a temple or ziggurat, but Eden's was just a garden amongst His people, so they both mention places for the god's / God's holy presence.
- They were both places where the people come to be near or into the presence of God.
- They both had gardens of blessing where food was in abundance.
- They both had various animals within their precincts.
- They both could have four streams flowing to water the gardens and the flocks.
- They were both places for the god / God.

Some of the differences between the ANE and Genesis 1 and 2:

- The Garden of Eden was God's holy place as He was present amongst His people (Adam and Eve). The god in the ziggurat was still removed from the people within the temple atop of the pyramid.
- The Garden of Eden was not really for people but was firstly the garden of God (cf. Is 51:3; Ez 28:13), then it was for the people.³⁰ The garden at the ziggurat was where the people went to get food for the god.
- The people did not build God a temple, but He created His place to live and come and be amongst His people.
- The produce of Eden was for the people (Gen 2:9) and not for God, unlike the garden around the ziggurat where the produce was for the god.
- There was no sacrifice of animals or grown produce to God in Eden. No sacrifice was mentioned until Genesis 4:2-5.
- The rivers of Eden ran further than those of the temple precinct of a ziggurat. The rivers of Eden ran out to the nations: Gen 2:10-14; cf. also Ez 47:1-12; and in the New Jerusalem Rev 22:2.
- The garden of God will be the place where it will all end, and it here that God will, in fact, be the temple: Rev 21 and 22.

So, why did God need to rest in the Garden of Eden after finishing His work? Was He tired and needed a rest after the completion of the work of creation? Or was there another reason for Him resting? It is here that we read,

³ "So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it God rested (*sabat*) from all His work that He had done in creation. ⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens" (Gen 2:3-4 ESV).

It needs to be stated up front that, God's rest was not merely a sleep or because He was tired from His work. The word used for rest here *sabat* is in the imperfect tense as it represents a series of incomplete actions that will be completed sometime in the future.

"The divine rest is characterised by ongoing control and stability (rather than simply sleeping peacefully, which is another concept in the Ancient Near East)... In Psalm 132 verses 15-18 concludes the Psalm by enumerating all that God will provide from His throne as He assures

³⁰ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 124.

the stability of the king and his people. The order in the cosmos is sustained not by God's being inactive, but precisely by His continued activity."³¹

So, for it to say that God rested, it is possibly better to say that He began to rest as there is more to do following on from the work of creation.

Why did He rest then, if the work was to continue? He enjoyed His creation and especially Adam and Eve. This is why He blessed the day and made it holy (set it apart as uncommon to the other six days). It was a day of rejoicing in light of creation, and so enjoying His creation. This event of God's Sabbath was recalled in Exodus where God instituted it,

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy... ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Ex 20:8,11 ESV).

Another reason for the Sabbath amongst the ANE was when a god had a victory over a rival god. Their rest would be seen as a time to rejoice and celebrate their god and their victory. In light of this, it is interesting that the Sabbath mentioned in Exodus 20:8-11 came after the defeat of the gods of Egypt Ex 7-12; 15. So, the Sabbath was to be a day of celebration, a day of recalling the defeat of the gods of Egypt and the Exodus. What is interesting here in Exodus 20 that Israel,

"They were commanded to share the rest of God on the Sabbath, not to participate in it per se, but in order to recognise His work of bringing and maintaining order. His control is represented in His rest and is recognised by yielding for the day their own attempts to provide for themselves."³²

This is even though the idea of the seventh day of Sabbath was previously introduced in Ex 16, with the giving of bread from heaven.

Finally, the idea of the Sabbath is mentioned in some passages, which referred back to the creation and that in Genesis 2:2 God rested on the seventh day. Some of these passages are

- "For in six days, the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Ex 20:11 ESV).
- "It is a sign forever between Me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed" (Ex 31:17 ESV).
- "For He has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works'" (Heb 4:4 ESV).

Hopefully, this brief overview has given you some perspective on the matter. However, it does not end here for the Christ-follower. Since we still need to answer the opening question, i.e. 'How does a Christ-follower relate to the Sabbath today?'

2. The Sabbath as a Christ-follower

Q. How would you explain the influence of the Sabbath as a Christ-follower?

a. Christ and the first Christ-followers,

So, having introduced the matter of the Sabbath rest within its historical context, it now needs to be asked, "So what?" or "How are we as Christ-followers to relate to the Sabbath today?" Well firstly, it needs to be pointed out that,

³¹ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 158.

³² Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 158.

“Contemporary studies try to make sense of the Sabbath as a day of rest for the overworked, stressed-out, and consumption-oriented human being, for the marginalised and oppressed, and for the suffering environment. While the Sabbath surely has something to say about these issues, the search for its meaning needs to address deeper questions and longings that were recognised in biblical times... the theological implications drawn from the text of the creation Sabbath include such aspects as cessation from work, holiness, divine, presence, relationship, and revelation.”³³

It was for the last reason mentioned above that Jesus kept the Sabbath,

“And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read” (Lk 4:16 ESV).

Also, Jesus made a strong statement about the Sabbath and its place for His followers. This happened during a legal challenge of Jesus’ authority do and say what He did, by the religious leaders. Jesus concluded by declaring His authority as the Lord of the Sabbath,³⁴

²⁷ “And He (Jesus) was persisted to say to them (the Pharisees), ‘The Sabbath was made for (came into existence for the sake of) humanity, not humanity for the (sake of the) Sabbath.’²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27-28 ESV).

Jesus pointed out that, the Sabbath is only a means to an end, i.e. for the good of humanity.³⁵ This needed to be pointed out, because of all of the regulations that had been brought to play into the Sabbath, which had nothing to do with the day. Consequently, the day became bogged down with unrelated minutiae.

Then, there was the women who came to Jesus’ tomb. Although they were in grief, they still kept the Sabbath. This is a challenging passage in light of what they had been through,

⁵⁵ “The women who had come with Him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how His body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath, they rested according to the commandment” (Lk 23:55-56 ESV).

Also, we read that Paul went to various Synagogues on the Sabbath on his journey as he preached the gospel. For him, it was not a day of rest because he was overworked and stressed-out. It was not because he was marginalised or oppressed, for even for the suffering environment around him due to the rape and pillage of the land by Rome. He kept the Sabbath as a Jewish Christ-follower he went to synagogues on the Sabbath, since that was where the Jews were meeting and where he had a chance to preach Christ.

¹ “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:1-2 ESV; Cf. also Acts 13:13-15,42-43; 16:11-13 etc.)

b. The letter to the Hebrews

However, when we come to the book of Hebrews and especially chapters 3-4 we find an important key to help understand the matter of the Sabbath for Christ-followers. We read that the writer gave the second warning of the letter to the Jewish Christ-followers, i.e. ‘do not miss entering the rest,’ 3:7-4:13. The writer pointed out that there was a better eternal rest rather than the temporary one that Joshua brought Israel into by entering the land of Canaan. The writer used an illustration from

³³ Frey, “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: an Exegetical and Theological Study,” 272, 273-274.

³⁴ Levine, Amy-Jill, & Brettler, Marc Zvi. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. (2nd Ed.). (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 75.

³⁵ Wuest, Kenneth S. *Wuest’s Word Studies: In The Greek New Testament*. Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 61.

the life of Israel, to show that they had not entered the rest of the land as recorded in Ps 95:7-11. The warning that came from this illustration was that the Jewish Christ-follower's needed to learn from Israel's failure and not imitate them, but make sure that they enter the rest.

A Rest for the People of God, quoted from Ps 95:7-11; in fact quoted from sections of Ex 17:17; and Num 14:20-24 regarding Israel's rebellion in the desert. In the end, God gave Israel what they asked for, i.e. "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!" (Num 14:2 ESV). So, we have this section in the book of Hebrews that says,

⁷ "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says (through David who wrote Ps 95), '**Today**, if you hear His voice, ⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, ⁹ where your fathers put Me to the test and saw My works for forty years. ¹⁰ Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known My ways.' ¹¹ As I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.' ¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart (or a heart evil with reference to unbelief...that is active and pernicious in condition³⁶), leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called '**today**,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin... ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief" (Heb 3:7-13,19 ESV).

One thing that stands out in this section is that the writer used the word "today," (Heb 3:7,13,15; and 4:7). This idea of it being today is within the context of the continuously strong exhorting or calling out of what needs to be done while it is still today. This is used within the context of the rest in God, Heb 3:11; 18; 4:1,3,5,8-11. The writer to the Hebrews is obviously focusing on God having entered the rest in Gen 2:2 and Israel was to do the same but did not. Consequently, these Jewish Christ-followers needed to make sure that they followed God's example and not that of rebellious Israel. The writer to the Hebrews linked the idea in Genesis 2:2 of God entering the eternal rest, with that of Ps 95, and also the eternalness of this rest that they see as being in Jesus Christ. So, the writer,

"...takes the 'rest' to be an eschatological reality, where Jesus' followers enjoy their divine inheritance as eternal life."³⁷

The problem we have as people is that we are good at institutionalising, and this has been the case with the Sabbath. We can manipulate a place or space, but we are not able to do so with time. That is, as it has been said,

"Time is man's greatest challenge... It belongs exclusively to God. Time, then, is otherness, a mystery that hovers above all categories... Every one of us occupies a portion of space. He takes it up exclusively. Yet, no one possesses time. There is no moment which I possess exclusively... We share time; we own space... We pass through time; we occupy space."³⁸

This is why the story of Israel missing the rest is so sad, as they tried to institutionalise the rest. They did not understand the idea of time and specifically the moment the Psalmist mentioned as 'today.' They wanted a place or space to rest and have Sabbath but could not see that it was about 'today,' which is present and continuous. This is why when God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush He said that "I AM who I AM," (Ex 3:14). That is, God is always present now. Jesus picked up on this and used the same name "I AM" in John's gospel (Jn 8:58). God is always present and continuous, as His is the divine Sabbath. This is what the writer to the Hebrews was trying to get across to Christ-followers. This comes through in Heb 3-4 (esp. 4:1,3,4,6-11),

³⁶ Wuest, Kenneth S. *Wuest's Word Studies: In The Greek New Testament*. Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 77.

³⁷ Levine, & Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 468.

³⁸ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 99.

¹ “Therefore, while the promise of entering His rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it (or there being left behind and still remaining³⁹)... ^{3a} For **we who have believed enter that rest**... ⁴ For He has somewhere spoken (Gen 2:2) of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works.’ ⁶ Since therefore, it remains for some to enter it (through salvation), and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again He appoints a certain day, ‘**Today**,’ saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, ‘**Today**, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.’ ⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from His. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, strive to enter that rest (through salvation), so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience” (Heb 4:1,3,4,6-11 ESV).

So, the writer to the Hebrews built on the previous section of Heb 1:1-2:4 ‘Christ the Son of God.’ They also spoke about His deity; that is, (Heb 2:5-4:13) and, which dealt with ‘Christ the Son of Man,’ and particularly His humanity. The writer to the Hebrews did this to encourage them to make sure that they have entered the rest and if not to do so and not harden their heart through unbelief. They drew on Old Testament illustrations and especially the rebellion of Israel to point out that the first rebellious generation died in the desert. Hence, they demonstrated that the generation of Israel in the desert never entered the rest of the Promised Land.

The writer to the Hebrews built on this challenge to the Jewish Christ-followers (to whom they were writing). They were to learn from this and if they had not already entered the eternal rest in Jesus Christ and His completed work to do so. It has been said about the weekly Jewish Sabbath that,

“The Sabbath is a reminder of the two worlds – this world and the world to come; it is an example of both worlds. For Sabbath is joy, holiness, and rest; joy is part of this world; holiness and rest are something of the world to come.”⁴⁰

Although this is said to Jews, I think it is a good provocation for Christ-followers to grasp the notion of living fully aware of the moment of Sabbath that we are always in being in Christ. That means we have entered into the Sabbath and should live in the joy of salvation because we have a foretaste of what is to come.⁴¹ The Sabbath is an eternal life that we have entered; it is a beautiful safe and in intimate closeness to the holiness of God. We need to realise that this eternity is where we now live in all of the time, regardless of the place or state of life we find our self.⁴²

c. The new temple of God

Consequently, there is no need for a temple anymore. Whether it is the Garden of Eden or the temple in Jerusalem, since, we as His church are the temple. This church is not a building, but we the people of God, are God’s holy home. The Bible points out that; we are all part of one temple where God now rests,

“Do you (plural [pl]) not know that you (pl) are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you (pl)?” (1 Cor 3:16 ESV).

“Or do you (plural [pl]) not know that your (pl) body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you (pl), whom you (pl) have from God? You (pl) are not your (pl) own” (1 Cor 6:19 ESV).

³⁹ Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies*, 83.

⁴⁰ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 19.

⁴¹ Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies*, 85.

⁴² Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 8, 29.

“What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make My dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (2 Cor 6:16 ESV). The first part of this quote is a reworking of what was said in Ezekiel 37:26, and the second part is from Exodus 29:45 see below,

“I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore” (Ez 37:26 ESV).

“I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God” (Ex 29:45 ESV).

⁴ “As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:4-5 ESV).

However, we will only be the temple of God while here on earth. The reason for this is that, when we enter into the next stage or time of our eternal life, God and the Lamb will be the eternal temple,

“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22 ESV)

Wow, that is mind-blowing. If only we could get our head around this eternal truth of the eternalness of the Sabbath and its intimacy with God. “Please open our eyes to see Lord and open our spirits to know the depths of this amazing truth.”

Some concluding thoughts

So, coming back to the opening question,

Q. How does a Christ-follower relate to the Sabbath today?

We need our eyes opened to see the divine inheritance given by our Heavenly Father to all Christ-followers as His children. This divine inheritance of Sabbath in Him is the eternal life, which we received in Jesus Christ when we entered into the beginning of our journey of salvation, i.e. when we were born again. Remember that, our Sabbath holiness has its beginnings long before the fall of humanity and death, even before freedom from the oppression of sin. Still more, Sabbath holiness reaches beyond human existence and time, in that it originated from the holy God. We have been supernaturally born of the Holy Spirit and are now in Sabbath in Him; it was not of our doing and it a gift from our Father. We need to rest in this truth and realise that,

“The Sabbath is given for you not you for the Sabbath.”⁴³

God is in charge and has authority over the created world, but we need to Sabbath in Him where He has put His children to be in control of what He has entrusted to us. As Christ-followers then we are to live from His Sabbath rest. God assures us that He is providing stability as the King of His people. Our Sabbath rest ought to be a time to rejoice and celebrate God and His victory. The reason is, we have been invited into His kingdom as His royal children to rule and reign as His kings and priests. That is why we as His children can rest assured and confident in Him!

⁴³ Levine, & Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 76.

Within chapters three and four of the Book of Hebrews the writer points out that, this Sabbath as Christ is eternal and not merely weekly.⁴⁴ As the Jewish Christ-followers were not to keep the weekly Sabbath, so we are not to keep it. This is because there is a greater Sabbath, Jesus Christ and we are in Him, and He is in us, 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 3:26-28. As it has rightly been said,

“Christ released us from the Sabbath. His finished work on the cross abolished the entire Mosaic law of ordinances, which includes the Sabbath commandment... If there is a principle that one day in seven belongs to God, then it should be used to arrest us from our normal pursuits and allow us to devote more attention to God’s Word and work, but Christians are not obligated to observe the Sabbath, nor are they committing apostasy if they exercise their Christian liberty not to observe the Sabbath.”⁴⁵

So, we need to learn from this truth and realise that we have already entered into the God’s Sabbath. We need to become “attuned to the holiness of time,”⁴⁶ that is contained in the sphere of eternity. It is important to live in that rest, to frequently stop and realise this truth and be encouraged and recalibrated. Just as we can take sound bites, so we need to (as it were) take ‘Sabbath Bites.’ That is, be regularly attuning ourselves to the life of Sabbath in which we are living. Things around us will persist in attempting to turn our attention away from our eternal Sabbath in God. However, be encouraged to, stop, realign, retune and then go on living in Sabbath life.

To many, this whole idea of the Sabbath may be a mystery, but it is important that,

“We address ourselves to Him who is beyond the mystery.”⁴⁷

Namely, Jesus Christ has completed the work of salvation and is in Sabbath. We need to rest in this truth that it has been done. This understanding of God’s Sabbath after the completion of His work built on the truth in Gen 2:1-3 should be an encouragement to us, as should the truth that Christ completed His work and then rested, Jn 19:30. It is His rest that we have entered into, i.e. “God’s unique personal rest in which the believer shares.”⁴⁸ There is absolutely nothing that we could add to our salvation to enhance the rest. The Word of God used by the Holy Spirit will test your life right to our very core to see if you are resting in Him and His finished work, Heb 4:11-13.

It has correctly been said that,

“Sabbath is about more than external rest of the body; it is about inner rest of the soul.”⁴⁹

As a result, we need to realise that we are already in God and,

“As our Sabbath rest, we need to let go and give Jesus our burdens, stress, and anxiety and rest in Him... There is an active move on our part as it relates to rest. Sabbath throughout Scripture is an intentional thing, not something that is thrown together at the end.”⁵⁰

Therefore, if He is the ultimate fulfilment of Sabbath then, all that has been stated in the Bible was leading to this conclusion. He is our rest, and we entered into this when we were renewed by the Holy Spirit at the beginning of our salvation. We need to realise and live in light of this truth. That is,

“The main theological aspect of the Sabbath in the Pentateuch may be summarised as follows: The Sabbath encapsulates and reveals God’s presence in the world, regardless of its

⁴⁴ Levine, & Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 469.

⁴⁵ Borland, “Should We Keep the Sabbath?”, 8, 10.

⁴⁶ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 10.

⁴⁷ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*. (Santa Fe, NM: Aurora, 1998), 63.

⁴⁸ Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies*, 87.

⁴⁹ “Sabbath Rest.” <http://dailykeller.com/sabbath-rest/> (8th January 2018).

⁵⁰ “Creating a Rhythm of Sabbath Rest.” <http://joshuareich.org/2017/11/20/creating-a-rhythm-of-sabbath-rest/> (8th January 2018).

nature and condition. The Sabbath was introduced by divine cessation from work in order for holiness to enter the world for the benefit of all humanity. Holiness is the essence of the divine-human relationship, which enables human beings to fully become what they were created to be: the image of the Creator. In its rhythmic recurrence, the Sabbath signifies the Creator's constant presence in the world and His care for it. Since the fall into sin, the Sabbath liberates people from oppressive regimes of man-made gods; it places them in proper relationships with each other; it relieves their attitude toward work in a society exhausted and stressed by hard labor; and it testifies to the sacred design in time and space whereby they can recognize and emulate the Maker of all. Thus the Sabbath is an important part of God's program for restoring *imago Dei* (image of God) in fallen human beings."⁵¹

All of this may ultimately be summarised in Father, Son and Holy Spirit our Sabbath. That is,

- They are the One who encapsulates and reveals God's presence in the world.
- By way of their divine end from work for their holiness to enter the world for the benefit of all humanity.
- They enable human beings to fully become what they were created to be: the image of the Creator.
- As Sabbath signifies the Creator's constant presence in the world and his care for it. Since the Fall into sin.
- It is only God as Sabbath who can liberate people from oppressive regimes of made gods.
- It is God who can place us in proper relationships with each other.
- It is only God who can relieve our attitude toward work in a society exhausted and stressed by hard labour.
- God as Sabbath testifies to the sacred design in time and space whereby we can recognise and emulate the Maker of all.
- Thus, Jesus Christ, the ultimate Sabbath is the important part of God's program for finally restoring *imago Dei* (image of God) in fallen human beings.

In light of all that has been said here, I will finish with Jesus' counsel to those around Him,

²⁸ "Come to Me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you. Let Me teach you because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28-29 NLT).

Although the word used here is not Sabbath, but more of an intermission (*anapausis*), it still leads toward that place of Sabbath as it is equal Sabbath. This Sabbath is not just make-believe, but a reality and is for today. So, enter His Sabbath while it is today!

⁵¹ Frey, "The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: an Exegetical and Theological Study," 303.