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## SABBATH TIME

*In a World of Work, an Invitation to Rest*

PHILLIP CARY

**K**eeping sabbath can be difficult these days. You might think observing a holy day that's all about taking a rest would not be so hard. But I find it can be as difficult as trying to fall asleep at night after a stressful day, when I can't stop thinking about everything that worries me. A world that's much too busy and unhealthy doesn't want to give us a rest, and I'm busy enough and unhealthy enough to be a member of that world in good standing. I find it hard to take much of a break from it, and when I do I tend to feel guilty.



So, while my propensities say otherwise, it is a good thing that I am commanded to take a break and give it a rest. It has its difficulties, but at root the commandment of God is not prohibition but permission: a 'thou shalt not' that opens up a 'you may.' I may take a good long break—I am allowed to give it a rest for a whole day in good conscience—because the commandment says I must. In this regard, the law of God is a front-line defense against being swallowed up by my work and its anxieties, my inflated desire to lean in, make a difference and change the world. It stops me in my tracks and blesses me in spite of myself.

Because the pressure, both internal and external, against keeping sabbath is so strong, it requires deliberate disciplines—like staying away from email and all the other ways the Web leaves me driven, distracted and exhausted. It can be a hard enough discipline just to take a nap. But I do try to be disciplined about it, and it has gotten easier and more delightful over the years, as I feel in my bones how much I need this—how much good it does me.

And it helps that Scripture has so much to say about the blessing of the sabbath, which I find increasingly beautiful every time I come back to it. Like a lived poem, the beauty of the sabbath is tied up with its meaning. Or rather its *meanings*—for there is more than one.

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**FINISHED  
WORK**  
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The sabbath command appears in both versions of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20 and Deut 5) and is the source of the most important difference between them. Both ver-

sions give an explanation of the sabbath command, but the explanations differ—offering us two different meanings of the sabbath. One is about the perfection of the creation, the other about its imperfection.

The more familiar explanation is from the first version. Why are we to remember the seventh day and keep it holy? Because “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” (Exod 20:11). God made it holy, so we are to keep it holy—to sanctify it. To keep sabbath is thus to do what God does. We are invited to participate in his creativity by sharing in his rest.

God rests not because he's tired, but because he's completed the work of creation. There's no more work to do because he's reached the end of it. This is *the end* in the rich sense of fulfillment or completion, which in Greek is called *telos* and in Latin *perfectio*—a bit of meaning that has been largely forgotten. To be *perfected* means to be completed. Even in English, “perfect” originally designated the completion of a process of growing or making something—like when the King James Bible talks about a person attaining the full stature of Christ by becoming “a perfect man” (Eph 4:13). To be perfect here does not mean to be absolutely blameless but rather to be fully adult (which is why later translations use words like “mature”), as someone who has completed the process of growing up. Likewise, when describing something *made*, the underlying idea is that it is thoroughly done (*per-factus* in Latin), just as we would now say, “all done.” The idea is still visible when Schubert's Unfinished Symphony is labeled an *opus imperfectum*, which means precisely “unfinished work”—a work that is imperfect not because it's flawed but because it's incomplete.



God rests on the seventh day because he now has a finished work. That's what we celebrate when we rest on the seventh day. We participate in the perfection of God's work of creation by getting nothing done, because nothing needs to be done when the work is *all done*. So on the sabbath we have nothing to accomplish but praise and thanksgiving, to give voice to our enjoyment of the goodness of the work God has already done. We get to do what God does, looking at all that he has made and seeing it is very good (Gen 1:31), like an artist who beholds his finished work and says, “Very good—all done!”

We can do this because we are ourselves the completion of creation. As the last of all things created, human beings are the finishing touches of the whole. In us creation finds its voice

and becomes capable of singing the praises of the finished work of God. In us creation itself is able not only to enjoy its own being, but to articulate thanks for it.

This is why the Bible calls us the priests of creation, offering sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. We can speak and listen to one another, teach and learn from one another, sing and enjoy the song together; we are the ones who most fully display and participate in the perfection of creation. It is therefore on the sabbath, when we gather to accomplish nothing but worship and praise, that we most fully enact our own being as the creatures made in God's image.

That is also why it is deeply inappropriate for anyone on the sabbath day to be working like a slave. Sabbath time is time to be free.

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**REST  
FROM LABOR**  
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The second time the Bible gives us the Ten Commandments, the explanation for the sabbath is about repairing, at least temporarily, one of the deep imperfections that has crept into God's creation, corroding and corrupting his finished work. What gets explained here is not so much the holiness of the day as why the rest is so imperative. It is not an option but a requirement, for it is not just about me. It is about how I must give others a rest as well. In its original setting, it extends beyond the Israelites who heard the command to include their guests and slaves and even their beasts of burden, the ox and the ass. Why is this so imperative? Because "you shall remember," the LORD says to Israel, "that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day" (Deut 5:15).

Here the work from which we must all rest isn't like the artistry of a master craftsman, but like the drudgery of forced labor. In our day, it's the non-stop stress, the inability to leave our work at the office, the constant need to stay ahead of the latest changes in the market or the workplace. In the ancient world, with its lack of machine-power and laborsaving devices, it included the drudgery of literal slaves, without which no large-scale work got accomplished. But this kind of labor is not what we were made for. Not even the ox and the ass were made for it. (It is perhaps more than just a lovely coincidence that these are the animals we think of, contemplating the Lord born in a

stable, because of the way they are mentioned in Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib").

So Israel must remember what it was like to be a slave—to understand why all the slaves within its borders, and even the animals, must be given rest from labor. They too are to enjoy their own being, at least one day in seven, and thereby witness the goodness of the Creator. On the sabbath day everyone is to be like Israel: not only created but redeemed, not only 'all done' but freed from bondage, like those to whom God proclaims his name in the preface to the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, *out of the house of slavery*" (Exod 20:2, Deut 5:6).

The first time these words were spoken was on Mount Sinai; the second time was when Israel gathered on the far side of Jordan, preparing to cross into the Promised Land. This is the land where God promises to give them rest from their enemies—"the rest... that the LORD your God is giving you"—so that they may bring their tithes and offerings to "the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there" (Deut 12:9-11). What is in view here is the future location of the temple in Jerusalem, and the ark of the covenant, come to rest after years wandering in the wilderness. This place of rest, corresponding to the Sabbath's time of rest, makes a home for sacrifice, which is to say, for *enjoyment*.

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**SACRIFICIAL  
MEAL**  
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Contrary to our modern usage, sacrifice does not mean giving stuff up and going without.

In ancient Israel, it typically meant throwing a party and celebrating. To sacrifice is to offer something to God, and what biblical people offered was food. So what were you going to do with food once it was offered to God? Sometimes the food was all burnt up, sent up to heaven in the form of smoke, in a burnt offering. But the usual thing to do with food offered to God was to eat it.

The sacrificial animal was placed on the altar, which was a large, elevated table with a fire built on it for cooking the meat. After the priests (literally) got their cut, the rest of the animal usually went to the owner, who now had a large amount of meat on his hands and only one proper way to dispose of it (there being, of course, no such thing as refrigeration at the time). Sacrifice in ancient Israel therefore typically meant gathering enough people to help you eat up some large animal like a goat or a sheep. It was the occasion for a lot of good eating as well as for thanksgiving and praise and celebration of the goodness of God the giver.

This is the kind of worship to keep in mind when thinking of the sabbath. It is the time of sacrifice, which means celebration and song and no one going hungry. It's the sort of long, drawn out happy event that follows the killing of a fatted calf. It's what everyone is waiting for, the kind of rest Israel was hoping to find in the Promised Land.

And it's the kind of thing we should be thinking of when the Psalm speaks of people who never enter God's rest (Ps 95:11). It is pointing to the generation of Israelites who died in the wilderness, never crossing the Jordan into the promised land. The author of the letter to Hebrews, quoting this, wants us thinking of a sabbath that remains still in the future for the people of God. This is the promised time when Jesus (whose name is a variant of Joshua, who led the chosen people into the promised land) will

give his people rest in eternal life (Heb 4:8-9).

The New Testament pictures this same rest as the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). We get to celebrate a foretaste of it in the Eucharist, the central event of the Christian sabbath. Through the Eucharist we remember another finished work, the one which Jesus himself completed on the cross. The Greek term in his dying cry, "It is finished" (John 19:30), is the word for achieving a *telos*, an end in the sense of the completion of a work. He's not just saying "it's all over," as if all he means is that his suffering has come to an end and now he can finally die. Rather, he has perfected and finished the work his Father gave him to do; he has redeemed the world that fell into the bondage of sin. *All done!* This is why the Eucharist, the sabbath meal at the heart of Christian worship, looks back to the finished work of Christ and forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb. As the author of Hebrews insists, Christ offered himself once for all (Heb 9:25-28), and so no new sacrifice needs to be made from henceforth. But the meal that follows this sacrifice lasts forever, for it gives us the bread of God (John 6:33), our participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16).

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**REDEEMING  
THE TIME**  
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Like the Eucharist, the sabbath looks both forward and back, as well as giving us something to sustain us in between, in the day-in, day-out of this present evil age. We celebrate the finished work of God, we take a break in the midst of our labors, and we anticipate the eternal rest when all is song, thanksgiving and praise. The holy day in the midst of our times

thus sanctifies time itself, as the holy place in the temple in Jerusalem sanctified all the land of Israel. But now we have a new holy place, Jesus' own body, raised up from death to an indestructible life (John 2:19-22). This holiness is in the midst of us when we gather on the sabbath to celebrate the sacrament of his body and blood. As in ancient Israel, holy time and holy place coincide in worship, and sanctify everything around them.

This sanctification is no trivial matter. It is what we do with *our* bodies for one day per week, which is a lot of time in this era of busyness. From the standpoint of the powers of this world, it is not hard to see why there is so much pressure *against* keeping sabbath. The internet competes jealously for as much of our attention as it can grab. For in our era it is not just time that is money, but attention. How much would an advertiser or start-up company, eager to monetize its product, be willing to pay in order to capture the attention of a whole congregation gathered on a Sunday morning for an hour or more? Multiply this by the thousands of congregations across the country and across the world, and it would be worth billions. And what are all these people doing on the sabbath—accomplishing nothing but telling old stories and singing old songs!

For the modern race, this is a tremendous waste of time. That, of course, is one of the most salient reasons to keep the sabbath, and keep it well. Let us waste our time accomplishing nothing but to sing to tell the old story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to enjoy the very being of creation. For all the imperfection that has befallen it in this present evil age, all the loss and ruination that affects the work God completed

in the beginning, it is still God's good creation, which is reason enough for ceaseless praise. So on the sabbath we rest and celebrate, as well as anticipate the marriage supper, when the kingdom comes which puts all things right that have been ruined and lost in the course of time.

Sabbath is time for things. It is time for things that, during six days of the week, we tell ourselves we have no time for. It is time to reclaim our attention from the things of this world and give it to the things of creation, including ourselves, our friends, our neighbors, and every lovely thing around us that we normally pass by in a rush. It is time to eat and be satisfied, time for a good book or an unhurried conversation, time to make something for the sheer beauty of the thing, not because it's needed. It is a time to be fully present, all day, rather than be looking ahead anxiously to the next piece of work that has to get done, in bondage to agendas and schedules. It is a time to do anything that is genuinely free—not to slave away, but to do things that are worth doing for their own sake. It is thus to practice loving what is worth loving for its own sake.

By freeing our attention, the sabbath frees us to love things. By inviting us to worship and celebrate the goodness of God, the sabbath builds us up in faith. And by training us to do nothing, the sabbath teaches us the hope of redemption, which is not our doing. Only the one who finished the work of creation in the beginning can bring it to glory in the end. In the meantime, there will be plenty of work for us to do—including all the works of love and faith and hope—but none of the work can replace the rest that anticipates and enacts the enjoyment for which we were created. ♪

