

God's Good Gift of Sabbath Rest

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Date: 08 February 2026

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[0 : 00] So we are talking today about rest. And I'm going to guess two things are true. That when we talk about rest, we're talking about something we know we need and often we find ourselves longing for. But at the same time, I suspect for at least many of us, life feels crazy busy and relentless. Perhaps you have arrived here feeling overworked, overstretched, like the hamster in a wheel and it's constantly spinning. And rest sounds wonderful, but it can sound like a distant dream. We live in the digital world and that is part of that drive that keeps us crazy busy. But we also need to recognize that we have various responsibilities, including church responsibilities, and even the good things that we do requires time and energy and can leave us feeling drained. Perhaps you are someone who is driven to succeed in work, and study in some pursuit, and that becomes the never-ending chase. And we need to acknowledge where we are and to acknowledge that in the beginning, God gave Sabbath and rest as a good gift. Before there was any sin and before anything broke down, there was rest. This little passage is a gift for us. This principle is a gift for us. It's a gift for our time management. Because here is

God helping us to establish habits and limits for our lives, we are called to work and to rest by God's design. It's also, for those of us who are Christians, a gift for our witness to the world.

Here is the way for the church and for a Christian to present hope. There is a way of escape from the crazy busy. There is the promise of a rest that is real and lasting. And it's also a gift for us today for our worship. We have this weekly rhythm. We get to hit the reset or the pause button on our lives to come into the presence of our Creator and our Savior each Sunday to remember His goodness and to remember the gospel. So we're going to think, there's loads that has been said, loads that we could say about the Sabbath. But we're going to do a few things. We're going to think, first of all, about the principle. What is Sabbath rest? So if you've been around for the last few weeks and if you've read through Genesis 1, you'll remember that it's full of patterns. God speaks. God says, let there be and there is. God declares things to be good. There's the evening and morning pattern. But day 7, it stands out as unique. So we're told in verse 1 that by the time we get to day 7, the heavens and the earth are completed and all their vast array. So the work of creating the masterpiece of the universe, that's now done. And three times in verses 2 and 3, we're told that on day 7, God rested.

And it's the language of the craftsman putting down his tools. He has finished creating his very good universe. There is nothing left to be done. And so he can rest because his good, very good work is completed. And then uniquely in verse 3 of chapter 2, God blesses the seventh day and makes it holy.

So this tells us that from the beginning, God intends that this rhythm of working and then resting is part of God's covenant gift. It's a gift to his people. This is crucial for us to have a flourishing life before God if people will obey. And it is a day set apart by the holy God for the holy God and his purposes. So three ideas we see in our verses. Very simple but really fundamental. The first is the idea of resting. God has willed and spoken and designed that great canvas of the universe.

[4 : 35] Now it is complete. He can rest and be satisfied. And from creation onwards, for those of us who are God's image bearers, and that's all of us as people, he gives the gift of our rest. We are called to find rest for our mind, for our body, for our soul. So we imitate God by enjoying his gift of Sabbath rest. We come for us to a Sunday recognizing. Here is a blessing for us to enter into. There is a rejoicing that goes with it, with that resting.

Just as God was delighted and declared his creation to be very good, once the pinnacle of his creation, you and I, have been made, so as his image bearers, we're given this gift, not some dull duty, but the freedom to enjoy God and his creation. So there's resting, there's rejoicing, and there's that rhythm. That God the creator sets the pattern. Six days we work and one day we rest.

And we read Exodus chapter 20, and we heard commandment four. Remember the Sabbath day to keep holy. And we remember who that word was given to. It was given to a community of people who were being worked to death as slaves in Egypt. And now God the true king rescues and says, come, enjoy the rest I provide. So it's a wonderful gift and a wonderful moment of celebrating freedom. But doesn't it say to us that there's a rightness to the rhythms and to the seasons of life that God has designed us this way?

And every week we have this privilege to be restored and to find joy as collectively we're invited to hit the pause button, where we can put aside our usual occupation. We can rest to enjoy God and his creation.

We can rest to make time to enjoy his good gifts. And ultimately we rest to enjoy God himself. Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, that wonderful rhythm. We're made for rhythm. Remember how strange and unsettling that COVID lockdown season was. When we lost all rhythm and shape, it was a really hard time for so many because it was not the way we were made to be. Likewise, we need to consider and recognize the pace of modern life in the digital age and recognize the challenge of finding this good rest.

[7 : 33] Those who are older among us, I am sure, will remember fondly quiet Sundays. Actually quiet. Times when workers got rest. When whole families could spend a considerable amount of time together.

As a society loses this good rhythm that God has given, we're becoming restless. Even as Christians, life can feel relentless and we don't know how to stop. So it's good to remember that in the beginning, God set this rhythm for us of resting and rejoicing. So that's the principle. But to kind of continue to thought, let's think about the purpose. Let's think about why did God give this Sabbath rest?

And again, in a group like ours, there's going to be a variety of people. Sabbath, to hear the word Sabbath, for some of us, I know this might be quite a new concept. This might be a new word, depending on your church background or your culture. You may come to an idea like Sabbath and rest, and it's like a blank slate because it's not something that you've really thought about a lot. But on the other side, many of us have grown up in a Sabbath, Sabbatarian context. Some of us have found that really positive. But if we're going to be honest, I imagine some of us have found that to be quite negative. Some people take the idea of Sabbath and attach that list that they maybe grew up with, of a list of do's and don'ts, and it can feel really stifling. Maybe the day that dragged along.

And so wherever we're coming from today, we need to kind of park our preconceived ideas, wherever they might be, and together to hear God speak about his day and the purpose for Sabbath and rest. And the first, I think, a fundamental thing that we need to hear is that God gives it as a gift to enjoy. That's why we heard Mark 2. We heard Jesus. You can turn to Mark 2, 23 to 28 if you wish.

[9 : 50] Here is this moment when Jesus challenges the extra rules and regulations tacked on to the Sabbath day by the religious leaders. They were making it a negative day. And Jesus wants people to understand that the Sabbath is a gift. And so he speaks with authority. He says, I am Lord of the Sabbath. There's a claim that Jesus is God. But he says, Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Sabbath is a gift from God. For Israel who had been slaves, Sabbath was a gift, a celebration of freedom. And it remains true for us. When our work or our study is full of demands and pressures, we come to this day. We come to this day and God invites us again into freedom. Give your heart and mind to other things. Allow your brain and your body to rest and be renewed. I wonder if you're here today and you feel something of a slave to your work. Do you find it really difficult to switch off?

Part of that is the digital age. But do you find it really hard to take a day off? To rest from those necessary activities. That could very well be a warning sign that you're becoming a slave to your work, as good as that work might be. And it's a sign that you need to return to enjoy the gift of Sabbath freedom. Because it is fundamentally a gift to enjoy. It's also, secondly, a trust to display. So again, picture the Israelites. The evening before the Sabbath, which for him would be a Friday evening. As he hangs up his tools, he is saying to himself, if he keeps the Sabbath, I am trusting God to look after me. To provide for me. To care for the crops of the animals while I take time to rest and to worship.

There's something really important that we can say when we rest. And this includes even our sleep. It is a reminder to us as we rest and as we sleep that at the end of the day, we are not God. We are not in control.

The God who is, he never slumbers or sleeps. He doesn't need to. He has no limits, but we do. And so we need to rest, trusting that God keeps the universe spinning. That God has appointed this day for our good.

And it's a chance for us to practice humble dependence. Resting can be an act of faith. I will trust that my good God will provide.

[12:59] I will trust that resting, in order to enjoy God's day and to enjoy God, it will renew me for those tasks that are pressing on my mind and in my agenda.

Resting our brains and our bodies for a week to come. Because again, restless, relentless working, that can be a warning sign.

That I am trusting myself as provider and saviour. Or that I find my purpose and my identity in my work and I cannot put it down in order to be before my God.

So it's a gift to enjoy. It's a trust to display. It's also a worship that we offer. And actually there's a clue here in Genesis chapter 2 verse 3. When God blesses the seventh day and makes it holy, it is clear again that by God's design he is setting apart one day as a holy day.

As a set apart day. As a unique day. And he blesses that day. For those who are in covenant with him, those who are made in his image, there is a goodness and a givenness to this.

[14:18] And what becomes clear as you read through the Old Testament is that God gives this day so that his people can worship. So that they can remember their creator.

And so they can remember the God who redeemed and rescued them. That God directs their weekly rhythm around the rhythms of worship.

And actually their annual calendar, their festivals were also involved with worshiping and resting. This was a people that could never rest in Egypt.

But now they worship the one true God and he saved them by grace. Freedom involves the rest to worship. We don't worship on the same day as the Old Testament Israelites.

I don't know if you've ever asked the question, why is it that we don't rest on day seven? We have our Lord's Day on day one at the start of the week. And we think about it still as the Christian Sabbath.

[15:18] But as we come to the crucial events of the life of Jesus, as we think about his resurrection, that happens on a Sunday on day one.

When we think about his appearances to his disciples after his resurrection, they happen on day one. And so by instinct and by God's good design, worship for the Christian church begins on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week.

They enter their week having rested in Jesus and his salvation. And there's something good about connecting worship with day one. We have associations of Jesus, the one who has come to bring new creation life.

We think on day one about the light that comes after darkness. And so we worship on Sunday as the Lord's Day.

But as we think about the principle of Sabbath, we recognize it's a particular kind of rest. This is something more than, you know, the good gift of a holiday in the sun.

[16:28] This is more than the rest of Netflix and chill or social media scrolling or simply switching off and doing nothing. It is freedom from work in order to know and to enjoy and to worship our God.

So the purpose of Sabbath is not simply rest, but rest is good. It's not simply leisure or the pursuit of pleasure. Sabbath is given so that you and I, we can enjoy our God as we rest in Jesus our Savior. It's a good gift. But let's now think thirdly about the practice. How can we, how can you, how can I enjoy Sabbath rest?

So I'm hoping that as we've looked briefly at the what and the why, we're seeing or seeing again that God's gift of rest, this is a good thing. This is something that connects with my felt needs physically, emotionally, spiritually.

This sounds good. But maybe it's raising some questions. Well, I recognize this is good, but it's not something I'm familiar with. So what might it look like? Or maybe we find ourselves in a really hectic schedule and you think, well, how am I going to go about changing my habits?

[17 : 55] Perhaps even more negatively, you might be thinking, well, that sounds really nice, but you don't know my diary. You don't know my calendar. What can I do to find rest? Let me say again, I'm really happy to chat to anyone about this, to suggest some books.

I would also suggest that if we know people in our lives, I'm sure we do, people who have that good work, life, worship balance, if you know people with good habits, talk to them, learn from them. But what follows for the next few minutes are really some suggested lines of thought, some pathways to follow that I hope will help us in the pursuit, the good pursuit of Sabbath rest. Some questions to reflect on. Because here's the thing. Christians in every age have recognized this. If we are going to Sabbath well, it requires discipline and effort and thought. Nobody moves from kind of chaos to good order, you know, just like that. We don't fall into good patterns. It requires effort and regular effort.

[19 : 05] So some questions for us that kind of are drawn from various Bible texts and themes. Here's the first one. This comes from, if you remember, Ita, who was a digital counselor.

She had this question, which I found really helpful. How can you, how are you guarding the gates of your heart? So the image is this, that on a Sabbath in an Israelite town or city, on the Sabbath, the gates would be closed.

And the gates were closed for a number of reasons. They were closed for protection from enemies. But they were also closed to keep out people who wanted to make life busy and to trade with them. So it was a way to have security in order to rest and to worship. Now think about that as we think about guarding the gates of our hearts and our minds.

What might that look like? How do we control what comes across our hearts and our minds? Maybe especially, do we think about when and how we consume digital content?

[20 : 13] Not just on a Sabbath, but any time. Are we allowing, I think also corporate. How can we be a city on a hill? So remember in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used that image.

He was presenting the church as an alternative society. Something that was life-giving. Something that would draw people towards God and His goodness. To be a beacon of light and hope.

To be that city on a hill saying, there's the place of rest and protection and security and home. One way we can do that is in how we use our time.

Is our attitude to time, to work, to rest, distinctively different to our course mates and our colleagues?

Because as Christians, we should probably expect it will be. And we can present, as Christians, a powerful and a positive witness to the world.

[21 : 16] That there is another way to do life. There is a way of life that makes time to be restored. That commits time to enjoy with people.

To get outside and to enjoy creation. That we take seriously our call to joy. So we deliberately make time to enjoy God's good gifts in all their variety.

And we take time to enjoy our God as a community. Since the beginning, God's people have been called to live differently in a positive way.

In a way that would attract people in. The way of life and the way of worship. And Sabbath rest remains something so important in that. And so we need to take care as individuals and as households, I think.

Especially when the world around us has a very different kind of cycle. That we don't get stuck on those same cycles of crazy busy and just accept that as normal. Of career or consumption or competition.

[22 : 30] Instead, we need to fight to rejoice in our rest. And to invite others to do likewise. Here's a third question. Where and how will you and I create margins in our lives?

And here I'm thinking about the Old Testament poor laws. Which are really interesting laws. So when an Israel had a field. God's command was that the field wouldn't be mown or harvested right to the edges.

There was space left for mercy. Your fields were not worked right to the borders. And again, here I think is where we can take that principle and apply it to our use of time.

Do we set limits so that we avoid overwork? And the risk of burnout? How can we apply those gleaning laws of mercy to our time?

So that we refuse to work every single minute that we are given. That we don't just keep the dregs of our time. But that we keep quality time.

[23 : 45] For the people that God has given to us in our lives. So that we can be good parents and children and family members and friends and colleagues.

How can we make sure that we haven't so gone to the fine margins of our time that we can actually enjoy the gift of family time as a church.

The gift of worship. To make room for one another through the week. How can we make sure that we create margins so that we've got the room to show mercy and kindness in Jesus' name.

When we think about the good gift of Sabbath rest that we're invited into. Ask yourself this question. How do I taste and see that God is good?

And that's a really important. I thought about that for a number of years. The idea that we're all made differently. So we all rest differently. Part of resting well is learning to know ourselves as individuals.

[24 : 55] You know as a fairly classic introvert. I know that I need quiet and space and outdoors in order to rest and be refreshed.

That's different for extroverts because you will recharge with lots of people and activity around. Ask yourselves those questions. Do I find that I am refreshed by inactivity?

I find that's deathly but you might not. Are you refreshed by pursuing a restful hobby? Do you find restoration and joy by being outside in nature?

And then ask yourself, how do I rest best to enjoy God? Have you thought about the spiritual practices that you're putting on?

Have you given time to think about how can I make the most of reading God's word and time and prayer? Do we find value in good books or fellowshiping with other believers?

[25 : 58] How do I, how do you taste and see that God is good? Because finding rest can be really hard. It can feel like one of those promises that seems always just out of reach.

But by God's grace, if we're disciplined, if we're asking those questions, if we're committing in principle to God's good design for working and resting, this promise is held out to us.

In our age, as in every age, Sabbath rest, resting to enjoy God is a gift worth fighting for.

It is worth getting serious with our calendars, with how we use our time, with the priorities and the values that we set. Because we are made to depend on God.

And we are made with limits. And we are made to enjoy Jesus as our strength and our salvation.

And that's the last thing that I want us to talk about really briefly, but really importantly, is to talk about the person of the Sabbath and who can give us this Sabbath rest.

[27 : 09] Because again, we understand that the Old Testament is shadow and we look forward to fulfillment. And Sabbath rest is the shadow of an ultimate rest.

Perhaps one of the reasons why we always find ourselves longing for a rest that is more permanent and deeper is because that's what we're made for eternally. But as we come to the New Testament, we hear the radical words of Jesus when he declares, I am the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

He is the one who calls himself the Lord of the Sabbath. And he is the Son of God who directs how we are to rest. And remember how we started our service, Matthew 11?

The command and the invitation of our King is this, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

We find our rest in Christ. Faith in Jesus is what brings us into the true rest of life with God, enjoying God, loving God, worshiping God, as we were created to do, as our catechism was reminding us.

[28 : 20] And then we heard Hebrews 4. And in Hebrews 4, we were told, there remains yet a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

And we are told that anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works. Those are deep words, but at least we can say this. We are called to rest in the finished work of Christ Jesus on the cross.

We are invited by faith to rest from, depending on our efforts to be good enough for God, and instead to rest in what Jesus has achieved for us by way of the cross and the resurrection.

And true rest begins here. It begins when I understand that Jesus has fully paid for all of my sin. That Jesus has secured my pardon.

That He has acted to bring me into God's family. And He has secured my eternal life in glory with the promise of eternal, joyful rest.

[29 : 27] And it's as we know that we enter into the rest of the Christian life. We work. We study.

We have our relationships. We serve. All the while resting in Christ Jesus and His work. And as we understand that, we allow ourselves to be governed by the values of our God, not the values of the world.

We commit to resting to enjoy God and worship, to say thank you to Him for His great salvation, as we look forward to the ultimate, eternal rest.

Work without toil. Hearts without sin. An earth without thorns. And life with Jesus that lasts forever. Let's give. Thank you. Thank you.