

The Sabbath

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 March 2026

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] The microphone is turned on so hopefully you can hear me.! I'm afraid my voice isn't great at the moment but I'll do my best to speak as clearly as I can.

! So my message to you this morning is simply this. You need a rest. I need a rest. We all really, really need a rest. Over the last few weeks we've been looking at what we do when we gather as a church.

But perhaps there's one question we haven't answered. Why have you actually come here this morning? Or why have you clicked on the live stream if that's what you're hearing?

What exactly, what personally, do we expect to gain by turning up at church on a Sunday?

[1 : 06] Is it a sense of superiority compared with those who passed on the way, who had other destinations in mind? Or is it going down to the half marathon and they're going to get wet?

Or is it just a matter of habit? I've always done it on a Sunday so I've carried on. The Pharisees of Jesus' time tended to think very much that way about the Sabbath.

That passage we've just read said, Jesus' answer is quite surprising.

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

So the question we started with isn't a wrong one to ask. What benefit do we expect by observing a rest day?

[2 : 30] Why are you coming to church on that rest day? After all, there's a reasonable question that one might ask, and certainly been asked from time to time. It's usually attributed to Mark Twain.

If Sunday is the Christians' day of rest, why don't they stay in bed? Not an unreasonable question when you think about it.

Yet this isn't how Jesus spent the Sabbath. It's worth just looking to see how Jesus spent the Sabbath. What we can find from the Gospels.

So Mark 6, 2 says, When the Sabbath came, Jesus began to teach in the synagogue. And many who heard him were amazed.

Well, one Sabbath, well this was Saturday of course in Jewish Canada. One Sabbath, Jesus went out for dinner.

[3 : 27] Luke 14, 1-3 says the following. One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.

There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?

Another good question. We see that Jesus certainly observed the Sabbath, but he didn't stay in bed. He observed it by activity.

Another incident is in John 5, 15-17. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

So because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. In his defence, Jesus said to him, and here of course he's referring to that creation story, My father is always at work to this very day, and I too am working.

[4 : 40] John 5, 15-17. So, a good question. In what sense is the Sabbath, the Shabbat, a rest?

And why do I need one? Most cultures today observe a seven day week. That's not always been the case. But the Jewish-Christian seven day cycle seems to have caught on pretty well everywhere.

Because it's been found kind of optimal to give rhythm and pace to our everyday lives. People have tried others, ten day, the French Revolution, they tried a ten day week, but it didn't work very well.

Seven days has seemed to have been the best cycle to observe. So let's look at some scriptures to find out why.

So where does this idea of the Sabbath rest come from? Well, we read that passage in Genesis. [5 : 53] Let me just remind you of Genesis 2, 1-3. Verse 3. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing.

So on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. Because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

So that term that we use, the Sabbath rest, is actually a tautology. Because the Hebrew word for rest here is Shabbat.

There's a play on words here as well. Because the word for seventh is Shabbeh. So it's the seventh rest or the rest of seven or something like that.

Notice also that this precedes the fall. It wasn't an institution after the fall, but before the fall of man.

[7 : 03] It was designed into the universe from the very beginning. That man should observe a seven day cycle. Genesis 1 describes creation in six days.

And I say, as Phil has already mentioned, I think you need to be a bit careful here. Divine days are not the same as our days. God views time differently to us. And of course time was part of the creation.

Time didn't exist until God created it. These are divine days. The point is not that they lasted 24 hours.

But the important point is that creation did not all happen at once. Do you ever wonder why that's the case? Why didn't God say, let everything happen, let everything be there?

It all happened instantly. God has simply not designed the universe that way.

[8 : 04] God built process and rhythm into creation. And we terrestrial beings are fitted for Earth's diurnal rhythm, the day-night rhythm, and the 28 day lunar cycle.

So a seventh day week works for us. Seven in symbology is the divine number of completeness. Notice also that what Jesus pointed out, that God did not actually stop working on the seventh day. If he had, the whole universe would have come apart again.

So in what sense did God rest? Well perhaps the meaning is that God stepped back, as it were, from his work, and reviewed it, put it into context, considered what he'd done, and said it was very good.

Genesis 1.31, as we read. So of course this idea of the Sabbath rest was built into the Mosaic law.

[9 : 16] Exodus 28 to 11 we read, Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work.

Notice it's not only the Sabbath that's commanded here, it's the six days of labour as well. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

So who gets a day off? On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them. But he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Notice that everyone gets a day of rest. Not just the family, but the staff and even the animals. But at this point other questions start to arise in our mind of course.

[10 : 29] In practice this isn't easy to do if we take it very, very, very literally. Someone has to cook the dinner. Someone has to feed the animals.

Someone has to respond to emergencies. Jesus himself pointed this out. Matthew 12 verse 11 says, If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold and lift it out?

Just imagine what would happen in our complex western cities. Everyone went home, turned off the power grid, parked the buses, closed the police stations and the fire stations and the hospitals and the care homes.

The result would be chaos and probably a disaster. People would die. How we observe the Sabbath nowadays can be very challenging.

I'm not sure I can give you a simple answer to that. We do need to organise it for each of us as best we can. But what we can do is be clear about why we are doing it.

[11 : 54] Because we really, really need a little rest. And think of the Mosaic Law was not just a legal code.

In fact it was much more a social contract. A way that people could live together in harmony with God and with each other. Think about a speed limit.

What's the purpose of a speed limit? It isn't so that the police can chase people and catch them really for going too fast. It has penalties of course. Any law has to have penalties.

But the point of a speed limit is so that the road users can all use the road together safely and in harmony. It's not the point of it is not the penalty.

The point of it is the contract that we all agree to use the road safely. And that of course is true of the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees sometimes seem to have forgotten that.

[12:56] And of course the other thing that Jesus says about this is that it is Jesus himself who gives rest to his people.

Matthew 11, 28, 29 says, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls. It is Jesus who gives us rest ultimately.

But we have gathered here this morning in this church. So what should we make of it? Why we have come here I hope is to seek that rest that Jesus gives.

Rest from the cares and challenges of the week. Rest from the successes and victories of the week. And it's not that what we have done in the other six days is unimportant.

[14:11] After all God did all his creation stuff in those six days. Rather it's about putting those things in the right context.

Regaining a sense of perspective. A mindset of peace. Jesus also said, Do not worry saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear.

For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. And all these things will be given to you as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow. For tomorrow will worry about itself. Every day has trouble enough of its own. That's why we need a rest.

We need a time to step back. And we gather here to get together essentially to do that. To get a perspective on what we've done on the other six days.

[15:19] Isaiah describes it like this. Isaiah 58. If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day.

If you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honourable. And if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words.

Then what will you get? Well this is what Isaiah says. Then you will find your joy in the Lord. I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land. To feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. As we assemble together this should be our happy place. Our mental detox.

Our spiritual wellness spa if you like. We gather together to seek rest in the Lord. Do we provide that as a church?

[16:25] Is a question we need to ask. The world looks on and thinks we are wasting our time. Or worst indulging in some irrational nonsense. It thinks we are taking comfort in fairy stories or becoming a cult or something like that.

In fact it thinks we are off our collective rocker. And sometimes regretfully that's not too far off the mark. But it shouldn't be. If the church is working properly.

The very opposite should be true. This is the best thing we can do with our time on a Sunday. The dusting can wait. The place should be a haven of wisdom and reason and sanity.

In an increasingly mad world. GK Chesterton put it this way. When men choose not to believe in God.

They do not thereafter believe in nothing. They then become capable of believing in anything. And he said that before the internet.

[17:38] The internet has proven his words prophetic hasn't it? Come here on a Sunday and get grounded.

Ground yourself in reality not in fantasy. Come here to escape the chaos. Come here for a rest. We need to think about why we are doing it and how we are doing it.

What I could do at this point is start talking about the exact status of the Ten Commandments in the New Covenant. Theologians have argued about that for generations.

I'm not going to go there. If you want to ask that sort of question. There's plenty of stuff online and in books. I thought this morning we'd take a slightly different approach.

We've been asking questions. Let's ask another question. A hypothetical question. A hypothetical question. But a real one in a sense.

[18 : 52] And one that we often come across, do come across in practice. It's Sunday. It's Sunday. But something has come up. An emergency perhaps.

The need to care for a loved one. Perhaps we're just on holiday in an unfamiliar town. We've not found a Bible believing church there.

Perfectly legitimate reasons for not going or being unable to go to church. But the question I want to ask ourselves is, if we're in that situation, what is our reaction to being unable to go?

Because that will help us to think about why we do go. Perhaps your reaction is this. Well, it didn't really matter.

It doesn't really make any difference. Who cares? Well, if that's your reaction, I would suggest, perhaps you better take the advice of Mark Twain and go back to bed.

[20 : 09] But you'll miss out on the rest that God provides. Perhaps you might think, well, I didn't really want to go anywhere.

I'm glad of the excuse to get out of it. We know perhaps we should do it. But if we've got an excuse not to come, we're relieved.

It's a bit like going to the dentist or signing up for the gym in January. Unless you focus on the benefits, healthy lifestyle, healthy teeth, you will soon give up.

But if you can rest in the dentist chair, which is generally a pretty unpleasant experience, for the sake of healthy teeth, how much more can you seek the joyous benefit to the rest in Jesus?

Don't miss out. Well, perhaps you think about this a bit like the Pharisees.

[21 : 20] I won't tick the religion box this week. God will not be happy about it. My discipleship rating will be down.

But I can't help it. For the Pharisees, the Sabbath had become an exercise in box ticking. It's a matter of rules.

The more rules, the more holy. They were missing the whole point of the thing. The Sabbath has enabled them to take the rest in the Lord.

Perhaps our reaction is this. This is possibly a better one.

Perhaps you think, I'm losing an opportunity to encourage my brothers and sisters. Now, of course, this is true. And of course, it's a much better answer.

[22 : 20] We do meet together. To seek the Lord and worship God together. According to the biblical pattern that we've been looking at over the last few weeks. Yet, I would suggest to you that even this is not the best answer.

The best answer we could give is that I'm missing out on my rest. Remember those words of Isaiah. Keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath. Call the Sabbath a delight. Then you will find your joy in the Lord. If you can't go, you're missing out on that delight and joy.

If you really can't manage it today, all the more reason to organise so that that does not become a habit. If you're still thinking of going to church as ticking the spiritual box, you really need to rethink. We meet together because it gives us the maximum benefit from our day of rest. We meet together. Our performance over the other six days will be enhanced and not degraded. We will study better or whatever it is we do during the week, we'll do it better because we've taken the rest on Sunday.

[23 : 51] Our performance over the other six days will be enhanced. You really need a rest. Luke records a rather puzzling incident actually.

Not specifically about the Sabbath, but it certainly throws light on it. This is Luke 10, 38 to 42. Jesus was visiting the house of two sisters, Martha and Mary.

They were actually the sisters of Lazarus who was raised from the dead. But this particular incident just involves Martha and Mary. As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.

She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he had said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

She came to him and asked, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me. Martha, Martha, the Lord answers, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, or indeed only one.

[25 : 16] Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. Of course, Martha is not criticized for doing the cooking.

Somebody had to do it. Her problem was that she was fretting over it. It was actually distracting her from listening to her guests and giving him a proper welcome.

And even worse, she was trying to deny her sister the opportunity to spend time with Jesus. Mary made the better choice then.

And we need to make the better choice on a Sunday. Let me just make some concluding remarks. First one is that no day is perfect. We hold a morning and evening service here. This may help for people who legitimately can only make one.

[26 : 21] But why not organize yourself to come twice for maximum benefit? If your parents are small children, take turns to come to the evening meeting. Or enlist the help of grandparents.

Why settle for the half day pass when you can have the whole day package? For maximum benefit. There's a psalm that reads like this.

We forget the titles of psalms are actually part of these inspired texts sometimes. This one is particularly relevant. This is a psalm, a song for the Sabbath day.

It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High, proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night.

The psalmist here has got the point. The whole day, beginning in the evening, is holy to the Lord, in spite of all the practical problems that ensue.

[27 : 30] But don't miss out. The problems can make you miss out, but don't miss out.

Get the maximum benefit you can. So the day isn't perfect, but we can make it as good as possible. The church isn't perfect, of course.

Charles Spurgeon famously remarked, if you find a perfect church, don't join it because you'll spoil it. But then we go to the gym and our gym isn't perfect.

Several of the machines are broken. Brenda always complained somebody's weight moved half the weights from the rack. She can't find the one she wants.

But that doesn't prevent us from benefiting. What sort of church should we come to? Well, let's find a church that faithfully handles the world, and where the people love each other.

[28 : 35] And as a church that's what we try to be. Then this can be your happy place. If other aspects need improving, well there's your opportunity to help.

Make sure you go to a church where the gospel is preached faithfully, and say that includes the command that we love one another. And finally, let us remind ourselves that no rest is perfect.

Not in this world. That's one reason why we do it every week. We need to do it every week to recharge our batteries, as it were. But at the same time, it points to the future.

I won't go into all this passage because it's quite long, but the writer to Hebrews talks about Joshua not giving them rest in the land, because he did in a sense. They stopped wandering and settled down in the land.

And he said that there is another rest. So the writer to Hebrews says, there remains then a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For anyone who enters God's rest, also rest from his own work, just as God did from his.

[30 : 08] So we rest from our own work on a Sunday. And we look forward to that future rest, when we rest in the kingdom of God.

In the Jerusalem from heaven, as we've been thinking about in the evening. So, that's my message this morning.

You really need a rest. Make sure you organise yourself to get the best possible rest. As we meet together. As we will sing again and take communion together, sharing in that rest.

Thank you.