

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles  
**Our Struggle with Rest**  
Exodus 20:7

***10 Commandments Today*** (video)

Of all the commandments summarized in what you have just seen, we may well struggle the most with the fourth. Here's what it says:

<sup>8</sup> “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. <sup>11</sup> 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. Exodus 20:8-11 NIV

The importance of this fourth commandment among the ten is seen by the very fact that four entire verses are devoted to it. In terms of space, at least, that's as much as is given to the second commandment not to make any graven images of God.

This fourth commandment is also important because it's so controversial. The church has been divided as to just how this commandment applies to today. Those who are part of the Seventh Day Adventist church believe that keeping the Sabbath day is a requirement for believers today. On the other hand, the majority of believers, while not observing the Sabbath (Saturday), have applied the same principles to the first day of the week. Blue laws prohibiting work and business on Sunday were quite prevalent up until only about 20 years ago. So what really does the Bible teach?

A final reason – and maybe the most important reason – this commandment is important is because it touches on an area of life in which we all struggle...the problem of rest.

“A recent long-term study of executive heart-attack victims show that 75 percent of those who died at work died on Monday,” according to the Blue Cross – Blue Shield magazine *Health Talk*. It goes on to say that “of those who died at home, 50% also died on Monday. *A major factor of those deaths,*” says the article, “*was the ‘Monday Blues’ associated with returning to work after an exhausting weekend.*” <sup>i</sup>

In 2001 *USA Today* featured an article entitled “Americans Working Too Hard.” In their survey, 67% of Americans say they need a long vacation, 66% say they often feel stressed; 60% say they feel time is crunched; and 48% say they feel overwhelmed.<sup>ii</sup> Have you felt “stressed,” “crunched,” or “overwhelmed” this past week?

God well knew man's tendency to worship his work, work at his play and play at his worship.<sup>iii</sup> And that's why we have this fourth commandment.

## **THE SABBATH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Before we can properly apply a passage, we need to understand its meaning. Just what is the meaning of this fourth commandment?

The word “Sabbath” means “to cease, to rest.” It speaks of an *intermission* – a period of repose, reflection and renewal – as part of the ongoing rhythm of life.

There are two basic motivations given in the Old Testament for this commandment. The first is that we are to follow in the steps of our *creator*. We see this in verse 11 of our passage: “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” (cf. Genesis 2:2-3).

A healthy rhythm of life necessitates a *division of labor*. Have you ever wondered why God did all of his creative work in six days? After all, he could have done it instantaneously. It seems that God modeled for us a healthy division of labor.

When you are feeling overwhelmed with what you think *must* be done, step back and divide your work into bite-sized chunks. Take life one day at a time. Say, “Lord, what do you have for me *today*.” And be content to do that. Don’t let today be the tomorrow you stressed about yesterday.

But a healthy rhythm of life also necessitates *rest*. When God finished his work, he *rested*.<sup>iv</sup> “But I don’t have time to rest!” you say. Remember, the people of Israel were even required to rest even in “plowing time and in harvest” (Exodus 34:21), the two times in the year when it was the most difficult to rest.<sup>v</sup>

When we ignore this built-in need of an “intermission” in our lives, a time of rest and renewal, we suffer the consequences. I thought of this when I read the other day about a team in the Netherlands that worked meticulously to break the world record for falling dominoes. They attempted to set up more than four million of the little plastic rectangles. Their painstaking labor came within inches of destruction when one of the team members left a window open. A sparrow flew in and knocked down about 25,000 of the dominoes. Why didn’t all the others fall? The organizers had wisely placed 750 built-in gaps intermittently throughout the succession of dominoes. These intentional gaps were a safety device, allowing enough space for a domino to fall without knocking over the ones behind it.<sup>vi</sup> Do you have such “built-in gaps” in your life?

The Sabbath rest God gave his people Israel had the same effect. Theologically, it was the sign of God’s covenant with Israel. But practically, it gave the safe-guard of an intermission, building into their lives a rhythm of rest and renewal.

The fourth commandment urged Israel to follow in the steps of their Creator. That means *rest*. But it also encouraged them to follow in the steps of their Savior. That meant *worship*. And these two elements – rest and worship – are the basic purposes of the Sabbath in the Old Testament.

This aspect of gratitude in worship is reflected in the restatement of the fourth commandment as found in Deuteronomy. Here’s what it says: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that

the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” (Deuteronomy 5:15). For four hundred years Israel lived and worked in hard slavery. But then God intervened and brought deliverance.

It makes sense, then, that the fourth commandment came to be associated with a day of corporate worship. Leviticus 23:3 says, “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, *a day of sacred assembly.*” On this day, God’s people gathered in worship of the God who, with an outstretched arm, delivered them from slavery in a foreign land.<sup>vii</sup>

The tragedy is this. Whenever God gives a command for our blessing, man has the tendency to make it a burden. As time progressed, what was intended as a day to keep God’s people in step with their Creator in rest and in step with their Savior in worship soon became a legalistic sham.

In the written tradition of the Jews called the *Halaka*, various and sundry hair-splitting rules are detailed as to what one can and cannot do on the Sabbath. In later Jewish tradition, one could carry only enough ink to write one letter of the alphabet, not two. Tailors could not go out with a needle near sundown, for they might lose it and have to look for it on the Sabbath. Some would not even eat an egg which a hen had laid on the Sabbath!

It’s this legalistic tradition that Jesus confronted head on in the gospels. It’s no wonder that Jesus had to remind the religious establishment of his day: “Man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man” (Mark 2:27).

### **THE LORD’S DAY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

But just what does that mean? In what way was the Sabbath made for man? And how do these words of Jesus apply to you and me today? We can’t answer those questions without understanding how Jesus Christ fulfilled the *rest* and the *deliverance* that the Sabbath typified in the Old Testament.

In Luke 4 Jesus finds himself in his home town of Nazareth. He’s in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. The traditional service begins with the citing of the *Shema* (“Here, O Israel, the Lord our God is One.”). This was followed by prayer, a reading from the Old Testament Law and another reading from the prophets. On this particular day, the prophetic reading was from Isaiah 61. Jesus stands and comments, citing the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me ...  
He has sent me to proclaim ...  
*the year of the Lord's favor.* Luke 4:18-19

What is this “year of the Lord’s favor?” It is the Old Testament Year of Jubilee, the 50<sup>th</sup> year, the Sabbath of all sabbaths! Not only was every seventh day set apart for rest and worship, but so also every seventh year, when the ground itself was to have its own Sabbath.<sup>viii</sup> And to top it all off, after every forty-ninth year (7 X 7), the 50<sup>th</sup> year was declared a Sabbath year par excellence.

But then Jesus makes this amazing statement: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (verse 21). Elsewhere, Jesus could say He was Lord of the Sabbath because he is the fulfillment of the Sabbath.<sup>ix</sup>

As God the Father created in six days and then rested, so God the Son says, “I have finished the work which you gave me to do” (John 17:4). And what is that work? It is the work of salvation. When Jesus hung on the cross his final words were, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). At that moment, all that the Sabbath typified in the Old Testament (both rest and deliverance) broke fully into this world in the person of Jesus Christ

Now turn with me to Hebrews chapter four where the writer summarizes for us the meaning of this for you and me:

“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts.”

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Hebrews 4:7, 9-10

God offers you and me *rest* and *deliverance* – not necessarily from that job that you don't like, or from the challenges of family responsibilities. But He offers you and me deliverance from the awful, terrible consequences of our sin. And He offers you and me rest from the constant striving to somehow please God and make it to heaven by our own efforts. As the text says, “We rest from our own work.” And believe me, that is real rest. Jesus said, “Come unto me all you are weary and burdened down, and I will give you rest.” The rest of knowing that I'm forgiven, that I'm accepted, that I am loved, that I don't have to work my way to heaven ... that is a rest beyond words.

Do you know that rest for your soul? You can. Jesus said, “*Today*, if you hear my voice, don't harden your heart.” Place your life and destiny in the hands of Christ and you too can know this eternal rest in your life.

For many of us, however, there is still this nagging question: How does all of this relate to today? Are we, or are we not, under obligation to keep a particular day of the week as a type of Sabbath for rest and worship?

The New Testament letters couldn't be clearer: Since Christ is the fulfillment of the law – including the law of the Sabbath – we as believers are not under a legalistic obligation to keep certain days of the week. There are several passages that speak to this<sup>x</sup>, but let me mention that one that is the most direct. It's found in Colossians 2:16-17 –

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a *Sabbath day*. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Paul is dealing with those who are imposing legalistic standards on others, in some cases as a means of salvation. He is saying: You have the substance – Christ, the fulfillment of all that the Sabbath of the Old Testament typified – don't turn back now to the mere shadow!

Aren't there, however, passages that speak of the New Testament believers gathering and worshipping on the first day of the week? And did the first day of the week become the new "Sabbath" for the early Christians? To help answer those questions let's look briefly at three passages that address the practice of the New Testament believers.

The first is found in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. Paul says, "Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. *On the first day of every week*, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income..." What is clear in these verses is that both in Corinth and in Galatia the churches had the habit of gathering together on the first day of the week, that is on Sunday.

When did they get together? The next passage gives us insight into that question. In Acts 20 we read this, starting in verse 7: "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." Luke states this as if this is the regular practice of the church to gather on the first day of the week to share the Lord's supper. And that makes sense. Troas is part of Galatia and Paul has already said in 1 Corinthians 16 that he Galatian churches had the practice of gathering on the first day of the week, which is Sunday.

Of course, if you've already read ahead, you know what happens. It's nighttime, and Paul preaches so long (up until midnight) that one poor soul named Eutychus, seated in a high window, sinks into a deep sleep and falls three stories to his death! My point has nothing to do with the length of my sermons! [If I wanted to make a point I guess I could, for Paul goes on to preach until sunrise!] But my point is this: the believers were meeting, not on Sunday morning, but on Sunday night. Why is that? The first day of the week was a work day in the Roman world at that time. No "blue laws" had come into effect. No Christian could get up on Sunday morning and say, "Well I think I'll just be with my fellow believers all day!" And Eutychus was probably so worn out from a long day at work that he just couldn't make it through Paul's extended message.<sup>xi</sup>

There is one final passage that speaks of the growing importance of this day. In the book of Revelation the Apostle John is writing from exile on the island of Patmos. In 1:10 he says this: "I was in the Spirit on the *Lord's day*..." This expression (the *Lord's*, in the possessive) is used only two times in the New Testament. The other occurrence is in 1 Corinthians 11 in reference to the Lord's supper (the bread and the wine). It expresses lordship and ownership. That's exactly what the entire book of Revelation is about. In contrast to what was at that time known as the "Emperor's Day," these believers gathered on the first day of the week as a sign of their devotion to the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 1:5).

From these passages I can only conclude that the first day of the week had special significance for the early believers as a day set apart for corporate worship.<sup>xii</sup> Of course, it was not necessarily a day of rest. All the evidence indicates that these believers had to carry on their normal work on the first day of the week.<sup>xiii</sup> But why this day rather than the Jewish seventh day? It was the day of Christ's resurrection, the sign and seal that God's redemptive work in Christ was finished. As

the Old Testament believers by keeping the Sabbath commemorated the completion of the work of creation, so the New Testament believers commemorate on the “Lord’s Day” the completion of the work of salvation.

## THE LORD’S DAY TODAY

We’ve looked at the Sabbath in the Old Testament and the Lord’s Day in the New Testament. How does all of this apply to me today? Let me draw out several principles from what we have seen.

1. As believers today, we are *not* under the law of the Sabbath.

The physical rest and worship of the Old Testament Sabbath has become the eternal rest and worship of salvation in Jesus Christ, the Lord and perfect fulfillment of the Sabbath. It is certainly for this reason that the fourth commandment (of the ten) is *not* repeated in the New Testament.

This being said, we should be tolerant and flexible towards our fellow Christians in those churches (i.e. Seventh-day Adventist) who interpret this question differently. We must remember the words of Paul to the Romans: “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5).

Of course, this raises the question of the importance of the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day as John calls it, for us today. The fact that the New Testament calls Sunday, the “Lord’s Day” does *not* imply that all the other days do not also belong to the Lord. The emphasis is rather on the first day of the week as the day of Christ’s resurrection. And because of the significance of the resurrection, it was normal that the early believers began to meet on this day for their regular gatherings. I believe this is also a good model for the church today.

2. The principle of rest *is* important for us today.

The Bible seems to indicate that God has stamped a seven-day pattern into the creation itself. If God commanded his people to rest every seven days in the Old Testament, there is certainly a valuable principle that we can learn for today. This day does not have to be Sunday, however. It does not appear to have been for the New Testament believers.<sup>xiv</sup> For over 15 years, my wife and I have taken Friday as our day of rest and renewal. I do not believe that we can consistently violate the *principle* of the fourth command without breaking down, either physically, emotionally or relationally. We preach a gospel that says, “Come to me, you who are weary, and I will give you rest.” But some of us ourselves are dying from overwork and stress in the process.

3. We, as the New Testament believers, should make our corporate worship a top priority.

We should also. The writer to the Hebrews tells us: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). The early believers gathered regularly on the first day of the week, and often at great inconvenience and sometimes at the cost of their very lives.

I personally believe that many Christians today, in the name of Christian liberty, take too lightly the weekly gathering of believers. Sometimes at the slightest sign of fatigue, or conflict in schedule, or sports event, we decide that the gathering of believers on the first day of the week is really not that important. “After all,” we reason, “I’m in a Bible study, or I’m in Bible school, or I meet with a small group of Christians during the week.” All of this is very good, but according to the biblical model, *never* at the expense of the weekly gathering of believers.

What about you? Are you observing God’s designed rhythm of rest and worship in your life? As Daniel comes and sings, reflect on your own life. What changes do you need to make?

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<sup>i</sup> “Danger of Returning to Work,” *U.S. News and World Reprint*, January 21, 1985, 68 as cited by

<sup>ii</sup> Lori Joseph and Bob Laird, “Americans Working Too Hard,” USA Today Snapshots; source: Hilton Generational Time Survey of 1,220 adults in January 2001 as cited by [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>iii</sup> Leland Ryken, author and Wheaton College professor quoted in *Critique* (1997, No. 7), p. 9; submitted by Aaron Goerner, New Hartford, New to [preachingtoday.com](http://preachingtoday.com).

<sup>iv</sup> The seventh day has no boundaries. In this way it typifies the future “rest” that would find its fulfillment in Christ. There is a divine ordering of history. “As history moves towards its consummation, it moves toward the goal of God’s rest.” See *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 349.

<sup>v</sup> The emphasis upon rest was not so much to require the total cessation of activity, as it was to abstain from one’s regular daily work.

<sup>vi</sup> “Sparrow Nearly Ruins Record for Dominoes,” [news.yahoo.com](http://news.yahoo.com) (11-14-05); submitted by David Slagle, Atlanta, Georgia as cited on [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>vii</sup> This is also seen in the importance of synagogue worship on the Sabbath in the time of Christ. Cf. Mark 1:21; 3:1ff; Luke 4:16; 13:10; Acts 13:14, 44; 15:21; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4).

<sup>viii</sup> Ex. 31:12-17; 35:3; 16:22-26; 2 Chron. 36:21. First mention of a specific “sabbath” is found in Exodus 16:21-30 where God provides manna for the nation of Israel. He sends no manna on the seventh day and the people are to rest from their work of collecting manna on that day.

<sup>ix</sup> Mark 2:28; Matthew 12:8; Luke 6:5. This is an amazing claim, for the Sabbath was a “sabbath to the Lord your God” (Ex. 20:10). Jesus, the Son of Man, is then claiming to be God.

<sup>x</sup> Romans 14:5-8; Galatians 4:9-11.

<sup>xi</sup> It was only Early in the Second Century believers were hindered from meeting in the evening hours as this was considered seditious.

<sup>xii</sup> The historical evidence supports this fact: “On the Lord’s own Day do you gather together and break bread and give thanks.” (*Didache of the Apostles*, 140 A.D.); “Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly...” (Justin Martyr 135 A.D.); “The churches throughout the rest of the world observe the practice that has prevailed from Apostolic tradition until the present time...the mystery of the Lord’s resurrection should be celebrated on ... the Lord’s day.” (Eusebius, 315 A.D.).

<sup>xiii</sup> Sunday did not become a day free from work until Constantine’s legislation in A.D. 321. “All judges, the inhabitants of cities and those concerned in the occupations of all trades shall rest on the honorable day of the sun.” (March 7, A.D. 321 Constantine).

<sup>xiv</sup> Except for the earliest Jewish Christians as they gathered on the Sabbath in the synagogue.