

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 31:12-18

To understand more about the Sabbath.

Read the Text:

And the LORD said to Moses, 13 "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. 14 You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. 15 Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. 16 Therefore, the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. 17 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.'" 18 And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (Exodus 31:12-18, ESV)

Study the Text:

The Sabbath

Verses 12 through 18 return, yet again, to the importance of the Sabbath. One question might arise: "Why is the Sabbath being dealt with again here? Wasn't it already sufficiently dealt with in Exodus 16:23-29 and within the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:8-11?" Douglas Stuart offers a helpful answer: "The answer is that the tabernacle was for worship; worship occurred weekly, on the Sabbath; and if the Sabbath were not properly observed, worship would not properly take place; so therefore the tabernacle would not be properly used."¹ Given the frequency of mentions, it should be clear that rest for God's economy is essential. So, once again, we explore the importance of this holy day.

THE CONTEXT MATTERS

In addition to anchoring the Sabbath within the context of the tabernacle as mentioned above, consider what this passage immediately follows: a passage about the excellent craftsmanship of Oholiab and Bezalel (Ex. 31:1-11). Consider, then, that this passage also fits neatly into their narrative. God has just designated these men for the important and time-consuming work of constructing and everything within the tabernacle. It will, therefore, be of the utmost importance for them to rest on the Sabbath each week. Duane Garrett adds, "In short, despite everything that had to be done, construction work was not to be done on the Sabbath, and Israelites were not to violate the Sabbath because their extra labor provided the income to help maintain the sanctuary."² This is a convicting reminder. It's easy to neglect rest on account of feeling obligated to perform. In our current culture, being busy is akin to being righteous. However, even with especially sanctified work that the Lord has commanded, it is never to override God's command to rest. It is rooted in the creation

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 653.

² Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014), 613.

account and modeled by God, though God Himself needs no rest (Gen. 2:1-3). Oholiab and Bezalel would need to keep the Sabbath just like everyone else.

ANOTHER NEW PURPOSE

Beyond the already understood purposes of rest, the Sabbath is given another new contour of meaning in verse 13: “Above all, you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.” One of the reasons for keeping the Sabbath is that “you may know” that God is the One who sanctifies us. In other words, the Sabbath promotes the knowledge of God. But how? Through rest and worshipful life rhythms. Rest on the Sabbath does not preclude doing specific “works” of ministry (gathering for worship, making offerings, feeding the poor, etc.), and actually, in those works, there is a kind of spiritual rest that takes place (at least, when it is done with the right motives in mind). Interestingly, Sabbath rest is meant to promote knowledge of God, and yet, without knowledge of God, there is no rest. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Knowledge of who God is in Christ Jesus opens the door for rest, and it is in that rest that we grow deeper in our understanding of Him.

WORK AND PROFANING

It is often assumed that working on the Sabbath is synonymous with “profaning” the Sabbath, but verse 14 distinguishes between the two. Anyone who “profanes” the Sabbath is put to death, but anyone who works on the Sabbath is “cut off from among his people.” Unless being put to death is a metaphor and these punishments are also synonymous with one another, it seems that working on the Sabbath warrants a lesser degree of punishment, while profaning the Sabbath warrants the greater degree of punishment.

TWO TABLETS

Verse 18 is the first time that the Ten Commandments, here noted as “the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God,” are mentioned as two. Contrary to popular belief, the commandments were not divided into two tablets because of their length. It is also not divided into the commandments concerning God and one another, although there is a clear distinction between commandments 1 through 4 and 5 through 10. The reason for the two tablets is likely linked to a cultural context that requires further explanation. The relationship between God and Israel has been likened to an ancient Near Eastern covenant practice known as a “suzerain-vassal treaty.” In the ancient world, this covenant arrangement was made between larger, more powerful nations (the suzerain) and smaller, less powerful nations (the vassal). The suzerain would hold authority over the vassal nation and require the vassal nation to pay financial tribute, rally troops in times of war for the cause of the suzerain nation, and owe absolute loyalty to the suzerain nation. In exchange, the suzerain provided wealth, military protection, and land grants to the vassal nation. The suzerain would always set the terms of the treaty.

In this case, the LORD is the suzerain and Israel is the vassal. The LORD provides protection, wealth, and land to Israel, and Israel pays financial tribute and absolute loyalty. Israel is even numbered in a census for eventually going to war for the LORD. When a suzerain-vassal treaty was formalized, the traditional practice required two copies, one for the suzerain and one for the vassal, hence the need for “two tablets.” The two tablets described in verse 18 are likely copies of each other. This is further supported by both copies being placed in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 10:5; Heb. 9:4).

THE FINGER OF GOD

Verse 18 also includes a unique phrase found only two other times in the Old Testament: “the finger of God.” The force of this phrase conveys divine power. In Exodus 8:19, the magicians of Pharaoh attribute the magnificent works of Moses to “the finger of God.” Here, and also recorded in Deuteronomy 9:10, the “finger

of God” indicates that God, not man, ultimately wrote the Ten Commandments. These are not the contrivances of Moses, but rather the divine mandate of the Lord Himself. This phrase becomes important again in the New Testament to affirm the sacred work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself says: “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Lk. 11:20).

What About Now?

One of the most debated concepts in the Christian tradition is the role of the Sabbath for the church. It is meant to be unending in its application to Israel. Verses 16 and 17 say: “Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. 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.” *How* it continues, however, is debated. Several factors play a role in how one interprets this. Is there continuity or discontinuity between the old and new covenants? Is it to continue literally or figuratively? Is it intended for spiritual Israel or physical Israel? The answers to those questions greatly influence how this text is interpreted. It is unclear which interpretation holds the most weight.

Rather than parsing out what is unclear, we will instead consider what *is* clear. We know that, whatever way the Jews understood the Sabbath in the first century, it was clearly wrong, as evidenced by the Pharisees' visceral reactions to Jesus' actions on the Sabbath. Jesus routinely healed the sick and collected grain for food on the Sabbath (Mk. 2:23-28). Further, He claimed to be Lord over the Sabbath (Mk. 2:28) and even redefined it (Mk. 2:27). We know that the earliest believers continued to carry out the Sabbath works of worship, handing out alms to the poor, and serving one another, but did so on the first day of the week rather than the last (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). We know that the apostle Paul condemned judging those who did not observe the Sabbath on the Sabbath day (Col. 2:16). We know that Hebrews conceptualizes the Sabbath typologically as ultimately being fulfilled in Christ (Heb. 4:9-10).

With these things in mind, rest is essential to human beings, not just Israel, and whether you rest on Saturday or Sunday seems irrelevant. What does seem to matter is that you actually rest, and that you do so in such a way that the knowledge of God is promoted. We know that issues of worship are a great deal to the New Testament church, and thus, you should be someone who worships regularly. We know that there is no rest apart from Jesus Christ. And we know that there is never a time in which Christians should speak judgmentally about other Christians who do not rest with the same rhythms.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 31:12-13. What was the Sabbath to be between God and Israel?

2. Read Exodus 31:14. Why was the Sabbath to be kept? What punishments were given for violating it?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 31:15. In your own words, what does verse 15 say?

2. Read Exodus 31:16. How long shall Israel observe the Sabbath?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 31:17. What is the Sabbath called in this passage? What other biblical story is referenced?

2. Read Exodus 31:18. What did the LORD give to Moses?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 31:18. According to the notes, why were there two tablets?

2. Read Exodus 31:18. According to the notes, what does “the finger of God” mean?

Discuss the Text!

Week 80 Discussion: Don't Neglect Rest

The Sabbath centers on the importance of rest. Whether the rest is spiritual, emotional, physical, or some combination of the three, it is unquestionably vital to God's heart for people (and creation) to rest. Talk as a group about the importance of rest and what you must do to emphasize it more.

1. Icebreaker: What is your ideal form of rest?
2. How important is rest to you? Is this reflected in your actions or only words?
3. Which acts of rest are the most spiritually invigorating to you?
4. Why do you think God is so insistent on rest?
5. Is rest culturally acceptable today? Why or why not?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Talk about nap time and how important it is for our bodies to rest. This is how God made us. Nap time, then, is being obedient to the LORD in some sense!

Takeaways:

1. The Sabbath is restated after charging Oholiab and Bezalel to construct the tabernacle.
2. The two identical tablets, written by the “finger of God,” are given to Moses.