

Practice of Sabbath

The Sabbath in Context

Rabbi Abraham Heschel calls Sabbath a “sanctuary in time”. In the Eden narrative of Genesis 1-2, God creates a garden sanctuary. He orders the cosmos, distinguishing between sea and land, fish and birds, light and dark, and he designates the land between the rivers as his dwelling place with Adam and Eve. It’s a sacred space for humanity to be with God. But God doesn’t just give order to physical space, designating a holy location; God gives order to time, designating a holy day: Sabbath. It’s a sacred time for humanity to be with God. This rest that God enjoyed with his people is interrupted by sin, which brings death and robs people of God’s presence. But God has a plan to restore people to his rest, so he can be present with them. The scriptures and Jewish writers leading up to Jesus talked about an eternal Sabbath, a coming cosmic rest.

In the meantime, God commanded his people to observe a day of rest at the end of the week to remember his desire to be with them since the beginning, and to recall their time in slavery to Egypt where they labored without rest. God also organized their time around Sabbath as an every seven-year observance: the Sabbatical year. In the Sabbatical year, debts were forgiven and the land was given time to rest. Every seven Sabbatical years (or forty-nine years) a year of Jubilee was to be proclaimed, like a restorative reset on the calendar. However, the Jewish people had two problems with Sabbath. First, they didn’t keep it, and this was one of the reasons they went into another time of slavery and exile. Secondly, they came up with countless regulations on very specific ways to keep Sabbath, like how many steps you could take on a walk and what severity of injury you had to have to receive medical care on the Sabbath. Jesus saw the legalism and hypocrisy of the culture and taught that he was “Lord of the Sabbath” and that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The law to keep Sabbath was fulfilled in Jesus, who died on the eve of Sabbath, rested in the tomb on the Sabbath, and arose to commence a new creation, a new age on the first day of the week, Sunday. Since then, Christians have considered Sunday a natural day to practice Sabbath, which is no longer about obeying a law, but acknowledging our limitations, pursuing rest and wholeness, communing with God and neighbor, and surrendering our time so we can engage in worship and recreation. As we practice Sabbath, we anticipate that future eternal Sabbath, a cosmic rest and restoration which Jesus inaugurated and when he returns will bring to completion. Then the new creation will be fully among us as God is once more present with his people. The Sabbath rest will permeate every day; it will be the new normal in God’s restored creation.

Practicing Sabbath

- Avoid doing schoolwork on that day by trying to get ahead or allotting other time in the week.
- Ask your parents if you can do Sabbath together, with chores on a different day and a special meal
- Engage in recreation. Recreation isn’t the same as mindless entertainment—don’t numb with screens for hours on end. We don’t want to turn sabbath into a selfish, hedonistic practice of indulgence.
- Give God some time. Go on a walk, pray, be in the scriptures. Sabbath is how we receive God’s invitation to presence with him.
- Sabbath is a feast day, not fasting day, so it should be celebratory, something to look forward to. However, if social media intake or something else is already excessive in your life, Sabbath should mark time away from that. Sabbath is a how we say “no” to limitless consumption and production.