

Sabbath Observance

Bible Background • [GENESIS 2:1–3](#); [EXODUS 31:12–18](#); [ISAIAH 56:1–8](#)

Printed Text • EXODUS 31:12–18

Devotional Reading • [PSALM 92](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: EXPLORE the Bible’s teaching about the Sabbath and its importance; EVALUATE the need to repent for neglecting weekly rest and spiritual renewal; and COMPOSE a thanksgiving to God for the gift of rest and spiritual renewal.



Antonio finally relaxed in his own bed after a four-day hospital stay. He had been rushed to the hospital from work after complaining about severe chest pains. The doctors ran many tests and discovered it was an anxiety attack, not a heart attack as they first thought. They told Antonio he must make changes in his life, or it could be a real heart attack next time.

Antonio and his wife, Celestine, had a long talk about what modifications were necessary. Currently, Antonio had a full-time and a part-time job. He also served with three ministries at church. On top of all that, he was the treasurer of his local fraternity chapter. After discussing it with his wife, Antonio felt it was better for him to resign from his part-time job, remove himself from two ministries at church, and let someone else take his position at the fraternity. It was not worth his health to continue with such a stressful schedule.

After Sunday morning worship services, they devoted the other part of the day to relaxing. They did not let anything hinder their plans to rest. Many people thought he was being selfish in his decision, but Celestine and Antonio urged others to rethink how they were living their lives.

How do you make rest a priority in your life? In today’s lesson, we will learn how God commanded the Israelites to observe the Sabbath in order to rest and to give honor to Him.

Keep in Mind

“Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you. Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you” (from [Exodus 31:13–14](#)^L).

KJV

[Exodus 31:12](#)  And the LORD spake unto Moses saying,

13 Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you.

14 Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

15 Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.

16 Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations for a perpetual covenant.

17 It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

18 And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon Mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.

NLT

[Exodus 31:12](#)  The Lord then gave these instructions to Moses:

13 “Tell the people of Israel: ‘Be careful to keep my Sabbath day, for the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant between me and you from generation to generation. It is given so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.

14 You must keep the Sabbath day, for it is a holy day for you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; anyone who works on that day will be cut off from the community.

15 You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day must be a Sabbath day of complete rest, a holy day dedicated to the LORD. Anyone who works on the Sabbath must be put to death.

16 The people of Israel must keep the Sabbath day by observing it from generation to generation. This is a covenant obligation for all time.

17 It is a permanent sign of my covenant with the people of Israel. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day he stopped working and was refreshed.”

18 When the LORD finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms

The People, Places, and Times

Moses. Moses' parents were Amram and Jochebed, who were of the tribe of Levi. In order to save him from death at Pharaoh's order, Moses' mother made a basket, placed him in it, and set it in the Nile River ([Exodus 2:1–10](#)^L). Years later, God called Moses to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3–4), and his older brother Aaron was made his spokesperson. After Pharaoh's refusal to listen to Moses, God sent ten plagues upon Egypt. Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt and across the parted Red Sea, but the Egyptians who chased them drowned (12:37–15:20). God provided the Hebrews' daily needs as they traveled through the wilderness. Moses and the people arrived at Mount Sinai, where God gave the Ten Commandments to them, as well as instructions on building a tabernacle as a center of worship.

Israelites. The Israelites were God's chosen people. God had blessed them by delivering them out of slavery. The Passover was instituted to remind them of their exodus from Egypt. God provided manna and quail to feed them during their wilderness journey (16:1–22). At Mount Sinai, the people received the Ten Commandments so they would understand God's holiness and faithfully maintain their covenant relationship (20:1–17). The provisions of God's covenant with Israel are outlined in Exodus 21–24.

What issues could develop among the Israelites that would lead them to violate the Sabbath?

Background

Exodus was written to record the events of Israel's deliverance from Egypt and their development as a nation. It is believed to have been written in the wilderness during Israel's wanderings. The Israelites had been slaves for four hundred years before God sent Moses as a deliverer. Many miracles occurred and are documented in Exodus. This book also contains the Ten Commandments.

Chapters 25–40 focus on building the tabernacle as well as on receiving a covenant. The specific details for constructing the portable tabernacle were given so the Israelites would honor the holiness of God, as this would be His dwelling place among them. God also gave precise instructions for making the priestly garments and consecrating the priests. Today's Focal Verses stress the importance and necessity of keeping the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant relationship between God and His people. The word "sabbath" comes from the Hebrew word meaning "to cease from exertion."

What is the main reason that God commanded the Sabbath to be observed?

At-A-Glance

1. The Sabbath Reinstated ([Exodus 31:12–17](#)^L)
2. Moses Receives the Tablets of Stone (v. 18)

In Depth

1. The Sabbath Reinstated (Exodus 31:12–17^L)

In verse 13, Moses is told, “You yourself are to speak to the Israelites.” God wanted the command on Sabbath observance to come directly from Moses, who was mediator and covenant enforcer at this time during the Israelites history. Moses not only delivered the Law of God but also led the people in obeying it. This included honoring the Sabbath as a sign of God’s covenant.

The Sabbath was required in the fourth commandment (20:8–11). This connected it with the rest God took on the seventh day of creation (Genesis 2:2^L). The Sabbath also is a time to remember what God has done. Any violation of the Sabbath was punishable by death (vv. 14–16), because, for the Israelites, it was not just a self-oriented day of rest, but a time to remember and honor the covenant that God made with them. Most modern-day practicing Jews still observe the Sabbath as a day of rest. The Sabbath day for them is the last day of the week, Saturday. For most Christians, our Sabbath is on the first day of the week, Sunday. This is because it is the day Jesus was resurrected, and as participants in the new covenant, He is our Sabbath rest.

How does the Israelites’ observation of the Sabbath compare to modern-day Sabbath observations?

2. Moses Receives the Tablets of Stone (v. 18)

The tablets of stone given to Moses were duplicates of the covenant, including the Ten Commandments. Both parties in the covenant received a copy. The copy that belonged to Israel had to be placed in the presence of God in the ark (vv. 25:21–22). These laws helped the nation keep a standard of judgment when people committed specific erroneous behaviors. The command to keep the Sabbath was a part of this law; it was inscribed in stone and contained the firm and faithful words of God for the nation. This is signified by the words “the finger of God.”

What changes would have to be made in our society and current legal system if we were strictly governed by the Ten Commandments?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why was the punishment so severe for violating the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14–15^L)?
2. How is the Sabbath a sign of the covenant between God and the Israelites (v. 17)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. How is it possible for people of faith to both observe and desecrate the Sabbath?

2. How do you define “rest”? What hinders you from regular rest and spiritual renewal?

Lesson in Our Society

Many people have great difficulty taking the time for rest and renewal. Some churches make it hard for us to experience rest, too. Lots of events are scheduled on Saturdays and Sundays, in addition to regular worship services. Churches often feel this is the best available time for most people to participate, which negates the fact that people need to rest. What can be done to help people observe the Sabbath properly?

In the African American context, rest has been especially hard to come by. Many adults work multiple jobs just to make ends meet. Others work non-stop to get ahead in life so they can provide things for their children that they never had a chance to experience. Far from being lazy, as many in our society would choose to believe, we are a hard-working people. At the same time, it would be good for us to heed God’s command to rest and trust that He will bless us beyond our own ability and effort.

What support can be given to help people observe the Sabbath properly?

Make It Happen

This week, reevaluate your life by looking at your daily schedule. What effect is your schedule having on you personally, as well as on other members of your family?

Pray and ask God to forgive you for not taking real time to rest.

Ask God to guide you in rearranging your schedule to include a Sabbath rest.

After you make changes, establish boundaries so that others do not violate your Sabbath time.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do?

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned.

More Light on the Text

Exodus 31:12–18^L

12 And the LORD spoke to Moses saying.

This passage begins by establishing Moses as an intermediary. The Lord speaks directly to Moses, who then transmits the information to the Israelites assembled at Mount Sinai. The formula, “And the LORD spoke to Moses say-ing...” signals the importance of the relationship between God and Moses. The Lord does not speak directly to the people; He speaks to them through Moses.

Throughout the Old Testament in general, and Exodus in particular, the Lord speaks directly to very few individuals. When God does speak directly, it is most often to Moses. Of the 44 occurrences of the Hebrew phrase in Exodus, Moses is the object in all but one instance. Moses has a particularly intimate relationship with the Lord.

13 Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you.

The Lord instructs the Israelites (through Moses) to keep His Sabbaths exclusively. Some English translations do not consider the particle, ‘ak (Heb. AHK), which is here translated “verily” and can also be translated “only” or “nevertheless.” This Hebrew word is important here because it sets the Sabbath of the Lord apart from any other sabbath. The Lord encourages the Israelites to acknowledge His Sabbath, perhaps as opposed to a sabbath of another god.

Keeping the Lord’s Sabbath serves as an indicator of the special relationship between Him and the Israelites. For the ancient Israelites, disregard for the Sabbath (either by neglect or by violating the restrictions concerning it) is a disregard for the Lord, and a disregard for Him is disregard for the reason and possibility of Israel’s existence as a people.

Modern believers can frame the idea of keep-ing the Sabbath as a way of being reminded of God’s presence in their lives. The symbols of the Sabbath and worship—such as specific locations for worship, particular actions, and rituals during worship, and avoiding certain activities on Sabbath days—all work to signal God’s presence in the lives of believers.

14 Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

The Lord stresses the importance of keep-ing the Sabbath by establishing its holy nature and the dire consequences for profaning it. The Hebrew for “holy” used in this verse, qodesh (Heb. ko-DESH), may be translated as “apart-ness” or “sacredness.” Throughout the biblical text, qodesh is used to designate places set apart as sacred because of God’s presence. This word may also denote objects or even people consecrated as sacred ([Leviticus 21:6^L](#)).

Keeping the Sabbath is presented as holy “unto [the Israelites].” The Sabbath day is not intrinsically holy or sacred, but it is considered holy for the people. Said differently, for those who do not follow the Lord, the Sabbath is not at all special or sacred, but because of their relationship with the Lord, the Sabbath day is holy for the Israelites. This linguistic nuance hearkens to the exclusive covenant relationship between the Israelites and the Lord.

15 Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.

Followers of the Lord are not to work on the Sabbath. Working on the Sabbath day of rest will result in death. To careful readers, it might seem extreme to expect a group of ancient, agrarian wanderers not to perform any work at all. After all, the social and topographical conditions would no doubt call for people to, at a minimum, gather water for cleaning and cooking. It seems each case of Sabbath violation is unique. For example, a man found gathering wood on the Sabbath was in violation of the specific ban against kindling a fire on the Sabbath ([Exodus 35:3](#) [Ⓛ]; [Numbers 15:32–36](#) [Ⓛ]). Elsewhere, the people are warned against Sabbath labor even during the busy agricultural seasons ([Exodus 34:21](#) [Ⓛ]), and lifting a burden is forbidden on the Sabbath ([Jeremiah 17:21](#) [Ⓛ]). In any case, the harsh penalties for sabbath violation are indicative of God’s holiness and the importance of the Sabbath as a sign of covenant relationship.

In the Old Testament, the thematic treatment of the idea of rest consists of two main strands: the Sabbath rest (from routine labor) and the promise of rest (from wandering/journeying or from enemy threat) in the land of Canaan. For example, after creating the world, the Lord rests on the seventh day ([Genesis 2:2](#) [Ⓛ]). The Promised Land (Canaan) is positioned as the land of rest for God’s people after journeying or warfare ([Joshua 1:13](#) [Ⓛ]). Furthermore, the idea of the land requiring a sabbatical year ([Leviticus 25:1–7](#) [Ⓛ]) also highlights the importance of Sabbath and rest for the ancient Israelites.

The phrase “sabbath of rest” (Heb. shabbat shabbaton, shah-BOT shabba-TON) is affiliated with the Hebrew noun, shabbat, which is translated as “a day of rest.” The repetition of the word shows that this is not just any sabbath; it’s a Sabbath of sabbaths. This follows the Hebrew literary device of repetition to show magnification. A similar phrase is Holy of Holies, also translated as the Most Holy Place. The magnification shows the importance of the day and points toward full obedience in regards to observing it. This magnified phrase shabbat shabbaton appears as “sabbath of complete/solemn rest” for the seventh day ([Exodus 32:5](#) [Ⓛ]; [Leviticus 23:3](#) [Ⓛ]), the annual Day of Atonement ([Leviticus 16:31](#) [Ⓛ], [23:32](#) [Ⓛ]), the annual Feast of Trumpets ([Leviticus 23:24](#) [Ⓛ]), and the sabbatical year ([Leviticus 25:4](#) [Ⓛ]).

16 Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations for a perpetual covenant. 17 It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

The Lord turns to point out the nature of the covenant relationship that the Israelites’ observance of the Sabbath signifies: the covenant is perpetual. The Lord commanded it as a sign of the covenant continuing between the two of them. In many ways, the observance of Sabbath is a response to God’s presence in the lives of the Israelites.

The idea of covenant is one of the most important motifs in biblical theology. The Hebrew term *berith* (beh-REETH, “covenant”) conveys the idea of a solemn commitment guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both covenanting parties. While the term applies predominantly to divine–human commitments, it is also used for various agreements between humans (1 Samuel 18:3^L; 2 Kings 11:17^L), including marriage (Malachi 2:14^L), and even in a figurative sense for solemn commitments made with oneself (Job 31:1^L; Isaiah 28:15^L). In the Old Testament, prominent covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David underpin God’s relationship with humanity. The rainbow is the sign of the covenant with Noah that God would never again destroy the earth (Genesis 9:11–12^L). The Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1–3^L) includes a promise to make Abraham’s people into “a great nation,” and Exodus 19–24 details the specifics of the Mosaic covenant in which God promises to make Israel “a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6^L). Finally, 2 Samuel 7 records the establishment of the Davidic covenant in which God promises that someone from David’s lineage would rule forever.

18 And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon Mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.

This passage concludes with the Lord giving the two stone tablets to Moses, which probably contain the Ten Commandments, and foreshadows the next episode in the narrative, which includes the smashing of the tablets. Additionally, the stone material and the figurative language, “written with the finger of God,” both support the long-lasting nature or eternity of the covenant.

Say It Correctly

Sanctify. SANK-tuh-fie.

Perpetual. per-PEH-chew-al.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Sabbath Commandment
([Exodus 20:8–11](#))

TUESDAY

Recall God's Deliverance on the Sabbath
([Deuteronomy 5:12–15](#))

WEDNESDAY

Healing on the Sabbath
([Matthew 12:9–14](#))

THURSDAY

Teaching on the Sabbath
([Mark 6:1–5](#))

FRIDAY

Worship on the Sabbath
([Acts 16:11–15](#))

SATURDAY

A Psalm for the Sabbath
(Psalm 92)

SUNDAY

The Sabbath, Sign of the Covenant
([Exodus 31:12–18](#))