

Some notes on the Sabbath for Further Reflection

In the Torah, there are five distinct commands that instruct us as to the purpose of the Sabbath:

Genesis 2:1-3 – The Sabbath is a holy day that is consecrated to rest as God rested on the seventh day.

Exodus 20:9-11 – The Sabbath day is set apart both as a day of rest and as a day wherein we commemorate God’s creative work; worship is a large part of this.

Exodus 31:12-15 – The Sabbath is a sign between God and his people as an indication that God has set us apart from all of the other peoples of the earth. The seriousness of this command is driven home when God insists on the death penalty for those who profane the day. In other words, how we approach the Sabbath day is a sign to God of obedience to the covenant and a sign to the world that we are different. When we treat the day just as everyone else treats the day, what kind of witness is that sending?

Leviticus 23:1-3 – The Sabbath is a day set apart for the gathering of God’s people (that’s what the word “convocation” means). This is the passage that the author of Hebrews had in mind when he said not to forsake the gathering (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 – God sets the day apart to commemorate his redemption of his people from slavery. As a Christian, we apply that in terms of commemorating God’s deliverance of us from our slavery to sin.

Jesus reminds us that he did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. The Law will stand until the new creation and he insists that the Sabbath is about him. (Matthew 5:17-19; 12:8).

Ezekiel adds to Moses’ language that the Sabbath stands as a sign between us and God (Ezekiel 20:19-20), a reminder of the consequences when we do not observe the Sabbath.

Isaiah reminds us of God’s blessings that are connected to obedience of the Sabbath day (Isaiah 53:13-14).

Heidelberg Catechism, Question 103: “What does God require in the fourth commandment?”

Answer: “In the first place, God wills that the ministry of the Gospel and schools be maintained, and that I, especially on the day of rest, diligently attend church to learn the Word of God, to use the holy sacraments, to call publically upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms. In the second place, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, allow the Lord to work in me by His Spirit, and thus begin in this life the everlasting Sabbath.”

Prooftexts: Psalm 40:10-11; 68:26; Isaiah 66:23; Acts 2:42,46; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 9:11,13-14; 11:33; 14:16,19,29,31; 16:2; Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 2:1-2,8-10; 3:14-15; 4:13-14; 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:2,15; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 4:9-10.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Questions 57-62 deal with the matter of the Sabbath.

**“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”
(Isaiah 58:13-14)**