

“The Covenant Sign of the Sabbath”

Exodus 31:12-18

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Introduction:

Making God priority. Notice I didn't say, "Making God a Priority." For me to say that would be to insinuate that He comes, in regard to the time we put toward Him, just as anything else on our to-do list to be itemized, categorized and strategized for how we work Him into our hectic schedules to be checked off later.

God is not just a priority. He is priority. He is to take precedence over all else in every area of our lives. But, how good are we through the daily routines that clutter our week at making time for Him? There are 168 hours allotted to us each and every week. How much is that used to focus on God?

Trust me. I know about our daily chores, homes, jobs, and children to shuffle. Routines, if you will, that will eat up an incredible amount of our time. God knows this. He ordained work, home, and family. But, He also knows the need for a time of refreshing, both spiritually and physically.

Therefore, God Himself designed a remedy for the chaotic pull of our lives through worship and rest. He specially marked out and ordained a day in that weekly bustle of things that was to be protected and upheld; a day set apart from the rest to restore mind, body, and spirit. It was called the Sabbath.

The word Sabbath was first introduced to us in the Bible way back in the beginning in the book of Genesis when God rested from His creative works in putting this world and the entire universe into existence. It says “on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made,” (Genesis 2:2; discussed more later in this lesson). The word Sabbath comes from the same word “rest” or to “cease” as some may translate it.

The word Sabbath also prominently appears on the list of the Ten Commandments given a few chapters before reaching the point of today’s lesson. When Moses is called up onto Mount Sinai to receive God’s directives for the lives and the order of living for His people, this commandment along with many others (some oral and the other nine prominent ones inscribed on tablets) are given in order that the people of Israel, God’s covenant people, would know what was expected from each individual in their daily lives.

As we unfold the information concerning the covenant of the Sabbath in today’s lesson, it invites us to come close to this day; to learn of it and to apply its restorative properties to our personal and spiritual lives.

Exodus 31:12-13 “And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 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.”

If we travel back a little bit to that day on Mt. Sinai as discussed in the introduction and look a little more closely at the original Sabbath command given: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” (Exodus 20:8), we will find out a couple of things. First, there is individual responsibility for the children of Israel to “remember” and “keep” the Sabbath. God’s instructive purposes for the lives of His people are not soon to be tossed aside and forgotten. Rather, there is to be a strict diligence in carrying one’s life in the specified manner. When one is dedicated to God that means they are dedicated to His word, His commands. One cannot claim a covenant relationship with God and not a relationship with His

word, and here His word/commandments spoken to Moses declare there is a day set aside for rest and worship.

Secondly, this is a “holy” day. Pay really close attention to that and don’t miss the significance of it. “Holy” means it is set apart from the rest; a day not to be like other days. It’s more than special. It’s more than unique. It’s more than a simple holiday. It is sanctified! Therefore, God issued this edict that His people are obligated to keep as a sanctified day under the law in the Old Testament.

In all of the chaos and hustle and bustle of this world of schedules, obligations, work, and routines, this set apart day is employed as a focusing agent that directs God’s people back to the main source and center of their living, which is God.

Arriving at the above verses in chapter 31 (the lesson text), we see a reiteration of the importance of keeping the Sabbath. The Sabbath was more than a set-aside time to worship God and to rest the body. The Sabbath, for the Israelites, stood as a “**sign**” between the people and God. The keeping of the Sabbath became an enduring, identifying mark for the Jewish people. This was God’s special day observed by God’s special people, and the keeping of it was the set apart symbol that showed the world they belonged to Him. This was a covenant covering that made known His people to the nations – separating them from all else.

God wants to be in a close and intimate relationship with His people. Between the giving of the original commandment on Mount Sinai and the verses above, instructions have been given to Moses on the constructing and erecting of the tabernacle (their designated place for worship; a place for people to physically come near to God). This was the place where God said, “I will dwell among them,” (Exodus 25:8).

When the sanctuary would be built (Exodus 35-40 describes the building of the tabernacle), the people needed to be reminded to align their hearts to the adhering of and following of God’s commands. That would mean even the construction of the tabernacle itself wasn’t to interfere with this special time with the Lord. At the final end of the building process, God’s glory would fill the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34), sanctifying the place for worship. But, God desires

more than a sanctified building for true worship. He wants sanctified hearts that will follow His holy edict in this ordained set apart time called the **“Sabbaths,”** which they were commanded, **“ye shall keep.”**

It is to be His dedicated day **“throughout your generations”** and it is not to be disregarded, but to be upheld. This was to be an enduring sign for God’s people (more on “generations” later in this lesson).

“That ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you” (compare Leviticus 20:8). Just as He set apart that day, so He does the people also. **“Sanctify”** means “set apart.” They are special in His eyes. They are His covenant people as opposed to the pagan cultures they may be surrounded by. This sign of the covenant will remind them continually who they are and where their worship is to be directed in the midst of it all and make them unique as the people of God.

Exodus 31:14-16 “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. 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. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant.”

Once again God announces the importance of the Sabbath and the nature of it: **“it is holy.”** That means it was not a day to play with, as we would say. It was to be revered in the highest possible degree. So much so that it was declared, **“every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death.”**

When one thinks of the word **“defile”** it brings to mind contamination and pollution in the natural sense. This is very contrary to the holiness of God and was taken as seriously to the point of **“death.”**

Think of it this way, with the human body any infections, viruses, or such that attempt to attack the body are met head on with the white blood cells. Their main focus is to defend the body against these foreign contaminants in order for the body to stay whole and healthy. I think of God’s protection of the Sabbath in

this regard in the same way. To prevent the growth of contaminants of the faith [things contrary to what He commanded] and to keep one's spiritual health well, this day was to be observed with devotion. Therefore, **“every one that defileth”** it will suffer the adverse consequences of it, which was to be **“cut off from among his people”** and **“death.”**

One may view this strict edict with a lackadaisical attitude in our day, but the very idea of working or doing anything back then that wasn't within the confines of keeping this holy day was considered defilement. This typified a mind and a heart that just didn't care and chose to disobey. But here's the thing, disobedience always brings with it consequences. God wants to maintain holiness, wholeness, and purity among His people with devoted hearts toward Him and His commands. One way of fulfilling that is the keeping of the Sabbath.

Thus, **“Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD.”** This is a reiteration of the instructions God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai regarding Sabbath regulations (see Exodus 20:9-10). There is a definite mark of separation between when and what is to be done or not done. Out of the seven days of the week, six of those days are what we would deem as ordinary or regular. It was on these days that the “ordinary” and “regular” things of life were to be taken care of such as **“work.”**

During their time of wilderness wandering, God gave the children of Israel a real life demonstration of this when they were delivered from the land of Egypt and murmured in the wilderness due to hunger. In that, God issued manna from heaven that would only come on six days of the week (on the sixth day they were to gather twice as much). This would be what we consider as those “ordinary, regular” work days (see Exodus 16).

Then, we see the separation from the ordinary and the holy; from the regular to that which is set apart specifically for God. In Exodus 16:26 (turn there and read it) and also here in our lesson in Exodus 31:15, both verses show a delineation of the regular days and the holy day by the use of the word **“but.”**

At the word **“but”** is where God draws the line. It shows that there is a stand-out time for God. In our day we may hear people say something to the effect of “I worship God every day!” And, to that, I say, “Yes, and you should.” However, God is showing His desire for a time when He can have His people all to Himself outside of the ordinary and regular distractions and routines of life. That day for His people the Israelites was the **“seventh day”** and it was marked as **“the Sabbath of rest, and holy to the LORD.”** This is a day of dedication and devotion to Him; a time when all the regular stuff was to cease.

“Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant.” Their allotted time with God was to always be protected and upheld under this **“covenant”** for **“generations”** to come.

As years went by and families grew, people would these edicts have in the form of these symbols of their covenant to remind them to whom they belonged. But, here’s the thing, **“generations”** can’t learn of one’s faith if that faith is not passed down. Keepers of this covenant also have the responsibility to be teachers of the covenant (read Psalm 78:1-8 for encouragement on passing down the faith); “That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments,” Psalm 78:7). They have to be shown the importance of maintaining a holy relationship with God that can only be achieved by spending quality time with Him and honoring the sanctity of His day. What greater gift is there than to pass down one’s faith to those who come behind you?

Previously, I wrote, *“Let your life lead those who are coming behind you. Breadcrumbs, if you will, on the road to help another find their direction. . . Show them there is something better,”* (Be a Teacher/Word For Life Says). And, that rings true here as well regarding those receiving the order of the Sabbath. **“Generations”** would learn of the importance of this day, drawing them closer to Him.

Exodus 31:17 “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.”

God's people were to follow His pattern. David A. Bednar states, "A pattern is a guide or a model. Patterns are used in sewing and knitting, in wood and metalworking, and in a wide variety of other productive pursuits, activities, and jobs. Patterns help to avoid waste and unwanted deviations and facilitate uniformity that is appropriate and beneficial," (Quote Source: Brainy Quote). And, what better of a "productive pursuit" to pattern oneself after than God? He wants to transform our behavior to His; He wants us to be like Him. After all, did He not say, "Be ye holy; for I am holy," (Leviticus 11:44 and 1 Peter. 1:16)? One way of getting His people to do this is through the assigned time of rest, reflection, and worship. **"On the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed,"** and God wants His people to do the same.

Also, if we go back and take a look at Exodus 20:11, after He gave the reason of the Sabbath (because He rested from work and became their example, as noted above), he also states of this special day that it is "blessed" and "hallowed."

Don't miss this, there was favor associated with the keeping of this protected time, this day unto the Lord. Isaiah 58:13-14 of the NIV tells us, "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.' The mouth of the Lord has spoken."

This day was a "blessed" day because God ordained it to be so and all who adhere in obedience to the day would receive of that day's blessings. There is always blessings in obedience to the Lord in all His commands (see Deut. 28:1-14 and Lev. 26:1-13); especially when it comes to our time with Him.

Exodus 31:18 "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."

In Exodus 24:12 the LORD called Moses up on the mount. He said, "I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them."

Moses was on the mount for "forty days and forty nights," (Exodus 24:18). While there, God gave detailed instructions on EVERYTHING! Traveling a little bit further in the Bible to Exodus 31:18 (today's text) it says, **"And he gave unto Moses when he made an end of communing with him upon the mount Sinai, two tablets of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God."**

In Exodus 32:19, those first "tables" given; those that were considered "the work . . . the writing of God," (Exodus 32:16) were broken when Moses cast them down in his anger over the worship of the golden calf and another set had to be made (see Exodus 34:1-4).

Conclusion:

Someone once said, "If you don't have time for God, nothing is going to work out right in your life," (Author Unknown). He is the center of all and we need time to focus on our Center.

Mother Teresa is quoted as saying, "We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence. . . We need silence to be able to touch souls." When we bring ourselves to Him in rest and worship we silence all other voices to draw near to Him and be strengthened by Him for the work He has given us. We won't find God in adding more "things" to our schedules. We find Him by drawing nigh unto Him and making Him priority over all the "things" on our schedules.

Our time with God today should be just as treasured and protected as when God issued the commandment of the Sabbath for the Jewish people. As Christians today, we celebrate the Lord's Day on Sunday (the day we celebrate Jesus' resurrection; the day we remember Christ – see Colossians 2:16-17) – yet, the same principle applies. God wants to come closer to His people. That can only happen if they honor time committed for that purpose. We all need dedicated

time of rest, reflection, and worship before God uninterrupted by the cares of this life.

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