



Rehearsing rest: the Sabbaths

Leviticus 23:1-3

A few years ago, a Christian friend who is a film producer shared an insight with me that changed the way I watch movies. He observed that most good stories — those that resonate with an audience — seem to have similar plot elements. They open by portraying life lived in happiness and joy. All is well. Conflict soon intrudes, though, in the form of changing circumstances or with the arrival of a new character, and the result disrupts life and brings a dissonance you can feel in your gut. Key to the story is how the conflict is resolved: redemption comes, usually at great personal cost, and it is this cost that is the heart of the story. It is this cost that connects with the viewer.¹

I've watched films through that lens ever since. I'd bet my friend's observations are true for your favorite films as they are for mine. I have always been a Tolkien fan (my wife would use a stronger word), and although Peter Jackson's films do not do justice to Tolkien's books, the Lord of the Rings trilogy is wonderful, bigger than life in its scope, and complex in its plot, language, and characterization. What makes it so compelling is that it is a story of redemption that comes at a shockingly great cost; it is that cost that makes the end so satisfying.

Of course, redemption stories are not the only popular genre. Quite different is the genre of *tragedy*, a form of literature, theater, or film as old as the Greeks. In tragedies, it is not redemption, but the *misery* of a sinful or broken world that is under close view. In tragedies, the chief character typically meets a disastrous fate, the broader ills of society often exposed in the tale. I recently viewed *No Country for Old Men*, the Coen brothers' film based on Cormac McCarthy's novel. There is barely time after the opening credits to start the camera before gut-wrenching violence fills the screen. The senseless brutality dominates the film to the end. All the good people die while the wretched murderer survives to destroy another day. The lives of simple people in rural West Texas are depicted as meaningless activity, as they scurry about like ants, seeking to survive, but all the while their lives are actually controlled by a cruel chance. It alone drives their fate; the flip of a coin — several times — is the sole determiner of life or death. Redemption? None comes. The film leaves viewers devoid of hope as the screen snaps black. Everyone in the theater in which I viewed the film sat in stunned silence for several minutes after the film ended, refusing to believe it had ended as it did.

While tragedies have always been an important literary genre, captivating the audiences of the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and the Coen brothers today, they *feel* less satisfying because they tell an unfinished truth. Ugliness and evil abound in the real world, to be sure, and their power is horrid. No one is exempt from their reach; good people feel the pain as much as the bad guys. But our souls desperately want to believe that there is more to life than the tragic.

Redemptive themes satisfy us more deeply, not only because we prefer to feel good when we leave a theater, but, suggested my friend, because such movies reflect the fuller truth of God's story. God's story isn't stuck on the tragic; he pursues redemption relentlessly. The movement of redemption is not only nice, it is normative, shaping our understanding of life because it is the movement of life.

The plot

On my mother's knee, I memorized a rhyme that would serve me well as a guide whenever I picked up the Bible. To explain the plot of redemption running through the Bible's two covenants,

she taught me, *"The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed."* Behind this saying lay her conviction that the Bible is one story, its narrative like a golden thread that wound its way through the pages of history. The golden thread, of course, is the coming of Jesus the Christ.

The plot of the Bible is dramatic and is set forth in three acts: Creation — Fall — Redemption.² The first two acts are very short and, in fact, are presented in just a few pages in the Bible's first book, Genesis. But their brevity does not belie their significance: understanding creation and fall correctly is essential to a proper understanding of the rest of the Bible, the divine act of redemption.

Creation

In the opening chapter of the Bible, we read that God *"created the heavens and the earth."* No mere polemic against evolution — Darwin was, after all, a long ways off — the issue in the opening words of the Bible is not *whether* or even *when* God created the heavens and the earth, but *who* he is and *what* the world is in relation to him. God is Creator, and creation — *"the heavens and the earth"* together in harmonious unity — is presented as his domain, his kingdom, and he its sovereign king.

Under his rule, creation has a dynamic character: God assigned active dominion responsibility to the sun (the greater light) *"to govern the day"* and to the moon (the lesser light) *"to govern the night"* skies. He established limits for the reproductive processes in the plant and animal kingdoms (*"according to their kinds"*). God, the greater King, also gave dominion responsibility to Adam, the lesser king, mandating him to subdue the earth and to rule over everything (Genesis 1:28).

Adam was not granted divine permission to do what he wanted with creation; he was to exercise *responsible* dominion, always under God, the Sovereign (Genesis 1:26-28). Under his care, creation was to bring praise to God in new ways. Adam's *identity* was that of image-bearer of God; his *work* would also image God's. As God had "separated" light from dark, atmosphere from planet surface, and land from sea, so Adam's cultural mandate called him and his seed to separate — to differentiate and develop — the creation entrusted to him. Minerals gathered from the ground would be studied, understood, and combined to produce pigments that would one day, in the hands of Da Vinci, create the *Mona Lisa* (and in mine, paint the garage). Antonio Vivaldi, in hearing, capturing, and reproducing the sounds of the wind and the rain in the changing seasons of the weather, would ultimately give us another kind of *Four Seasons* with which to praise God.

Creation, when God finished it, was perfect. When he surveyed his realm, he spoke with royal voice: *"It is very good!"* He *rested* the seventh day (Genesis 2:2-3). He wasn't tired; Sabbath makes its first appearance in the biblical narrative to mark God's joy, his celebration and delight that creation was just the way it was supposed to be, that it enjoyed *shalom*.

Fall

But the joy was short lived. Sin slithered in through a rebel who challenged the authority of the King of creation by inciting doubt in his royal word ("Did God really say...?"). Corrupting everything God made with horrible effectiveness, sin warped all that had been very good so that it is now *"not the way it's supposed to be."*⁶ Theologians call this the fall, but the word hardly does justice to the devastation. A marriage that had begun with a "Wow!" became cloaked in a clumsy leaf-shroud of shame, while a delightful evening garden walk between God and his right-hand man morphed into a guilty game of hide and seek. In a rapid-fire series of judicial pronouncements, God cursed Satan, sentenced Adam, and then his wife. The woman, created to rest in the tender love of a husband and rejoice in the life-affirming gift of birth, would instead groan in labor and chafe under his dominance. The man, created to be happy and productive in his labor and to rest in the sweet weariness that comes at the end of a long day of work, would now taste the bitterness and frustration of toil. God's gleeful delight in a colorful creation that was deemed "very good" gave way to a bleak wasteland of human hopelessness, rendered now only in shades of gray.

Redemption

But wait! Peeking up from the rubble of a world gone bad, a fragile light flickered, all the more noticeable because of the strange timing of its appearance. God simply couldn't wait to redeem; his promise of redemption was spoken in the same breath as his curse, the flame of hope lit even before the pronouncement of sentence. Juxtaposing hope over against the cold horror of long warfare, the Royal One declared his intent: he will crush Satan; he will win victory through the *"seed of the woman."*

God will make right all that sin has made wrong. God will restore *shalom* and give his people rest again. Because of sin, creation had become — and still is — restless. Once thrilled that his creation was "very good," God no longer delights in what *is*; he, and all creation with him, yearn now for what *should be*, for what *will be*.

Restoring joy and bringing rest would involve conflict. In Genesis 3:15, God had promised Satan *"enmity between you and the woman."* The long war would be for man's benefit: we must know the cost of our sin and learn in faith to long for God's redemption. But the outcome was never in question. God assured that he would triumph through *"the seed of the woman."* His promise would allow the fragile candle of hope to flicker, despite the winds of war in a world that would witness fratricide (4:8), terrorist threats (4:23-24), and ethical anarchy: *"every inclination of the thoughts of (man's) heart was only evil all the time"* (6:5).

Rehearsals, types, and shadows

Once, when my children were small, we vacationed near the Pea Ridge Civil War battlefield in northwest Arkansas. The day was beautiful and the site well preserved. I was not prepared for the frustration we would experience for a full morning. Simply put, we had no clue what we were viewing. The park was enormous, and without a map that showed us what the key locations were and how the battle had progressed, we would remain frustrated.

On the way toward God's rest, his people needed help too. Struggling each day with the tension of enmity, they would easily lose the big-picture perspective of faith. Through the centuries, God sometimes intervened directly with his mighty hand to stimulate their faith, acting in ways both mighty and tender: crushing a mighty foe here, opening a closed womb there. But he also worked in ways more subtle. To shape the daily routines of the people of Israel, a people whose history began well over a thousand years before Messiah and whose faith would therefore need serious staying power, he established festivals that would both structure life and serve as portraits of redemption. These festivals are prescribed in Leviticus 23 and reveal from varying angles the wonder and grace of his redeeming work.

God called his festivals *"appointed feasts"* and *"sacred assemblies"* (Leviticus 23:1-2). Several Hebrew words lay behind these English translations. The first of these — the Hebrew word *mo'ed* — defines all the festivals as *"set feasts"* established by the LORD and regulated by his commands. Among these set feasts were the *haggim*, three pilgrimage festivals requiring Israel to travel annually to a central location. The name is appropriate; the singular *hag* evokes movement and suggests a joyous dance.

In the book of Leviticus, another term nuanced all the festivals. The term *miqra qodesh* — usually translated *"sacred assemblies"* — suggests a convocation that had a religious purpose, one shaped by hope.⁴ To Israel, camped at Sinai at the dawn of her life as a redeemed people, God's sacred assemblies were not established merely to commemorate *past* acts of redemption but also to serve as *"rehearsals"* of what was to come.⁵ When Israel was summoned to one of the pilgrimage festivals or when her families gathered in homes or village streets to celebrate the others, her eye — and her faith — were to be fixed on the future. Israel was not like the nations around her whose cultic gatherings were attempts to pacify the demands of pagan gods, angry for last year's failures, in a desperate form of bargaining for next year's blessings on crop and womb. Israel's feasts would not require her to barter with God. They were established *after* she had been

delivered from bondage in Egypt, already freed by God's amazing grace, redeemed by that grace to be his special people. The feasts were designed to lean forward, to give life a future tilt, pointing her relentlessly to the Messiah who would fulfill all that the feasts portrayed.

Each festival was a *type* of Messiah. Derived from the Greek word *tupos*, *type* is commonly understood to refer to the use of the Old Testament to provide models, human figures whose lives serve as examples of Christian virtues or character traits. Thus, Daniel is said to be a type of Christian courage, David a type of godly friendship (Jonathan narratives) or of true repentance (Bathsheba narrative). The word *tupos* is even translated as "*example*" in most contemporary versions of 1 Corinthians 10:6.⁶

But such a use of *type* is thin. The word actually connotes something much richer, the notion of a foretaste, an advance presentation of the whole. An *example* of tonight's dinner could be milk and cookies, arranged by a four-year-old and presented with dramatic flair on downsized plastic dinnerware to a gathering of dolls seated neatly around a cardboard dining table. It is a play meal, different in substance from tonight's family dinner. Not so a *type*. Last Christmas, impatient for the holiday feast still fifteen minutes away, I sneaked into the kitchen like a cat burglar to pilfer a tasty morsel of the standing rib roast that would anchor our family meal. It had just been removed from the oven and was sitting on a rack while the rest of the feast was being prepared. Knowing I'd be alone for just a few ticks of the clock, I activated both hands in my nefarious plot. With my right, I quickly sliced a not-too-thin corner of the succulent beef — redolent in spices, crusty with caramelized fat, and brimming with roasting juices — and with my left soaked an end piece of crusty sourdough bread in the meat drippings just before using it as a scoop for garlic mashed potatoes — perfectly seasoned and steamy hot — which delivered to my nostrils and my mouth the beginnings of ecstasy. Rudely apprehended by the cook, who shooed me irreverently out of the kitchen, I was shamefully unrepentant. I consumed the evidence slowly, like chewing cud, lost in the reverie and longing for more.

A children's play party may give an idea of food and drink. A *type* — like my samplings of the beef and potatoes — makes your mouth water because it is an early taste of the actual feast to come. That's how the ancient feasts of Israel served the people of God. More than religious play acting, they gave God's people a real and authentic taste of the redemption Messiah would bring centuries later, a taste that would make them long in faith and hope for the fuller revelation of the gift of God.

Speaking to a different culture a thousand years later, the apostle Paul used another metaphor to make the same point. He called the festivals *shadows* (Colossians 2:17). Think of a man walking westbound on a brilliant sunny morning. As the rising sun warms his back, his shadow stretches out before him, reaching the corner well before he does. His shadow is not merely an *example* of him but is inseparably connected to his very person. It announces that his arrival is at hand. More, his shadow provides many real and telling clues about him, clues like size and shape and the speed with which he walks. The clues may be indistinct, but since they are cast by a real person, they are authentic.

The story of the Bible is the story of Jesus the Messiah. He is the main character, the One who cast shadows as he moved relentlessly through history toward his incarnation in Bethlehem of Judea. That shadow appeared to ancient Israel in her sacrifices and festivals, each one awakening expectations about the promised Messiah and the redemption he would bring. Somewhat indistinct, not easily identified in a single glance, always requiring faith and constant explanation, his shadow was nonetheless the promise of *him*, a very real portrayal of "*the reality*" which "*is found in Christ.*"

It's all about rest

At the base of Sinai, God would give his people seven festivals that would function like individual frames in a reel of film, a series of feasts that would serve to give them glimpses of Messiah's shadow. There was an additional feast, however, one established at the same time and in the same biblical passage, that was distinct from the other seven and, in fact, framed all of them.

Leviticus 23 begins with this feast, a celebration known as Sabbath. Its name suggests the idea of rest, and its commemoration would shade all the other feasts with a unique hue. Redemption in its rich and variegated dimensions — as seven festivals would soon show — was about the bringing of rest and the restoration of shalom. If the Bible is a story, its dramatic movement is from restlessness toward Sabbath rest.⁷

Sabbath was not only one day per week. Actually, there were *Sabbaths*, plural, as Israel was soon to learn, and they were to be commemorated every seventh day, every seventh year, and, in the year of Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, a year-long celebration following the seventh cycle of seven years.

Keeping the Sabbaths involved first of all heeding the call to remember. But what was Israel to remember? In its first appearance in Scripture (Genesis 2), the *Sabbath* was a remembering of creation. God himself rested and remembered with delight the work he had done in creating the heavens and the earth. Later, in the first giving of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8-11), God grounded Israel's Sabbath-keeping in this creation rest: *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy ... For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."*

However, in the second giving of the law, God laid a different foundation for the Sabbath feast (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Here rest was linked to remembering *deliverance* from Egypt: *"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."*

The twin reasons for the feast flavor the subtle but rich recipe of God's gift of rest.

Remembering and resting: creation

In calling Israel to remember creation, God wanted her to do more than recall Genesis 1 and the fact that he had made all things. God wanted her to grapple with the wondrous truth that all aspects of creation took their *meaning* and *purpose* from the One who called it into being. Sabbath thus became a gift that defined Israel's notion of work and gave her a sense of holy vocation. From her stewardship of beasts of burden to her management of servants and employees, Israel was to sense that she was a people on a peculiar mission in the name of her God. Noortzij observes: *"The rhythmic character that the Sabbath gave to the Israelites' life, which is met with nowhere else in the ancient Near Eastern world, contributed to distinguishing them as a peculiar people, and it at the same time exerted an extremely favorable influence both on their capacity for work and on their manner of life in general."*⁸

If the weekly Sabbaths became routine, every seventh year would jump-start an even stronger memory. Remembering creation was more than a mental exercise; God put legs and feet under the command. On Sabbath *days*, men and animals were to take a day off to taste God's gift of rest in their weary world, recalling that work was not supposed to be toil. But in Sabbath *years*, even the soil would be allowed to remember the goodness it once enjoyed before weeds choked the dirt or invaders salted it. All of creation, including its very soil, had once been good; it bore a divine voiceprint because it had been created by the word of the Lord.⁹

In a delightful portrait of faith and life in rural Iowa in the 1930s, poet Sietze Buning helps us understand a rest that touched all of creation:

*Into the daily swirl of skim milk and cornmeal
Dad stirred an extra number-two canful
of Peet's Perfection Mineral Supplement
on Saturday nights for the pigs' Sunday breakfast.
It always foamed over the barrel by Sunday morning
and turned so crusty on top you had to cut it with a spade.
It was like slopping the pigs on Sunday with coffee cake.*

*Roy, Bob, Frank, and Snoodles, our four horses,
each got an extra gallon of oats on Sunday morning;
every cow an extra half-gallon of shelled-corn meal;
the chickens an extra gallon of
shelled corn on the ground...
Not even during threshing did our overweight horses
need extra oats, although they gladly feasted . . .*

Dad's explanations:

*"We look to God as animals look to us.
We're their idea of God, their image of God.
God's love to animals flows through us to them.
How will they know God's love unless we show them?
How can they tell the Lord's Day from another?
How can we comfort animals except by food?
They groan for eternal Sabbath with all creation."¹⁰*

Remembering and resting: deliverance

Deliverance colored the second giving of the Sabbath command and was the second focal point of all the Sabbaths. This required remembering, too: Israel was to recall and retell the story of the patriarchs — and especially the story of the Exodus — to the rising generations. But it also involved wrestling in faith to see glimpses of the redemption to come more fully on a future day. For the Sabbaths tilted Israel forward to the coming Messiah, one who would finally bring authentic rest. His name was Jesus; all the Sabbaths of the Old Testament would find their meaning in him.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," he would cry, *"and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28). In the very next verses, he called himself *"Lord of the Sabbath,"* validating his claim by healing a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath day. Defiantly rejecting the Pharisees' demand that Sabbath was honored by the avoidance of work, he insisted that *his work brought rest*.

His rest did not come because he healed a man or plucked grain *on* a Sabbath day, thus offering people an example that stretched the traditional understanding of Sabbath behavior. The central teaching of Jesus about the Sabbath is that no one finds rest by his own efforts, by what Scripture calls *"observing the law,"* even Sabbath laws. The Old Testament prohibition against work on the Sabbath — under penalty of death, no less (Exodus 31:15) — anticipated that truth. God wanted his people to know — in every generation — that seeking rest by their own effort was a doomed enterprise, for no rest is to be found at the end of such a quest. Thus he forbade them from working to find it.

Jesus' words and Jesus' Sabbath-keeping hung a neon sign in a public place, a sign for all generations to see: *working at rest won't bring it — don't even try!*

Only God can give rest, and it will come only through Christ. God's rest would be secured by Jesus' death on the cross as a punishment for our sin and as the end of the guilt that makes our souls so very restless. Paul would instruct the Romans that Jesus *"was delivered over to death for our sins"* (4:25) and that *"our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin"* (6:6). He explained this more fully in his letter to the Galatians: *"I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"* (2:20).¹¹ He assured them that, justified by faith, we have *"peace with God"* (Romans 5:1). His conclusion was that, in light of the cross of Christ, *"there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* (8:1).

Such rest runs deep, for it releases our souls from the burden of guilt both for sins committed and obedience omitted, seals the tear in the fabric of our personal history, and gives each of us a new purpose and meaning that is tied to a new life enjoyed in the love of God.

Yet keen eyes and sensitive hearts know well that the restlessness of the world and in the human soul are not yet completely done away with. People still hurt, they still cry, and they still die, all marks of the old restless order of things.

James and Rebecca were the model couple. Newly wed and in their late twenties, they are handsome, their wedding picture the sort that could have adorned frames for sale at the neighborhood Walmart. And with a new baby, life before them had a sweet cast to it. James had been a Navy diver, was well trained, and was physically a specimen the likes of which would inspire jealousy in all men over the age of forty. They were partners in a new business venture that promised a solid and prosperous future.

But when James suffered nine days of relentless, brutal headaches, it was not only Rebecca who was concerned; the doctors shifted into diagnostic overdrive. They dug deep, ordering tests that bewildered and frightened everyone. The tests confirmed the worst fears: James had a brain tumor.

The diagnosis launched a series of bewildering but rapid actions: the immediate surgery was radical, leaving visible scars; the follow-up radiation killed cells indiscriminately, destroying healthy hair follicles as well as malignant cells; and chemotherapy brought a weariness that young men are unprepared for. Tears gave way to fears, and fears gave way to more tears as the unknown trumped the known. At first, the tumor was seldom discussed, a pink elephant everyone knows is in the room but which no one wants to acknowledge. Gradually, as they grew in faith, and with the support of family and friends, the tumor became a reality to be dealt with, a factor in daily life, but not the defining factor.

James and Rebecca are resting in Christ. Like the rest of us, they do not know the future. But if asked, they'll tell you, without hesitation, that all is well.

Stories like this remind us that there is an undeniable *not yet* to our rest in Christ. We inhabit a broken world; those who follow Christ walk with both a limp and a tilt, hobbled both by cosmic brokenness and by personal sin, always leaning toward the new order of things his resurrection promises. Even though people who come to Christ really do find forgiveness, joy, and hope because of the finished redemption his cross provides, they don't always heal completely — not this side of glory, anyway. Our sins don't disappear overnight; neither do their consequences. Some brain tumors are completely healed; but sometimes, the medical journey is a hard one and the outcome sad. Sinful marital patterns — twisted out of shape over decades — don't untangle easily; memories aren't quickly purged of cruel treatment or harsh words, and hearts cringe in desperate fear for years following physical or verbal abuse. One may be set free from addictions, but a rotten liver may well be the price of decades of overindulgence. A bright young mind may have limitless potential, but a self-image crippled by the cruel names children call out or damaged by parental criticism that never showed unconditional love or approval may well be hobbled for life — life this side of the grave, anyway.

We already taste rest, but we haven't yet been seated at the table for the full feast. *"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God"* (Hebrews 4:9).

Twisted Sabbaths, weary rest

Ever been invited to a party at someone's home, only to discover that there was no reason for the party? There is nothing to celebrate, nothing drawing this particular group of people together except the personalities of the hosts. In such gatherings, most mill around for a while, but leave early. With all due respect to the hosts, nothing keeps them there.

Parties without meaning are empty; they have no purpose other than fun, a pale counterfeit for real joy. The truth is that it is easy to lose the purpose of a celebration. A wedding anniversary can be shared with friends, with a first-rate dinner at a five-star restaurant and a card or gift, while the first love that bloomed into wedding vows shrivels after years of neglect, cold hearts, and quiet desperation. In our culture, Christmas commemorations are often the worst. Traditions like gift-

giving — unrelated to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea but essential to the commercial extravaganza December 25 has become — drape the holidays with stress and financial pressures that make them prime time for painful family crises and bleak seasonal depression. In today's commercialized culture, the incarnate Son of God has become as easy to miss in December as a mustard seed in a shopping mall.

The meaning of the Sabbaths was easy to lose too. Over the centuries, Israel distorted the biblical gift of rest by reducing Sabbath to duty and tying it to a twenty-four-hour period beginning at dusk on Friday. She worked the day to death and "*turned the permission to rest into an imperative.*"¹² She scrupulously obeyed the rules and drew out the implications but never found the rest the day proclaimed. She worked hard at not working: her rabbis identified "*Sabbath day journeys*" that limited the distance a person could walk without his steps becoming laborious. A housewife was permitted to take one stitch in a garment, but two constituted work and thus broke the law. Some knots might be tied on a Sabbath, but others — any that would be "lasting" knots, like a camel-driver's knot or a sailor's — were prohibited. If a stone lay on the mouth of a jar, the jar could be tipped so that the stone fell off. But the stone itself could not be lifted; such would constitute labor.¹³

Modern people react variously to the notion of Sabbath. Many ignore it altogether, giving Saturday to Sunday no spiritual significance except as a recreational weekend.¹⁴ Some Christian communities see no compelling connection between Sunday and the Sabbath. They reason that the age called Law is past and another called Grace has arrived, and with the change in epochs, Sabbath became a relic of the former dispensation.

Other Christian fellowships are convinced of a different logic: Sabbath is tied to the fourth of God's Ten Commandments. Sunday has replaced Saturday and is now the Christian Sabbath, and keeping the Sunday-Sabbath is a matter of obedience. Believers are to follow God's laws against unnecessary work or commerce on the Lord's Day.

Those who so easily disconnect Sabbath from Sunday risk forgetting that Sabbath did not start out as a complex of rules but as a celebration of rest that echoed God's own, a rest that enjoyed fellowship between a creation and its Creator. They also risk forgetting that Sabbath remembers redemption — once in the Exodus and more fully in Christ alone. Remembering God as Lord of creation and as Redeemer through Christ grounded two thousand years of the church's pattern of faith: they gathered communally each Sunday to rest in Him.

Those who suggest that rest can be found by following Jewish Sabbath proscriptions — applicable now to Sunday instead of Saturday — also run a risk. They risk forgetting that any rest that has to be obtained by human efforts — even Sabbath-keeping ones — is not really rest at all.

The hard part of honoring Sabbath today is sorting out what is rehearsal and what is truly feast, what was temporary and what is eternal, what is shadow and what is the substance that cast it.

Such struggles are not new, John Calvin, the sixteenth-century reformer, provides a helpful perspective. He warns against "superstition" in regard to Sabbath-keeping:

By the Lord Christ's coming the ceremonial part of this commandment was abolished. For he himself is the truth, with whose presence all figures vanish; he is the body, at whose appearance the shadows are left behind. He is, I say, the true fulfillment of the Sabbath ... Christians ought therefore to shun completely the superstitious observance of days (emphasis added — JRS).¹⁵

In the same paragraphs in which Calvin argues that the "*ceremonial part*" of the fourth commandment should be abolished, he affirms two valid reasons for "*observing Sabbath.*" The first is a call to gather "*on stated days*" for worship and instruction in God's Word, which will help us to rest in Christ and turn away from seeking to earn rest by the works of the flesh; the second is a call to treat employees well, giving them a day of rest to show the holistic grace the kingdom of God brings.¹⁶

Calvin's balanced warnings are fresh and timely for believers in this generation. Any view or practice of Sabbath that puts its focus on our behavior one day of the week instead of placing the focus on the accomplished work of redemption by grace in Christ is off target. Jesus Christ is the true Sabbath; all the Sabbath requirements in the Old Testament point to the rest he alone would provide for his people by the cross and resurrection. Learning to rest in the salvation that Jesus brought — without adding our own efforts — is the way we embrace Sabbath rest. All the weight of salvation is borne by Christ alone, given to us by grace alone, embraced by faith alone.

My wife and I recently enjoyed the privilege of a working sabbatical. I was working on this chapter, in fact, so Sabbath rest was in the forefront of my mind and heart. So we were excited one Sunday when we visited another church and read in the bulletin that the preacher would preach about "*Keeping Sabbath*." Very articulate and most persuasive, he touched on important issues. He charged us to "get off the merry-go-round" of stress to find freedom from the tyranny of the urgent. He recited compelling statistics showing how busy we are as a culture and how desperately we need to find balance by taking time off from the demands of work. He lamented that our expanding list of labor-saving devices merely adds to our stress levels by seducing us to think we can get more done than ever.

But his solution — "Keep the Sabbath; take Sundays off!" — missed the mark. Not a word was spoken about resting *in Christ alone*. Not a word pointed us to the cross and the resurrection as the ground of our peace. Time management was offered as a substitute redeemer.

As we left, I couldn't help thinking that the same talk could have been delivered by an Orthodox Jew steeped in the Sabbath regulations of the Mishnah or a secular business consultant advising an overworked client. Perhaps the word *Sabbath* would have appeared in the Jew's presentation and been absent from the consultant's, or even a different day proposed for it. Yet the message would have been the same: if you take a day off you will achieve schedule and relationship balance, be able to say no to over commitment, and you will invest more time in marriage and family. The benefits will be well worth the effort.

Few will disagree that a day off can benefit stressed people and that renewing your commitment to a busy family shows love and provides nurture to a generation of children themselves showing the strain of this pressured life. But the currents of *rest* run deep, its spring bubbling from a place far beyond human obedience. Going to church faithfully on Sundays does not itself fix the greed that drives people the other days. Making a commitment not to go shopping on Sunday and not to buy or sell or go to the office that day could be driven by a desire to honor the Lord more purely. But it may as well be driven by tradition, custom, or even fear of reprisal — from the Lord, your parents, or your church community. Ultimately, keeping Sabbath by such behavioral commitments is no guarantee at all that you rest in Christ or that your labor the other six is "*unto the Lord*."

To find rest in a world of relentless change, stress, and the tyranny of the urgent, people need a new heart, one emptied of self-reliance and unburdened of frustrating duty, one desperate for God's grace. They need redemption of a kind that will set the world right once again.

The Sabbaths in Leviticus 23 showed the movement of the plot of God's redemption: he would bring *rest* to a restless world. The redemption would prove to be something mysterious, different from anything Israel could imagine. In fact, it would take seven feasts to help her dream.

Questions for further study and discussion

1. God established Sabbaths (plural) that blessed animals, servants, and even the land itself with rest. How does this fact shape your thinking about the redemption Christ brought?
2. Re-read Matthew 11:28-12:13. How does the healing of the man with a shriveled hand bring him Sabbath rest?
3. Hebrews 4:9 speaks of a Sabbath rest to come. Will it be a rest tied to a Saturday (Old Testament Sabbath), Sunday (called by many the Christian Sabbath), or neither?

4. Do you rest well in the cross and resurrection of Christ? Does your church? Explain.
5. The chapter refers to the "relentless movement of history from restlessness to rest." How does this movement affect the way you read the daily news reports? Does it shape the yearnings of your heart? Does it influence the mission strategy of your local church to bring rest to the restless in your community?

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¹ I am indebted to Gregg Easterbrook for this insight.

² Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W Goheen further divide redemption into initiation (Old Testament Israel), accomplishment (Christ's earthly ministry and that of the missionary church), and completion (Christ's return). *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004).

³ Plantinga, Cornelius, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

⁴ Swanson, James, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed., s. v. "miqra," #5246.

⁵ Strong, James, *The New Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words*, electronic ed., s. v. #4744.

⁶ Notably, the older RSV renders the word as "warnings:"

⁷ C. Vonk speaks of the "idea of rest" as being the "signature" of all of the feasts, not only of Sabbath. *De Voorzeide Leer: Leviticus*, vol. 1b (Uitgave: Drukkerij Barendrecht, 1963), 635.

⁸ *Bible Student's Commentary: Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Corp., 1982), 230.

⁹ Brueggeman, Walter, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 49.

¹⁰ Buning, Sietze, "An Open Letter," in *Style and Class* (Orange City, Iowa: Middleburg Press, 1982), 56-7.

¹¹ The verb tells the story: it is in the perfect tense, stressing completed action with ongoing results.

¹² Noortzij reminds us that the prohibition of all work was not absolute. *Leviticus*, 230.

¹³ For a glimpse at the extensive rabbinic tradition surrounding Sabbath laws, see Shabbath 15.1 in *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 113.

¹⁴ Ironically, what our culture refers to as *recreation* (meaning by the term weekends, sports, and play) is rooted in the biblical concept of redemption, the bringing of the new creation — and with it, rest.

¹⁵ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, bk. 2, chap. 8:32 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 8:32. For Calvin, Sunday has no special claim as the day of rest but is an accommodation to our weakness, only advisable because we do not worship every day. He comments, "Would that we were privileged to do so!"