

# A Rhythm of Life

#  Exodus 20:8-11

Among the Ten Commandments, the fourth stands out for a number of reasons. Among a list of ‘thou shalt nots’ it is the only positive one, an invitation to cease activity and rest. But it is also, sadly, one of the commandments with which we struggle most, especially in our ‘always on’ 24/7 culture. As the American writer Dorothy Bass observes, ‘”Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,” is the only one we brag about breaking.’

Central to the command is the idea of a day which is ‘holy,’ different to all others. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes that, intriguingly, ‘There is no mention of worship. The way in which this day is to be acknowledged as holy – i.e., different and special – is to separate it from all days of required activity, productivity, coercive performance, self-securing, or service to other human agents.’[[1]](#footnote-1) This aspect of the command seems remarkable and life-giving in our present culture but must have felt like even more of a gift to a nation of former slaves recently liberated from Egypt.

It is also striking that this gift of rest is granted to every member of the community. Even animals and outsiders are to have the opportunity to cease from their labour.

The two versions of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus and Deuteronomy offer different reasons as foundational for the practice of Sabbath. The latter book (Deut 5:12-15) emphasises the importance of remembering the people’s release from slavery, while the Exodus version points to God’s own rest after six days of continual work when creating the world.

Eugene Peterson has written of a tension that lies at the heart of Sabbath observance, one which Jesus himself challenged in some of his disputes with the Pharisees and which we ourselves may have experienced: ‘This is a most difficult command to keep, a most difficult practice to cultivate. It is one of the most abused and distorted practices of the Christian life. Many through the centuries have suffered much under oppressive Sabbath regimens. And more than a few of us have been among the oppressors.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

**For discussion**

1. As with any other passage, we need to read Exodus 20 in context. The commandment to rest on the Sabbath is given to a group of ex-slaves who have recently been freed, and who are now being provided with manna and quail as they wander in the desert. How does this context change your perspective on the command to rest?
2. On Sunday, Trevor spoke about the challenge of working alongside each other in a congregation the size of SBC, with all that needs to be done. Can you think of ways in which we can make church less ‘labour intensive’?
3. As noted above, many of us may have had experiences of Sabbath as a day when we don’t feel free, but rather when religious rules are imposed upon us. How can we maintain the habit of Sabbath in a way which is truly life giving rather than legalistic?
4. Exodus 20:11 provides a fascinating reason for the importance of Sabbath: God rested on the seventh day, after six days’ work when creating the world. How this idea of God himself resting inform your understanding of your own need to rest?
1. Walter Brueggemann, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Exodus,* 1994, p845 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places,* 2005, p117 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)