



Living in God's abundant grace

SABBATH AS A SOURCE FOR AN ABUNDANT LIFE | *A STUDY GUIDE FOR GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS*
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A Discipleship Resource of the Brethren in Christ Church



This study guide is based on “In Search of the Sabbath,” a feature article written by Valerie Weaver-Zercher that appeared in the spring 2006 issue of *Seek* magazine. The article can be viewed or downloaded at www.bic-church.org/seek.

In her article, Valerie-Weaver-Zercher argues that Sabbath as God intended it is neither legalistic nor self-centered rest. It is not so much about “making time for yourself” or making sure that no work is done on Sundays as it is about obeying God’s command to periodically withdraw from the exhausting business of producing and consuming that occupy so much of our waking hours.

This study guide builds upon those concepts and draws on the wisdom of Old Testament laws to even further broaden our view of Sabbath as a vehicle for grace—a grace that intrudes on our lives to bring freedom and abundance.

SESSION I

Sabbath: God’s gracious intrusion and the principle of time with God

Valerie Weaver-Zercher writes that “there’s certainly no easy formula for figuring out what constitutes God-glorifying rest, nor how to discern what a modern-day Sabbath should be. Christians who are attempting to be faithful will practice Sabbath differently.”

1. What do you think God’s command to keep the Sabbath means?
2. What were you taught we are to do—or not to do—in order to keep the commandment?
3. Why does God want this commandment kept?

Often we think about the Sabbath in terms of what we do to observe God’s commandment—things like worshipping God, spending time with family, and refraining from work. But what we do for God or in obedience to God pales in comparison to His work in us and through us when we take time to rest in Him.

Read Exodus 5:1–4; 12:29–31

Imagine yourself in the sandals of the first generation of Israelites whom God had brought out of bondage in the land of Egypt. In those sandals, you had slaved away for Pharaoh—never getting a day off from work; never even thinking of asking for a day off; never getting a day to worship your Lord and Creator.

All of the excitement started with a simple request from Moses, who had returned from exile: “Let my people go and worship the Lord.” But Pharaoh could think only of work, of the gold and silver he would lose if he let the people have a day off for worship. So you had watched and worked as God brought plagues upon the Egyptians. After the last plague, Pharaoh had finally said, “No more, you can go worship, but bring me a blessing, too.”

The Exodus event began as a struggle between an earthly king, who relied on slave labor to sustain his luxurious economy, and the heavenly Lord, who desired that the chosen people be allowed the chance to worship.

4. Do you ever take for granted the opportunity to worship?

5. What are the reasons today that people might not be able to worship God?

Read Exodus 20:1–2

Imagine again that you were one of that first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt. You walked into the sea as an escaped slave, with your owner charging hard after you in his chariot. You walked out of the sea a free person, with nobody looking over your shoulder. So what to do now? How to live now?

This is the situation that faced the Exodus generation. When they were slaves in Egypt, all their decisions were made for them: when to get up today, what to wear today, where to go today, what to eat today. Yesterday was the same as today and the same as tomorrow and the day after.

Children are like that, too. When you were young, someone—probably your mother or father—got you up, picked out your clothes, set breakfast in front of you, packed you out the door with lunch, and so on. And like a herd of teenagers suddenly left on their own, free to make all their decisions for themselves, our ancestors in the faith walked out of Egypt and did not have the foggiest idea of how free people are to live.

So God gave them the Ten Commandments. God said this: I am now your Lord and you are my people, because I brought you out of Egypt. Nobody else will ever be your king again, I will fill that role, so that no human oppressor ever tries to lord it over you. You are free now and here is how free people live. Free people don't steal, or they go back into bondage. And besides, are you really free if your neighbor can just take your stuff? Free people don't murder, or they go back into bondage. And besides, are you really free if your neighbor can just kill you? And so on.

God's laws only make sense to people who have been freed from some sort of bondage.

If you have ever been in bondage to anything—to an abusive relationship or family situation, to alcohol or other drugs, to a bad job, to significant financial debt, to health problems, to sin—and if you have been freed, then you can understand God's laws.

God's laws are not restrictions on freedom but guide the way that free people live. Some teenagers think that their parents' rules limit their freedom, like a cage that confines a tiger in a zoo. But other teenagers understand that their parents' rules actually keep them safe, like a fence along the edge of a cliff or the guard rail on a highway. If you have never been freed from anything, you may be like the first kind of teenager and you may think that God's laws restrict your freedom. But if you understand that God has freed you from sin in your baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ then you can understand that God's laws are how free people live.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses says: "For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?" (4:7–8).

Notice that for Moses, who had been freed from bondage, God's laws are a sign of how good and gracious God is and a means by which God keeps the promise to make Israel a great nation.

6. What is your attitude towards God's commandments?

7. Have you ever been freed from any sort of bondage?

8. What factors keep people from a proper understanding of God's commandments?

Read Exodus 31:12–13

One way to think about a law is as a fence surrounding a value. A law protects something that is important and worth preserving. If that is so, we might wonder what it is that God is protecting by giving us the Sabbath law.

In fact, it turns out to be more than just one value. For right now, however, we will

focus on the idea that the Sabbath law protects the good thing of having regular time with God. Every relationship needs time in order to be healthy. We need regular, quality time to spend with friends, family, and loved ones. That time allows us to communicate, clear the air, share experiences, get to know, and continue to know each other. Our time with God is the same. The most important time that we have with God is in worship.

But here is a really important thing to get clear about worship: In worship, we are not so much doing something for God as we are opening ourselves up for Him to work on us. Notice the words in the text from Exodus 31:

The LORD said to Moses: You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: “You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you (verses 12–13).

Notice who is in charge of the verbs here: “I, the Lord, sanctify you.” We don’t keep the Sabbath so that we can do something for God. We keep the Sabbath because in the worship event, when we come together, God sanctifies us, God makes us holy.

Without time for worship, we would be left on our own, without God’s gift of holiness. We cannot make ourselves holy. Therefore God has commanded that there be a regular, gracious intrusion into our lives, so that we will have regular time with God, wherein God will justify us and sanctify us. God has said that this regular time should be once every seven days.

1. How does your idea of worship change when you see worship as an event in which God works on us, rather than as something we do for God?
2. What parts of worship change their meaning when seen through this lens?

Read Exodus 23:14–17

Earlier, we read about how the Sabbath law preserves regular time with God, through which He makes us holy. The law written in Exodus 23:12–17 takes the idea of regular time to another level. Notice that we are again dealing with the Sabbath law here. The law repeats that no work is to be done on the Sabbath. And the law states: “Do not invoke the names of other gods,” showing us the connection between Sabbath and worship—that we are to worship on the Sabbath. Then notice that the law goes right into talking about the three major worship festivals of the Israelite year: Passover (the festival of unleavened bread), Pentecost (the festival of “weeks,” seven weeks after Passover), and Booths (the festival of ingathering).

God has established regular time in our relationship on more than just a weekly basis. Yes, we keep the Sabbath by having weekly time for the preaching and teaching of God's word. But there is also an annual rhythm to our relationship with God, and by extension, a daily rhythm, too. God sets aside special times on annual basis, such as the Christian times of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Likewise, there are times each day for us to worship God in our homes and daily lives: prayer before meals, morning and evening prayers, personal Bible study, and devotions. All of these, too, are God's actions, in which God forms us anew, recreates us.

3. What practices are important to your faith life on a daily basis?

4. What about on an annual basis?

5. How does God work through these regular times devoted to Him?

SESSION 2

Sabbath: God's gracious intrusion and the principle of justice

Read Exodus 20: 8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15

1. The Ten Commandments are given twice, once in Exodus 20 and once in Deuteronomy 5. The only commandment with any significant difference is the Sabbath commandment. Compare the two versions of the command. What differences do you find?

In comparing these two versions of this commandment, you might notice that the motive clauses are very different. Exodus has a theology of imitation: God rested so we rest. Deuteronomy has a theology of response: Because God freed us when we were slaves, we should free our workers to have a day off.

Imagine that you have been a slave all of your life, with never a day or weekend or holiday off. And then God frees you from slavery and says this: "The first rule is that you HAVE to take one day off from work in every seven."

You might respond, "Have to? HAVE TO?! You don't have to tell me that twice, it's more like GET TO!"

Offering a day off each week to someone who has never had one is something like commanding a starving man that he has to eat or a woman dying of thirst that she has to drink.

“And not just you,” said God, “but you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.”

In other words, you also have to make sure that you don’t live in such a way that others can’t have a day off.

In session one, we talked about how the Sabbath is like a fence that protects the value of regular time with God. But a fence can surround more than one thing and as it turns out, the Sabbath law is also God’s way of protecting another value. That value is justice.

Notice that in the Sabbath laws stated above, there is an emphasis on the slaves getting a day off. God says, remember that you were a slave once who never got a day off, so from now on, not only do you get a day off, but all slaves and average workers do, too.

Here is the point. God’s Sabbath law is about God’s grace. Last session we looked at the sort of grace in which God creates regular time to make us holy. But the Sabbath law is also about God’s grace in creating a kingdom where justice is the norm.

The people had been slaves in Egypt—God graciously intruded into that bondage and freed the people. But there is more than one kind of bondage. If you have to work every day as a slave for a master, that is bondage. But if you have to work every day for your parents, or for your business, or for yourself, then that also is a form of bondage.

And so God regularized this intrusion of grace. God said, “I am going to make it a regular part of every week that everyone gets a day off from the bondage of toil and trouble.” So God threw a wrench into the economic gears of our human world that want to churn away day after day and God said, “No! Rest!” This is the principle of what the Sabbath is all about. The Sabbath is about God’s way of intruding into our bondage to free us and grant us grace. God made the Sabbath a regular part of our routine. By doing so God made it so that all might live under the banner of God’s gracious justice.

But making the gift of grace a routine part of life is not universally popular. Human nature is a stubborn thing. Some people soon came to see the Sabbath as an imposition, especially where it intruded on their ability to make money. Perhaps you remember the scene at the start of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* in which Scrooge resents having to give his nephew Christmas Day off:

“You’ll want all day tomorrow, I suppose?” said Scrooge.

“If quite convenient, sir.”

“It’s not convenient,” said Scrooge, “and it’s not fair. If I was to stop half-a-crown for it, you’d think yourself ill-used, I’ll be bound?”

The clerk smiled faintly.

“And yet,” said Scrooge, “you don’t think me ill-used, when I pay a day’s wages for no work.”

The clerk observed that it was only once a year.

“A poor excuse for picking a man’s pocket every twenty-fifth of

December!” said Scrooge, buttoning his great-coat to the chin. “But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here all the earlier next morning.”

Scrooge represents that voice in all of us that resists God’s grace, especially that part of God’s grace through which God wants to extend the rule of justice. Scrooge is like Pharaoh, he would rather cling to the false gods of silver and gold—especially where the labor of those who owe him sweat is concerned. And perhaps that is exactly why God made a day off to worship and rest a regular part of life in God’s kingdom.

2. Do you keep the Sabbath because you are imitating God, because you are responding to God’s grace, or for any other reason?
3. Are there any “sons or daughters, male or female slaves” in our world today for whom you are not providing a Sabbath?
4. What does justice have to do with the Sabbath?

Read Deuteronomy 15:12–18

So, God works like this: He intrudes graciously into the bondage of our lives to free and bless us. In the ancient world, like in our world, the most widespread form of bondage was financial or economic bondage. In the ancient world, slavery was about economics and was an economic reality—do not confuse slavery in the Bible with the bond slavery of American history; in the biblical world, slavery was more like the indentured servitude of American history, it was not lifelong slavery. If people were in financial trouble with heavy debts, they might have to sell themselves into slavery in order to pay off their debts.

Exodus 22:3 says that if a thief is caught and cannot pay back to the property owner the penalty for what he stole, then he shall be sold into slavery to pay the restitution.

2 Kings 4 tells the story of how Elisha helped a woman whose husband died before he could pay off his debt and how a creditor came to claim her two children as payment for the loan.

So here is what God said: “Where I rule, such bondage shall not be permanent. After serving six years, slaves shall go free in the seventh year.” That is, God was saying that the principle of God’s gracious intrusion into the realities of human bondage will extend to the problem of economic bondage. This is what God said. So God made provision in God’s kingdom for regularized intrusion into economic bondage.

Notice one other thing. Sometimes, certain forms of “liberty” actually are less “free”

than certain forms of service. A dependent wife or a child who is kicked out with no means of supporting themselves; a slave who is sent on his way with no means to make a living or get started—in such situations, servitude actually affords people the freedom of stability.

Therefore God commanded two things. First, the Israelites could not send out slaves “empty-handed” at the end of six years. To be sent forth with no means of support could be the equivalent of a death sentence. Second, if the slaves wished to remain in their masters’ households, the slaves could choose to do so. If so, the slave would be figuratively joined to the master’s house through a ceremony in which an ear was pierced. But the choice in the matter was left up to the slave! The master—the one in economic and political power—was not the one given the choice. That choice was given to the powerless. That is God’s idea of justice. And that is part of what God was protecting when God set up the Sabbath laws.

5. Do we have any ways today of protecting the economically disadvantaged? What does our congregation do to help the poor?

Read Exodus 23:10–11

In this text from Exodus 23, notice what gets to rest now every seven years and for whose benefit this rest exists! The land gets to rest. Every seven years fields, vineyards, and orchards were given rest. This was for the renewal of those fields, vineyards, and orchards, of course, so that especially the fields might be renewed.

But who was to benefit? The “poor of your people” and “the wild animals.” So notice again the connection between God’s gracious and intrusive commandments and God’s principle of justice. God commanded rest for the land for the sake of the poor! How else would the poor eat, after all?

And there is a sense also of ecology here, a sense that God cares about nature and creatures outside of the human sphere. As we human beings fulfill God’s command to subdue the earth (Genesis 1), we are to do so in way that cares for the wild animals—we are to provide for them, as God commands here in Exodus 23. God’s concern for the poor is seen in other laws from the first five books of the Bible, also. In Deuteronomy, God uses language very similar to what we have seen in the Sabbath laws to speak of provision for the poor:

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the

orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this (verses 24:19–22).

Read Deuteronomy 15:1–2, 7–11

God has even more surprises for you, showing that His plan of gracious intrusion into the bondage of life goes even further.

Here, in Deuteronomy, God commands something that modern, capitalistic Americans can hardly understand. God commands that all debts be forgiven every seven years. Have you ever heard of such a crazy thing? And God warns the people, if it is the sixth year and your neighbor needs some money, you cannot do the math and realize that you won't get paid back. You have to lend it. "Be ungrudging when you do so," says the Lord. Do not be tightfisted and miserly.

Now, of course, this law would not work today, because we live in a capitalist economy. Ancient Israel's economy was much different. They were not a capitalist free-market economy. For better or worse (and I think it is clearly for the better) we live in a different system, but the issue is still this: What can we learn from this law in Deuteronomy 15? Cannot we still learn to be ungrudging and not tight-fisted? Doesn't it still tell us that God demands that we care for our neighbors? So notice God's sabbatical pattern of gracious intrusion:

- Every seven days, God commands release from work for all, including slaves
- Every seven years, God commands release from bondage for slaves
- Every seven years, God commands release from production for the land, for the purpose of feeding the poor and the wild animals
- Every seven years, God commands release from debt for the poor

It should be clear by now that God's Sabbath principle is not just about rest or worship, but about God's value for justice. And God has regularized and institutionalized this love of justice in God's laws.

6. We don't live in Israel's system, but how can we "keep" God's sabbatical laws in our own way?

SESSION 3

Sabbath: God's Sufficiency and Our Generosity

Read Exodus 16:1–26

Most of us live in fear most of the time. Fear may not rule our every thought or guide every movement of our hands. We may not even know we are afraid or living in fear. But at some level, fear is a factor. We don't do some things that we want to do because we are afraid. We don't let our kids do things that we should let them do, because we are afraid. We are not as generous or kind as we should be, because fear stops us from giving all we can from our hearts or wallets.

The Israelites had good reason to trust God. They had been slaves in Egypt but had seen God do mighty things for them. God had sent Moses and Aaron, and along with Moses and Aaron, God had sent powerful plagues to help loosen Pharaoh's iron grip: darkness, frogs, blood, gnats, the angel of death. God had opened the sea in front of the people so that they could escape Pharaoh's revenge. God had led them by a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. When thirst threatened them, God had provided water.

So what did the people do when they got hungry? They lived out of fear rather than out of trust. They complained that God just wanted to kill them by starvation.

So God gave them bread from heaven—manna it was called. Each day the manna came down and the people gathered it, ate it, and did not starve. And God said this, "I want you to learn a new word: 'Enough.' I will give you enough. I will take care of you out of my abundance. So, each day you only are to gather enough for you and your family. Whether you gather more than you need or less, it will be enough." But people live out of fear. Some gathered more than their share and some less, but when they looked, they all had "enough."

And God said, "Eat what you have and don't save any. If you try to save it, it will be rotten. Trust me, I will provide more for you tomorrow." But people live out of fear. Some tried to save some for later, being afraid that there would not be enough later, but what they saved went rotten.

And God said, "As long as you are with me, you will get to rest on every seventh day. No exceptions. Everyone rests. So, in addition to the miracle of giving you manna each day, on the seventh day, I add a miracle so that the manna will not go rotten for two days.

What does it mean to live in the love of God, to dwell all of our days in the shadow of the Savior? It means, among other things, that we trust in a God who cares for us, who gives us enough, who is abundant in his gifts. God has said this to us: "I will give you enough, as much as you need." Our eyes are bigger than our stomachs, though, and sometimes we want more than enough. And should we be surprised when it goes rotten? And we live in fear. Instead of sharing with our neighbors out of the abundance that God has given to us, we hoard our small stack of coins and live in fear.

But God invites us to live differently. To live in God's abundance. Not to live in fear, but in trust; to trust that He will always provide enough.

1. In what ways are we like the Israelites who tried to gather too much? In what ways are we like those who tried to keep some manna for later? In what ways does what we have go rotten when we live in fear and try too much?

Let's go back and look at an aspect of these Sabbath laws that we have not seen as of yet. This aspect has been hinted at now and then, but the hope is that by looking at many of the texts at the same time, you will be able to see this aspect more clearly than if we had talked about it a little bit here and a little bit there. This aspect is generosity. Part of the issue of what it means to observe Sabbath is to be generous. Consider again some of the laws that we have looked at so far, and look at the bolded parts:

- From Exodus 20:10 (The Ten Commandments): “But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.”
- From Exodus 23:15: “You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed.”
- From Deuteronomy 15:14–18: “Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. But if he says to you, “I will not go out from you,” because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his earlobe into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. You shall do the same with regard to your female slave. Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired laborers; and the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do.”
- From Exodus 23:10–11: “For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.”
- From Deuteronomy 15:7–11: “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, **do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought,** thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. **Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”**

It should be clear in all of these texts, that generosity is a part of God's Sabbath intrusion into the ways we humans like to do things. In the Old Testament, the foundation of Christian generosity and charity is the Sabbath commandment. The connection has to do with how God frees us from those things that keep us in bondage. One of the things that we are most in bondage to is our stuff. A friend's grandmother used to say, "Possessions are their own punishment."

God comes into our lives and says, "Christ is raised from the dead, your sins are forgiven, you no longer need to seek the living amongst the dead or serve the false god of money. Let go, quit living in fear; live in my abundance."

A friend of mine once said, "I used to give to the poor because I thought they could not live without my giving. Now I give because I have learned that I cannot live without my giving." She had learned that living in trust, rather than fear, yields freedom. She had learned to live in God's Sabbath. She had learned that, yes, we serve the poor and serve justice when we give. But even more than that, she had learned how a free person lives.

2. Have you ever connected the idea of keeping the Sabbath with generosity? Why are the ideas of worship and rest so connected to Christian generosity? In what ways do our possessions possess us?

As you go through daily life, look for ways in which you can both give and receive God's gift of Sabbath—the freedom to worship, the freedom to refrain from work, and the freedom to give generously to others.