

# EXODUS

## THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

---

### **SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:8-11**

To understand more about the fourth commandment and its implications for us today.

## Old or Young Earth?

There is an ongoing debate among evangelicals concerning the age of the earth. Is the earth less than 10,000 years old? Or is it, as modern science would argue, millions, if not billions of years old? The way a Bible-believing Christian answers this will in part depend upon how they understand the six days of creation in Genesis 1. Did God create the world in six literal days? Or do the days represent epochs of time? For a long time I've held to a young earth theory, though I am sensitive to the arguments for the word "day" meaning something longer than a literal day. After all, Genesis 1 is written in chiasmic form, and it could therefore be argued that perhaps it is more poetic than narrative. However, what brings me back to the young earth, six literal days of creation, is the fourth commandment, to "remember the Sabbath day." In this commandment, the observation of a Sabbath is established on the basis that "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them" and then "rested on the seventh day." It seems far-fetched to think that Moses believed these days were representative of a larger amount of time. Those six days of work, followed by a seventh day of rest, serve as the model for what will become one of the most important days of the Jewish calendar, and a shadow of the ultimate rest we find in the Messiah, Christ Jesus.

---

### **Read the Text:**

*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11, ESV)*

---

### **Study the Text:**

## Remember the Sabbath Day

The fourth commandment has been the subject of much debate through the centuries of the church, especially. Prior to the new covenant, the Sabbath was clearly a day of remembrance and holiness on what we would call "Saturday." However, after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the church opted to gather on "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10), and questions over whether or not the Sabbath would be observed on the traditionally accepted Saturday or the newly minted Sunday arose. Additionally, some have argued that the Sabbath is no longer designated on a day, but in a person, the man Christ Jesus. Beyond that, questions have arisen concerning the central focus of the Sabbath, whether it is more about worship or more about rest, and whether the day is for primarily sacred purposes still or more practical. Below is a brief breakdown of some of the prominent views of the Sabbath.

### **THE COMMON EVANGELICAL POSITION**

The common evangelical position is that simply, “the Sabbath was an Old Testament practice that we no longer are bound to in the new covenant.” This is, of course, an unfounded argument unless we are willing to throw out the rest of the Ten Commandments on the same grounds. Some have suggested we should throw out the Ten Commandments and only receive what the New Testament restates. Proponents of this argument will note that all ten of the commandments are restated in the New Testament with the exception of the fourth commandment, which is spiritualized in Christ. There is no longer a legal obligation to remember the Sabbath because Jesus is “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8), and He Himself is the fulfillment of the Sabbath demands and the person in which we find our eternal rest (Heb. 4:9-11). Advocates of this position see a clear distinction between The Lord’s Day (Sunday) and the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday).

### **JOHN CALVIN’S POSITION**

Surprisingly, the Genevan reformer John Calvin held a pretty relaxed view of the Sabbath. In his well-known *Institutes*, Calvin argued that there are three purposes of the Sabbath for the Christian. Primarily, the Sabbath represents “spiritual rest, in which believers ought to lay aside their own works to allow God to work in them.”<sup>1</sup> Frame summarizes this by saying: “Salvation is by rest, not work,” and, “since we have the reality (Christ), we no longer need to carry on this symbolic observance.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the spiritual aspect of resting on the Sabbath is no longer necessary because we find eternal rest in the finished work of Christ, who is the Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8). There are, however, still reasons to observe the Sabbath in Calvin’s mind. For one, Christians should set aside time once a week for worship and reflection on God’s goodness. For Calvin, it need not necessarily be Sunday (or any specific day for that matter), but it should be weekly. Beyond that, Christians ought to give weekly rest to their servants (or employees, to use a modern application). Calvin’s position is one that I personally am close to. I do not believe the Sabbath rest is binding on Christians in the same way it was for Israel, but I do think there needs to be a commitment to weekly rest and worship.

### **SYNOD OF DORT’S POSITION**

The Synod of Dort (1618-19) sees both “a ceremonial and a moral element in the fourth commandment”<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Calvin, Dort advocates not only for a weekly day of worship, but a *definite day* of worship on the Lord’s Day, *Sunday*. This day is to replace the previous Old Covenant’s day of rest and worship on Saturday, albeit in a new covenant framework. The Sabbath, as it pertained to Israel, is still not binding on the people of God, according to Dort. Beyond that, while Calvin saw the necessity of rest in practical terms, Dort specifies that rest is a necessity in order to keep the day “holy,” as the fourth commandment explicates.

### **THE WESTMINSTER POSITION**

The Westminster Larger Catechism is, as you might have guessed, the longest and most restrictive position. The WLC describes “the Lord’s Day” as the Christian Sabbath, and asks: “How is the sabbath or the Lord’s day to be sanctified?” It answers: “The sabbath or Lord’s day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God’s worship: and, to

---

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 2.8.28.

<sup>2</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 517.

<sup>3</sup> Synod of Dort, *The Canons of Dort*, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 4: 1600-1693*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 5.

that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.” Westminster shifts the focus from rest to worship. It advocates for a total ceasing of any kind of work or even enjoyment (working out, tossing a baseball, mowing the lawn) except for “works of necessity and mercy.”

Westminster frames the Sabbath as unchanging from creation to redemption, with the sole exception that the day moves from Saturday to Sunday in light of the Lord’s resurrection. It qualifies the Sabbath as “a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.7). Every restriction that was placed upon Israel should be still placed upon the church.

## Rest or Worship?

The major weakness of Westminster is its insistence on worship over rest. The problem with highlighting worship over rest in the context of the fourth commandment is that nowhere in either the Exodus rendition of or Deuteronomy’s rendition of it is there a mention of worship. Rest, or the ceasing of work, is the central idea of the fourth commandment. Exodus 34:21 forbids plowing and harvesting. There is a prohibition against treading the winepress and transporting goods for sale in Nehemiah 13:15-18. Amos 8:4-6 prohibits buying and selling good as well. Jeremiah 17:22 prohibits any heavy burdens “out of your houses.” In Numbers 15:32-36, a man is put to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath after explicitly being told not to work. Exodus 35:2 forbids kindling fires.

Moreover, the restatement of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy provides another contour to this discussion. In the Exodus account, rest is tied to God’s rest on the seventh day of creation, something the LORD did not need to do, but models for us as a necessity for creation. But in Deuteronomy, rest is linked to God’s redemptive measures to bring Israel out of Egypt (Deut. 5:12-15). This adds to the focus of rest in the fourth commandment. Israel was worked nearly to death by their masters in Egypt, but God redeemed them out of Egypt and into the promised land, thus providing them a kind of rest. Rest is the focus. It always has been, and it remains to be the focus in light of the finished work of Christ, who now rests at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 4:9-11).

## What About Now?

The major takeaway is the importance of rest. To view the Sabbath primarily in terms of worship is to miss the force of the commandment. Should one worship on the Sabbath? Yes, but Christians should worship every day of the week. By contrast, Christians should rest one day a week, and not because they are Christians, but because they are human beings designed to need it. Any view of the fourth commandment that highlights worship over rest is missing the point. Therefore, as a secondary takeaway, this means that limiting work on one day a week is crucial to recovery and renewal, but that does not necessarily limit all work. For example, I would do well to not read or write theological works on Sunday. I should rest from those things. However, it would not hurt me to mow my lawn or go on a picnic with my family (something that requires a lot of work!). Why? Because those things renew me to some extent, and bring a sense of joy that I otherwise wouldn’t have. Gray areas might include painting a room or doing some home project. If I am rejuvenated by such work, great, but not at the expense of physical burnout. Rest is key.

# Study Questions

## Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:8. What is the commandment?

---

---

2. Read Exodus 20:9. For how many days should the people labor?

---

---

## Day Two

1. Read Exodus 20:10. What things are restricted in this verse?

---

---

2. Read Exodus 20:11. What is this commandment based on? What passage does this reference?

---

---

## Day Three

1. Read Deuteronomy 5:12. What is the commandment described here?

---

---

2. Read Deuteronomy 5:13. According to this verse, how many days are the people of God to labor?

---

---

## Day Four

1. Read Deuteronomy 5:14. What are the restrictions for the Sabbath in this verse?

---

---

2. Read Deuteronomy 5:15. What is the commandment based upon? How is this different than the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8-11?

---

---

**Discuss the Text!****Week 51 Discussion: Rest Matters**

The major focus of the fourth commandment is the importance of rest. Talk as a group about your rest habits, and where (maybe) you need improvement.

1. Icebreaker: Is rest important to you?
2. Do you rest at least one day a week? If not, why not?
3. Do you rest for more than one day a week? If so, why?
4. Of the different Sabbath positions highlight in this study, which appeals most to you? Why?
5. Do you think the Sabbath is more about rest or worship? Why? Use Scripture to make your case.
6. How important is consistent church attendance to you? Why?
7. Kid Talk (For Home): What things help you rest the most? What are ways we as a family could rest?

**Takeaways:**

1. The fourth commandment is about resting on the Sabbath.
2. The spiritual rest Christians find in the Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ, and therefore the legal binding of this law is no longer active, hence why it is the only commandment not directly restated in the New Testament.
3. Christians should still rest once a week for reasons connected to both creation and redemption.