
Entering Rest

Exodus 23:10-33

Introduction Rest is a good thing. I know that sometimes I have said, “Sleep is a waste of time.” But age and pace and growing bodily weakness has taught me that rest is a good thing.

What an odd setting here in Exodus 23 to be talking about rest

In such a fenced and fearsome place, with thundering and lightening and a shuddering fear commands come, “Rest!” In noise and tumult, with God descending on the mountain and a mediator standing between, “Rest!”

With such an emphasis on do or die. Here are God’s commands. They must do them. They must do every one of them. They must do them all the time. They must do them from the heart, with a full obedience that believes what God says and desires what God requires with joy. If they do, they will be blest. If they do not, they will be cursed. And one of the commands, “Rest!”

Yet the Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant. At the center of the Decalogue, at the center of God’s Constitution of the nation of Israel, came the command to set aside the Sabbath as holy. What would mark God’s believing people was rest.

Why is ceasing from work so vital to life? Is this merely a health concern? Is this just a natural cycle designed by God and built into His created order? Let’s think together around this text so that we all will enter God’s rest.

In the Sabbath Cycles

(v. 10-13)

¹⁰ For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, ¹¹ but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

¹² Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.

¹³ Pay attention to all that I have said to you, and make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let it be heard on your lips.

Just before confirming the covenant, God expands on what is meant by the Sabbath rest. This is an expansion and explanation of the commandment in the Decalogue. The key is in the rhythm of work and rest. The word translated rest also means, to cease. So the point here is that there is a time to work and a time to cease work. This work and cease are commanded in sets of cycles that reflect what God did in creation and demonstrate the sovereign rule of God over His people.

The Land's Rest**(v.10-11)**

God commands that the land be allowed to cease from its work of producing crops. They were to sow and reap for six years. In the seventh year, they were to cease from sowing and reaping. The land was to simply be allowed to lie fallow. The poor and the beasts could glean and graze from what would grow up on the land. But the land could not be worked, including the vineyards and orchards.

In an agricultural economy, this meant that a certain amount of planning had to take place. Food and seed had to be set aside to live off of during the year of rest. Once Israel entered the land, this command took effect. Yet, for 490 years, over 20 generations of Israelites failed to keep this command. For the same number of years that they were in Egypt, they failed to cease from working the land. So God sent them into the Babylonian exile to give the land its rest, to punish Israel for her many sins and begin the times of the Gentiles.

The People's Rest**(v.12)**

The Lord also commanded that after six days of work, the people and the beasts should cease from work. They should rest and be refreshed. The Sabbaths were the sign of the Mosaic Covenant. It functioned in the Mosaic Covenant the same way that circumcision functioned in the Abrahamic Covenant. It was the mark that people were under the respective covenants. So, Israel's keeping the Sabbaths marked them uniquely as God's people. They had to believe God in an obeying way that caused them to, once a week and one year every seven years and later, one additional year every fifty years, to cease from their work.

The Lord's Command**(v.13)**

This suite of commands in relation to their ceasing from work is closed with and tied closely to the confession of their mouths. They were to pay close attention to what God had said and commanded. They were to understand that these commands were more than just good for the land and good for the body. The commands themselves pointed to something greater. The keeping of the commands was interwoven with the uniqueness of God's name on them and in them, of their being God's people. To keep the commands while confessing allegiance to false gods was useless. To confess the name of God while disobeying the commands was also useless. In the very linkage here, the ways in which Israel would disobey and break the covenant, placing themselves under the curse of the covenant was anticipated.

I want to pause to think together about a theology of Sabbaths. Usually, Christians want to jump immediately to an obvious question: are we to keep the Sabbath? But to do that, we need a Biblical Theology of the Sabbath.

God created the universe and all that is in it in six days and ceased from His work in the seventh day. God did not "rest" because he was tired or needed refreshment or any such thing. God ceased from His work because it was finished (Genesis 2:1-3).

Adam fell into sin bringing depravity, fallenness and the curse upon the creation. God resumed His work to bring about a new creation through redemptive history (John 4:34; 5:17-36; 17:4; Ephesians 1:19-20).

God gave the Sabbaths (please note that I use the plural – the Sabbaths were not just weekly, but also a cycle of seven years and fifty years) as a sign in the Mosaic Covenant that God’s people believed Him in an obeying way. Israel failed in to keep the Sabbaths resulting in their judgment and removal from the land into captivity (Leviticus 19:3-30; 26:2; Ezekiel 20:12-24).

Jesus is the reality, the substance of which the Sabbaths are a shadow. Jesus came to do the will and the work of His Father in redemption. He was working because His Father was working. At the cross in the moment of His death, He cried out, “It is finished.” The work that had been resumed at the fall was now completed. In the resurrection, the rest was entered as the new creation was begun. Christ fulfilled the Sabbaths of the Mosaic Law just as He did the whole rest of the Law (Hebrews 4:1-11).

Christ is our Sabbath rest – we do not work for our salvation. The work of our salvation has already been completed. All those who believe and bow, all those who cease from work and rest in Christ, owning God as their sovereign Lord have entered the Sabbath rest of the new creation, but not yet fully (Hebrews 4).

Believers no longer are under the Mosaic Law and do not keep the Sabbaths. To return to the cult of Judaism is to leave Christ (Galatians 4:1-11, Hebrews 13:9-16). While observing a regular time or day of rest is wise for the sake of the body and the soul, we are not Sabbath keepers. We set aside a day of worship to celebrate the resurrection as the beginning of the new creation, not as Sabbath keeping to celebrate the old creation (Matthew 28:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).

There is yet a grand future Sabbath, when we will cease from sin with a glorified body in the new heavens and the new earth.

The next suite of commands continues the expansion of the Decalogue with a clear linkage between the Sabbath rests and the Cycle of Feasts and Festivals.

With the Festival Cycle

(v.14-19)

¹⁴ Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. ¹⁵ You shall keep the Feast 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. None shall appear before me empty-handed. ¹⁶ You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. ¹⁷ Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord GOD.

¹⁸ You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my feast remain until the morning.

¹⁹ The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.

While later Jewish traditions would add other celebrations and feasts to commemorate important days in their national history, God commands three festivals at this point in this text surrounded by this context. These three feasts, by celebrating joyous things in their time and place, anticipate greater things in redemptive history, in future times and persons.

By the Pilgrim Feasts

(v.14-17)

These three feasts have rightly been called the “Pilgrim Feasts” for they require at the feast that every male in Israel appear before the Lord, that is, at the Tabernacle and Temple.

They were to celebrate the *FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD*. We are more familiar with this feast under the name, the Passover. This feast had been commanded to Israel as they departed from Egypt. It was to commemorate their redemption from Egypt. It pointed forward to Christ, our unleavened manna and bread of life the Passover Lamb who was slain for us on the cross by taking the curse of the Law and the punishment for sin, suffering on behalf of those who were chosen and would believe.

They were to celebrate the *FEAST OF HARVEST*. It became known through the Scriptures as the Feast of Weeks and ended with what we know as Pentecost. This was a celebration of the beginning of the harvest. When the first sheaves of wheat were ready to be harvested, the festival was to begin. It ran for 7 weeks. On the fiftieth day, they were to bring a grand offering celebrating the harvest. This fiftieth day corresponded to the year of jubilee, the fiftieth year.

The feast pointed forward to God giving His Spirit through His Son to the church for its work in the gospel harvest. The once for all pouring out of Spirit on the Apostles launched the harvest of the elect through the preaching of the gospel. The work of the Word and Spirit in the gospel began in Jerusalem and is going through out all the people groups until the end of the age when all are gathered in.

They were to celebrate the *FEAST OF INGATHERING*. It was also called the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. Later instruction in the Mosaic Law called on all the males in Israel to bring their harvest tithe and offerings to the Tabernacle and Temple. While they were in Jerusalem, they were to build simple booths to live in during the feast weekend. The ingathered harvest was celebrated in the presence of God in gratitude and glory to Him.

This feast points to Christ at His return when the ingathering of the elect is complete. The sequence of the agricultural or pilgrim feasts and their use in the New Testament are a part of the Biblical Theology of the Bible. The feasts are realities in themselves for the people to whom they were given. The Israelites were to celebrate the feasts obediently from the heart. And the feasts point forward to greater realities, to Christ and what God has purposed in Christ. Christ and the Apostles were reading, explaining and applying these feasts even as the realities they pointed to were unfolding and were fulfilled.

The sentence of verse 17 is the core of the festivals and feasts of Israel. Every male in Israel was to appear before the Lord three times. Yet, as Israel’s history unfolded, they failed in this as well. The prophets condemn the men of Israel for not gathering and for gathering without heart obedience. So once again, we are prepared in Israel’s failure to look to someone and something greater. He is the faithful man, living before the face of God, bringing redemption to His people, sending His Spirit to gather and indwell His people and becoming the grand object of their celebration at the end of the harvest in the end of days.

In the Distinguishing Guidelines (v.18-19)

The pilgrim festivals are grounded in three distinguishing commands.

God's people must come with pure sacrifices before God. This first instruction calls for complete obedience to God in the sacrifices they bring. They recognize that sin requires an unblemished sacrifice. Furthermore, they need to make the connections between the present commands in Exodus and what they had been instructed earlier. Thus, this command is particularly related to the first feast.

God's people must bring the first and the best in the offerings to God. This instruction calls for God's people to set God first in their hearts. The very best of the very first must be brought. The act of bringing is not merely what is in view. It is the heart exposing, heart transforming belief in the preeminence of God that motivates bringing the best. So the second festival tests hearts even as it celebrates the goodness of God and points dimly to a glorious, age long ingathering of the elect.

What a wonderful theme is wrapped up in this word. "firstfruits".

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| 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23 | But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. |
| Romans 8:23 | And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. |
| 2 Thessalonians 2:13 | But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. |
| James 1:18 | Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. |

So the offering they brought every harvest year pointed to and was fulfilled by Christ in His resurrection who was the firstfruit of the new creation. Those early believers were the firstfruits of the age long harvest. Believers are the firstfruits of the new creation in the new heavens and new earth until it fully consummated.

God's people must live differently from the world in detailed obedience to God. This seemingly odd little sentence in verse 19 is not a footnote, a by-the-way or a random command seemingly out of nowhere. It is repeated several times in the Mosaic Law. It marks the Israelites under the Mosaic Covenant as a people who obey God in what seem to be trivial details. Not boiling meat in milk may have health ramifications. Not boiling a baby goat in what is supposed to sustain its life may have social impacts. Not doing this may have set them apart from what was a common practice in the idolatrous cultures around them. Whatever the underlying motive may be, at the end of the day it made them different. As a nomadic people they were personally and practically to be and to live differently.

By the Conquering Leader**(v.20-33)**

God's provision is in Sabbath rests, celebratory festivals and now by a conquering leader. They are headed towards the Promised Land. As a people becoming a nation through this Mosaic Covenant, through this national constitution, they were anticipating having a place, a land, a country. That land had been promised to their patriarchal fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now, they are being told that they will fulfill that promise at some level by occupying the land, by defeating, destroying and displacing the peoples and nations that lived there. Now listen to what is actually written here in this text and see if you hear echoes in the New Testament (or more properly, this is an echo of the voice of the New Testament).¹⁸

An Angel who Leads and Commands**(v.20-22)**

²⁰ Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹ Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.

²² But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

“Look at this,” Moses says. “Behold!” Look, here is someone sent from God who will guard you on the way. He will actually bring you to a prepared place. Furthermore, this angel is invested with kingly authority. They are required to pay attention to him with an aim to obey him. His authority is such that disobedience is called rebellion and transgression. They are warned that those transgressions will not be pardoned, which is both royal and redemptive language. Then the reason is given, “For my Name is in him.” He will not just have the name of God on Him as was said of the human priests, judges and kings of Israel. The Name, the character and reputation of God are in him. But, if they will hear and heed this angel, which is equated with doing all God says (v.22), then God will fight for them and oppose those who oppose them.

Now, who is this angel? Is this Michael, the archangel? Is this just some commander of God's heavenly host? No, then thousand times, no. This is the angel of the Lord. This is the One who met Moses in the burning bush. This is One who stood on the rock, struck by Moses. This is the Captain of the Hosts that met with Joshua as he took up the task of obeying this command. This is the Lord Jesus Christ who was sent to them to lead them into the land who would be their king, the authoritative voice of God and the regent on the throne.

An Angel who Brings them into the land**(v.23-31)**

²³ When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, ²⁴ you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. ²⁵ You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. ²⁶ None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. ²⁷ I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will

¹⁸ I am reflecting here in my voice analogy the Biblical analogy of substance and shadow. The Old Testament is a shadow of the New Covenant realities. So, the OT is an echo of the NT voice.

make all your enemies turn their backs to you. ²⁸ And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. ²⁹ I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. ³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. ³¹ And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.

This Angel, whom they must pay attention to, will lead them into the land that they must conquer. They will conquer through their work in obedience to Him. He has a strategy for them to carry out. He will strengthen them to defeat their enemies while sending assistance through His terror and the land's hornets. But it will be a slow gradual process, not because of the strength of the opponent, but because in order to preserve the land prepared for them.

They are being sent to conquer a land from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, from Sinai Wilderness to the Euphrates. Nowhere ever in Israel's history did they ever conquer this territory. Even in the height of the David Kingdom, they did not obey God in pressing into the land given them, defeating and displacing the nations that were there. Once again, we are confronted head on with the failure of Israel under the Old Covenant all the way up to Christ. They did not receive the blessing of the Covenant because they disobeyed the Covenant *and forfeited the blessing*.

Now, why is that? Why is this here? This paragraph is critical to understand what went wrong in the book of Joshua that eventually led to the period of the Judges and gave rise to the human kings of Israel. But they failed. They did not pay attention to Him. They did not follow Him. They did not hear and heed Him and so they did not actually conquer the land.

Towards the end of His ministry, as Jesus is heading to the cross, He breaks the news to His disciples that He is going away. The disciples are shocked! Will they be able to go with Him? Listen to His answer, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." I hear the true voice of which Exodus is the echo. Here is Jesus, with his disciples, preparing through the cross, the resurrection and the ascension to enter the true Promised Land, the heaven prepared for us. Then He will come through His Spirit to bring us into the land prepared for us.

How is this land entered? By conquering the enemy of sin, the world and Satan over time beginning in us. Thus will entering the Land be brought to its fulfillment. Then, united in Christ as one body, with glorified bodies all of God's people will experience the full realization of the kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth.

So there is a rest to be entered. This rest is entered by faith in Christ where we cease from our working for salvation. This rest is being ever more realized all across the nations through the age as people believe in and bow to Christ. The

rest of belief is being lived out with holiness and wisdom in radical obedience to Christ. So sin is being conquered in each believer's life, in the community of believers until Jesus comes and delivers us from the world of sin.

A Warning that Protects from Apostasy (v.32-33)

³² You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. ³³ They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you."

Moses warns of the danger of co-dwelling in the Promised Land with the godless nations. They were not to enter into covenants with them. They were not to worship their gods. The best way to prevent apostasy away from the Lord was to remove the source of the temptation.

Did they do this? No. They failed in this as well. They continued to live side-by-side with the nations right up until the time of King David. Even after the exile, they intermarried with the pagans around them invoking the wrath of their leaders and their God.

But what a glorious thing that Christ has come and we can enter rest. Watch how Hebrews develops this:

Joshua did not bring in the Sabbath Rest even though they came into the land.

Jesus did bring us the Sabbath Rest by completing the work God was doing.

Sabbath Rest is what we enter by faith, by believing God in an obeying way.

The Sabbath Rest is brought in, experienced and consummated by the realities to which the Festival's point.

In the New Covenant, our Lord Jesus, brings us into heaven's rest both in principle at our conversion and then bit by bit until our glorification.

Conclusion

I want to close this morning by reading Hebrews 3:12-4:11 from the NLT.

²Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. ¹³You must warn each other every day, while it is still today," so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. ¹⁴For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ. ¹⁵Remember what it says: Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled."

¹⁶And who was it who rebelled against God, even though they heard his voice? Wasn't it the people Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷And who made God angry for forty years? Wasn't it the people who sinned, whose corpses lay in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom was God speaking when he took an oath that they would never enter his rest? Wasn't it the people who disobeyed him? ¹⁹So we see that because of their unbelief they were not able to enter his rest.

God's promise of entering his rest still stands, so we ought to tremble with fear that some of you might fail to experience it. ²For this good news—that God has prepared this rest—has been announced to us just as it was to them. But it did them no good because they didn't share the faith of those who listened to God. ³For only we who believe can enter his rest. As for the others, God said, In my anger I took an oath: 'They will never enter my place of rest,' "even though this rest has been ready since he made the world. ⁴We know it is ready because of the place in the Scriptures where it mentions the seventh day: "On the seventh day God rested from all his work." ⁵But in the other passage God said, "They will never enter my place of rest."

⁶So God's rest is there for people to enter, but those who first heard this good news failed to enter because they disobeyed God. ⁷So God set another time for entering his rest, and that time is today. God announced this through David much later in the words already quoted: "Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts."

⁸Now if Joshua had succeeded in giving them this rest, God would not have spoken about another day of rest still to come. ⁹So there is a special rest still waiting for the people of God. ¹⁰For all who have entered into God's rest have rested from their labors, just as God did after creating the world.

¹¹So let us do our best to enter that rest.