

The Sabbath

It seems that God is very keen on the Sabbath.

The opening of the book of Genesis explains that God created the world in six days, and then sabbathed – rested or ceased – on the seventh day. He blessed it and made it holy (2:2). The words seven and Sabbath are similar in Hebrew.

Later, when the ten commandments were given, observing the Sabbath came in at number four, with a reference to God resting after his creation (Exodus 20:8-11). The Israelites were to observe a weekly cycle, with no work being done on the seventh day. There were in addition to be festival days each year when no work was to be done (Leviticus 23:3ff).

This principle was to be deeply embedded in their life. When they entered the promised land, there was to be a Sabbath year. For six years they were to sow their fields and tend their vineyards, but in the seventh year, they were to desist. The land was to have a year of rest. Then after seven Sabbaths of years – forty-nine years – they were to have a year of jubilee in year fifty, when there was to be freedom throughout the land for all its inhabitants. The sale of land was to be only until the next jubilee: on that date land was to be returned.

Sadly, the people ignored these commands. When they were finally taken into exile, part of the reason was their failure to keep the Sabbath during the period of kingship and before. Indeed, the exile was to last seventy years, so that the land could enjoy the Sabbaths it had never had (Leviticus 26:34-35).

Note the forbearance of God. It seems that the people had been ignoring the Sabbath for four hundred and ninety years before he finally acted in punishment. He is slow to anger (Exodus 34:6).

This time frame of 490 years surfaced again when Daniel prayed to God for an end to the exile. In the coming period of kingship, the struggle would intensify. The world's rulers were going to behave like beasts, attacking one another, with grim consequences for the city and its sanctuary (Daniel 9:26 & chs 10-12). But then, the final Sabbath rest for the people would bring in cleansing from sin and wickedness (Daniel 9:24, Hebrews ch3). Something to look forward to.

The purposes of God are obscure: his ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9). However, in this instance, we are given a glimpse of his thinking.

Having one day in seven when there is no work of any kind, including no work for the alien and the servants (Deuteronomy 5:14) is for our benefit, to save us from being exploited. It is not good for people to spend all their time working.

I had a vivid example of this. A man I knew only a little had a specialised job in a company which got into difficulties. The result was that he worked seven days a week for several years in a row, without any annual leave. They were long days involving miles of commuting. The day came when he had a stroke. He managed to recover from that, but then he developed a cancer, and he died in his fifties. In my opinion, he died from over-work.

I am writing this during lock-down, in April 2020. I see our current season as a period of enforced Sabbath rest. Our nation had embraced the principle of a day off each week, observing it on Sunday, but in 1994 we passed the Sunday trading act which ended that. The people who have suffered since are the poorly paid, forced to work on Sundays.

If our current period of enforced Sabbath rest is to make up for the Sabbaths we have missed, then we can expect it to last for one seventh of twenty-six years, which means it might come to an end at the end of 2023.

Prepare for the long haul.

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