

September 17
Lesson 3 (NIV)

SABBATH

OBSERVANCE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 92

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 31:12-18; Isaiah 56:1-8

EXODUS 31:12-18

¹² Then the LORD said to Moses, ¹³ “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.

¹⁴ “Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it is to be put to death; those who do any work on that day must be cut off from their people.

¹⁵ For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death. ¹⁶ The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. ¹⁷ It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”

¹⁸ When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.



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KEY VERSES

You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you.—Exodus 31:13b, 14a

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the Sabbath regulations of the Mosaic covenant.
2. Explain Jesus' statement in [Mark 2:27](#).
3. Explain to a fellow believer why Sabbath observance does not apply in the New Testament era.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. The Dark Side of Achievement
- B. Lesson Background

I. Sacred Sabbath ([EXODUS 31:12-15](#))

- A. Special Sign ([vv. 12-14a](#))
- B. Severe Penalty ([vv. 14b, 15](#))

II. Continual Covenant ([EXODUS 31:16, 17](#))

- A. Throughout the Generations ([v. 16](#))
- B. Imitating the Lord ([v. 17](#))

Till . . . What?

III. Tablets of Testimony ([EXODUS 31:18](#))

In Stone and from Stone

Conclusion

- A. Why Sabbath Observance is Obsolete
- B. Why the Sabbath Principle Still Stands
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. The Dark Side of Achievement

The term *burnout* was popularized in the 1970s by American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger. In working with those who devoted themselves to serving others in free clinics, Freudenberger found that many clinic workers became exhausted, listless, and unable to cope over time. Doctors, nurses, and social workers exhibited burnout when their idealism gave way to cynicism as they felt increasingly ineffective and helpless. Today the word *burnout* is applied to those who are stressed-out in many other professions as well.

The negative effects of burnout at work spill over into home and social life. When that happens, relationships do not get the full focus they deserve, prioritizing becomes difficult, and busyness replaces true accomplishment. Over the long run, burnout can make people vulnerable to illness.

Our bodies have limitations. Overwork paired with insufficient rest is a poisonous recipe for burnout. Today we will look at God's antidote.

B. Lesson Background

The subject of our lesson is early instruction to the Israelites regarding the Sabbath. But this instruction was not the first on this subject. The first mention of the word *Sabbath* as a noun was when God provided manna as the Israelites sojourned toward Mount Sinai. Two days' worth was to be gathered on the sixth day of the week so the people could rest on the seventh—the Sabbath ([Exodus 16:21-30](#)). On any other day, gathering more than one day's worth resulted in spoilage ([16:20](#)). But manna gathered on the sixth day and saved for the Sabbath did not spoil ([16:24](#)).

In the third month after leaving Egypt, the Israelites assembled in front of Mount Sinai ([Exodus 19:1](#)). There God spoke to them and gave them the Ten Commandments ([20:1-17](#)). The requirement to keep the Sabbath was the fourth of those and was the longest ([20:8-11](#)). Further instructions regarding the Sabbath followed. These required land to be left fallow one year in seven; a weekly Sabbath rest for every person and beast of burden was mandatory ([23:10-12](#)).

Moses confirmed the covenant with the people in [Exodus 24](#); then God called him again to the top of the mountain to receive more instructions ([24:12](#)). A break of sorts occurs with [Exodus 24:18](#) when Moses "stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights." The section that follows ([Exodus 25-31](#)) records God's commands about the construction of the tabernacle and how to furnish it. Today's text comes at the conclusion of this section.

I. Sacred Sabbath

([EXODUS 31:12-15](#))

A. Special Sign (vv. 12-14a)

¹². Then the LORD said to Moses,

This is the seventh time in the section [Exodus 25-31](#) that the Lord is recorded as speaking to Moses (the other six are [Exodus 25:1](#); [30:11](#), [17](#), [22](#), [34](#); [31:1](#)). Parallels have been drawn between this feature and the seven days of creation in [Genesis 1:1-2:3](#). We may observe that the seventh day in Genesis is the original Sabbath; the seventh time the Lord speaks in [Exodus 25-31](#), the subject is the Sabbath (a Hebrew word transliterated into English).

^{13a}. "Say to the Israelites, 'You must observe my Sabbaths.

This is not the first mention of Sabbath in our Bibles. The first occurs in [Exodus 16:23](#) (see the Lesson Background). Going back further, when [Genesis 2:2](#) says that "on the seventh day [God] rested from all his work," the Hebrew word underneath the translation "rested" is *Sabbath*; but there it is a verb, not a noun as in [Exodus 16:23](#). [Genesis 2:3](#) also features the verb form of this word: "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating." There is no mention, however, of how the seventh day was sanctified (made holy) or how (or whether) God's people observe it as such.

^{13b}. "This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.

Circumcision is considered a covenant sign between God and his people ([Genesis 17:9-11](#), last week's lesson), but that rite is limited to males. Keeping the Sabbath, by contrast, applies to all Israelites. [Exodus 20:8](#) speaks of keeping the Sabbath holy; in the verse before us, however, the emphasis is on the holiness of the Sabbath keeper: *I am the Lord, who makes you holy*. To be made holy is to be sanctified or set apart. Prior to giving Israel the Ten Commandments, God had called his people "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" ([Exodus 19:6](#); compare [Revelation 1:6](#); [5:10](#); [20:6](#)).

What Do You Think?

What helps you most to guard your sanctification in and for Christ? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning physical disciplines (dietary practices, etc.)
- Concerning spiritual disciplines (prayer, etc.)
- Concerning mental disciplines (Christian reading, etc.)

^{14a}. "Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you.

We just learned that the Sabbath is to be kept because it is a sign that God's people are holy. Now we are back to a reflection of [Exodus 20:8](#), where the day itself is holy. This matches what we just observed about [Genesis 2:3](#).

B. Severe Penalty (vv. 14b, 15)

^{14b}. "Anyone who desecrates it is to be put to death; those who do any work on that day must be cut off from

their people.

The primary means of observing or keeping the Sabbath is refraining from work. Rest—which is what the word *Sabbath* means—is the key to keeping the day as God intends. Another feature of Sabbath observance is found in [Numbers 28:9, 10](#), where the daily offerings are to be doubled on that day (compare [2 Chronicles 2:4; 8:13](#)). [Leviticus 23:3](#) indicates the Sabbath is a day for a “sacred assembly.” That seems to be an umbrella term that includes not only the Sabbath but also the first day of the week ([Exodus 12:16](#)), feasts ([Leviticus 23:4](#)), and the Day of Atonement ([23:27](#)).

While bodily rest is not the only means of Sabbath observance, it is the aspect that carries the stiffest penalty if not observed. Anyone who *desecrates it* by doing *any work* on the Sabbath is to *be put to death*. [Numbers 15:32-36](#) records the one time we know of when this penalty was carried out. It happened during the wilderness experience of Israel when a man was found gathering sticks, presumably firewood (building a fire is also prohibited on the Sabbath; see [Exodus 35:2, 3](#)).

When the offender is brought before Moses and Aaron, there is uncertainty regarding what to do. Such uncertainty seems strange in light of the clear command in this text, but perhaps the issue in question is the means of execution. The Lord declares that the offender is to be stoned, and that is what happens. Stoning is also the punishment for blasphemy, and that is no doubt what the Lord intends for Israel to understand regarding the gravity of defiling the Sabbath. It is holy, as God is holy, so to defile the Sabbath is an act of blasphemy.

¹⁵ “For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death.

There is no new information here; the repetition is for emphasis. Only *six days* of a week are for work; then Sabbath rest is prescribed in the Mosaic law—in several places (examples: [Exodus 20:9-11; 23:12; 34:21; Leviticus 23:3; Deuteronomy 5:13-15](#)). The sanctity of the Sabbath is paramount. No work may be done on that day. This explains the intensity of the Jewish leaders’ opposition of what they considered “work” by Jesus on the Sabbath ([Luke 13:14](#)).

Yet there are practical exceptions to this law, and Jesus cites one example in answer to the synagogue ruler’s complaint: those who own livestock do the work required to give the animal water on the Sabbath ([Luke 13:15](#)). Elsewhere Jesus points out that priests work on the Sabbath and are yet “innocent” ([Matthew 12:5](#); compare [Numbers 28:9, 19](#)). In an emergency, the owner of a sheep might work on the Sabbath without incurring guilt ([Matthew 12:11](#)). And any parent whose son turns eight days old on the Sabbath will have the child circumcised on that day so “that the law of Moses may not be broken” ([John 7:22, 23](#)).

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances, if any, is it appropriate to approve an exception to a command of God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding Old Testament commands
- Regarding New Testament commands
- Considering the motives of those involved
- Considering “the lesser of two evils” concept
- Considering scriptural exceptions
- Other

Jesus summarizes the nature of the Sabbath this way: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” ([Mark 2:27](#)). The Sabbath was instituted to provide relief from labor. There is no eight-hour workday in either Moses’ day or in Jesus’. For six days people labor for 12 hours ([John 11:9](#); compare [Matthew 20:1-12](#)). A day of rest is needed to recharge the body. It’s hard to keep one’s spiritual defenses up when the body is continually exhausted.

II. Continual Covenant

([EXODUS 31:16, 17](#))

A. Throughout the Generations (v. 16)

¹⁶ “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant.

The word translated *lasting* is the same one translated “everlasting” of the rainbow in [Genesis 9:16 \(lesson 1\)](#) and of circumcision in [17:7 \(lesson 2\)](#). Until the old covenant is replaced by the new, the endurance of Sabbath regulations is *lasting* throughout the generations of Israel.

Some believers honor the Sabbath in various ways even today, with practices varying widely. Some groups insist that Saturday, the seventh day of the week and the Sabbath, is the proper day of worship for the church. They hold services and restrict activity on Saturday. Others simply import Sabbath regulations from the old covenant into their understanding of the church’s responsibility; some of these folks even use the word *Sabbath* to refer to Sunday, the first day of the week. According to these believers, only those who respond to emergencies (fire, police, hospital staff, etc.) should engage in work on Sunday. Still others take a more temperate view, holding a personal preference for refraining from work on Sunday but not insisting on the practice by others (compare [Romans 14:5](#)).

The New Testament practice overall seems most like the temperate view. Jewish believers of the first century AD continue to observe the Sabbath and many other aspects of the Law of Moses. Even Paul, “the apostle to the Gentiles” ([Romans 11:13](#)), practices certain ceremonial portions of the law ([Acts 18:18; 21:20-24; 24:17](#)).

But Paul also notes that pressure to conform to Sabbath rules must be resisted ([Colossians 2:16, 17](#)). Sabbath observance is not to be imposed on the church. As the new covenant comes into force, the old covenant “is obsolete and outdated” and “will soon disappear” ([Hebrews 8:13](#)).

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to a fellow believer who insists that worship, rest, and essential functions are the only allowable activities for Christians on Sunday?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding the basis of his or her belief
- Regarding the original-creation basis of Sabbath regulations as contrasted with the new-creation emphasis of the new covenant
- Considering [Romans 14:5; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13; Colossians 2:16-19; Hebrews 4:9](#)

B. Imitating the Lord (v. 17)

¹⁷. “It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”

Also like circumcision, Sabbath observance serves as a *sign* of God’s covenant with Israel. The tribes of Israel will be in constant contact with pagan groups during and after taking the promised land. Such groups will either influence Israel to serve the Baals or will be influenced by Israel to serve Yahweh. The pagans’ observance of how the Israelites rest on the Sabbath can serve as a witness that the Israelites are a separate people who are faithful to the one, true God. This God is the Creator of *the heavens and the earth*. The identity of Yahweh as the Creator and the observance of the Sabbath as the day *he rested* from his work of creation are linked as one reminder of the uniqueness of the God the Israelites serve. Another reminder that observance of the Sabbath provides is that the God the Israelites serve is the one who delivered them from Egyptian bondage ([Deuteronomy 5:12-15](#)).

What Do You Think?

How have you seen Christian observance of a day off influence culture?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding business practices (Chick-fil-A, Hobby Lobby)

Regarding practices of high-profile individuals

Other

TILL . . . WHAT?

In the ceremony that was long a part of the Christian covenant of marriage, the bride and groom vowed “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.” Those promises go all the way back to the 1549 Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

But times have changed. Couples are now more likely to promise to love each other “through fat and skinny” or “until you become a Cubs fan.” Yes, those are actual vows spoken in real weddings! The trend these days seems to be to play down the “till death do us part” idea and take the whole marriage idea more lightly. Perhaps there is something to be said for making wedding ceremonies less somber than they used to be. But the levity may also reflect the fact that marriage itself seems to be taken less seriously these days than many of us think it should.

When God told the Hebrews to keep the Sabbath, it was a “till death do us part” sign of his covenant with them, and then some! A regular day of rest was to be kept sacrosanct throughout their generations. The principle, though not the legalistic imposition of it, is still a good idea for all of us! See the lesson’s concluding thoughts.

—C. R. B.



Visual for Lesson 3. Point to this visual as you challenge the class to name tasks that are “work” to some but relaxing “rest” to others.

III. Tablets of Testimony

(EXODUS 31:18)

18. When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.

The entire monologue of [Exodus 25-31](#) takes place on Mount Sinai. God had called Moses up to the mountain, promising to meet Moses and to give him “tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction” ([Exodus 24:12](#)).

What is written on the stones that Moses receives is probably not the entire message of these chapters, however, but the Ten Commandments. Moses is given additional instruction, which he himself writes along with the historical narrative that accompanies it here in the book of Exodus. Moses is the author of this book as well as the rest of the books of Law, commonly referred to as the Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy).

The *two . . . tablets of stone* do not last long. When Moses (along with Joshua) comes down from the mountain, the people of Israel are worshipping a golden

calf idol. God has already told Moses about it ([Exodus 32:7, 8](#)), so it's not a surprise to him when he sees what is going on. But the actual sight of it is apparently worse than Moses imagined. When he sees "the calf and the dancing," Moses loses his temper. He throws "the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain" ([32:19](#)). These are later replaced, and the new tablets are specifically said to contain "the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments" ([34:28](#)).

These new tablets will be kept in the ark of the covenant for many generations ([Hebrews 9:4](#)). They will still be there when Solomon installs the ark in the temple that he will build around 965 BC ([1 Kings 8:9](#)). They will probably remain there until the Babylonians destroy the temple and plunder its contents in 586 BC.

IN STONE AND FROM STONE

Country music seems dedicated to sadness. Heartbreak, nostalgia for better times, and job loss are recurring themes. Also recurring are laments about attempts to escape from trouble by means of trucks, trains, and alcohol. One example of such pathos is the song "Chiseled in Stone." A couple has a spat. She runs in tears from the bedroom; he heads for the bar to drown his troubles. There he meets an old man who tells him to go home to his wife while he still has her. The old man's wife is dead, and he has no one waiting for him at home. Her name is chiseled in stone in the cemetery.

HOW TO SAY IT

Aaron *Air-un*.
 baals *bay-ulz*.
 Colossians *Kuh-losh-unz*.
 Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me*.
 Hebrews *Hee-breus*.
 Israelites *Iz-ray-el-ites*.
 Leviticus *Leh-vit-ih-kus*.
 manna *ma-nuh* (*a* as in *mat*).
 Mosaic *Mo-zay-ik*.
 Moses *Mo-zes* or *Mo-zez*.
 Pentateuch *Pen-ta-teuk*.
 Sabbath *Sa-buth* (*a* as in *mat*).
 sanctified *sank-tuh-fide*.
 Sinai *Sigh-nye* or *Sigh-nay-eye*.
 Yahweh (*Hebrew*) *Yah-weh*.

The words inscribed on stone tablets that God entrusted to Moses resulted in death when disobeyed. "The sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death" ([Romans 7:5](#)). The law reminds us of our sin, the consequent separation from God, and our need for Christ ([Galatians 3:23, 24](#); [Colossians 1:21](#)).

The glory of God's plan is that Christ allowed himself to be killed to pay the penalty of our lawbreaking. He was placed in a tomb where his body lay stone-cold dead for three days. His emergence from the stone tomb established that the reign of death was over. Jesus, "the stone the builders rejected" ([1 Peter 2:7](#)), is the one who promises "to the one who is victorious, I will give . . . a white stone with a new name written on it" ([Revelation 2:17](#)). Jesus is the "living Stone" ([1 Peter 2:4](#)) who brings us life.

—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Why Sabbath Observance Is Obsolete

Examining the Ten Commandments alongside Christian practice, we reach a conclusion that is uncomfortable to many: it seems that nine of the Ten Commandments still apply, but one—the command to keep the Sabbath (Saturday)—does not. A close look at each of the Ten Commandments in light of other Scripture reveals why this conclusion is valid. Nine of the commandments are based on the nature of God; and since his nature never changes ([Malachi 3:6](#); [James 1:17](#)), neither does the application of those nine. The Sabbath commandment, however, is based on works of God. His works of the old creation ([Genesis 2:2, 3](#)) and deliverance under the old covenant ([Deuteronomy 5:15](#)) are now superseded by his work of deliverance under the new covenant that results in new creation ([Romans 8:19-23](#); [2 Corinthians 5:17](#)).

Since the new covenant is bound intrinsically with Christ's resurrection from the dead, we honor him on the day he won that victory ([Matthew 28:1](#); [Mark 16:1](#); [Luke 24:1](#); [John 20:1](#)). This is the first day of the week ([Acts 20:7](#)), the Lord's Day ([Revelation 1:10](#)), the day we call Sunday.

B. Why the Sabbath Principle Still Stands

Although Sabbath requirements are no longer in force, are there benefits in the Sabbath principle of regular, periodic rest? Matthew Sleeth thinks so. A former emergency room doctor, Sleeth is the author of *24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life*. The book calls for making one day a week a work-free day. In an interview with CNN, he said, "I don't try to define what rest is for a person, but I ask you to figure out what work is for you, and don't do it one day out of the week."

Taking a day off has been associated with a variety of health benefits, including stress management. No doubt, that is one reason God gave the Sabbath to his old covenant people—to provide rest and relief. But even if keeping the Sabbath principle as a day of rest is legitimate for one's personal health and devotion, it is not something to be demanded of others or made a test of fellowship (again, [Romans 14:5, 6](#); [Colossians 2:16](#)).

The Sabbath was made for man ([Mark 2:27](#)), and each man (and woman) is free to apply the principle of Sabbath rest as seems best. But the fulfillment, the substance, is Christ (compare [Hebrews 4:1-13](#)).

What Do You Think?

What features of church life can we improve to serve better as signs to point the world to Christ?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding practices taken from New Testament command and/or precedent

Regarding practices developed for expediency

Regarding the degree to which such improvements are enforced on others

Other

C. Prayer

Father, thank you for the eternal rest promised to your people. May we live faithful to your Son, Jesus, using our time, our work, and our rest to honor him. We pray in his name. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

God did not design us to be 24/7/365 machines!

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Before class, set up one to three stations. Each station should have (1) a flashlight with no batteries inserted, (2) just enough fully charged batteries as needed to power the flashlight, and (3) one dead battery.

As learners arrive, direct them to a station, asking them to get the flashlight at that station to work. This will take some trial and error, because the one dead battery among the charged batteries will keep the flashlight from working.

After all class members have arrived, review what this exercise teaches: one dead battery can keep a flashlight from working. Likewise, for any group to function well, everyone must be “fully charged.”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Candle Meltdown” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually on this for a few minutes before asking the entire class to share their opinions.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “Our bodies have limitations. Too much work paired with insufficient rest is a recipe for burnout. Having our energy depleted can hurt us and those around us. Today we will look at God’s prescription for avoiding burnout.”

Into the Word

Explain that while the Sabbath was a command only for the Jews, the principles found in the Sabbath are important for us today.

Prepare for this activity by writing the phrases in each assignment on separate index cards. Divide your class into three groups, giving each group one of the following assignments and a set of index cards. They are to put their cards in order to reveal a Sabbath principle and be prepared to tell how their assigned Scripture verses applied to the Jewish Sabbath and to Christian practice today. (Our suggestions are in italics.)

Assignment 1—A day set apart / for God / reminds us that / God is holy / and calls us / to be set apart / from this world.

[Exodus 31:12-15](#); [1 Peter 1:14-16](#)

God gave the Jews a special day different from others, which they recognized as set apart for God. God wants us to recognize his holiness by living lives that are set apart from the sins of this world.

Assignment 2—A day set apart / for God / can be celebrated / with others who / share a / covenant relationship / with him.

[Exodus 31:16](#); [Hebrews 10:24, 25](#)

The Sabbath was to be observed by all Israelites of the Old Testament era. Christians meet together to recognize their special relationship with each other and with God.

Assignment 3—A day set apart / for God / demonstrates that / our work / can wait / as we take time / to be refreshed.

[Exodus 31:17, 18](#); [Mark 2:27](#)

The Sabbath recognized that even God stopped his work to rest. Christians today still benefit when we set apart time for renewal.

After work is complete, have groups share their research.

Into Life

Write, *I need to rest when . . .* across the top of the board. Brainstorm with the group about times when a Sabbath rest is needed. Your learners may mention the following: *when I find myself being a workaholic; when I feel emotionally weary; when I think I don’t have time to rest; when I realize I have overcommitted myself to trivial matters; when I join an assembly of believers for worship and study.*

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Time Peace” activity from the reproducible page. Have students evaluate themselves with these timepiece comparisons. Close either activity with prayer.