

Sunday

Space for rest or
business as usual?

In many countries in Europe and around the world, shops are now open seven days a week. Sunday is considered a normal working day for many people. Even if we are not at work, our increased dependence on the internet and our mobile phones makes it difficult to switch off from work for even one day a week.

The Bible has a very different vision. The importance of a weekly day of rest is woven through both Testaments. But times have changed; why should Christians or anyone else pay attention to this distinctive and challenging message?



OPEN
24 HRS

Thinking Biblically About...



My Sunday, my choice?

Imagine a sporting event in which all the spectators are seated, and everyone can see the game. A few people decide to stand up for a better view. But this blocks the view of people behind them, so more have to stand up. Very soon, a large proportion of the crowd are standing – but few of them have a better view than they did to begin with.

As more shops and services open on Sundays, the remaining ones are forced to open too in order to be able to compete. A few are better off financially. But we pay a heavy price in other areas of life, and shops that do not open lose income.

“One person’s freedom to work and shop undermines another’s freedom to rest”

We are taught that choice and freedom are good, and that it is our right to work and shop on Sundays if we want to. However, we seldom consider that:

- The financial benefits come at a cost in other areas of life
- One person’s freedom to work and shop undermines another’s freedom to rest

The Bible looks at things a different way. Instead of upholding the rights of the individual and allowing the overall shape of society to evolve from that, it puts forward a vision of the kind of society God deems best and how we should act as individuals if this is to be achieved. In the Bible, the Sabbath held a special place in the culture of Israel and the Church and influenced many different areas of life – religious, economic and family, to name a few.

Q: How do you currently view the purpose of your Sundays?

What's the problem?

We increasingly treat Sunday the same as any other day. Our 24/7 society tends to blur the boundaries between home and office, work and rest. The internet, mobile phones and laptops mean we can work anywhere, any time. Even if we are not doing paid work, we rarely ring-fence a few hours to rest: there are too many demands on our time.

This non-stop culture and the mentality that goes with it may bring short-term financial rewards, but it has many costs associated with it. If 'time is the currency of relationships', the less time we have for those who matter to us, the more those relationships will suffer.

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More than **one in five households** has at least one parent who regularly works both weekend days. It becomes far harder for families (including the extended family) to gather together, and for parents to spend time with their children.



Packing our Sundays with both paid and unpaid work means that **two-thirds** of us are now busier and more stressed than we are on regular weekdays – making Sunday anything but a day of rest.



Christians have **no legal right to refuse to work on Sundays**. Some people are unable to go to church on Sundays, because they have to work instead – undermining both their own faith and the Church as a whole.

SUN DAY

Over a quarter of businesses require their employees to work on Sunday. Those on low incomes are more likely to work at weekends, and the majority of people who work on the weekends do not do so out of choice.

What does the Bible say?

The Bible gives a clear, positive vision for the Sabbath, which held enormous significance and affected many different areas of life.

“The idea of rest is introduced right at the start of the Bible”

As humans, we are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), setting us apart from the rest of Creation. God made us as an overflow of his love, with the Trinity ‘rejoicing

always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind’ (Proverbs 8:30-31).

The idea of rest is introduced right at the start of the Bible, when God sets the Sabbath apart for our rest, and rests himself.



‘By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested.’

(Genesis 2:3)

God did not rest because he was tired. The Hebrew word used here also means ‘stopped’: God rested because he had simply finished his work. The Creation account could have finished at the end of the sixth day when God’s work was completed. Instead, it is included at the end of the account, showing that this rest was an integral part of the Creation pattern for us. God made us not only to work and steward his Creation (Genesis 2:15) but also to rest periodically, to spend time with him and with one another.

The Old Testament Sabbath

Aside from having a key place in the Creation story, the Sabbath is mentioned many times throughout the Old Testament, indicating its enduring importance. Not least, it appears in the Ten Commandments, with two different reasons given for its significance to Israelite life.

Universal rest

In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, the Israelites are reminded that God made the Sabbath as a part of his Creation template.



‘Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.’

(Exodus 20:8-11)

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, God ensures that the Israelites are provided for during these periods of rest, so that they don’t have to work to meet their immediate needs. During their forty years wandering in the wilderness, God sent them daily manna to eat, except on the Sabbath: ‘Bear in mind that the Lord has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days.’ (Exodus 16:29)

By giving them more than enough food the day before the Sabbath, God demonstrates that he is not placing an impossible burden on them, but that he has thought through the implications and made provision accordingly, showing them care and compassion.

A perpetual Covenant

The Sabbath rest was not just a chance to break from work. It had fundamental religious significance as a sign of God's everlasting Covenant with the Israelites.



'The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. 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 abstained from work and rested.'
(Exodus 31:16-17)

This significance to the Israelites' religious identity and faithfulness to God was one reason that breaking the Sabbath was so strictly punished.

God as deliverer

In Deuteronomy's account of the Ten Commandments, God reminds the Israelites of their escape from Egypt. The weekly day of rest celebrates the Exodus and the Israelites' freedom from slavery in circumstances where they were forced to work continually.



'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.'
(Deuteronomy 5:15)

Q: How do you understand work?

- weekday jobs?
- shopping?
- housework?

Protection for the poor and the outsider

Not only were the Israelites commanded to break from work, but they were commanded not to make anyone else work either. No family member, no one attached to the household as a long-term hired labourer or bonded servant – no one, whether Israelite or foreign born, was exempt.



'On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.'
(Exodus 20:10)

The Sabbath was not simply about God's compassion: it was about his justice. The universal law against working on the Sabbath protected the vulnerable, who might otherwise be exploited by the wealthy. The Sabbath laws reflect God's concern for the poor and marginalised.

Justice

This theme of Sabbath observance being linked to justice is taken up by the prophets. It is not hard to see why. The Sabbath rest held many purposes. One was to serve as a sign of the Covenant with God; another was temporarily to halt economic activity to focus on maintaining right relationships with God and each other. Breaking the Sabbath ignored these priorities, so it is inevitable that injustice would result.

In Amos 8:4-6, for example, dishonest trading goes hand-in-hand with impatience to end the Sabbath rest and start making money again. The weekly Sabbath is also linked to the seven-yearly Sabbatical and the Jubilee year, every 50th year. These were both intended to limit economic inequality, prevent long-term poverty and address injustice.

Sabbath in the New Testament





Jesus called himself 'Lord of the Sabbath' (Mark 2:28), arguing that the true purpose of the Sabbath was to do what was good and life-giving. His death and resurrection sealed the New Covenant, superseding the Old Covenant made on Sinai. For Christians, Sabbath – like animal sacrifice, circumcision and the food laws – is no longer a sign of the Covenant.

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The early Christians wanted to honour the continuing moral and social importance of the Sabbath but not adopt a characteristically Jewish religious tradition. They chose Sunday, the day of the Resurrection and Pentecost, as their day of rest. There are references to the Church meeting on 'the first day' (Sunday) in the New Testament (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2) and by the second century it was well-established practice.

Whilst the Sabbath still has present significance, it also prefigures the eternal rest of the Kingdom of God. As Hebrews 4:9 reads, 'There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.' This is the fulfilment of the rest that the Israelites did not enter in full (Hebrews 4:1-11). When we rest on Sundays, this is a reminder of God's grace, his provision, his justice, and his promise to us.

Modern and biblical attitudes to weekly day of rest

	Today	God's ideal in the Bible
REST 	Long hours culture approaching 24/7 society	Rest and renewal built into our weekly rhythm of life
WORSHIP 	Worship considered a personal matter, like leisure activities, to be fitted around work	Regular space made for corporate worship and time with God
FAMILY 	Economic productivity prioritised over family life	Family prioritised over work, including time with extended family
JUSTICE 	Low-income employees forced to accept employers' terms, including weekend work	The poor protected from exploitation and employers unable to force anyone to work on the Sabbath

Where do we go from here?

The weekly day of rest is woven through the Bible, from Creation through the Ten Commandments and the Prophets and on into the New Testament. Jesus affirms the importance of the Sabbath, whilst clarifying that it was intended to benefit humans – and even the animals on which we rely – rather than simply being a period of inactivity (Mark 2:27).

The Sabbath's many purposes included:

- Honouring the Israelites' Covenant relationship with God
- Commemorating God's saving power in delivering the Israelites from slavery
- Protecting the poor and marginalised from exploitation
- Prefiguring the eternal rest of the Kingdom of God

Whilst the early Church distanced itself from Jewish ceremonial practice but retained a day of rest and worship, we live in a society which denies the importance of a day off altogether, and even finds it inconvenient. How should we affirm the God-given day of rest?

God's Covenant: the 'vertical' relationship

The day of rest is taken seriously throughout the Bible, not just as a practical way to protect workers and ensure time for our families and other relationships, but as a symbol of our relationship with God and a chance to spend time with him.

“We live in a society which denies the importance of a day off altogether”

Justice: the 'horizontal' relationship

Maintaining justice across society was another major theme of the Sabbath laws. God's design for a weekly day of rest prioritised the outsider and the poor, as well as limiting economic activity at the expense of family and community relationships.

Do we consider the effects that our choices and freedom have on other people? What are the wider implications of us choosing to 'work' (whatever we decide that means) or otherwise?

What role can we play as Christians in enabling and encouraging others to rest God's way – whether individually, as Churches or at the national level?

Q: How might the Bible's vision for a weekly day of rest change how you see Sunday and the nature of work and rest?

What's so **special** about **Sunday**?



- More and more, we treat Sundays the same as any other working day.
- The Bible sets one day a week apart for rest from work of all kinds. No one could force another person to work – providing protection for the most vulnerable in society.
- We see working and shopping when we want as our right, but our freedom comes at the expense of others who want to rest, spend time with friends and family, and worship God.

Thinking Biblically About... is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government is.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform organisation based in Cambridge, UK. We believe that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at www.jubilee-centre.org/sunday