

Seldom will you have heard the whole gospel more clearly than in this book. It's written with an artistry likely to move you to wonder and a passion directed to lead you to praise. The church needs this study for her recovery of Scripture's unity, of its cosmic storyline, and of its whole life-changing power. This work satisfies the reader on so many levels at once: straightforward Bible study, warm pastoral proclamation, careful cultural assessment, and a taste of rejoicing that only God's children know. What a gift for storytelling! What a pleasure to read! More, more, I say!

**Nelson D. Kloosterman, Professor of New Testament and Ethics,
Mid-America Reformed Seminary**

For many the Old Testament is only a collection of stories about ancient individuals. What is lacking is the grand redemptive thread that ties those stories together in Christ. This book traces that thread through the feasts that shaped Israel's annual calendar, anticipated Jesus' coming, and defined his gospel. It will change the way you read the Bible. I strongly recommend this book for use by individuals, Sunday school classes, and small groups.

**Dr. Charles Dunahoo, Director of Christian Education and
Publications, Presbyterian Church in America**

Many see the name Jesus and immediately think of the New Testament, but his presence is the scarlet thread running through the pages of the Old Testament as well. In *Meeting Jesus at the Feast*, John Sittema pulls back the curtain on the Hebrew festivals of the Old Testament to reveal Jesus sitting at the head of the table. He brings to light how each of the God-ordained feasts and festivals point to a future manifestation of the person and work of Jesus Christ. By unveiling the purpose and passion behind each of the seven celebrations, John helps us grasp a deeper and richer understanding of God's redemptive plan through his Son.

**Sharon Jaynes, Author of *Building an Effective Women's Ministry*
and *The Power of a Woman's Words***

Sittema's book presents in a fresh way the story of God's coming to us in Jesus Christ to mend the brokenness of human life under the power of sin. Jesus Christ fulfills all the biblical promises of shalom that God's renewed people and world already experience in this life, but not fully as in the life to come. Throughout his stimulating study, Sittema artfully weaves together the biblical story of redemption through Jesus Christ

with the stories of believers who are experiencing the transforming power of the gospel.

**Dr. Cornel Venema, President, Mid-America Reformed Seminary
and author of *Christ and the Future: The Bible's Teaching on the
Last Things***

Clear and precise, *Meeting Jesus* is an insightful study into the festivals God himself instituted among His chosen people. Their universal significance and ultimate meaning would be revealed by the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, bearing tremendous consequences for all of mankind. An essential read for new and long-time Christians alike for a deeper understanding and appreciation of our hopeless past, redeemed present, and the glorious future that awaits us.

**“B,” leader in the Chinese house church movement
(name withheld by request)**

This book is filled with breathtaking insights into the Scriptures. These become sweet moments in which you will see the greatness of Jesus Christ as he is revealed in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures.

**Frank Reich, M. Div., President of Reformed Theological Seminary
and pastor, former NFL quarterback**

Meeting
JESUS
AT THE FEAST:

Israel's Festivals and the Gospel

JOHN R. SITTEMA



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*For my Mother, Jeanette Sittema,
who taught me the story
and showed me the thread*

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine . . . morning in New York on a late summer day. Your husband Kevin is ready to walk out the door to catch the train into Manhattan. Just before he does, you confront him about the light switch he promised to fix over the weekend but didn't. Again. You exchange cross words. He grabs his backpack and travel mug and storms out the door without giving you a kiss. You know you'll smooth things over that night when he gets home, but you already feel a ten-pound weight on your heart. Should you run after him? You decide not to. Two hours later, your neighbor bangs on the door, shouting at you to turn on the TV. When you do, your heart stops. A familiar reporter is making an announcement. His voice is agitated; he shuffles papers and fumbles for words. Images flash across the screen: one airplane . . . two airplanes . . . crashing into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. (Your mind is whirling. *This can't be real; it must be a movie.*) The massive towers explode, burn, and collapse in a fiery heap. But Kevin works there! The phone begins to ring. It won't stop for days.

Imagine . . . having cancer. You're worn out, weakened by chemotherapy and radiation, weary beyond description. You've been in treatment for years; it has become so much a part of your life that you can't remember not being sick. There are always tests: tests to see if your blood is back to normal, tests to find out if the treatment is effective, if another protocol will be necessary. At the beginning, the tests scared you; these days they just add to the weariness. A knock at the door. The whole medical team enters the room—that's a bad sign, isn't it?—but your doctor is smiling. He says simply, "Everything worked great. The cancer is gone! Go home and live a little. You deserve it!" You pack fast while your driver pulls the car around, repeatedly looking at the door, fearful that they made a mistake and will return to correct it. You leave the building stunned and just a bit numb, but by the time you arrive at home, the shock is over. You start making phone calls immediately. News this good simply must be shared. A party is on for that evening!

Powerful announcements like these—whether delivered in image form on TV or in person by a doctor—*look back* to something that has already happened and thus cause you to take stock, to reflect, to regret, to grieve, to celebrate. But they also *look forward* to an unknown future. Because of one simple announcement, life changes, and your mind races with the possibilities.

The gospel—literally "good news"—of Jesus Christ is an announcement that changed everything. I don't mean the kind of change

where you commit to wearing your seatbelt regularly, squeeze another child's soccer schedule into an already too-full life, or cut carbs out of your diet. I mean change the way 9/11 changed U.S. history, the way being cleared of cancer changes a person's life. I mean breathtaking change—a 10 on the Richter scale change. Jesus' arrival on the world scene to a stable in Bethlehem did more than add a Hallmark moment to late December schedules; it announced the arrival of a king more majestic and powerful than Caesar himself, one who would make Caesar's Rome distant and ancient history. The reports of his simple life, cruel death, and covered-up resurrection made news so incredible that it impacts the future of every human who has ever lived or ever will live. Jesus the Messiah did not merely provide a good example or launch a religion; he changed the world.

A paragraph like the previous one, with assertions seemingly so over the top, simply begs the question. "Show me how," you may be thinking. "Tell me how this can be, how you know such a thing is true."

The Bible does just that. More than just a book of rules and regulations or a collection of character studies from which you can learn ethics or techniques for self-improvement, the Bible is a *story*, and a unique one at that. It is the story of God and the history of his redemption, a God who saves people, to be sure, but also one who restores the whole of the cosmos. Jesus is the key to the story, the main character, the central thread around which God weaves the astonishing tapestry of salvation.

That can be hard to understand. It can seem harder still to believe down deep. It takes the kind of faith only God can give. Do you know what was more difficult than believing what happened in the past? Believing that Jesus was the point of the story long *before* he arrived on the world scene. Yet that is just what God asked of the ancient people of Israel: to put their faith and hope in a Redeemer and Messiah who would not make his appearance for more than a thousand years.

To help his people see and identify the coming Messiah—although faintly, and still in the distant future—God made promises to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He used Moses and the prophets to point Israel's gaze forward through the words of the Torah and the prophetic writings. One of the most significant ways he helped an ancient people to believe was by giving them a series of feasts or festivals that would shape both their daily life and their annual calendars. Each of these provided a hint, a clue, of the One who was coming. More than just information, each feast was a taste to whet their appetites and build anticipation and excitement.

God also wants people today, some two thousand years *after* Messiah's appearance, to know that Jesus—and particularly his cross and resurrection—did change everything, to believe and trust in him, and to follow him with a whole heart. But people today struggle with faith's claim just as those in ancient times struggled to believe the promises God gave them. Belief seems difficult when all you hear about Jesus is that he was a good man, was humble, taught well, and died a horrible death. Those factoids are only bits and bytes of data that are often unconnected to the story, but they are the only pieces of information that many will ever know about Jesus.

Sadly, data processing does not qualify as authentic and dynamic faith.

This book aims to tell you more about Jesus. Much more. By unpacking and explaining the ancient feasts, it aims to give modern people a fuller vision of the good news of God, reveal just what it means that Jesus is the Messiah, and explain how and why his coming changed the world.

For the feasts, commissioned twelve hundred years before Jesus came, were celebrations about him. First, they anticipated his coming. Then they *defined* his life and ministry. In fact, you cannot really comprehend what it means that Jesus is Messiah without knowing something about the feasts. All the significant moments in his ministry (both his earthly ministry and his ministry from heaven's throne after the ascension) were divinely structured around them. Consider:

- Jesus' death was pointedly timed to take place on *Passover*.
- Jesus' burial was specifically timed to occur on the *Feast of Unleavened Bread*.
- His resurrection waited for the dawning of *Firstfruits*.
- The outpouring of the Spirit came precisely fifty days later, on the *Feast of Pentecost*.
- The *Feast of Trumpets* defines the Spirit-filled church's task: to preach the gospel.
- The *Day of Atonement* defines just what being saved really means.
- The *Feast of Tabernacles* shows what it is to live in the joy of fellowship with Christ.
- And *Jubilee* teaches us what heaven is and will be like, tilting us forward to its glory, grace, and final rest.

If Jesus' entire ministry was structured around the feasts, it seems important for us to understand why. Turn the page and join me as we meet Jesus at the feast!

Chapter 1



REHEARSING REST

THE SABBATHS

Leviticus 23:1–3

A few years ago, a Christian friend who is a film producer shared an insight with me that changed the way I watch movies. He observed that most good stories—those that resonate with an audience—seem to have similar plot elements. They open by portraying life lived in happiness and joy. All is well. Conflict soon intrudes, though, in the form of changing circumstances or with the arrival of a new character, and the result disrupts life and brings a dissonance you can feel in your gut. Key to the story is how the conflict is resolved: redemption comes, usually at great personal cost, and it is this cost that is the heart of the story. It is this cost that connects with the viewer.¹

I've watched films through that lens ever since. I'd bet my friend's observations are true for your favorite films as they are for mine. I have always been a Tolkien fan (my wife would use a stronger word), and although Peter Jackson's films do not do justice to Tolkien's books, the Lord of the Rings trilogy is wonderful, bigger than life in its scope, and complex in its plot, language, and characterization. What makes it so compelling is that it is a story of redemption that comes at a shockingly great cost; it is that cost that makes the end so satisfying.

1 I am indebted to Gregg Easterbrook for this insight.

Of course, redemption stories are not the only popular genre. Quite different is the genre of tragedy, a form of literature, theater, or film as old as the Greeks. In tragedies, it is not redemption, but the misery of a sinful or broken world that is under close view. In tragedies, the chief character typically meets a disastrous fate, the broader ills of society often exposed in the tale. I recently viewed *No Country for Old Men*, the Coen brothers' film based on Cormac McCarthy's novel. There is barely time after the opening credits to start the camera before gut-wrenching violence fills the screen. Senseless brutality dominates the film to the end. All the good people die, while the wretched murderer survives to destroy another day. The lives of simple people in rural West Texas are depicted as meaningless activity as they scurry about like ants struggling for survival, but all the while their lives are actually controlled by a cruel chance. It alone drives their fate; the flip of a coin—several times—is the sole determiner of life or death. Redemption? None comes. The film leaves viewers devoid of hope as the screen snaps black. Everyone in the theater in which I viewed the film sat in stunned silence for several minutes after the film ended, refusing to believe it had ended as it did.

While tragedies have always been an important literary genre, they *feel* less satisfying because they tell an unfinished truth. Ugliness and evil abound in the real world, to be sure, and their power is horrid. No one is exempt from their reach; good people feel the pain as much as the bad guys. But our souls desperately want to believe that there is more to life than tragedy.

Redemptive themes satisfy us more deeply, not only because we prefer to feel good when we leave a theater, but, suggested my friend, because such movies reflect the fuller truth of God's story. God's story isn't stuck on the tragic; he pursues redemption relentlessly. The movement of redemption is not only nice, it is normative, shaping our understanding of life because it is the movement of life.

The Plot

On my mother's knee, I memorized a rhyme that would serve me well as a guide whenever I picked up the Bible. To explain the plot of redemption running through the Bible's two covenants, she taught me, "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed." Behind this saying lay her conviction that the Bible is one story, its narrative like a golden thread that wound its way through the pages of history. The golden thread, of course, is the coming of Jesus the Christ.

The plot of the Bible is dramatic and is set forth in three acts: Creation—Fall—Redemption.² The first two acts are very short and, in fact, are presented in just a few pages in the Bible’s first book, Genesis. But their brevity does not belie their significance: understanding creation and fall correctly is essential to a proper understanding of the rest of the Bible, the divine act of redemption.

Creation

In the opening chapter of the Bible, we read that God “created the heavens and the earth.” No mere polemic against evolution—Darwin was, after all, a long ways off—the issue in the opening words of the Bible is not whether or even when God created the heavens and the earth, but who he is and what the world is in relation to him. God is Creator, and creation—“the heavens and the earth” together in harmonious unity—is presented as his domain, his kingdom, and he its sovereign king.

Under his rule, creation has a dynamic character: God assigned active dominion responsibility to the sun (the greater light) “to govern the day” and to the moon (the lesser light) “to govern the night” skies. He established limits for the reproductive processes in the plant and animal kingdoms (“according to their kinds”). God, the greater King, also gave dominion responsibility to Adam, the lesser king, mandating him to subdue the earth and to rule over everything (Genesis 1:28).

Adam was not granted divine permission to do what he wanted with creation; he was to exercise responsible dominion, always under God, the Sovereign (Genesis 1:26–28). Under his care, creation was to bring praise to God in new ways. Adam’s *identity* was that of image-bearer of God; his work would also image God’s. As God had “separated” light from dark, atmosphere from planet surface, and land from sea, so Adam’s cultural mandate called him and his seed to separate—to differentiate and develop—the creation entrusted to him. Minerals gathered from the ground would be studied, understood, and combined to produce pigments that would one day, in the hands of Da Vinci,

2 Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen further divide redemption into initiation (Old Testament Israel), accomplishment (Christ’s earthly ministry and that of the missionary church), and completion (Christ’s return). *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004). Christopher J. H. Wright, in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downer’s Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), sees the history of redemption as missiological, both of God and for his people.

create the *Mona Lisa* (and in mine, paint the garage). Antonio Vivaldi, in hearing, capturing, and reproducing the sounds of the wind and the rain in the changing seasons of the weather, would ultimately give us another kind of *Four Seasons* with which to praise God.

Creation, when God finished it, was perfect. When he surveyed his realm, he spoke with royal voice: “It is very good!” He *rested* the seventh day (Genesis 2:2–3). He wasn’t tired; Sabbath makes its first appearance in the biblical narrative to mark God’s joy, his celebration and delight that creation was just the way it was supposed to be. The Bible would later call such harmony *shalom*.

But the joy was short lived. Sin slithered in through a rebel who challenged the authority of the King of creation by inciting doubt in his royal word (“Did God really say . . . ?”). Corrupting everything God made with horrible effectiveness, sin warped all that had been very good so that it is now “not the way it’s supposed to be.”³ Theologians call this the fall, but the word hardly does justice to the devastation. A marriage that had begun with a “Wow!” became cloaked in a clumsy leaf-shroud of shame, while a delightful evening garden walk between God and his right-hand man morphed into a guilty game of hide and seek. In a rapid-fire series of judicial pronouncements, God cursed Satan, sentenced Adam, and then his wife. The woman, created to rest in the tender love of a husband and rejoice in the life-affirming gift of birth, would instead groan in labor and chafe under his dominance. The man, created to be happy and productive in his labor and to rest in the sweet weariness that comes at the end of a long day of work, would now taste the bitterness and frustration of toil. God’s gleeful delight in a colorful creation that was deemed “very good” gave way to a bleak wasteland of human hopelessness, rendered now only in shades of gray.

Redemption

But wait! Peeking up from the rubble of a world gone bad, a fragile light flickered, all the more noticeable because of the strange timing of its appearance. God simply couldn’t wait to redeem; his promise of redemption was spoken in the same breath as his curse, the flame of hope lit even before the pronouncement of sentence. Juxtaposing hope over against the cold horror of long warfare, the Royal One declared his intent: he will crush Satan; he will win victory through the “seed of the woman.”

3 Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

God will make right all that sin has made wrong. God will restore shalom and give his people rest again. Because of sin, creation had become—and still is—restless. Once thrilled that his creation was “very good,” God no longer delights in what is; he, and all creation with him, yearn now for what should be, for what will be.

Restoring joy and bringing rest would involve conflict. In Genesis 3:15, God had promised Satan “enmity between you and the woman.” The long war would be for man’s benefit: we must know the cost of our sin and learn in faith to long for God’s redemption. But the outcome was never in question. God assured that he would triumph through “the seed of the woman.” His promise would allow the fragile candle of hope to flicker, despite the winds of war in a world that would witness fratricide (4:8), terrorist threats (4:23–24), and ethical anarchy: “every inclination of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil all the time” (6:5).

Rehearsals, Types, and Shadows

Once, when my children were small, we vacationed near the Pea Ridge Civil War battlefield in northwest Arkansas. The day was beautiful and the site well preserved. I was not prepared for the frustration we would experience for a full morning. Simply put, we had no clue what we were viewing. The park was enormous, and without a map that showed us what the key locations were and how the battle had progressed, we would remain frustrated.

On the way toward God’s rest, his people needed help too. Struggling each day with the tension of enmity, they would easily lose the big-picture perspective of faith. Through the centuries, God sometimes intervened directly with his mighty hand to stimulate their faith, acting in ways both mighty and tender: crushing a mighty foe here, opening a closed womb there. But he also worked in ways more subtle. To shape the daily routines of the people of Israel, a people whose history began well over a thousand years before Messiah and whose faith would therefore need serious staying power, he established festivals that would both structure life and serve as portraits of redemption. These festivals are prescribed in Leviticus 23 and reveal from varying angles the wonder and grace of his redeeming work.

God called his festivals “appointed feasts” and “sacred assemblies” (Leviticus 23:1–2). Several Hebrew words lay behind these English translations. The first of these—the Hebrew word *mo’ed*—defines all the festivals as “set feasts” established by the LORD and regulated by his commands. Among these set feasts were the *haggim*, three pilgrimage

festivals requiring Israel to travel annually to a central location. The name is appropriate; the singular *hag* evokes movement and suggests a joyous dance.

In the book of Leviticus, another term nuanced all the festivals. The term *miqra qodesh*—usually translated “sacred assemblies”—suggests a convocation that had a religious purpose, one shaped by hope.⁴ To Israel, camped at Sinai at the dawn of her life as a redeemed people, God’s sacred assemblies were not established merely to commemorate past acts of redemption but also to serve as “rehearsals” of what was to come.⁵ When Israel was summoned to one of the pilgrimage festivals or when her families gathered in homes or village streets to celebrate the others, her eye—and her faith—were to be fixed on the future. Israel was not like the nations around her whose cultic gatherings were attempts to pacify the demands of pagan gods, angry for last year’s failures, in a desperate form of bargaining for next year’s blessings on crop and womb. Israel’s feasts would not require her to barter with God. They were established after she had been delivered from bondage in Egypt, already freed by God’s amazing grace, redeemed by that grace to be his special people. The feasts were designed to lean forward, to give life a future tilt, pointing her relentlessly to the Messiah who would fulfill all that the feasts portrayed.

Each festival was a type of Messiah. Derived from the Greek word *tupos*, *type* is commonly understood to refer to the use of the Old Testament to provide models, human figures whose lives serve as examples of Christian virtues or character traits. Thus, Daniel is said to be a type of Christian courage, David a type of godly friendship (Jonathan narratives) or of true repentance (Bathsheba narrative). The word *tupos* is even translated as “example” in most contemporary versions of 1 Corinthians 10:6.⁶

But such a use of *type* is thin. The word actually connotes something much richer, the notion of a foretaste, an advance presentation of the whole.⁷ An example of tonight’s dinner could be milk and cookies, arranged by

4 James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed., s. v. “miqra,” #5246.

5 James Strong, *The New Strong’s Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words*, electronic ed., s. v. #4744.

6 Notably, the older RSV renders the word as “warnings.”

7 *Tupos* serves as a technical term meaning precisely that. See Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 251–2.

a four-year-old and presented with dramatic flair on downsized plastic dinnerware to a gathering of dolls seated neatly around a cardboard dining table. It is a play meal, different in substance from tonight's family dinner. Not so a *type*. Last Christmas, impatient for the holiday feast still fifteen minutes away, I sneaked into the kitchen like a cat burglar to pilfer a tasty morsel of the standing rib roast that would anchor our family meal. It had just been removed from the oven and was resting on a rack while the balance of the feast was being prepared. Knowing I'd be alone for just a few ticks of the clock, I activated both hands in my nefarious plot. With my right, I quickly sliced a not-too-thin corner of the succulent beef—redolent in spices, crusty with caramelized fat, and brimming with roasting juices—and with my left I soaked an end piece of crusty sourdough bread in the meat drippings just before using it as a scoop for garlic mashed potatoes—perfectly seasoned and steamy hot—which delivered to my nostrils and my mouth the beginnings of ecstasy. Rudely apprehended by the cook who shooed me irreverently out of the kitchen, I was shamefully unrepentant. I consumed the evidence slowly, like chewing cud, lost in the reverie and longing for more.

A children's play party may give an idea of food and drink. A type—like my samplings of the beef and potatoes—makes your mouth water because it is an early taste of the actual feast to come. That's how the ancient feasts of Israel served the people of God. More than religious play acting, they gave God's people a real and authentic taste of the redemption Messiah would bring centuries later, a taste that would make them long in faith and hope for the fuller revelation of the gift of God.

Speaking to a different culture a thousand years later, the apostle Paul used another metaphor to make the same point. He called the festivals "shadows" (Colossians 2:17). Think of a man walking westbound on a brilliant sunny morning. As the rising sun warms his back, his shadow stretches out before him, reaching the corner well before he does. His shadow is not merely an example of him but is inseparably connected to his very person. It announces that his arrival is at hand. More, his shadow provides many real and telling clues about him, clues like size and shape and the speed with which he walks. The clues may be indistinct, but since they are cast by a real person, they are authentic.

The story of the Bible is the story of Jesus the Messiah. He is the main character, the One who cast shadows as he moved relentlessly through history toward his incarnation in Bethlehem of Judea. That shadow appeared to ancient Israel in her sacrifices and festivals, each one awakening expectations about the promised Messiah and the

redemption he would bring. Somewhat indistinct, not easily identified in a single glance, always requiring faith and constant explanation, his shadow was nonetheless the promise of him, a very real portrayal of “the reality” which “is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:17).

It’s All about Rest

At the base of Sinai, God would give his people seven festivals that would function like individual frames in a reel of film, a series of feasts that would serve to give them glimpses of Messiah’s shadow. There was an additional feast, however, one established at the same time and in the same biblical passage, that was distinct from the other seven and, in fact, framed all of them. Leviticus 23 begins with this feast, a celebration known as *Sabbath*. Its name suggests the idea of rest, and its commemoration would shade all the other feasts with a unique hue. Redemption in its rich and variegated dimensions—as seven festivals would soon show—was about the bringing of rest and the restoration of shalom. If the Bible is a story, its dramatic movement is from restlessness toward Sabbath rest.⁸

Sabbath was not only one day per week. Actually, there were Sabbaths (plural), as Israel was soon to learn, and they were to be commemorated every seventh day, every seventh year, and, in the year of Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, a year-long celebration following the seventh cycle of seven years.

Keeping the Sabbaths involved first of all heeding the call to remember. But what was Israel to remember? In its first appearance in Scripture (Genesis 2), resting involved remembering creation. God himself rested and remembered with delight the work he had done in creating the heavens and the earth. Later, in the first giving of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8–11), God grounded Israel’s Sabbath-keeping in this creation rest: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy . . . 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. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

In calling Israel to remember, God wanted her to do more than recall Genesis 1 and the fact that he had made all things. God wanted her to grapple with the wondrous truth that all aspects of creation took

8 C. Vonk speaks of the “idea of rest” as being the “signature” of all of the feasts, not only of Sabbath. *De Voorzeide Leer: Leviticus*, vol. 1b (Uitgave: Drukkerij Barendrecht, 1963), 635.

their meaning and purpose from the One who called it into being. Sabbath thus became a gift that defined Israel's notion of work and gave her a sense of holy vocation. From her stewardship of beasts of burden to her management of servants and employees, Israel was to sense that she was a people on a peculiar mission in the name of her God. Noortzij observes: "The rhythmic character that the Sabbath gave to the Israelites' life, which is met with nowhere else in the ancient Near Eastern world, contributed to distinguishing them as a peculiar people, and it at the same time exerted an extremely favorable influence both on their capacity for work and on their manner of life in general."⁹

If the weekly Sabbaths became routine, every seventh year would jump-start an even stronger memory. Remembering creation was more than a mental exercise; God put legs and feet under the command. On Sabbath days, men and animals were to take a day off to taste God's gift of rest in their weary world, recalling that work was not supposed to be toil. But in Sabbath years, even the soil would be allowed to remember the goodness it once enjoyed before weeds choked the dirt or invaders salted it. All of creation, including its very soil, had once been good; it bore a divine voiceprint because it had been created by the word of the Lord.¹⁰

In a delightful portrait of faith and life in rural Iowa in the 1930s, poet Sietze Buning helps us understand a rest that touched all of creation:

Into the daily swirl of skim milk and cornmeal
 Dad stirred an extra number-two canful
 of Peet's Perfection Mineral Supplement
 on Saturday nights for the pigs' Sunday breakfast.
 It always foamed over the barrel by Sunday morning
 and turned so crusty on top you had to cut it with a spade.
 It was like slopping the pigs on Sunday with coffee cake.
 Roy, Bob, Frank, and Snoodles, our four horses,
 each got an extra gallon of oats on Sunday morning;
 every cow an extra half-gallon of shelled-corn meal;
 the chickens an extra gallon of shelled corn on the ground . . .

9 *Bible Student's Commentary: Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Corp., 1982), 230.

10 Walter Brueggeman, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 49.

Not even during threshing did our overweight horses need extra oats, although they gladly feasted . . .

Dad's explanations:

“We look to God as animals look to us.

We're their idea of God, their image of God.

God's love to animals flows through us to them.

How will they know God's love unless we show them?

How can they tell the Lord's Day from another?

How can we comfort animals except by food?

They groan for eternal Sabbath with all creation.”¹¹

Deliverance flavored the second giving of the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy 5, adding a second nuance to all the Sabbaths. Deliverance must be remembered, too: Israel was to recall and retell the story of the patriarchs—and especially the story of the Exodus—to the rising generations. But it also involved wrestling in faith to see glimpses of the redemption to come more fully on a future day. For the Sabbaths tilted Israel forward to the coming Messiah, one who would finally bring authentic rest. His name was Jesus; all the Sabbaths of the Old Testament would find their meaning in him.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,” he would cry, “and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). In the very next verses, he called himself “Lord of the Sabbath,” validating his claim by healing a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath day. Defiantly rejecting the Pharisees' demand that Sabbath be honored by the avoidance of work, he insisted that his work brought rest.

His rest did not come because he healed a man or plucked grain *on* a Sabbath day, thus offering people an example that stretched the traditional understanding of Sabbath behavior. The central teaching of Jesus about the Sabbath is that no one finds rest by his own efforts, by what Scripture calls “observing the law,” even Sabbath laws. The Old Testament prohibition against work on the Sabbath—under penalty of death, no less (Exodus 31:15)—anticipated that truth. God wanted his people to know—in every generation—that seeking rest by their own effort was a doomed enterprise, for no rest is to be found at the end of such a quest. Thus he forbade them from working to find it.

11 “An Open Letter,” in *Style and Class* (Orange City, Iowa: Middleburg Press, 1982), 56–7. Cited with permission.

Jesus' words and Jesus' Sabbath-keeping hung a neon sign in a public place, a sign for all generations to see: *Working at rest won't bring it—don't even try!*

Only God can give rest, and it will come only through Christ. God's rest would be secured by Jesus' death on the cross as a punishment for our sin and as the end of the guilt that makes our souls so very restless. Paul would instruct the Romans that Jesus "was delivered over to death for our sins" (4:25) and that "our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (6:6). He explained this more fully in his letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (2:20).¹² He assured them that, justified by faith, we have "peace with God" (Romans 5:1). His conclusion was that, in light of the cross of Christ, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1).

Such rest runs deep, for it releases our souls from the burden of guilt both for sins committed and obedience omitted, seals the tear in the fabric of our personal history, and gives each of us a new purpose and meaning that is tied to a new life enjoyed in the love of God.

Yet keen eyes and sensitive hearts know well that the restlessness of the world and in the human soul is not yet completely done away with. People still hurt, they still cry, and they still die, all marks of the old restless order of things.

James and Rebecca were the model couple. Newly wed and in their late twenties, they are handsome, their wedding picture the sort that could have adorned frames for sale at the neighborhood Target. And with a new baby, life before them had a sweet cast to it. James had been a Navy diver, was well trained, and was physically a specimen the likes of which would inspire jealousy in all men over the age of forty. They were partners in a new business venture that promised a solid and prosperous future.

But when James suffered nine days of relentless, brutal headaches, it was not only Rebecca who was concerned; the doctors shifted into diagnostic overdrive. They dug deep, ordering tests that bewildered and frightened everyone. The tests confirmed the worst fears: James had a brain tumor.

12 The verb tells the story: it is in the perfect tense, stressing completed action with ongoing results.

The diagnosis launched a series of bewildering but rapid interventions: immediate brain surgery was radical, but left massive scars; follow-up radiation targeted cancer cells with precision but destroyed healthy hair follicles as well; and chemotherapy attacked the disease broadly but brought a weariness for which young men are unprepared. Tears gave way to fears, and fears gave way to more tears as the unknown trumped the known. At first, the tumor was seldom discussed, a pink elephant everyone knows is in the room but which no one wants to acknowledge. Gradually, as they grew in faith, and with the support of family and friends, the tumor became a reality to be dealt with, a factor in daily life, but not the defining factor.

James and Rebecca are resting in Christ. Like all of us, they do not know the future. But if asked, they'll tell you, without hesitation, that all is well.

Stories like theirs remind us that there is an undeniable *not yet* to our rest in Christ. We inhabit a broken world; those who follow Christ walk with both a limp and a tilt, hobbled both by cosmic brokenness and by personal sin, always leaning toward the new order of things his resurrection promises. Even though people who come to Christ really do find forgiveness, joy, and hope because of the finished redemption his cross provides, they don't always heal completely—not this side of glory, anyway. Our sins don't disappear overnight; neither do their consequences. Some brain tumors are completely healed; but sometimes, the medical journey is a hard one and the outcome sad. Sinful marital patterns—twisted out of shape over decades—don't untangle easily; memories aren't quickly purged of cruel treatment or harsh words, and hearts cringe in desperate fear for years following physical or verbal abuse. One may be set free from addictions, but a rotten liver may well be the price of decades of overindulgence. A bright young mind may have limitless potential, but a self-image crippled by the cruel names children call out or damaged by parental criticism that never shows unconditional love or approval may well be hobbled for life—life this side of the grave, anyway.

We already taste rest, but we haven't yet been seated at the table for the full feast. "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9).

Twisted Sabbaths, Weary Rest

Ever been invited to a party at someone's home, only to discover that there was no reason for the party? There is nothing to celebrate, nothing

drawing this particular group of people together except the personalities of the hosts. In such gatherings, most mill around for a while, but leave early. With all due respect to the hosts, nothing keeps them there.

Parties without meaning are empty; they have no purpose other than fun, a pale counterfeit for real joy. The truth is that it is easy to lose the purpose of a celebration. A wedding anniversary can be shared with friends, with a first-rate dinner at a five-star restaurant and a card or gift, while the first love that bloomed into wedding vows shrivels after years of neglect, cold hearts, and quiet desperation. In our culture, Christmas commemorations are often the worst. Traditions like gift-giving—unrelated to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea but essential to the commercial extravaganza December 25 has become—drape the holidays with stress and financial pressures that make them prime time for painful family crises and bleak seasonal depression. In today's commercialized culture, the incarnate Son of God has become as easy to miss in December as a mustard seed in a shopping mall.

The meaning of the Sabbaths was easy to lose too. Over the centuries, Israel distorted the biblical gift of rest by reducing Sabbath to duty and tying it to a twenty-four-hour period beginning at dusk on Friday. She worked the day to death and “turned the permission to rest into an imperative.”¹³ She scrupulously obeyed the rules and drew out the implications but never found the rest the day proclaimed. She worked hard at not working: her rabbis identified “Sabbath day journeys” that limited the distance a person could walk without his steps becoming laborious. A housewife was permitted to take one stitch in a garment, but two constituted work and thus broke the law. Some knots might be tied on a Sabbath, but others—any that would be lasting knots, like a camel-driver's knot or a sailor's—were prohibited. If a stone lay on the mouth of a jar, the jar could be tipped so that the stone fell off. But the stone itself could not be lifted; such would constitute labor.¹⁴

Modern people react variously to the notion of Sabbath. Many ignore it altogether, giving the day no spiritual significance except as part of

13 Noortzij reminds us that the prohibition of all work was not absolute. *Leviticus*, 230.

14 For a glimpse at the extensive rabbinic tradition surrounding Sabbath laws, see Shabbath 15.1 in *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 113.

a recreational weekend.¹⁵ Some see no compelling connection between Sunday and the Sabbath. They reason that the age called Law is past and another called Grace has arrived, and with the change in epochs, Sabbath became a relic of the former dispensation.

Other Christian fellowships are convinced of a different logic: Sabbath is tied to the fourth of God's Ten Commandments. Sunday has replaced Saturday and is now the Christian Sabbath, and keeping the Sunday-Sabbath is a matter of obedience. Believers are to follow God's laws against unnecessary work or commerce on the Lord's Day.

Those who are eager to flee Sabbath legalism risk forgetting that Sabbath did not start out as a complex of rules but as a celebration of rest that echoed God's own joy in the sweet fellowship between a creation and its Creator. They also risk forgetting that Sabbath is a celebration of deliverance—first in the Exodus and now more fully in Christ. Such celebrations shaped two thousand years of the church's pattern of faith: she gathered communally each Sunday to rest in him.

On the other hand, those who suggest that rest can be attained by shifting Old Testament Sabbath proscriptions from Saturday to Sunday also run a risk. They risk forgetting that any rest that has to be obtained by human efforts—even Sabbath-keeping ones—is not really rest at all.

The hard part of honoring Sabbath today is sorting out what is rehearsal and what is truly feast, what was temporary and what is eternal, what is shadow and what is the substance that cast it (Colossians 2:17).

Such struggles are not new. John Calvin, the sixteenth-century reformer, wrestled with the same tensions, and provides a helpful perspective. He warns against "superstition" in regard to Sabbath-keeping:

By the Lord Christ's coming the ceremonial part of this commandment was abolished. For *he himself is the truth*, with whose presence all figures vanish; he is the body, at whose appearance the shadows are left behind. *He is, I say, the true fulfillment of the Sabbath . . .* Christians ought therefore to shun completely the superstitious observance of days.¹⁶

15 Ironically, what our culture refers to as *recreation* (meaning by the term weekends, sports, and play) is rooted in the biblical concept of redemption, the bringing of the new creation—and with it, rest.

16 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, bk. 2, chap. 8:32 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967). Italics added.

In the same paragraphs in which Calvin argues that the “ceremonial part” of the fourth commandment should be abolished, he affirms two valid reasons for “observing Sabbath.” The first is a call to gather “on stated days” for worship and instruction in God’s Word, which will help us to rest in Christ and turn away from seeking to earn rest by the works of the flesh. The second is a call to treat employees well, giving them a day of rest to show the holistic grace the kingdom of God brings.¹⁷

Calvin’s balanced warnings are fresh and timely for believers in this generation. Any view or practice of Sabbath that puts its focus on our behavior one day of the week instead of placing the focus on the accomplished work of redemption by grace in Christ is off target. Jesus Christ is the true Sabbath; all the Sabbath requirements in the Old Testament point to the rest he alone would provide for his people by the cross and resurrection. Learning to rest in the salvation that Jesus brought—without adding our own efforts—is the way we embrace Sabbath rest. All the weight of salvation is borne by Christ alone, given to us by grace alone, embraced by faith alone.

My wife and I recently enjoyed the privilege of a working sabbatical. I was working on this chapter, in fact, so Sabbath rest was in the forefront of my mind and heart. We were excited one Sunday when we visited another church and read in the bulletin that the preacher would preach about keeping Sabbath. Very articulate and most persuasive, he touched on important issues. He charged us to “get off the merry-go-round” of stress to find freedom from the tyranny of the urgent. He recited compelling statistics showing how busy we are as a culture and how desperately we need to find balance by taking time off from the demands of work. He lamented that our expanding list of labor-saving devices merely adds to our stress levels by seducing us to think we can get more done than ever.

But his solution—“Keep the Sabbath; take Sundays off!”—missed the mark. Not a word was spoken about resting *in Christ alone*. Not a word pointed us to the cross and the resurrection as the ground of our peace. Time management was offered as a substitute redeemer.

As we left, I couldn’t help thinking that the same talk could have been delivered by an Orthodox Jew steeped in the Sabbath regulations of the Mishnah or a secular business consultant advising an overworked

17 Ibid., 8:32. For Calvin, Sunday has no special claim as the day of rest but is an accommodation to our weakness, only advisable because we do not worship every day. He comments, “Would that we were privileged to do so!”

client. Perhaps the word *Sabbath* would have appeared in the former's presentation and been absent from the latter's. Yet the message would have been the same: if you take a day off you will achieve schedule and relationship balance, find relief from over commitment, and be able to invest more time in marriage and family. The benefits will be well worth the effort.

Few will disagree that a day off can benefit stressed people and that renewing your commitment to a busy family shows love and provides nurture to a generation of children themselves showing the strain of this pressured life. But the currents of restlessness run deep, their source bubbling from places other than schedules. Going to church faithfully on Sundays does not itself fix the greed that drives people the other days. Making a commitment not to go shopping on Sunday or go to the office that day could be driven by a desire to honor the Lord more purely. But it may as well be driven by tradition, custom, or even fear of reprisal—from the Lord, your parents, or your church community. Ultimately, keeping Sabbath by such behavioral commitments one day a week is no guarantee at all that your rest is in Christ or that your labor the other six is “unto the Lord.”

To find rest in a world of relentless change, stress, and the tyranny of the urgent, people need a new heart, one emptied of self-reliance and unburdened of frustrating duty, one desperate for God's grace. They need redemption of a kind that will set the world right once more.

The Sabbaths in Leviticus 23 showed the movement of the plot of God's redemption: he would bring rest to a restless world. But his redemption would prove to be something mysterious, different from anything Israel could imagine. In fact, it would take seven feasts to help her dream.

Questions for Further Study and Discussion

1. God established Sabbaths (plural) that blessed animals, servants, and even the land itself with rest. How does this fact shape your thinking about the redemption Christ brought?
2. Re-read Matthew 11:28–12:13. How does the healing of the man with a shriveled hand bring him Sabbath rest?
3. Hebrews 4:9 speaks of a Sabbath rest to come. Will it be a rest tied to a Saturday (Old Testament Sabbath), Sunday (called by many the Christian Sabbath), or neither?
4. Do you rest well in the cross and resurrection of Christ? Does your church? Talk about it.
5. The chapter refers to God’s “relentless movement of history from restlessness to rest.” How does this divine movement affect the way you engage the daily news reports? Does it shape the yearnings of your heart? Does it influence the mission strategy of your local church to bring rest to the restless in your community? Should it?

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