Sabbath Rest
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The Beauty of God’s Rhythm
for a Digital Age

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For Bettina, Nathaniel, Madeleine, and Annabelle

*Shabbat Shalom*
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Preface

Over the course of several years while writing a theological commentary on Exodus (The Abiding Presence, 2018), I was struck by how often the Sabbath appeared in the narrative. Whether it was the manna story in the wilderness, the ten commandments, or the framing elements around the building of the tabernacle, the Sabbath motif weaves its way throughout this archetypal story of God’s salvation. No doubt this is due in part to the fact that the Sabbath became one of the most significant signs of Judaism in the second temple period when the Old Testament was being formed. As worship and study began to form around the many dispersed synagogal communities throughout Palestine and beyond, a day of holy rest and ceasing from work became critical to the life of God’s people. Gathering together to read God’s word, maintaining relationships and celebrating rest from work preserved Jewish communities and their life of faith in the ancient world, as it continues to do so today.

The more that I studied and recognized the importance of the Sabbath in the Pentateuch, the prophets and the second temple period, the more I realized that as a Christian I had largely disregarded the commandment to rest. In some ways I had relegated the Sabbath to a matter of legalistic dispute between Christ and the Pharisees in the New Testament that had little to do with the life of faith. Either that or I thought the Sabbath had been spiritualized through Christ and was now just another way
to speak about the rest that Christians experience through the Holy Spirit. Yet the more that I researched, the more it became abundantly clear that the Sabbath was a sign of God’s movement in creation towards wholeness and rest that was central to the flourishing of Israel and to the mission of Christ through the Church.

Having been convicted of my own Sabbath neglect, I began to set aside a 24-hour period from sunset to sunset each week. I thought of it as a spiritual discipline and would test whether or not a Sabbath-rhythm was really important to my own Christian formation. What began as a short journey has turned into a long pilgrimage that continues to lead me to places that I never expected. The Sabbath has opened up and deepened family relationships, church relationships and the desire to bring liberation to the oppressed and to the land. Practising the Sabbath has also revealed to me the restlessness of our digital and consumer society. In fact, one of the greatest hindrances to my own Sabbath rest was my inability to detach from digital devices for a 24-hour period. It took some time before I realized that for many (myself included) putting down our work means disconnecting from the digital world and reconnecting with those around us.

What follows are reflections not from an expert but from a fellow pilgrim on a journey home to the Father’s rest. I offer some practical suggestions for maintaining the Sabbath, but mostly I have tried to explore the biblical texts to offer a compelling case for why the Sabbath remains critical to the life and witness of God’s people today. In my own practice, I have failed to keep many Sabbaths but continue to learn from my failures. Sabbath is a discipline that doesn’t come naturally to us, but like any spiritual discipline we continue to be transformed as we commit to practising it in our own lives. This book is an invitation to discover one of the great gifts of God to his people. Sabbath rest is desperately needed in our restless digital age. It
is a rest offered by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that was first given to Israel and now has been given to the Church to be a sign of his wholeness and reconciliation in the world.

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The Beauty of the Sabbath

Finding Rest

Centuries ago a bishop in northern Africa called Augustine wrote, ‘Our heart is restless until it rests in you.’ His precise insight into the human condition came out of his own struggle to find peace. Augustine had a sensitive and perceptive soul. He engaged in all the worldly pleasures he could as a young intellectual, but something was missing. Despite his learning and success, his restlessness increased until one day, through a flood of tears, he read from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome, ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’. He describes that moment by saying, ‘At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart’ (Confessions 9.29). Augustine had found his rest. Like all believers, however, he would go on to enter further into that rest by discovering the one who had called him to wholeness.

Regardless of race, culture or background, human beings have an inner sense of restlessness, a sense of unease and insecurity. There is a longing in each one of us that yearns for rest, for the wheels to stop turning and to sit in stillness before our creator. Augustine understood this over a thousand years ago and humanity has remained the same ever since.

In the consumer and digital world of today people are desperate to escape the rat race and the stress that comes
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from being constantly connected. They search for inner peace through self-help books, yoga retreats, serenity spas or different types of drugs. They try to find a sustainable rhythm to life that won’t lead to complete burnout. Advertisers capitalize on these desires and sell products that promise to free us from anxiety and bring tranquility to an otherwise chaotic life. The problem is that these remedies for busyness and stress are often marked by narcissistic individualism. It’s important to care for ourselves, but excessive preoccupation with our own well-being can often result in disregard for the welfare of the wider community. We may seek inner peace but if the end goal is simply to experience personal rest, then that goal has missed the mark.

God has a much broader vision of rest. In fact, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation he is leading all creation towards wholeness and rest in him. The Scriptures give us a vision for the fullness of that rest when on the final day a loud voice from his throne will proclaim, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them’ (Rev. 21.3). When God returns in the fullness of his glory there will be no more suffering, no more fear, no more stress and anxiety, but all things will find their wholeness in him.

Until that time, however, God’s people have always lived in eager anticipation of experiencing the rest that comes with his divine presence. For the ancient Israelites it was the promise of freedom and life in the land where God’s abundant blessings would be poured out on his people. They would be free from war with their enemies. They would produce bumper crops, healthy livestock and extended families that could celebrate in peace. To do so, the Israelites entered into a covenant agreement with God to be obedient to his commandments. This was not a set of laws meant to be a burden on his people, but commands that, if kept, would lead to their flourishing.

For Christians, those commands were fulfilled through
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God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. In him we are given a visual image or representation of what it means to live out the very heart of God’s commands in the Old Testament - to love God and to love our neighbour. As John’s Gospel reminds us, ‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth’ (John 1.14). The glory that we witness in the Son shines out through his obedience to God’s command, his teaching on the commandments, and his ushering in the kingdom through works of healing, forgiving and making people whole. Yet one of the most critical commandments of the Old Testament – that often goes unnoticed by Christians – which is filled out by Christ in the New Testament, is the command for Sabbath rest.

The commandment to remember and keep the Sabbath was critical for the life and faith of ancient Israel and it continues to be an essential practice for many Jews today. One reason the Sabbath command is vital to the life of faith is because it’s not about individual inner peace. It will certainly bring about inner peace, but that is not its end goal. Sabbath is about communal rest and wholeness that comes when we live in the fullness of God’s presence. The Sabbath is the gift of rest for the community of creation, the community of Israel, the community of the Church and the community of all humanity. It brings release and restoration to all levels of society. The Sabbath is as much about political and economic freedom as it is about physical and spiritual rest. Sabbath restores families and communities, and ushers in a time of shalom, that wonderful Hebrew word that conveys the sense of justice, peace and joy existing in every human relationship and in our relationship with God. The gift of the Sabbath is God’s invitation to us to enter into communion with him, to experience the holiness of his time, and to dwell in his presence.
What is the Sabbath?

We shall go into detail on the nature of the Sabbath in the coming chapters, but we can begin with a brief overview of its origins in the Old Testament and its developments as we enter the New Testament period and the early Church.

The Hebrew noun shabbat means to cease or stop, and so the implied meaning is also to rest. Shabbat is used for the first time in the Bible in Exodus 16.23 when God commands the Israelites in the wilderness to observe a ‘holy sabbath’ where they will cease from gathering manna on the seventh day to rest. However, the verb ‘to cease, rest’ is used in the opening chapters of Genesis when God ‘rested’ on the seventh day from all the work that he had done’ (Gen. 2.2). The creation story reveals the rhythm of life that God has woven into the fabric of the world. If God works for six days and rests for one, then all of creation must do the same, which is later made explicit in the ten commandments.

When Moses receives the law at Mount Sinai God reinforces the need for Israel to imitate this same pattern of work and rest.

For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Ex. 20.9–11)

The command for holy rest applies to the whole covenant community and even the sojourner, or foreigner, who might happen to be living among them. Rest is mandatory for God’s people and is at the heart of what keeping Sabbath is all about. God himself rested and set an example for us to follow. To become
fully human means that, as ones created in God’s image, we imitate God’s ways. So the pattern of six and one for work and rest are essential to our own flourishing, to the health of our communities, and for the flourishing of the world. At the heart of the Sabbath commandment in Exodus is the call to be imitators of God, which means ordering our lives after the pattern he has set in creation from the beginning of time.

The God who rested from his work on the seventh day, however, is also the God who liberates his people from death and bondage. Later in Deuteronomy, the ten commandments are repeated but this time the motivation for maintaining the Sabbath is because of God’s saving acts in history.

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut. 5.15)

Sabbath rest is also a day to remember that we were all once slaves and living in bondage. Rest is the gift of life for those who have been released from oppression and the burden of ceaseless toil. The experience of Sabbath is a reminder of our identity as ones who have moved from captivity to freedom, from mourning to joy, and from death to life. God has liberated his people by his mighty works and now he invites them to join in his rest.

The Sabbath is also a sign of the covenant that God establishes with Israel (Ex. 31.17) and is to be honoured by how the Israelites treat the land. Specific regulations are given to the people concerning their fields. The land is allowed to rest every Sabbath day and after six years of harvesting it should lie fallow in the seventh year (Lev. 25.4). After seven Sabbath years the shofar (an odd-looking horn) was sounded to mark the beginning of the fiftieth year, which was the time of Jubilee.

It was not uncommon in the ancient world for people to sell
their land, or sell themselves as indentured servants, if their crops failed or they faced difficult economic situations. Over time families might have been caught in slavery for generations, but the Jubilee marked a time of freedom and liberation where everyone was returned to their original land (Lev. 25.9–13). Israel was to be a people that recognized the difficult economic realities of living in an agrarian community. However, they were also to be a generous and gracious people that would not keep successive generations bound in slavery as their ancestors had experienced in Egypt. Instead, they were commanded to offer freedom and redemption in the fiftieth year of Jubilee just as God had released them and given them the gift of rest in the land.

It is not clear whether the ancient Israelites ever celebrated the Jubilee in their communities. The scriptures do not record any such event so we cannot be sure that the command was ever followed. However, whether or not Israel celebrated the Jubilee is not as important as the fact that the command was given. The vision of Jubilee is a vision of a Sabbath-keeping people who prioritize the upholding of social and economic justice, especially for the poor and the marginalized. Maintaining Sabbath rest was not just a religious ritual, it was a practice that had very real social, political and economic implications. The sacred authors envisaged a Sabbath-society that was shaped by justice, liberation and restoration.

The immense importance of the Sabbath in Israel was also made known through the prophets who condemned the peoples’ utter disregard and abuse of God’s command. The prophet Amos spoke to the Northern tribes of Israel as they broke the Sabbath for the sake of exploiting the poor and making money.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’ (Amos 8.4–6)

The injustice of God’s own people was disgraceful in the eyes of the prophet. The Sabbath was meant to be a day to remember the poor as God had remembered Israel in Egypt, but the people were doing exactly the opposite. Rather than rest, they imposed the same brutal treatment on the poor and were acting like Pharaoh rather than God’s chosen people.

In a similar manner the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel chastised those living in Jerusalem for failing to be obedient to the Sabbath. Jeremiah was concerned about economic activity (Jer. 17.21–27), while Ezekiel was concerned with the people profaning the Sabbath that was meant to be a holy day (Ezek. 20.13). The prophet Isaiah also rebukes the people for continuing to celebrate the Sabbath outwardly even though their inner lives are completely corrupt. He pleads with them to ‘learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow’ (Isa. 1.17). In other words, do all the things that the Sabbath reminds you to do!

But the prophets also had a vision for the future when the Sabbath would become the gift that it was intended to be. Isaiah sees a time when all people will be invited to join in the blessing of the Sabbath. Even the eunuchs and foreigners, who were outside the covenant community, will be able to participate in the blessing of Sabbath rest when God redeems his people (Isa. 56.4–6). In the end, Isaiah has a vision of the final days when God will renew the heavens and the earth. ‘From new moon to
new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord’ (Isa. 66.23). The hope of the prophet is that all creation and all humanity will enjoy Sabbath rest as they gather together in worship of the one true God.

Ezekiel’s hope for the Sabbath is one that is connected to worship after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. He looks to a future when the temple will be rebuilt and the priests of Israel will honour the Sabbath. Ezekiel foresees a time when the inner courts of the temple will once again be open on the Sabbath and the people will bring their offerings and the priests will make pleasing sacrifices to God (Ezek. 46.1–12). Though Ezekiel’s hope is distinctly tied to temple worship, he sees the practice of the Sabbath as a key part of God’s restoration after exile.

When the Jews did finally return from exile, we find a particular emphasis on the practice of Sabbath, especially in the conflict that faced Nehemiah. In restoring Jerusalem, Nehemiah not only had to rebuild the city walls but also had to teach the people the commandments of God. One of the most significant of these was to keep the Sabbath day holy and to cease from their daily work.

After seeing the Jews going about their normal business on the Sabbath, Nehemiah finally confronts them and says:

‘What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the sabbath day? Did not your ancestors act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring more wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath.’ (Neh. 13.17–18)

What is so important in this statement is that Nehemiah connects the exile and God’s punishment on Israel directly to their disobedience of the Sabbath command. Sabbath obedience is so critical for Nehemiah that he even sets watchmen over the gate to prevent anyone from coming into the city to trade on the day of
rest (Neh. 13.19-21).

In the time after Nehemiah and before the birth of Jesus (often called the second temple period) we find a growing tradition of Jewish interpretation of Scripture that becomes the basis for how Jews were meant to live in obedience to God’s law. Since the Old Testament did not always give extensive, clear-cut rules on how a person should live, the scribes and teachers offered additional regulations for how a person could remain faithful to the commandments. This was especially true regarding the Sabbath.

What develops in Judaism during this period is a great concern for strict Sabbath obedience as an outward sign for God’s covenant people. To be seen as part of the true Israel, a person needed to abide by the teachings on Sabbath that had been passed down from previous generations. These traditions had become more and more specific about what one could or could not do to observe the Sabbath properly. There were various Jewish groups that had differing opinions on how to practise Sabbath obedience, but each of them struggled with the question of what it meant to be faithful to God’s commands in an alien culture that threatened their very existence.

In a collection of rabbinic commentaries called the Talmud, there is a discussion that raises the question about how a person could be obedient to the Sabbath if they were in the middle of the desert and didn’t know what day it was (Shabbat 69b). One rabbi says that you should count six days from the day you realized you lost track of time and then celebrate the Sabbath. Another rabbi, however, counters and says that Adam was created on the sixth day and observed the Sabbath on the seventh. So the person in the desert should keep the Sabbath immediately and then count six days. The discussion seems somewhat pedantic, and we might be more concerned with how the person is going to survive for seven days in the desert! However, this demonstrates how central the Sabbath was for
the Jews and how critical it was to set aside one day a week for holy rest.

During the second temple period, keeping the Sabbath was also a matter of life and death for some Jews. The events surrounding 167 BCE are celebrated in the festival of Hanukkah when the Jews recaptured the temple that had been desecrated by the King Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus had tried to convert the Jews to following Greek traditions, but many who resisted were slaughtered in Jerusalem. He made offerings on the temple altar to the Greek god Zeus, which was seen as the ‘abomination of desolation’ alluded to in Daniel (11.31; 12.11).

The persecution of Jews continued, but some, like the priest Mattathias, refused to make sacrifices to the pagan gods. He killed a Greek officer, destroyed the pagan altar and fled with others to the hills. The soldiers pursued them and commanded one group to come out and fight, but they refused because it was the Sabbath. The soldiers went on to kill every man, woman and child. When Mattathias heard this he and the others declared that fighting on the Sabbath was permitted in the case of self-defence (1 Macc. 2.1-41).

Following the persecution of Antiochus IV, other groups of Jews also fled to the Judean wilderness but for different reasons. The Essenes were a Jewish sect that condemned the temple in Jerusalem and established their own religious community. They lived in the caves of Qumran just south-west of Jerusalem near the Dead Sea. Many of their biblical scrolls, along with other writings, formed the collection now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. As we will discuss later, the Sabbath was also critical in their communal life and was a sign that they were a part of God’s true covenant community.

This leads us to the Pharisees and the Sadducees during Jesus’ lifetime. The scribes and teachers of the law had inherited a significant body of teaching on Sabbath practice that they continued to wrestle with in their own time. The rabbis debated
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about the nature of Sabbath observance and the tension it created with everyday life under Roman rule in Jerusalem. They would have been well aware of Nehemiah’s association of Sabbath disobedience with exile and they did not want to commit the same sins as their ancestors. Nor did they necessarily want to repeat the mass killings and persecution experienced by their ancestors under Antiochus IV.

These historic events may help us sympathize slightly with the Pharisees in their anxieties surrounding Sabbath obedience and their confrontations with Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth, who seemed to be flagrantly disobeying the Sabbath. Though at times they were probably enforcing a religion of strict legalism, the Pharisees were also concerned with not neglecting the Sabbath commands in even the slightest way.

Our sympathies, however, can only run so deep since the result of such stringent Sabbath regulations often ended in bondage rather than liberation. The rules had undermined the original intent of the Sabbath as a gift of rest and refreshment to God’s people. And so we can understand Jesus’ response when he reminds the Pharisees that ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath’ (Mark 2.27).

As we survey the Old Testament and find the prominence of the Sabbath in so many places, it may be surprising that there are also many books where the practice is completely absent. Despite the centrality of Sabbath rest in the creation account of Genesis, there is no mention of Adam and Eve, or anyone else before or after the flood, ceasing from work on the seventh day. Neither do we hear of Abraham, Isaac or Jacob following the practice of working for six days and resting on the seventh. For something that is so central to the creation story it seems odd that there is no record of the earliest ancestors practising the Sabbath.

We have already noted the significant theme of the Sabbath in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, but nothing
more is said about it once the Israelites enter into the land. In Joshua, Judges and the early monarchies of Saul, David and Solomon we find nothing that alludes to the practice of Sabbath. The word *shabbat* is not even mentioned until 2 Kings, which simply describes it as a particular day of the week. Sabbath abuses are later raised by the prophets, but a significant portion of Israel’s history is silent on the subject.

The Old Testament’s diverse witness to the Sabbath may shed light on how important it was for particular generations of Israelites. Some may have emphasized the Sabbath, while during other periods it may have fallen out of the life of faith and practice. The other possibility is that the absence of Sabbath references is due to the fact that the sacred authors assumed the pattern of rest continued and did not need to be mentioned. Whatever the case, we see that upon returning from exile and into the period of the New Testament, Sabbath obedience became one of the most significant identifying markers of belonging to God’s covenant community. To be a true Israelite was to practise the Sabbath religiously, even in the midst of a foreign culture where persecution was always a danger.

For the Sadducees and Pharisees the question of Sabbath-keeping was debated while under Roman rule where Caesar was Lord. The social and political setting situates Jesus amid the real tension confronting Jews about how to be obedient while under foreign occupation. Yet Jesus does not come as a military Messiah with the intention of leading a rebellion against Rome. He comes as the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2.28) who will reconcile, heal and restore all creation through his death and resurrection. This is what he models on the Sabbath throughout his life as he heals the lame and crippled, gives food to the hungry, and cures many of their diseases.

The movement of all creation towards rest is marked by the kingdom of God being inaugurated in Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
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The new covenant has been established and the new community of the Church is formed on the day of Pentecost. But how does the command for Sabbath rest relate to the new community in Christ? Are Christians meant to follow God’s pattern set in creation and the command for rest in the Old Testament? Or are they set free from the old commands to live in the new age of the Spirit?

From Sabbath to the Lord’s Day

The earliest followers of Christ in Jerusalem were predominantly Jews who continued to observe the practice of Sabbath one day a week from Friday evening to Saturday evening. The book of Acts presents a picture of a newly gathered people sharing their resources, worshipping in their homes and celebrating the power of the Spirit poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2.42‒46). In this earliest expression of the Church we find that believers continued to pray and gather in the Jerusalem temple (Acts 2.46; 3.1, 11; 5.12).

As the early Christians began to take the message of Christ out to the Gentiles they continued to observe the Sabbath by preaching in the synagogues (Acts 13.27; 15.21). The synagogues were gathering places outside of Jerusalem where Jews would come together to read the Old Testament and discuss rabbinic teachings. They were places of worship and study, which made them opportune locations for sharing the good news of the gospel. The apostle Paul often taught on the Sabbath in different cities as he carried out his ministry to both Jew and Gentile (Acts 13.42-44; 16.13; 17.2; 18.4).

The early Christians, however, also began to gather on ‘the first day of the week’ (Acts 20.7; 1 Cor. 16.2), which would become known as the ‘Lord’s Day’ (Rev. 1.10). The New Testament offers very little evidence of how and why these changes took place, but it is likely that the Christians gathered on the first day of the week (Sunday) because of its association
with the resurrection. The Sabbath was a day for rest, as it had been passed on from the Jewish tradition, but the Lord’s Day was a time for the new community of Christ to gather together to share in the gifts of the Holy Spirit as they worshipped the risen Lord. This demonstrates that in the earliest Christian traditions the ‘Lord’s Day’ (Sunday) did not replace the Sabbath, but existed alongside it as the natural day for believers to celebrate and worship the risen Christ (for more detailed studies, see Bacchiocchi 1977, Carson 1999).

As the Church continued to grow we see signs in the New Testament that some remained committed to the Sabbath while others did not. The Council of Jerusalem made no binding requirements on non-Jewish believers (see Acts 15.28-29) and they were clear that they ‘should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God’ (Acts 15.19). Likewise, Paul encourages Christians in Rome to observe certain days in honour of the Lord if they choose to do so, but it is not a requirement for all believers (Rom. 14.6). He also writes to the Christians in Colossae that they can freely celebrate the Sabbath and other festivals without being condemned (Col. 2.16), but that these things are ultimately pointing towards fullness in Christ. These passages indicate that there was no set practice in the early Church of observing the Sabbath. Some likely remained faithful to resting one day a week and gathering on the Lord’s Day, while others chose not to observe specific Jewish festivals.

Following the apostles, there was a general movement towards the Lord’s Day becoming the Christian day of worship, but this did not necessarily replace the Sabbath. Instead, we also begin to see the spiritualization of the Sabbath and its association with rest experienced in Christ now and in the age to come (Heb. 4.1-13). This is nowhere better expressed than in the words of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, writing in the early second century.

In his letter to the believers in Magnesia (an ancient Greek
city in Ionia) he commends them to a new life in Christ that ‘no longer observes the Sabbath, but lives in the observance of the Lord’s Day’. He goes on to say:

Let us therefore no longer keep the Sabbath after the Jewish manner, and rejoice in days of idleness … But let every one of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body, admiring the workmanship of God, and not eating things prepared the day before, nor using lukewarm drinks, and walking within a prescribed space, nor finding delight in dancing and plaudits which have no sense in them. (Letter to the Magnesians 9.1 in Coxe et al 1996).

Ignatius is not just making jabs at Jewish practice by citing well-known rules for the Sabbath. His concern demonstrates that the churches had a strong Jewish-Christian contingent and it is possible that they were putting pressure on the Gentiles to observe traditional Sabbath laws. Many of these were written in the Talmud; they do not allow for cooking food on the Sabbath or for a person to walk 2,000 cubits (approximately 3,000 feet or 914 metres). Magnesia was also located in Asia Minor, which was where Paul experienced so much conflict with the Judaizing that went on in his own day. We do not know if Jewish Christians were trying to ‘convert’ Gentile Christians to following Jewish law, but what we can see is the Gentile identity of the Christian Church growing and shedding some of its Jewish heritage. This was done through worshipping on the Lord’s Day and understanding the Sabbath as spiritual rest now offered in Christ.

The most significant change to the Christian Church, however, took place with the rise of Emperor Constantine in Rome. In AD 321 he declared the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, to be the official day of rest and Christian worship throughout the empire. Despite some dissenting groups, the whole of the Christian Church
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under Roman rule gathered together on Sunday. This was not a theological replacement of the Sabbath, but it was the first time that the Lord’s Day was associated with rest from work. Other Christians, however, continued to interpret the Sabbath through a spiritual lens as a time to refrain from sin, to perform the works of God, to rest from the burdens of this world, to engage in contemplation and prayer, to experience freedom in Christ, and to be active in spiritual activities rather than physical rest.

It is not until the medieval period that the spiritual interpretation of the Sabbath is largely replaced by the ruling class’s desire to enact laws that would create a Christian society. Legislation for Sunday produced a form of Christian sabbatarianism that reflected Old Testament Israel. Though the old covenant had been fulfilled in Christ, Christendom worked on the principle that the Sabbath notions of rest had been transferred to Sunday along with the requirement of worship. Thus the Church, the new Israel, could enforce similar laws on society regarding the observance of the Lord’s Day (see Bauckham 1999).

Tracing the movement of the Jewish Sabbath to the Christian observance of the Lord’s Day is not straightforward. Different approaches have been voiced throughout the centuries, but the earliest witnesses demonstrate that Sabbath practice was very much a part of the early Church’s life. Some Gentile Christians may have been pressured into obeying Sabbath rules, others saw it as a connection to their roots in Judaism, while others understood its spiritual fulfilment in Christ. However it was perceived, Christians throughout the centuries have wrestled with the relevance of the Sabbath commandment and how it relates to the life of faith. After centuries of theological reflection on the topic, where does that leave the Christian of today?
Should Christians Obey the Sabbath Command?

The question of obedience to the Mosaic laws was of central importance to the early Church. The first followers of Jesus were predominantly Jewish and had grown up under the guidance of the laws and commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Their lives were shaped by the traditions passed down to them from God’s original covenant with Israel. When the Gentiles came to faith, critical questions were raised about what Jewish laws, if any, they should follow. One of the first recorded responses to this dilemma comes in Acts 15 when Pharisees who followed Jesus argued that the Gentiles should be circumcised (Acts 15.5). Following a discussion among the apostles, James announced the decision that non-Jews did not have to follow the laws of Moses (Acts 15.9–21). But did this mean they were to abandon all the teachings of the law?

One difficulty comes from our interpretation of the word ‘law’ in the Bible. The ‘law of Moses’ is often a reference to the collection of the first five books of the Bible called the Pentateuch, or the Hebrew Torah. The word torah is often translated as ‘law’ in English, but this is somewhat misleading since it comes from a verb that means ‘teach, instruct.’ There are certainly portions of the Pentateuch that contain legal prescriptions that resemble our modern idea of law. Yet much of the instruction or teaching in the Torah comes through narrative, poetry or songs, and focuses on how to live faithfully in relationship with God and within the covenant community.

The difficulty of translating torah as ‘law’ in every occurrence in our English Bible is that it can sound as if God is only concerned with obedience to a strict legal code of conduct, but this is not the case. The Torah is the summary of God’s salvation for his people from Genesis to Deuteronomy, and within this story we find teachings, instructions and commandments that are there to help guide God’s people to the fullness of life. When
Moses and Israel received the commandments at Mount Sinai after being liberated from 400 years of slavery it was not as if God released them from one burden only to give them another! The commandments at Sinai were a gift of the covenant that provided the Israelites with a guide to walk in righteousness and holiness with their God.

Many Christians today, however, think of the law in the Old Testament as a burden that the Jews of Jesus’ day followed meticulously and stringently. The religious leaders were narrowly fixated on keeping every rule and quickly condemned those who did not live up to their strict standards. The law was a burden to the people, and Jesus came to save us from such legalism, to free us from the law, and to live by the Golden Rule of love. Such caricatures of the Jewish understanding of the law in the New Testament period are far from the truth.

While there were forms of Judaism during Jesus’ day that emphasized following rules and regulations additional to the Mosaic laws, these were not accepted by all Jews. The setting of the New Testament is far more complex than many Christians realize because the Gospels tend to depict the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees as the main antagonists to Jesus. Their confrontations over obedience to particular Jewish practices portray them as small-minded legalists who are concerned only with the outward practice of the law. In comparison, Jesus appears as the champion for freedom from such pedantry and demonstrates what it means to love and care for other human beings.

There are two problems with reading the Gospels from this perspective. The first is that not all Jews believed, or acted like, the Pharisees. They were only one small group of religious leaders in Jerusalem who had their own interpretation of the law. They had major theological differences with the Sadducees over significant topics like the resurrection. Other Jews would have rejected the teachings of the Pharisees altogether. Judaism
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during Jesus’ day was complex, and different groups made claims to be the ‘true Israel’ by their interpretation and obedience to the law. The Pharisees represent one of those groups who had particular issues with Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth, and his interpretation of the law.

The second difficulty is that Jesus’ response to the Pharisees seems to demonstrate that he came to abolish the law by establishing a new covenant where people can live by faith alone. The Pharisees were trying to achieve righteousness by their outward obedience to the law, but Jesus offered grace through faith. If this belief is applied to all the Jews during the New Testament period (as it often is), it paints a picture of a Jewish people obsessed by laws, trying desperately to win God’s favour through their good works and obedience. This stereotype reduces the laws of the Old Testament to a burdensome set of rules that a person follows in order to get to heaven. And Judaism appears to be a religion of legalism whereby one earns God’s blessing and favour by good works. The problem is that this does not reflect a Jewish understanding of the law or Jesus’ perception of Torah.

From the earliest moments recorded in his childhood we see Jesus sitting among the Jewish leaders, having in-depth discussions about the law, and their being amazed at his understanding (Luke 2.46‒47). What is remarkable about this scene is Jesus’ depth of wisdom on the law at such a young age. As he grew, Luke reminds us that the young boy from Nazareth ‘increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour’ (Luke 2.52). The youth who discussed the law in the temple of Jerusalem would become the man who did the same throughout the synagogues in Galilee. Rather than being a burden or a set of legalistic religious rules, the law was central to Jesus’ identity as the Messiah of Israel and as the one who would demonstrate what it meant to live in obedience to God’s commands.

The idea that Jesus abolishes the law is also problematic
because he declares the exact opposite! The Gospel of Matthew
is thought to be written mainly to Jews in the early Christian
Church, and so there are frequent references to Jewish tradition
and the new covenant in Christ. One of these instances is
the Sermon on the Mount, which offers a parallel to Moses
delivering the law from Mount Sinai. Jesus begins his teaching
with the Beatitudes and reveals what it means to experience
and participate in the kingdom of God. He goes on to say:

‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the
prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly
I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter,
not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is
accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of
these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will
be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does
them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of
heaven.’ (Matt. 5.17–19)

The positioning of these verses is important because what follows
is Jesus’ interpretation of the laws given to Moses. The Gospel
writer does not want the following to be misconstrued as if Jesus is
offering a completely new teaching. Instead, when Jesus says, ‘You
have heard that it was said …’ and follows with, ‘But I say to you
…’, we are to understand this as a further exposition of the truth
contained in the law. This is not a condemnation or surpassing of
the laws given to Moses, but Jesus articulates the depth of their.radical call to holiness.

Take for example the seventh commandment of the Decalogue
‘You shall not commit adultery.’ Jesus presents the law and then
goes beyond the mere prohibition of sleeping with someone
outside of the marriage covenant. ‘But I say to you that everyone
who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery
with her in his heart’ (Matt. 5.28). The original command was
given to preserve the sacredness of the marriage covenant and to protect the health of the family and the community. Jesus’ reinterpretation of the command maintains its original intention but also reveals that the law is concerned with the state of the heart. Jesus illuminates the inner thoughts of human beings to demonstrate that the goal of the law is not just about outward obedience: it’s also about inward transformation. If we want to flourish in life and experience the fullness of God’s promise, then Jesus says we must apply God’s teaching and command to our external actions as well as to our inner thoughts. This is summed up when Jesus declares, ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matt. 5.48), which echoes the command given to Moses and the Israelites, ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’ (Lev. 19.2).

Jesus had no intention of abolishing the laws and writings of the Old Testament, but, rather, he says that he has come to ‘fulfil’ them. By his life and works Jesus demonstrates what it means to be fully obedient to the law. He offers a picture of the perfection of humanity as one who lives in complete unity with the will of the Father. He also gives us a vision of perfection for the future by saying that not one letter (Greek: iota) of the law will pass away until the renewal of the heavens and the earth. Everyone is accountable to the truth of God’s law. It was revealed to Moses and the Israelites in the Old Testament, but has been illuminated in the life of Jesus. He demonstrates that the heart of the law is more than just a set of individual commands. Instead, the law’s weight and depth are found in obedience that leads to holiness, justice and righteousness (Matt. 23.23).

Later in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus is ‘tested’ by one of the Pharisees about the meaning of the law. In an attempt to trap Jesus amid the religious and political debates of his day, we discover the summary of all God’s commandments.

‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He
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said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ (Matt. 22.36–40)

The first commandment Jesus cites comes from Deuteronomy 6.4 and is a prayer, known as the Shema, that has been recited by Jews for centuries upon centuries. The law is summed up in a call to loyalty and allegiance to God that consumes every part of our being. The second command comes from Leviticus 19.18, ‘You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.’ This might seem an obscure reference to some, but at the heart of the law is also a steadfast commitment to the love of others. Complete fidelity and devotion to the entire law is summed up in these two commandments to love. And it is through Jesus’ obedience to these commandments that we see the fulfilment of what it means to walk in perfect obedience to the law. The commandments were not a form of religious legalism but, rather, they were the gift of life to God’s people.

As we move into the life of the first Christian communities working through what it means for Jews and Gentiles to worship together, we are given insights into the law through the apostle Paul. This rabbi who practised a strict form of Judaism was like a Pharisee (Phil. 3.4–6), persecuting Christians until his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.1–19). Paul, who was steeped in Jewish tradition and the Torah, was called to bring the gospel to the uncircumcised Gentiles. His message to the churches is one of freedom and grace by faith in Christ alone. He argues against the need for Gentile circumcision or following dietary restrictions and emphasizes that the new community in Christ is one that lives by the Spirit.
What, then, is the lasting significance of the Torah for the apostle Paul? Is he saying that the Torah has become obsolete and that the Jewish tradition summed up in the Old Testament has been surpassed in Christ? Is the new Christian church to follow a different code of behaviour than what was previously established by God through his people Israel?

We do not have space to survey all of Paul’s epistles, but his letter to the churches in Rome offers insights into the issues that early Christians were wrestling with as they sought to be faithful to the life and teachings of Jesus, a Jewish Messiah. As Jews and Gentiles from all nations gathered together in life and worship, problems arose as to what aspects of the Mosaic laws would shape this new community.

Romans is one of the last letters that Paul wrote and was probably composed in Corinth. It is the longest of his letters and deals with significant theological topics as well as social issues that arose in a mixed community. We remember that Rome was the political centre of the world, and the empire exerted its strength and authority throughout Europe, Asia Minor and the Middle East. It is the place where Caesar is Lord except for a small minority who claim that Jesus is Lord. It is to these followers of Christ that Paul attempts to explain the role of the Jewish tradition in the life of the Church.

Romans 9–11 is the most extensive treatment of Israel’s role in the history of God’s salvation and in the new covenant in Christ. Paul repeatedly argues that the Gentiles have been added to Israel and that they have not replaced them. ‘I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin’ (Rom. 11.1). Paul is clear that Israel is still God’s first covenant people but he mourns for his fellow Jews who have rejected Jesus as Messiah. The benefit is that Israel’s disobedience has made room for the Gentiles to be grafted into the body of faith (Rom. 11.11–25, 28–31). If the Gentiles have
become a part of God’s people, but are not under the Mosaic commandments, then what becomes of Torah?

Paul seems to argue that faith has replaced the law because righteousness now comes through Christ: ‘But now, irrespective of the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe’ (Rom. 3.21–22). In an effort to clarify the role of the law in the light of faith in Christ, however, Paul is quick to remind the new Christians that the law has not become obsolete: ‘Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law’ (Rom. 3.31).

The difficulty is that some interpretations of Romans treat the words law and faith as conflicting terms, but they are not. To ‘uphold the law’ is to live by faith in such a way that means we are obedient to the summary of the law to love God and to love our neighbour. Later in his letter Paul describes Christ as the ‘end of the law’ (Rom. 10.4), but even here he is not arguing that God’s truth revealed in the Torah has somehow become obsolete. Instead, he is making a similar statement to Jesus who claimed that he had come to ‘fulfil’ the law (Matt. 5.17). The word Paul uses here for ‘end’ is telos, which is the Greek meaning ‘end, conclusion, cessation’. Telos can also have the meaning of fulfilment or reaching the goal. If Jesus is the telos of the law, then he is the fullness and culmination of God’s commands. In this sense, Jesus is the complete and perfect representation of what it means to live according to the Torah. Life in Christ is not a disregard for the law, but by faith through the Holy Spirit we aspire to Christ’s example of living in full obedience to the truth contained in the commandments.

How we relate to the Old Testament law as Christians is important as we think about the command for Sabbath rest. As it was for Israel, God’s instructions to cease for one day after six days of work is crucial for the life of faith in Christ. We see
the fulfilment of Sabbath rest in the life of Jesus, but now we must work out how that fulfilment can be made known in our contemporary world through our own lives and through the life of the Church. The Sabbath has not come to an end in Christ but, rather, its true meaning has been revealed and the truth of God’s rest, healing and wholeness is now made available to all who receive it.

Discovering the Beauty of the Sabbath

We have surveyed the biblical and historical developments of the Sabbath and have seen how different Christian traditions have approached its value for the life of the Church. However, it may be helpful to look at the Sabbath from another perspective. Holding on to the witness of Scripture and tradition, we might also see the seventh day of rest through the lens of beauty.

The ancient Greeks spoke about the absolute properties of all reality in the universe (the ‘transcendentals’), which could be summed up in the notions of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. Objects that are true and good reflect beauty and these things are ultimately reflections of the beauty of God. If we consider the Sabbath as a work of ‘beauty’, we see it as a creative act that reveals the truth and goodness of God. The beauty of the Sabbath is that it’s not just one day of the week, but rather it reveals the ongoing creative activity, restoration and reconciliation of God’s kingdom on earth. The Sabbath offers us a rhythm for life, and as we live within that rhythm we begin to discover the depths and riches of God’s truth and beauty in the world.

When we think of the Sabbath as reflecting the beauty of God’s truth, we also begin to see how the layers of that truth unfold as they have been revealed throughout history. The Sabbath was the climax of God’s work in the creation narrative when he brought all things into existence and order. When God rested and consecrated time on the seventh day he offered us a
pattern through which we could see and experience his world. Later in Israel’s history, the Sabbath command provided a framework for a community rooted in liberation, freedom and renewal. The Sabbath also helps us to see one another and to experience the fullness of our humanity within the community of faith. The beauty of the Sabbath is that it offers an ongoing revelation of God’s kingdom and his vision for all creation to experience his rest.

Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote of how we witness the glory of God through beauty in the world. He felt that theology had lost a sense of transcendence and awe at the beauty of God’s creation. So he pursued what he called a ‘theological aesthetic’, which claimed that we can see and experience God’s glory through the beauty of creation. The reason that we can do so is because we are created in the image of God and even though divine beauty cannot be compared with the beauty of this world, there remains an analogy between the two. Von Balthasar writes that

if God’s will to give form really aims at man as God truly wants to shape him – aims, that is, at the perfecting of that work begun by God’s ‘hands’ in the Garden of Eden–then it appears impossible to deny that there exists an analogy between God’s work of formation and the shaping forces of nature and of man as they generate and give birth. (von Balthasar 1989, p. 36)

What von Balthasar sees is that there is a key relationship between God’s beauty in creation and our own creative work. If God shaped and formed us from the material world into his image, then we can also give shape and form to the material world to create things that reflect his beauty and goodness. When we participate in the creative process we can give birth to that which reveals God’s truth.

Von Balthasar goes on to say that in order to perceive God’s beauty in the world we must understand its two aspects. One is
the ‘form’ or the shape it takes and the other is its ‘splendour’. The *form* refers to the material aspect of something and the *splendour* refers to its luminosity or the light of goodness and truth that is manifested within it (von Balthasar 1989, p. 118). As we contemplate the beauty of the form we see that it points to a deeper revelation of truth and the splendour of God’s glory.

To understand the concept of *form* and *splendour*, imagine that you are standing at the top of a mountain as the sun is rising. You see the *form* of the landscape taking shape as the light breaks over the horizon. The mist rises, the trees begin to appear in ever greater detail as distant peaks come out from the shadows. As the light strengthens so too does your perception of the scene as you take notice of different aspects of shape and colour. The *splendour* of nature’s display causes you to pause as it captivates you, turns your focus away from yourself, and draws you outwards with the desire to connect to something greater.

In witnessing this sublime moment you recognize the glory that fills creation. You begin to consider your own life and its meaning in the presence of such beauty and in the presence of the creator God. These types of experiences often evoke our own sense of insignificance within the vastness of the universe. We might stand in awe and wonder of such beauty, or we might experience a profound sense of peace knowing that God cares so deeply for us. The feeling is like that of Moses who, when walking through the barren wilderness, suddenly found himself standing on holy ground. This is one way that we might witness the form and splendour of God’s beauty in creation.

To experience God’s beauty, however, doesn’t mean that we need to be standing on the mountain tops. We might be looking through a microscope examining the wonders of cellular biology, or through a telescope gazing at distant galaxies. We might be drawn to the simple beauty of a stream running through a village, or a tree emerging through the pavement on
a city street. We might find ourselves mesmerized by a cluster of leaves swirling up in the wind, or the way the light reflects off a particular building. Wherever it is, the beauty we experience in its form and splendour turns us from ourselves and draws us to an experience of God’s glory. We stop and for a moment in time we break from our normal lives to reflect on a deeper sense of truth that we witness in the world around us. And this is also true when we encounter powerful works of art.

The shapes and forms created by human hands can have the same effect on us as when we encounter beauty. The greatest works of art open up vistas and horizons. They expand our vision of truth and goodness and help us to see from new perspectives through the eyes of others. They do not tell us how to think or force us into an experience (like propaganda). Instead, they cause us to reflect on how we perceive the world and help us to see truth in a new way.

We are enraptured in the presence of great artistic works because their beauty draws us into new realities. We might find this in a painting at a national gallery or an image etched on a wall in the ghetto. We might hear this in a great symphony or in the music of a busker on the street corner. The irruption of beauty arrests us and attracts us, helping us to see the light of God’s glory breaking into the world. Sometimes this comes at unexpected moments, but often our experience of beauty in art and creation is through our continued exposure to it.

As we experience works of beauty day after day, we awaken to new discoveries and perceive subtleties that we may have missed. Colours, musical notes, shapes that were always present suddenly arouse our senses as we become conscious of God’s splendour around us. We see this in architecture, art and music. As we experience them over time we recognize different aspects of their beauty and truth. It is like worshipping in a great cathedral year after year. We experience the space in different ways throughout the seasons. Songs and music we’ve
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heard before suddenly arouse new emotions and insights. The nuances of the architecture and craftsmanship inspire us and give us a vision of God’s presence in the world. The continued exposure to beauty helps shape and form our faith, and this is like our experience of the Sabbath as we live in its rhythm over time.

The recurrent pattern of the Sabbath and our encounters with beauty also find an analogy in the repetition that we discover in music. In his book *Theology, Music and Time*, Jeremy Begbie discusses the nature of the ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ in musical pieces. The basis for almost every composition is formed on repetition, whether it’s classical or pop music. The same tune or pattern might be repeated, but rather than resulting in boring monotony, the difference comes when the setting of a repetition changes. The sound might be the same, but when it is heard before or after different music we hear it in a new way (Begbie 2000, p. 160). The same is true of the Sabbath-rhythm. Though we repeat the same pattern of rest each week, the setting of our lives is constantly changing and the experience of rest is ever unfolding, drawing us into new revelations.

Begbie goes on to highlight that repetition in music also changes when it occurs in a different metrical pattern. An identical tune played over and over again will sound very different if its tension and resolution change according to its metre (2000, pp. 161–2). Though we might hear the same pattern, it becomes new when played in a different way. Repetition in music does not mean dull redundancy, but when orchestrated according to a new tone or rhythm it comes alive and captures our imagination. Begbie goes on to write:

Therefore, although it is often assumed that repetition is basically a stabilising practice, marking out secure points amidst life’s flux, in metrical music, repetition can both stabilise and destabilise. It can both close the wave and provoke a desire for
further fulfilment, and it can do both concurrently. (2000, p. 166)

Living within a Sabbath-rhythm is like the movement found in music – the repetition of rest both stabilizes and destabilizes. It secures us within God’s holy time and grounds us amid our busy work lives. We have a chance to catch our breath and root ourselves in family and communal relationships. We are refreshed and restored, but we also look forward to a future restoration. The Sabbath destabilizes because it awakens us to the liberation and healing that is needed in a broken world. We anticipate a time when God’s rest and presence will consume all things, but until that time the Sabbath reminds us of the work required to usher in reconciliation and restoration now.

There is always the possibility that anything repeated over and over can go flat and lose its dynamic qualities. Ritual can quickly become stale when it is stripped of its power and meaning through empty repetition. The same can be true of the Sabbath as we practise it week after week and year after year. But when we keep the Sabbath with that simple ever-changing variation, the repetition expands our understanding of God’s movement towards rest and wholeness in the world. Following the Sabbath-rhythm opens us up to God’s past, present and future salvation, and the role that we play within his divine drama.

As we shall see in the coming chapters, Sabbath-keeping provides a rhythm of life that attunes us to the truth and beauty of God and turns us outwards to the love and care of our neighbour. Throughout Israel’s history the Sabbath brought different revelations of God’s truth to his people at different times. The Sabbath was a weekly event that reminded Israel about rest, creation, covenant, liberation, land, community and their role as God’s witness in the world. The Sabbath-rhythm is a weekly pause and interruption to our daily work so that we might recognize the
beauty of God’s kingdom in our midst. This is the pattern or form that God prescribes for his people so that he might reveal the truth of who he is and who we are to be as his covenant community.

When we return to von Balthasar’s idea of form and splendour, he is not saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Instead, he argues that when we perceive beauty in creation or in the arts we are drawn into the depths of truth: ‘The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed’ (von Balthasar 1989, p. 118). Witnessing beauty, then, is a movement where we are “enraptured” by our contemplation of these depths and are “transported” to them’ (p. 119).

The climax of God’s beauty is revealed in the form and splendour of the incarnation. Here we witness Jesus, the Son of God, as he takes on the form of humanity in the flesh. He reflects the splendour of God’s glory (John 1.14) and is the perfect witness of the Father’s beauty in the world. We are ‘enraptured’ and drawn into the depths and mystery of the incarnation because the Son reveals the deepest truths of the Father. The light of Christ illumines our minds and leads us to a knowledge of God that draws us further into relationship with him. The form and splendour of the Son reveals the depth of beauty of the Father and moves us closer to the mystery of God’s presence in us through the Spirit.

So why should we think about the Sabbath through the category of beauty? Because it helps us to understand how this creative gift from God reflects his truth and goodness. The form of the Sabbath – ceasing on the seventh day and consecrating time – reveals his glory and the ongoing movement of his rest and liberation for all creation. It also reveals God’s creative activity in the world and how we, as persons created in his image, might imitate him in our own creative activity. If, as we considered above, there is an analogy between God and
humanity, then we too are invited to cease on the seventh day and to set it apart as holy time. And as we re-create Sabbath time week after week we begin to experience God’s refreshment and understand his passion for redemption, reconciliation and the unity of his covenant people and of all humanity. The beauty of the Sabbath-rhythm is that it opens up in us the divine imagination and invites us into the experience of his presence that is leading towards the ultimate goal of wholeness and rest.

Another reason why we might consider the Sabbath through the lens of beauty is because it compels us to stop, reflect and witness. Beauty creates necessary disruptions to destabilize our lives when we find ourselves mindlessly drifting through time as days blur into weeks and weeks into months and years. Life can become a monotonous, repetitive routine, but the Sabbath-rhythm wakes us up and attunes us to God’s time, his kingdom and his reality. The form and splendour of the Sabbath is ever awakening us to how our lives are being shaped in this world. The Sabbath reminds us that we are participants in God’s kingdom and that we are transforming the movement of human history towards the restoration of all things.

In his book *Sacred Attunement*, Jewish scholar Michael Fishbane writes about the aesthetic imagination that allows us to interpret reality through artistic forms such as painting, music and poetry. These forms of art represent the beauty of the world and help us to renew and consider our experience of reality. He writes: ‘The artistic imagination thus involves intentional acts of rupture, opening caesural spaces against our worldly habitude. In this way, it attempts to *cultivate the self*’ (Fishbane 2008, p. 24). The deliberate act of interruption in time breaks us from our daily habits and awakens us to beauty in our midst. We need these ‘acts of rupture’ within the normal flow of time to help us reflect on what it means to be human and to live in attunement with God.

The Sabbath is a deliberate interruption in our week that
helps us attune our lives to the holiness of God’s time. When we consecrate the Sabbath we are creating gaps in the flow of time which begin to form outlets and provide sanctuaries from the rush of our daily lives. Ceasing from our normal activity in the world releases us to experience the beauty of life as God intended. Fishbane goes on to write: ‘Entrance into the forms of Sabbath rest thus entails a shift of consciousness, from the particular details of human life to the cosmic vastness of Divinity’ (2008, p. 126). To follow a Sabbath-rhythm is to break from our normal workday patterns so that we might cultivate our hearts and minds as we are being formed in the image of Christ. God’s prescribed rest provides a way for humanity to experience refreshment so that we might reorient ourselves to gaze on his beauty and see his beauty in one another and in his creation.

Sabbath and the creative arts share a common purpose in allowing us to see God’s glory and beauty in the repetitive and the mundane as we catch glimpses of eternity by participating in his holy time. Sabbath is God’s way of drawing us into a place of rest where we might begin to tap into the divine imagination and wisdom that brought the entire universe into being.

To speak of the beauty of the Sabbath, however, is not an attempt to over-spiritualize the day or to think of it only in terms of rest for the soul. The Sabbath is also about real, physical rest. As human beings we are still very much a part of the material world. Our bodies require sustenance, activity and rest because we are not a disembodied people. The Sabbath is as much about our participation in the physical world as it is about our experiencing the spiritual realities of God’s kingdom. Too often Christians have been guilty of overemphasizing the spiritual and neglecting the importance of the physical. Sabbath-keeping is a practice that encompasses body, mind and spirit for an embodied people.

The beauty of Sabbath rest is that it reflects the glory of God
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and is leading all creation towards wholeness in communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sabbath is concerned with this world and the world to come. As we find rest for our physical bodies on the seventh day we also seek to liberate captives, to restore justice and to bring God’s healing and restoration now. But Sabbath rest also reminds us of our spiritual bodies and our longing for the resurrection and the fullness of God’s kingdom when heaven and earth will be made new. Every time we practise Sabbath rest we get a glimpse into the consummation of all things. We experience the slightest taste of what it will mean to rest and dwell in the fullness of God’s presence.

The practice of Sabbath rest is part of the Church’s witness to God’s kingdom here on earth as we anticipate Christ’s return. As we will see in the coming chapters, it is an individual and corporate discipline that proclaims the coming of a king who will establish his rest, healing and liberation. Keeping the Sabbath is to experience the gift given from the beginning of creation that has been further unveiled through the revelation of the Son. It is a practice that is central to the life of faith because it invites us into the wholeness and rest promised in Christ that extends from the Father through the Spirit.

Jesus says the Sabbath was made for humanity (Mark 2.27). It is God’s gift of rest and wholeness for his people. But like any gift, we can choose to refuse it or just ignore it. Can you live the Christian life without keeping the Sabbath? Yes and no. It would be like asking a professional orchestra to play a symphony on old, rickety instruments with tattered strings, rusted pieces and worn-out bows. They would certainly be able to play the piece and they might even make it sound fairly good. But if they received the gift of new instruments they could play a music so beautiful that the world would want to listen. The Church is that orchestra and each of us is offered the gift of Sabbath rest, a new instrument, so that we might play the music of the kingdom here on earth – a music of love, forgiveness, justice,
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reconciliation and healing.

The invitation to join in God’s holy time is available to us all. The Sabbath has been consecrated from the beginning of creation, but now God invites us to consecrate one day a week as we cease from our work in the world. The more we participate in the gift of the Sabbath, the more we experience the beauty of God’s rest in our families, in our churches, in our workplaces. And the more we can offer that rest to the world.

The Sabbath also reminds us that we are pilgrims travelling through this world and in need of refreshment. In the wilderness the Israelites were in need of rest and the gift of bread from heaven to sustain them. In the same way, as we journey in this life, we are in need of the bread of heaven and the true bread of heaven given through the Son. In his profound and insightful book *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: ‘All our life should be a pilgrimage to the seventh day’ (1951, p. 89). All creation is moving towards God’s full embrace on the seventh day. We are travellers destined for the new Jerusalem when all time and space will be consecrated as holy and where there will be ‘no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’ (Rev. 21.22). The beauty of rest begins with the beauty of dwelling in the presence of God, and this is where the Sabbath is leading us.

**For Reflection or Discussion**

1. How have you experienced beauty in your life? Has this led to a greater understanding of truth and of God?
2. How can we see God’s beauty through the Sabbath?
3. How does Jesus reveal the deeper truths of the Sabbath through his life, death and resurrection?
4. Should Christians keep the Sabbath? Why or why not?