

Holy Time

Series: Out of Egypt - Exodus

Date: 6 September 2026, 13th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 23:10–19; 31:12–18; 35:1–3; Deuteronomy 16:9–17; John 7:37–39

One of the things you notice when you travel to a country like the United States or the UK is that their system of measurement is different. They talk about inches, feet and miles, whereas we use the metric system: metres, centimetres and kilometres. The metric system was designed to be more ordered and logical, with everything based on multiples of ten. It came out of revolutionary France, where the revolutionaries wanted not only to overthrow the king but to remake society from the ground up, getting rid of everything associated with the *ancien régime*, the old way of doing things.

This included the calendar. On 5 October 1793 they adopted a new Republican calendar. Years would begin with the founding of the Republic in 1792 rather than with BC and AD. A year still had 365 days and 12 months, but every month had 30 days, with five or six extra days at the end of the year. Each month contained three ten-day weeks, with the tenth day being a day of rest. Days were simply called “first day”, “second day” and so on. They even divided each day into ten hours, each hour into 100 minutes, and each minute into 100 seconds.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Republican calendar didn't last long. One of the things people particularly resented was having to work nine days before getting a day of rest. They missed the ancient rhythm of work, rest and worship.

We're continuing our series in Exodus. Exodus has three big themes: **Redemption, Covenant and Presence**. God redeemed a people for himself, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. He made a covenant with them: they would be his people and he would be their God. And all this was so that he could be present with them.

Over the past few weeks we've looked at the terms of that covenant in Exodus 20–23: the Ten Commandments and the laws applying them to Israel's whole life so that they would be a holy nation. Today we come to laws about the **Sabbath** and Israel's three great annual festivals. We'll see that how we structure our time shapes our whole life, and that God's purpose in these commands is to give life, peace and joy.

Right at the outset, let me say that we all live downstream from the law of the Sabbath. Many ancient and modern cultures have not had a seven-day week. The expectation that we should not work every day but have a regular day of rest comes from the Sabbath. The Sabbath itself is Saturday, but Christians have traditionally gathered on Sunday because it is the Lord's Day, the day Jesus rose from the dead. In AD 321, the Emperor Constantine made Sunday a public holiday throughout the Roman Empire, a practice that has continued in much of the Western world.

Sabbath

So, what does Exodus teach about the Sabbath? The Sabbath laws appear repeatedly in Exodus—in chapters 20, 23, 31, 34 and 35. Interestingly, the Sabbath is the final instruction before Israel's great sin of worshipping the golden calf, and it is the first command after Moses intercedes and the relationship between God and his people is restored.

In chapter 31 God says that the Sabbath “will be a sign between me and you for generations to come so that you may know that I am the LORD who makes you holy.” How does the Sabbath remind Israel of God and of his work?

First, the Sabbath reflects the order of **creation**. Exodus 31 says:

“For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”¹

If even the God who keeps the whole universe turning can rest, then we can rest too. The Sabbath teaches us to trust that the world does not depend entirely on our work. God will provide.

Second, the Sabbath reminds Israel of **redemption**. In Deuteronomy, when the Ten Commandments are repeated, the reason given for Sabbath rest is:

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”²

The Sabbath therefore reminds Israel that God is the God who saves. Because he rescued them from slavery, they do not need to become slaves to work. The weekly Sabbath interrupts the temptation to return to slavery by making us rest.

So the Sabbath is a reminder of both **God's work in creation** and **God's work in redemption**.

¹ Exodus 31.17, cf. 20.11

² Deuteronomy 5.15

But Sabbath was not merely a weekly rhythm. It was a principle woven throughout Israel's whole life. We read in Exodus that every seventh year, the land was to lie fallow.³ Leviticus says that whatever the land produced during that Sabbath year was to be food for the people. The land itself was to rest. This was an act of ecological care and a limit on over-farming. The Sabbath year also meant that the poor and even wild animals could eat from what the land produced.⁴ It taught Israel to care for the land, animals and people on the margins. In an agricultural society, a Sabbath year required enormous faith that God would provide.

The same principle appears in the weekly Sabbath. Exodus 23 says:

“Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed.”⁵

The Sabbath was a reminder that God had rescued Israel from slavery, but it also taught them to give others rest. Their animals were to rest. Their servants and slaves were to rest. Foreigners were to rest.

In this way, Sabbath was a break on economic oppression—the relentless drive to maximise profit from labour. It was not simply a day set aside for God; it was also a day for the good of society. The Sabbath embodied both the **vertical** and **horizontal** dimensions of God's covenant: worshipping God and loving our neighbour.

This was serious business for Israel. Breaking the Sabbath was a capital offence⁶ because refusing to rest revealed a failure to trust and worship God and opened the door to greed and exploitation. This helps us understand Jesus' statement that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”⁷

There is a straightforward application for us today.

Our virtual world makes it possible to be logged into work almost constantly. You can check your emails from bed when you wake up, answer messages at dinner and finish “just one more task” before going to sleep. Work can so easily come to dominate our lives and even define our identity.

³ Exodus 23.10-11

⁴ Leviticus 25.5-6

⁵ Exodus 23.12

⁶ Exodus 31.15, 35.2

⁷ Mark 2.27

I know this within my own family. My parents were missionaries. They were incredibly dedicated and did amazing work bringing the good news of Jesus to people in hundreds of different languages around the world. But they were terrible at resting. I can count on one hand the number of holidays we had when I was a child. Taking time off for illness is I'm sure God reminding me I need to rest regularly!

When work becomes all there is, it becomes an idol. Instead of being something we do, it becomes who we are, and we become slaves again.

The Sabbath also challenges the way we think about other workers. The temptation to see people not as human beings but simply as "labour" is still very real, perhaps especially in enormous corporations where executives can be far removed from employees. We can also outsource work we would rather not do to people overseas because their labour is cheaper. The Sabbath alerts us to the danger of treating people as resources rather than neighbours. The Sabbath is still a gift to us. It is not a law for which Christians will be punished if we get it wrong. But it is a gift for our good.

How you order your time is how you order your life.

We all live by rhythms. One of the most spiritually nourishing things you can do to resist slavery to work, worship God and love your neighbour is to begin your week with church. Before family. Before friends. Before sport. Before birthday parties. Before DIY. Before the Farmers Market. Of course people can have shift work, but the question is how will you order your time? **God first. Church. Worship and rest.**

Jesus says: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."⁸

The weekly rhythm of gathering for worship is one concrete way of entering that rest together. We stop. We slow down. We unplug. We look up. We are refreshed as we receive God's love. Then we are sent out to serve him in the world.

How you order your time is how you order your life.

Festivals

Alongside the Sabbath, Exodus 23 gives Israel three annual festivals: the **Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering.**

The Festival of Unleavened Bread followed Passover and commemorated God's rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Passover remembered the blood of the lamb on the doorposts,

⁸ Matthew 11.28

so that God's judgement would pass over and the firstborn would be spared. The unleavened bread recalled that Israel had to leave Egypt so quickly that there was no time for the bread to rise.

This is fulfilled in the **Lord's Supper**. Here the Passover and Festival of Unleavened bread is reconstituted in the bread, remembering his body broken, and the cup remembering Jesus' blood shed for the forgiveness of sins.

The second festival was the **Festival of Harvest**, later called the Festival of Weeks. It took place seven weeks, or 50 days, after the beginning of the grain harvest. This is why it became known as Pentecost—the Greek word for fifty. That should sound familiar from the New Testament. It was at Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, that God poured out the Holy Spirit on his people.

Paul brings these ideas together by calling Jesus' resurrection the **firstfruits**, pointing forward to our resurrection, and describing the Holy Spirit as the firstfruits of the new creation that will come with the resurrection of the dead. The Festival of Harvest therefore finds its fulfilment in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The third festival was the **Festival of Ingathering**, later called the Festival of Tabernacles or Booths. It celebrated the end of the harvest, particularly olives and grapes, and took place in autumn. Israel was instructed to live in temporary shelters for a week to remember how they had lived in tents in the wilderness after God brought them out of Egypt. The word "tabernacle" is the same word that was used for the special tent that housed the ark of the covenant and represented God's presence with Israel.

In John 7, we read that Jesus was in the temple during the Festival of Tabernacles. On the last and greatest day of the festival, he said:

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

John explains that Jesus was speaking about the **Holy Spirit**.

Deuteronomy says that Tabernacles was a celebration of God blessing the work of the people's hands, and that their joy would be complete. In John 7, that joy is fulfilled in the gift of the Holy Spirit—the river of God's own life flowing within all who believe in Christ and in his body, the Church.

There are two final things to notice about these festivals.

First, Exodus says: “No one is to appear before me emptyhanded.” Deuteronomy adds that each person should bring a gift “in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you.”⁹

If these festivals find their fulfilment in the life of the Church and in our celebration of the Lord’s Day, then this applies directly to us. We bring a gift in proportion to how God has blessed us. That means our financial offering, but it also means using our gifts to serve. We cannot do what we do at St George’s without either of those things.

Second, did you notice in Deuteronomy who the festivals were for? “You, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you. Remember you were slaves in Egypt.”¹⁰ Everyone was to be included in the celebration, and God particularly highlights those on the margins. Why? “Remember you were slaves in Egypt.” Israel’s experience of God’s redemption was to motivate their care for people in need. Again we see that quartet of the vulnerable: **the poor, the widow, the orphan and the foreigner**.

This directly applies to us. When we gather as a church, particularly for lunches and celebrations like Easter and Christmas, how can we include people who might otherwise be left out?

We should expect to have people among us who are rough sleepers, battling addiction, single parents, refugees or people with disabilities. Christmas is perhaps the biggest festival in our culture, but it can also be the loneliest time of year for people without family. Maybe this year you could plan to invite someone to join your family for Christmas, or we could do a church lunch like we do for Easter.

Exodus 23 gives us the Sabbath and Israel’s three great festivals. We’ve seen how **ordering time shapes the whole of life**. We too can receive God’s gift of Sunday worship to order our lives. We order our **priorities** by beginning with worship. We order our **wealth** by beginning with offering a gift to the Lord according to how he has blessed us. And we order our **relationships** by beginning with the motley crew around us—the body of Christ—where we pay special attention to the vulnerable. Why? Because we worship a God who has reached out to us with care and compassion. The God who created the world rested. The God who rescued Israel from slavery gave them rest. The God who redeemed us in Christ gives us his Spirit. And the God who has welcomed us into his family calls us to welcome others. **How we**

⁹ Exodus 23.15b; Deuteronomy 16.17

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 16.11-12

order our time reveals what we worship. So let us begin with God—with worship, rest, generosity and welcome—and allow him to order the rest of our lives.