



# The Ten Commandments

## (19) The Meaning of the Fourth Commandment

### (3) A Memorial and a Sign

Exodus 20:8-11

Exodus 31:12-17

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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This is our third sermon on the meaning of the Fourth Commandment. In the first sermon we looked at the idea that God is the Lord of our time and we looked at the idea of the Sabbath as a holy day. In the second sermon on the meaning of the Fourth Commandment we looked at what it says about life as a rhythm of work and rest. Today we will consider the idea that the Sabbath is a sign of our relationship with God and that it is a day in which God commands us to remember certain things. These two ideas go together because one of the purposes of a sign is to remind us of something. But as we will see the idea of the Sabbath as a sign is more than just a reminder.

The first word in the version of the Fourth Commandment that we have in Exodus 20 is the command to remember. “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” The most obvious meaning of that command is that we are not to forget to keep the Sabbath day as a holy day. So, we should not get up on Sunday morning and forget that it is Sunday and go to work instead of going to church. But the word “remember” in the Bible has a deeper meaning than just “not forgetting.” The word “remember” in the Bible often has to do with remembering God and what he has done for us and re-applying those thoughts to our lives. The purpose of remembering is worship and gratitude, but also reminding ourselves what it means to be God’s people and living accordingly.

Remembering then, has to do with sanctification. It has to do with growing in holiness. It is part of what it means to be holy and it is part of the way that we grow in devotion to God and obedience. It does not honor God if we hardly ever think about him and what he has done for us. It does not honor God if he is on the back burner of our lives. It does not honor God if his significance is not determining the way in which we live our lives. And the remembering that is commanded in the Fourth Commandment has to be understood in the light of this religious and spiritual significance of remembering in the Bible. The idea is the same as Jesus' use of it in telling us in the Lord's Supper to "Do this in remembrance of me."

Now, as I've already pointed out, the remembering that is commanded in the version of the Fourth Commandment that we find in Exodus 20 is first of all to keep the day as a holy day. Israel was to remember the Sabbath day by not working on that day and keeping it as a holy day unto the Lord. But there is a close association with this with God's example of working six days and resting on the seventh day on the very first week of the history of the world. The sequence of ideas goes like this. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Work six days and rest on the seventh day. For, God, during the creation week, worked six days and rested on the seventh day. By following the pattern that God set during the creation week, they would be remembering the creation week.

The remembering of the Sabbath day to keep it holy involved imitating God's pattern of work and rest during the creation week. We looked at the significance of that for our understanding of work and rest last week and I am not going to repeat that. The new point that I want to make now is that following that pattern was also a reminder of the creation week itself. Following the pattern that God set on the creation week of six days of working and one day of rest was a weekly reminder of the fact that God is the creator and they were creatures brought into existence by the creative power of God. Further, the fact that they were to imitate God was a reminder that they were made in the image of God and their purpose in life was to be God-reflectors in the world.

So, the remembering that is commanded in the Fourth Commandment involves remembering God as the creator and ourselves as the work of his hands made by him and for him – made in his image to reflect his glory.

This is one of the things that we are to remember on the Sabbath day. We are to remember that we are resting on the Sabbath day because God rested on the first Sabbath day after creating the world including us in six days.

Having a weekly time set aside to remember God as our creator is a very fruitful exercise. It stimulates worship because the creation is pretty amazing. Psalm 8:1 says, "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens." The creation reveals the glory of God. He made it, so it reflects his power and his wisdom and his greatness in all kinds of ways. Keeping the Sabbath is a way of remembering that God made all of the creation in six days and rested on the seventh. On the first seventh day God contemplated what he had made and what he saw was his own glory. We are to imitate him in celebrating the glory of God as the creator of all that exists and our creator.

Another important result of remembering God as our creator on the Sabbath day is thanksgiving. Think of how amazing it is simply to be alive - and to be alive as a human being made in the image of God with the capacity to have a relationship with God and with the capacity to have relationships with other people and to enjoy the pleasures and the satisfactions that God has built into life for us. Unless we are very depressed because of a mental problem of some sort, life is very precious indeed. We want life to last as long as possible. Just being alive is an amazing gift of God. The Sabbath is for remembering that life is a gift of God and celebrating the richness of life as a creature of God.

A third good result of remembering God as our creator on the Sabbath day is that we are reminded that we are not God. That is something that we are prone to forget. It is terribly irrational, but we have a tendency to act as if we are God. Not that we walk around telling people that we are the one true God of heaven and earth, but we often act and think as if we are. We act out of that delusion when we worship ourselves and

expect others to be our servants. We act out of the delusion that we are God when we act as if the true God's purpose in life is to cater to all our wants and desires. We live out of a God-like identity when we think that our glory and our desires are the most important values in the universe.

When we remember the Sabbath and remember that God is the creator, we are reminded that we are creatures, made by God to serve him and to live for him and to do what he tells us to do. This must be the most fundamental part of our identity - our self-concept – our understanding of who we are. We are not God. We exist because God made us. We are the work of his hands. We depend upon God for our existence and for our life. And our purpose is to live for him.

Now it turns out that that is a great purpose. It turns out that living for God is a supremely satisfying and enriching way to live. God is exceedingly generous and so he has designed living for him to be supremely fulfilling and enjoyable. But because of our sinful nature we have a tendency to forget that and so the Sabbath is one of the ways that God seeks to remind us on a regular basis that he is God and we are not. We exist for him. He does not exist for us.

One of the ways that God helps us not to forget this is by telling us to follow the example that he set on the creation week of six days of work and one day of rest.

Now, as New Testament Christians we are to think of Jesus when we think of the creator. John tells us in the first verse of his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And then he goes on to say in verse 3, "All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made." Furthermore, Jesus tells us that he is Lord of the Sabbath and Paul tells us in Colossians 1 that all things were created through him and for him.

On the Sabbath, we are especially to remember God as our creator, but in the light of New Testament revelation we must include thoughts of Jesus as our creator. He is more than our creator, but he is our creator and the New Testament teaches us that we were created by him and for him. On the Sabbath we are to remember this fact and dwell on what it means for our lives. Our status as human beings is the status of having

been made by Jesus and for Jesus. Our fundamental nature is that of a servant. We exist for another. We exist to serve Jesus. That puts us in our place, but it is a very good place to be put. It is humbling because life is not about us and our desires. But it is also exhilarating because there is no more worthwhile way to live than to live for Jesus.

So, the Sabbath is a memorial of creation.

It is also a memorial of redemption – of salvation. This is the point of the version of the Fourth Commandment that we find in Deuteronomy 5. The whole of the Ten Commandments is repeated in Deuteronomy 5, and mostly it is identical to Exodus 20, but the one difference is the wording of the Fourth Commandment. Here is the last verse of the Fourth Commandment from Deuteronomy 5. I won't repeat all of it because the rest is virtually the same. But the reason given for keeping the Sabbath day as a holy day in Deuteronomy 5 is not creation, but redemption. Verse 15 says, "<sup>15</sup>You shall 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."

The people of Israel were to remember that they were slaves in the land of Egypt and that God had delivered them from the slavery with "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." The Sabbath was given also as a day of remembering what their life had been like before God rescued them and remembering the fact that God had rescued them through his great power and overwhelming force. They were to remember that in a special way each week on the holy day that God had given them to rest and to focus all their attention on him and their relationship with him.

They were to ponder what it had been like to be slaves in Egypt. They were to remember how awful their lives had been as Pharaoh's slaves. They were to remember the whips of the Egyptian foremen and the unreasonable expectations. They were to remember the emptiness and futility of their lives. They were to remember how it had been to be treated as human tools living for a master who used them without any regard for their value as human beings. They were not to forget what they had been saved from.

Thinking of that would at the same time remind them of what it meant to be free. They were no longer slaves. They had been rescued. They had been given their freedom. And they were now serving a king who loved them and who cared for them as persons and who had embraced them as his own people. Their freedom from Pharaoh meant that they were servants of God, so they were still servants, but it makes a huge difference who your master is.

As human beings we do not have the option of not having a master. We are not the big “G” God and we are not small “g” gods. We are created to be servants. The only difference is who our master will be. Pharaoh was a cruel and selfish master. He took, but he did not give. He demanded but he did not love. God delivered them from this cruel master and took them to be his servants. But God is a master who loves his servants. He loved them, and he wanted them to love him. He demanded their all, in service, but that service was life-giving and life-affirming. Because God is God and because he created us to flourish in his service, serving God is actually freedom. It is freedom like the obligations of a good marriage are freedom and like the obligations of a parent to a child are freedom. You meet those obligations willingly and motivated by love. God defines service to him as freedom because it is part of the covenant relationship with him which is a relationship of love and commitment.

The Sabbath was given as a day to remember these things. Explicitly they were to remember not only that they had been slaves, but also how God had delivered them with “a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” This are images of power. God had explicitly said a number of times during the events of the exodus that he was doing all those mighty deeds so that Pharaoh and the Egyptians and the nations and Israel might know that he was the Lord. For instance, in Exodus 6:7, God says to the people of Israel, “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”

God saving actions that are summarized by the phrase, “a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” were done so that everyone who witnessed

them or heard about them might know that God is the Lord, but also how great and powerful he was.

This is one of God's great purposes in creation and in the history of salvation – that people might come to know that he is the Lord of all and that they might give him the glory that is his due. And so, for his people, he gave them a day where work was off-limits and common activities were off-limits so that they might remember and contemplate where they had been before God had rescued them, but also that they might remember and adoringly ponder the awesome power and glory of their God revealed in their rescue.

Now the connection to the New Testament and to Jesus and to us is easy to make. The exodus is the greatest Old Testament example of God saving his people. Jesus' work of salvation is understood in the New Testament as the fulfillment of the exodus. Jesus, by his life, death, and resurrection, delivers his people from the slavery to sin and Satan that is our natural condition. In Colossians 1:13 Paul tells us that God through Jesus has "has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son," Jesus in Luke 4 tells us that he is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of a Saviour who would "proclaim liberty to the captives." And in John 8 Jesus says that everyone who "practices sin is a slave to sin," but that if he sets you free you are free indeed.

So, for us the Sabbath is about remembering not only our creation, but also our redemption. We are to remember the slavery to sin that is our natural condition. Just as Israel was to remember that they were slaves in Egypt, we are to remember that we were slaves to sin and Satan. We are born as slaves of sin. We are born as slaves of Satan. Satan makes sin seem appealing, but there is no love in Satan and he seeks our destruction. Sin seems appealing, but it is slavery – it is life-destroying rather than life affirming. It is a form of death and it leads to eternal death. We are to remember that. We are to remember that apart from Christ we are without hope and without God in the world.

But, just as with Israel, remembering our past slavery automatically reminds us of our current freedom. We have been set free to serve the Lord. We have been set free to serve the God who loves us and who, in

the way of his demands and the ability to begin to keep those demands, seeks our flourishing and wellbeing.

And we are to remember the grace and the power and the wisdom of God that is revealed in our rescue from sin and Satan. That power and wisdom and grace are displayed most gloriously by the cross and the resurrection. The cross, at least, does not look like power, but it is because by it Jesus won the victory over sin and Satan and death itself. As Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 1, God's weakness is stronger than human power. And then the resurrection is a glorious display of God's power. It is more glorious than we can comprehend because the resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of the new creation and the power of the resurrection is the power that will make all things new. That power is visible now only in the lives of the people of God because it is the new life that animates them, but one day that power is going to bring about the completion of God's glorious purposes for a new heaven and a new earth.

The Sabbath is given as a day to remember these things. We are to remember creation and what that means for us. We are to remember redemption and what that means for us. And that remembering is to shape our thinking and our affections and our lives. Remembering in the Bible is life-transforming.

One more angle on the kind of remembering that we are to do on the Sabbath and the significance of that remembering. The Sabbath is also given to us as a sign of our covenant relationship with God. That kind of language is used in Exodus 31:12–13, "<sup>12</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, <sup>13</sup>“You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.” The language of the Sabbath as a sign is also used in verses 16-17. Exodus 31:16–17, "<sup>16</sup>Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. <sup>17</sup>It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’ ”"

So, the Sabbath is a sign. A sign of the covenant relationship between God and his people. It is a sign that God is our God and that we are his people. It is also a sign that this God is the creator God – maker of heaven and earth.

Now a sign functions as a reminder so the idea is similar to the idea of remembering. But the idea of the Sabbath as a sign has to do with the fact that God has established a covenant relationship between himself and his people. The Sabbath is a sign of the covenant and so it is a reminder of this special relationship between God and his people.

Now the easiest way to understand the covenant relationship between God and his people is to think about a marriage relationship. A marriage relationship is a covenant relationship. It is a formal legal relationship which is at the same time a loving relationship. It is a relationship which has been constituted by the making of promises and by the assuming of obligations and responsibilities. And the purpose of all of that is a secure relationship of love. All of that is true of the relationship between God and his people. The relationship is instituted by God, but he has made promises and commitments by which he places himself under obligations to his people. By those promises and commitments he voluntarily places himself under obligations to keep the promises that he has made and to be faithful to the commitments. And the people also made promises and assume obligations to obey and to serve the Lord.

The Sabbath is a sign of this wonderful secure relationship. It is a sign that we are married to God. It is like a wedding ring. It is a weekly reminder that we are in a secure and intimate relationship with God. God promises to be our God with all that that means, and we promise to be his people with all that that means.

For us Jesus is at the heart of this relationship. Just before he died he instituted the Lord's Supper during which he said that he was establishing the new covenant in his blood. And Paul teaches us that the relationship between Christ and his people is a marriage relationship.

The Sabbath is a sign of all that. It is a weekly reminder that Christ is our bridegroom and we are his bride. It is a weekly reminder that God is our

God and we are his people. It is a weekly reminder that God has bound himself to us through promises and commitments to be our God with all that that means. But also, that we have made promises and commitments too, to be a faithful bride to Jesus and a faithful people to our God with all that that means.

Now all of this, the remembering and the Sabbath as a sign of our covenant relationship with God is designed to nurture and maintain our relationship with God. It is very significant that in the Old Testament prophets, one of the things that the prophets often spoke about was that Israel had not been faithful in keeping the Sabbaths. And there was a relationship between that and the rest of their sin and rebellion.

Sabbath-keeping is designed by God that we might have a day each week free from our everyday work and concerns, to focus on worship and find rest for our souls. But the Sabbath as a sign and the Sabbath as a day to remember creation and redemption was designed for our sanctification, for our spiritual growth, for the nurture of our spiritual lives. Remembering is an activity that shapes us. Remembering is associated in the Bible with faithfulness to God while forgetting is associated with turning away from God. Psalm 106:21 says of Israel, "21They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt,"

Remembering is the key to faithfulness to God and spiritual growth while forgetting is the reason for spiritual weakness and turning away from God. God has given us one day a week that is set aside for remembering – and that remembering is necessary for us for faithfulness to God. The remembering itself is part of our worship. But the remembering is also what God uses to shape us and to grow us as his people.

So, let us take the Fourth Commandment seriously. It is one of the Ten. It is as important as any other. Also, in keeping this commandment there is great reward.