

Celebrating our Sabbath Year



Another September comes around and for us at St. James', this September 2009 means that we are beginning our **Sabbath Year**. What does that look like for us? To answer that question, a look into the background of the Sabbath may be a good starting point.

Background to the Sabbath

We begin with the basic understanding that the people of Israel, and now you and me, are God's people. This means that we are Holy people. The word Holy means set apart for God. It means that we have a special and unique relationship with God. He is our God and we are His people.

The first biblical mention of the 7th day of rest, (*Shabat* is the Hebrew word for rest) is actually right in the beginning of our story with God, in Genesis 1:31-2:3. "*God blessed the 7th day and declared it Holy because it was the day when he rested from all his creation.*" The keeping of the Sabbath appears again in the Book of Exodus. It is the 4th of the 10 commandments. God's words are to "remember" the Sabbath and to keep it Holy. The interpretation of this 4th commandment suggests that Sabbath keeping was already a part of the culture of the people of God. This 4th commandment is simply a very clear, emphatic reminder to God's people to continue to keep the Sabbath.

Did the concept of Sabbath-keeping exist in areas neighbouring Israel or in other parts of the Ancient Near East?

Biblical critics will often look for origins of words and cultural practices that would have existed outside of the Biblical story. In the case of the Sabbath, "the quest for the origin of the Sabbath outside of the Old Testament has not been successful." In other words, the Sabbath is exclusively from God as His gift to His chosen people. This is a very significant reality in our faith journey with God.

The sequence of working 6 days and having a 7th day of complete rest is in the image of God. God has invited us to participate in His rest by enjoying and celebrating his grace-filled gift of freedom from all our labours. In enjoying and celebrating the 7th day, we graciously acknowledge the blessings and provisions of God our Creator. Sabbath is meant to be a day of delight and enjoyment in which we celebrate what it means to be in relationship with God as His chosen people.

God introduces the 7th Year as a Sabbath Year.

To grasp the significance of the Sabbath it is vital for us to understand that the land is God's and so are we.

"The sea belongs to him, for he made it and his hands prepared the dry land too."
Psalm 95:5.

"I will be your God and you will be my people" Lev. 26:12.

The Sabbath Year is God's way of ensuring good stewardship over His land and over His chosen people. The Sabbath Year reinforces our understanding that God is the true provider and that anything we have has ultimately come from His gracious hand. In the Sabbath Year, when the land and the people are at rest, we must trust completely in God's provision, and in His faithfulness to us.

There are further requirements during the Sabbath Year.

During the **Sabbath Year** the land was not to be planted; it was to rest. The land, however, by its very nature will produce some crops. These crops were not to be harvested; they were to remain on the land for use by the poor, the widows, the orphans, the landowner and his complete household, including his slaves. The taking of produce was to be on an as required basis. There was to be no storehouse, no hoarding. In a Sabbath Year, the natural produce of the land was common and free. The rights and benefits of slaves, hired workers, resident aliens, and workers were to be equal to that of the landowner.

In the **Sabbath Year**, there was a release from debt or pledges. Scholars are not sure if this release was a release from payments for the year or if it meant a release from the debt in its entirety. Either way, this release was of great benefit to the poor and the vulnerable. Those carrying heavy burdens of debt were released in joy.

Another component of the **Sabbath Year of Celebration** proclaimed that all slaves were released from their masters. If a slave chose to leave his master he was to be endowed with a significant gift, which would help him to become economically independent.

The **Sabbath Year**, as God ordained it, is all about caring for one another, sharing God's provision, and helping to redeem those who are bound by debt, poverty, vulnerability, and slavery. The Sabbath Year allows the land to rest; it allows God's people and all those in their charge to spend a year intentionally resting in the hands of God.

Why should 2009-2010 be a Sabbath Year?

An article on the Internet proclaimed September 2009-2010 as a 7th Year Sabbath.

An attempt to verify this claim revealed some interesting numbers! According to *Luke 4* the 31st year AD was a year of Jubilee, that is, a 50th year. The 30th year would then have been a Sabbath Year. The 30th year is actually 29 AD. We are in our 2010th year, but the year is actually 2009. $2009 - 29 = 1980$; $1980 / 7 = 282 + 6$ years remainder. The six year remainder means that we are in the 7th year, or a Sabbath Year. (Wendy's math)

Whether the math is correct or not, the reality seems to be that God has called us, the people of St. James', into a **Sabbath Year**.

How do we interpret the Sabbath Year into our life at St. James' in 2009?

If, in a **Sabbath Year**, the land is to rest, we will give the church, which belongs to God, a rest. The church is not so much about the facility, as it is about God's people. To rest is to abide with God. It is a Holy rest, a time to set the church and the people apart

exclusively for the Lord, for his purpose and for his glory. If, in the past Sabbath Years, people were released from work obligations, then the people of St. James' are released from "work" around the church. On the other hand, if there is "work" that is a joy, a delight and a pleasure to do, then we are to pursue it with joy and consider it "Holy work."

In the Sabbath Year, if the fruit of the land is to be of benefit for all people equally, as they have need, so then will the fruits and blessings of our church be shared with everyone equally. In the **Sabbath Year**, God calls us not only to allow provision for the poor and the vulnerable, but also to provide nourishment for the spiritually poor and the spiritually vulnerable. We are called to generously share our experience of God, including his power working in us.



If debts are to be cancelled or postponed in the **Sabbath Year**, (although the bank won't cancel the mortgage), the difficult questions become what to do with things like emotional debt, the sense of personal obligation, the rejected peace offering, the demand for retribution, the simple misunderstanding that has multiplied. This is the year to let it go. Trust in the Lord. Consider the Lord's Prayer: "*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*" This Sabbath Year is our year to consciously entrust ourselves to God and his gracious provision, to listen quietly for his voice, to walk gently beside him, and to let his presence permeate our entire beings and the full body of Christ here at St. James.

This is my **Sabbath Year** prayer for each of you personally, and for all of us corporately as God's church here at St. James'.



May Christ make his home in your hearts. May your roots grow down into God's love and keep you strong. May you have the power to understand how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness and power that comes from God.

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