

# Sabbath: Experiencing *and* Living *the* Character of God



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Genesis 1, 2, Exod. 16:14–29, Isa. 58:1–14, Matt. 12:1–13, Luke 13:10–17.*

**Memory Text:** “And He said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.’ ” (*Mark 2:27, 28, NKJV*).

Jodie was the only Seventh-day Adventist in her graduate program, and her choice not to attend some social events on Sabbath made her beliefs very visible.

One day one of her friends, Gayle, called her. Gayle's husband was going to be out of town for six weeks, and she asked Jodie if she wanted to spend the next six Friday nights with her, because she knew Jodie did “nothing” on those evenings, anyway.

For the next four Friday nights they ate together, played music, shared their Christian experiences, and generally enjoyed each other's company. The fifth weekend, Gayle told Jodie that she had been downtown shopping and looked at her watch. *Oh, good*, she thought. *Sabbath is very soon*. She suddenly realized that over the four Friday nights she had experienced something new in her Christian experience. She had grown, learned more of her God, and deepened her faith. Sabbath had been an opportunity for education and personal development.

It's an interesting story about how we can think of the Sabbath as, not just a day for rest but as a means of education, as well.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 19.

## Time to Be Astonished

Have you ever wondered why God chose to give us two harmonious Creation accounts in the first two chapters of Genesis? Genesis 1 recounts the Creation week and the growing wonder of the earth as it is given form and then life, culminating in the creation of man and woman on the sixth day. Genesis 2 looks at the same account but from a different perspective, with a special focus on the sixth day. Adam is at the center of the picture now, and everything is described as being there for him and the woman: the garden, the rivers, and the animals.

Creation is too deep for one single account. First, we learn of the powerful, artistic Creator who has an eye for perfect beauty. Then we meet the God of relationships, who wants humanity to love and care for each other and the rest of creation.

**Read Genesis 1 and 2 and then reflect on how the first Sabbath (*Gen. 2:1–3*) links back to the first Creation story and forward to the second Creation account. How do your conclusions help you understand what God’s blessing of the Sabbath and making it holy might mean?**

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Imagine yourself as Adam or Eve on that first Sabbath. It’s your first day alive, your first day with your spouse, and your first day with God. What a day of education! You start to learn of the God who could create such beauty. You marvel as you see an elephant one moment and a frog the next, each unique. You smile as you see the antics of the giraffe or buffalo. You are silent in awe of the many colors and shapes, enraptured by the symphony of sounds; you revel in the range of delights in taste and smells and enjoy exploring the delights of different textures. Most of all, you start learning about relationships: responsibility, caring, love. You experience it with your Creator; you start to practice it with the rest of the created.

The first Sabbath could not have been a passive experience for Adam and Eve. It was a God-created opportunity for them to focus on their Creator and the created. It was a time for them to be astonished.

**List the different educational opportunities that Adam and Eve had during that first Sabbath. Which of these opportunities would still be relevant today, even if in a different form? How can they enrich your Sabbaths?**

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## Time for Rediscovery

When Moses is asked to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, it is clear that the masses have lost their perspective as children of God. They need to rediscover who the God is who asks for their worship and gives them so many promises of an amazing future. The Sabbath is a pivotal learning experience in their journey of rediscovery. It also becomes a clear signal to other nations of the special relationship between God and this nation. The experience of the manna epitomizes God's way of educating the Israelites.

**In Exodus 16:14–29, what lessons are there for the Israelites to learn?**

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God provides the miracle of the manna for the Israelites, giving them just enough food for each day. If He gave them more than that amount, they then might forget who their Provider was. So, every day He performed a miracle for them, and they saw God's care. On the Sabbath, however, the situation was different, just as the day was to be special. Now two miracles were performed: double food on Friday, and the food did not spoil overnight. That left the Sabbath for the Israelites to marvel at the God who was their Deliverer and to rediscover what it meant to be the people of God.

The Israelites were to eat this manna 40 years (*Exod. 16:35*). God also instructs Moses to keep an omer of manna to remind the Israelites of how He fed them in the wilderness (*Exod. 16:32, 33*). It also would have been a reminder of the particular experience of the Sabbath day.

There also are other occasions when God makes clear to the Israelites that the Sabbath is special.

The Sabbath was a way God helped the Israelites rediscover their identity and their God. They were asked to obey and keep the Sabbath holy, but this was in the context of developing a deeper understanding of the character of their Creator and about building a lasting relationship of promise.

**You are talking to a teenager who is finding Sabbath “boring.” He is keeping it only because that is what the Bible and his parents say he must do. What suggestions will you give to help him (re)discover the Sabbath as a positive learning experience?**

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## Time for Learning Priorities

The ups and downs of Israel's experience with God were closely linked to the way they related to the Sabbath. God saw their unwillingness to respect the Sabbath as a sign of His irrelevance in their lives (*Jer. 17:19–27*). A renewed commitment to the Sabbath also was part of restoration—a signal that priorities were right. Isaiah 58 pictures an interesting contrast.

**Read** Isaiah 58:1–14. What is God saying to His people here that is relevant to us today?

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The Israelites are posing as followers of God—in their worship, in their fasting—but the way they live their lives after they have finished worshiping shows that they are only going through the motions of correct behavior; there is no sincere heart commitment to the law of God.

Isaiah continues in chapter 58 to identify what God does expect from His people.

This is not all. Read Isaiah 58:13, 14. Why does God focus on the Sabbath at the end of this chapter? The prophet uses phrases here similar to those in the rest of the chapter: keep “from doing as you please”; don’t go “your own way”; avoid “doing as you please or speaking idle words” (*NIV*), the prophet warns. In other words, the Sabbath isn’t the time to go through the routine of worship, only to be thinking your own thoughts and living a life irrelevant to the one of worship. The Sabbath is to be a “delight” and to be “honorable.” In the context of the rest of the chapter, Sabbath is about delighting in learning the character and purposes of God, and then living that character and those purposes in our relations to others. Knowing how to go through the form of Sabbath observance and worship is not enough. Learning must impact life. Sabbath is time for learning and living priorities.

**Do you delight in the Sabbath? If not, what can you do to change that? Have you learned to “honor” the Sabbath? Discuss what this might mean with the rest of your Sabbath School class. Be as practical as you can.**

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## Time for Finding Balance

Jesus respected and upheld the law of God (*Matt. 5:17, 18*). Yet, Jesus also challenged the religious leadership over their interpretation of the law. None of His challenges was more threatening to the establishment than the choices He made on Sabbath keeping. The synagogues did not fail to make the Sabbath an opportunity for education—the Torah was read and interpreted without fail. The scribes and Pharisees knew the letter of the law. However, Jesus went much further in His Sabbath-day education of His followers.

**Read** Matthew 12:1–13 and Luke 13:10–17. What was Jesus teaching the people in His time, and us today, with these events?

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The controversies surrounding Jesus' healing on the Sabbath lead into important spiritual debates about the nature of sin, the reason for the Sabbath, the relationship between Jesus and the Father, and the nature of Jesus' authority.

Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath is summarized well in our memory verse for this week: "And He said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath' " (*Mark 2:27, 28, NKJV*). He wanted to emphasize that the Sabbath should not be a burden. It was "made" (created) as a unique opportunity for people to learn of the character of God, who made the Sabbath, and to learn experientially by valuing His creation.

By raising questions through His actions, Jesus pushes His disciples, the Jewish leaders, and the crowds to think more deeply about Scripture and about what their faith and their God meant anyway. It is so easy for any of us to get so caught up in rules and regulations that might not be bad in and of themselves, but that become an end in and of themselves, rather than means to an end—and that end should be a knowledge of the character of the God we serve. And this, then, leads to our faithful obedience to Him based on our trust in the merits of Christ's righteousness for us.

**What about your own Sabbath keeping? Have you turned it into a day of just "don't do this" and "don't do that," rather than a time to truly rest in the Lord and know Him better? If so, how can you change so that you can get from it what God intends for you?**

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## A Time for Community

Jesus modeled for His disciples the practice of weekly attendance at the synagogue. After His resurrection, they continued this pattern, as did other followers of Jesus. The synagogue became one of the main venues for the apostles to raise questions relating to the Resurrection, and the Sabbath provided a key opportunity for the community to gather together and learn. After all, Jesus was the Hebrew Messiah, the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament, which was read in the synagogue each Sabbath. What better place, then, did the believers have for promoting Jesus than in the synagogue, especially when they were witnessing to Jews and to others “who fear God” (*Acts 13:16, 26, NKJV*)?

**Look** at the following texts. What do they tell us about how Jesus’ followers witnessed in public arenas? As you read these texts, think about where they were speaking, to whom they were speaking, what was said, and what were the results: *Acts 13:14–45; Acts 16:13, 14; Acts 17:1–5; Acts 18:4.*

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The apostles’ testimony was both personal and scriptural. Paul elaborated on the history of Israel, starting with “our fathers” (*Acts 13:17*) in Egypt, and followed their history from the settlement to the judges, to the kings, and to David, from whom he had a perfect transition to Jesus.

Paul and others also showed how their personal experience and understanding made sense within the context of the Scriptures. They presented information, and they debated and discussed. The combination of personal testimony and Scripture delivered through preaching, teaching, and discussion was very powerful. As the Bible passages show, some of the religious leaders were envious of the authority of the apostles and the resulting power they had over the people, both Jews and Gentiles.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a strong history, too, of encouraging testimony and scriptural exposition through both preaching and teaching/sharing. The combination of Sabbath School with the divine (preaching) service and other Sabbath meetings (youth meetings, for example) gives a strong formal educational base to Seventh-day Adventist worship. While this needs to be complemented by other learning experiences, it is essential to the educational experience of the Sabbath.

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Sabbath,” pp. 281–289, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“No other institution which was committed to the Jews tended so fully to distinguish them from surrounding nations as did the Sabbath. God designed that its observance should designate them as His worshippers. It was to be a token of their separation from idolatry, and their connection with the true God. But in order to keep the Sabbath holy, men must themselves be holy. Through faith they must become partakers of the righteousness of Christ. When the command was given to Israel, ‘Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,’ the Lord said also to them, ‘Ye shall be holy men unto Me.’ Ex. 20:8; 22:31. Only thus could the Sabbath distinguish Israel as the worshippers of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 283.

“Then the Sabbath is a sign of Christ’s power to make us holy. . . . As a sign of His sanctifying power, the Sabbath is given to all who through Christ become a part of the Israel of God.”—*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 288, 289.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Often Seventh-day Adventists spend time considering what is not acceptable to do on Sabbath. Develop a set of questions that would keep Sabbath keepers focused on the ideals discussed in this lesson and that emphasize Sabbath as an educative experience. For example: “What do I do on Sabbath that enables me to learn more about God’s character?”
- 2 Consider the quotations from Ellen G. White given above. They suggest that it is not just the formality of keeping Sabbath that distinguishes Sabbath keepers in the community. What would individuals be like that are “partakers of the righteousness of Christ” and have been made “holy”? What does this have to do with the Sabbath?
- 3 In what ways can you enrich your Sabbath experience? Identify three goals that focus on what you would like to learn through Sabbath observance in the next 12 months.