

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



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## 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 worshipping 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 led 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 worshipers. 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 worshipers 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.

## Escape From Father in Paris

By MALIKA LEOCADIE

I was born into a non-Christian family in Algeria, but I didn't live like people of my faith were supposed to live. My parents left me with my grandmother and moved to France when I was three. After I turned 18, my father brought me to Paris to take care of his new wife and children.

My time with them was hell. Father was a hard man. Not only did he order me to tidy up the house and care for the children, but he also used me as if I were his wife. When I refused his advances, he beat me. After several years, I tried to commit suicide.

Father forbade me from leaving the house except to take the children to school. One day as I walked the children to school, I met a young man, a next-door neighbor, who took pity on me. Seeing the bruises on my face, he gave me a piece of paper with his mother's phone number. But I didn't call for help.

Instead, I spent a lot of time looking out the window, longing to be free. The young man saw me and told his mother, "Did you see the girl who is always looking out the window? She will be my wife one day."

I didn't hear the conversation, but I sensed that the young man wanted to marry me. I dismissed the thought. I couldn't marry someone outside my faith.

My life reached the point that I couldn't stop crying. Father came into my room every night. I didn't want to live. One night, I looked out the window at the dark sky and poured out my heart to God. I was sure that a God lived in the sky. I remembered Grandmother telling me about a God. "I will marry that young man," I told myself. "I will have a house and children."

The next day, Father beat me again and left the house. His wife insulted me and went on an errand. The children were at school. I called the young man.

"I want to go with you," I said.

"I'll get you in an hour," he said.

I packed all my belongings. Getting into his car, I learned that his name was Juleen and that he was a Seventh-day Adventist from the West Indies. His mother, Simone, had made arrangements for me to stay with another Adventist family where Father would not find me in Paris. The family also was from Algeria.

That's how I met Jesus. Today Juleen and I have our own home and children. We worship every Sabbath in church. My father eventually found me and, weeping, asked for forgiveness. I forgave him.

Father has since died, and the rest of my family has rejected me for becoming a Christian. The church is my new family.



*Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the gospel around the world.*

## *Part I: Overview*

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So much more than just a 24-hour break from work, the Sabbath is a theologically rich and intimate gift of time from our Creator. Whatever we know about the Sabbath, “rest” assured that there is always more to discover.

But what does the Sabbath have to do with education? Think back to the moments in which you have learned the most about God. The studies, the sermons, the fellowship, the special speakers, the songs, the seminars, the vespers, the camp meetings, the potlucks—how many of these moments included the Sabbath hours? With some reflection, for many of us, the Sabbath has been a “university in time” wherein we have been inducted, schooled, and continue to be lifelong scholars-in-residence in the ways and kingdom of God.

The Sabbath also provides time to relearn what we forgot. The Sabbath/manna test was really a trust/obey test to reacquaint Israel with their God after a disorienting sojourn in Egypt. Jesus used the Sabbath to restructure holiness along the lines of relieving human suffering instead of prioritizing traditions that augmented Sabbath prohibitions (*Matt. 12:11, 12*). His brilliant but terse rebuke—“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath’ ”—stands as a monument of reeducation and correction (*Mark 2:27, NKJV*). Jesus is “Lord also of the sabbath,” and we can learn of the One by studying the other (*Luke 6:5*).

## *Part II: Commentary*

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### **A Testimony on Motivations**

Think for a moment about how to educate one’s heart and mind to be obedient to God, including His Sabbath commandment. Over the years, there seems to have been a shift—a good shift—in strategy when motivating people to obey God’s laws.

We can emphasize the negative consequences of disobedience (misery, bondage, penalties, and death). We also can use positive motivations, in which obedience is so attractively presented that people would feel as though they were missing out on a grand adventure if they were to neglect God’s laws.

I became acutely aware of this dichotomy within motivations in talking to Christians other than Adventists. When they learned that I was an

annihilationist (not believing in a place of unending eternal torment), two different Christians, unacquainted with each other, made the same comment on two different occasions, as if reading from a common script: “Don’t you lose leverage for evangelism and soul winning by not using an eternally burning hell?” I remember how struck I was by that comment and, repressing my shock, let them know that I felt that the character of Jesus and His plan of redemption were winsome enough to draw people effectively to God. They both quickly followed up, somewhat embarrassed, with something along the lines of, “Of course, yes, that would work, too.” I quietly thought, *Yes, I should hope so*. But their knee-jerk response to my annihilationism basically was, “How can you get people into heaven without turning the heat up in hell?” Notice how theology inexorably affects evangelism.

I came to realize, maybe for the first time, that *Seventh-day Adventist evangelism, and, by extension, education, is uniquely compelled to discover the heart of God so as to present Him in a way in which people are drawn*, rather than psychologically forced. And I mean psychologically *forced*. Because, frankly, if eternal burning torture is the reality of the lost, I couldn’t care less who God is, at this point—just tell me the magic words or orthodox doctrines to believe so that I may escape the eternal sulfuric nightmare! Who knows to what degree churches fill their pews based on that argument? But Adventist education puts no such tool in its toolbox to use on its students. Of course, final death and regret are legitimate negatives and, in some cases, may be invoked to kick-start serious thought by a student about his or her future. But for every negative, there are a dozen positives that press one to act on what he or she will receive, rather than on what he or she will avoid. Think of a happy marriage: is it fear of the pain and complex consequences of divorce that keeps spouses together, or have they found another source that keeps them bonded? Let’s apply these reflections to understanding the significance of the Sabbath.

### Scripture

There are 89 chapters in the four Gospels. It is relatively easy to see how many of those chapters speak of Jesus’ understanding of the Sabbath. There are 11 instances. This translates to a ratio of one out of eight chapters of the Gospels that deal with the Sabbath. That substantial figure is rendered more relevant when remembering two facts: (1) Jesus did so many things that if it were all written, John “suppose[s] that even the world itself could not contain the books” (*John 21:25*). (2) The earliest Gospels were probably written 30 or so years after Jesus’ death. Now put those two facts together. Among most Christians, there is an assumption that the institution of the Sabbath ended at the Cross. But if that were the case, wouldn’t it be odd that 1/8 of the Gospels dealt with Jesus’ Sabbath reforms? If the Sabbath institution had been defunct for 30 years,

especially in light of the fact that there was so much other material about Jesus' life that could have been recorded, how would this emphasis on the Sabbath be relevant for the fledging church? A quick answer is to say, at least, that the Sabbath was likely still kept by early Christians. Though true, that is arguably the least interesting conclusion. There may be a deeper significance than that, however. Here are a few fascinating connections between the Sabbath, salvation, Jesus, and His kingdom. (The following is taken from Gnana Robinson, "The Origin and Development of the Old Testament Sabbath—A Comprehensive Exegetical Approach" [PhD dissertation, University of Hamburg, June 1975], pp. 413, 414):

1. Matthew and Luke's genealogies are organized according to a sabbatical, sevenfold arrangement or one that is based on multiples of seven. Matthew, for example, offers three groups of 14 generations in which Abraham, David, and Jesus are the high points. Jesus is the continuation and culmination of the salvation pattern, which began in Israel. Luke has 77 generations, starting right from Creation to Jesus. Tying Jesus to Creation through genealogy shows that His salvation is for all of humanity, a fundamental truth that the Sabbath symbolizes.
2. The fact that Jesus is "Lord of the Sabbath" (*see Matt. 12:8*) means that the Sabbath belongs to the Messiah as it belonged to Yahweh in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant that God had with Israel, that they might know that the One who is Lord of the Sabbath is God (*Ezek. 20:20*) and that He is the one who sanctifies them (*Ezek. 20:12, Exod. 31:13*). The foreigner who kept Sabbath also was guaranteed to receive a "place . . . [and] an everlasting name" in His house (*Isa. 56:5*), which is to be a house of prayer "for all people" (*Isa. 56:7*). "In this sense, Sabbath is certainly given for the sake . . . of man, for his salvation." Jesus reinforces these same points by asking rhetorically whether the Sabbath is a time for "sav[ing] life" (*Mark 3:4*) and freeing the suffering from "bond[age]" (*Luke 13:16*). The Sabbath is intimately connected with salvation in the Old Testament (*Deut. 5:15*), and it is the same with Jesus in the New.
3. Just as the temple in the Old Testament functioned as the place of forgiveness, release, and salvation, so Jesus, being greater than the temple, is now the locus of salvation. The salvation that Jesus brings is poignantly seen in His healings (the word for "save," *sozo*, is often used to refer to physical healing [*e.g., Matt. 9:22, Mark 6:56, Luke 17:19*]). Jesus chooses to demonstrate His healing/salvation actions on the Sabbath (*e.g., Mark 3:4; Luke 13:10; John 5:1, 9*). Each of these cases and more could have waited till another day besides the Sabbath, but perhaps Jesus intends to "show the imminence of the

Kingdom of God (Lk. 4:16-19; Lk. 7:22)” and purposefully links the Sabbath with salvation so that the Sabbath remains “the sign of the Messianic Kingdom.”

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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The insights featured in the commentary section are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to seeing the significance of the Sabbath in Scripture. We Adventists spend so much time just trying to educate others to obey the Sabbath command with the same handful of texts. Thus, we are prone to overlook the breadth of Sabbath theology throughout Scripture. Finally, lest all this Sabbath talk be dismissed as simply Adventists stretching the Scriptures to find more Sabbath support, the above theology that weaves Jesus, the Messianic kingdom, new creation, and the Sabbath together *was not authored by any Seventh-day Adventist*. One does not have to be a Seventh-day Adventist to see these connections; one just needs a Bible and an open mind.

Here are some practical tips for learning more about the Sabbath other than the fact that it is still to be kept:

- 1. Read and listen to more advanced theological material put out by the church’s Biblical Research Institute or the Adventist Theological Society. Even if you only understand 40 percent of what you read, you will still learn, and your comprehension will increase with continued exposure.**

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- 2. Form a small reading group that works through more challenging Sabbath material. In this way, you can help to support one another.**

