



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Sacred Time

Reverend Scott Johnson | July 19, 2026 | Exodus 31:12-18

Old Testament Reading

Our Old Testament reading in our sermon text is Exodus chapter 31, verses 12 through 18, and this is God's inspired, his infallible, and inerrant word. And the Lord said to Moses, 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. You shall keep the Sabbath because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore, the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations as a covenant forever. 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. And he gave to Moses when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone written with the finger of God.

New Testament Reading

Let's turn now to Mark chapter two, verses 23 through 28. And this is our New Testament reading. Mark two, 23 through 28. This is the Lord's teaching, part of his teaching on the Sabbath. One Sabbath, Jesus was going through the grain fields. And as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? And he said to them, have you never read

what David did when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him. And he said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. You can turn back to Exodus chapter 31.

The Story of Eric Liddell

In 1924, at the Olympic Games in Paris, France, there was an athlete there who did something that caused an international controversy. No, it had nothing to do with his gender. It had nothing to do with performance enhancing drugs. In fact, this athlete was a man of tremendous integrity. He was a serious and faithful Christian. And he was so committed to his faith in Christ that after the Olympics were over, he turned away from the fame and the glory that he could have enjoyed for a long time after the Olympics. And instead, he spent the rest of his life as a missionary serving in far away China.

You probably know who I'm talking about, most of you will. His name was Eric Liddell, and he was from Scotland. He was a sprinter from that nation. And what he did that was so controversial at those Olympic Games was that he withdrew from the 100-meter race, even though that was his best event. And that was almost a sure thing for Great Britain to get a medal in that event. And so you can imagine that his withdrawing from that race caused a lot of people to be very unhappy.

And why did he withdraw from the 100 meters race? It was because one of the qualifying heats for that race took place on a Sunday. And for Eric Liddell, Sunday was not just another day, but it was the Lord's Day. It was a day in which he could not, with a good conscience, engage in anything that basically amounted to work, and his racing that day would have basically been work for him. And so, out of conscience, he withdrew from the race altogether.

Of course, if you've seen the movie Chariots of Fire, you know the really dramatic parts of Liddell's story at the Olympics that year. He would go on to shock the world by winning the 400-meter race, a race that he was not supposed to do well in. It was not his best event, but that unlikely victory made him a national hero. And that part of the story, if you've seen the movie, it makes for a great movie. But I believe the best parts of the story of Eric Liddell and the 24

Olympics was his faithfulness, that he was faithful. He was faithful to his conscience. He was faithful to the word of God in obeying the fourth commandment. And just a reminder, the fourth commandment, it's been a while since we were in the Ten Commandments, but the fourth commandment says, remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

The Sabbath as a Gift and a Commandment

It's very hard to imagine a similar scenario taking place at the Olympics today, where an athlete refuses to compete in his best event because it takes part on Sunday. The truth is, for most people today, the Fourth Commandment is essentially irrelevant, useless, a quaint relic from a bygone religious era. As a society, we don't value the Fourth Commandment as we once did.

In the days of America's westward expansion, as missionaries were going out west, crossing the Mississippi River, they called the western frontier, everything beyond the Mississippi, they called it the land beyond the Sabbath. It was a kind of spiritual wilderness with no regard for God's law. But that could very well describe the time in which we live. We very much live in a time that is the land beyond the Sabbath.

And that is a tragedy, because insofar as we as Christians fail to keep the fourth commandment, we not only fail to honor the Lord who gave it to us and commanded us to keep it, but we deprive ourselves of a precious gift. God gave us the Sabbath for our good. We heard that from our New Testament reading. Jesus said in Mark chapter two, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. In other words, God created the Sabbath, he gave it to us, his image bearers, for our good, for our blessing. And so the Sabbath day is both a commandment and it is a blessing, it is a gift from God. That was true for the Israelites then, back in the days of Exodus, that is true for us as Christians today.

And so as we consider the fourth commandment this morning from this passage of scripture, we'll first see what it meant for the people of Israel back then, and then we'll consider the significance of the fourth commandment for us as Christians today.

The Meaning of the Sabbath for Ancient Israel

So first, the meaning of the Sabbath commandment for the people of Israel who received it from the Lord back in the days of Exodus. So at this point in Exodus, Moses has been up on the

mountain of Mount Sinai for almost 40 days and 40 nights. And he's been there receiving instructions directly from the Lord. Instructions that included various laws that would govern the society, the life of the nation of Israel. And also, as we've seen the last several weeks, instructions concerning the tabernacle and the worship there.

But before God gave these instructions to Moses, the first thing he did from the top of Mount Sinai was that he declared to all the people of Israel the Ten Commandments. And with our passage this morning, we have in a sense, we have come full circle because at the very end of this passage, we read this in verse 18. And he gave to Moses when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone written with the finger of God. And so after all the other laws and instructions that the Lord gave to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai, he gives to him at the very end of all that, the two tablets of stone on which were written the 10 commandments. And that was where the Lord began to proclaim his law to the people of Israel with the 10 commandments.

Now, the two tablets that God gave to Moses, most likely these were two separate copies of the 10 commandments. We often think of the two tablets, tablet containing the first four commandments, the other tablet containing the last six commandments. That may have been the case. Perhaps, though, more likely, it was two copies of ten commandments, and the reason for that was because there were two parties to this covenant. There was the Lord and the people of Israel, and each party had their copy of the law of the covenant.

And the fact that the Ten Commandments were written in stone with the finger of God tells us a lot about the supreme importance of these Ten Commandments. All of the laws that we have considered concerning the tabernacle and the garments of the priests and the worship there and so on, all of those laws would one day give way with the coming of Christ, because Christ would be the fulfillment of everything that those laws were pointing towards. As well, all of the laws that governed the people of Israel as a nation, those too would give way to the establishment of the church. The church is a spiritual kingdom. We no longer apply the civil laws that God gave to the people of Israel to the church today.

But the Ten Commandments, these are different. These were literally written in stone. And they were God's enduring commandments, not only for the people of Israel then, but they are his law for all people at all times and in all places.

The Sabbath as a Covenant Sign

And what remarkable thing about the way that the Lord gave his laws and instructions to Moses is that before he gives to Moses the two tablets of stone that contain the 10 commandments, he speaks to Moses about one of the commandments in particular, and that is the fourth commandment. And that was our passage this morning. And so the Lord says to Moses in verse 13, he says, 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.

Notice how the Lord emphasizes this commandment. He says, above all, above all, you shall keep my commandments or my Sabbaths rather. And that raises the question, why did the Lord choose to remind Moses of this one commandment in particular? Why did he not remind Moses of the first commandment? That would seem to be the one commandment we might choose out of all 10 to impress upon someone, to have no other gods before the Lord, Moses could have reminded the Israelites of the sixth commandment, or the seventh commandment, or any of them. But why did the Lord remind Moses, after the end of all these instructions that he gave to him, that the people of Israel were to be especially vigilant in keeping the fourth commandment?

Well, the answer is found in what the Lord says to Moses, both in verses 13 and in verse 17. If you look at verse 13, the Lord says, This is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. And then in verse 17, the language of sign is used again. 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.

And so the fourth commandment, in a way that made it unique, distinct from the other nine commandments, was a sign. It was a sign for the people of Israel that they were a people who belonged to God. They were people who belonged to the Lord. It was the Lord who sanctified them, he says in verse 13. That is, it is the Lord who sets them apart. It was the Lord who set his people Israel apart from all the other nations of the world to be his beloved people, to be his redeemed people, his holy people.

In other words, insofar as the people of Israel kept the fourth commandment, insofar as they rested and worshiped on the seventh day of the week, they testified, both to themselves and to

the world, that they were in covenant with the Lord, that the God who created the heavens and the earth, the true, the living God of all things, that He had made Israel His people, and Israel had God, or the Lord, as their God.

And if the Israelites were tempted to think that keeping this commandment as a covenant sign between them and the Lord, if they were tempted to think that this was something that was not so serious or so important, something that could be safely ignored, the Lord tells Moses here in this passage just how seriously he takes the fourth commandment. Look at verses 14 and 15. Verse 14, you shall keep the Sabbath because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Verse 15, six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.

And so the death penalty was the consequence for breaking this commandment for the people of Israel. Later in the Old Testament, we read in the book of Numbers that upon the Lord's instructions, a man was stoned to death for breaking the Sabbath. Now, what did this man do to deserve the death penalty when he broke the Sabbath? Did he go on a murder rampage on the Sabbath day? Did he commit adultery on the Sabbath day? No. What he did was, is he went outside to gather sticks, presumably to make a fire. Now, that strikes us as being cruel or harsh. Why did the Lord bring this penalty of death upon this man who simply went out on the Sabbath day to gather some firewood?

But the Lord was showing the people of Israel just how important it was that they keep the fourth commandment, just how serious a matter it was, how seriously the Lord took the fourth commandment. Remember, it was a sign of God's covenant with His people. And so for the Israelites to break the fourth commandment, it really was on their part an act of denying the Lord, rejecting the covenant. It was a kind of defiant rejection of God's goodness and grace in making Israel His people. It was really an act of apostasy. And so according to God's perfect justice, to break the Sabbath required capital punishment.

And so, by telling Moses here as a kind of final word, after all of his other instructions and laws that he gave to the Israelites, that they were to keep the Sabbath day holy, and by applying these penalties to the fourth commandment for breaking it, God was driving home the truth that the Israelites always had to remember who they were. They could not forget that they were a

people who had been redeemed by the Lord, who were set apart for God to belong to Him, who were loved by God, who belonged to God. They were His people. The Lord was their God.

And they would remember that week by week as they observed the Sabbath day, as they rested from their work on that day, as they worshiped the Lord that day. They would remember who they were and who God was as their God. One person put it this way, the Sabbath day was like a wedding ring for the people of Israel. It was kind of a intangible wedding ring, a sign that they did not belong to themselves, but that as a people, they belonged to another. That is, they belonged to the Lord. And so that's what the fourth commandment, the special significance that it had for the people of Israel.

Application to Christians Today

But now let's ask the question, how does this passage apply to us as Christians today? Well, the first thing we need to ask is the question, does this passage apply to us at all as Christians today? Does the fourth commandment apply to us as Christians today at all? Are we bound to keep the fourth commandments?

Well, let me ask this. Are we bound to keep the fourth commandments in the same way that the Israelites were bound to keep the fourth commandments? We don't have time to do full justice to this question, but the answer is yes and no. First, there are aspects to the fourth commandment that don't apply to us today.

For example, the first one to mention is that for us, the day that we are to keep holy is not the seventh day of the week, but the first day of the week. And why is that? It's because it was on the first day of the week that our Lord Jesus rose from the dead. And so that's why the New Testament refers to the first day of the week, and this is the day that the New Testament Christians gathered according to 1 Corinthians, but this was the day on which Christ was resurrected from the dead, and so the New Testament refers to that day as the Lord's Day. It is the Lord's Day. And so for us as Christians, Sunday, the first day of the week, is our Sabbath. It is the Lord's Day.

Also, the penalties for breaking the fourth commandment obviously no longer apply to the church today. I hardly need to say it, but God does not command the church to put anybody to death ever for any reason. That is not the church's calling or commission in the world today. We

are a spiritual kingdom, and so we don't exercise the death penalty for someone breaking the commandment of God.

However, having said all that, the heart or the essence of the Fourth Commandment is still very much in effect for us as Christians today. First of all, stating the obvious, it is one of the Ten Commandments. It was not written in pencil to be erased later, but it was written on tablets of stone with the finger of God. And if we don't believe that the fourth commandment is no longer valid or binding upon the church today, then basically we don't have ten commandments. We have nine commandments.

But not only that, but it is a commandment that is grounded in creation. The very first Sabbath day was the Sabbath rest that the Lord himself took when he rested from all of his works in creating the world, the heavens and the earth. And so like the institution of marriage, which was also given with creation, the Sabbath day transcends the nation of Israel. It is something much greater than simply a law for the nation of Israel at that time. And so we are in solid biblical ground to say that, yes, the fourth commandment does still apply to us today.

When Eric Liddell refused to compete because it was a Sunday at the Olympics, it wasn't because he was a legalist at heart. It wasn't because he was bound by religious tradition. No, he refused to compete because of a conviction based upon the word of God. That Sunday is the Lord's day, a day to rest and to worship God.

And if the fourth commandment, if it still applies to us as Christians today, which it does, then much of what the Lord says to the people of Israel then, or what he said to them then, will also apply to us as Christians today. And so that's what I want to look with you at is how this passage applies to us as Christians today as we seek by God's grace to keep the fourth commandment.

And as we do so, as we look at this passage, the main truth, the main takeaway that I want you to be impressed with or that I pray that the Lord will impress on our hearts today as we look at the fourth commandment is the truth that God has given this commandment to us for our good. It is meant to be a blessing to us. It is not supposed to be a burden. It is not supposed to be a drag, but it is supposed to be for our good. And you and I will only begin to keep the fourth commandment when we do see it as that, as it is a gift from God. We will only make the sacrifices that we need to make to keep the fourth commandment when we know that in keeping it, there is blessing. And there is blessing in keeping this commandment.

Now, having said that, it also must be said that everybody's circumstances are different. There is some work in this world that simply must be done on a Sunday. If I have to have emergency surgery on a Sunday, I definitely want a surgeon who is willing to work that day. I don't want to wait till Monday. I might be in heaven by Monday.

And what's more, for all kinds of reasons, that we can't get into because there's almost as many reasons as there are situations and people. But for some people, at least, it may not be wise, it may not be practical to refuse to work on Sunday. Of course, that's a case-by-case situation.

Not only that, but the particulars of keeping the Fourth Commandment will be different from person to person, from family to family. I will not offer you a list of do's and don'ts for the Lord's Day. I will let your conscience be your guide. I will let the spirit of Christ as he speaks through his word be your guide in what keeping the Lord's Day holy looks like for you and for your family.

A Day of Rest

But with all that in mind, I want to focus on two truths about the Sabbath from this passage that apply to us today. First of all, for us as Christians, it is a day of rest. The Sabbath is a day of rest. What was good for the Israelites then is good for us today. A day off from our usual labors, our usual responsibilities. That is something good so that we can rest.

It is especially something that is needful for us today. It's always been needful, but it's very needful for us today as well, because everybody is going full steam 24-7 in our world today. There's always something more that needs to be done. There's always something that demands our attention all the time. We live in a consumer culture, and so our stores, our services are available all the time. Therefore, employers demand employees who are available to work on any day. And what free time we do manage to have, we tend to fill it up with entertainment, recreation. And so the pace of our lives is hurried and frantic.

What do people tell you when you ask them, how are you doing? What is the number one response that you usually get from that question? I can tell you what it's not. I rarely hear the answer, I'm just bored. I don't know what to do with myself. I don't have anything to do. I have all this time on my hands. You don't hear that very often. Usually what you hear is, I'm busy. I'm so busy. I'm crazy busy. I don't know how I'm gonna get it all done.

Well, what if God gave us one day each week in which we could step back from all that busyness and all that activity, take a breath, and just rest, rest from our work? And not only that, what if on that same day we could turn our thoughts, our attention, to the things of eternal consequence, to things that have eternal value, eternal worth, the things of God, the things of Christ, the things of our salvation, of our hope in the life to come, the world to come. Well, God has given us that gift. He has given us that gift in the fourth commandment.

And the question for you and me is, do we avail ourselves of it? Do you take advantage of this gift of God, or have you, without even realizing it, adopted the culture's idea that Sunday is just another Saturday. That's the way the world looks at Sunday. It's just a repeat of Saturday, a day that we can devote to whatever we please.

But Sunday's not just another day that belongs to you. It doesn't belong to you. It's not a day for you to be more productive with your work and your studies. It's not a day to entertain yourself. God has given us six days of the week. He has given us six days of the week to pursue our work, our recreation, and so on, but he's given us one day, a Sabbath day, to rest from all of that and to rest in him.

And so we are to rest on Sunday, not just because God commands it, and that is sufficient reason to do anything that God commands because God commands it, but we need the Sabbath day because we need to rest. We need to take a break from our busy lives to focus on the Lord, to rest from our work so that we can enjoy the Lord on that day.

Now look again at verse 15. It says, Notice how it's called a solemn rest. Not just a rest, but a solemn rest. And also that the day is holy to the Lord. It is set apart to God. It belongs to Him.

And so what that means is that the rest that God commands us on the seventh day is not just inactivity, it's not doing nothing, but it's resting from our work in order that we may be engaged in the worship of God. In Leviticus 23.3, the Sabbath day is called a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. And so what that translates into for us as the church today is that as Christians, on Sunday, we make church a priority. It is called a holy convocation. How do we have a holy convocation? We come to church on the Lord's day to worship God with His people.

And we make time in the day for fellowship, for worship, We make time in the day for reading the scripture, prayer, meditation. And if we love Christ, if there is in our hearts a love for Christ as our Savior and Lord, and I trust that is true for all of us, that we have a genuine love for

Christ, then the Lord's day will not be a burden. it will not be drudgery, it will not be something that we dread because we can't go out and do this or that, but it'll be something that we look forward to, something we delight in, that we desire to have.

Notice how in verse 17 it says that, after the Lord made heaven and earth in six days, on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed. Well, we know that God did not need to rest, literally. We know that He did not need to be refreshed. God is the inexhaustible source of all life and vitality and being and energy and power. He does not need to be refreshed. He does not get tired. But He says this, and He did this for us, for an example to follow, because we do need rest. We need the physical, spiritual refreshment that comes to us when we keep the Lord's Day, when we enjoy this solemn rest. And so the Lord's Day is a day of rest.

A Day for Christian Witness

Secondly, the Lord's Day is a day for Christian witness. Remember, in this passage, what is being emphasized here is the fact that the fourth commandment was a sign. It was a covenant sign between God and his people. And in the same way, the Lord's day is meant to be a sign for us that we do not belong to ourselves, but that we belong to another. We belong to Christ.

This is one of the fundamental truths that is true of you as a believer in Jesus Christ, that you are not your own. You do not belong to yourself. You are not your own master and Lord, but you belong to Christ. I read this passage a couple of weeks ago, I think, from 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 6, 19 and 20. As a believer in Jesus Christ, as one who has come to Christ for salvation, you have also come to him as your master. You belong to him. You have been redeemed from sin and death by the grace of Christ. You have been delivered from bondage and you have been given over to a new master, one who is gracious, a gracious Lord, whose rule over you is loving and merciful and kind. You belong to a Master who does all things for your eternal good, for your eternal blessedness. And so you are not your own, but you belong to Jesus. But to belong to Jesus, to be His, is nothing but good. It is nothing but good.

Many of you will be familiar with the first question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism. This is a catechism that came out of the Reformation. It's not the catechism that we use for our own theological standards as a Presbyterian church. Nevertheless, it is a wonderful catechism. But the first question and answer in the catechism goes like this, what is your only comfort in life

and in death? And the answer is that I am not my own, but belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

And for that reason, because we belong body and soul to Christ, the Lord's Day is kind of like a placard or a billboard that advertises the fact that we are His. When we keep the Lord's Day holy, when we set it apart, when we rest, when we worship on that day, we are proclaiming to ourselves and to the world that This is not our day, this is the Lord's day, and we are not our own, but we belong to God.

In fact, you could even say that in keeping the Lord's day, there was a kind of preaching of the gospel in that, because you are telling the world, today is the day that my Savior rose from the dead. Today is the day that Jesus Christ was raised victorious over sin and death and hell forever, and my victory is in Him. My life is bound up with Him. And therefore, this day belongs to my Savior. And therefore, it doesn't matter what others may do on Sunday. It doesn't matter what others may think that I should do on Sunday. I will rest in my risen Lord, and I will worship Him with His people. And so for us, the Lord's Day is a day for Christian witness.

I believe one of the major stumbling blocks that keeps people from coming to faith in Christ in the first place is this idea that somehow becoming a Christian is all about loss. What will I lose if I come to faith in Christ, if I become a Christian? I will lose my freedom to do as I please. I will lose my freedom to think for myself.

But for those who come, to Jesus as their Savior, what they realize is that it's all about gaining, it's not about losing. What they discover is that what they really lose is the so-called freedom to sin, but what they gain in return is infinitely greater, the forgiveness of sins, the blessing of a clean conscience, the gift of eternal life, the joy of knowing Christ, the hope of the life to come, the world to come, courage in the face of death,

And in the same way, we as Christians, we look at the fourth commandment and we only think about what we have to give up, what we might lose. And so we look at it the wrong way. We think, well, we'll lose the freedom to use the day as we please. We lose the ease and the comfort of conforming to our culture around us that has no holy day. We lose out on opportunities for work, for study, for sports, and so on.

But we shouldn't think of the Lord's Day in that way, of what we might lose or give up, but we should think of it in terms of what we gain, what we benefit from it. And when we make the

Lord's Day holy, when we keep it holy, we gain a priceless treasure, an entire day devoted to Christ, a day for physical rest, spiritual rest, a day to look ahead, ultimately, to that eternal rest that God has promised us in Christ.

Honor the Lord

After Eric Liddell raced and won the 400 meters in the Paris Olympics that year, 1924, after the race was over, he opened a note that one of his trainers had given to him before the race. And the note said this, in the old book, it says, he that honors me, I will honor, wishing you the best of success always. Of course, the old book in that note was the Bible. And he was referring to 1 Samuel 2, verse 30. The Lord says, those who honor me, I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.

And one way to honor the Lord is to keep his day holy, the Lord's day. It is to devote that one day of the week to a solemn rest. And we honor the Lord when we make worship, resting, taking a break from our usual work and activity, when we make that a priority on Sunday. Of course, there will be unavoidable circumstances, there will be emergencies, but when we establish a pattern in our lives in which Sunday is the day that we rest and worship, we honor the Lord.

And if you will honor the Lord in that way, he will honor you in return. because the promise that he made to the people of Israel then is the same promise he makes to us today. Those who honor me, I will honor.

Let's pray.