

**+ Deuteronomy 5:12-15 + Rest, Remember, and Rejoice! + 2nd Sunday after Pentecost + 29 May 2016 +**

What comes to mind when you think of Memorial Day? Rest and relaxation as you spend time with friends and family and maybe even a barbeque? Remembrance as our nation recalls the ultimate sacrifice given by so many in wars going back to America's earliest days? Rejoicing as summer and all its activities kick off or simply because you live in a country that is free?

Back in 1868, there was no Memorial Day. Only a couple years had passed since the nation-rending violence of the Civil War had come to an end. Nearly every family had a loved one who had lost his life in that war. The wounds and the grief were still raw. So people honored their war dead locally and personally, but the desire to do that nationally grew.

So Gen. John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic—a veterans' organization, issued an order that 30 May 1868 be designated as "Decoration Day." It was a day to decorate the graves of Union soldiers who had given their lives in the Civil War. New York made it official in 1873. By 1890, all of the northern states were participating and the southern states joined in when Decoration Day was expanded to include our fallen soldiers from every war. It started with remembering, but in 1971, Memorial Day became a national holiday and part of a three-day weekend. Today Memorial Day is a day to rest, to remember, and to rejoice.

Back in the Old Testament, there was no Memorial Day, but in a certain sense, every Sabbath day was like Memorial Day. Shortly after rescuing the Israelites from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the Lord gave his holy Law to his people through the prophet Moses. The Lord gave ceremonial laws that regulated their worship lives with detailed descriptions for sacrifices and festival days. The Lord gave civil laws that regulated their daily lives enabling justice and peace to rule the land.

Above all, the Lord gave his moral law to be the holy guide over the lives of his people in thought, word, and action. We know that moral law as the Ten Commandments. Within that moral law and also within the ceremonial law, the Lord commanded his people to celebrate the Sabbath—to set aside the seventh day of the week for worship and the study of God's Word.

Jump ahead 40+ years and you find a new generation of Israelites encamped along the banks of the Jordan River. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness due to their fathers' rejection, the Lord had finally brought the Israelites to this place. Soon they would cross that river and, with the Lord's help, take the land that God had promised to their ancestors. Before they did so, God had his prophet Moses teach his holy Law to the people one last time. Moses wouldn't be leading them into the Promised Land, so they needed to remember what God had told them.

As Moses recounted God's Ten Commandments, he spoke about God's command to set aside the Sabbath. ***"Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do."*** God wanted his people to rest on the Sabbath (which means "rest")—to spend one day a week not working, but spending time with him in his Word.

Now people back then were a lot like they are today. Every day was a day to work, to open up shop, to go out in the fields and put your animals and hired hands to work, but what about time spent with the Lord? They weren't going to stop unless he told them to do so. God wanted them to stop working as he did on the seventh day after six busy days of creating the universe. So he told them to rest, to pause from work on the seventh day.

...But why? What was the purpose? The Lord wanted his people to take time to rest on the Sabbath day so they could remember. ***"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."*** Like Memorial Day today, the Lord wanted his people to remember. Remember what they had been—poor slaves dominated by the mighty Egyptian empire, but also remember who their God is—the Creator of the universe, the Lord of heaven and earth, and above all, their Savior-God.

They were to remember what the Lord their God had done for them—rescued them with ten terrible plagues, mighty miracles of deliverance, and gracious providing, how the Lord had brought them to the Promised Land

and would deliver it into their hands. No army or ruler could withstand them because they had the Lord their God on their side. At the same time, the Lord wanted his people to look ahead to the Savior whom he had promised to them, a Savior who would bring eternal rest for their souls. The Lord wanted his people to pause to remember his mercy and his promises.

Resting and remembering each week on the Sabbath would lead God's people to rejoice in their Savior-God and who they were in him. Each week they would be refreshed to joyfully serve him and each other.

That Savior whom God had promised eventually came. He came teaching and proclaiming the good news of true rest for their souls—rest that would last for eternity. ***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”*** (Matthew 11:28-29)

Yet after centuries of keeping God's Sabbath law, many had come to see it as a burden and a work they had to do for God. It wasn't a source of rest and refreshment for their souls as they spent time in God's Word. At most, they remembered how God had delivered them in the past and many hoped he would throw off the oppression of the hated Romans like mighty Egypt.

...But that's not why Jesus came and not why God had originally established the Sabbath. God had established the Sabbath so his people could rest to remember and rejoice as they looked ahead to the coming of eternal rest with Christ—and that's exactly what Jesus had come to do!

Jesus brought rest for hearts burdened with the guilt of lifetimes of sin. Jesus brought rest for hearts crushed with grief and worry and fear and rejection and loneliness and the pain of death. Jesus brought rest for souls. Because Jesus brought rest for souls, all that they were to remember on the Sabbath—all the miracles and the rescues and the victories—all of that, including the Sabbath day itself, was a shadow of the reality that Jesus brought.

Now some still tried to make the Sabbath day a burdensome law for God's people—and to that the Apostle Paul responded in his letter to the Colossian Christians: ***“When you were dead in your sins..., God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins... Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”*** (Colossians 2:13,16-17)

Because Christ fulfilled that promise and brought the reality of his rest to our souls, we are now free from the command to worship on the seventh day. In fact, the Christian church started worshiping on the first day of the week—Sunday—shortly after Jesus was raised from the dead on Easter. However, we are not free from his gift of time to rest and remember and rejoice.

God wants you and me to spend time with him. Why? So you and I, like those ancient believers, can have regular rest for our souls. In this world in which we live, there is no end to the busyness and the distractions that try to draw our attention away from our Lord and his Word. Given the opportunity, you and I could busy ourselves every day without ever taking a break.

We could devote all our time to selfish gain and the distractions of the here and now, but the Lord wants you and me to pause, to rest, to be refreshed in him. He wants you to rest in his everlasting arms. He wants you to drink deeply from the cool, clear waters of Holy Scripture and be refreshed. He wants you to hear and read and meditate on his Word regularly. He wants you to ***“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ...”*** (2 Peter 3:18) He wants to prepare and equip you for another week of service to him and to each other. So he calls you to rest in your Savior Jesus and to leave with him all that has burdened you during the week so he can carry it for you.

Our God has a purpose in doing this. He wants you to rest so you can remember. Unlike the Old Testament Israelites, we have the advantage of being able to look back and see everything that took place. God wants you to remember what you are by nature—slaves to sin and death and the devil. Yet God also wants you to remember what he did for you through Christ. He wants you to remember the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made for you. Much like those who honor the war dead from years long gone like my great-great grandfather who started placing flags on the graves of his fallen Civil War comrades back in 1875, he wants you to remember.

Each time we gather we look back and remember what we are by nature—condemned, sinful enemies of God. Yet we also remember what our God has done—how he loved you so much that he was willing to sacrifice his one and only Son to make you his child. We look back and remember how Jesus willingly fought the fight to set us free and won the war for our souls by his own death on the cross, but unlike all those who remember the war dead, we remember that Christ's tomb didn't stay empty. No, his final and greatest victory was over death when Jesus rose from the dead as he promised.

So how do you respond when you rest and remember what Christ has done for you? You rejoice! You praise our God not only with words, but with your lives as ***“living sacrifices—holy and pleasing to God...”*** (Romans 12:1) You can leave our time of rest with our Lord refreshed and ready to serve him and each other rejoicing that you have been rescued by our Savior Jesus.

This weekend, be sure to rest and enjoy your time with family and friends away from work. Remember those who gave their lives to enable us to freely worship here and enjoy peace in this land. Rejoice that summer begins and you live in a free country, but above all that, even after the weekend is over, rest in Christ. Remember what he has done for you, and rejoice in your Savior-God! Amen.