**TEACHING RESOURCE: SABBATH**

***This resource can be used as the basis for a sermon, Bible study or small group session. The questions at the end can be used to support individual reflection and group discussion.***

**Key passages: Leviticus 25:3-5 and Leviticus 26:3-5**

**Teaching aims**

* Understand the importance and meaning of Sabbath.
* Explore the link between Sabbath and Shalom.
* Apply the principles of Sabbath to our care for creation.

**To explore this, we’re going to look at four things:**

* Our lived experience.
* The context in Leviticus.
* The context of today.
* Our application.

**Introduction**

We are living in a time of crisis for the natural world. Climate change is accelerating, and creatures and plants are dying out at an alarming rate[[1]](#footnote-1). The increase in carbon emissions is causing temperatures to rise and increasing the number and intensity of extreme weather events[[2]](#footnote-2).

We have known this for a while, and although progress has been made in some areas, there is much more that needs to be done to limit climate change and protect wildlife. This is largely down to humanity’s overconsumption of the world’s finite resources. We are also generally more disconnected from the natural world and its rhythms than ever before.

One of those God-given rhythms which is built into the fabric of the cosmos and our very lives, is that of the Sabbath. Exodus 20:8-10 says ‘Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour 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…’. In this study, we will explore what is meant by a sabbath for creation and see how we can learn and apply the principles in our lives.

The more we can grasp this, the more it can inform our missional activities. Then as disciples and the body of Christ it will help us realise God’s shalom for ourselves, our communities and the wider creation.

**OUR LIVED EXPERIENCE**

**‘God has, in fact, written two books, not just one. Of course, we are all familiar with the first book he wrote, namely Scripture. But he has written a second book called creation.’ (Francis Bacon)[[3]](#footnote-3)**

*Listen to creation for a few moments during the pandemic lockdown:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1iboKia3AQ>

* For a while, we were restrained from our constant drive for growth, and the earth was able to breathe.
* For a while, we watched creation restore itself, wildlife wandered into villages, the soil replenished itself, the air was clear of pollution and noise.
* We stopped, and something in ourselves found ourselves, reconnected with life values, reconnected with our family and neighbour again.

**THE CONTEXT OF LEVITICUS (25:3-5)**

**When we care for creation, then creation will care for us.**

* Moses is with the Israelites as they travel through the wilderness from the Egypt of slavery to the promised land. They are living on the move, they don’t plant crops, they have their livestock and God has provided miraculously for them. On Mout Sinai, God speaks to Moses about how to live in the land they are going to settle in. The land where they will plant and tend and harvest their crops, grow their families and build their businesses.
* Israel was to do this as a radical demonstration that the land belonged to God, not to them.
* This called Israel to truly trust God. They had to trust God that he would provide enough in the harvest of six years to see them through the seventh year of rest.
* Observing the sabbath year was also a powerful testimony of dependence on God. Israel declared their belief that God would meet their needs. This was truly living by faith, and God wanted his people to live trusting him.
* It was wise management of the land. Giving the land some rest every seven years helped restore vital nutrients to the soil that are depleted by constant use.
* Some commentaries suggest that the Sabbath year was to put everyone in Israel in the same place as the poor of the land, who had to simply trust that God would provide in unlikely circumstances. This would give them compassion for the poor, who had to live that way *every* year.

**Leviticus 26:3-5**

* Farmers know that it is good practice to allow the land to lie fallow. The soil is able to restore its structure and its nutrients, the earth worms and microbes do their jobs and the yields after a rest are noticeably better. You may not be responsible for farmland, but this is about the principle of taking care of our common home.
* Leviticus 25 and 26 shows us how to love people and care for creation at the same time. A fast for the land in order that it may be restored, the poor can be provided for and the inequality between rich and poor reduced.
* The Bible calls this shalom. Shalom means peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility.
* The Hebrew word *Shabbat* comes from the Hebrew word *Lishbot* which means ‘to stop’ or the Hebrew word *Lashevet* which means ‘to sit’. How appropriate![[4]](#footnote-4)

**THE CONTEXT OF TODAY**

**Science confirms that we are guaranteed more intense and frequent weather hazards and, for those who have the highest vulnerability and lowest capacity, the greater the crisis will be.**

**Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)[[5]](#footnote-5)**

* The rising sea levels are causing a number of Pacific islands to be completely covered, people have lost their homes, their lands and their livelihoods.
* In sub-Saharan Africa there is an ever-encroaching advancement of the desert. And now in East Africa there is a hunger crisis. Where it was normal to have drought every four years, now there has been a drought for four years in a row.
* In 2022, more than 2.3 billion people faced water stress and almost 160 million children were exposed to severe and prolonged droughts. [[6]](#footnote-6)
* Imagine living in Pakistan, when one-third of your country was under water. Over 33 million people (15 percent of the population) were impacted and internally displaced, close to 1,200 died, almost one million houses were washed away, 900,000 livestock perished and 90 percent of the crops were damaged.

**OUR APPLICATION**

**‘God is all that is good. God has created all that is made. God loves all that he has created. And so anyone who, in loving God, loves all his fellow creatures [and] loves all that is. All those who are on the spiritual path contain the whole of creation, and the Creator. That is because God is inside us, and inside God is everything. And so whoever loves God loves all that is.’ (*Julian of Norwich, 1343 – 1416)***

* In Luke 10:37 the lawyer asks Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’
* Commissioner Christine McMillan said that our neighbour is ‘whoever comes within our sphere of influence’. When it comes to climate change, future generations and our global brothers and sisters are our neighbours.
* However, there is a challenge when we need to change our behaviour in order to reduce our carbon footprint. Human beings are hard wired to respond to risk. We are risk averse. Our primal instincts kick in when we are in danger. We see a snake and we either run or kill it. We act immediately. When our energy bills started to rise we switched off our heating and used the oven less. Smart meters were suddenly very important. Our behaviour changed because our finances were at risk!
* With climate change, the risk is different. For decades, in the west, we haven’t seen or felt the risk to us, so we haven’t acted to change our behaviour. Unfortunately, now we are beginning to feel the effects, so there is a greater engagement with the issue.

**QUESTIONS (For personal reflection and discussion)**

**Our lived experience**

* Living through the Covid pandemic was very difficult for so many people. Can you relate to the thinking that it changed our perspective on what was important.
* In what ways could it have been a rest for the earth?
* What did we learn – is there anything we do differently now?

**The context of Leviticus**

* Why did God ordain a Sabbath for the land?
* How would a Sabbath demonstrate that the land belonged to God?

**The context of today**

* Are reaping the results of disobedience? How?
* What would a Sabbath of the land look like now? Is it even realistic?

**Our application**

* I wonder what your thoughts and practice of a Sabbath rest are. Dallas Willard said ‘You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.’[[7]](#footnote-7)
* What are the benefits?
* What would it take to change my behaviour on behalf of my neighbour? Address the risk that I cannot see or feel?
1. <https://theethicalist.com/wwf-devastating-69-global-species-decline/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/climate-change/effects-of-climate-change> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/66310-god-has-in-fact-written-two-books-not-just-one> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://firmisrael.org/learn/the-meaning-of-shalom/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1118142> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Soul Rest on Bible App [↑](#footnote-ref-7)