

We Accepted God's Sabbath Gift

by Nan Chase

Not long ago I was just a harried mom, rushing through the day with one thought always in mind: *Why isn't there enough time?*

Then, in a moment of divine inspiration, I decided to try an old-fashioned cure for my space-age blues. It's called the Sabbath, and it's a mental health tool that works as well today as it did 3,200 years ago when the Hebrews codified a weekly day of rest as the fourth commandment.

The beauty is that it can work for anyone. It's been said that the Sabbath is the Hebrews' greatest gift to humanity; indeed, no matter what religion you practice (or don't practice), a day of rest each week brings rich rewards.

Now, if someone told you there was a way to stop the onslaught of everyday obligations, improve your social life, keep the house clean, revive your tired marriage, elevate spiritual awareness, and improved productivity at work—all overnight and without cost—you'd probably say the claim is absurd.

I certainly did. But I was willing to see if some cosmic miracle cure might really work, and after a year of earnest research, I've discovered that adherence to a seemingly arcane set of Sabbath rules yields a precious gift of time.

I admit that my observations are not those of Orthodox Jews, who engage in elaborate prayer and ritual throughout the Sabbath, uphold special dietary rules, spend many hours studying at a synagogue, and may even avoid switching on electrical devices. Instead, my husband and I try to honor the meaning of the Sabbath while adapting the practices of our tastes, temperaments, and times.

Nonetheless, from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday, we symbolically join the Jews of Jerusalem at rest: no cooking, no shopping or paying bills, no pulling weeds or pruning shrubs, no cleaning or repairing the house, not even talking about or thinking about work and the office.

The Sabbath is a day without labor, a time to savor the sweetest of life with a delicious meal, lovemaking (honest), napping, reading, strolling.

My personal life, my professional life, and my family life have all improved, and I plan to go on celebrating the Sabbath. The most powerful and illuminating discovery for me may be the sudden understanding of how an ancient edict can have such thoroughly modern applications. The Sabbath commandment was given thousands of years ago

as an answer to the burdens of ceaseless and difficult labor. And our problems today aren't all that different.

Why Things Changed

My quest began at a marriage counselor's office. After 22 fruitful years of marriage, my husband, Saul, and I found ourselves deadlocked over crises of time management, of growth, and change.

Our children were beginning to leave the nest, to have wonderful adventures with new friends and interests, and I wanted to try that myself—and with Saul. But we had a lot of responsibilities, including a new business property under construction, and we needed to work extra hours to make the project succeed. We were caught in a net of squabbling. Just deciding to get some help from a marriage counselor was a sobering step for both of us.

Then I came across a book about Jewish holidays and started the chapter describing the Sabbath. Yes, it's a holiday, a special event that occurs not once a year but once a week—a day so significant that it's inscribed among the Ten Commandments along with “Thou shalt not murder” and “Thou shalt not steal.”

The simple textbook description electrified me. The Sabbath, it said, “marks the difference between man and all other creatures that live in the universe.” This day of rest

was to be strictly observed in order for humans to cease the everyday struggles for existence and enjoy life's material and spiritual gifts.

At our second and last meeting with the counselor, I suggested to Saul that we try a day of rest—a day set aside from the others—as a way to break out of our rut. He readily agreed, and all that remained was to follow the rules and see what happened.

A different Friday

Like so many people in the modern United States, we had never learned what it meant to really observe the Sabbath. We knew the outlines: the approach of sundown on Friday was to be heralded with an especially good meal; the house was to be spotless, and all work was to be completed.

What did it all mean? The answer has proven to be an exciting journey.

The Friday before the first Sabbath, I took the afternoon off work to clean the house from top to bottom. If a family with three teenagers was going to get a day without work, we should start with everything extra clean. This practice proved an instant winner, and I have permanently changed my work week to the benefit of our home life.

I also baked bread that first week, two loaves to honor the

biblical injunction to prepare extra food on Friday and save it over for the Sabbath (Exodus16:23). The extra food underscores the day's importance as a day of rest. Along with the bread, I cooked enough stew to last through the Sabbath, and suddenly a day's worth of cooking and cleanup had disappeared!

Saul came home from work that Friday afternoon and cleared away a stack of bills before the sun went down. In the last hour before sunset, I thumbed my briefcase and decided to tie up some loose ends. Since then both of us have adopted the habit of doubling our pace on Fridays—taking care of the little things that are so easy to put off.

A different Saturday

And what about Saturday? That first week, after rising extra late, Saul and I spent some time relaxing in the backyard, and I absentmindedly began to pick weeds. “Stop. Don't do that!” Saul said.

Saul was right to stop me, it turns out; we now try to read every week from a book of biblical commentary as a way to learn the theology. On the Sabbath, our book says, humans should exist in a state of harmony with the natural world and that means letting the weeds and lawn grow without interference. We're both passionate gardeners, but working in the garden every spare moment leaves no time to enjoy its beauty and tranquility.

We soon gave up shopping on Saturdays. Now there is a whole day when the commercial realm has no hold on our family whatsoever.

So what do we do with the time we've gained? In addition to sleeping late and enjoying our garden, Saul and I have started doing things we had long put off: hiking, visiting friends, enjoying museums, reading, and so on.

And what of our children? Daniel, now 18, was always resistant to organized religion, but during the past year he's started to attend religious services. Austin, 12, accepted that we wouldn't be visiting the video arcade on Saturdays; instead, he relishes the hiking trips. The family's Sabbath observances have meant the most to 16-year-old Marina; she makes sure she's home for Friday dinner, and her friends have discovered "that cool braided bread" hot from the oven on Friday afternoons.

Most of all, I anticipate my weekly rest day. As the sun goes down each Friday, I take off my wristwatch, and for a night and a day, time stands still.