

The Lord's Day as Our Sabbath Rest

Genesis 2:1-3; Hebrews 4:1-4

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Today is the Lord's Day. And although we are not able to worship with our brothers and sisters in Christ in this place, we must still honor and hallow this Lord's Day.

Why is this day called "the Lord's Day"? In the Scriptures, there is only one mention of "the Lord's Day" when the Apostle John was shown a vision of heaven by the Holy Spirit, "*I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day*" (Rev 1:10). In church history afterwards, the first day of the week became known as "the Lord's Day."¹

What is the significance of the first day of the week? It is the day of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, as all four Gospels attest, "*Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week...*" (see also Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). It was on the day of his resurrection that Christ appeared to His disciples (John 20:19, 26). Even more significant was that the Lord poured out his Spirit on the first day of the week, known today as Pentecost Sunday. This is why Justin Martyr wrote in the second century,

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read... But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples... (First Apology 67).

After Christ's resurrection, Christians started meeting together for worship on the first day of the week. They "broke bread" (Holy Communion) (Acts 20:7) and gathered offerings (1 Cor 16:2) on the first day of the week. Whenever they met, the early church "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*" (Acts 2:42). Since the breaking of bread and the "fellowship" (sharing things with one another) were done on the first day of the week, sitting at the apostles' feet and praying must also have been part of their regular Lord's Day worship assembly. This is exactly how Justin Martyr described their worship service on the Lord's Day:

the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen... And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and

widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need (First Apology 67).

Curiously, Justin Martyr never mentions singing as part of the service.

The Seventh Day: Why No “Evening-Morning”

The evidence is incontrovertible that the old creation Sabbath has been changed from the seventh day to the first day of the week. But the first day of the week not only has earthly significance; more importantly, it has eternal significance. To gain a perspective on this eternal significance, let us go back to the seventh day of the creation narrative,

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation (Gen 2:2-3).

Because God rested on the seventh day, he blessed it and made it a holy day, distinct from all the other six days of the first seven days of the world. This is so important that God made it one of the Ten Commandments for his people Israel (Exod 20:8-11).

How else is the seventh day different from the other six days of creation? While each of the six days was summarized by, *“And there was evening and there was morning...”* the seventh day has no such summary. Why is the seventh day open-ended, which means it continues throughout history and to eternity?

The answer is found in Hebrews 4. Here too, the writer compares God’s seventh-day rest in creation to God’s promise of “rest” to his people. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve enjoyed God’s Sabbath rest so long as they lived in complete obedience. But from the day that they disobeyed, there will be no rest for them and their descendants from their earthly toils if not for God’s gracious redemption. Later, Israel started enjoying their promised physical rest only after Joshua settled them in the Promised Land and kept God’s covenant laws:

Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers... And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers... Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass (John 21:43-45).

All of God’s earthly promises to Abraham were fulfilled. But the writer of Hebrews says that Joshua’s rest was not the complete fulfillment of God’s promise of rest, *“For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on”* (Heb 4:8). Psalm 95:7-11 speaks of this later day after Joshua’s rest – which Hebrews 4:7 calls “Today” – a day of rest that still awaits God’s obedient people, *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”* The Lord warned all those hardhearted Israelites then, and then all unbelievers today, *“Therefore I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest’”* (Psa 95:7; Heb 4:5).

Even today, therefore, we can now enjoy this eternal seventh-day rest. We are to rest one day every seven days from the pain and the “the sweat of our face” to overcome God’s curse on the

ground (Gen 3:17-19). But most importantly, the old creation Sabbath is a foretaste of the new creation eternal Sabbath rest that awaits all those who cease from their righteous works to enter it.

We do not enter the eternal Sabbath based on our own faulty righteous works, but based on the perfect sacrifice and righteous works of Jesus our Great High Priest, through whom we *“receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (Heb 4:14-16). This Jesus exhorts all of us,

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt 11:28-29).

So the Hebrews preacher exhorts all Christians on this day called *“Today,” “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest”* (Heb 4:11). Today and every first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, is a foretaste of the eternal Sabbath that awaits God’s persevering people. Whenever we gather together for worship on this Day, we actually enter the eternal Sabbath rest spiritually by faith. This is why the Hebrews preacher later writes:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant... (Heb 12:22-24).

In worship, as the Apostle John was lifted up heaven *“in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day,”* so also God lifts us up to heaven and brings heaven down to us, where we join together with all the saints in all ages and in all places, and with all the angelic throng in worshipping God our Judge and Jesus our Mediator. In a great festal gathering before a holy and merciful God, we *“worship the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling”*(Psa 2:11). We *“worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness,”* but at the same time *“tremble before him”* (Psa 96:9). Therefore, we do not come to worship flippantly, presumptuously, or casually, as if we are attending an American Idol show, or an NBA game, or a Pacquaio fight.

Therefore, let us always be mindful that the Lord’s Day is holy to the Lord, and that the Lord’s Day worship is a foretaste of our eternal Sabbath rest:

If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth (Isa 58:13-14).