

# The Lord's Day as Our Sabbath Delight and Rest

*Genesis 2:1-3; Isaiah 58:13-14 (text); Hebrews 4:1-4*

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**T**oday is the Lord's Day. The Bible commands believers to remember and honor the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath. But there are many who call themselves Christians who ignore and even deliberately violate this commandment. They only join their church's worship service only when they do not have any other fun things to do on this day. And if they did, they are there halfheartedly, are present physically, but their minds are somewhere else. Many are too tired from Saturday night's parties to participate in any meaningful way.

But the Scriptures are full of God's warnings about violating the holiness of this day. Why is this day called "the Lord's Day"? The term "Lord's Day" is found only in one verse, when the Apostle John was shown a vision of heaven by the Spirit, "*I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day*" (Rev 1:10). Thus, the first day of the week later became known as "the Lord's Day."<sup>1</sup>

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,

Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God... made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead... which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples... (*First Apology* 67).

Ignatius of Antioch, known as a close associate of the apostles, also wrote that Christians "no longer observing the seventh day, but living in the observance of the Lord's day, on which also our life has sprung up again, by Him and by His death" (*To the Magnesians* 9).

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... the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray... bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings... and the people assent, saying Amen... And they... give what each thinks fit... [for] orphans and widows and... all who are in need (*First Apology* 67).

This description fits Acts 2:42 like a glove. The assembly consists of the apostles' teaching, sharing with the poor (fellowship), Lord's Supper, and prayers. Curiously, Justin Martyr never mentions singing as part of the service.

In the first three Commandments of the Decalogue, the LORD tells us that we are to worship God alone, not idols, and to honor his name. The Fourth Commandment is also about honoring him when we honor the Sabbath day to keep it holy (Exod 20:8-11). Our text in Isaiah 58:13-14 tells us that if his people honor and delight in the Sabbath, God will fulfill all his promises to them, especially of rest and nourishment in the Promised Land.

Today, we will meditate on our text, together with Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism on this theme: **"The Lord's Day as Our Sabbath Delight and Rest" in two headings: (1) Delighting in the Sabbath; and (2) Resting on the Sabbath.**

## **Delighting in the Sabbath**

In Isaiah 58, the Lord rebukes the Israelites in performing their rituals in order to manipulate God into giving them what they wanted. Their seeking and delighting in God is all hypocrisy, because they show no evidence of godliness and righteousness. As an example, the Lord convicts their hypocrisy in fasting in verses 3-12, *"Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers"* (verse 3). They fast, but not to help the hungry, the needy, and the oppressed. In fasting, they did as they pleased in hypocrisy, because their false piety did not translate into justice and righteousness towards their neighbors.

In verses 13-14, God turns his attention from false fasting to his people's neglect of his Sabbath command. Instead of *"seeking your own pleasure,"* they are to *"call the Sabbath a delight."* To *"delight"* is to *"incline or bend oneself towards someone or something."* Delighting in the Lord and in his word is a command, so when we delight and take pleasure in him, he in turn is delighted with us. He delights in his people (Psa 16:3), and in our obedience more than sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22). He rescues those in whom he delights (Psa 18:19), and he gives wisdom, knowledge and joy to those who please him (Eccl 2:26).

God is pleased with his people, but there is One who pleases him the most, his only-begotten Son Jesus. At his baptism, he spoke his pleasure as a blessing and anointing that rested upon Jesus' head, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"* (Matt 3:17; see also Matt 17:5). This is because *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"* (Col 1:19).

God had delight in his Son because he is his only-begotten Son, but he also fulfilled all his commands perfectly, including the Fourth Commandment. Jesus delighted in the Sabbath by going regularly to the synagogue worship on the Sabbath, *"as was his custom"* (Luke 4:16). Given opportunity, he taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Matt 4:23; Mark 6:2; Luke 4:31, 13:10). So when the Jews confronted him why he was doing work on the Sabbath – plucking grain and healing people – he stopped them in their tracks by quoting the Fourth Commandment, saying, *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."* And if he is Lord of all, and if the Sabbath is made for all, then he is also *"the Lord even of the Sabbath"* (Mark 2:27).

In principle, there is no difference between the Old Testament seventh-day Sabbath and the New Testament first-day Lord's Day. So if we do not commemorate the new Sabbath as a continuity of the old Sabbath – with a different form and observance – then, we must of necessity abrogate the Fourth Commandment and call the whole the Nine Commandments!

John Calvin taught that there are three reasons why God gave man the Sabbath: first, to picture spiritual rest; second, to preserve the regular assembly of the saints; and third, to provide rest to workers. We will deal with the first reason later. Calvin says that though the Sabbath is but a foreshadow of a principle that was fulfilled with the coming of Christ, the Sabbath was declared as a special day of rest, a day of assembling together to hear God's law and to perform ceremonial sacrifices. Though the outward ceremonies have changed, the internal principle remains for New Testament believers.

If we delight in God's law, including the observance of the new Sabbath, then we “*shall take delight in the LORD*” (verse 14). Paul says that he delights in God's law (Rom 7:22). And if our lives are living, holy sacrifices to God, then we become a delight to God, our worship holy, acceptable and pleasing before him (Rom 12:1-2).

Our text tells us that we are to delight in the Sabbath and honor it as God's holy day. How? By not “*turning back our foot*” from it, and by not “*doing our pleasure on his holy day.*” In the Old Testament commandment, we see that the Sabbath is not merely a day of rest, but always rest that is coupled with a day of solemn assemblies to praise Yahweh, “*Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwelling places*” (Lev 23:3; see also Num 28:25). It is a day of listening to God's Word (2 Kings 4:23). It is a day of praising God, as we see in the heading of Psalm 92, “A Song for the Sabbath,” where the people sang:

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord,  
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;  
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,  
and your faithfulness by night,  
to the music of the lute and the harp,  
to the melody of the lyre.  
For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;  
at the works of your hands I sing for joy (Psa 92:1-4).*

I remember our younger days when our Lord's Day practically started on Saturday evening. We all ironed our clothes and spit-shined our shoes. My mother prepared our meals for Sunday. There was no staying late on Saturday nights, because there were no malls, no computers, no video games, not even late-night parties. Not many people had cars, but today, many Christians have cars – and yes, jeeps, buses, and trains – to go to the church of their choosing, “church shopping.” But many will miss the worship service to go to malls, sports events, family outings, company picnics, or just to sleep in because they stayed late on the previous Saturday night. For many, the Lord's Day is merely a two-hour “gotta-do-it” disruption of their daily pursuit of pleasure.

How different we are from the 17th century Puritans and Pilgrims! They prepared early for Sunday worship. On Saturdays at sunset, a man is assigned to fire a gun, a signal to the children to stop their play and go back to their homes. Not only were clothes and meals prepared on Saturdays; they prepared their hearts, as an author wrote:

For the Puritans the Sabbath began at sunset on Saturday, and no child might play after the sunset gun was heard. When the children reached home, Hope ran to her bed to get Mary Ellen [her doll]. Presently her mother came in and said, "This is the Sabbath now, Hope. You must not play with your doll on the Sabbath." The evening was spent in reading the Bible and learning verses from it.

This is in keeping with the Westminster Confession of Faith 21:8, which says that Christians are to go to the worship service after "due preparation of their hearts and arranging of their common affairs beforehand."

### ***Distorting, no Delighting in, the Sabbath***

But many have distorted the Lord's Day observance. Instead of devoting one day a week to physical rest and spiritual nourishment through worship, they do not cease from regular work. If you work on Sundays only for the purpose of making more money to acquire more and more possessions and do more leisure, then you are distorting the Lord's Day. Amos 8:5 condemns businessmen who can hardly wait for the Sabbath to be over so they can transact their business again, asking, "When will the new moon be past, that we may sell again?" In renewing the covenant, God restated the Fourth Commandment with reference to resting the workers. They were to cease from using their land, workers and animals, so "that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you," because they too were slaves in Egypt who had no Sabbath rest (Deut 5:14-15).

Many Christians also violate the Sabbath commandment in their pursuit of recreation. In the 1924 Olympics, Eric Liddell, A Scottish Olympic runner, honored the Sabbath by forfeiting his most-favored event, but he won the gold medal in another event. In recent times, Euan Murray, another Scottish, this time a professional rugby player, refused to play on Sundays, but was still rewarded with a good contract. He also affirmed his commitment to the Sabbath, "Jesus said, 'If you love me, keep my commandments,' and there are ten commandments – not nine." Compare them with many athletes who profess to be Christians who do not have any guilt in forfeiting Sunday worship for most of the year because they have to train and play on Sundays. As well, many "regular" evangelicals will not hesitate to absent themselves from Sunday worship to watch a Pacquiao fight, or the Super Bowl, or a beach outing.

Is it only the worship service and rest from their regular work that Christians must fulfill on the Lord's Day? Again, the Westminster Confession is helpful, saying that we are to "devote the whole time to the public and private exercises of God's worship and to the duties of necessity and mercy." The whole day must be devoted to worshipping God and studying and meditating on his Word. This is why when we have the resources, we will add a second service to our Lord's Day, similar to the Old Testament's morning and evening sacrifice (Psa 92:2).

Attending two services is a novel idea for most evangelicals today. Worse, in going to just one service, many arrive late, thinking that the sermon is the only important portion of the service. This is perhaps the result of the “sing-a-lot, pray-a-little, here-comes-the-host” format of most services. But if you were late for worship and miss everything before the sermon, then you missed so much! You missed God’s trumpet call to worship and praising him in song and prayer. You missed hearing God’s law reminding you of your sinfulness and being assured that you are now righteous before God because of Christ’s sacrifice. You missed giving thanks to God in Scripture, song and prayer for your redemption. You missed hearing and reciting what it is that the universal church believe as God’s people. And you missed praying to God together with all the assembled saints for all the needs of God’s people, the nation, and the world.

To delight in the Lord's Day is to praise him in song, prayers and Scriptures, hearing and meditating on his Word, and in sharing our resources with the needy. And when we go home, we continue our worship, reflection and prayers until the Lord's Day evening is over. We can even gather together with other families for further Bible study. There are so many excellent ways to keep the Sabbath holy and a delight in the Lord. So when we go out into the world for the rest of the week, we have been refreshed and strengthened to take on its desires, temptations and enmity.

Not only are we to devote the whole day to worship and to the Word. We are to perform “duties of mercy,” such as visiting the sick, the elderly, those who need to be comforted and counseled, and even those who are absent from the Lord's Day worship. This is part and parcel of the church as a communion of saints building up and encouraging one another in Christ.

What about “duties of necessity”? Here, there is another distortion, seen in the example of the legalistic Pharisees. On the Sabbath, when they saw Jesus healing the sick, or his disciples plucking grain, or even the lame man who was healed picking up his bed and carrying it away, they condemned him as violating the Fourth Commandment. The Sabbath commandment is a prohibition of performing regular, daily work, not works of “necessity.”

What then are “duties of necessity”? Can you conceive of our society where hospitals and pharmacies are closed on Sundays, and no police, firemen, and emergency workers are on duty? Or an army being attacked by the enemy on a Sunday not defending itself? Remember the march around Jericho? On each of the first six days, they marched around the city walls once. But on the seventh day, the Sabbath, they marched seven times around the city, and after a shout, God destroyed the walls of Jericho. Was God violating his own Sabbath command? Surely, there are exceptions to the command to rest from all regular, daily, physical labor.

We have mentioned two of the three reasons set down by Calvin why God instituted the Sabbath for man: first, to preserve the regular assembly of the saints; and second, to give rest to workers. There is a third reason: to picture or foreshadow spiritual rest.

## **Resting on the Sabbath**

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.

## *The Seventh Day: Why No “Evening-Morning”*

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). But let us remember that the word Sabbath does not mean “seventh.” Rather, it means “to cease,” so it implies “rest from work.”

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 (Josh 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).

The Apostle John was lifted up heaven "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." So also, in our worship today, 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, and with Jesus our Mediator. It is a great festal and reverential gathering of God's people who delight in the new Sabbath worship before a holy and merciful God, who in turn takes delight in his people.

## Conclusion

Therefore, beloved friends, 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. We are to delight in the Lord by delighting in the Sabbath.

Again, a description of the Puritans' and Pilgrims' Lord's Day observance is a sobering reminder to us who have all the comforts and conveniences available to us when we come to our worship assembly on the Lord's Day:

A big drum, beaten on the steps of the meetinghouse, told the people it was time to come together. At the sound of the drum... from every house in the village came men, women, and children. They were always ready when the drum began to beat. It was not the custom to be late to meeting and as for staying away one had to be very ill indeed to do that.

The church was very cold, for there was no fire... Only a very few people had hymn books. The minister read two lines of the hymn and they all sang them to some well-known tune. Then he read two more lines, and all sang them, and so on until they had sung all the verses... When the [hour]glass had been turned three times, the minister closed the service... Often there was another service in the afternoon. At sunset the Puritan Sabbath ended.

The Puritans were a great example, but our supreme example is Jesus, who took great delight in honoring and obeying his father (John 5:30; 8:29). That which delights Jesus should be our delight as well. We are to make it our all-consuming desire to please him (2 Col 5:9; 1 Thess 2:4; 4:1; 1 John 3:22).