

Leviticus 23
Psalm 95
Hebrews 4

“The Christian Sabbath”

August 29, 2021

Psalm 95 reflects on the connection between creation and rest – and between space and time.
Verses 1-2 call us to sing to LORD and make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

As we take these words on our lips, we are doing precisely what the Psalm calls us to do!
Verses 3-5 then say *why* we should come into his presence with thanksgiving:
it is because the LORD is a great God, and a great king above all gods.
He formed the seas and the dry land and all creation is in his hand.

And so verses 6-7 reiterate the call to “worship and bow down” before the LORD our Maker.
For he *is* our God –
and when we sing these words, we declare that we *are* the people of his pasture.

And if this is the case –
if he is our God, and we are his people –
then the warning of verses 8-11 is a needful reminder:
Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts
the way that your fathers hardened their hearts in the rebellion.

Sing Psalm 95
Read Hebrews 4

When we looked at the third commandment,
we saw that anything that reveals God participates in his holiness.

Perhaps you are now beginning to see that *all sin* is a violation of the first three commandments.
All other sin begins with valuing *something else* more than we value God.
So every sin begins with having some other god besides God.
And all other sin begins with *worshipping* some other god –
bowing down to something else (and thus violating the second commandment).
And all other sin then misuses something that reveals God.
God reveals himself in nature, in other people, and in scripture –
but all sin misuses nature, other people, and scripture,
and so every sin involves taking God’s name in vain.

The fourth commandment likewise has an all-encompassing aspect.

Q. 57. *Which is the fourth commandment?*

A. The fourth commandment is, Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor, and do all your work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord your God: in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

The fourth commandment involves our use of time.

We usually focus on the seventh day, but the commandment includes the first six as well!
We are commanded to labor – to work for six days.

If we are lazy or foolish in our employments on the six days,
then we break this commandment just as much as if we work on the seventh.

As we saw last time, we shouldn't confuse "work" with "what you get paid to do."

Your "work" involves the whole of your "six days" employments.

Think about the pattern that God gave us.

God created all things in six days.

He then rested from his work of creation.

So all the stuff that God did during the creation week
is what he rested from on the seventh day.

Even so, your work is anything that you do in fulfillment of God's call
to be stewards of the created order.

There are three basic points in the fourth commandment:

- 1) six days are for your labor to reflect God's labor;
one day is for your rest to reflect God's rest ["six days shall you labor..."]
- 2) This day is not merely for you to rest--it is a day where you give rest to others as well
["you and your son and your daughter..."]
- 3) This is a day for remembering ["remember the sabbath day"]

Today I would like for us to reflect on the idea of the Lord's Day as the "Christian Sabbath."

And right up front, I would like to clear up one common misunderstanding.

You don't find the apostles or early Fathers using the phrase "Christian Sabbath"
for a very simple reason –

"*shabbat*" means "seventh" –

And so people who were still familiar with Jewish usage
would not generally refer to the Lord's Day as the Christian Seventh Day,
because the whole point of the Lord's Day is that it is the *Eighth Day!*

You'll find *lots* of references to Christians gathering on the Eighth Day (or the First Day).

So some would prefer not to use the phrase "Christian Sabbath."

And that's fine –

so long as you recognize that the Lord's Day is a Christian feast day.

The Roman Senator Cicero – writing a generation before the birth of Christ –

explained that in the Roman world, a feast day was a day

when the courts were closed,

ordinary work should not be done,

servants were to be given the day off,

and religious rituals were to be performed.

In other words, a Roman feast day looked an awful lot like a Jewish Sabbath.

So when the early Christians talked about the Lord's Day as their feast day,
that means that they did not do ordinary work – they gave rest to their servants –
and they engaged in religious worship.

If you think about it – this is pretty much exactly how our Larger Catechism says it:

Q. 117. *How is the sabbath or the Lord's day to be sanctified?*

A. The sabbath or Lord's day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God's worship: and, to that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.

And that's why *later* in church history, the shorthand term was used –
“Christian Sabbath.”

So whether you want to call it “Christian Sabbath” or not –
if Sunday was the day when the apostles gathered for worship –
then it was also their “feast day” – their day for rest and for giving rest to others!

You see – it's not just ancient Jews who would be horrified at the American disregard
for communal rest and worship!

Ancient Greeks – ancient Romans – pretty much most of human history! –
would find our crazy 24/7 culture to be utterly bizarre!

When do you ever rest?

When do you give rest to others?

Of course – the same impulse that has created the workaholic culture –
has also created the entertainment culture –
where we demand to be entertained 24/7!

Entertainment used to require live human beings to perform.

Now they can record themselves – which means that their services are available 24/7!

But God says that on the Sabbath day, not only should *we* rest –
but also our servants – and even our animals!

The idea of *sabbath* as a corporate, communal day of feasting, worshiping, resting,

and giving rest –
is at the heart of what it means to be human –
because we are made in the image of the God who made all things.

And that's where we start today in looking at the Sabbath as a Creation ordinance.

1. The Sabbath as Creation Ordinance (Exodus 20:8-11)

The first thing we need to see is that the Sabbath was not simply a Mosaic institution.

The Sabbath goes all the way back to creation.

Why is this important?

Well, with most of the law –

indeed, with the Ten Commandments as a whole –
the Exodus is given as the reason for Israel's obedience.

'I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt
out of the house of bondage...'

But the reason for the fourth commandment goes all the way back to creation.

God created humanity in his own image.

And part of that image is to be reflected in how we work and rest.

In the same way that God worked for six days, and rested on the seventh,
so also *we* are to work for six days, and rest on the seventh.

Some people get hung up on the question of the length and nature of the creation days.

Were they 24-hour days?

I don't know.

I don't know how to tell time without the sun, moon, and stars,
and *they* weren't created until the fourth day.

The text does not specify how long the days were,
it just says that these were God's creation days.

They were the original six days.

That's why I prefer the analogical day view.

God's days were the "archetypal" days –

they are the pattern and plan which now structure our time.

Our week is patterned after the divine week.

And God made us in such a way that we function properly
with six days of work and one day of rest.

I once read an article by a secular Jew
who had rejected everything else from his Jewish heritage,
but he prized the Sabbath as a day of rest and refreshment
and was trying to convince Gentiles to do the same!

I think we too often think of "sabbatarianism" as a list of rules and restrictions –

(and it can become that) –
but it only becomes that when we lose sight of the whole point of Sabbath.

The problem starts in one of two ways:

The first is when we begin to think that what *really* matters is our work –
and so therefore we cannot “afford” to take a whole day off every week.
This is a form of idolatry, where we do not love God with all our heart,
and so we take his name in vain,
by using his holy day for our own advancement – our own kingdom.
The other way things go wrong is when we get lazy and selfish in our six-day labors,
and so we find that we “have to” work on the seventh day in order to keep up.
This is really just a different form of the first –
and no less idolatrous and vain.

Either way, we are loving something else more than we love the LORD our God.

Let me put it this way,
if *God himself* worked for six days and rested on the seventh,
wouldn't that (all by itself, without any commandment)
suggest that those created in his image should do likewise?

But scripture says quite a bit about the Sabbath.
And much of that focuses on the Sabbath as a *redemptive* ordinance.

2. The Sabbath as Redemption Ordinance (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

Was the Sabbath practiced before the time of Moses.

Did Noah or Abraham observe the Sabbath day?
Maybe – but we simply don't know.

What we *do* know is that the Sabbath became a prominent part of the Mosaic Covenant.

Exodus 20 and Exodus 31 root the Sabbath commandment in creation,
but Deuteronomy 5 does not.

Deuteronomy 5 provides the “second” giving of the ten commandments –
this time when Moses is preaching on the plains of Moab,
just before Israel enters the promised land.

There are only a couple minor differences between Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Except for this one major difference on the fourth commandment:

After emphasizing the part about you and your household – even your animals –
must rest, Moses says,

“that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,

and the LORD your God brought you out from there
with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

In Exodus the focus is on the fact that since God rested on the seventh day,
therefore we must rest as well.

In Deuteronomy the focus is on your servants.

You must give *them* rest –
because God gave *you* rest in delivering you from Egypt.

Next week we'll explore this in more detail,
but for today we need to see that Moses shifts the attention
from Sabbath as a creation ordinance
to Sabbath as a redemptive ordinance.

It's not just that God created you in his image – therefore you should rest on the seventh day –
but also God has redeemed you from bondage and oppression in Egypt,
and therefore you should give rest to those under your care.

3. The Importance of the Eighth Day (Lev 23 and Heb 4)

Our Larger Catechism asks,

Q. 116. *What is required in the fourth commandment?*

A. The fourth commandment requires of all men the sanctifying or keeping holy to God such set times as he has appointed in his word, expressly one whole day in seven; which was the seventh from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, and the first day of the week ever since, and so to continue to the end of the world; which is the Christian sabbath, and in the New Testament called *The Lord's Day*.

The catechism reminds us that while the Sabbath commandment focuses on the 7th day,
the fourth commandment has broader applications.

After all, it speaks of “such set times” – not just a single time.

How should we order time?

How do we “keep holy to God such set times as he has appointed in his word”?

Last time we saw how Deuteronomy 15-16 applied the sabbath principle to the seventh year.

But today I'd like for us to see how Moses also understood the *eighth-day* principle.

a. The Sabbath and the Feasts (Lev 23)

In the Old Testament, the Sabbath day was not primarily a day of worship.

It was *primarily* a day of rest.

But Leviticus 23:3 said that the people of God should gather together every Sabbath:

*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.

A holy convocation is a public assembly – a gathering.
What were they supposed to do in these gatherings in all their towns and villages?
We don't really know much about them.
It is quite likely that Israel never did much with this –
though I'm sure that faithful Israelites
would speak together about their God on the Sabbath!

But Leviticus 23 says a lot about other feast days.
The fourteenth day of the first month is Passover.
And then from the 15th to the 22nd is the Feast of Unleavened Bread.
Sacred assemblies – holy convocations – are held
on the first day and the seventh day of the Feast.

(and God says that you shall not do any ordinary work on those days).

But then verse 11 says that on the day *after* the Sabbath,
the firstfruits shall be presented to the LORD.
What is the day after the Sabbath?
Sunday – the first day of the week!
What is the purpose of this “feast of firstfruits”?
“You shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day,
until you have brought the offering of your God.”
When the barley harvest begins –
when the new creation arrives –
you shall worship the Lord on the first day of the week!

There is a day beyond the Sabbath...

And, as if to drive that point home, the Feast of Weeks – the Feast of Pentecost –
counts *seven Sabbaths* – fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath.
So the Feast of Pentecost is *always* on a Sunday!

If you count the time from Egypt to Sinai –
the giving of the Law happened at Pentecost!
Think about it!
The giving of the Law – and the coming of the Holy Spirit –
both happened on Pentecost Sunday!

The final feast – the Feast of Booths – is called a seven day feast,
but the holy convocations are held on the first day and the eighth day of the feast.
The first day is a day of solemn rest – and the eighth day is a day of solemn rest.

The days when Israel held sacred assemblies – corporate worship services –
are either the first day of the week (Sunday)

or the first or eighth day of the feast.
Only at Passover is there a seventh-day holy convocation –
but Passover isn't *really* over until Pentecost –
because you calculate Pentecost based on Passover.

Passover ends with Israel in Egypt –
Passover is not really complete until you get to Mt. Sinai.
(After all, God said to Pharaoh –
“Israel is my son, my firstborn – let my son go, that he may worship me” –
and where did Israel first worship God?
At Mt. Sinai – when the Ten Commandments were first given!)

So the public worship of Israel was not primarily a “seventh-day” thing –
but a first day/eighth day thing.
But of course, as Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16 make clear –
the Sabbath principle is at the heart of all the feasts:
these are days for rest (setting aside ordinary work),
these are days for giving rest to others,
and these are days for worship – remembering.

So how should we as Christians think about the Sabbath?
[Please turn back to Hebrews 4]

b. The Sabbath Principle in the Church (Hebrews 4)

Our catechism asks:

Q. 59. *Which day of the seven has God appointed to be the weekly sabbath?*

A. From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, God appointed the seventh day of the week to be the weekly sabbath; and the first day of the week ever since, to continue to the end of the world, which is the Christian sabbath.

If the Sabbath is an eternal sign between God and Israel,
then we should not be surprised to see some continuity between the OT and NT sign,
because all of the signs of the OT point us to Christ,
and through him to NT signs as well.

But there is a problem with the Sabbath.

The Sabbath keeps coming around every week.
Every week we have a sign of God's rest.
Every week we are reminded that God entered his rest on the seventh day.
Every week we also work for six days,
and then rest from our labors on the seventh.
But then comes Sunday morning (remember that the Jews celebrated Saturday!)
For the Jews, the first day of the week dawns,
and we are no closer to that eschatological rest than we were last week.
The seventh day, for the Jew, is an ever-recurring reminder

that there must be another day.

And that is the point of Hebrews 4.

Hebrews 3-4 is an extended commentary on Psalm 95,
which speaks of the need for the people of God to heed God's voice "today,"
lest they fail to enter God's rest.

God calls us to enter his rest—to believe his promises, and walk in his ways.

(Read 4:4-11)

⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." ⁵ And again in this passage he said,

"They shall not enter my rest."

⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

*"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts."*

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

God entered his rest on the seventh day of creation.

The image is rather simple.

Genesis tells us that God created the heavens and earth in the space of six days.
Each day begins and ends with "and there was evening and there was morning,
an "Nth" day."

But after the seventh day, there is no such statement.

Hebrews takes the silence of Genesis 2 as suggestive.

The reason why Genesis never speaks of the "end" of the seventh day,
is because the seventh day has not ended.

God's work was a six-day work,
but his rest is never-ending.

And when God promised Adam an inheritance of life,
he was calling Adam to enter into his rest.

The whole history of redemption can be seen focused around this idea of rest.

Israel was called as God's firstborn son to enter his rest.

But at Kadesh, in Numbers 14,
the son refused to heed his Father.

He refused to enter God's rest,
and so God swore in his wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."

In other words,

Israel has repeated the sin of Adam.

God promised Abraham that through his seed all the nations would be blessed,
but it will not be through the wilderness generation!

The first generation of Israel repeats the sin of the first generation of Adam.

It is not the first Adam—it is not the first Israel—nor is it the first Joshua, or the first David,
who will enter God's rest.

When Adam failed to enter God's seventh day rest,

that was the moment that created the necessity of another day.

If man was going to enter God's rest, there must be another day—beyond the seventh day.

There must be a new "day"—an eighth day, as it were, when man can enter God's rest.

Hebrews says that if Joshua had brought about that day of rest,

then David would never have spoken of another day.

And that new day has come in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ "Today" has dawned.

And because this final "Today" has come in Christ,

therefore "there remains a Sabbath-rest (or Sabbath-celebration) for the people of God,
for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works
as God did from his."

God entered his rest (ceased from his creational work) on the seventh day.

We enter that rest (ceasing from our creational work) on our Sabbath-rest.

Some have tried to say that we are living in the eschatological Sabbath,

and that we have entered God's rest in Christ.

And there is a sense in which that is true.

But that is NOT what Hebrews says.

Hebrews says that we must still "strive to enter that rest."

In other words,

we have not *yet* entered God's rest.

Yes, Jesus (our Joshua) has entered God's rest.

You, however, are still at the point of decision at Kadesh in the wilderness.

Will you believe God's promises in Jesus Christ?

Or will you rebel and perish in the wilderness?

Hebrews does not explicitly say that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath.

But at the same time, the seventh day, for Hebrews, is insufficient.

There must be another day.

And given the fact that the book of Acts speaks of the regular gathering of the people of God on the first day of the week for worship, it is easy to see a sort of argument from analogy here.

Later on in Hebrews, he will portray the corporate worship of the church as participating in the heavenly worship (Heb 12).
Even though we have not yet entered our rest,
we have a foretaste of it in our worship.
When you hear the message proclaimed,
and you respond to it with faith,
you are striving to enter your rest.

Hebrews uses the weekly Sabbath-celebration as a picture of the future.
The attempt to eliminate any weekly Sabbath has a gnostic flavor.
If the sabbath-celebration is entirely future,
then how do you know that it is going to happen?
The weekly sabbath-celebration which we celebrate every Sunday
is a sure sign to the church that we are still “on the way.”
We are the eschatological community—we are those who live in anticipation
of that final sabbath-rest.

And so our weekly sabbath-rest functions as a sign,
reminding us week-by-week that we are still walking by faith.

Conclusion: Entering God’s Rest

I want to keep our eyes on the joy of this day.
In a world where stress is the order of the day,
God commands you to rest.
In the midst of the miseries of this life,
God calls you to rejoice in his gracious provision.

Remember the Sabbath.
Remember how God created all things in the space of six days,
and how he rested on the seventh day,
blessing that day and setting it apart for you to rest and worship him.
Remember how God sent his only begotten Son
to die on the cross, and rest in the grave for that final Sabbath,
arising from the dead on the First Day of the New Creation –
giving rest *to you!*
Remember how God sent his Holy Spirit on the first day of the week,
that first Pentecost Sunday, in order to give us new life.

Sure, I can make some suggestions for your family:
don’t stay up late Saturday night;
spend Saturday evening in family worship, preparing for the Lord’s Day;

prepare whatever you can on Saturday evening, so Sunday morning isn't rushed.

But best of all:

Remember the Sabbath.

Remember that glorious eschatological rest that awaits us in Christ!

Remember that each Sunday you get a brief foretaste of that glory,

as you are called to set aside the cares of the week,

turn away from your self-centered focus,

and spend the day simply and solely in the service of your creator and redeemer.