

The Goal of Creation: the Sabbath (Gen. 2:1-3)

I. *The Uniqueness of the Sabbath*

- A. **It is without parallel in the other days of creation.** We are prone to overlook the importance of the seventh day because of our chapter divisions but it is properly the conclusion of the creation narrative. Yet the Sabbath is unique among the days of creation. This is seen in that the Sabbath has no counterpart, unlike the other days, in that there is no repetition of the evening and morning formula, and in that the day is focused, not upon the creation but on God. The six days have formed and filled the creation that was originally formless and void, building up to its completion. With the work of creation complete, God rests and sanctifies (makes holy) the seventh day as the intended goal for His creation.
- B. **It is holy.** Another unique aspect of the Sabbath is that it is the only thing called “holy” in all of Genesis. That which is holy is set apart for the worship of God; holy things are not to be used for other purposes. On the Sabbath God rests from all His earthly works and refreshes Himself, not in the things of the creation but in Himself. So, likewise, those made in the image of God are to follow His example, setting aside their earthly works, recreations, and cares in order to devote and refresh themselves in God.

II. *The Continuing Relevance of the Sabbath in the OT*

A. **The basis of the Sabbath in the law**

1. **Creation (Ex. 20:8-11).** The command to observe the Sabbath is tied to creation. As we see in Gen. 2, it has always been in force, from the dawn of creation and even before the fall; the Sabbath is not something that was added because of sin. Because God rested on the Sabbath day, so humanity too is to rest on the Sabbath day.
2. **Redemption (Deut. 5:12-15).** The command to observe the Sabbath is also tied to God’s great act of redemption in the OT, the Exodus. God’s salvation is freedom from His people’s enslavement to the powers of the world so that they would be uniquely His. Because Israel belonged to the Lord, they had to keep the Sabbath.

B. **What the Sabbath was for**

1. **Negatively: not for our own works or pleasures (Isa. 58:13-14).** The prohibition against work in the Sabbath commands is obvious and found everywhere the Sabbath is mentioned. However, as Isaiah makes clear, God’s people were not only to refrain from work but also from their own pleasure on the Sabbath. Rather than in their own pleasures, they were to find pleasure in the Lord, and He would sustain them. The Sabbath was designed to call God’s people to set aside the things they normally did so that they could reorient themselves around the Lord, learning that it is not their work that sustains them but the Lord.
2. **Positively: for God’s people to worship God together (Lev. 23:1-3).** The Sabbath was to be a holy convocation. We’ve already seen that for something to be holy was for it to be set apart for the worship of God, but we also see that it is to be the people coming together to worship. Leviticus 23 teaches this purpose very powerfully because the Sabbath is listed as the first and primary holy convocation and then the rest of the holy days on Israel’s calendar are designated as special Sabbaths, meaning that they were to follow the pattern of the Sabbath in being set apart for the people to come together and worship God according to His command.

III. *The Place of the Sabbath in the Christian Life*

A. **Does Christ bring an end to the Sabbath?**

1. **Sabbath made for man (Mark 2:27-28).** Many Christians see this passage as teaching that Christ sees no need for any restrictions on the Sabbath but that we are free to do what we want with it. However, He rather means that the Sabbath is made for man's highest good, namely His communion with God. In this passage, the disciples broke no part of God's law, only of the tradition of the Pharisees, and they were actually fulfilling the purpose of the day in their communion with and service to God in the flesh. Just as Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (**Matt. 5:17**), so He does not come to take away from the Sabbath command but to show us its fulness.
2. **Paul's exhortations concerning "Sabbaths" (Col. 2:16-17; Gal. 4:8-11).** Many Christians believe that Paul's directions concerning holy days means that Christians have no need to observe the Sabbath. However, that is a misreading of these passages. They do not speak of the weekly Sabbath but rather the additional Sabbaths that were part of the Hebrew festival calendar. We can understand this because everything else Paul mentions in those passages is tied to the Hebrew ceremonial holy days and because Paul is arguing for the doing away of those things that separate Jews from Gentiles but, as we have seen, the Sabbath was not given only for the Jews but for all people from the beginning of creation.
3. **The eternal Sabbath day (Heb. 4:4-10).** Some Christians argue that we are not to observe the weekly Sabbath any longer but are to look forward to the eternal Sabbath that awaits us. It is true that the weekly Sabbath points to the everlasting rest that we will enjoy in Christ. However, this should not cause us to disregard to weekly Sabbath but to observe it with greater joy and hope for the significance of an eternal Sabbath depends on us knowing and experiencing a temporal Sabbath that points us to that greater reality.
4. **Is it possible to keep the Sabbath on Sunday?** Some Christians think that anyone who argues in favor of the Sabbath being something that continues for Christians has to hold to the Saturday Sabbath because that was when God instituted it at creation and in the law (**Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14**). However, reading the Scriptures in light of the theology of the Sabbath that we have already seen demonstrates that, after the Resurrection, Sunday has become the Sabbath. First, the purpose of the Sabbath is for God's people to meet with each other and with God for worship and every time we are told of the day when Christ meets with the disciples after the resurrection it is the first day of the week (**Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1, 13, 33; John 20:1, 19, 26**). The first day is also the day that we see the early church under the teaching of the apostles meet for worship (**Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2**) and came to be known as the Lord's Day, which was the day in which John was in the Spirit to worship when Christ met with him to give him the vision of Revelation (**Rev. 1:10**). Second, as we saw before, the observance of the Sabbath is tied to God's great acts of redemption and the greatest of those acts is the resurrection on the first day of the week. Third, we also saw that observance of the Sabbath is tied to the work of creation and the resurrection of Christ on the first day is the inauguration of the new creation. Therefore, in light of the example of the early church, God's own reasons for why we are to observe the Sabbath, and the purpose of the Sabbath for worship as applied by Christ after the resurrection, the church is right to understand that the Sabbath is Sunday.

B. How Christians should keep the Sabbath today**1. WSC Q. 60. How is the sabbath to be sanctified?**

A. The sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.

2. Practical conclusions

- a. The Sabbath is not about sitting idly and doing nothing, but about giving all that we are to God's worship together with His people. Therefore, we should seek to occupy ourselves with the means of grace and with Christian fellowship.
- b. The question we should be asking about activities on the Sabbath is not, "can I do this?" but rather, "how do I best give myself to the worship of God today?" It is not a time for our recreation but for turning our hearts and minds to the Lord. Our efforts on the Sabbath should be focused positively on how we can worship God as He has commanded.
- c. We should not be working at our places of employment on the Sabbath unless it falls under the categories of works of necessity or mercy (e.g. law enforcement, medical care, military service). We also should not cause others to work.
- d. Disciplining children to observe the Sabbath is difficult and will take time, as it does with all of God's commands. We should seek to train them and teach them how the day is set apart, but it doesn't mean they have to sit still and read books all day. Children need outlets for their energy so that they can be in a right frame of mind to worship. Seeing to their needs so that they are not disruptions to themselves or others in worship does not violate the Sabbath but rather is a means of keeping it. However, it is important to guard against enforcing no discipline on a child's time and so defeat the purpose for their Sabbath activities to help them worship.
- e. The Sabbath is about resting and finding your joy in the Lord. It is a celebratory feast day for God's people! God has ordained it to be the best and most joyous of days of the week. If we approach the day with a sense of drudgery or apathy then we have missed God's purpose for the day and likely have lost much of the joy of our salvation in the Christian life.