

A Day for Delight By David Feddes

Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work. (Exodus 20:9-10)

Have you ever wondered why a week is exactly seven days long? Why isn't it shorter or longer? Why not a four-day week? Why not a twenty-day week? Why seven? And given that we do have a seven-day week, why does that set the rhythm of work and rest? Why have time away from work weekly, instead of only monthly or yearly or not at all? These questions are answered in Genesis, as are so many other questions about the origins of things. In Genesis, the Bible says that God spent six days creating the universe and every kind of creature. Then Scripture says,

By the seventh day, God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done (2:2-3).

The seven-day week goes all the way back to the first week of history, and the day of rest is the Creator's own idea. What does it mean to say God rested? Did he take a nap? No, God doesn't "slumber or sleep" (Psalm 121:4). He never needs a break to regain his energy. God has infinite energy and power. "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary" (Isaiah 40:28). Whatever the Creator's reason for resting, it's not that he was exhausted and needed to recover.

Also, God's rest did not mean God stopped doing anything at all and left the world on its own. Without God upholding it each moment, the world would immediately collapse. God never stops watching over his creatures and maintaining the world, but God did rest "from all the work of *creating*." God's creative work involved making brand new kinds of things that never before existed. By the end of day six, God had completed that creative work. The universe was richly furnished, fully functional. Creatures could flourish and multiply within the order God had set up, without any new miracles. At that point, while God kept sustaining all things, he rested from his work of creating.

Why did God do it this way? As Almighty God, he could have created everything in six seconds, but he took six days. He could have finished creating without setting aside a special day, but he rested on the seventh day, blessed it, and made it holy. Why? God did this, not just for his own benefit, but for the benefit of people whom he made in his image and wanted to pattern after himself. In the Ten Commandments, God told the people of Israel to follow the pattern he himself had set:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

Attacking God's Day

Sad to say, many people attack God's day of blessing. This happens at two levels: intellectual and practical. At an intellectual level, many reject the statement that God created everything in six days because they think science has proven otherwise. At a practical level, people do their own thing and don't set aside one day in seven for rest and worship.

The intellectual attack assumes that people are smarter than God. Continually changing theories are taken more seriously than the Bible. Some people think science has proven beyond doubt that creatures gradually evolved over millions of years, so they think the Bible is just plain wrong when it says God made the universe and all the basic kinds of creatures in a period of six days. Others, who still believe in the Creator, don't say flatly that the Bible is wrong; they just insist that the Bible can't really *mean* six days when it says six days and that each creation "day" lasted millions or billions of years.

Such thinking has various problems. One problem is assuming that the origin of things can be explained by projecting current processes into the distant past. But God's current patterns of sustaining and maintaining his world are very different from God's creative activity in producing brand new kinds of things in the six days of creation. Also, the curse of sin has changed the world from what it once was (not to mention the fact that sin has also distorted our powers of observation and reasoning). So it's wrong to think that any supposedly scientific theory of origins in which fallible humans project the present into the past is more accurate than God's infallible account of creation.

Another problem for those who deny creation in six days is that our workweek is patterned on the Creator's workweek. If six days were actually billions of years, we'd have to work for billions of years before it was time to rest. We'd never make it! So let's just accept what God says in the Bible.

And let's not just accept what God says; let's act on it. Once we've dealt with the intellectual, we also need to deal with the practical. The practical attack on God's day for delight assumes that our time is our own, to use as we choose. Instead of a day set apart for rest, renewal and fellowship with God, we cram the Lord's Day with shopping and selling, factory work, office work, farm work, schoolwork, housework, and yard work. If we do take a break from work, we may be so busy scurrying to ball games or golf courses that we have no time for church, no time for worshiping God, no time for prayer and Scripture, no time for fellowship with God's people. Nobody, not even God, is going to tell us what to do with *our* time.

The Sabbath commandment is violated perhaps more than any of the Ten Commandments. But if you violate God's day for delight, you violate yourself. You can't reject God's pattern without offending God and damaging yourself. When you cram life with your own pursuits 24 hours a day, seven days a week, you suffer, and your relationship to God suffers. You work and worry, plan and perspire your way through each day, without any special pause to rejoice in God and refresh your soul and body. Life becomes a burden instead of a blessing.

Enjoying God's Day

Take at least one day in seven to relax and rejoice. If you don't have the time, then make time. If you're too busy for God, you're too busy. Make time for delight. Make

time for God. Don't do it because I say so. Do it because God says so. The seven-day week, with one day set apart, is the Creator's own pattern, woven into the world's fabric from the beginning. It's also in the Ten Commandments, literally written in stone by God himself.

One reason God set aside this day of delight was to relish his creation. Even the Creator himself didn't just work, work, work. During the six days of creation, says Genesis, God paused and took stock repeatedly, and saw that his accomplishments were good. That's a pattern for our work too: do it well, and enjoy a sense of accomplishment as we do it. Work is good, but there comes a time to finish the week's work and stop. The Bible says, "God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work." That's what our Creator did, and that's what he tells us to do.

God made a vast variety of delightful things for his own enjoyment and for the enjoyment of his people. Why should he work to create so many good things if nobody ever takes the time to appreciate and enjoy them? And why should you work day in and day out if you never relax and relish the fruit of your work? Enjoy God's good creation, as the Creator himself did.

Another reason for weekly rest, in addition to enjoying creation, is to enjoy the freedom of salvation. In Deuteronomy 5:15, after commanding the Israelites to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy and resting, God said, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for many years, without a vacation or a day off. Then God rescued them and set them free from slavery. But why rescue them if they were just going to go back to slaving away 24 hours a day, seven days a week? Why rescue them at all if they were just going to be enslaved by their own schedules rather than by the Egyptians? God wanted to make sure his people took a day to enjoy their freedom and to remember who it was who had set them free.

God also wanted to make sure the Israelites didn't treat other people the way the Egyptians had treated them. Part of God's purpose in the Sabbath command is "so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do." God's day of delight is a great equalizer. There's no difference between immigrants and native-born, no difference between bosses and servants, nobody giving orders or following orders. There are only people equally created in God's image, equally set free by God's salvation. Whatever the differences in social status, God dissolved those differences for at least one day each week and showed that those differences didn't count for anything with God. The Sabbath command gave everyone equal opportunity to be renewed and refreshed by the reality that God was Lord of all equally. If people really took this fact seriously on the Sabbath, it would transform the way they treated each other on all the other days (Isaiah 58).

In fact, even the animals were to share the Sabbath blessing. Though not equal to humans, animals were still created by God and are meant to share in the benefits of God's liberation and salvation of humanity. So God insisted that even beasts of labor must have a day to rest and "be refreshed" (Exodus 23:12).

In short, God instituted a special day of blessing so that his people and all creatures could regularly enjoy the fruits of his creation and the freedom of his salvation.

Above all, he wanted them to enjoy *him*, to relish having him as their God and being set apart as his very own.

Lord of the Sabbath

In order to fully enjoy the Lord's Day and honor God, it must be a day of celebration and gladness. Beware of at least two joy-killers that can spoil the Lord's Day.

One joy-killer is to be so wrapped up in daily activities that we see any pause as a bothersome interruption. In the Bible book of Amos, God rebuked merchants who could hardly wait for the Sabbath to be over so that they could get back to selling stuff and making money. Such people saw the Sabbath as nothing more than a waste of time that was hurting their profits. Their obsession with money not only gave them the wrong attitude toward the Lord's Day, it also made them dishonest and willing to cheat their customers (Amos 8:5).

Many merchants today have a similar attitude. In fact, they don't just complain about the Lord's Day; they ignore it entirely and go on with business as usual. Stores are open seven days a week to boost profits. Factories operate around the clock and don't stop even for one day per week. That way the factory will never be idle and will generate as much money as possible. Why shut anything down on the Lord's Day so that everyone can go to church if they wish when there's money to be made? Why worship when there's always more work to be done? A billionaire businessman once said religion is not an efficient use of time.

If you're a business owner or manager, and you're filled with the love of Christ and the Spirit of Christ, you won't drive your employees ruthlessly. You won't demand all their time and energy. Instead, you'll respect the days an employee needs for worship, and you'll make room for an employee's personal and family life as well. Such worship of efficiency is a joy-wrecker. You wreck other people's joy, and you're not helping yourself either. Many people who drive themselves too hard without a day for rest and worship end up stressed out, burned out, divorced, or even dead of a heart attack. Seeing rest and worship as obstacles to business as usual—that's a joy-wrecker.

At the other extreme is another joy-wrecker. While some people ignore the Lord's Day entirely, others fall into the opposite trap and take the Sabbath as an end in itself. They make it into a legalistic pile of do's and don'ts, rather than a day of joy-filled celebration. Throughout the Bible, a holy day was supposed to be a day of special joy and feasting, a day of worship and thanks to God.

Maybe when you think of a holy day, you tend to picture it as a sad, somber, solemn occasion where smiling is prohibited. But the Bible shows that a holy day is a day to enjoy, a day to celebrate, a day to party. In Nehemiah 8, the Bible tells about a memorable holy day. After decades of exile in a foreign land, God's people had returned to their homeland. They had begun to rebuild their city and their spiritual lives. But they still had a lingering sense of failure and guilt. One day they all came together for a sacred assembly. As they listened to the reading and explanation of God's Law, all the people started to weep. They realized how badly they had failed. But their leaders said, "This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing

prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." It was fitting for the people to be saddened by their sins and failures, but God didn't want them to get stuck at that point. He wanted them to rejoice in his forgiveness and in the new future he was opening up for them. When the people realized that, they stopped crying and had a party instead. "Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them" (Nehemiah 8:9-12).

A holy day was supposed to be a day of special joy and feasting in worship and gratitude to God. When Jesus came, he fulfilled the Sabbath and revealed the real spirit of God's day of delight. Jesus came to save sinners and set off celebrations, not to pile on regulations. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Jesus is the source of ultimate rest and refreshment, of which the Sabbath was a sign. Jesus told some legalists, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28).

Since Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath and fulfills the meaning of the Sabbath, Christians are not required to observe all the Sabbath regulations that were directed to Jewish people in Old Testament times. Christians with different understandings of the Sabbath should not judge each other. The Bible says, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you ... with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" (Colossians 2:16). "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5).

A New Day

After Jesus returned to heaven and his gospel spread, the Holy Spirit showed the church that certain ceremonies and feast days no longer needed to be observed. These things had been pointers and hints of God's eternal rest, but the full reality had come in Christ. Some things in the Old Testament law became obsolete because Christ fulfilled them. Still, the pattern of one special day in seven did not become obsolete. This pattern is rooted in the world's first week, when God finished his creative work in six days and rested the seventh. This pattern was fixed long before God gave Israel specific ceremonies and regulations. What's more, this one-day-in-seven pattern is in the Ten Commandments, which remain the defining statement of God's moral law. Every other command among the Ten remains in effect and normative, so it would be strange if this particular command no longer applied.

The command still applies, but the meaning has become richer since Jesus came. In fact, the day has even been moved to a new day because of what Jesus has done. The Old Testament Sabbath was on the seventh day of the week, in honor of God's original creation and also to celebrate being saved from slavery. But with Jesus came a greater salvation and a new creation, so there also came a new day of celebration: the first day of the week instead of the last, Sunday instead of Saturday.

The ultimate salvation and new creation burst into life on a Sunday morning. After dying on the cross to pay for the sins of the world, Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he showed himself to his disciples and helped them to understand many things in a fresh way in the light of his resurrection. The church came to see that the resurrection was a greater event than

even the original creation of the world, and that being rescued from sin and granted eternal life was a greater salvation than when Israel was rescued from Egypt. Jesus' victory over death made the first day of the week the ultimate day of delight. This was confirmed by another huge event that also happened on the first day of the week. Seven weeks after resurrection Sunday, the risen and reigning Christ poured out his Holy Spirit with tremendous power on the church. That day, Pentecost, was also a Sunday.

The change from Saturday to Sunday is evident at various points in the New Testament part of the Bible. According to the apostle John, Jesus' disciples were meeting together on the first day of the week already a week after the resurrection (John 20:19,26). Later, as people in other nations learned about Jesus, they too scheduled their worship gatherings for Sunday. Acts 20:7 says, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." They worshiped and celebrated the Lord's Supper that Sunday, and they also listened to God's Word together. Sunday was also the day for God's people to give offerings. In 1 Corinthians 16:2, the Bible says, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income." Even when circumstances or persecution prevented Christians from worshiping with others, they still observed Sunday as the Lord's Day in personal worship. Jesus' friend John was in exile on a prison island when he wrote in Revelation 1:10, "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit."

The change to Sunday as the Lord's Day is also evident in statements made by Christian leaders in the century after the New Testament was written. For example, Ignatius, one of the foremost Christian leaders in the second century, wrote, "Christians have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in observance of the Lord's Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death." Justin Martyr, another leader who lived in the second century, describes the church's worship "on the day called Sunday."

The Holy Spirit guided the church to make Sunday its day of worship. In this way the church honors the resurrected Christ as the source of salvation and as Lord of the new creation, and it also distinguishes the new and better covenant in Christ from the earlier covenant with Moses. Instead of calling it the Sabbath, God's new day of delight is called "the Lord's Day," after the Lord Jesus.

Keep it Holy

Christians now worship on a new day because of Christ, but the one-in-seven pattern is still embedded in the way we've been created, and remains in the Ten Commandments. God set apart a day as holy, and he commands us to keep it holy. God blessed this day in order to bless us. Each of us needs a day set aside to rest from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the week, a day to rejoice and be refreshed and renewed. We also need a day set aside so that God's people can get together on the same schedule, worship him, hear his Word read and preached, pray and bring offerings, and share in the Lord's Supper.

Now let's get personal. How are you spending your Sundays? Do you take time to rest and enjoy God's goodness? Or do you think everything is going to fall apart if you stop working for a moment? Are you the servant of a gracious God, or the slave of a demanding schedule? Do you make space in your life to enjoy the fruit of creation and

the freedom of salvation? Do you celebrate God's goodness with other people in church each week, and do you extend this into daily, personal prayer and Bible reading? Set aside a full day each week to focus on God and rest in Christ, and the effects will spill over into all your other days and enrich your relationship to the Lord.

Honoring Sunday is a mark of belonging to God. Resting on Sunday helps you to rest in God every day. You depend on your Creator, not just your own efforts, to supply your needs. You receive salvation through faith in Christ's perfect work and not through your own works. Is that true of you? Have you found in Jesus your joy and peace, your delight and security? He says, "Come to me and I will give you rest." How are you responding to that loving invitation? Rest in Christ and let your faith be renewed and refreshed in a special way each Sunday.

For further study:

J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments* p. 109-160 (P&R Publishing, 1996).

"The Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 2, p. 93-103.

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