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### Delight in a Day

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RUSSELL HARLAN, ARTIST

*The Sabbath day is twenty-four hours of heaven  
let down to earth  
to give us a foretaste of eternity.*

By WILBER ALEXANDER

*Professor of Theology, Andrews University*

# DELIGHT in a DAY

**A**MONG the almost innumerable topics to be found discussed in the Scriptures is time. If you look between the pages of your Bible you will find, from Genesis to Revelation, an eternity, with earth-time wedged into it. You will find historical time, the record of events described in days, months, and years. You will find prophetic time, predicting the future for God's people and His universe. You will find personal time, the lifetime of an individual, containing the time between his birth and his death; the time of accountability to the time of the close of human probation; the times of decision that face all men and women. Another reference to the dimension of time begins early and runs throughout the Scriptures. In Genesis 2 we read: "And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:2, 3, R.S.V.).

Man's week contains 168 hours. God has given man six sevenths of this time, 144 hours, to use in work, play, and contemplation. God asks that man give one seventh of that 168-hour week to Him. Surface evidence produces no other reason than God's command-request. He said simply, "This day is holy, it has been sanctified, it has been set apart, keep it holy as the Sabbath day."

It is interesting to read in Scripture how man has reacted to this command-request of God, and the ensuing results. Genesis mentions it only by saying that God blessed the day and hallowed it. The book of Genesis was written as a history of God's people, stating God's commands. There were no express commands as to how the day should be kept, nor is there recorded here any of the problems

connected with Sabbathkeeping. It is assumed that those who lived during the time Genesis was written had no problems in keeping the day. They knew that it was a day for sacred purposes. They knew that their God had asked them to keep it.

Exodus 16 next mentions the Sabbath in the experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness. God provided manna for them and told them to go out six days and collect it. On the sixth day, the preparation, they were to collect enough for the Sabbath also. God was testing their loyalty to Him and His command. Some of the mixed multitude who came from Egypt, some who knew God, and knew that He meant what He said, went out Sabbath morning and found nothing.

In Exodus 20 is the command: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy." The remaining chapters of Exodus contain some of the details of Sabbathkeeping. The people responded, "All that the Lord hath said, we will do." Their history from the time of Sinai to the time of the Captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem reveals how often they failed to keep their promise. After the Captivity Nehemiah found men treading the wine presses and animals laden with grapes and figs coming into the city on Sabbath. When he found men and women bringing fish to market he asked, "What is this evil thing you are doing, profaning the Sabbath?" Amos chided the children of Israel because of their Sabbathkeeping. Many of them sat around watching the clock and questioning, When will the Sabbath be past?

After the Captivity, in the time of Christ, we discover that the children of Israel never returned to idol worship. They had discovered a connection between their falling into idol worship and their keeping of the Sabbath. Thus

they began to add to the Sabbath very scrupulous details to protect themselves from falling again into idolatry, and to make sure they were keeping the full command of God.

By the time Jesus came, so many restrictions had been placed on the day that it was impossible for even the scribes and Pharisees and rulers to keep the day holy. They had some negative rules that endorsed absolute rest from all labor, and positive rules to make the Sabbath a delight. On the positive side they were to wear on the Sabbath the very finest garment they could find. They were to prepare the best food, even if they had to take from charity, or work diligently all week to provide for the Sabbath meal. This was to be a high day, a day of joy.

On the negative side were the specific, burdensome rules—24 chapters of them. The most common labor was that of bearing or carrying something, so a large number of the tractates were related to what would be classed work, as bearing or carrying something. The division line was rather thin. They divided the carrying of a burden into two different acts, lifting up the burden and putting down the burden. Both of these constituted work. To determine how much they could lift or how much they could set down, they established the rule that if the article weighed less than one dried fig it could be carried. The carrying of half a fig from one room to another would be permissible and would not be considered as breaking the Sabbath. If one was reaching his hand into a basket for some fruit and had the fruit in his hand as the Sabbath chimes rang out over the village, he was immediately to drop it, because he would be moving the burden from one locality to another and thereby would be working.

The people were permitted to eat what was already in the oven only if it had formed a crust. On the Sabbath they could heat the oven only with straw so that they would not be tempted to tend the fire or remove the coals. They must never throw hot water over themselves on the Sabbath, for fear that the vapor from their body might cleanse the floor or the walls. The women in Christ's time were forbidden to look in a mirror on the Sabbath lest they

might find a white hair and be tempted to pluck it. If the lady of the house should spill water on her dress she might shake it off, but she must not wring the garment. They could not pluck a blade of grass. Jesus was chided because his disciples plucked some wheat and rubbed it in their hands. This was considered threshing and winnowing, and therefore harvesting.

No bones could be set, no surgery performed on the Sabbath day. If on Thursday or Friday a person had some wadding in his ear for an earache, he might continue to carry this throughout the Sabbath hours. But if the ear started to ache after the Sabbath began, he was not permitted to put anything in the ear, since this would be considered carrying a burden. Trimming the nails was sin, for it constituted work from one hand to the other. People were forbidden to eat an egg laid on the Sabbath, because it should have been laid on a week day. However, if the hen was kept only for fattening, then if she happened to lay an egg it could be eaten.

These rules and regulations confronted Jesus when He came to this earth. He who had created the day, and set it apart for a holy purpose, found that purpose disguised. Jesus spent a great deal of His ministry in helping people understand how the Sabbath should be kept. On the Sabbath He healed the sick. He traveled where necessary. He went into the synagogue and worshiped. He rested on the Sabbath day according to the commandment, for He believed in the day He had established. He often quoted from the Old Testament to help the Israelites understand Sabbathkeeping as it was intended, and that the traditions and legalism they had attached to the day were robbing them of its blessing.

The Sabbath was kept with simplicity by the early church. The women at the tomb prepared for the Sabbath. Yet a few short years after Jesus returned to heaven the significance of the day was changed from one day to the next. In Colonial times men and women were placed in stocks for Sabbath (Sunday) breaking. Ever since, the Sabbath has fluctuated between a holy day and a holiday.



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BOB BERRAN, ARTIST

The Sabbath testifies to God's infinite love and His creative power. By keeping His day holy we testify to our acceptance of His love and power.

What is the purpose of the Sabbath?

That the Sabbath survived all other forms of the religion with which it was connected is significant. All of these passed away, but the Sabbath remained. Why did it remain? What was God's purpose in it?

First, it was to be a reminder of Creation. For man to worship God in the beauty of holiness, a knowledge of God must be preserved to remind His creatures who He is. They must remember He is the true and living God, and through knowledge of Him man is to find life and peace. Man must know that He has a divine origin, that he is not just an accident, that he did not just happen to be by chance, but that he came into being deliberately, carefully, and creatively.

### The Sabbath as a Sign

"Wherefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed" (Exodus 31:16, 17, R.S.V.).

The Sabbath, then, was created as a sign of God's power and God's love. What a joy it is to serve a God who can step out into space and say, "Let it remain fast," and it remains steadfast as He sustains it. The day was a reminder of God's power, love, wisdom, and goodness. In the day that He has created holy He intends men to remember the great Creation.

After sin entered, God made the Sabbath a reminder of His redemption, as we read in Ezekiel 20:12, 20, R.S.V.:

"Moreover I gave them my sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I the Lord sanctify them." "Hallow my sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I the Lord am your God."

If we yield to Him, God can recreate us, sanctifying our lives so that it is safe to take us to the kingdom of glory. The Sabbath is to remind us of that creative power in our own lives.

How little opportunity we have for worship in the regular work week! From the time the alarm goes off in the morning until we tumble back between the sheets at night we are busy. We read a paragraph, say a prayer on our way, but when the Sabbath hours come and work is laid aside, what a joy it is to worship quietly, knowing that God is present by His Holy Spirit. It affords us time to get acquainted

with God, and to cultivate a meaningful relationship. It is a time for fellowship with people we love. It provides a busy, working father time to spend with his boy or girl.

There is time to do good (cf. Matt. 12:12). Our greatest joy in this life comes from serving others. The sick person's day is brightened by our visit. And there is also time for rest, when the body can renew its strength.

God gave us the Sabbath for a blessing, a time of discovery and deepening of spiritual things. Quick, momentary views of the Bible do not deeply stir the heart. The Sabbath brings with it the blessing of filling the heart with reverence and love for our Maker, the awakening of gratitude for all that we have, and strength for days to come.

The Sabbath is also a test as to whether we accept God as our Creator and Sovereign, by our obedience in following His command-request. It is a test of our acceptance of Christ as a Saviour. The Sabbath is a symbol of the rest mentioned in Hebrews 4—rest from our works, rest from the sin that holds us away from our God. It is also the symbol of a finished work. The Sabbath is a test of our acceptance of Jesus as our sanctifier, and most of all, the acceptance of a love relationship.

The Sabbath was given as a safeguard against selfishness. Had the Sabbath been universally kept, man's thoughts and affections would have been led to the Creator as the object of reverence and worship and there would never have been an idolater, an atheist, an infidel. Had men kept the day holy, with all of its privileges, opportunities, and blessings, they would have known the true God.

Finally, God gave the Sabbath that to the universe we might be an example of a people who would take God at His word and keep the day holy because He made it holy. Yet proper Sabbath discipline sometimes seems difficult. If the Sabbath is such a joy, why should this be? Why would Isaiah have to write:

"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 upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isa. 58:13, 14, R.S.V.).

God tells His people, "Quit step-

ping on the Sabbath. Quit occupying these holy hours with your own thoughts. Cease seeking your pleasure. Cease talking idly. Call the Sabbath a delight, and honor the day because it is God's holy day." This reasonable request ensures a great result—delighting oneself in the Lord.

### The Purpose of Sabbath Discipline

The purpose of Sabbath discipline is to make us aware of its sacred hours, and to prepare our minds for communion and worship. It helps us to form habits of devotion, for getting the most from its sacred hours, and to cultivate the spirit of self-denial so that God can do more for us spiritually.

How does this discipline affect our home? All things are in readiness when the hour comes. The clothing is ready, the food has been prepared, and the house is in order.

True Sabbathkeeping is not simply a matter of prohibitions, for it is impossible to set up a list of rigid rules to follow in all circumstances, in all homes. It is not a matter of law alone, but a matter of spiritual development. No delight comes in merely passing the time in refraining, avoiding, abstaining, vegetating. Ceremony and rules and prohibitions can have no moral value apart from heart and will.

Finding delight in the day is one of the chief avenues to finding delight in the Lord of the Sabbath (cf. Mark 2:27). How many Christians have enough religion to give them delight, enough to save them from the dullness of routine obedience and worship? Religion is of little value unless it brings joy in worshiping God. Keeping the Sabbath is worth little unless it is kept creatively, meaningfully.

A tribe in South America frequently journeys down the great Amazon River. After traveling a certain period of time the whole group stops, anchors the little boats, and then they just wait a day for their souls to catch up with them.

Every seven days God asks us to put aside the daily routine of our lives and "let our souls catch up." Our Sabbaths are to be planned for, looked forward to, and entered into fully. In another seven days the Sabbath will come again—twenty-four hours of heaven let down to earth to give us a foretaste of eternity. What kind of Sabbath will it be? It can be a day of dull obedience, enforced rest, routine worship, with one eye on the clock and the other on the horizon, or it can be what God intended—a day of spiritual delight.