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The Sabbath Rest: Its Meaning for the Christian Today

The Christian who enters into the
Sabbath rest proclaims in a tangible
way that God has delivered him
from the bondage of sin and has
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deliverance to his fellow men.

By SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

THE CYCLE OF SIX DAYS OF WORK and one day of rest is the legacy of the Jewish tradition that in the course of time has prevailed practically over all the world. Scholars who refuse to accept the simple and straightforward account of Genesis 1 and 2 have advanced various theories to explain the origin of the seven-day week with its recurring day of rest. But the Old Testament still remains the best explanation of both the origin and the meaning of the week and of its day of rest. When we use the seven-day week to count and measure the days of our lives we are actually using one of the oldest time measures this world has ever known.

During our lifetime our society has undergone some radical transformations as a result of the technological, scientific, and spatial conquests. Even though the weekly cycle of seven days still remains, in most cases the proportion of six days of work and one of rest no longer holds true. Man today works less and rests more. By this we do not wish to imply that man is lazier today than in the past. The contrary may be true. But generally speaking, the official working week of the American or the European is no longer six days, but five, and in some cases only four. The fact that man today does not have to spend six full days at work to earn his livelihood, but only

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five or perhaps four, as is the case in some industries, raises social and theological problems.

To provide answers to these questions, it is necessary to take some time to investigate and discover which is the Biblical meaning of the Sabbath rest. What does the Sabbath rest mean and involve in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and how should this affect our lives? Let us consider some of its basic meanings.

Sabbath Rest as Completion of God's Creation and Redemption. Genesis 2:2, R.S.V., reports the first Sabbath in which God Himself rested at the inauguration of the newly created world. "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." It is worth noticing that the Bible places emphasis on the fact that God's work and Creation were completed at the moment in which God took time to rest. Three times the verb *finished* or *done* is repeated in Genesis 2:2 and twice again in the following verse. Forcefully and emphatically the inspired writer emphasizes the fact that God's Sabbath rest was the crowning act of six days of intense, creative, and productive activity.

Creation Completed

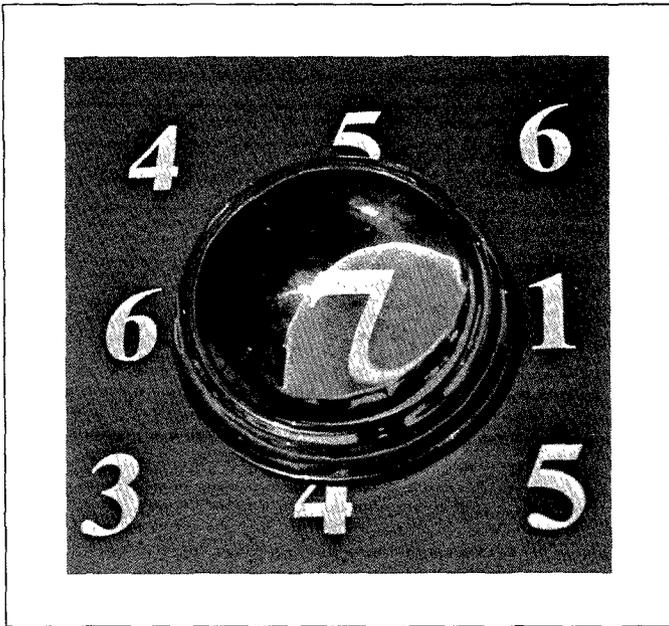
On the seventh day God rested as a witness to Himself and to His creatures, that He considered the creation of this world completed and "very good" (chap. 1:31). There was no need for further improvements or finishing touches. The Creation was complete and perfect.

God is an endless source of energy and therefore needs not to take time to rest physically because of weariness or fatigue. Jesus replied to those who rebuked Him for having acted on the Sabbath day: "'My Father is working still, and I am working'" (John 5:17, R.S.V.). The rest, then, that God took at the end of the six creative days is a rest that expressed God's satisfaction for His Creation, which He considered completed and perfect. God, having completed the first act of the history of this planet, took time to rest. What does it mean? Would it seem too anthropomorphic to suggest that God took time out to experience the joy and the satisfaction that come from the sense of accomplishment when a job is completed and well done? It must have been thrilling on that first Sabbath to view the perfect planet earth, filled with teeming life, harmony, and joy.

It is illuminating to associate with the first act of Creation the second great act of God in history. It was on Friday afternoon that Christ completed His redemptive mission on this earth. John reports the last words that Jesus pronounced on the cross: "When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, 'It is finished'; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (chap. 19:30, R.S.V.).

Some might say that it was just coincidental that Christ completed His work of redemption on Friday afternoon and that He pronounced those significant words "It is finished" just as, to use Luke's words, "the Sabbath was beginning" (Luke 23:54, R.S.V.). We know, however, that in God's plan nothing really happens accidentally. There is a purpose and a reason behind what our human eyes might see as simple coincidence. Luke emphasized specifically in his inspired report that when Christ died on the cross, "It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning." In the following verse the same Gospel writer describes how the women meticulously placed Christ's body at rest in the tomb, and then, we read in verse 56, "On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment." Indeed, Christ completed His second great act as the Sabbath was beginning, and having said, "It is finished," He took time to rest on the Sabbath.

In the light of Creation and redemption the Sabbath rest, then, speaks forth a message from God. It is a message of reassurance from our Creator and Redeemer, who wishes to remind mankind that God rested on the Sabbath day, because His creative and redemptive activities on behalf of man stand complete. But it is also a message that conveys to us an invitation to rejoice with God and accept God's complete and perfect Creation and redemption on our behalf. When we accept God's invitation and enter into the Sabbath rest by deliberately interrupting our daily routine and dedicating 24 hours to our Creator and Redeemer, by so doing, as K. Barth puts it, we "participate consciously in the salvation provided by Him [God]." ¹



In other words, the Sabbath rest becomes God's opportunity extended to man to accept and experience God's complete and marvelous Creation and redemption. By resting on the Sabbath we express and exercise our confidence in God as the Author and Finisher of our salvation. While for six days we are commanded to work to provide for our daily needs, on the Sabbath we are invited to rest in order for us to accept God's salvation as a free gift of grace, and not as our personal achievement. By resting on the Sabbath we surrender ourselves totally to God, and we place ourselves unconditionally at God's disposal and allow His omnipotent grace to fill our lives.

Turning our attention more specifically to man, the question might be raised: "Can man also, at the end of his six days of work, experience, in the same way as did God, that sense of completion, satisfaction, and accomplishment?" Experience would seem to suggest a negative answer. Do we not often find ourselves at the end of a working week frustrated over tasks left uncompleted? Frequently we accomplish in the six days only a part of what we set out to do at the beginning of the week. How can the Sabbath rest give a sense of completion and accomplishment to our weekly labor, which at best is unfinished and imperfect? A rabbinical comment on Exodus 20:9 suggests an interesting answer to this question: "Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work." . . . Is it possible for a human being to do all his work in six days? Does not our work always remain incomplete? What the verse means to convey is: Rest on the Sabbath as if all your work were done." ²

It is true, often Friday night seems to arrive earlier than expected and we may feel disappointed with ourselves, because of many unfinished tasks. This is a forceful reminder that we are finite and limited human beings who often come short of our very expectations. However, by enabling us to detach ourselves from the work performed during the six days, the Sabbath rest gives a sense of completion not only to our unfinished tasks but to our life itself. The Christian, then, who enters into the Sabbath rest not only accepts and participates in the complete salvation provided by God but, in the light of what God has accomplished for him, is able to look also at his imperfect and unfinished work of a week gone by as being complete and acceptable in God's sight.

Life cannot be lived in a stretch without a break. The student needs quizzes, weekly tests, and midterm tests before the final test, to discover where he stands. The Christian needs a weekly break, the Sabbath rest, to discover the joys, the directions, and the meaning of his life and work. The Sabbath rest has been so designed by God that it should give a sense of meaning and direction to our work and to our lives, which to many appear as a continuous, meaningless, and linear existence.

The Sabbath rest places us on a cosmic plane with our Creator. During the week we use things, we exploit them for our use and needs. But on the Sabbath day by taking time out for rest we look at the things we have done and at the things that God has generously provided for us as an expression of His bountiful goodness to us. By resting on the Sabbath we unite ourselves in a cosmic plane with our Creator, admiring and participating in God's marvelous, perfect, and complete Creation and redemption.

Sabbath Rest as Deliverance and Freedom. In the history of salvation the Sabbath rest has from time to time gained added significances. After the supernatural liberation of Israel from the Egyptian bondage the Sabbath rest was enjoined as a memorial of God's mighty deliverance of His people. We read in Deuteronomy 5:15, R.S.V., after the reiteration of the Sabbath commandment: "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and with outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day." It is worth noticing that while in Genesis 2:2 and Exodus 20:8-11 the Sabbath rest is founded on the completion of God's work of Creation, in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 the Sabbath rest is presented as the memorial of another significant act of God, that is, His extraordinary deliverance of the people from the Egyptian bondage. To the original motif of the completion of Creation is now added the Sabbath rest, in the light of the Exodus experience, the significance of deliverance and freedom.

Commemoration of Deliverance

The Israelite who had known oppression, poverty, pain, and slavery in Egypt and who had been delivered by God's mighty hand was now invited by God to commemorate that divine deliverance, not only by resting himself but by making it possible for all his dependents, even the animals, to enjoy a full day of rest. It is fascinating to notice how, through the Sabbath rest, the Israelite weekly re-enacted God's marvelous original deliverance. Every seven days, seven years, and seven weeks of years, the Israelite entered into a renewed experience of liberation, both by resting himself and by rendering free all men, beasts, and property.

At the setting of the sun all men were to become free and equal before God. The uneven divisions of the Hebrew society were leveled out as the Sabbath began. Servants, as well

as masters, were to rest. The Sabbath was the great equalizer.

It was God's plan that the weekly Sabbath rest, if properly observed, would have constantly delivered man from the bondage of the type that Egypt represented, which is not limited to any country or century, but which includes every land and every age. Man needs today to be delivered from the bondage that comes from the greediness for always greater gains and power; the bondage of social inequalities of rich and poor, of high and low, of the haves and have-nots; the bondage of sin and selfishness. Some have been made slaves, but the greatest majority of men have chosen to become slaves by their insatiable greediness and selfishness. The Sabbath rest was divinely designed to deliver man weekly from his measureless selfishness and lead him back to God. P. Massi pointedly observes that "a break from work is necessary to the modern man, victim of sin, in order to offer a barrier against that exaggerated selfish tendency, which makes of our I the center and the measure of all, so that we may be brought to recognize God as the owner of the universe and that we may engage ourselves in leading back all things to God."³

The Sabbath rest as a medium of man's deliverance from sin, sickness, and selfishness is sublimely portrayed in the example and teachings of Jesus. Jesus proclaims Himself the Lord of the Sabbath in order to demonstrate, as R. S. McConnell writes, that He "has the authority to determine in what manner the Sabbath is to be kept so that God is honored."⁴ Christ as the Lord of the Sabbath not only enunciated the principle that "it is lawful to do good on the sabbath" (Matt. 12:12, R.S.V.), but also through His forceful example He demonstrated how to relieve the physical and spiritual needs of man on the Sabbath day. Five episodes of healing performed by Christ on the Sabbath are reported by the Gospel writers.⁵ It may be surprising to some to notice that it was Christ's positive example and command "to do good on the sabbath" that led the Pharisees to take "counsel against him, how to destroy him" (verse 14). Referring to another healing performed by Christ on the Sabbath, John similarly testifies: "This was why the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he did this on the Sabbath" (John 5:16, R.S.V.). The Sabbath rest is presented by Christ in a new perspective that, as C. S. Mosna puts it, "is manifested in the precept of performing humanitarian deeds."⁶

"The sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27), Jesus declared. How desperately man needs the Sabbath rest today! In our industrial society where work makes man a cog in a machine and a number in the computer, man needs the Sabbath rest to retain his individuality; to rediscover his Creator and Redeemer; to experience the forgiveness and the rest that Jesus gives to sin-troubled souls; to remember and alleviate the needs of friends and foes; and to strengthen and deepen those human relationships that are often neglected during the busy working week. The Sabbath rest contains for the Christian today, as well as for the Israelite of old, a message and a promise of God's deliverance and of God's desire for man to be totally free and to find rest in Him. The Christian who enters into the Sabbath rest, dedicating 24 hours to God, proclaims in a tangible way that God has delivered him from the bondage of sin and has empowered him to extend the same deliverance to his fellow men. □

To be continued

REFERENCES

- ¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), vol. 111, p. 50.
- ² Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), p. 32.
- ³ Pacifico Massi, *La Domenica* (Napoli: M. D'Auria, 1967), p. 376.
- ⁴ R. S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew's Gospel* (Basel: University of Basel doctoral dissertation, 1969), p. 71.
- ⁵ Matt. 12:9-21; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-16; 9:1-38.
- ⁶ S. C. Mosna, *Storia della Domenica Dalle Origini fino agli Inizi del Secolo V* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana doctoral dissertation, 1969), p. 176.

Fellowship of Prayer

Working and Praying for Others

"Angels are watching with intense interest to see how man is dealing with his fellow men. When they see one manifest Christ-like sympathy for the erring, they press to his side and bring to his remembrance words to speak that will be as the bread of life to the soul. . . .

"Personal effort for others should be preceded by much secret prayer; for it requires great wisdom to understand the science of saving souls. Before communicating with men, commune with Christ. At the throne of heavenly grace obtain a preparation for ministering to the people."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 149.

"There are many who long to help others, but they feel that they have no spiritual strength or light to impart. Let them present their petitions at the throne of grace. Plead for the Holy Spirit. God stands back of every promise He has made. With your Bible in your hands say, I have done as Thou hast said. I present Thy promise, 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.'"—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 147.

► God is so good and merciful. He does answer prayer! He has answered many prayers for me.

For 20 years I worked as a multilith operator. Last year I wrote asking you to pray that I would pass a special course to become an employment interviewer. Thank the Lord, I have had the position since September. I see people in distress every day and can share my faith with them.

A few years ago I wrote asking you to pray with me that my son would return from California. In less than a week I received word he was coming. We are so glad.

I wrote to you six years ago asking you to pray that my mother's life be spared. Although this prayer was not answered as I had hoped, I know that for those who love Him, God works all things for good.

I work with a woman who wants to keep the Sabbath but is holding back because of her family and minister. Please pray for her and for me that I will be a faithful witness.

God is wonderful. I am thankful for the answers to prayer I have received and I am thankful to know that fellow believers around the world are uniting in prayer for one another.—M. A., of Illinois.

► Several years ago I wrote and asked you to pray for my husband to join the church. He is a member now and has been Sabbath school superintendent and assistant for some time, and is also a deacon. Thank you so much for your prayers.

I also asked you to pray that we would get a home in the country. We have now purchased one, but several problems have come up preventing our moving. I know that these are hurdles the devil is throwing in our way. Please pray that the Lord will help us overcome these obstacles so we can go ahead and move.—L. H., of New York.

► Thank you for your response to my letter. My son was baptized last Sabbath and has been going steady with a lovely Christian girl of our faith. His attitude and thinking have changed greatly. He is saving money for school and is working at La Sierra.

I am still praying that my husband will return to the truth and that we both will be ready when Jesus comes. His family have been exposed to Christian influences for years, but seem quite resistant, so far, to committing themselves.—E. H., of California.

We are admonished by the Scriptures to "pray for one another" (James 5:16). This column is designed to encourage united prayer for personal, family, and church problems. The appointed time of prayer is at sunset each Friday evening. Participants believe "it is a part of God's plan to grant us, in answer to the prayer of faith, that which He would not bestow did we not thus ask."—The Great Controversy, p. 525.

Portions of letters reporting answers to prayer will be published as space permits.