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### Divine Rest for Human Restlessness

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# Divine rest for human restlessness

In the light of the cross, the Sabbath is the weekly celebration and jubilation of a liberated people; it is the day when we cease from our work to allow God to work in us, to experience through physical rest His greater rest of forgiveness and salvation.

By SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

Our tension-filled and restless lives long for rest. But how difficult it is to work off tension, to quiet restlessness! Some join athletic clubs, others join meditation groups. Still others seek release from their tension by taking vacations, tranquilizers, drugs, or alcohol. However, experience tells us that even vacations in exotic places or magic pills can provide at best only a temporary evasion, not a permanent quieting of inner tension and restlessness. Why? Because true rest is to be found not in *places* or *pills*, but rather in a right relationship with a *Person*, our Saviour, who says: " 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' " (Matt. 11:28, N.I.V.).

Perfect rest and peace are not a human achievement, but a divine gift. Just as the various components of an orchestra need the direction of a skillful maestro to blend them into harmonious music, so the physical, mental, and spiritual components of our being need the guidance of the Master in order for us to experience harmonious rest and peace.

How can we make it possible for Christ to bring harmony and quiet to our restless lives? The Scriptures tell us that before and after the Fall, God gave to the human family a most vital institution, the Sabbath day—a day

specifically designed to free us from daily pressures and restlessness in order to experience rest in God (Heb. 4:9, 10). On the Sabbath the body can rest because the mind is at rest, and the mind is at rest because it rests in God. To appreciate more fully this vital function of the Sabbath, let us briefly consider seven ways in which proper Sabbath-keeping enables the Saviour to bring us peace and rest.

**1. The rest of Creation.** The Sabbath regularly reassures us that our lives have meaning, value, and hope, because they are rooted in God from Creation to eternity. Many thinking persons are searching for this kind of rest. Not knowing where they come from or where they are heading, they feel restless and disillusioned by their meaningless existence. Some, perhaps inspired by Alex Haley's book *Roots*, seek to overcome their sense of meaninglessness by tracing their ancestral roots. Many who do this hope to add value and meaning to their lives by finding royal or noble ancestors. Through the Sabbath, Christ offers us a much greater reassurance: the restful assurance that our roots can be traced back to God Himself (Gen. 1:26, 27); the assurance that our existence has value because it is not the product of *chance*, but of a personal *choice* on the part of a loving Creator.

In the Creation story the seventh day expresses the culmination, celebration, and inauguration of human life and history. The creation and blessing of mankind (verses 26-31) is followed immediately by the creation and blessing of the Sabbath (chap. 2:1-3). The reason is obvious. God wanted to celebrate with human beings the birthday of this perfect world on and through the seventh day. Adam and Eve's first full day of life was a Sabbath day. They did not spend it working, but celebrating with their Maker the inauguration of a completed and perfect Creation. To celebrate the Sabbath, then, means first of all to celebrate the divine origin, value, and destiny of human life. It means to experience the restful assurance that, in spite of its apparent futility and tragedy, our life has value and hope because it proceeds from and moves toward a glorious destiny with God.

**2. The rest of Divine Presence.** Sabbathkeeping brings Christ's rest to our lives by enabling us to experience His divine presence. As Christ's presence brought stillness to the stormy Lake of Galilee (Matt. 8:23-27), the assurance of His presence brings peace and stillness to troubled lives today. This aspect of the holiness of the Sabbath is frequently mentioned in the Bible.

In a special sense the Sabbath is God's sanctuary in time: a sanctuary that has survived the Fall, the Flood, the Egyptian slavery, the Babylonian Exile, the Roman anti-Sabbath legislation, the French and Russian temporary introduction of the ten-day week, antinomianism, and modern secularism; a sanctuary that still invites believers to enter weekly through its portals, laying aside their secular concerns in order to experience the spiritual presence of Christ.

Because we enter into the spiritual presence and

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or social injustices experienced by others. It would be a denial of the human values and experience of the Sabbath if we were to exploit or detest during the week those whom the Sabbath teaches us to respect and love as God's creatures. By teaching us to accept and respect every person, whether rich or poor, black or white, as a human being created and redeemed by the Lord, the Sabbath makes it possible for the peace of Christ to dwell in our hearts.

**6. The rest of redemption.** Sabbathkeeping also brings Christ's rest to our lives by enabling us to experience through the physical rest the greater rest and peace of redemption. The human heart longs for a constant assurance of divine forgiveness, acceptance, and salvation. Since the Fall an important function of the Sabbath has been to nourish this assurance in the hearts of believers. In Old Testament times, the rest and liberation from the hardship of work and from social inequalities that both the weekly and annual Sabbaths granted to every member of the Hebrew society have been viewed not merely as a commemoration of Creation (Ex. 20:11), and of the past Exodus deliverance (Deut. 5:15), but as a prefiguration of the future redemption—rest to be realized through the Messiah.

For example, the prophet Isaiah utilizes the delightful sabbatical imagery of the jubilee year ("the year of the Lord's favor") to describe the liberation and restoration to be brought about by the Messiah (Isa. 61:1, 2, R.S.V.). Similarly, in Daniel 9, the time to the coming of the Messiah is predicted by means of the sabbatical division of time, "seventy weeks of years" (verse 24, R.S.V.), which add up to 490 years or ten jubilee years. Examples such as these indicate that in Old Testament times the Sabbath served not only to provide rest and liberation from social injustices but also to nourish the Messianic hope of redemption to come.

The existence of this Messianic-redemptive understanding of the Sabbath helps us understand the reason why Christ inaugurated His public ministry on a Sabbath day in the synagogue of Nazareth by quoting the sabbatical passage of Isaiah 61:1, 2, which, as noted earlier, announces the mission of the Messiah through the language and imagery of the restoration and liberation of the Sabbath years (Luke 4:18, 19). The Lord undoubtedly startled the congregation when He claimed briefly but emphatically to be the fulfillment of the Messianic redemption promised by Isaiah through the Sabbath years. "Today," Jesus said, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (verse 21, R.S.V.).

In His subsequent ministry Christ revealed the nature of His redemptive mission especially through His Sabbath healing and teaching ministry. Seven Sabbath healing episodes and ensuing controversies are reported in the Gospels (Matt. 12:9-14; Mark 1:21-28; 3:1-6; Luke 4:31-39; 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:2-18; 7:21-24; 9; cf. Matt. 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 4:16-30; 6:1-5). It is noteworthy that in each of these cases Christ

intentionally acted against prevailing tradition by healing chronically sick persons on the Sabbath. By offering physical and spiritual liberation on the Sabbath to souls "whom Satan bound" (Luke 13:16, R.S.V.), the Saviour made the day a time to celebrate and to experience the blessings of His redemptive ministry.

The historic Friday when the Lord completed His redemptive mission, crying out, "It is finished" (John 19:30), was followed by His resting in the tomb on the Sabbath (Luke 23:54-56). Divine rest on the Sabbath marks the completion of both Creation and redemption. Christ's Sabbath rest in the tomb reveals the depth of God's love for His creatures. It tells us God so loved the world that He was willing to experience not only the limitations of human time at the Creation but also the suffering, agony, and death of human flesh during the Incarnation. In the light of the cross, then, the Sabbath is the weekly celebration and jubilation of a liberated people; it is the day when we cease from our work to allow God to work in us, to experience through physical rest His greater rest of forgiveness and salvation.

**7. The rest of service.** Sabbathkeeping also brings Christ's rest to our lives by providing time and opportunities for service. Inner rest and peace are not to be found in selfish relaxation, but in unselfish service. Christ's Sabbath teaching and ministry proclaimed the Sabbath to be a day "to do good" (Matt. 12:12, R.S.V.), "to save" (Mark 3:4), to loose men and women from physical and spiritual bonds (see Luke 13:12), and a day to show "mercy" rather than religiosity (Matt. 12:7). The Sabbath provides us opportunities to serve God, self, others, and our habitat.

We serve God on the Sabbath by resting to acknowledge His claim over our lives and by worshiping to celebrate His marvelous accomplishments for this world. This celebration of God's goodness offers us a fresh experience of divine rest and peace. We serve our personal needs on the Sabbath by taking time to reorder our lives, to sharpen our moral consciousness, to experience divine forgiveness, presence, and rest. We serve others on the Sabbath by coming closer to loved ones, friends, and needy persons, sharing with them our friendship and concern. The service we render to others on the Sabbath honors God and enriches our lives with a sense of restful satisfaction. We serve our habitat on the Sabbath by learning to act as curators rather than predators of this earth and by taking time to admire rather than to exploit God's creation.

Can the Sabbath bring divine rest to our human restlessness? The Sabbath is a vital institution that enables the Saviour to bring His perfect rest to our lives by offering us the opportunity to experience the rest of Creation, the rest of Divine Presence, a rest from competition, the rest of belonging, a rest from social tensions, the rest of redemption, and the rest of service. May the Sabbath become for all of us the day through which we experience Divine rest for our human restlessness. □