

# Call the Sabbath a Delight

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Ps. 122: 1, 3

Ps. 97: 6

Hymn 55: 2, 3, 4

Ps. 119: 29, 66

Ps. 84: 1, 5, 6

Scripture reading: Ex. 31: 12 - 18; Hebr. 3: 7 - 4: 11.

Text: LD 38

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Someone once said:

“I believe in all Nine of the Ten Commandments!”

Without explanation we know what he meant.

Is the fourth commandment still a command to rest on the day of rest? We are not interested to hear whether it is *desirable* to rest on the Sabbath. We are not interested to hear whether the benefit of such rest makes it *useful* for us. That may be interesting points for discussion, but we are not here to listen to the opinion and advice of the minister, or to be amused by his interesting thoughts.

We are here to hear God's Word. Thus we want to know whether it is still a *command* of God that we shall rest on the Sabbath day. Is the day of rest a matter of opinion, or is it the law of God? May we bind the consciences of church members to observe the Sabbath day as a day of rest?

If it is only *desirable* and *useful* to rest on the Sabbath day, then we would be cursed if we change it into a law; but if it is indeed the law of God - cursed is he who breaks it.

The argument for the Sabbath rest stands or falls with the question of divine institution and obligation. Is it a command from God or not? And is it still valid for us or not? Only when the answer to these questions is clear in our minds, will we benefit from the instruction of this commandment. Only if it is *law* will there be divine reward and blessing in observing it.

I proclaim God's Word to you with the theme:

## Call the Sabbath a delight

We will note...

1. The unity of the Old and the New Covenant with respect to the Sabbath
2. The observance of the Sabbath day
3. The blessing of the Sabbath day

In the first place we note:

## The Unity of the Old and the New Covenant with respect to the Sabbath

The Sabbath was instituted at creation.

“...on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made -

Gen.2: 2, 3.

The meaning of the Sabbath was therefore not determined by the fall of man or by our need of salvation. The Sabbath was part of a perfect creation without sin; a creation where no redemption from sin was needed. The original meaning of the

Sabbath was therefore not determined by a future salvation. The Sabbath was not originally instituted as a shadow of future redemption. Therefore our redemption in Christ does not change the original meaning of the Sabbath, but restores it. In Christ we receive back again the Sabbath rest which was once lost.

If we want to understand the meaning of the Sabbath we should therefore start at its institution at creation, follow the line of redemption and restoration, and finally look at its full glory as revealed in the New Covenant.

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It was a perfect creation without sin. In that perfect state the Sabbath had its full meaning and reality apart from sin and redemption. God's work of creation was complete, and so was His rest. With regard to man the Sabbath gave man the assurance and promise that his labour would result in a Sabbath rest similar to the rest of God Himself.

This one consideration, that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance, should be enough reason to convince us that it is no shadow or ceremonial law that passed away with the ceremonial laws of Moses.

But there is still another consideration which confirms the lasting character of the Sabbath even further: the fact that it is one of the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment is not given as an *appendix* to God's moral law, nor is it given as an *application* of the moral law, but it is given as part of God's everlasting rule for our lives.

There were ordinances in Israel regulating the outward observance of the Sabbath. We may call it the outward administration of the fourth commandment among the people of Israel. Now, that outward administration is indeed different in the New Testament. We will, for example, not stone someone to death who breaks the Sabbath day. But the fourth commandment itself was not given as a shadow that would again pass away, nor was it given as an outward administration of some other principle. The fourth commandment was not given as a ceremonial law or as a civil law. It was engraved on the two tablets of stone which is a summary of God's moral law, the very reflection and revelation of God's own image, which is everlasting.

The fourth commandment is not in a different category from the other nine commandments.

The fourth commandment does not introduce a new law or a temporary law, but reinforces that which was from the beginning.

The weekly Sabbath is not only part of creation; it is also part of God's perfect and everlasting moral law.

Yet another reason for observing the Sabbath is added when we read in Deut.5:15 these words:

“...remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day”

Actually these words apply just as much to the other nine commandments. In fact, the heading above the whole law is this:

“I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage...” (Deut.5: 6).

Thus the observance of each one of the Ten Commandments is sanctioned by Israel’s redemption. But this does not replace the original reason for observing these commandments. All the commandments have to be observed by us first of all because we are made in God’s image and responsible to correspond to His image. That we are saved from slavery to sin in order to obey these commandments is an additional reason for obeying them, but our salvation does not replace our original obligation to obey these laws.

Now, the same is true with regard to the fourth commandment. Israel’s redemption from Egypt does not replacing the original reason for observing the Sabbath as given in Ex.20:11:

“For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it”.

Without replacing that, Deuteronomy chapter 5 however does emphasise an additional reason for keeping the Sabbath: Israel’s redemption from Egypt.

Now, Israel’s deliverance from Egypt was redemption (Ex.15:13), and it served as a shadow of our final and glorious redemption through Christ. Israel’s redemption from Egypt cannot be properly understood apart from redemptive history which leads to its climax with the coming of Christ. Therefore, if Israel’s redemption from Egypt added a reason for observing the Sabbath day, the same must apply to our final redemption in Christ.

Each Sabbath in the Old Testament was a reminder to Israel of their redemption from Egypt, so also does each Sabbath in the New Testament remind us of our salvation in Christ which was accomplished by His death and resurrection. In the new covenant this additional reason for observing the Sabbath is even more clearly revealed than in Deut. 5.

Our Lord Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week (Mt.28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24: 1; John 20:1). After His resurrection the first day of the week clearly became a memorial of the salvation accomplished.

We have to note this carefully. Jesus Himself focused His disciples' attention to the first day of the week. First He appeared to them on the first Sunday (Mt.28:9; Luke 24:15 - 31, 36; John 20:19), and then we read that He did it again on the next Sunday too (John 20:26). Again, He also poured out His Holy Spirit on a Sunday. The day of Pentecost was described in the Law of Moses as **the day after the seventh Sabbath** - Lev. 23: 16. Thus not only the resurrection of Christ but also Pentecost was on the first day of the week. Again we read in the New Testament of a congregation gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week - Acts 20:7 (compare Acts 2:42). And again we read in 1 Cor. 16: 2 that the congregations had their collections on the first day of the week.

When we take these verses all together it becomes clear that the first day of the week became a memorial of Christ's completed work of salvation and therefore also the day on which the New Testament congregations gathered for worship. This new focus on the first day of the week was not initiated by the disciples, but by the Lord Himself. It was on the first day of the week that the rest of the seventh day was once more restored. This was not by chance. It was even foretold in the Law of Moses. There was nothing wrong with God's planning and time schedule. The two most glorious and festive events in the New Testament - Christ's resurrection and Pentecost - were both scheduled by God for the first day of the week. And thus the first day of the week became a memorial of redemption accomplished.

Each Sabbath Israel had to remember the day of their redemption from Egypt, and in the same way the completed redemption in Christ has to be remembered each Sabbath. In this way the Lord's Day has become the Christian Sabbath. It is fully in line with the teaching of the Old Testament which appealed to redemption as reason for Sabbath observance.

Deut. 5: 15, the command to Israel to remember their redemption from Egypt on the Sabbath day, applies in the new covenant to the memorial of completed salvation on the Lord's Day.

The shift from Saturday to Sunday does not indicate that the law is abolished. No, it simply indicates the New Testament's own focus away from the old creation to the new creation in Christ. We expect the eternal Sabbath on a new earth which is the result of **Christ's** completed work. We no longer look backwards to a rest once lost and to the lost Paradise of the old creation; but we look back to the rest restored in Christ, and we look forward to the eternal rest of His new creation.

This exposition of the facts is confirmed by Hebrews chapter 4. The apostle makes clear in this passage that we enter God's rest only through the redemption in Christ. Through Christ we share in God's rest of Gen.2:2 (Hebr.4:2 - 4). At the same time the gospel is also called a *promise of rest* (Hebr. 4: 1). Israel did not enjoy the rest of Paradise restored when they entered Canaan (Hebr. 4: 8). That was not yet the real fulfilment of the gospel promise. Nor do *we* experience the fullness of that glory yet. The promise to enter that rest still stands. We do enter that rest now by faith, but we will enter its fullness only when salvation finds its final climax and completion on the day of Christ's coming. *That* is the great Lord's Day that we await. On that day we will enter God's rest forever. Then the rest of Gen.2:2 will be finally restored, but with an additional reason to celebrate: our redemption from sin unto holiness; our redemption from death unto a new life devoted to God - a rest that will last forever.

The weekly Sabbath has become a memorial, a promise, and a foretaste of that eternal deliverance from slavery unto the rest of Paradise restored - a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells.

Each Sabbath is both a memorial looking back at the completed work of Christ, and a promise looking forward to the final consummation of His redemption.

Thus we see the unity of the old and the new covenant with respect to the fourth commandment. The original meaning of the Sabbath before the fall has not been removed by Christ, but restored. In Christ we enter God's rest, the rest of His completed work. At the same time His redemption by which we enter this rest, adds a new reason for observing the day. Yet the new reason is not totally new, as the Old Testament testify to it.

In the second place we will now note:

## The observance of the Sabbath day

Do you still believe that the fourth commandment applies to you? And how do you apply it?

When God instituted the Sabbath day He sanctified it - Gen. 2: 3. What does that mean? There was no sin as yet, and therefore the word sanctify in Gen.2:3 does not refer to purification or to redemption from sin. There are two elements in the word sanctify that apply to the Sabbath day. Sanctify means, first of all, to set apart.

Now, some people will say that **every** day is a sabbath to them, for they devote every day to the Lord and they find their rest every day in Christ. This may seem very pious. It seems pious because there is an element of truth in the statement - an element that is also noted by LD 38. Yet, such a statement is a distortion of the truth if it is used to abolish the day of rest, for we are not to serve the Lord on the day of rest in the same way as on the other six days. The rest on the Sabbath day is different from the rest which we find on the other days.

The Sabbath day is different from other days, and it is different by divine appointment. To deny the separateness of this day is to destroy its holiness.

To recognise the separateness of this day is essential to its observance. If the day is not set apart, it cannot be observed.

Sometimes people abstain from certain practices on a Sunday merely because they still honour the traditions of their fathers, while they themselves are no longer convinced of the separateness of this day. Their tradition is then no more than a shell without a kernel. The foundation as well as the justification for their tradition has been removed. The result is also that as soon as they come under certain pressure or temptation to deviate from the tradition, nothing remains to restrain them, because they no longer understand or believe the separateness of this day.

Now, when you spend the Sabbath in a certain way merely out of tradition, that is no observance of the day. When the principle of separateness is removed from the Sabbath, no true Sabbath observance is possible.

If the day is not kept holy, then the day is not observed.

Why then shall we keep the day holy? Not because the day is **in itself** holier than other days, but because it has been set apart by the Lord. It is sanctified in the different way the day is spent. Not merely out of tradition. Also not because we find it is **useful** or **desirable**, but because God Himself has set the day apart. He sanctified the day, and this sanctity is an essential part of its divine institution at creation.

But there is also another element in sanctification. The day is not only set apart from other days, it is also devoted to the Lord. It is the Sabbath of the LORD your God - Ex. 20: 10. It is “a Sabbath of rest to the LORD” - Ex. 35: 2.

The Sabbath rest does not mean inactivity. When God rested on the seventh day He rested of *creative* activity, but it was not a rest of inactivity. He rested from His work of creation but He continued to be active in the work of His providence. In the same way our rest on the Sabbath day is not to be idle. It is not a rest that consists in doing nothing. It is not the one who sleeps most on a Sunday that observes it the best. No, it is a rest that is found in activity; another kind of activity than in the other six days. It is resting *from* the ordinary work of the other six days, but it is also a rest *to* and *in* the Lord, a rest which is found in active worship to the Lord. It is a day consecrated to worship the Lord.

The word Sabbath simply means rest. When our confession speaks, here in LD 38, of a day of rest, it speaks of a Sabbath day. It says we should attend the church services especially on the day of rest. But is there still a day of rest in the New Testament? Do we still have a *special* day of rest? Our confession says: Yes! And it describes this day of rest as a day of active worship and communion with God - communion with God and also the communion of the saints. And it presents this to us as a true exposition of the fourth commandment.

What is our Reformed confession with regard to the fourth commandment? Not only that we look forward to an eternal Sabbath, but first of all that we observe a special *day of rest*, a day of rest which we spend differently than the other days - a day devoted to the worship of God. And when it says that we worship Him *especially* on the day of rest, the word “especially” is added to indicate that we do not worship God only on Sundays. Yet, this day of rest remains a special day of rest, a day that is set apart from the other days *in order to be* a day of rest. This is our confession.

If any minister would explain the fourth commandment differently, then he is deviating on this point from our confession and from Scripture itself. It is not a small deviation to delete the “day of rest” from the fourth commandment.

How then should we observe this day of rest?

It is sometimes said that in the New Testament we do not have to observe this day of rest as strictly as in the Old Testament. Now, there is an element of truth in that statement, but there is also a good deal of error in such a statement. While we have to recognise fully that the outward administration of the law is different in the New Testament than in the Old Testament, this difference has nothing to do with the strictness of observance.

It is true that we do not stone to death with stones someone who works on Sunday, but do we not discipline him? And will a hardening in his sin not lead to excommunication?

The same applies to all the other commandments. There were civil laws in Israel which were the outward administration of the moral law. That outward administration differs in the New Testament, but their underlying principle - which is the moral law - has not changed.

Does the change in outward administration means that we do not have to obey the Ten Commandments as strictly as in the Old Testament? Are we now more free to divorce than in the Old Testament. Are we now more free to rebel against authority than in the Old Testament? Do we now observe the Ten Commandments less strictly than Israel? No, the opposite is true. After Pentecost our obedience became more, not less!

And there is no way in which we can say that the fourth commandment should not be observed as strictly as the other commandments.

In this regard people often quote Matthew chapter 12 where Christ approved of His disciples' eating of grain in the field on a Sabbath, while the Pharisees accused them of breaking the Sabbath. Yet, Christ does not at all approve of breaking of the Sabbath. No, He defends His disciples from the *false* accusation of the Pharisees. The accusation of Pharisees did not result from good insight in the law, but from twisting the law and turning the Sabbath into an instrument of oppression

and hypocrisy. That is what Christ attacks. He is not at all giving His approval to any breaking of the Sabbath, but He frees the Sabbath from the way in which the Pharisees distorted it.

Insistence upon Sabbath observance is not legalistic.

The question is: Is the Sabbath a divine ordinance or not? If it is, then careful observance is not legalistic; just as it is not legalistic to be faithful to your wife. It is not legalistic to honour your parents. It is not legalistic to restrain your tongue from slander. Why then should it be legalistic to observe the day of rest which God has sanctified?

Are we legalistic when we hate lawlessness? How distorted is our understanding of Christian ethics and of the demands of holiness if we associate diligent obedience to the law with pharisaism!

The fourth commandment has not been abolished. Nor has the commandment changed.

Why then should insistence on Sabbath observance be legalism and pharisaism?

Such an accusation flows from misunderstanding the liberty of the Christian. The law of God is the royal law of liberty. Liberty is to be captive to the Word and law of God. All other liberty is not liberty, but slavery to sin.

In the third place we note:

### **The Blessing of the Sabbath day**

“And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it...” - Gen.2: 2, 3.

What does it mean that He blessed the Sabbath day? It means that He made this day a special blessing for man.

But how do we receive the blessing of this day? We receive this blessing not automatically as soon as the day starts; we find the blessing of the day only through active devotion to the Lord. The day is set apart in order to be a blessing. When we stop our daily labour the day is made free of other activities in order to worship and to delight ourselves in the Lord.

On this day we are freed from our ordinary labour in order that we may enjoy unhindered worship to the Lord and unhindered meditation of His Word and unhindered fellowship with Him. For although we worship Him every day, and although we meditate every day on His Word, and have every day fellowship with Him, we have to remember that the fourth commandment is also a command to labour six days of the week. Six days you shall labour. That is a command. Yes, we serve and worship God also with our labour, and we serve Him with our labour no less than with our worship, we serve Him with our hands just as much as with our heart, but we are to serve Him in another way on the day of rest. It is a day of special delight in the Lord.

Now, as we said, this blessing does not come to us automatically as soon as the day starts; the blessing is only received by observing the day. No observance of this day, means no special blessing on this day.

And to observe the day does not only mean to stop working; it means active worship and devotion.

Therefore it was Jesus' custom to go to the synagogues on the Sabbath day. We read in Luke 4:16:

“...And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read...”

This custom of Jesus was well founded in the Old Testament, but we have to deal with that another time. For now it will be enough to note that attendance of the worship service is the first and most important way of receiving the blessing of this day.

That is why the catechism says that we diligently attend the church services especially on this day of rest. For, it is by hearing the gospel that we enter God's rest and find our delight in Him.

But the day of rest is not observed when we only go to the worship services and then spend the rest of the day with our own things. No, the whole day should be devoted to God. And this is not a burden, but a blessing.

“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honourable, and shall honour Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking idle words, then you shall delight yourself

in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken” - Isaiah 58: 13, 14.

Call the Sabbath a delight. Delight yourself in the Lord. That is the purpose of this day, that we may receive a special blessing from the Lord in holy communion with Him in a way that is not possible during the six days of labour.

Do you see why this day is called a blessing?

It is not meant to be burdensome or boring. No, for those who delight themselves in the Lord, the day is almost too short, so that we eagerly look forward to the next day of rest and refreshment to come - not to do our own pleasure, not to spend it in our own way, but to be strengthened and refreshed in our communion with God.

It is a day holy to the Lord, devoted and consecrated to Him, so that we find the blessing of this day not in the day itself, but in the special fellowship with God which is made possible by this day of rest.

Let us then diligently *observe* this day and delight ourselves in the Lord.

“This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24).

Let us remember the rest which God has prepared for us. Let us remember the completion of God’s work in Christ - a work greater than that of creation.

But the Sabbath is not only a memorial of creation completed and redemption accomplished; it is also a promise of eternal glory, a foretaste of the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God. Through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ this day reminds us also of the consummation of all things on *the* Day of the LORD, the day of His coming. Then He will make all things new and say:

“It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End...” (Rev.21:6).

And *He* will be our delight forevermore. Amen.