

GOD BLESSED THE 7TH DAY (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 2:1-3

The Lord's Day was once highly honored not only by professing Christians, but also by the culture at large. The influence of obedient Christians resulted in "blue laws," which had forbidden businesses from opening on Sunday. But times have changed, and are still changing—for the worse, I'm afraid.

In their book *Resident Aliens*, William Willimon and Stanley Haueras describe how the Sabbath changed in their lifetime. This radical shift took place on a Sunday evening in 1963. "Then, in Greenville, South Carolina, in defiance of the state's time-honored blue laws, the Fox Theatre opened on Sunday. Seven of us—regular attenders of the Methodist Youth Fellowship at Buncombe Street Church—made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox."

They went on to explain, "You see, our parents had never worried about whether we would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the town closed down. One could not even buy a gallon of gas. There was a traffic jam on Sunday mornings at 9:45, when all went to their respective Sunday schools.

"Church, home and state," they observed, "formed a national consortium that worked together to instill 'Christian values.' People grew up Christian simply by being lucky enough to be born in places like Greenville, South Carolina" (p.).

I had a similar experience in 2006, when I went to the library and read the new banner over the front entrance: "Now open on Sunday...1-4pm." I'm sure they saw it as a way to accommodate their patrons, but I saw it as yet another assault upon God's commands.

Today our children will grow up assuming that the Lord's Day is just a second Saturday in the weekend, unless we raise them differently. We can expect to get zero help from the culture. In fact, our culture will become a greater and greater hindrance to Sabbath observance. Perhaps you've noticed that sports events for kids and school activities are being scheduled on Sundays more and more. I wish I could say that Christians are united in swimming against this tide, but they're not. I was stunned a while back when an evangelical ministry made a sales call to my house on a Sunday—disrupting my nap. I wasn't happy, and I let them know it.

Some of you might be thinking I'm all wet. But maybe you're all wet, and don't even know it. Let me ask you, "Does a fish know it's wet?" No, of course not, since wetness is all it has ever known, unless it gets out of the water somehow and experiences dryness, then it will finally realize how wet it was. Here's my point, to understand our observance of the Sabbath (or lack thereof) we need something to compare it to. This is why history is so valuable. It enables us to get out of our own culture, and it provides us with another time, place and set of principles by which we can objectively evaluate our present culture. I'd like to do that now by going back about 150 years.

Steve Wilkins writes of Stonewall Jackson, "One of his first Christian convictions was adherence to the fourth commandment. Jackson believed that the Sabbath was ordained by God for rest and worship, and so he avoided all unnecessary labor and nonreligious activities on that day. He sought to spend the day in works of 'necessity and mercy,' as they are described in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Thus he refused to read a newspaper, discuss secular subjects, or write letters on Sunday. He gave himself to worship and to his Sunday school class as well as to other acts of fellowship and kindness" (Steve Wilkins, *All Things for Good*, p. 334). Today we see this as odd or worse legalistic, when it's supposed to be normative for Christians.

Explaining why Jackson would refuse to discuss secular topics on the Sabbath, Wilkins said that Jackson took the text of Isaiah 58:13-14 literally (Verse 13 says, '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 you own pleasure, or *talking idly*.'). Therefore, "Jackson sought to avoid any discussion of 'secular' topics on Sunday. If any topic was raised that he believed did not suit proper Sabbath conversation, he would say, 'We will talk about that tomorrow'" (Ibid., p. 274).

Brothers and sisters, we're the ones who are all wet. We've strayed terribly from God's command to remember the Sabbath day, and it's time for us to repent and restore this blessed day.

GOD BLESSED THE 7TH DAY (2)

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Creation, from week one—literally—was designed with a built-in rhythm: six days of work followed by one day of rest, six...one, six...one. The Sabbath was another gift from God to man. Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:27). We don’t serve the Sabbath, it serves us.

When the LORD brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, he gave them the law, including the fourth of the Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God...For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex. 20:8-11). This of course refers to Genesis 2:1-3. God is taking his people back to the garden, as it were; they’re returning to paradise.

To better appreciate this commandment, consider the historical context. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and they were being worked to death—probably literally in many cases. Don’t picture slavery as a dull, monotonous, 9 to 5 job desk job that they endured five days a week. Picture back-breaking, sun up to sun down, seven-days-a-week-without-vacation-time-cruelty. These people were *oppressed*, in the fullest sense of the word. The Egyptians “ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field” (Ex. 1:13-14). Then God miraculously delivers his people, and says, “Now you will rest every Sabbath, like I intended from the beginning of creation.” If you’re a slave, this is the greatest commandment you’ve ever heard in your life. You can hardly believe it, so you ask for clarification, “You mean I don’t have to get up early Saturday morning and go to work?” God reassures you, “That’s right; this day is set aside for worship and rest.” “Hallelujah,” you cry out, “we’re going to the Promised Land! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we’re free at last!”

God was serious about making the Sabbath part of Israel’s culture. When he gave them manna in the wilderness, they were to gather twice as much on the sixth day, so that the Sabbath could be a day of solemn rest (Ex. 16:22-30). Even the land was to rest and observe the Sabbath, with six years of sowing followed by one year of rest, as it lay fallow (23:10-11). Keeping the Sabbath was part of keeping covenant with God (31:16). And anyone who profaned the Sabbath was to be put to death (vs. 14-15).

If you understand the blessing of the Sabbath, you don’t ask, “Do we still *have* to keep the Sabbath?” Rather, you ask, “Do we still *get* to keep the Sabbath?” And we do. It’s sad to observe that in the first century some believers were already in the habit of neglecting to meet together for Sabbath worship and edification (Heb. 10:24-25).

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (11:7) describes the Sabbath, and its transition from the last day of the week to the first day of a new week: “As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.”

Sunday should be the best day of the week. It was on a Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead. It was on a Sunday that our resurrected Lord appeared to his disciples. It was on a Sunday when the Holy Spirit descended on the day of Pentecost and filled the people of God. The early church gathered together on Sunday to listen the apostles’ teaching, to pray, to fellowship and to break bread. If we fail to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, God may bring disaster upon us just as he brought disaster upon the Israelites for failing to keep the land Sabbaths. Israel was sent into Babylonian captivity for 70 years, because of 490 years of disobedience. Do we think we will escape the judgment of God? Let us heed the words of Nehemiah, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city” (Neh. 13:17-18). But, if we remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, God promises to make us ride of the heights of the earth (Isa. 58:13-14).

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