

# **The Good News Of The Sabbath: Perfect Creation, Complete Redemption, And Final Restorations**

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## **Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Newsletter:**

The last newsletter (no. 27) on the relationship between Christ and the law, generated some healthy discussion. I would like to come back to some of the questions, possibly in conjunction with Elder Will Eva's response which will be posted when I receive it.

This newsletter was supposed to carry the third installment of our study on "The Bible and Alcohol," dealing specifically with "Jesus and Wine." What caused me to change my mind is the theme of this week (September 11-17, 1999) Sabbath School lesson: "Sabbath and Redemption in Creation." The connection between the Sabbath and redemption, is seldom explored in Adventist literature. The few Adventist studies that address this important subject, usually do it in a rather superficial way. The lesson of this week is no exception. The result is that in Adventist thought the Sabbath is primarily connected with the commemoration of the completion and perfection of creation. The redemptive meaning and function of the Sabbath is largely unknown. Yet, it is the redemptive meaning of the Sabbath which makes the observance of the day particularly meaningful to our Christian life.

It is important to realize that the meaning of the Sabbath has grown with the unfolding of salvation history. From the memorial of an originally perfect creation, the Sabbath became the symbol of messianic redemption, and of ultimate restoration. A fuller understanding of how the Sabbath is linked to the Savior is indispensable for celebrating on and through this day, not only the fact that Lord has created us perfectly, but also that He has redeemed us completely and that He will restore us ultimately.

It is my sincere desire to enrich our understanding and experience of the Sabbath that has caused me to depart from my original plan, and focus instead on the theme of this week Sabbath School lesson. Incidentally, God willing, I will have the privilege to study this lesson next Sabbath, September 18, with our fellow believers in Christchurch, South New Zealand. I look forward to worship and fellowship with our believers and to meet our subscribers in that beautiful island.

The New Zealand/Australian lecture tour will keep me away from home for 25 days. This means that the next newsletter will not be posted until toward the end of October. For some of you this will be a welcome relief, because you told me that you need time to catch up with the lengthy studies already received.

## **UPDATE REPORT ON RECENT SABBATH DEVELOPMENTS**

The Sabbath reports that have come to my attention during the past few weeks are both positive and negative. On the negative side, I have received messages from members and pastors who share with me their concern over members of their church who have been influenced by the new anti-Sabbath literature produced by former sabbatarians. It is evident that the so-called "New Covenant theology" which negates the continuity and validity of the Sabbath for Christians today, is finding its way in our churches.

For example, Pastor Joe Mallison from Hollister, California, emailed me a message about an influential Adventist medical doctor of his church. He says: "I just found out a few days ago that he [the medical doctor] has been studying with a protestant pastor who shared Dale Ratzlaff's book [*The Sabbath in Crisis*] on the Sabbath with him. Now the doctor is going to the other church full time and is very involved in their fellowship. I spoke to him and he says that, when he finishes Ratzlaff's book, he is going to read one from a man named Bacchiocchi about the Sabbath." (used by permission).

Pastor Mallison ordered immediately 22 copies of my latest book *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*, one of which he already gave to the doctor who has promised to contact me after reading the book. I look forward to help this doctor. Let us keep him in our prayers. Feel free to contact us if you or your church need copies of *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*. You will find that the book provides a comprehensive and compelling Biblical refutation of the anti-Sabbath arguments, besides helping people to discover the Sabbath as a day of joyful celebration of God's creative and redemptive love.

On the positive side, I received an encouraging email message from an Adventist sister serving in China. She says that someone received a copy of *The Sabbath Under Crossfire* which is already translated and distributed into Chinese. "Because of this," she writes, "the Holy Spirit has been working and some Sunday Christians have already moved to the SDA Church."

It might be of interest to some of our members to learn that in China there is a well-known Sabbatarian church, called "The True Jesus Church." It was established in 1917 in Beijing, China, by Paul Wei, Ling-Shen Chang, and Barnabas Chung, who had been affiliated with Sundaykeeping denominations. They claim to have received the complete truth regarding salvation through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Sabbath observance is one of their fundamental beliefs, as stated in the list of their basic beliefs: "The Sabbath Day, the seventh day of the week (Saturday), is a holy day, blessed and sanctified by God. It is to be observed under the Lord's grace for the commemoration of God's creation and redemption, and with the hope of eternal rest."

Although the True Jesus Church originated in China, its mission has spread to the South Pacific, South-East Asia, and other parts of the world, including Russia. At present it has approximately 1,000,000 members in China and 79,000 members in the free world. For further information, you may wish to visit their web site which you can access simply by typing in your browser: True Jesus Church.

## **THE GOOD NEWS OF THE SABBATH**

A PERSONAL NOTE: For the sake of those whose internet provider rejects documents longer than 50K, I am not posting the notes of this essay. You can find the footnotes apparatus as well as a more comprehensive presentation of the theological meanings of the Sabbath, in chapter 5 of *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*, and in chapter 4 of *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*.

You may feel that this Bible study lacks balance, because it gives far more coverage to the redemptive meaning of the Sabbath, than to its creational and restorative aspects. The reason for this intentional unbalance is the simple fact that the linkage between the Sabbath and the Savior is largely unknown to most Adventists. Thus, I felt that this aspect of the Sabbath needed to be explained more fully.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Sabbath means different things to different people. To some the Sabbath is *Good News* of joyful celebration of God's creative and redemptive love. To others it is *Bad News* of restrictive impositions and/or bondage to the law.

The **legalist** sees the Sabbath primarily as a commandment that must be observed in order to be saved. He views the interruption that the Sabbath brings to his life like a bitter medicine that must be swallowed in order to get well. Consequently for the legalist the Sabbath is not a day of celebration of God's creative and redemptive love, but rather a day of gloom and frustration because of the things that cannot be done on this day. He counts the hours of the Sabbath like the astronaut counts the seconds preceding the firing of his spacecraft: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0. Sunset! Take off to some exciting activity to burn up the repression and depression of the Sabbath.

The **materialist** views the Sabbath (or Sunday for that matter) as a day of "solemn" rest but to himself rather than to the Lord. It is a day to seek personal profit or pleasure rather than divine peace and presence.

The **antinomian** interprets Sabbathkeeping as a sign of bondage to the law. He interprets the freedom of the Gospel as freedom to keep the Sabbath on any weekday (pan-Sabbatism). But the theory that each weekday is a Sabbath in practice results on each Sabbath being a week day. Ultimately no real worship is offered to God because nothing really matters.

The **Christian** who loves the Savior experiences the Sabbath as a day of joyful celebration: a day to celebrate the Good News of God's marvelous accomplishments both in the world and in his/her personal life. It is a human desire to wish to celebrate and share with others the good news of unusual achievements. Players and fans celebrate the winning of a game. A father celebrates the birth of his new born. Students celebrate their graduation. A couple celebrates with their friends their engagement or wedding. A Christian celebrates on the Sabbath the Good News of what God has done, of what He is doing and of what He will do for His people.

In Hebrews 4:2,6 the Sabbath rest is twice presented as the "Good News" or the Gospel (same verb-*evangelizo*) of God's rest for His people. Yet for some persons the Sabbath is not Good News but bad news. Why is the Sabbath viewed and experienced differently by different persons? Principally because of different understandings and acceptance of the message of the Sabbath. Obviously a person cannot joyfully celebrate the Sabbath if he or she does not know what is there to celebrate.

Our family landed in the USA on July 4, 1974, the day when Americans celebrate the signing of their Declaration of Independence. We needed to clear our car through customs but everything was closed. We spent that day in a motel in a mood of frustration rather than enjoying the spirit of celebration. Why? Primarily because we did not fully understand and accept the significance of the event. Frankly, we were more interested in the signing of our custom declaration than in the signing of the American declaration of independence. In the same way, a person who does not understand and accept the Good News of the Sabbath, cannot joyfully celebrate the Sabbath and experience its blessings.

To help us understand and experience more fully the message and blessings of the Sabbath, we shall briefly examine in this newsletter the three basic glad tidings which the Sabbath contains and proclaims: (1) Perfect Creation, (2) Complete Redemption, (3) Final Restoration. A more comprehensive study of these messages is found in my books *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* and *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*. Greater coverage is given to the redemptive meaning and function of the Sabbath, since this aspect of the Sabbath is largely ignored in Adventist literature.

## **1. THE SABBATH: GOOD NEWS OF PERFECT CREATION**

The first good news the Sabbath proclaims is that *God created this world and all its creatures in a perfect and complete manner*. This message is first presented in a most emphatic way in the creation story (Gen 1:1-2:3) by means of three effective literary

devices: (1) the use of the number seven, (2) the emphatic use of words, and (3) the imagery of the rest of God.

**The Number Seven.** The number seven is used both to structure the creation story in *seven parts*, that is, according to the seven days of Creation, and to relate many details of the story. The creation story is arranged in seven sections, each divided by the recurring sentence "and there was evening and there was morning, one day . . . a second day. . . a third day." The climactic moment is the seventh day which is repeated 3 times (Gen 2:2-3) to emphasize its function as the goal, conclusion, perfection of the whole creation.

Several details of the creation are also given in seven or multiples. For example, in Hebrew, there are *seven* words in Genesis 1:1 and *fourteen-twice seven* in verse two. The name of God (*Elohim*) occurs *thirty five* times, that is *five times seven*; earth (*'eres*) *twenty one* times, that is *three times seven*; light (*'or*) occurs *seven* times in the account of the fourth day (Gen 1:14-18); the expression *it was good* also occurs *seven* times (the last time is *very good*-Gen 1:31).

The structure as well as many of the details of the creation story are based upon the number seven and its multiples, because the number seven signifies *totality, completion* and *perfection*. Thus its repeated use in the creation story heightens the role of the seventh day as the memorial of God's complete and perfect creation.

**The Emphatic use of Words.** In the account of the establishment of the Sabbath given in Genesis 2:1-3, four words have the highest frequency, namely, *God, Seventh Day, Work, Done*. Each of these words occurs *three times*, because they are central to the message of the passage, namely, that *God* on the *Seventh Day* proclaimed His *work done, done, done*.

**The Imagery of the Rest of God.** To dramatize the perfection and completion of His creation, the Scripture tells us that God rested (Gen 2:2-3). Obviously God was not tired. God "does not faint or grow weary" (Is 40:28). In fact, the Hebrew verb (*shabat*) does not mean that God took a rest to recover from exhaustion but rather that "He stopped or ceased creating." Why? To testify by this dramatic action-by desisting from creating-that He regarded His creation "very good" and perfectly satisfying. There was no need for additional touches to improve His workmanship, because all came up to His expectations.

The first glad tidings the Sabbath proclaims is then a message of reassurance from God that this world and all its creatures came into existence not in a deformed state by chance but in a perfect way by the personal act of God. This message is indeed *Good News*. It gives us the reassurance that our ancestral roots are good because they are rooted in God Himself from creation to eternity. It reassures us that in spite of its apparent futility and tragedy, our life has meaning, value, and hope because it proceeds from and moves toward a glorious destiny with God.

## 2. THE SABBATH: GOOD NEWS OF COMPLETE REDEMPTION

A second significant message of glad tidings the Sabbath proclaims is that *God has redeemed us completely through Jesus Christ*. The human heart longs for a constant assurance of divine redemption from the reality of sin and death. We want to be reassured that God has indeed saved us. A vital function of the Sabbath in the history of salvation has been to provide this reassurance of divine redemption.

In the Old Testament the Sabbath served to nourish the hope and faith of God's people in the messianic redemption to come. In the New Testament it enables believers to experience the reality of the salvation which has come, while nourishing the hope in the future restoration rest that awaits the people of God (Heb 4:9). For the sake of brevity, we will consider only few of the Sabbath themes that have helped believers to understand and experience the reality of redemption. A fuller treatment of this subject is

found in chapter 4 of *THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE*. The chapter is entitled "The Sabbath and the Savior." A thoughtful reading of this chapter will help you to appreciate more fully the redemptive meaning and function of the Sabbath.

### **The Sabbath and Salvation in the Old Testament**

In Old Testament times the Sabbath served not only to provide personal rest and liberation from the hardship of work and social injustices, but also to nourish the hope for a future Messianic peace, prosperity, and redemption. The latter function was apparently inspired by the role of the Sabbath in God's original creation.

Genesis provides no information on the actual observance of the Sabbath by Adam and Eve before their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Yet the picture of perfection and satisfaction (note the sevenfold repetition of the phrase "it was good") it portrays, especially through the divine blessing and sanctification of the seventh day (Gen 2:3), could easily offer to believers the basis for a vision of the Messianic age.

The parallels and equivalences between the Sabbath of Genesis, Adam's *First Day* after his creation, and the *Last Days* of the Messianic age, though not always explicitly made, are implicitly present in the Biblical and extrabiblical sources.

**Sabbath Peace and Harmony.** The peace and harmony that existed between Adam and the animals at the creation Sabbath will be restored in the Messianic age when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Is 11:6). At that time, according to the same prophet, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea" (Is 11:9).<sup>3</sup> This vision of the earth full of peace and of the knowledge of God in the *Last Days* may well have been inspired by the view of the *First Days*, of which the Sabbath is the epitome.

The latter is suggested by those rabbinical Sabbath regulations which prohibited killing insects or carrying weapons on the Sabbath because the latter represents a foretaste of the world to come. Such a vision of the world to come was inspired by the primordial Sabbath, a day of peace and harmony between the human and sub-human creation.

**Sabbath Delight.** The delight and joy of the Edenic Sabbath inspired also the prophetic vision of the Messianic age. Theodore Friedman notes that "two of the three passages in which Isaiah refers to the Sabbath are linked by the prophet with the end of days (Is 56:1-7; 58:13-14; 66:20-24) . . . it is no mere coincidence that Isaiah employs the words 'delight' (*oneg*) and 'honor' (*kavod*) in his description of both the Sabbath and the end of days (58:13-'And thou shalt call the Sabbath delight . . . and honor it'; 66:11-'And you shall delight in the glow of its honor'). The implication is clear. The delight and joy that will mark the end of days is made available here and not by the Sabbath."

Sabbath delight is expressed in the Jewish tradition by kindling lights on that day. This act, a prerogative of the Jewish woman, is interpreted as symbolic of the extraordinary light that God caused to shine out for 36 hours in consideration for the Sabbath, that is, from Friday morning to Saturday night.

The redemptive role of the primordial Sabbath in the Jewish tradition is impressive. Being viewed as the symbol of primordial redemption from chaos to a perfect cosmos, the Sabbath could effectively typify the future Messianic restoration. The tradition of kindling lights on the Sabbath was symbolically linked both to the supernatural light that shone during the first Sabbath upon Adam as an assurance of salvation and of the extraordinary light of the Messianic age.

The prophets envision the appearance of refulgent light during the latter days: "Moreover the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of the seven days" (Is 30:26). The comparison with "*the light*

*of the seven days*" is presumably an allusion to the seven days of creation, which, according to an ancient Midrash (Jewish commentary), were bathed by extraordinary light more brilliant than the sun.

The prophetic vision of the extraordinary light of the Messianic age (Zech 14:7) most probably derives from the notion of the supernatural light experienced by Adam on the first Sabbath-light which, according to Jewish tradition, disappeared at the close of the creation Sabbath because of his disobedience, but which is to reappear in the Messianic age.

**Sabbath Rest.** The theme of Sabbath rest (*menuhah*) which to "the biblical mind," as Abraham Joshua Heschel explains, "is the same as happiness and stillness, as peace and harmony," has served as an effective typology of the Messianic age, often known as the "end of days" or "world-to-come."

In the Old Testament the notion of "rest" is utilized to express both national and messianic aspirations. As a national aspiration, the Sabbath rest served to typify a peaceful life in a land of rest (Deut 12:9; 25:19; Is 14:3), where the king would give to the people "rest from all enemies" (2 Sam 7:1) and where God would find His "resting place" among His people and especially in His sanctuary at Zion (2 Chron 6:41; 1 Chron 23:25; Ps 132:8, 13, 14; Is 66:1).

The connection between Sabbath rest and national rest is found not only in rabbinical literature, but also in Hebrews 4:4, 6, 8, where the author speaks of the creation Sabbath rest as the symbol of the promised entrance into the land of Canaan. Because of disobedience the wilderness generation "failed to enter" (v. 6) into the land of rest typified by the Sabbath.

The fact that the blessings of the Sabbath rest were never realized as a political condition of rest and peace, challenged God's people to look for their future fulfillment at and through the coming of the Messiah. In the Jewish literature we find numerous examples where the Sabbath rest and the septenary structure of time are used to signify the rest, peace, and redemption of the messianic age.

For example, the *Babylonian Talmud* says "Our Rabbis taught: at the conclusion of the Sabbath the son of David will come. Rabbi Joseph demurred: But so many Sabbaths have passed, yet has he not come!" The age of the Messiah is often described as a time of Sabbatical rest. At the end of the *Mishnah Tamid* we read: "A Psalm, a song for the Sabbath day—a song for the time to come, for the day that is all Sabbath rest in the eternal life." The rest experience of the Sabbath served to nourish the hope of the future Messianic peace and rest. The messianic redemption came to be viewed, as stated in the *Mishnah*, as "all Sabbath and rest in the life everlasting."

**Sabbath Liberation.** The freedom, release, and liberation which the weekly and annual Sabbaths were designed to grant to every member of the Hebrew society, also have served as effective types of Messianic redemption.

In the Deuteronomic version of the Fourth Commandment, the Sabbath is explicitly linked to the Exodus liberation by means of the "remembrance clause": "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 an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath" (Deut 5:15).

The connection between the Sabbath and the Exodus deliverance may explain why the Sabbath became ideologically connected with the Passover, the annual celebration of the deliverance from Egypt. In a sense, the Sabbath came to be viewed as a "little Passover."

The Sabbath was a real liberator of the Hebrew society by providing a release from the hardship of life and social inequalities, not only every seventh day, but also

every seventh year, on the Sabbatical year (Lev 25:8), and every "seven sabbaths of years," on the jubilee year (Lev 25:8). At these annual institutions the Sabbath truly became the liberator of the oppressed in the Hebrew society. The land was to lie fallow, to provide free produce for the dispossessed and animals. The slaves were emancipated and the debts owed by fellow citizens were remitted. Though seldom observed, these annual Sabbaths served to announce the future liberation and redemption to be brought about by the Messiah. One reason for the messianic function of the Sabbath years is to be found in their messianic features.

For example, the annual Sabbaths promised *release* from personal debts and slavery. Such a *release* provided an effective imagery to typify the expected Messianic deliverance (Is 61:1-3, 7; 40:2).<sup>19</sup> In his dissertation on *The Jubiliary Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, Robert Sloan shows how the New Testament concept of forgiveness ("*aphesis*") is derived largely from the release from financial indebtedness and social injustices of the annual Sabbaths. These are referred to as "the release," "the Lord's release," "the year of release" (Deut 15:1, 2, 9; 31:10; Lev 25:10).

In the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) the Hebrew term for "release" *deror*, is translated as *aphesis*-"release," which is the New Testament word for "forgiveness." The Lord's Prayer's phrase "*forgive us our debts*" (Matt 6:12) derives from the release from financial indebtedness of the annual Sabbaths. The sabbatical release from financial indebtedness and social injustices came to be viewed as the prefiguration of the future messianic release from the moral indebtedness of sin.

An example is Isaiah 61:1-3 where the prophet employs the imagery of the sabbatical release to describe the mission of the Messiah, who would bring jubiliary amnesty and release from captivity. Soon we shall see how Christ utilized this very imagery of the sabbatical release to announce and explain the nature of His redemptive mission.

**Sabbatical Structure of Time.** The unique Messianic features of the Sabbath years inspired also the use of the sabbatical structure of time to measure the waiting time of Messianic redemption. Some scholars call this phenomenon "sabbatical Messianism" or "chronomessianism.."

The classical place of Sabbatical Messianism is found in Daniel 9, where two Sabbatical periods are given. The first consists of the 70 years prophecy (Jer 29:10) regarding the time to *national restoration* of the Jews (Dan 9:3-19) and is made up of 10 sabbatical years (10 x 7). The second period consists of "seventy weeks (*shabuim*)"-technically "seventy sabbatical cycles"-which lead to *Messianic redemption* (Dan 9:24-27). This sabbatical messianism is frequently found in later Jewish literature. For example, the Talmud says: "Elijah said to Rab Judah . . . 'The world shall exist not less than eighty-five jubilees, and in the last jubilee the son of David will come.'"

**Conclusion.** This brief survey of Old Testament Sabbath themes has shown that in Old Testament times the weekly and annual Sabbaths have served not only to provide physical rest and liberation from social injustices, but also to epitomize and nourish the hope of future Messianic redemption.

Rabbi Heschel captures vividly the Old Testament messianic typology of the Sabbath in his classic book *The Sabbath: Its meaning for Modern Man*. He writes: "Zion is in ruins, Jerusalem lies in the dust. All week there is only hope of redemption. But when the Sabbath is entering the world, man is touched by a moment of actual redemption; as if for a moment the spirit of the Messiah moved over the face of the earth."

## **The Sabbath and Redemption in the New Testament**

The fact that the Sabbath served to nourish the hope of Messianic redemption in Old Testament times it helps us appreciate the relationship between the Sabbath and the Savior in the New Testament. To explore this theme we now examine some Sabbath passages found in Luke, Matthew, and John.

## 1. The Sabbath in Luke

**Nazareth Address.** Luke introduces Christ as an habitual Sabbathkeeper ("as his custom was"-4:16) who delivered His inaugural address in the synagogue of Nazareth on a Sabbath day, by reading and commenting upon a sabbatical passage drawn mostly from Isaiah 61:1-3 (also 58:6): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18).

We noted earlier that in this passage Isaiah announces the mission of the Messiah through the imagery of the liberation of the Sabbath years. The Lord undoubtedly must have startled the congregation when He briefly but emphatically commented on this text by claiming to be the fulfillment of the Messianic Redemption promised by Isaiah through the Sabbatical year. The Savior said: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). In other words, Christ presented Himself to the people as the very fulfillment of their Messianic expectations which had been nourished by the experience of the Sabbath peace, rest and liberation.

The theme of *promise* and *fulfillment* is recurrent in all the Gospels, including Luke (Luke 24:44; cf. 24:26-27). How does the Sabbath fit into this theme? Let us look for an answer in the Sabbath teaching and ministry of Christ.

**Early Sabbath Healings.** Christ's announcement of His Messiahship (Luke 4:16-21) is followed in Luke by two Sabbath healing episodes. The first took place in the synagogue of Capernaum during a Sabbath service and resulted in the *spiritual* healing of a demon-possessed man (Luke 4:31-37; Mark 1:21-28).

The second healing was accomplished immediately after the religious service in Simon's house and brought about the *physical* restoration of Simon's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39; Mark 1:29-31). The result of the latter was *rejoicing* for the whole family and *service*: "immediately she rose and *served* them" (Luke 4:39).

The themes of *liberation*, *joy*, and *service* which are present in an embryonic form in these first healing acts are more explicitly associated with the meaning of the Sabbath in the subsequent ministry of Christ.

**The Crippled Woman.** The healing of the crippled woman, reported only by Luke, further clarifies the relationship between the Sabbath and the Savior's saving ministry. In the brief narrative (Luke 13:10-17) the Greek verb *luein*, usually translated "to free, to untie, to loose," is used by the Lord *three* times, thus suggesting *intentional* rather than *accidental* usage of the term.

The first time the verb is used by Christ in addressing the woman, "you are *freed* from your infirmity" (13:12).<sup>2</sup> Twice again the verb is used by Christ to respond to the indignation of the ruler of the synagogue: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath *untie* his ox or his ass from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be *loosed* from this bond on the Sabbath day?" (13:15-16).<sup>3</sup>

Arguing from a minor to a major case, Christ shows how the Sabbath had been paradoxically distorted. An ox or an ass could be legitimately *untied* on the Sabbath for drinking purposes (possibly because a day without water would result in loss of weight and thus of market value), but a suffering woman could not be released on such a day from the shackles of her physical and spiritual infirmity.

Christ acted deliberately against prevailing misconceptions in order to restore the day to God's intended purpose. It should be noted that in this as well as in all other Sabbath healings, Christ is not questioning the validity of the Sabbath commandment,

but rather He argues for its true values which had been largely obscured by the accumulation of traditions and countless regulations.

**Sabbath Redemption.** The imagery of loosing on the Sabbath a victim bound by Satan's bonds (Luke 13:16) recalls Christ's announcement of His mission "to proclaim *release* to the captives . . . to set as *liberty* those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18).<sup>4</sup> Does not Jesus' act of freeing a daughter of Abraham from her physical and spiritual bonds on the Sabbath, exemplify how the liberation of the messianic Sabbath was being fulfilled (Luke 4:21)?

The connection between the two is recognized, for example, by Paul K. Jewett who rightly observes: "We have in Jesus' healings on the Sabbath, not only acts of love, compassion, and mercy, but true 'sabbatical acts,' acts which show that the messianic Sabbath, the fulfillment of the Sabbath rest of the Old Testament, has broken into our world. Therefore, the Sabbath, of all days, is the most appropriate for healing."

Healing people such as the Crippled Woman are not merely acts of love and compassion but true "sabbatical acts" which reveal how the messianic redemption typified and promised by the Sabbath was being fulfilled through Christ's saving ministry. For all the people blessed by Christ's Sabbath ministry, the day became the memorial of the healing of their bodies and souls, the exodus from the bonds of Satan into the freedom of the Savior.

## 2. The Sabbath in Matthew

**The Savior's Rest.** Matthew connects *temporally* two Sabbath episodes (Matt 12:1-14) to Jesus' offer of His rest: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28-30).

To understand the nature of the Savior's rest, it is important to remember that the Sabbath rest in Old Testament times served to nourish the hope of messianic redemption. The messianic age was expected to be "wholly Sabbath and *rest* in the life everlasting." In the light of the existing messianic understanding of the Sabbath rest, by offering His rest Christ disclosed Himself as the Messiah who was to bring the peace and rest typified by the Sabbath.

**The Savior's Rest and the Sabbath.** The connection between Jesus' rest and the Sabbath is also indicated in Matthew by the placement of the former (11:28-30) in the immediate context of two Sabbath episodes (12:1-14). The two are connected, as noted by several scholars, not only *structurally* but also *temporally* by the phrase "at that time" (12:1).<sup>8</sup> The time referred to is a Sabbath day when Jesus and the disciples went through a field.

The theological connection between the Savior's rest and the Sabbath is clarified by the two Sabbath episodes. The first story about the disciples plucking ears of corn on a Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8) interprets Jesus' rest as redemption-rest, especially through Christ's appeal to the example of the priests who worked intensively on the Sabbath in the Temple and yet were "guiltless" (Matt 12:5).

The priests were "guiltless," though offering more services and sacrifices on the Sabbath (Num 28:8, 9), because of the redemptive nature of their Sabbath services. Christ finds in the redemptive work performed typologically by the priests on the Sabbath a valid basis to justify His own Sabbath ministry because He views it as "something greater than the temple" (Matt 12:6). The redemption offered *typologically* through the Temple services and sacrifices performed by the priests<sup>9</sup> is now being provided *realistically* through the saving mission of the Son of Man, the Messiah.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, just as the priests were "guiltless" in performing their Sabbath services in the Temple, so were Jesus' disciples in serving the One who is greater than the Temple.

The second episode about the healing of the man with the withered hand (Matt 12:9-14) points to messianic healing and restoration typified by the Sabbath. As Donald A. Carson points out, the healing of the man with the withered hand "pictures Jesus performing a messianic healing on that day. Is this not part and parcel of Matthew's fulfillment motifs? The rest to which the Sabbath had always pointed now was dawning."

Summing up, in Matthew the Old Testament Sabbath rest is seen as being actualized by Christ who offers to His followers the messianic rest. The two Sabbath episodes reported by Matthew qualify the meaning of the Sabbath rest, as messianic *redemption* and *restoration*.

It is noteworthy that all of the seven Sabbath healings reported in the Gospels are performed by Christ on behalf of chronically sick persons. These intentional healing acts performed by Christ on the Sabbath on behalf of incurable persons serve to demonstrate how Jesus fulfilled messianic expectations nourished by the celebration of the Sabbath.

### 3. The Sabbath in John

In the Gospel of John, the relationship between the Sabbath and Christ's work of salvation can be seen in two Sabbath miracles, namely, the healing of the paralytic (John 5:1-18) and of the blind man (John 9:1-41). To refute the charge of Sabbath-breaking for having instructed the paralytic to carry his bedding home, Christ made a memorable statement: "My Father is working until now and I am working" (John 5:17).

Does the "working until now" of the Father represent a *negation* or a *clarification* of the Sabbath law? To answer this question, let us consider the meaning of the adverb "until now," the significance of the verb "is working" and the theological implications of the passage.

**The Adverb "Until Now."** Traditionally the adverbial phrase "until now" has been interpreted as the *continuous* working of God (whether it be in creation, preservation, or redemption) which allegedly overrides or rescinds the Sabbath law. But the adverb itself ("until"), especially as used in Greek in its emphatic position before the verb, presupposes not *constancy* but *culmination*. The latter is brought out by some translators through the use of the emphatic form "even until now."

This adverbial phrase presupposes a beginning (*terminus a quo*) and an end (*terminus ad quem*). The former is the initial creation Sabbath (Gen 2:2-3) and the latter the final Sabbath rest envisaged in a similar Sabbath pronouncement as the "night . . . when no one can work" (John 9:4). What Jesus is saying, then, is that God rested on the Sabbath at the completion of creation, but because of sin He has been "working until now" to bring the promised Sabbath rest to fruition.

**The Verb "Is Working."** The meaning of the verb "is working" until now of the Father is clarified by John's references to the working and works of God, which are repeatedly and explicitly identified, not with a continuous divine creation nor with a constant maintenance of the universe, but with the saving mission of Christ.

Jesus explicitly states: "This is the *work* of God, that you *believe* in him whom he has sent" (6:29).<sup>15</sup> And again, "If I am not doing the *works* of my Father, then do not *believe* me; but if I do them, even though you do not *believe* me, *believe the works*, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:37, 38; cf. 4:34; 14:11; 15:24).

God ended on the Sabbath His *works of creation* but not His *working in general*. Because of sin, He has been engaged in the work of redemption "until now." To use the words of A. T. Lincoln, one might say, "As regards the work of creation God's rest was final, but as that rest was meant for humanity to enjoy, when it was disturbed by sin, God worked in history to accomplish his original purpose."

**Theological Implications.** Christ appeals to the "working" of His Father not to nullify but clarify the function of the Sabbath. To understand Christ's defense, one needs to remember that the Sabbath is linked both to *creation* (Gen 2:2-3; Ex 20:11), and *redemption* (Deut 5:15).

While by interrupting all secular activities the Israelite was remembering the Creator-God, by acting mercifully toward fellow-beings he was imitating the Redeemer-God. This was true, not only in the life of the people in general who on the Sabbath were to be compassionate toward the less fortunate, but especially in the service of the priest who could legitimately perform on the Sabbath works forbidden to other Israelites, because such works had a redemptive function.

On the basis of this theology of the Sabbath admitted by the Jews, Christ defends the legality of the "working" that He and His Father perform on the Sabbath. In John Christ appeals to the example of circumcision to silence the echo of the controversy over the healing of the paralytic (John 7:22-24). The Lord argues that if it is legitimate on the Sabbath for the priests to care for one small part of man's body (according to rabbinic reckoning circumcision involved one of man's 248 members) in order to extend to the newborn child the salvation of the covenant, there is no reason to be "angry" with Him for restoring on that day the "*whole body* of man" (John 7:23).

For Christ the Sabbath is the day to work for the redemption of the *whole* man. This is borne out by the fact that in both healings, Christ looked for the healed men on the same day and having found them, He ministered to their spiritual need (John 5:14; 9:35-38).

Christ's opponents cannot perceive the redemptive nature of His Sabbath ministry because they "judge by appearances" (John 7:24). For them the pallet and the clay are more important than the social reunion (John 5:10) and the restoration of sight (John 9:14) which those objects symbolized. It was therefore necessary for Christ to act against prevailing misconceptions in order to restore the Sabbath to its positive function.

The foregoing considerations indicate that the two Sabbath healings reported by John substantiate the redemptive meaning of the Sabbath we found earlier in Luke and Matthew, namely, a time to experience and share the blessings of salvation accomplished by Christ.

#### **4. The Manner of Sabbathkeeping**

The redemptive meaning of the Sabbath is reflected in the manner of Sabbathkeeping. The various Sabbath pericopes reported in the Gospels reflect the existence of an ongoing controversy between the Christian congregations and the Jewish synagogues, which in some cases may have been located across the street from one another.

The controversy centered primarily on the manner of Sabbathkeeping. Was the day to be observed primarily as "sacrifice," that is, as an outward fulfillment of the Sabbath law? Or was the Sabbath to be observed as "mercy," that is, as an occasion to show compassion and do good to those in need? (Matt 12:7).

To defend the new Christian understanding of Sabbathkeeping as a day to celebrate messianic redemption by showing "mercy" and doing "good" to those in need, the Evangelists appeal to the example and teaching of Jesus. For example, in the healing of the crippled woman, Luke contrasts two different concepts of Sabbathkeeping: that of the Ruler of the synagogue versus that of Christ. For the Ruler, the Sabbath consisted of rules to obey rather than people to love (Luke 13:14). For Christ, the Sabbath was a day to bring physical and spiritual liberation to needy people (Luke 13:12, 16).

**A Day to Save.** This humanitarian understanding of the Sabbath is expressed also in the episode of the healing of the man with the withered hand, reported by all the three Synoptics (Mark 3:1-6; Matt 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11). In this instance, Jesus responds to the testing question posed by a deputation of Scribes and Pharisees, regarding the legitimacy of healing on the Sabbath by asking a question of principle: "Is it lawful on the sabbath, to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9).

It is noteworthy that in both Mark and Luke Christ substitutes for the verb "to heal" (*therapeuein*), used in the question, the verbs "to do good" (*agathopoiein*) and "to save" (*sozein*). The reason for this change is Christ's concern to include not one type but all kinds of benevolent activities within the intention of the Sabbath law. Such a broad interpretation of the function of the Sabbath finds no parallel in rabbinic concessions.

The new Christian understanding of the Sabbath is attested also in an early document, known as the *Epistle to Diognetus* (dated between A. D. 130-200), where the Jews are charged with "speaking falsely of God" because they claim that "He [God] forbade us to do what is good on the Sabbath-days-how is not this impious?"

The positive humanitarian understanding of Sabbathkeeping is rooted in Christ's fulfillment of the redemptive typology of the Sabbath, which we found brought out in the Gospels in several ways. Viewing the rest and redemption typified by the Old Testament Sabbath as realized by Christ's redemptive mission, New Testament believers regarded Sabbathkeeping as a day to celebrate and experience the Messianic redemption-rest by showing "mercy" and doing "good" to those in need. What this means to us Christians today is that on and through the Sabbath we celebrate not only God's creation by resting, but also Christ's redemption by acting mercifully toward others.

**Completion of Redemption.** Christ's ministry not only began but also ended on a Sabbath day. On that historic Good Friday, the Lord completed his redemptive mission saying "It is finished" (John 19:30) and then resting in the tomb (Luke 23:54-56). 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 limitation 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. 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. It is the day to experience through the physical rest the greater rest of Christ's forgiveness and salvation.

### **3. THE SABBATH: GOOD NEWS OF FINAL RESTORATION**

A third significant message of glad tidings the Sabbath proclaims is the God "*Is working until now*" (John 5:17) *to restore this world to its original perfection.* Christ declared this good news emphatically when healing on a sabbath day a paralytic at the pool of Bethesda. We noted that the Lord explained to those who charged Him with Sabbathbreaking that God on the Sabbath ended His *act* of creation but not his *action* in general. In fact, Christ said, because of sin, God "*Is working until now*" (John 5:17) on the Sabbath to restore this world to its original perfection.

In the Sabbath healing of the blind man recorded in John 9, Christ extends to His followers the invitation to become links of the same redemptive chain, saying: "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work" (v. 4). The "night" apparently refers to the conclusion of the history of salvation, a conclusion which we found implied in the adverbial phrase "until now." Such a conclusion of divine and human redemptive activity would usher in the final Sabbath of which the creation Sabbath was a prototype. To bring about that final Sabbath, the Godhead "is working" for our salvation (John 5:17) but also "we must work" to extend it to others (John 9:4). Thus, on the Sabbath God not only reassures us that He is working for the

restoration of this world, but he also invites us to participate in accomplishing His restoration in our lives and in the lives of others.

In an age when the forces of chaos and disorder appear to prevail, when injustice, greed, violence, corruption, suffering, sickness and death seem to dominate, God through the Sabbath reassures us that we need not fear these destructive forces, because "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb 4:9).

As God's people we need not fear the threat of Y2K, natural and man-made disasters, nuclear or population explosion because the Sabbath reassures us that God is still in control of this world, working out His ultimate purpose. The Sabbath tells us that God has conquered chaos at creation, that He has liberated His people from the bonds of sin and death at the cross and that now He is working to establish a new world where "from Sabbath to Sabbath all flesh shall come to worship before God" (Is 66:23). In that final Sabbath, as eloquently expressed by Augustine, "We shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise."

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