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Delight In The Sabbath

The weekly Sabbath is for Christians a day in which to delight in God's presence

by James McBride

"Sabbath rest" is a concept far removed from the hurly-burly of modern life. The day is, for most, consumed with a round of strenuous (or couch-potato) leisure activity or shopping or visiting - leaving no time for recovery from the weekly grind. Besides, the notion of a day set apart for religious purpose is simply old hat.

But what if you consider Sabbath observance important to your Christian walk? Is it a day to hibernate in gloomy solitude? A day crammed with restriction? What is a Sabbath rest?

The manner of observance of a weekly "holy day" varies from, Bible in hand, staying in bed all day - through to minor adjustments to the normal daily routine. What is a godly balance.?

Brief History of Time

Health experts praise the benefits of a weekly time of rest. It's approximately twenty-four hours of physical recuperation. And certainly Sabbath observance provides that - a charging of our depleted batteries. But there's more to it. For, apart from the physical benefit, Sabbath has no *eternal* value unless we are in a personal relationship with the Lord of the Sabbath.

Jesus Christ is that Lord: "The Son of man is also Lord of the Sabbath: (Luke 6:5). As the Father's representative and executive it was he who was instrumental in creating the material universe and the creation of time itself. Writing of Jesus, the apostle Paul told the Colossian Christians: "...by him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible-...and he is before all things and by him all things consist" (ch 1:14-17)

We owe our very continuing existence to God's creative power manifested through Jesus. The laws by which we live and breathe are sustained by him: "You alone are the LORD. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them. And you preserve them all" (Nehemiah 9:6).

And as a reminder, a memorial, of such incredible power and authority, God gave us the seventh day - a day to

acknowledge the Source of our being, a day for refreshment from daily labor, a day to meet with our Creator in a personal relationship just as He met with Adam upon his creation.

A Day of Joy

Certainly such a memorial must encourage a joyful response. Yet many believers dread the approach of the Day! It's traditionally dourly viewed as merely a time of boring inactivity punctuated by a church visit followed by the long-awaited end of the day. Others will invest the day with an endless round of "don'ts" to the extent of suppressing the joy of Sabbath.

Whatever way observed it is a personal matter between each of us and our Creator. What guidance has He given us in the Scriptures as to its observance?

Sabbath is *a day of God's appointment* - a day *He* has set aside to meet with His people. It will be useful to note what God has said about this day. To Moses He said: "...the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, *a holy convocation* (Heb *miqra*)" (Leviticus 23:3). That is, a separated day for assembling in His presence. And as the Almighty Creator *He* determines the time and the day! He tells us, too, the attitude we ought to have on Sabbath.

Following their seventy years of serfdom in Babylon (imposed by God for Sabbath neglect!) the Jews returned chastened to the land of Israel. They protected the Sabbath by numerous regulations (included in their Oral Law), many of which went contrary to the divine intent of Sabbath observance. *Joy* was largely emptied from this special Day!

God set the Sabbath aside for rest: "...in it you shall do no work" (Exodus 20:10). To fulfill this, the Pharisees minutely defined "work". It was forbidden to pluck a head of grain, for example (Matthew 12:1ff) - that's harvesting. But it was permitted on the Sabbath to circumcise, which is work for someone (John 7:22). Permitted also to attend to distressed animals (Luke 13:15, 14:5) - a logical exception. For the Pharisees the day of joy had become a burdensome ball and chain - eased only by the addition of humanly - devised circumventions.

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Made For Man

By contrast, how does the Creator of the Sabbath expect us to spend this precious twenty-four hours? Through the prophet Isaiah God makes it crystal clear: "If you refrain from doing your own business on the Sabbath, on my sacred day, and hold the Sabbath a delight, and the Eternal's sacred day an honor, not following your own wonted round, not doing business and not talking idly, then you shall have delight in the Eternal's favor" (*ch* 58:13-14, Moffatt).

God wants us to enjoy His Day!

Jesus picked up on the same theme. He saw no conflict when the disciples plucked some grain on the Sabbath. (This wasn't theft but was permitted in the Law, though the Pharisees said 'not on the Sabbath'!) He accepted the Pharisees right to circumcise and to attend to the needs of livestock. In essence, Jesus made it clear that "the Sabbath was made [created] for man" - ie, for our benefit (Mark 2:27). He cited the fact that the divine Law permitted the priestly work to proceed on the Sabbath. He cites also the example of the starving David and his men. [*NB* This was a one-off emergency situation!] They ate the shewbread - forbidden to all but the priests. Jesus refers here to the Jewish oral tradition (based on Leviticus 24:8) that the loaves were baked on the Sabbath, and that it was on this day David ate it.

From this incident, Jesus draws the conclusion that "the son of man is lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). Sabbath is our servant - for physical re-creation, and above all to provide spiritual nourishment through our contact with its Creator. In a special sense, Jesus Christ is with each of his brethren on that appointed day.

Adam was created in the dying hours of the sixth day, and although he didn't need a physical rest, he stepped right into joyful Sabbath communion with his Creator. That's the fundamental purpose of Sabbath.

Clear The Decks

Sabbath, then, is indeed a time for physical rest. It's a day for joyful celebration. It's a day to spend extra time with our heavenly Father and our Savior in prayer and in perusing God's Word in depth. It's a time for fellowship, where possible, with brethren. It's even a time, following the example of Jesus, to "stroll through the corn-field". And to enjoy these benefits to the full we should "clear the decks" by preparing for it on the day before.

The vast majority of mankind, of course, treads all over God's holy day without a thought for their Creator. They will work in restaurants and power stations. They will serve in shops and deliver the milk and the newspapers. The

Sabbath means nothing to them. In a sense that doesn't matter so long as they don't have a personal relationship with their Creator and Savior. Yet they do miss out on the physical and spiritual refreshment that must come high on the 'hierarchy of needs' of *all* mankind.

Are we not glad we can on the Sabbath switch on the power for heat and light and a cuppa? And if away from home can benefit from the services of transport and restaurants and service stations? That we can rest assured the emergency services are at the other end of the 'phone link?

Balanced Choice

Wise King Solomon made a helpful statement which applies well to our keeping of the Sabbath. He wrote: "Do not be overly righteous, nor overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself [*ie* be desolate, miserable]?" (Eccles 7:16). As with life in general, our observance of the Sabbath is a matter of balanced choice. Each Christian must decide how he or she can in their situation best fulfill their weekly appointment with their Creator - in the liberated spirit of the example of Jesus. The observance of the Sabbath day for Christians is *personal*. It's not now a national institution as in ancient Israel.

The Colossian Christians had a thing about how to observe the weekly and annual Sabbaths. They had taken on board the then prevalent austere practices. Paul told them to lighten up! He wrote: "So let no one judge you in food or in drink or regarding a festival or new moon or sabbaths... Therefore if you died, with Christ, from the basic principles of the world why as living in the world do you subject yourselves to regulations - 'do not touch, do not taste, do not handle' - which all concern things which perish with the using, according to *the commandments and doctrines of men*? These indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (*ch* 2:16-23).

The apostle continues by focusing their minds (*ch* 3) on the important issue - through the risen Christ conquering our base human nature. It's largely through or Sabbath contact with the Savior that we can so overcome!

Sabbath, then, is a day for the people of God to rejoice before Him, and a day in which to delight.

[The Biblical day for observing the Sabbath is explained in our article *The Day to Remember* and a more comprehensive study of the Biblical Sabbath is included in our home study course *Bible Basics*. It's available free from any of our addresses.]

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