

19.12.20 SABBATH: EXPERIENCING AND LIVING THE CHARACTER OF GOD

***And He said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.'* Mark 2:27, 28**

The Sabbath is a sign and celebration of God our Creator, our Provider, our Redeemer and our Righteousness. We are called to respond to Him in saving faith, to hear His voice and not harden our hearts (Hebrews 4:7). Every day of our lives we are called to worship Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath – the God who is our perfect Creator, Provider, Redeemer and Righteousness.

God intends that our relationship with Him will lead us to share our share our Sabbath blessings with others. To a restless world, we can point the way to the Saviour who provides rest for all who are weary and heavy laden. In a cruel world our kindness and compassion can reveal to mankind the kindness of God our Saviour.

Time to Be Astonished

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. 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, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. Genesis 2:1-3

At the end of the 6th day, God looks upon His creation – *the heavens, the earth and all the host of them* - and declares it very good. His work of Creation was ended.

God did not rest alone. The Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27) and on their first whole day on planet earth, Adam and Eve were invited to join God's rest. They had nothing to add to God's finished work. Instead, they were to rejoice in His work, worship Him and commune with Him.

Can you imagine the astonishment when Adam and Eve woke to see a perfect creation? They woke to see the face of their Creator God who not only had prepared a perfect world for them, but planned to live in daily fellowship with them.

Today we live after the Fall. But, thank God, we also live after Calvary. Every Sabbath we are called anew to be astonished at the love of God that has redeemed and ransomed a rebellious race and to praise God for His great salvation.

Time for Rediscovery

You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, and commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, by the hand of Moses Your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst. Nehemiah 9:14, 15

After living as slaves of the Egyptians for generations, the children of Israel had lost their knowledge of the God of Israel, His holiness and provision for His people. God redeemed them from Egypt and then, through 40 years of wilderness wandering, provided them with manna, bread from heaven, angels' food.

As in Eden, God provided all they needed for the week in 6 days. They were asked to rest on the Sabbath as an acknowledgement that God was their Provider.

"See! For the Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." Exodus 16:29

Yet, despite the goodness of God, their time in the wilderness was marked by unbelief and rebellion.

They did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation. Yet He had commanded the clouds above, and opened the doors of heaven, had rained down manna on them to eat, and given them of the bread of heaven. Men ate angels' food; He sent them food to the full. Psalm 78:22-25

Time for Learning Priorities

During the times of the kings, the attitude of the children of Israel to the Sabbath often acted as a marker of their commitment to God. Unfaithfulness and unbelief was marked by either irreverence for the Sabbath or following the tradition of Sabbath-keeping with no spiritual relationship to the God they worshipped.

“If you do not obey Me, but walk contrary to Me... your land shall be desolate and your cities waste. As long as it lies desolate it shall rest—for the time it did not rest on your sabbaths when you dwelt in it.” Leviticus 26:32, 34, 35

Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them. Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them’; and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. Ezekiel 20:12, 13

“When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.” Isaiah 1:12-17

Isaiah 58 is a chapter that warns us of the perils of external religion without a heart-relationship with God. In contrast, among the many consequences of turning to God and executing mercy and justice, is a return to true Sabbath-keeping.

“Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’” Isaiah 58:6-9

‘No other institution which was committed to the Jews tended so fully to distinguish them from surrounding nations as did the Sabbath. God designed that its observance should designate them as His worshipers. It was to be a token of their separation from idolatry, and their connection with the true God. But in order to keep the Sabbath holy, men must themselves be holy. Through faith they must become partakers of the righteousness of Christ. When the command was given to Israel, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," the Lord said also to them, "Ye shall be holy men unto Me." Exodus 20:8; 22:31. Only thus could the Sabbath distinguish Israel as the worshipers of God.

As the Jews departed from God, and failed to make the righteousness of Christ their own by faith, the Sabbath lost its significance to them.’ Desire of Ages: p 283

Time for Finding Balance

“Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Matthew 12:12

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a sign of God’s redemption – restoring to mankind holiness, health and true happiness (joy). Christ demonstrated that His mission, His work of *‘preaching the gospel to the poor; healing the broken-hearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18)’* was perfectly compatible with true Sabbath-keeping. (Read the stories in Matt 12:9-13, Mark 2:23-26, Luke 13:10-17, John 5:1-7).

We too can work as Christ did on the Sabbath – not for self-centred reasons, but in self-giving; doing good for others. Thus we too can fulfil the mission of Christ. But our first priority must be to spend time with Christ, before we go to help others on the Sabbath day.

'Christ reiterated the truth that the sacrifices were in themselves of no value. They were a means, and not an end. Their object was to direct men to the Saviour, and thus to bring them into harmony with God. It is the service of love that God values. When this is lacking, the mere round of ceremony is an offense to Him. So with the Sabbath. It was designed to bring men into communion with God; but when the mind was absorbed with wearisome rites, the object of the Sabbath was thwarted. Its mere outward observance was a mockery.' *Ibid: p 286*

'The substitution of the precepts of men for the commandments of God has not ceased. Even among Christians are found institutions and usages that have no better foundation than the traditions of the fathers. Such institutions, resting upon mere human authority, have supplanted those of divine appointment. Men cling to their traditions, and revere their customs, and cherish hatred against those who seek to show them their error... Let all who accept human authority, the customs of the church, or the traditions of the fathers, take heed to the warning conveyed in the words of Christ, "In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.'" *Desire of Ages: p 398*

A Time for Community

While the experience of entering into God's rest is primarily a personal experience between me and my God, it is also important to share that experience with fellow-believers and praise and worship God together for His perfect work for us and in us. In addition, the Sabbath does not bring us just spiritual blessings. The physical blessing of pausing weekly from work and having time to spend privately with God, with family and with other believers brings us physical, mental and social blessings.

We have the great example of Christ Himself, who went to synagogue every Sabbath 'as His custom was'.

And as His custom was, He (Jesus) went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. Luke 4:16

He left us an example of the importance of corporate worship; of worshipping God as a community of believers. We are to reflect the worship and praise of heaven. In heaven, the angels join together to sing and praise God and worship Him for His holiness (see Revelation 4 and 5).

The apostolic church went regularly to the synagogue, met regularly in homes of members to praise God, fellowship and partake in the breaking of bread.

When Paul went on his missionary journeys we are told in the book of Acts that it was his custom to attend the local synagogue – see Acts 13:14, 42; 16:13; 17:1-2; 18:4. He encouraged his flock to meet together regularly to praise and worship God.

In Jesus' time, as in ours, there will be those who come to worship with wrong attitudes and behaviours. Nevertheless, Jesus went regularly to the synagogue, where the leaders of worship were the scribes, the Pharisees and the rabbis, many of whom were scornful of Jesus, and some of whom actively hated Him and His mission.

None of this deterred Jesus and it must not deter us. We go to church, not to focus on others, but to focus on God – to worship Him who is fully worthy of our adoration and praise, for He has redeemed us and is restoring us to the very image of God Himself.

We go to celebrate His love for us and what it means in our lives; celebration is always best enjoyed in community with others who have a similar reason for celebration. We go to encourage and inspire our brothers and sisters in the faith to remain faithful to Jesus, to live in His presence by faith daily and to look forward to that Day when we will see Him face to face.

There are those who think that the coming of Christ has exempted us from worshipping together on the Sabbath day, but Paul is very clear in Hebrews 10:23-25:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:23-25

Conclusion:

God calls us today to continue in His Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:9-11). From week to week, we pause to thank Him and worship Him for His perfect work in creation, in redemption and the assurance that He is perfecting us in faith and love (Hebrews 12:1, 2, 1 John 1:1-3, Philippians 1:6) until that Day when He comes to claim His own.

The Sabbath is our weekly reminder that God calls us to remember what we were created for: Holiness, Health and Joy. His purpose has not changed despite the Fall. Every Sabbath we are called to rest in Him; to rest and acknowledge (remember) His perfectly finished work on earth at Creation, in redemption and sanctification. We rest every Sabbath confident in the sure and certain hope of our glorification at His second coming. This is indeed the rest of God – rest for our souls. And when we enjoy the eternal rest of heaven, we shall meet every Sabbath to declare His praise and worship Him who created, redeemed and re-created us; and Who gave us eternal life and immortality. It will be an everlasting celebration of the God of the everlasting covenant who, when we fell, undertook to restore us to righteousness and eternal life and saved us from eternal death.

'The children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.' Exodus 31:16, 17
