

The Seventh Day

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we come to Genesis 2, and one of those unexplained and unexplainable misplaced chapter divisions which we find so frequently in the uninspired division of our Bibles. The first three verses of Chapter 2 really belong with Chapter 1 and complete the record of the creative week. We must now consider the seventh day of creation.

Yesterday, which was the seventh day of the week, my wife and I attended a Bar Mitzvah service for a Jewish neighbor lad, to hear him conduct the service much as a rabbi would. He read, for the first time, from the scrolls of the Torah, the first five books of Moses. It was very impressive to see the rabbi unlock the ark in which the Torah is kept, bring out the scrolls, unroll them on the table, as Jews have done for centuries, and hear this thirteen-year-old boy read in Hebrew from the scrolls. Then he gave thanks for two things which have been the treasure of Israel for centuries, the Law and the Sabbath.

As you know, the Sabbath is one of the oldest institutions in the world, dating, as the Bible makes clear, from the very earliest appearance of man upon the earth, when God blessed and hallowed the Sabbath. Later, it was part of the Law given to Moses and Israel. Many Christians today are troubled – considerably at times – by the question: “Should we be observing the Sabbath yet today?” There are certain Christian groups who feel that this is the case; in fact they insist that we are not genuine Christians unless we observe the commandment of God to keep the Sabbath continuously. It is those claims that I want to examine now as we look at this record from the book of Genesis for the seventh day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation. {Gen 2:1-3 RSV}

We must try to unfold the riddle of this passage, the hidden mysteries which God delights to hide within these simple words. We will look together at seven facts which will open to us the remarkable truth that is hidden in this strange institution of the Sabbath. It seems strange that after 2000 years of Christian teaching the Sabbath is still little understood, though its true meaning is of crucial importance to us.

1. The most outstandingly noteworthy thing that this passage indicates, which differs completely from the other days of creation is the absence of any reference to an evening or a morning. The record of all the other days of creation closed with the words, “and there was evening and there was morning, (a first, second, etc..) day.” But there is no reference to evening or morning in this passage. This helps to confirm what we have already seen in these “days” of creation: that these “days” do not primarily emphasize time, but development. The evening and morning were indicative of a developing process, beginning in a rather incomplete state and moving toward light. But on this seventh day there is no evening and morning. In fact, twice in this brief passage we find the word, “finished,” occurring. “Thus the heavens the

earth were finished” {Gen 2:1a RSV} and “God finished his work” {Gen 2:2b RSV}. Obviously there is no need for development, no place for it. The work of God is complete on the seventh day, and therefore no evening or morning is mentioned.

Therefore, whatever the Sabbath is (which we will see as we go along), it is a perfect thing. It is always the same whenever we experience it. It is not something to grow into; it is something to step into and to discover it to be exactly what it always is perfect, finished. That is our first clue.

2. Let us now look at the second. It is obvious from this passage that the supreme meaning of sabbath is rest. In fact, the word “seven,” the word “sabbath,” and the word “rest,” are all the same basic word in Hebrew, *Shabat*, seven, sabbath, rest. Therefore, the heart of the meaning of sabbath is rest. That is its primary significance.

Let us not misunderstand that. That does not mean rest as we often think of it. When we have been working hard and are weary and tired we need rest in order to restore our strength. But this is not the significance of the word here. It simply means the ending of activity, the cessation of effort. God was not tired by his creative work, he did not need to rest to restore strength. He did not stop because he was fatigued; he stopped because he was through. The Hawaiians have a very expressive word for it, *pau*. It means finished. He is *pau*, finished; and so he stopped. That is what we do when we are through with something, we stop. And this is what God did. He stopped because he was through. He had done all he intended to do and he rested in the midst of a perfect creation. Therefore the true sabbath, we will learn from this clue, is not the keeping of a special day but the ending of a specific effort. That is what sabbath means.

3. As a third point here, the specific effort from which God rested was creation. The text says, “So ... God rested from all his work which he had done in creation,” {Gen 2:3 RSV}. This is the last account of any creative activity. Man was made and then God rested, and there has been no creation since. Man is the last effort

of God in creation, on the physical level. Therefore this sabbath, this rest upon which God entered, is still continuing today. God is not creating physically today. God is ceaselessly active in many, many ways, but not in creation. In the fifth chapter of John, when Jesus was in the synagogue the Jews were very distressed because he had healed a man on the sabbath day. The Pharisees accused him of breaking the Sabbath and Jesus answered them by saying, “My Father is working until now, and I am working,” {cf, John 5:17 RSV}. His argument was that it was proper for him to do a deed of mercy on the sabbath day because he was simply imitating his Father who was ceaselessly active in mercy and love on his sabbath day, his long rest. God had stopped creating but he was still busy in a thousand different ways. Thus the sabbath means that God’s creative activity has ended.

Even evolutionists acknowledge this. Interestingly enough, many evolutionists admit that man is the end of the evolutionary ladder, and that nothing further has been evolved since the producing of man. We cannot agree with them as to how man came into being, but it is interesting that they agree at this point that there is no further evidence of development beyond man.

4. As a fourth point we must therefore recognize that the weekly sabbath, i.e., Saturday, is not the real sabbath. It never was, and it is not now. It is a picture or a reminder of the real sabbath. The true sabbath is a rest; the Jewish sabbath is a shadow, a picture of that rest. All the Old Testament shadows pointed to Christ. They were predictions, foreviews, of the coming of the One who would fulfill all these remarkable things. Every lamb that was brought as an offering was a shadow of the work of Christ. Every burnt offering, every bit of incense that was offered, was a picture of the fragrance of Jesus Christ. The tabernacle was a shadow of him. The high priest, in his garments and his office, was a shadow of Christ as our High Priest. Read the book of Hebrews and you will see how beautifully all this is brought out. These Old Testament shadows were looking forward to the coming of the One who would fulfill these and thus end them.

When the work of Jesus Christ was finished the shadows were no longer needed.

We behave very similarly today. Some twenty-two years ago when, as a much younger man, I was in Hawaii, I found myself engaged to a lovely girl who lived in Montana and whom I hadn't seen for three or four years. We were writing back and forth in those lonely days, and she sent me her picture. It was a beautiful picture and I showed it to all my friends dozens of times. I propped it up on the desk and I would look at it at least three or four times a day. It was all I had to remind me of her and it served moderately well for that purpose. But one wonderful day she arrived in Hawaii and I saw her face to face. I didn't spend much time with the picture after that, nor have I since. The other day I was cleaning out the garage and ran across the picture. It was still a beautiful picture, and I noted that she had not changed very remarkably since those days, but I found that the picture was quite incomplete and unsatisfying. When the real thing came there was no longer any need for the picture.

This is exactly what happened with these Old Testament shadows, including the Sabbath. When the Lord came, and his work was ended, making possible the true fulfillment of God's intention in the Sabbath, the picture was no longer needed. The weekly sabbath ended at the cross. Paul specifically says this. In the letter to the Colossians he confirms it to us. In Chapter 2, beginning with Verse 13, he says,

And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it [not *him*; *it*, the cross].

Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the

substance belongs to Christ. {Col 2:13-17 RSV}

That should make it clear. This is why the claims of the Seventh Day Adventists, the Seventh Day Baptists, and other groups, that Christians changed the sabbath, are absurd, ridiculous. They claim that the Pope changed the sabbath by a papal edict from Saturday to Sunday, and that around the third or fourth century Christians began to celebrate Sunday rather than Saturday, out of obedience to this papal edict. But nothing could be further from the truth. History does not corroborate that in any degree. The Sabbath has always been Saturday and it always will be. It is the seventh day of the week. Sunday has always been the first day of the week. It has never been a sabbath, and it is pure legalism to call it a sabbath or to treat it as one. It is not a day of rest or restricted activity and it is not designed as such. It is the first day of the week; to Christians, the Lord's day.

The shadow-sabbath ended at the cross, as Paul has made clear. The next day was the day of resurrection, the day when the Lord Jesus came from the tomb. On that day a new day began – the Lord's day. Christians immediately began to observe the Lord's day on the first day of the week. They ceased observing the Sabbath because it was ended by the fulfillment of its reality in the cross, and they began to observe the first day of the week. This is what you find reflected in the book of Acts. Justin Martyr, who writes from the 2nd century, says,

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, when he changed the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ, our Savior, on the same day, rose from the dead.

5. A fifth fact about this: Though this shadow-sabbath, i.e., Saturday observance, ended at the cross, the true sabbath, the rest of God, God's ceasing from effort, continued and still continues today. That sabbath, in its application to us, is defined for us in Hebrews 4, Verses 9 and 10:

So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God [it is available to us now]; for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. {Heb 4:9-10 RSV}

That is what the true sabbath is, to cease from your own labors, your own efforts, your own activity; to cease from your own works.

“Well,” you say, “if I did that I would be nothing but a blob, an immobile inactive piece of flesh.”

Exactly! Of course you would. But the implication is that you cease from your own efforts and depend on the work of Another. That is the whole import of the book of Hebrews, another One is going to work through you. This is why Paul cries, “Not I, but Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me,” {cf, Gal 2:20}. This was also the secret of the life of Jesus, as we have seen. He himself said, “It is the Father who dwells in me who does the work,” {cf, John 14:10}. “The Son can do nothing by himself,” {cf, John 5:19}. This is the secret of the Christian who learns “it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,” {cf, Phil 2:13}. So the secret of true Christian life is to cease from dependence on one's own activity, and to rest in dependence upon the activity of Another who dwells within. That is fulfilling the sabbath, the true sabbath.

That true sabbath, we read in Genesis 2, God blessed and hallowed. As we have already seen in this series, blessing is connected with fruitfulness and dominion. God blessed the animals and said, “Be fruitful and multiply.” He said to man, “Be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over all the earth.” That is what blessing means, to make possible both fruitfulness and dominion. When God “hallowed,” or “sanctified” {KJV}, the sabbath, he assigned it a specific function to perform. That is what sanctification always is – to put to a proper or intended purpose. Thus God designated the true sabbath to the function of producing blessing (fruitfulness and dominion) for man. This is why the Lord Jesus declared, “the sabbath is made for man; not man for the sabbath,” {Mark 2:27}. So the true sabbath rest is to rest on Another, and this is

the divine provision to produce fruitfulness and abundance of victory in a Christian's life.

6. Let us look at that a little closer because that is God's provision for living adequately today. Are you adequate? Do you find yourself able to cope with the situations in life into which you are thrust day after day, moment by moment? Are you confident? Are you capable? Are you panic-proof? Are you filled with fruitfulness, fragrance, abundance? God's rest is designed to produce that. God said it would. He makes it available for that purpose and it is the only thing that will do it; there is no substitute.

I'm afraid most of us fit the self-description of someone who said he was a mouse studying to be a rat. By our best efforts we can rise to a high level of mediocrity – inadequate, unable. Why? Simply because we are depending on our effort. We are either extroverts, confident that we can do things and therefore frequently falling flat on our face; or we are introverts, so afraid to try anything that we don't even dare show our face. It is all because we are looking to ourselves as our resource; our background, our training, our gifts, our talents, our education, etc. It either results in feeling that we have what it takes and can be confident, able, and powerful; or, as we look at ourselves we say, we don't have what it takes and therefore we can't take it and we won't even try. So we become either over-confident and under-equipped, or under-confident and overworked, trying constantly to make up by activity what we lack in results.

God knew that this would be our problem. He understands us. Nothing is hidden from him; he knows exactly the way we operate. Therefore he has designed an adequate provision for our weakness, teaching us how to operate on an entirely different basis, to no longer look to oneself but to look to the one who dwells within; to expect him to do something through you, using your mind, your will, your emotions, your feelings, but it is he who does the work. But unless you begin to count on his working you will never experience it.

7. Right here comes the seventh factor, the one serious problem which remains. Christians say again and again,

- Why is this so difficult to do?
- Why do I have so much trouble?
- Why is it that Hebrews 4:11 goes on to say, "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience."
- Why must we work at this?

Some seem able to learn it, and from time to time we see someone virtually come alive and their Christian life is simply transformed by learning to operate on this principle. They lose their egotism, as extroverts; or they lose their introverted feeling of self-consciousness. They begin to do things and to enjoy them, experiencing the blessing and excitement of Christian living.

Others say, "I see all this, and I want to do it too. I know what is said about how to rest, but I try it and it doesn't work. Why? Why do we fail?" The answer is given, I think, in a word of the Lord Jesus, recorded in Matthew 11, words we well know:

"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 RSV}

Notice that twice in that passage is the word *rest*. One rest is *given*, the other is *found*:

One is experienced when we first come to Jesus Christ. He *gives* us rest. Do you remember when you came to Christ? You simply believed what the Scripture said, that on the cross of Calvary he took your place, he died for you; he bore the punishment for your sin; he was wounded for your transgressions, he was bruised for your iniquity; and you believed that. Immediately there was a sense of peace flooding your heart, a quietness. You felt no more guilt, no more fear of death, no more need for painful efforts to win Brownie points with

God. You were resting on the work of Another. Christ paid it all; you were freely forgiven. What a sense of rest that was! He gave it to you.

But as you went on as a Christian you found that problems began to return and failures came. Your Christian life became boring and dull, barren and uninteresting. You knew something was wrong and you resolved to try harder, to give yourself more fully to Christian activity, to throw yourself into it with more zeal and effort. This you did, and for awhile things went better, then it seemed to ebb out again into the same old thing. You ended up bored and disillusioned, disenchanted, discouraged. What is the answer? Well, it is what our Lord said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, and you will *find* rest," {Matt 11:29-30a RSV}

Back in the days of the old West the oxen teams that came across the prairies were yoked together with a great, wooden yoke, made to fit over the necks of two oxen. A yoke is always made for two, never for one. Jesus was a carpenter, and in the carpenter shop in Nazareth he often made yokes. From this he draws this very apt simile. "Enter into the yoke with me," he says, "you on one side; I on the other." A yoke is also a symbol of servitude, of controlled labor and activity. It means the end of self-service. When an ox is yoked, he is no longer free to do what he wants to do. He is under the direction of the owner, the driver. To be yoked means the end of running his own life and seeking his own way. This is what Jesus means. He did this. "He learned obedience by the things which he suffered," the writer of Hebrews tells us {cf, Heb 5:8}. He learned to do what he did not want to do, because God wanted him to do it. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me," he says {Matt 11:29a RSV}.

When you enter into the yoke with Jesus you expect the Father to take over the program of your life. You may be surprised what he does with it. You no longer have the right to decide what you are going to do with your life. It does not make any difference what time of your life you enter into this yoke, whether you are a youth at the beginning of your adult life, or whether you are a man sixty years old, with a great business depending upon you as the ex-

ecutive head. It does not make any difference. When you enter into the yoke with Jesus Christ you give up the right to determine what your life may be. You expect him to direct you.

It is his job to give the orders, it is his job to make you know what he wants you to do. He may make some dramatic changes, or he may not. He may leave you right where you are, doing what you are doing now, or he may tell you to stop it all, at great cost perhaps, outwardly, and leave it and go some place else to do something else. But one thing is certain, one thing he surely will do, no matter if he sends you some place else or leaves you right where you are – one thing he will certainly do: He will remove you from the spotlight, out of the center of things, he will enroll you in school. And do you know what the curriculum will be? “Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart,” {Matt 11:29b KJV}. He will begin to teach you humility – how not to be the center of attention, how to be content with letting someone else get all the credit. He will enroll you in the school that cancels out ego satisfaction. That is the principle by which the world lives, in its delusion. It is the thing that is destroying human life; the desire to be a god, your own god; to run your life to suit yourself. This can never be for those who are called to be Jesus Christ’s – “you are not your own, you are bought with a price” {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}.

The reason why you cannot enter into the joy and glory and excitement of the rest which God has provided in ceasing from your own activities and resting upon his, is because, in some way or another, you are protecting some area of the ego, the self-life, saying, “This is mine; keep your hands off.” As long as you do that you cannot have rest.

“Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone; but if it die, it brings forth much fruit.” {cf, John 12:24 KJV}

Rest is the secret of human fruitfulness.

As you consent to this, a wonderful thing will begin to happen. You will find rest. Jesus said you would. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find

rest.” {Matt 11:29 KJV}. Rest, with all it implies in terms of fruitfulness and dominion; reigning, ruling, producing that which is worthwhile and satisfying in life. That is the secret of life. This is why Jesus said, “If any man will save his life, he shall lose it. But if he shall lose his life for my sake, he shall find it,” {cf, Matt 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24}. He will find rest, he will fulfill the sabbath for that is what the sabbath is. It is God’s divine provision for us.

This last week I was in a meeting in San Jose with a group of college kids. We were discussing together various aspects of the Christian life and after the meeting closed I was standing with a young man by the fireplace. The room was buzzing with conversation all around us but we were talking quietly together. With great earnestness he told me of the emptiness of his Christian life, despite the fact that he was doing all the things he knew he ought to do. I believed him, too. Yet he was not finding anything of the electric excitement that belongs to a Christian, or of the joy of daily adventure of faith with Jesus Christ. He had no sense of the glory of Christ’s presence in his life, or of the peace that floods the hearts of those who are resting on his activity in them. As we talked together it became apparent that he had made his own plans for his life, had determined what he ought to be, along the lines of his gifts, and was pursuing that program. I said to him, “Perhaps that’s your problem. You see, you don’t have the right to tell God what you ought to be; whether you’re going to be an engineer, or what it is. You don’t have that right any more. You have only the right to come to him and say, ‘Lord, here I am. Now you tell me what you want me to be. You set me in the direction you want me to go.’” Very honestly, he said, “Well, if I did that I’d just end up a drifter. I’d become nothing, I’d just go from place to place. My life would never be worthwhile.” I asked him, “Do you know what is the most worthwhile life that was ever lived on earth? It was that of Jesus of Nazareth and he said that the secret of his life was, ‘I do always those things that please the Father. Where he sends, I will go.’ The program is in his hands, and I am simply fulfilling what he wants me to do. It is up to him whether my life ends up worthwhile or not.”

I do not know what this young man is going to do, but I know that is the secret of finding success in life, a success which is not measured by the

empty standards of the world. In the only judgment that is ever worthwhile, the judgment before the assembled hosts of heaven, when every life is reviewed as to whether it was worth the living, whether it hit the target or not, the secret of a success that will merit the words of Jesus, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," is to learn the rest of God. Anyone who learns that (and to the degree that you learn it) is keeping the sabbath as God intended the sabbath to be kept.

Prayer:

Speak to us, our Father, with those living words which individually suit the message to each heart. Make us to understand ourselves and our relationship to you. Help each one of us to say, with all our heart, "Lord, I acknowledge it. I surrender. I give to you the direction of my life, and I look to you to indicate to me what it will be. Lord, I'm ready to follow, depending upon you to produce in me what you want." In Jesus' name, Amen.

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