

Worship (15) Corporate – The Lord's Day & Gatherings

When we gather on a Sunday, did you ever ask yourself – ‘Why aren't we here on Tuesday, or Thursday? Why are we here on Sunday?’

You may have seen Jewish people walking to synagogue on Friday evenings and on Saturdays. For them, Friday evening to Saturday evening is Shabbat – the ancient Sabbath observed by Israel for almost 4000 years.

Corporate worship has always centred round the one day in the week when believers gathered. For Old Testament Israel, it was the seventh day. For New Testament believers - Jew and Gentile - it increasingly began to be the first day of the week – Sunday.

For centuries, countries influenced by Christianity kept Sunday apart. Shops were closed. Businesses could not operate. Sports were not played – a good example is Olympic athlete, Eric Liddell, on whom the movie *Chariots of Fire* was based. He refused to race on a Sunday.

As believers who believe in corporate worship – we need to understand what the Bible says about the Sabbath, about the Lord's Day and its importance to believers. What is the Sabbath for a believer? What day should we meet on? Seventh Day Adventists tell us Saturday. Some Messianic groups tell us the same thing.

Is there still a Sabbath which we are to observe?

What about working on that day?

In spite of what our culture is doing – what should *we* be doing as believers? The approach I want us to take is to look at what the Sabbath was; what the Sabbath became; what it means for us as Christians.

I. What the Sabbath Was

The first time we encounter something resembling the Sabbath is in **Genesis 2:2-3**. God rested – not in the sense that He was tired, but that He ceased creating and enjoyed the complete creation. But notice – God doesn't tell Adam to observe the Sabbath, or to rest on it – because Adam didn't need to. They were living in a state of tranquillity. So, at this early point – all that the seventh day did was remind man of God – his Creator.

The existence of a week keeps reminding everyone – including evolutionists - God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Why has the world divided its 365 days into seven day weeks – there is no mathematical reason. Seven doesn't divide well into 365. Weeks of five or ten would work much better. Yet every culture has a seven day week.

The next time we find the Sabbath is in Exodus where God now commands Israel to keep the Sabbath. God gave a number of commands as to how this day was to be spent. You were not to continue with regular work, you were not to build a fire, you were not to carry a load, and you were not to buy or sell.

Positively, Israel was to gather at the Tabernacle; a special sacrifice would be made. It was a day for Israel to remember that they had been slaves, but now were delivered by God. How much time off does a slave have?

They were to reflect on their salvation.

The main purpose of the Sabbath for Israel is seen in **Exodus 31:13**. It was a sign. Circumcision was the sign that a Jew was part of the Abrahamic covenant – and keeping the Sabbath was a sign of being part of the Mosaic covenant. It was a day's pause to reflect on being God's covenant people – on God's law, and on how they had not kept it.

By the way, a Sabbath for a Jew was not just the seventh day; it was also all the feasts - Passover, Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Yom Kippur, Tabernacles, Feast of Trumpets, New moons every month, Sabbath Year, Year of Jubilee.

2. What the Sabbath Became

The Sabbath was meant to be special days where Israelites could have time to pause, to reflect, to rejoice in God, to re-dedicate self to Him, without being burdened down by work. But over time, it became something quite burdensome and unhelpful. The scribes, and rabbis, in trying to make sure that people did not transgress the Sabbath laws, started creating more Sabbath commands – supposedly fences built around the original command to prevent people from transgressing.

Soon a list of 39 kinds of activities which were forbidden had been developed. Included were: Sowing, plowing, reaping, selecting, kneading, baking, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying, untying, sewing stitches, tearing, writing two or more letters, erasing two or more letters, building, extinguishing a fire, kindling a fire

All kinds of ridiculous rabbinical arguments and debates went on, and still go on, about the Sabbath. Throw up an object with the right hand and catch it – that was sin. But if you throw it with the right and catch it with the left – that might not be sin. And, if it is food, and you throw it in the air with your hand but catch it in your mouth and eat it – it is not sin because then it no longer exists.

You were not allowed to walk a certain distance; but if you had deposited some food there the previous day, then that doubled the length that you could walk because that was part of home.

This remains so for orthodox Jews - no flipping of a switch, no tearing of paper. You can carry heavy furniture though, but you cannot add more grapes to a container full of grapes. If the refrigerator light was left on before Shabbos, it is forbidden to open the door on Shabbos. If one of them mistakenly opens it, he may not close the door because this will then cause the light to turn off. However, any food or drinks removed from the fridge may be used.

Jesus came into conflict with the Pharisees six times over the Sabbath. Most often, it is obvious He did so deliberately - He was trying to show them:

- [The Sabbath was non-moral. It could be set aside for the priests, for David.
- [Secondly, that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Sabbath was made to help man, not burden him. Rabbinical Judaism had lost the spirit of God's Word.
- [He was Lord of the Sabbath. He had the right to do whatever He wanted on the Sabbath – and He had the right to change it completely. He was bringing in the New Covenant, which would change the observances.

Christians appear to have begun observing Sunday very early.

Acts 20:7 *Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.*

1 Cor. 16:2 *On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.*

Note - *every* week.

Remember, the early Christians were all Jews obeying the Law of Moses – and yet they began to meet on the first day of the week.

3. What the Sabbath Should Be For Christians

The Christian is not bound to the Mosaic Sabbath.

Col 2:16- 17 *Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: ¹⁷ which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ*

Christ is our Sabbath rest.

Heb 4:6-9 *Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief:⁷ Again, He limiteth a certain day, saying in David, Today, after so long a time; as it is said, Today if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.⁸ For if Jesus had given them rest, then would He not afterward have spoken of another day.⁹ There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.*

Jesus, through His death and resurrection, saves us from our own works – from having to work for salvation. When we repent and receive Him, He becomes our everyday, eternal rest.

None of the Jewish apostles ever call on the church to keep the Sabbath. All of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, but not the command to keep the Sabbath.

In fact, Paul said to the Galatians:

Gal 4:9-10 *But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years.*

So, in one sentence, a New Testament Christian, Jew or Gentile is not commanded to keep the Sabbath.

But does that mean there should not be a day that we set apart for the Lord?

We have already seen that the early believers began to meet on the first day of the week. While we are not under the Sabbath law, we can take many of the principles related to the Sabbath and apply it to Sunday.

A day to consecrate

In **Revelation 1**, John refers to that day as ‘The Lord’s Day’.

In **1 Cor. 11:20**, we see the phrase ‘Lord’s Supper’ – a regular meal vs a special meal. You have normal meals to eat in houses – which you do everyday for God’s glory (**1 Cor. 10:31**); and yet there is a special meal – a meal set aside for the Lord.

One day is set aside for the Lord – not to be treated like other days.

The day is different because of how you approach it.

There is anticipation - “What do you think the Word of God will teach us this week? What hymns do you hope will be sung? Maybe Sunday evening you will get to choose one of the hymns.”

There is preparation – clothes are laid out. You return home on a Saturday early enough for everyone to get ‘washed-up’, and you are in bed at a certain hour.

Anticipation and preparation produce greater enjoyment. Think of birthdays, Christmas.

The day is different because of how you spend it.

A consecrated day means you do not do the things you would regularly do. The day is especially for the Lord. Now that does not rule out recreation, rest and enjoyment. But ask yourself – is this recreation rest and enjoyment any different from what you might do on Saturday, or on a public holiday, or on any other day? What is particularly God-centred about your activities?

If you are working as per usual, studying as per usual, watching the same TV and videos, doing the same sports you do on Saturday – it doesn’t sound like much of a different day.

Now, sometimes work is necessary. Sometimes studying is necessary. But the key is – when you lay your head down on your pillow on Sunday night, can you honestly say, ‘This day was given to God?’

3. What are some ways the day can be spent for God?

A day to congregate

They gathered for worship (**Psalm 92**).

The Lord’s Day is particularly a day to gather with God’s people. Gathering with God’s people takes precedence over all other things. Much of the day is to be built around gathering with God’s people.

And, I believe, it is a day to congregate as families too.

As a family, I believe the goal is togetherness. For children to see their parents bow their heads in prayer, to see their parents listening hungrily to the Word, to see them singing God’s praise with joy. The idea is not to be split apart during worship services, but to be together. It is not an excessive expectation for a normal healthy six year-old, who has been taught to obey his parents, to sit quietly for an hour or two on Sunday. It is not an excessive expectation for a normal healthy six year-old, who has been taught to obey his parents, to sit quietly in two Sunday services – morning and evening. It requires discipline and training – but it is part of training children to be submissive and respectful in every way – **I Tim 3:4**. Sometimes it means training to pray quietly before meals at home; or sit quietly while Mom reads a Bible story.

You’d be amazed at how much children absorb. Not everything has to be put on their level for them to benefit. Just because some of it is over their heads does not mean they will not benefit – they will grow into it.

Buy them a Bible. Teach them to take notes. Give them offering money.

Much of the modern mindset is – Sunday is relaxation day, but we have to include church. So let's get church out the way, so we can enjoy Sunday our own way. But that would be to treat Sunday like any other day. The focal point of Sunday is the gathering with God's people. It's the climax.

Now, we believe strongly enough that the whole day is to be given to God, so that we could have a morning service and an evening service. The evening service is not a repeat service for those who sleep in on Sunday. It is finishing off the Lord's Day in the Lord's House.

Do you know that on average – taking Baptist churches in America as an example – you can expect less than 30% of the Sunday morning crowd to return for the Sunday evening service. 70% of the church goes missing. I ask myself – what happens to 70% of the church? Do they all have emergencies – every Sunday? Do they all have unexpected events occurring – every Sunday? No, I am inclined to believe 70% of the church simply doesn't believe the whole day belongs to the Lord. 70% of the church believes that 90 minutes of a Sunday is the Lord's. So it is really the Lord's hour, but not the Lord's Day in any meaningful sense of the term.

There is no Scripture commanding you to gather twice on Sunday. But that's not the spirit of God's people in Scripture.

Psalm 84:10 *For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.*

Psalm 122:1 *I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD."*

Another way to congregate is to show hospitality to one another. Invite one another over on the Lord's Day, enjoy fellowship at home, and edify one another.

A day to celebrate & commemorate

The Lord's Day is overwhelmingly a day to take joy in our God.

What happened on the first day of the week? Resurrection! Resurrection is also liberty from slavery to sin and death. Just like the Israelites could use Sabbath to rejoice that God had liberated them from slavery – this is our day to celebrate our Lord's resurrection, and commemorate His death, with the Lord's Table.

Psalm 118:24 *This is the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it.*

Sunday is a special day – a day to consecrate, and a day to congregate – but it is not a burden, it is a delight.

As we come together, there is joy – joy in our salvation, joy in our God, and joy in His promises. That's why we sing – because we are a people celebrating our God.

Isa 58:13-14 *If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on My holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD, honourable; and shall honour Him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.*

The day is an opportunity to delight in God Himself. But many Christians have not learnt to enjoy direct interaction with God in His word, in praise, or in meditation. So Sunday is just

more time to enjoy TV and magazines and recreation and hobbies and sports; and church is really an unwanted interruption in our pleasure-seeking. Notice, God says – ‘*If you delight in My day, and don’t seek your own selfish pleasures and go your own way on my day,*’ – then what? ‘*Then you will enjoy Me!*’

A day to contemplate

The Lord’s Day is particularly a day to contemplate. There is the Word of God to listen to and consider. You can discuss it as couples, as families, amongst one another.

One way to make sure a sermon is ineffectual is to give it no more attention than the time in which it is preached - don’t talk about it amongst one another, don’t talk about it on the way home, around the dinner table. But what an opportunity it is - a day set apart to consider what God has just said; to make applications – to make changes.

But the Lord’s Day gives you another opportunity. Very often our weeks are hugely busy from beginning to end. That time we are looking for to do some extra reading of the Word, to read a chapter in that Christian book – to do a deeper study of God’s Word – most often eludes us. The Lord’s Day gives us this.

Maybe spend just 30 minutes on a Sunday afternoon, given to further reading; or 20 minutes of memorising.

Maybe you don’t often get time to think about your relationship with the Lord – where it is going, what progress you have made. The Lord’s Day is the day to do that – to contemplate.

It is a day of rest – a day of resting physically, and emotionally.

It isn’t meant to be another burden to you. It is the very opposite. Jesus said,

Mat 11:28-30 “Come to Me, all who labour 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.”

Christ is our rest. And the Lord’s Day – when lived for Him gives you spiritual rest. It is a day to consecrate to Him; a day to congregate together; a day to celebrate and commemorate Christ’s death and resurrection; a day to contemplate His Word and our lives.

I believe if I was serving Satan, and my instructions were to keep Christians from becoming more like Christ, and thus more effective, what I would do is keep them busy all the time. I’d encourage them to take on too much – too much work, too many extra-curricular activities for the children, too many people to please. And I’d keep them running from Monday to Saturday with nervous, exhausting activity – making them feel more and more guilt about their neglected walk with God.

Then – when God’s great weapon to overcome all this busyness rolled around – the Lord’s Day – I would whisper in the ear of the Christian – ‘You are so busy. You need a break. You don’t need more church, more Bible. You need to just snuggle up behind the TV today. You need to just rent a video or a DVD – you need to unwind. You need to go to the mall and buy something to get your mind off all the stuff at work.’

And then I’d laugh wickedly as I’d see them listening to me – and exhausting themselves further with activity that doesn’t refresh them in the deepest part of their soul. And I’d know

that, on Monday morning, they will be right where they were the previous week – no closer to God, no more like Him.

Don't let that be you.