

The Great Sabbath Principle

²⁹ And God said, "See, I have given you every herb *that* yields seed which *is* on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. ³⁰ Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which *there is* life, *I have given* every green herb for food"; and it was so. ³¹ Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed *it was* very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day. ¹ Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. ² 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. ³ 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 1:29–2:3)

During the French Revolution, the revolutionaries were intent on erasing anything that smacked of religion, Christianity, or what they called 'superstition'. One of those things was a seven day week with one day of rest. They abolished the French word for Sunday, turned it into a ten-day week, one with one day of rest after nine days of work. But soon they found that it was intolerable for people to work for nine days in a row, and under Napoleon, the original seven-day week was back.

Although the two-day weekend is something that only developed in America in the 20th century, the seven-day week has been a staple of society for centuries. There have been cultures that have had six-day, five-day, ten-day, even thirteen-day weeks. But the most ancient cultures on Earth – the Mesopotamians, Sumerians, Babylonians, all had a seven-day week. And of course, it is thanks to the Hebrews, and the Scriptures delivered through them, that we know why.

Today we consider how God completed creation, and did the unexpected: He extended the creation week by what appears at first to be a completely superfluous day.

I. The Completion of the God's Work

²⁹ And God said, "See, I have given you every herb *that* yields seed which *is* on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. ³⁰ Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which *there is* life, *I have given* every green herb for food"; and it was so.

We are picking up reading at the end of God's blessing on the first human couple. In verse 28, He gave them their life mission: "²⁸ Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:28)

Subdue the Earth, exercise dominion over every living thing, and do so by multiplying abundantly. Let the human race grow exponentially, and be the kings and queens of the earth for the glory of God. Bring the orderly beauty of God upon the whole Earth: name it, tame it, shape it for God's glory.

In verse 29, God gives His added blessing. Growing out of the Earth, for free, will be the food that mankind needs. Man will not have to buy it from God, but as their lives are pure gift, as the Earth is pure gift, so the food will be pure gift. Fruits and herbs, all things growing.

Likewise, the plants are food for the animals. At this point, man is not to eat the flesh of living creatures, and apparently the creatures do not prey upon one another. There is no death here among creatures that breathe air.

Evidently, man's relationship to the animals is different here: they are not his food, or even his servants for transport or agriculture. After the Flood, God says to Noah that the fear of you and the

dread of you shall be in every animal, which was apparently not the case prior to this. What it was, we do not know.

Now, as you can tell, this is a completely different world to the post-Flood world we live in. We have all sorts of questions for a world like this? Did the animals we now know as carnivores have sharp teeth and claws? Were they original, like the sharp teeth of the fruit bat, or did they develop later through selective features? Did animals start preying on each other after the Fall, or after the Flood? And how was the balance of creatures maintained without predators and through a complex food chain?

Well, there are a few responses. First, such a world is not at all implausible. The Bible describes a return in the future to a world without predation. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, The lion shall eat straw like the ox, And dust *shall be* the serpent's food. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain," Says the LORD. (Isaiah 65:25)

Second, the Bible itself describes these different eras as different worlds altogether. Peter, writing in 2 Peter says ⁵ For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, ⁶ by which the world *that* then existed perished, being flooded with water. (2 Peter 3:5–6)

Peter calls the pre-Flood Earth a world that then existed and has perished. We know as little about the pre-Flood world as we do about the post-Second Advent of Christ world. What God describes, we simply have to picture with sanctified imagination, though it is very different to the world we are in now.

But the point is that God finishes creation by describing how there is abundant food for all His creatures. God has made a beautiful world, filled it with beautiful animals, made His own image-bearers to tend and keep this world, and provided abundant food for all. So this work of art deserves some admiring.

II. The Contemplation of God's Work

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed *it was* very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day. ¹ Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished.

Now we move from the final blessing to the final appraisal. God looks upon the entire cosmos, everything that He had made in those six days, and His estimation of what He had made was that it was very good. All the other judgements in this chapter are that it was good. Now, the accumulated worth of the whole creation is that it was *very* good. וְהָיָה טוֹב

Here we should make a remark about beauty. The meaning of good here is obviously beautiful. God doesn't think that the stars and animals are morally good. He thinks they are aesthetically good – they are beautiful, well-pleasing, delightful to Him.

If God remarked that it was beautiful, then it must be that beauty is something real and objective. It exists, not just in the eye of the beholder, but outside of the eye of the beholder. Beauty exists because God exists, and what He makes that mirrors Him is beautiful. Beauty is not a statement about what you like. You should like what is beautiful, but if you don't, it is a statement about you, not about what is beautiful.

Beauty is a statement of whether something conforms to what God delights in and made good. In a fallen world, beauty can be distorted, ugliness exists alongside beauty. Evil delights in ugliness, and comes to see what is ugly as beautiful. One of the quests of the Christian life is to see as beautiful what God sees as beautiful, or to put it another way – to love what God loves.

God's work is very good, excellent in beauty. Amazingly, though, not yet *perfect* in beauty. That's part of man's task: take this already beautiful world and beautify it further. Take what God gave, and use your image-bearing ability and create new beauties, further beauties.

What this also means is that at this time there can be no death, no disease, no deformity, no suffering, no calamities, no struggles for survival. What we see in the fossil record must belong to a time after this moment. The fossil record shows disease, deformity, predation, destruction, and of course, whatever suddenly buried millions of animals in muddy sediment so as to preserve them as fossils was itself a cataclysm and wouldn't qualify as very good.

Importantly, we are given the formula again: evening and morning with the sixth day. There can be no ambiguity here. This is not the sixth age or the sixth aeon, or the sixth millennium. It is clearly the sixth day, with a morning and an evening. And so, verse 1 of chapter tells us, the entire heavens and the earth, and all the host was finished. That harkens back to 1:1- the heavens and the earth. The word host sometimes refers to angels, sometimes to armies, sometimes to stars. It could be referring to everything in creation with its various ranks, and hierarchies. But the idea is to bracket day 1 to day 6. At the close of day 6, everything that God began on day 1 in 1:1, is now finished. The work is complete, nothing remains for God to create or make once the sixth day is over.

God contemplates His work as very good. And I think that explains what is happening next, and what God is doing on this next day.

III. The Consecration of God's Work

² 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. ³ Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

Now here is something amazing. God, in making the world, is also making time. And He is making it as long as He wants it to be, and in the cycles He wishes it to have. So we have already seen that He makes the days be 24 hour cycles with morning and evening. And we have seen that though God could have made everything in six minutes or six seconds, He chose to make it in six of those morning and evening days.

So since everything is complete, what we would expect is that now the week begins, a six-day week representing the six days that God worked. But instead of now beginning a new week and launching into the cycles of weekly life, God creates another day. Remember, time is not happening to God, as if God is contained within the cycles of rising and setting sun, and now the seventh day arrives. No, there is only a seventh day if God makes it so. God could have made it six days and then repeated those. But God makes another day without making anymore things.

Verse 2 should be understood in the what we call the pluperfect tense, the past-past. We might translate it, by the seventh day, God had ended His work which He had done. So on the seventh day, God rested from all His work which He had done. Verse 3 repeats that God rested from all His work which He had created and made.

So what does it mean that God rested? The Hebrew word is most likely where the word Sabbath comes from. The verb *shavat* is a negative word and it just means to stop, to cease, to desist. Whatever you were doing, you no longer do it, you refrain. It doesn't mean to try to recover from weariness, to find rejuvenation from weakness, to take a break out of tiredness or fatigue or

weakness. In God's case, the seventh day is an added day of non-creation to the created week.

But we do read that God blesses and sanctifies the day. Previously God had blessed creation, and blessed mankind, but this is the first time He blesses a day. Not only does He bless it, but He sanctifies it. This is the first use of the Hebrew word that means holy, unique, set apart, special. He makes the seventh day different to the other six. The seventh has a different purpose to the other six.

Now the text doesn't tell us what that purpose is, except that it tells us God blessed and sanctified the seventh day, because that was the day He rested from His work. The seventh day is set apart to do something of what God did on the seventh. What did he do on the seventh? He ceased making creation, and instead celebrated creation.

The seventh day is the day that God, as it were, stepped back to view the whole thing, and enjoyed its beauty. In the same way that when you have been working at something, fixing something, making something, practising something, at some point, there is the moment when you stop and just consider your finished work and take it in.

Now that is what we might call the Sabbath principle, which is to be distinguished from the seventh day Sabbath Day. The Sabbath principle is that 1/7th of your days should be cessation of your usual labour to do something similar to what God did.

And it is significant that God does this, because it is gracious and kind. God suffers no exhaustion, and could have created a six-day week of non-stop toil. But He rests on this day, in ways that only an infinite God can rest, so as to set up a principle for us all.

The seventh day Sabbath is something different. The observance of what we today call Saturday begins under the Law of Moses. There is no evidence that Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph or his brothers observed the seventh day in some particular way.

When the Law of Moses is given, Israel is commanded to observe not just one Sabbath, but several. There was the seventh-Day Sabbath, but several other days were also considered Sabbaths: The feast of Trumpets was considered a Sabbath, The Day of Atonement was considered a Sabbath, The Feast of Tabernacles had two sabbaths, at the beginning and the end. In fact, Israel was supposed to give the land itself a sabbath every seven years. There was even a sabbath of sabbath years – after 49 years, seven sets of seven, in the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee was a year of releasing debts, releasing slaves. I'm always curious when I meet modern-day seventh-day Sabbatarians why they are observing one of Israel's commanded sabbaths, but not all of them.

Israel was given the seventh-day Sabbath as more than just a day to observe the Sabbath principle. For Israel, the Sabbaths collectively formed part of the Law, which was the marriage contract between Israel and Jehovah-God. When Messiah comes, He fulfills the Law's righteousness as the ultimate Law-keeper with His life, and pays the penalty for as the ultimate Law-breaker on the cross. Everyone who dies and rises with Christ completes the Law, you get 100% on that exam, and you don't ever have to take it again.

That's why Paul says **Colossians 2:16-17** ¹⁶ So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷ which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

In other words, just like your shadow on the ground gives a general outline of your shape, but you

are the substance, so all those festivals gave a general outline or shape of Messiah. But when He came, the substance had come.

When the Jerusalem council met, as recorded in Acts 15, they were deciding on what they should ask Gentile churches to observe, especially when Jewish believers were present. They made no mention of the Sabbath day, they simply recommended Gentiles to respect Jewish consciences if they were going to sit down together for a meal.

When Paul wrote to the church at Rome, there were clearly both Jewish and Gentile believers in that church, and in chapter 14, Paul says, “⁵ One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day *alike*. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes *it* to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe *it*.”

If we are to still keep Sabbath, it is strange for Paul to say this. But if the Sabbath is something which some Jewish believers still kept, but was not binding on all Christians, then this makes perfect sense.

The New Testament never commands Christians to observe the Sabbath. Between Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, Jude, and the writer of Hebrews, none of them ever commands believers to keep the Sabbath. Writers like Paul sometimes include lists of sins, but Sabbath-breaking is never among them.

But I do believe that what has not passed away is the Sabbath principle. The Sabbath principle is that out of seven days, you select one to observe the Sabbath idea. See, in some ways, speaking of the seventh day is rather arbitrary: it all depends on what day you begin counting.

What we find in the New Testament though, is that the early believers, including Jewish believers, had begun worshipping on the first day of the week.

Acts 20:7 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 Corinthians 16:2 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.

Ignatius, pastor of Antioch, writing to the Magnesians in the year 105, "We have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day." *Epistle to the Magnesians 9, Ante-Nicene Fathers 1.62*

Justin Martyr, writing in the year 160, "But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God ... made the world. And Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead on that same day. - *First Apology, Ante-Nicene Fathers 1.186*

In other words, since Christ rose from the dead, Christians have begun celebrating the Sabbath principle on the first day of the week. Covenantal theologians like to speak of the Sunday Sabbath, or to say that Sabbath has moved from Saturday to Sunday, but I think that is confusing and misleading. The seventh-day Sabbath was and always will be Saturday. But if you are going to observe it, remember you are bound to observe all the sabbaths, and for that matter, all the commands given to Israel.

Instead, we should say that the sabbath principle is something that Christians have traditionally observed, from the time of the Apostles on the first day of the week.

So what does the Sabbath principle look like for us on the first day of the week? Let me suggest three things.

First, it is a day to consecrate.

In the book of Revelation, John refers to this as 'the Lord's Day'. The particular form of the word *Lord* used here in Revelation 1:10 only occurs twice in all the New Testament. The one occurrence is here. The only other place where this special use of Lord is used is in 1 Corinthians 11:20, it is the Lord's Supper. Now this begins to open some things up for us, because we do know many things about the Lord's Supper. When we eat the Lord's Supper, are there some things we should not do? Yes. Because it's not my supper, it's His. This unique construction in the Greek means belonging to the Lord. Of all suppers, this particular Supper is His, dedicated to Him, coming from Him. So even though all foods are clean in Christ, even though we are not bound to dietary laws, there is one Supper we must treat differently from all other Suppers.

If there is one thing we see in Genesis, it is that God does something completely different on the seventh day. He sanctifies it. This is why the Lord's Day is not supposed to be the same kind of day: the same work, the same use of your laptop, the same checking of social media, the same answering of emails and messages, the same replying to all. It's a day set aside. That's where a lot of modern Jews could still teach Christians a thing or two about the Sabbath principle. For many of them, the phone goes off sunset Friday, and does not come back on until sunset Saturday. The idea is, if Christians are going to observe the sabbath principle on the Lord's Day, then let this day be set aside to be totally different from all other days.

Second, it is a day to congregate.

A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath Day. *It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning, And Your faithfulness every night, On an instrument of ten strings, On the lute, And on the harp, With harmonious sound. (Psalm 92:title-3)*

The psalmist expected that on the sabbath day, Israel would congregate to give thanks and to sing praises. This was Israel's practice by the time of Christ, and as we saw, the early church gathered together on the Lord's Day.

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 if there is an evening service, then we gather again, because it is the Lord's Day, not the Lord's morning, or the Lord's hour and a half.

.B. B. Warfield pointed out that the Lord's appearing on two consecutive Sundays must have truly affected the disciples. "For six whole days between the rising day and its octave he was absent." "Is it possible to exaggerate the effect of this blank space of time, in fixing and defining the impressions received through his visits?"

In other words, the disciples must have been struck by the fact that He manifested himself that first Easter Sunday, and then disappeared and was absent for the rest of the week, until appearing again on the next Sunday. Therefore, one of the ways we honour the sabbath principle is that we congregate, expecting the Lord's presence among us.

As we congregate, we adore God, and we serve one another.

Third, it's 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. We celebrate God and commemorate His works. 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.

“We gather together on the first rather than the seventh day of the week because redemption is even a greater work than creation and more worthy of commemoration and because the rest which followed creation is far outdone by the rest which ensues upon the completion of redemption. Like the Apostles, we meet on the first day of the week and hope that Jesus may stand in our midst and say, “Peace be unto you.” Our Lord has lifted the Sabbath from the old and rusty hinges where on the law had placed it long before and set it on the new golden hinges which His love has fashioned. He has placed our rest day not at the end of a week of toil but at the beginning of the rest which remains for the people of God. Every first day of the week we should meditate on the rising of our Lord and seek to enter into the fellowship with Him in His risen life.” - Charles Spurgeon

On the Lord's Day, just as the Lord contemplated His creation, so we contemplate our Creator. We look directly at God, and we worship Him in prayer, in praise and in proclamation. It is the highlight of my week. It is the priority of my week.

We can worship God not only by looking at God, but by looking away from Him at what He has made. When we look at God's creation, His works, the things He has done, we come to admire Him even more. The Lord's Day is uniquely a day to be able to stop and reflect. Look at creation as you go on a walk or enjoy your garden. Look at the story of redemption as you read. Look at the truths you heard at church and consider them. Look at the gifts He has showered you with. Look at the good food that decks your table. Reflect. Remember that on the seventh day the Lord stepped back and saw that it was very good. On the Lord's Day, worship Him by reflection. Step back and consider your life and its meaning, and its purpose, and its direction.

Ask yourself, what usually crowds out reflection during the week? What is it that keeps you distracted? What activities prevent you from reflecting on the glory of God? If this is the Lord's Day, what should you rest from to be able to reflect?

So what am I not allowed to do? There is no rule book. Stop activities that do not allow you to adore God with His people or serve God and His people. Stop the activities that prevent you from reflecting on Him. Stop doing what would prevent you from serving. Stop doing what would make the Lord's Day feel like Tuesday or Thursday or any other day. Just like you don't treat His Supper casually, flippantly, frivolously, don't treat His day that way either. Rest from all that makes it an ordinary day.

The Lord's Day is overwhelmingly a day to take joy in our God. It is a day to consecrate. A day to congregate, and a day to contemplate. This is the Sabbath principle, that God instituted for our good, and His glory.