

# THE GOOD NEWS OF THE SABBATH FOR TODAY

**By Samuele Bacchiocchi**

We live today in a most exciting and yet paradoxical age. We can tune our radio and TV receivers to sounds and pictures coming from outer space or across the ocean, and yet many persons fail to tune their souls to God and to hear His voice.

We can race the sun across the sky with supersonic jets, and yet we often fail to reach the needy across the street. We live and move among large crowds, and yet many persons are afflicted by a deep sense of loneliness or by an identity crisis. Many seek for rest and inner peace by taking vacations, tranquilizers, drugs, alcohol; and yet often restlessness, tension, and anxiety remain in their inner souls.

We can dial a few numbers and talk instantly with someone living on the farthest continent, and yet we sometimes fail to communicate with our closest kin: our husband, our wife, and our children. We can harness many types of natural resources to ensure our modern comforts, and yet our very existence is being threatened today by the depletion and pollution of our natural resources.

To sum it all up, we might say that we live today in a paradoxical age where on the one hand we enjoy increased knowledge, goods, communication, and comforts, while on the other hand many are experiencing increased physical exhaustion, emotional frustration, social neglect, inner restlessness, and loss of assurance in God's existence and in a divine solution to the problems that afflict this world and our personal lives.

What contribution can the values of the Biblical Sabbath make toward solving some of these pressing human problems. To guide our reflections we shall consider first the meaning of the Sabbath and then the manner of its observance.

In the first part we shall consider three important meanings of the Sabbath, namely, the celebration of God's perfect creation, complete redemption, and final restoration.

In the second part we shall examine three important aspects of the manner of Sabbathkeeping, namely, the time and opportunities the Sabbath provide to serve God, ourselves, and other. These essays are excerpted from my book **DIVINE REST FOR HUMAN RESTLESSNESS** where I examine the theological relevance of the Sabbath for today.

The Sabbath means different things to different people. To some the Sabbath is Good News of joyful celebration of God's creative and redemptive love. To others it is Bad News of restrictive impositions and/or bondage to the law.

The legalist sees the Sabbath primarily as a commandment that must be observed in order to be saved. He views the interruption that the Sabbath brings to his life like a bitter medicine that must be swallowed in order to get well. Consequently to the legalist the Sabbath is not a day of gladness and exultation because of the divine accomplishments memorialized by this day, but rather a day of gloom and frustration because of the things that cannot be done on this day. He counts the hours of the Sabbath like the astronaut counts the seconds preceding the firing of his spacecraft: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0. Sunset! Take off to some exciting activity to burn up the repression of the Sabbath.

The materialist views the Sabbath (or Sunday for that matter) as a day of "solemn" rest but to himself rather than to the Lord. It is a day to seek personal profit or pleasure rather than divine peace and presence.

The antinomian interprets Sabbathkeeping as a sign of bondage to the law. He interprets the freedom of the Gospel as freedom to keep the Sabbath on any weekday (pan-Sabbatism). But the theory that each weekday is a Sabbath in practice results on each Sabbath being a week day. Ultimately no real worship is offered to God because nothing really matters.

The Christian who loves the Savior experiences the Sabbath as a day of joyful celebration: a day to celebrate the Good News of God's marvellous accomplishments both in the world and in his/her personal life.

It is a human desire to wish to celebrate and share with others the good news of unusual achievements. Players and fans celebrate the winning of a game. Students celebrate their graduation. A couple celebrates with their friends their engagement or wedding. A Christian celebrates on the Sabbath the Good News of what God has done, of what He is doing and of what He will do for His people.

In Hebrews 4:2,6 the Sabbath rest is twice presented as the "Good News" or the Gospel (same verb-evangelizo) of God's rest for His people. Yet for some persons as noticed, the Sabbath is not Good News but bad news. Why is the Sabbath viewed and experienced differently by different persons? Principally because of different understandings and acceptance of the message of the Sabbath. Obviously a person cannot joyfully celebrate the Sabbath if he or she does not know what is there to celebrate.

Our family landed in the USA on July 4, 1974, the day when Americans celebrate the signing of their Declaration of Independence. We needed to clear our car

through customs but everything was closed. We spent that day in a motel in a mood of frustration rather than enjoying the spirit of celebration. Why? Primarily because we did not fully understand and accept the significance of the event. Frankly, we were more interested in the signing of our custom declaration than in the American declaration of independence. In the same way, a person who does not understand and accept the Good News of the Sabbath, will experience not rest, peace and jubilation, but rather restlessness, tension and frustration.

To help us understand and experience the message and blessings of the Sabbath, we shall briefly examine three basic glad tidings which according to the Scripture, the Sabbath contains and proclaims: (1) Perfect Creation, (2) Complete Redemption, (3) Final Restoration.

### **1. The Good News of Perfect Creation**

The first good news the Sabbath proclaims is that God has originally created this world and its creatures in a perfect and complete manner. This message is first presented in a most emphatic way in the creation story (Gen 1:1-2:3) by means of three effective literary devices: (1) the use of the number seven, (2) the emphatic use of words, and (3) the imagery of the rest of God.

The Number Seven. The number seven is used both to structure the creation story in seven parts, that is, according to the seven days of Creation, and to relate many details of the story. The creation story is arranged in seven sections, each divided by the recurring sentence "and there was evening and there was morning, one day...a second day...a third day." The climactic moment is the seventh day which is repeated 3 times (Gen 2:2-3) to emphasize its function as the goal, conclusion, perfection of the whole creation.

Several details of the creation are also given in seven or multiples. For example, in Hebrew, there are seven words in Genesis 1:1 and fourteen-twice seven-in verse two. The name of God (Elohim) occurs thirty five times, that is five times seven; earth ('eres) twenty one times, that is three times seven; light ('or) occurs seven times in the account of the fourth day (Gen 1:14-18); the expression It was good also occurs seven times (the last time is very good-Gen 1:31).

The structure as well as many of the details of the creation story are based upon the number seven because the number seven signifies totality, completion and perfection. Thus its repeated use in the creation story heightens the role of the seventh day as the memorial of God's complete and perfect creation.

The Emphatic use of Words. In the account of the establishment of the Sabbath given in Genesis 2:1-3, four words have the highest frequency, namely, God,

Seventh Day, Work, Done. Each of these words occurs three times, because they are central to the message of the passage, namely that God on the Seventh Day proclaimed His work done, done, done.

The Imagery of the Rest of God. To dramatize the perfection and completion of His creation, the scripture tells us that God rested (Gen 2:2-3) obviously God was not tired. God "does not faint or grow weary" (Is 40:28). In fact, the Hebrew verb (shabat) does not mean that God took a rest to recover from exhaustion but rather that "He stopped or ceased creating." Why? To testify by this dramatic action-by desisting from creating-that He regarded His creation "very good" and perfectly satisfying. There was no need for additional touches to improve His workmanship, because all came up to His expectations.

The first glad tidings the Sabbath proclaims is then a message of reassurance from God that this world and all its creatures came into existence not in a deformed state by chance but in a perfect way by the personal act of God. This message is indeed Good News. It gives us the reassurance that our ancestral roots are good because they are rooted in God Himself from creation to eternity. It reassures us that in spite of apparent futility and tragedy, our life has meaning, value, and hope because it proceeds from and moves toward a glorious destiny with God.

## **2. The Good News of Perfect Redemption**

A second significant message of glad tidings the Sabbath proclaims is that God has completely redeemed us through Jesus Christ. The human heart longs for a constant assurance of divine redemption. We want to be reassured that God has indeed saved us.

A vital function of the Sabbath in the history of salvation has been to provide this reassurance of divine redemption. In the Old Testament the Sabbath served to nourish the hope and faith of God's people in the messianic redemption that was to come. In the New Testament it enables believers to experience the reality of the salvation which has come. We can only consider a few of the Sabbath themes which have helped believers to understand and experience the reality of redemption.

The Blessing of the Sabbath. In the Old Testament the Sabbath functioned as a symbol of redemption because it contains God's original promise of the blessing and sanctification of mankind. The Scripture says: "God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it" (Gen 2:3). God's blessing is not just a good wish, like our human blessings, but a concrete assurance of happy and abundant life. The Psalmist declares: "The Lord has commanded the blessing, life for evermore" (Ps 133:3). Being the symbol of God's gift of abundant life, when Eden was lost, the Sabbath,

remained as God's assurance to restore life to his creatures. This can be seen in the Old Testament by how the rest and liberation of the weekly and annual Sabbaths served to nourish the hope of messianic redemption.

**The Sabbath Rest.** In the Old Testament times the rest and peace of the Sabbath was viewed not only as a physical benefit (EX 20:10; LEV 23:3) but also as the symbol of the messianic age. The Messiah was expected to bring to the people the rest and peace experienced on the Sabbath. The prophet Isaiah, for example, describes the messianic age (IS 66:11) by using the same words "delight" and "honor" which he employs for the Sabbath (IS 58:13). The implication is that the peace and delight of the present Sabbath is a foretaste, an anticipation of the expected messianic peace and delight.

The messianic function of the Sabbath rest is very explicit in Jewish literature. The Babylonian Talmud, for example, teaches: "at the conclusion of the Sabbath the son of David will come." A Rabbi demurred: "but so many Sabbaths have passed, yet He has not come." Not only was the Messiah expected to come on a Sabbath, but He was also expected to bring to the people the blessing of the Sabbath rest and peace. A Jewish work of the first century A.D. known as 2 Baruch describes "the time of my Messiah" as the time when "joy shall be revealed and rest shall appear"(29:3). Another Jewish work, known as The Book of Adam and Eve, admonishes to "mourn not for the dead more than six days, for the seventh day is a sign of the resurrection and the rest of the age to come" (51:1-2). The Mishna Tamid, describes "the time of salvation" as "wholly Sabbath rest" (7:4). Examples such as these show that the Sabbath rest served to nourish the hope for the rest and peace to be brought by the Messiah.

**The Sabbath Liberation.** The liberation from the oppression and pressure of work which the weekly and annual Sabbaths provided to every member of the Hebrew society could effectively symbolize both the past and future divine deliverance. The link between the Sabbath and deliverance is explicitly found in Deuteronomy 45:15: "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." The reason given in this text for observing the sabbath is to remember the past exodus deliverance. Being a symbol of past deliverance, the Sabbath could fittingly express and nourish the hope of future Messianic redemption. The latter was accomplished particularly through the Sabbath year.

The Sabbatical year which occurred every 7 years (Lev 25:8) and the Jubilee year which occurred every 49 years (Lev 25:8), were in a sense an intensification of the weekly Sabbath (Lev 25:2, 4). At these annual institutions, the Sabbath truly became the liberator of land, slaves, debtors, and property. The land was to lie fallow, slaves were to be emancipated, debts were to be cancelled, and

property was to be restored to the original owner. The restoration offered by the annual Sabbaths served to announce the future restoration to be brought about by the Messiah.

The prophet Isaiah announces the redemptive mission of the Messiah by means of the imagery of Sabbatical release: "The Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted...to proclaim liberty to the captives...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (IS 61:1-2). The latter is a clear reference to the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:10). Jesus, as we shall see, used this very passage to announce and explain the nature of His redemptive mission.

Not only the rest and liberation of the Sabbath, but also the Sabbatical (septenary) structure of time is used in the Bible to announce the Messianic redemption. A noteworthy example is found in Daniel 9. The first part of the chapter refers to the 70 Years Prophecy of Jeremiah (Dan 9:2; Jer 29:10) which predicted the national restoration of the Jews. The second part of the chapter speaks of "70 Weeks" or "70 Sabbatical cycles" until the Messianic Restoration: "to the coming of the anointed one... to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for iniquity" (Dan 9:24-25). The vision of the release of the Sabbath years is here utilized to announce both the national and the messianic liberation.

This brief survey of Sabbatical themes suffices to show that in Old Testament times the Sabbath served not only to provide personal rest and liberation from social injustices but also to nourish the hope of Messianic redemption to come.

The Sabbath and Redemption in the New Testament. The fact that the Sabbath served to nourish the hope of Messianic redemption in Old Testament times it helps us appreciate the relationship between the Sabbath and the Savior in the New Testament. It was on a Sabbath day that Jesus, according to Luke inaugurated His public ministry by quoting the Sabbatical passage of Isaiah 61:1-2 (Luke 4:18-19). We noted earlier that in this passage Isaiah announces the mission of the Messiah through the imagery of the liberation of the Sabbath years (Luke 4:18-19). The Lord undoubtedly must have startled the congregation when He briefly but emphatically claimed to be the fulfillment of the Messianic Redemption promised by Isaiah through the Sabbatical year: "Today," Jesus said, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). In other words, Christ presented Himself to the people as the very fulfillment of their Messianic expectations which had been nourished by the experience of the Sabbath peace, rest and liberation.

Sabbath Healing. In His subsequent ministry, Christ revealed the mature of His redemptive mission especially through His Sabbath healing and teaching ministry. Seven Sabbath Healing episodes and ensuing controversies are reported in the Gospels (Matt 12:1-8; 9:14; Mark 1:21-28; 2:23-28; 3:1-6; Luke

4:16-30, 31-37, 38-39; 6:1-5, 6-11; 13:10-17; John 5:2-18; 7:21-24; 9:1-41). It is noteworthy that in all cases Christ intentionally acted against prevailing tradition by healing on the Sabbath chronically sick persons. By offering on the Sabbath physical and spiritual liberation to souls "whom Satan bound" (Luke 13:16), the Savior made the day a time to celebrate and to experience the blessings of His redemptive ministry.

Completion of Redemption. Christ's ministry not only began but also ended on a Sabbath day. On that historic Good Friday, the Lord completed his redemptive mission saying "It is finished" (John 19:30) and then resting in the tomb (Luke 23:54-56). Sabbath marks the completion of both creation and redemption. Christ's Sabbath rest in the tomb reveals the depth of God's love for His creatures. It tells us God so loved the world that He was willing to experience not only the limitation of human time at the creation but also the suffering, agony and death of human flesh during the incarnation..

In the light of the cross. The Sabbath is the weekly celebration and jubilation of a liberated people. It is the day when we cease from our work to allow God to work in us. It is the day to experience through the physical rest the greater rest of Christ's forgiveness and salvation.

### **3. The Good News of Perfect Future Restoration**

A third significant message of glad tidings the Sabbath proclaims is the God "Is working until now" (John 5:17) to restore this world to its original perfection. Christ declared this good news emphatically when healing on a sabbath day a paralytic at the pool of Bethesda. He explained to those who charged Him with Sabbathbreaking that God on the Sabbath ended His act of creation but not his action in general. In fact, Christ said, because of sin, God "Is working until now" (John 5:17) on the Sabbath to restore this world to its original perfection.

Invitation to Participate in God's Restoration. In another significant Sabbath pronouncement, Christ invited His followers to become participants in this divine restoration program, saying: "We must work the works of Him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work" (John 9:4). on the Sabbath God not only reassures us that He is working for the restoration of this world, but he also invites us to participate in accomplishing His restoration in our lives and in the lives of others.

In an age when the forces of chaos and disorder appear to prevail, when injustice, greed, violence, corruption, suffering, sickness and death seem to dominate, God through the Sabbath reassures us that we need not fear these destructive forces, because "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb 4:9).

God's people need not fear the threat of nuclear or population explosion because the Sabbath reassures us that God is still in control of this world, working out His ultimate purpose. The Sabbath tells us that God has conquered chaos at creation, that He has liberated His people from the bonds of sin and death at the cross and that now He is working to establish a new world where "From Sabbath to Sabbath all flesh shall come to worship before God" (IS 66:23). In that final Sabbath, as eloquently expressed by Augustine, "We shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise."

Conclusion. The Sabbath contains three significant messages for the human family:

- (1) the Lord has created us perfectly,
- (2) He has redeemed us completely,
- (3) He will restore us ultimately.

The Sabbath invites us weekly to celebrate joyfully creation, redemption, restoration; the past, the present, and the future divine accomplishments for the human family; man, nature, and God; this world and the world to come.