

“The Rhythm of Life”

Genesis 2:1-3

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Now, as we have mentioned previously, the first three verses of our chapter two ought to be the last three verses of chapter 1, which we said was the prologue of the book. Genesis’ own chapter divisions begin in v. 4 with “These are the generations of...” the phrase that is found throughout Genesis as the heading for a new section of material.

Text Comment

v.2 When the Bible describes what God did in creating the world as *his work* and then uses the same term for the work that men and women do, it has wonderfully dignified human labor. We are workers in imitation of God himself. [Delitzsch in Collins, 49n]

Three times in these few verses we read of the *seventh* day, the only day of the seven days of the creation week to which such attention is called. It is a way of emphasizing the importance of this day among all the others. [Waltke, 67] The last day is the best day!

The word "Sabbath" is not used here, but the related verb "to rest" is used in both v. 2 and v. 3. This rest is the rest of achievement, not inactivity, for God continues to involve himself with what he has made. It is not unlike the Lord Jesus being "seated" after completing his redeeming work. He sat down in one very important sense, but from his throne he still rules over the world and dispenses the benefits of his salvation.

What is more, alone in regard to the seventh day it is not said that there was evening and there was morning. We are reminded elsewhere in the Bible that the Sabbath is different in precisely this way: it continues; it never ends. Not only is the Sabbath itself celebrated week by week throughout human history, but, in a way, God’s own seventh day never ends, it is open-ended to the future. Jesus made that point, as you remember, in John 5, when, after healing a man on the Sabbath, he spoke of his Father “working until now.” God’s own Sabbath, as the Lord’s, was a day of work, different work, but work nonetheless. Then in Hebrews we learn that our weekly Sabbaths are an anticipation of God’s *eternal* rest; heaven is God’s Sabbath. In that way too the Sabbath was and is an eternal day.

v.3 To sanctify something is not simply to call it holy or special or sacred. It is to set it apart for some sacred *use*. To sanctify in the Bible is to order something to be used for a holy purpose. [Junius in Shepard, *Theses Sabbaticae*, 158]

The account we are given of the creation of all things and the ordering of human life in the first few chapters of Genesis is foundational in the truest sense of the word. Everything rests upon it. Everything else in human life and all of human behavior comes back to this foundation. Why is adultery wrong and why is it so destructive of human happiness and well-being? Because when God made human beings male and female he also ordered marriage for them as an exclusive,

family-making institution. Adultery violates the intrinsic order of things as God made them. Why is human life so sacred and murder so egregious a crime? Because man was made in the image of God, so homicide is thus a kind of deicide. And why is the Sabbath sacred among the days of the week? Because God himself rested on that seventh day after the work of creation and established that same pattern for human life.

Now as some of you remember, I have on several occasions through the years preached an entire series of sermons on the history, the purpose, and the obligation of the Sabbath day, so there is much more to be said about it than can be fit into a single sermon. Still, we cannot do justice to the creation narrative without giving careful attention to the conclusion of it and its impressive emphasis on the 7th day and the holiness or sanctification of that day. The creation was called “good” in all its parts when God was done making it, but only the seventh day was called *holy*! Philosophers have often spoken as if *the good* were the highest thing, but in the Bible it is not the good, but the holy that is the apex of reality! [Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 75] All the creation was good, but nothing was holy until God set the seventh day apart.

It is a universal feature of human life, is it not, that human beings celebrate holidays. All through time and all over the world human beings interrupt their work days with days of rest and celebration. We regard it cruelty when people are not given days of rest. Where did this universal pattern of human life come from? It came from God himself at the beginning of creation as did the other features of human life that are universal in the experience of human beings: marriage and family, work, and worship, all of which appear here at the very beginning. (Oh, yes; even worship, for all human beings worship. As C.S. Lewis reminds us, the world rings with worship. *Homo adorans*, worshipping man, is perhaps a more precise and significant definition of mankind than *homo sapiens*, thinking man. For while we sometimes wonder whether some human beings think at all, they all worship something and ardently. It may be the creature rather than the creator -- have you ever seen teenage girls at a rock concert? -- but it is worship nonetheless.) But equally fundamental is this universal rhythm of work and rest, of labor and holiday.

It has not always been every seventh day, to be sure. Indeed, the seven day week is unique to Israel in the ancient world. [Waltke, 68] Like so many other things in the life of the mankind, the original pattern was lost but the imprint of the original could still be seen; the echo could still be heard. They still had regular holidays, just not the seventh day every week. And, alas, the same thing might be said of the so-called Christian world today. Sunday is still our weekly holiday, if any day of the week might be said to be so -- though increasingly people are working on Sunday -- but the Sabbath as a day of rest in the biblical sense has largely disappeared from American life, even, alas, from much American Christian life.

In 1981, almost 35 years ago now, a film appeared that was almost unique among Hollywood offerings in presenting principled, evangelical Christianity in a highly positive light. It was, surprisingly, a huge success as a movie, making lots of money and winning the Oscar for Best Picture.

Chariots of Fire told a true story though taking many liberties along the way. The hero of the movie, a Scottish seminarian and soon to be China missionary, Eric Liddell, was a rugby and

track star in 1920s Britain and, as you may remember, was to represent Britain in the 1924 Olympics in the 100 meters. But when he learned that the qualifying heats for his race were scheduled on a Sunday, he withdrew from the event. He gained notoriety for his stand for the holiness of the Lord's Day, a stand that seemed still more heroic when, offered a chance to compete in the 400 meters instead, he won a gold medal for Britain after all. I remember the days when *Chariots of Fire* was soon to appear in theaters. The studio marketed the movie directly to churches which Hollywood studios do not usually do. A group of us from Faith went to see it together. Evangelicals flocked to see it because of its sympathetic, even heroic portrayal of one of their own and for its celebration of a Christian's standing up for the law of God.

The irony, of course, missed by most Christians who loved the film, was that they themselves would not have done as Liddell did, would not have counseled anyone else to do it either, and, in fact, would have considered legalistic and unbiblical Liddell's conviction that, as a Christian, he was obliged not to treat the Sabbath as any other day come wind, come weather. Who was right? Liddell, or the evangelicals who so admired him for a completely unnecessary sacrifice? Is the holiness of the Sabbath an obligation for us today, or is it not?

We are perhaps too familiar with these verses early in Genesis 2 to appreciate how striking, how unexpected, and how full of significance they are. God made the heavens and the earth and all that they contain in six days. But why should God himself "rest" on the seventh day? Certainly the Almighty who brought all things into being by the mere utterance of his word was not weary! He didn't need a nap! And if it were that kind of rest, a bare cessation from labor, there would be no need to say that he rested "the seventh day." It would have been enough to say that at the end of the sixth day he rested. No, his resting on the seventh day had another purpose. It was to bless or hallow or sanctify the seventh day, to set it apart for a special use that had something to do with God. It was, by his example, to establish as a rule for mankind, a rhythm of six days of labor and a seventh of spiritual rest. Spiritual rest not simply physical rest, for God's rest was not the rest of inactivity, as the Bible teaches us. That God intended his resting on the seventh day to be a pattern for man is also demonstrated conclusively by the 4th commandment which says that we are to work six days and rest a seventh *because that is what God did when he created the world*. The great and most high God could have made the entire world in a moment, why did he make it then in six days and rest a seventh except as an example to man. The creation, from the beginning was directed to both work and rest, fruitful labor and refreshment in God.

But what does it mean that God blessed the day and made it holy? God is holy; holiness is the essence of his character. The divine holiness is his distinctiveness, his separateness, either with respect to his being or with respect to the moral perfection of his character. He alone is holy by nature, intrinsically. Everything else that is holy in the Bible is either chosen by God for some special purpose relating to him, or given to God for his worship and service. So when the Scripture says that God made the seventh day "holy" it means that he set it apart for his use and gave it to us to be part of our worship and service of him. Now that is straightforward enough and almost everyone agrees that that is what the words mean. The problem is that this statement comes when it does in the Bible.

The widespread belief of many Christians today is that the Sabbath was something for the days of Moses and that it has been superseded in the NT. People put it differently: some will say that

now every day is a Sabbath; others that we, unlike our OT brethren, have found our Sabbath rest in Christ. Many still say that we should worship on Sunday, the NT Lord's Day. But even many of them will admit that the obligation to keep the Lord's Day holy belonged to the age before Christ and Pentecost. It was part of Jewish worship but does not continue to be an obligation for Christian believers today. This is now the majority view in American evangelical Christianity today.

But, Gen. 2:2-3 poses a great problem for that way of thinking about the Sabbath Day. For here the seventh day is made holy not only long before Moses, but even before the fall of man into sin. As I said, the first two chapters of Genesis introduce us to the fundamental structures of human life as God made it: dominion over the creation, marriage, family, a life of work, and a day of rest. Theologians call these structures or institutions "creation ordinances" because the Scripture lays them down as fundamental to human life already at its beginning, and as so fundamental to God's intention for human life that they were woven into the fabric of human life at the outset. In other words, these verses teach that the rhythm of work and rest that we find in God's creation week was intentionally made the pattern of human life from the beginning.

Now we don't imagine that marriage, or family, or work do not continue to be fundamental structures of human life. We know that they do. But how then is it possible to extract the Sabbath day from these other creation ordinances and consider it alone to have been abolished at Pentecost? The observing or keeping holy the Sabbath day seems, on any straightforward reading of Gen. 2:1-3, to be the divine purpose for human life perpetually. *He* made the seventh day holy; *he* set that day apart for holy use.

But if you once admit that the seventh day was holy from the creation and an original part of the divine pattern for human life, it will be very difficult then to argue that the Sabbath is a Jewish practice superseded in the NT. Marriage isn't a Jewish custom; the family wasn't invented by Moses; the life of work isn't peculiarly Jewish -- these all belong to the human race universally. But so the Sabbath Day! Indeed most Christians who argue against Sabbath observance in our time give themselves away when they make it clear that, holy Sabbath or not, they still want days off every week! They may want their own days off; they may want to do on their day off whatever they want, but they have no intention of working all seven days of the week! As I have often asked people of this opinion: "If Christ is now our Sabbath rest, if he has given us perfect rest in himself, why do Christians need a day off? Shouldn't they prove their perfect rest by working every day of the week, every week of the year, every year of our lives?" No one has yet answered that question with a "Yes!"

Now the problem posed by Genesis 2:1-3 is appreciated by those who believe that the obligation to keep one day in seven holy to the Lord has been done away. They fully appreciate that a Sabbath in Eden would be a death blow to that view. They argue that, in fact, what we have in Gen. 2 is not the institution of the Sabbath at all, but a prolepsis, an anticipation of something that happened much later. They argue that the Sabbath did not originate as a practice until Exodus 16 -- where next we read of the Sabbath in the Bible -- when the instructions to the Jews for gathering manna in the wilderness included a specific rule not to gather manna on the seventh day. That, they say, was the first anyone knew about the Sabbath as the holy day of the week. Moses, who wrote Genesis after the Sabbath had been given to Israel, stuck in a reference to it

here in Gen. 2 in anticipation of what we actually won't read about the institution of the Sabbath as a holy day until Exodus 16. It is as if Gen. 2:1-3 read, "And that is why long afterward God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." I need to acquaint you with this thinking because it is *the* argument used to liberate American evangelicals from the obligation of sanctifying the Lord's Day.

It must be said that this interpretation is theoretically possible and that good men have held it through the years. But, let me tell you why I so strongly believe that you should not accept it and, instead, should face squarely the implications of the fact that the Sabbath was made for man and given to man for his life at the very headwaters of that life.

1. First, it is not the natural reading of the verse. No one would ever take these verses that way unless they were driven to by other considerations. Nothing else God said or did in Genesis 1 or 2 is taken to be a prolepsis. The simple meaning of the words is that the nature of the holy day comes not from its being given to the Jews as a law, but because it replicates the pattern of God's own working and resting which he intended to be a pattern for us. It was holy from the beginning because it is the day on which God rested from his work of creating the world. *At that time* the Lord blessed and sanctified the day.
2. Second, the pattern of seven day weeks, appears subsequently in Genesis, although according to the prolepsis interpretation seven-day weeks should not appear until the Sabbath is revealed in Exodus 16. Remember, for example, that Noah twice waited a week, seven days, to send out the dove from the ark. There are other examples.
3. Third, Exodus 16 does not appear to expect us to understand this to be the origin of the Sabbath day. The subject is the gathering of manna. The word Sabbath is used as if it were already understood. Nothing is said in Exodus 16 about where this day came from or for what purpose it might be observed. Yet, according to the prolepsis interpretation, no one knew anything about such a day until these instructions were given not to gather manna on the seventh day of the week. And that was all they knew about the Sabbath, in fact they didn't even know there were seven days in the week. For some reason you weren't supposed to gather manna on the seventh day.
4. Fourth, as everyone knows, the keeping of the Sabbath holy is also part of the Ten Commandments; the fourth of the ten. Now, nothing else in the Ten Commandments is temporary; nothing else was done away with at Pentecost. Nothing else was strictly Jewish. This is the moral law that reflects God's own nature and which God has made the basis of his judgment of mankind. I tell you this plainly, brothers and sisters: the very idea that one of the Ten Commandments should fall out of the law, with no word to that effect in the NT, and no explanation as to why, is, in the context of the whole Bible, simply preposterous. "I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it," Jesus said, and then he added "not one jot or tittle will fall from the law." Except, apparently, one of the Ten Commandments!
5. Fifth, the reason why Christian folk have thought the Sabbath done away with is no reason at all. As you may remember, three times in the NT -- in Gal. 4; Col. 2; and Rom. 15 -- Paul says that the Sabbath does not need to be kept by Gentile Christians. It is from these statements that people have concluded that the fourth commandment has been done away with in the new epoch. But, in context, it is perfectly plain that Paul means no such thing. The problem he faced in all of those passages was the great problem of NT

Christianity, that of the transition from a Jewish church to a mixed church of Jews and Gentiles and then to a church of mostly Gentiles. The most precious elements of Jewish piety, in the first century were circumcision and the keeping of the Sabbath day. Close behind were laws regarding clean and unclean foods. It should surprise no one then that these would be the issues around which controversies swirled in first century Christianity. All these statements mean is that Gentile Christians didn't have to keep the *Jewish* Sabbath, the one on Saturday. They could content themselves with Sunday as the Lord's Holy Day. As circumcision had become baptism -- a change of form that did not change the meaning of the rite of initiation -- as the sacrifices had become the Lord's Supper -- a change of form that left the meaning of the sacred meals intact -- so the Saturday or seventh day Sabbath had become the Sunday Lord's Day. The form changed; the substance remained the same. Remember, "Lord's Day," the Christian name for the Sunday Sabbath, was taken from the OT; it was another name for the Sabbath Day.

Jewish Christians happily accepted baptism and the change of day for the new Lord's Day, from Saturday to Sunday, to commemorate the resurrection of the Lord, the great act of the *new* creation. They had no difficulty with these new developments at all. Their problem was that they wanted the old elements preserved as well. They accepted the new elements, but only as additions not as substitutions. They were happy to have Gentiles in the church and to have them baptized, but they wanted them also to be circumcised! *They wanted Gentile Christians to practice Jewish Christianity in the ways that were most precious to them.* A very predictable human reaction! And the Saturday Sabbath was one of those ways. But Paul argued that to demand Gentiles to observe the old forms threatened the meaning of those ancient practices and masked a legalistic view of circumcision and Sabbath that would prove fatal to the gospel over time. Hence, he refused to require Gentiles to be circumcised. Baptism, which had come in circumcision's place, was enough for them. Nor did they need to observe Saturday as the Lord's Day. In the context of Paul's letters and of the first century church, that is all that his statements about not keeping the Sabbath mean.

The simple fact is that if you took Paul to be abolishing the Sabbath, his statements prove too much, for they would mean that there is no day of the week that any Christian needs to observe in any way. And the NT says plainly that there is such a day: the Lord's Day, as John calls it in the first chapter of his Revelation (again, simply another OT name for the Sabbath); the day of the week on which all Gentile churches met for worship. Just as baptism replaced circumcision, so Sunday replaced Saturday; but it remained the Lord's Holy Day, the Sabbath Day.

6. Sixth, and finally, if the Sabbath were merely a Jewish institution, it is hard to understand why it serves as an inclusio for human history as a whole: being introduced in Gen. 2 and being used to describe the life of heaven in Hebrews 4. There was a Sabbath at the very beginning of life and a Sabbath at its end and for all eternity. Are we really to believe that in all of eternity we alone are the only people to have no Sabbath Day?

I urge you to believe that God established the Sabbath Day for mankind and for all time and that that explains why every human being looks forward to holidays; Chinese, Indian, Kenyan, Brazilian, American. It is God who has given us a holiday every week. It is God who has invited

us to enjoy a day free from our ordinary work, a day we can devote to worshipping him and enjoying the richest features of human life.

Of course we can come to resent the obligation to keep the Lord's Day holy. In one way or another, at one time or another, we resent all the commandments of God: from having no other gods but God, to having to obey our parents; from sexual purity to contentment with God's provision for our lives. That people have not wanted to keep the Lord's Day holy should surprise no one who knows at all the human heart. And, of course, people have misinterpreted the obligation of the Lord's Day, as they have misinterpreted all the rest of God's commandments through the ages. The true purpose and blessing of the Sabbath has often been buried under thick layers of misunderstanding, as if God had made the day to test our mettle, rather than to give us a gift; as if it were to be a day of miserable inactivity instead of a holiday; the worst day of the week instead of the best.

Who better to teach us how to keep the Sabbath than Jesus himself, the only man who ever kept the fourth commandment perfectly his entire life? It was for him a day of worship; he went to church on the Sabbath. For Jesus the Sabbath was also a day of good food and fellowship with close friends, often over sumptuous meals that someone took time to cook and serve, and as well a day for spending time with people he hardly knew, who had asked him to grace their Sabbath table. He took walks with his disciples and took advantage of opportunities to help others. How much has to be wrong with a person's view of life for him to resent being given a whole day to worship with the people of God, to share a meal with friends, and to be of some help to others! If that seems a burden to us, what does that say about us? "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," Jesus once said to some people who had missed the whole point, who had buried the pure law and the Lord's holy day under a mass of man-made regulations and interpretations. It is a gift, not a burden and we should be careful to be sure that we are treating it that way and teaching our children to think of it that way. When the Lord made the day holy, he was not laying some heavy burden on the backs of his people; he was giving them a great gift. How perverse and how like us to turn his gifts into our burdens!

If you want to keep the Sabbath day holy, ask yourself such questions as these: how can I make this day for me, for my family, and for others I know *the very best, the very happiest day of the week*; the day we are going to regret coming to an end. How can I make this day a day of rest in the truest and deepest sense of that beautiful word? The Bible tells us only a few things, the main things; most is left to us. But it expects us to observe the day as those who know it is the Lord's gift to us, who know it is a holy day precisely because it was meant to help us to live a holy life.

The Sabbath was for the Lord Christ as it has been for countless saints through the ages, a holiday every week, the best day of the week, a day that was kept free for the best things of life, at least what godly folk would think are the best things of life. There are a thousand good and happy and holy things that can be done on the Sabbath day, a thousand ways to make it both the Lord's holy day and a day of rest and refreshment and renewal for ourselves.

The Sabbath is one of the great engines of faith and holiness God has provided us. As Thomas Shepard, the founder of Harvard quaintly put it:

"It is easie to demonstrate by Scripture and argument as well as by experience that religion is just as the Sabbath is, and decays and growes as the Sabbath is esteemed; the immediate honour and worship of God which is brought forth and swaddled in the first three commandments, is nurst up and suckled in the bosome of the Sabbath."

Why ought we not to suppose that the spiritual doldrums, the childishness and effeminacy, and the outright defections that now so plague American Christianity are not in some part the consequence of the refusal of American Christians to make use of the day God gave them as a free gift, a day set apart for their drawing near to him, for strengthening their faith, for increasing their love, and for doing the works that not only bind them to one another but extend the kingdom of God.

God could have made us to work every day. After all, we can rest at night. But it was God's goodness to grant us a holiday every seven days. Why do human beings all over the world love and crave holidays? It is because their generous maker wove the need for them into the very fabric of their being. To love a holiday -- "holiday" is originally "holy day," after all -- is to be like God! But if we do not use the holiday for the purposes for which he gave it to us, this gift, like all of his other gifts -- marriage, family, fulfilling work -- will lead us away from Him instead of to him.

I want you to be a people that loves the Lord's Day and loves to keep it holy. I want our young people to find it natural, even an honor to turn down the world's invitation to use this day just like any other day in order to keep the Lord's Day holy to Him. And if we do and they do, I know you will be a holy people and a very happy people and so will your children!