

Sabbath

By Ryan Dean

As long as I can remember, Orthodox Jews have intrigued me. Even as a kid I recall Saturdays, driving down Lavista Road near the Orthodox synagogue, feeling like I had entered a different dimension. Who were these people wearing black, their curly locks obscuring their faces, their top hats like those old-timey Broadway players? Many times I have gone out of my way to drive Lavista just for the experience of seeing these people observe the 4th Commandment with such external seriousness. Every week from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, the world stops for these people. They gather by candlelight on Friday night with their families and begin a 24-hour long, age-old ritual of remembering, worshipping, eating, and resting that distinctively marks this last day of the week from the six that have come before. While outside the world charges on in its progress, they clock-out of the rat race for a day. Some days I'm a little jealous of them: not because their tradition actually pleases God or secures his favor for them-the New Testament is quite clear that the Sabbath is but a shadow of something greater-but because their week has a discernable, predictable rhythm. Because theirs is a Christ-less Sabbath, it is a worthless Sabbath. Yet I sense that we, as Christians, in our 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week world might have something to learn from them.

The pattern (6 days of work/1 day of rest) is as old as time itself. The Creator God set the example for how his creation would function best: for 6 days he created, after which he rested. In love, God ordained a rhythm for his creation. But, if that is all we have to say about God's purpose for creating the world this way, we've missed the significance of the Sabbath as the Bible understands it.

The Sabbath is a shadow of a larger spiritual reality. Hebrews 3-4 makes the connection between the Sabbath and the Promised Land of the Old Testament. "To enter the Promised Land" is synonymous with "to enter the Sabbath rest of God." They are both shadows of the same larger spiritual reality. So what is this larger spiritual reality that both point to? I ask in reply: What is at the heart of the ideas of Sabbath and the Promised Land? In both examples, it is rest. In the former the Israelites literally rested from their work; in the latter, they literally rested from their wanderings

in the wilderness. In the same way, the author of Hebrews explains, we enter into the state of being “saved” (the Promised Land/Sabbath) not through our work (good works-that is), but through resting from our works and having faith in Christ. Contained within these principles of Sabbath and Promised Land is the content of the Gospel. God established the Sabbath rhythm as weekly reminder to the Old Testament saints of their coming redemption. They looked forward in faith to the day of “Sabbath rest”, when they would spiritually enter the “Promised Land” of God's redemption. For we who live in this era after the coming of Christ, we must relate differently to this idea of Sabbath than the Old Testament saints who came before us, for “we who have believed enter that rest” (Heb. 4:3). The Sabbath reality is one that is dawning among us, as more and more people turn from their wickedness and place their faith in Christ. We don't look *forward* to our Sabbath rest like the Old Testament saints did (although we do still anticipate our ultimate redemption with Christ's return), but *back* to Christ, who has inaugurated this era known biblically as “the last days”. This is why the early church began to gather not on the Jewish Sabbath, but on the day of Christ's resurrection, the first day of the week: Sunday. The fulfillment of the Sabbath had come in the person of Jesus; no longer did his people end their week in anticipation of His coming, instead they began their week by remembering the new creation that Christ began through his resurrection: “he is the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29). The Sabbath, therefore, is not about “It's Sunday, I can't go to the movies today”, but something of much deeper significance. We cannot allow our minds to be mired in the particulars of “can dos” and “can't dos” to the point that we miss God's purpose in establishing this day of rest.

So the question remains: How do we relate to the idea of weekly rhythm considering the fact that the Sabbath is not an end in itself, but a shadow directing us to see God's redemptive work in Christ? As Christians, we are often quick to throw out the idea of literal Sabbath rest because of our New Testament understanding. Paul himself said, “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 a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:16-17). Yet at the same time, I sense that I need to take a weekly break from my life to focus on Christ. This is why I said earlier that I'm sometimes jealous of the Orthodox Jews. Although they practice Sabbath with a deficient understanding of it, their tradition forces them to stop, to rest, to worship, and to enjoy

their community. As your Worship Leader, I hope you both understand the spiritual essence of the Sabbath principle and consider how the Lord would have you apply it practically to your life. There is so much to be gained by recognizing why we gather on Sunday and disciplining ourselves to think about the day differently than we do all the others. Sunday is our protest against this world that wants us to be submerged in its doings and consumed in its concerns. Sunday is our weekly taste of heaven, the day when we worship God corporately, rest from our labors, and enjoy the presence of those who will be our eternal company: the Body of Christ.