

# Sabbath and Heaven

by Sinclair Ferguson

The anonymous author of Hebrews found different ways of describing the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of them, which forms the underlying motif of chapters 3 and 4, is that Jesus Christ gives the rest that neither Moses nor Joshua could provide. Under Moses, the people of God were disobedient and failed to enter into God's rest (3:18). Psalm 95:11 (quoted in Hebrews 4:3) implies that Joshua could not have given the people "real rest" since "through David" God speaks about the rest he will give on another day (Heb. 4:7). This in turn implies that "There remains a sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9).

In speaking of this rest (3:18; 4:1, 3–6, 8) the author consistently used the same word for "rest" (*katapausis*). Suddenly, in speaking about the "rest" that remains for the people of God, he uses a different word (*sabbatismos*, used only here in the NT) meaning specifically a Sabbath rest. In the context of his teaching, this refers fundamentally to the "Sabbath rest" which is found in Christ ("Come ... I will give you rest," Matt. 11:28–30). Thus we are to "strive to enter that rest" (4:11).

Since Augustine, Christians have recognized that the Bible describes human experience in a fourfold scheme: in (i) creation, (ii) fall, (iii) redemption and (iv) glory. We are familiar with echoes of this in the Westminster Confession of Faith and in Thomas Boston's great book *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*. It is no surprise then that the Sabbath, which was made for man, is experienced by him in four ways.

In creation, man was made as God's image — intended "naturally" as God's child to reflect his Father. Since his Father worked creatively for six days and rested on the seventh, Adam, like a son, was to copy Him. Together, on the seventh day, they were to walk in the garden. That day was a time to listen to all the Father had to show and tell about the wonders of His creating work.

Thus the Sabbath Day was meant to be "Father's Day" every week. It was "made" for Adam. It also had a hint of the future in it. The Father had finished His work, but Adam had not.

But Adam fell. He ruined everything, including the Sabbath. Instead of walking with God, he hid from God (Gen. 3:8). It was the Sabbath, Father's Day, but God had to look for him!

This new context helps us to understand the significance of the fourth commandment. It was given to fallen man — that is why it contains a "you shall not." He was not to work, but to rest. Externally, that meant ceasing from his ordinary tasks in order to meet with God. Internally, it involved ceasing from all self-sufficiency in order to rest in God's grace.

Considering this, what difference did the coming of Jesus make to the Sabbath day? In Christ crucified and risen, we find eternal rest (Matt. 11:28–30), and we are restored to communion with God (Matt. 11:25–30). The lost treasures of the Sabbath are restored. We rest in Christ from our labor of self-sufficiency, and we have access to the Father (Eph. 2:18). As we meet with Him, He shows us Himself, His ways, His world, His purposes, His glory. And whatever was temporary about the Mosaic Sabbath must be left behind as the reality of the intimate

communion of the Adamic Sabbath is again experienced in our worship of the risen Savior on the first day of the week — the Lord’s Day.

But we have not yet reached the goal. We still struggle to rest from our labors; we still must “strive to enter that rest” (Heb. 4:11). Consequently the weekly nature of the Sabbath continues as a reminder that we are not yet home with the Father. And since this rest is ours only through union with Christ in His death and resurrection, our struggles to refuse the old life and enjoy the new continue.

But one may ask: “How does this impact my Sundays as a Christian?” This view of the Sabbath should help us regulate our weeks. Sunday is “Father’s Day,” and we have an appointment to meet Him. The child who asks “How short can the meeting be?” has a dysfunctional relationship problem — not an intellectual, theological problem — something is amiss in his fellowship with God.

This view of the Sabbath helps us deal with the question “Is it ok to do ... on Sunday? — because I don’t have any time to do it in the rest of the week?” If this is our question, the problem is not how we use Sunday, it is how we are misusing the rest of the week.

This view of the Lord’s Day helps us see the day as a foretaste of heaven. And it teaches us that if the worship, fellowship, ministry, and outreach of our churches do not give expression to that then something is seriously amiss.

Hebrews teaches us that eternal glory is a Sabbath rest. Every day, all day, will be “Father’s Day”! Thus if here and now we learn the pleasures of a God-given weekly rhythm, it will no longer seem strange to us that the eternal glory can be described as a prolonged Sabbath!

---

### **Prayer:**

God Almighty,

One day of Sabbath is an extraordinary gift. Help us to live into your image so we too may experience the Adamic Sabbath and find you in your full glory. We pray this in confidence, knowing you already know our downfalls and still love us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

---

### **Questions:**

1. How is the limited rest that the world can provide different from the true rest that God gives us on the Sabbath?
2. Have you ever thought of Sabbath as “Father’s Day”? How does this perspective change how you view the Sabbath?
3. Do you ever find yourself trying to “get away with” certain things on your Sabbath? How does this reflect in your relationship with God?
4. What is the connection between Sabbath and heaven?

<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/sabbath-rest/>