



God's Rest Day



Before we start...

This booklet looks at a **very important and practical** theme. The church here and elsewhere is likely to remain much stronger, vibrant, fruitful and pleasing to Christ if it retains and lives out the biblical teaching about God's Rest Day. It will be weaker and poorer if it doesn't!

This booklet deals with a **debated theme**. Through the ages, and perhaps even more acutely today, there have been varied views on this matter. Brothers and sisters who we love in the gospel and respect for their commitment to Christ do differ, sometimes slightly, sometimes substantially, on both the theology and especially the practical outworking of God's Rest Day.

This booklet is **Bible-based**. The views in this booklet were reached after an attempt to consider all the relevant Bible passages and after reading different interpretations on the subject. The aim has been to concentrate on the main thrust of the passages rather than get obsessed with detailed diversions. It reflects the Bible-based convictions of the elders at Forest Fold on this theme. We do want to be biblical, not merely traditional.

This booklet is a **summary of a sermon series**. Four Sunday morning messages were given in May and June of 2011 at Forest Fold Baptist Chapel, Crowborough. So what follows is not a scholarly treatise¹. It is a pastor's attempt to summarise the main contours of the Bible's teaching with a view to stirring up a positive, wise approach to the day. In order to get a full-orbed and balanced sense of the Bible's teaching it is important to read all four messages.

This booklet is meant to **affect you!** As well as laying the ground work of biblical teaching it is hoped it will give a challenge and an encouragement in living for Christ in this area. Please don't finish this booklet exactly as you started!

*'This is the Day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice
and be glad in it' Ps 118 v24*

¹ For a fuller, yet readable, treatment of this theme the DayOne book 'On The First Day of the week' by Iain Campbell would be a good start

1 - The Foundations of God's Rest Day

Why one day in seven, not ten, or twelve? Two major points give us our bearings.

Creation - Gen 2 v1-3

We are barely out of the first chapter of the Bible when the subject comes up.

The Hebrew draws attention to this seventh day. 'Seventh' occurs three times. As we look back to creation, this day shines out above the others.

*'He has put a
divine highlighter
through that day'*

God finishes work and rests.

Finishing work and enjoying rest are emphasised in these three verses.

God never needs to rest (Isa 40 v28) but here, as a pattern for humanity, He rests.

God blesses and sanctifies the day

The day is blessed, happy. God's favour is on it. Of all the days of creation He has put a divine yellow highlighter through that day. He also sanctifies it. It is separate, special, different, devoted to Him.

*'Two hefty
foundational reasons
for keeping one day in
seven special'*

It is not enough to say these verses are merely a description of what God did. Blessing and sanctifying the day has a forward looking purpose. It is seen elsewhere in the Bible as a deliberate God-ordained pattern (Ex 20 v11, 31 v17, Deut 5 v14). The one day in seven is a purposeful

creation pattern for the good of men and women.

The Ten Commandments – Ex 20 v8-11

The Ten Commandments have a special status. They are engraved in stone (Deut 4 v13-14). They are 'The Ten Words' (Ex 34 v28). They are in the Ark of the Covenant. In the New Testament (NT) they are referred to as showing the essence of the law (Luke 18 v20). Yes, we see them in a deeper, richer, more spiritually minded way in the New Testament, but they are not destroyed or undone (Matt 5 v17-30). So we can say the thrust of the fourth commandment remains. Like all commandments, it is for our good. We are to '*Remember*' (v8), mark and observe the Sabbath Day.

It was to be a holy day v8 & v11

We serve God every day, but this day brings special opportunities. As some families have best cutlery for special meals and guests, so this day is better than the everyday, a special privilege, kept separate for a special use.

It was to be free from normal work

There is a place for work – six days of it (v9). But, (and get ready to cheer!), *‘in the seventh you shall not do any work’* (v10). It is a ‘Sabbath’ (rest, repose, cease from work). A day when we stop work. A day when those we are responsible for stop work. A day to try and avoid making others work - *‘so they may rest as well as you’* (Deut 5 v14).

‘and get ready to cheer!...not do any work’

It is not a mindless day - God’s works are remembered. In Exodus it is creation (Ex 20 v11) that is in mind, in Deuteronomy it is their great salvation from Egypt (Deut 5 v15). Creation & salvation - two things for us to keep in mind on this special day.

So in the creation pattern and the Ten Commandments we have two hefty foundational reasons for keeping one day in seven special. Some modern Christian thinking tends not to give sufficient weight to these foundations.

Applications – In our series we will identify 4 R’s to use the day to the full. Here we have our first two....

a.) **Rest from normal work.**

There is a good place for hard work (the ants Prov 6, the parable of the talents Matt 25, the word to servants Col 3 v23). But there is also a place for enjoying rest – guilt-free rest! There is a need for rest in our lives generally, but here specifically one day in seven should especially include rest. A day for the student to enjoy freedom from the

‘guilt-free rest!’

tyranny of revision and projects, a day free from unnecessary household responsibilities, a day when work emails don’t need to be seen, and the frenzy of planning & preparation can be left to one side! We should step into Monday with a spring in our step. Even God describes Himself as being *‘refreshed’* (Ex 31 v17) by the day of rest - we should be too!

b.) Remember God and His works and delight in Him.

‘We should step into Monday with a spring in our step’

It is always a challenge to manage time, maintain our priorities, and have time for the relationships that really matter. Our most important relationship is with God. What a help it is to have one day in seven to especially remember Him; a day when we can worship, read, reflect, talk with others and pray. What a gift!

Double refreshment – physical rest and spiritual blessing. Are you using the day for both?

‘Are you using the day for both?’

2 - The Development of God’s Rest Day

The ambitious aim here is to draw on the rest of the Old Testament (OT) and see some avenues from it into the New!

Development of God’s Rest Day

The creation pattern and the thrust of the fourth commandment remain, but there are other aspects in relation to the Sabbath in the life of Israel which seem to develop, especially as you proceed into the New Testament.

The **Sabbath was a sign** between God and the children of Israel (Ex 31 v13, 17 & Ezek 20 v12). John Mackay² suggests there are three Old Testament signs which are modified in the New Testament: Circumcision develops into baptism, the Passover develops into the Lord’s Supper and the Jewish Sabbath develops into the Lord’s Day. On that basis it is not a surprise to see this observance develop. Coupled with this there are aspects to the Old Testament law which are seen as civil, and so more directly relate to the people of God at that phase of history. Three of the main changes we see are as follows:-

² Mackay J. L. ‘Exodus – A Mentor Commentary’, Christian Focus, Fearn, 2001, p518 in commenting on Exodus 31

1. **The Day of the week has changed.** We meet on Sundays not Saturdays. There is evidence of this move in the New Testament (Acts 2v1, 20 v7 & 1 Cor 16 v2). Meeting on the first day had clearly become a pattern in early church history as sources from 2nd and 3rd centuries show. This change of day reflects the huge significance of what Jesus did in rising again, having paid the price for sin. All four gospels specify it was on *'the first day of the week'*. The Holy Spirit came on this first day. The apostle John saw this day as *'The Lord's Day'* (Rev 1 v10).
2. **Civil punishments are not carried out.** Ex 31v14-15 made clear that Sabbath breaking in the OT times was punishable by death. The somewhat surprising case of Num 15 v32-36 confirms this. Whilst such passages underline the importance of a command, we must notice the New Testament does not continue these civil punishments. Jesus did not countenance the stoning of the adulteress (John 8), or the woman at the well (John 4).
3. **There is a different spirit and emphasis in the NT.** This becomes clearer in the gospel accounts looked at later. There is a move from what you don't do, to what you do do; from the detailed outward aspects to the spiritual. John was *'in the Spirit on the Lord's Day'* (Rev 1 v10). Walter Chantry explains this well. Referring to the OT sacrifices for the Sabbath he says

*'in the Spirit on the
Lord's Day'
Revelation 1 v10*

*'Strict instructions down to minute particulars were given. Our Saviour handled precisely the same Sabbath law in a different spirit. He displayed a much greater disposition of leniency, granting men a larger freedom'... and...
'On the Sabbath as in all moral laws Christ's Spirit must prevail'* ³

A comparison can be made with young children and grown ups. Children require detailed instruction, clear prohibitions ('No!') and definite punishments. Adults often require an explanation of purpose, principles, freedom, and a positive emphasis.

*'we will soon grow
cold if we miss out on
public worship'*

³ Chantry W Call the Sabbath a Delight, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1991 p64, 69

So the creation pattern remains. The essence and principle in the Ten Commandments remains but the Jewish Sabbath develops in NT times.

One particularly positive aspect which seems to develop and is established by New Testament times is that the day is a 'together day' for God's people. In the Old Testament, there were sacrifices on the Sabbath Day. There was a Psalm for that day (Ps 92) which portrays praising God morning and evening. It was seen as a day of worship (Ezek 46 v3-4). By the New Testament this had blossomed, and the scriptures were read in the synagogues every Sabbath (Acts 13 v27, 15 v21). On the first day of the week the church prayed (Acts 1 v14), broke bread, heard preaching (Acts 20 v7), met together, and took collections (1 Cor 16 v2). We see later in Hebrews (10 v25) that gathering for worship is not to be neglected. This leads to a third 'R' in the use of the day.

c.) Reunite with Christians to worship and hear God's word

Like a coal separated from fire, or an emperor penguin away from the winter group, we will soon grow cold if we miss out on public worship.

Sunday has been called the 'Christian's training day', or 'the Market day for the soul'. Many Christians and churches are weaker because they do not make the

'the Christian's training day'

most of these opportunities. The general pattern of coming to morning and evening services here at Forest Fold has helped strengthen Christians and prepared them for future usefulness. Whilst in some circumstances that is not possible, it is a good general pattern. As one modern evangelical author has written: 'Despite what has become popular in our evangelical culture, it is still the Lord's Day, not the Lord's Morning, which we are to celebrate⁴!

'still the Lord's Day, not the Lord's Morning'

Delighting in God's Rest Day

As you continue through the Old Testament, you realise that neglect of the Sabbath was a repeated matter of concern. It reflected a cold heart and a rebellious spirit.

⁴ J. E. Benton article 'Why Two Sunday Services?', *Evangelicals Now*, September 2008

Isaiah speaks of not defiling the Sabbath (56 v1-7), Ezekiel says profaning it was a sign of rebellion leading to judgement (20 v19-24), Jeremiah conveys a similar message (17 v21-27), and Amos denounces those who can't wait for it to finish (Amos 8 v5). It is not forgotten after the exile either; on three occasions it features in Nehemiah as he seeks to reform the people (Neh 9 v13-14, 10 v31, 13 v15-22).

Our attitude to the Lord's Day is often a sign of our spiritual temperature. It is right and impressive that some Christians are clearly very sad when not well enough to meet for worship, some have been known to be in tears with disappointment!

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Isaiah 58 v13-14 urges a very positive approach to the day. Although there is so much which is truly pleasurable in the day, it is not a day for pursuing our own pleasures⁵, where we disregard God and His priorities and claims on our life. Instead we are to *'call the Sabbath a delight'* (v14). Does it have a yellow highlighter through it in our minds & hearts? As a dad longs for time with his family on holiday or with his wife over a meal out, so we should look forward to God's special day.

'As a dad longs for time with his family on holiday'

We delight in the day, because we delight in God (Ps 37 v4). Psalms 122 (esp v1) and 84 (esp v10) show a heart that loves God and loves to worship Him with others.

Questions for reflection

Am I making the most of opportunities to meet with other Christians to worship God and hear from His Word?

Does my heart delight in the Day as it should?

⁵ The term 'pleasure' in that verse refers to *"that which pleases man instead of God. It is a gross misunderstanding to interpret it as though the words meant 'that which is pleasant' and to conclude from this that the prophet's only concern is that the Sabbath be not of pleasure but of gloom"* Young E. J. The Book of Isaiah, Vol 3, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p426

3 - The Distortions of God's Rest Day

We move to the gospels. Here we see that as well as teaching on the Sabbath (Luke 4 v31-32, Mark 1 v62, 6v2), Jesus Himself regularly worshipped on the Sabbath Day (Luke 4 v16). Whilst we don't want mere external customs, a heartfelt habit of meeting for worship is a good thing. All Christians are surely keen to follow the example of their Saviour. Some discipline and sense of priority is required.

'All Christians are surely keen to follow the example of their Saviour'

Distortions

In the gospels the Sabbath is often the cause of clashes between Jesus and the religious leaders. They had distorted God's Rest Day, and had developed a fault-finding, picky, legalistic approach to the Sabbath. They objected to Jesus (or His disciples) plucking grain when walking through a field (Luke 6 v1-2), healing a man with a withered hand (Luke 6 v6-11), healing a doubled over woman (Luke 13 v14-15), healing a man with dropsy (Luke 14 v1-5), a healed lame man carrying his bed (John 5 v9-18), and, giving sight to a blind man on the Sabbath (John 9 v14-16). How distorted!

'They strained out gnats and swallowed camels'

Their hard hearts had turned it into a day of burdensome regulations. They suffocated the day with many petty man-made rules as legalists often do. To some they seemed to have the 'moral high ground' with their detailed holiness, but this was Jesus' assessment - He *'looked around at them with anger, being grieved at the hardness of their hearts'* (Mark 3 v5). They were blind. They strained out gnats and swallowed camels (Matt 23 v24).

Jesus' response

Sometimes it is best to avoid confrontation, but on this issue Jesus does not. Jesus shows that these leaders are blind to the Sabbath's purpose and blind to why He came. His words of correction will help keep us from similar distortions.

1. Jesus made two very striking statements. *'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath'* and *'the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath'* (Mark 2 v27-28). These should be kept to the front of our minds. It is not a day of mindless bondage

to rules but to remember God's good purposes in giving the day. It is a day to serve Him in, not to allow petty man made rules to block Him out.

2. He made clear it was good to save life, do good and show mercy.

'Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' He asked (Mark 3 v4). Jesus did not stop His miracles on that day; rather He seemed to go out of His way to do them on that day. It was a day of grace, a day to roll back the kingdom of Satan.

'not a day of mindless bondage to rules'

3. He taught us to be reasonable in our approach. If an animal falls into a pit and you get it out, why not rescue people? (Matt 12 v11). David and his men weren't technically allowed to have the holy bread, but in the circumstances it was right (Mark 2 v25-26). The priests worked on the Sabbath – no problem (Matt 12 v5). If they untied an ox to water it on the Sabbath, shouldn't people be freed from Satan's grip on that day (Luke 14 v15-16)! A hard, rigid, external approach does not please Christ.

Applications

'I really want it to be... so I will...'

1. Avoid legalism

Many of the details of how we keep the day are 'matters of conscience'. In seeking to make the most of the day and pursue the 4 R's it is good to have some personal and family habits. *'I really want it to be a day of rest so I will not generally...'* *'We so want to remember what God has done so we will...'* *'I love to reunite with Christians so I intend to...'* However, we must not allow such habits to become excessive and

'we must not allow such habits to be excessive and obsessive'

obsessive so that they obliterate that it is Christ's day for our good. The lady who tied up her parrot's swing and the man who would not post letters on Thursday, Friday or Saturday, to avoid postal staff working on

Sunday are surely both losing a sense of perspective!! We will also be wise not to allow our own standards to become a point of fault-finding judgement towards others. There is a place for Christian charity in matters of conscience (a right use of Rom 14 v12-13). Sometimes we need just to say 'Others may, I cannot'. If our Sunday is ruined because some children are doing what we think they shouldn't then maybe we need to do the soul-searching!

2. There are some works which are appropriate

Whilst we delight in a work-free day and realise it is something we may need to make a personal stand on, yet we must also realise that some work is appropriate for God's Rest Day. Aspects of God's work continue on that Day (John 5 v17). The gospel accounts (e.g. Mark 3 v4) have led Christians to speak of works of necessity & works of mercy as descriptions of the sorts of things that must continue. Care homes cannot be left unstaffed. We cannot respond to a riot by saying 'the police will be there first thing in the morning'. Even Nehemiah had security staff on the Sabbath (13 v19)! We are all surely glad of doctors, hospitals, medication and the like on the Lord's Day. In today's 24/7 society, with whole industries working all hours, we should pray for Christian brothers and sisters who have to think through where to make a stand and where to oblige.

'Care homes cannot be left unstaffed'

3. We come to our **fourth R...**

d.) **Reach out with God's grace, mercy and compassion**

It is a day to delight in doing good. Whilst it may not have moved the hard-hearted Pharisees, surely we can catch the vision of doing good on that day. The greatest good is spiritual good. The miracles were a picture of what God was to do spiritually in His kingdom. It is a day to roll back the kingdom of Satan (Luke 13 v16). The Sabbath was used as a day of gospel opportunity by the apostles (Acts 17 v2-3). Sundays are a day of gospel opportunity – in church services, in Sunday School, in purposeful hospitality, in leafleting, in old people's homes. Work in reaching out with the gospel so that others find rest for their souls!

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Taking stock

We now have our four R's. This is one way of presenting the main purposes of God's Rest Day.

- Rest from normal work
- Remember God and His works and delight in Him
- Reunite with Christians to worship and hear God's word
- Reach out with God's grace, mercy and compassion

'good to examine your current approach to the day in the light of them'

It is good to examine your current approach to the day in the light of them. It will be helpful to bear them in mind as you make future decisions about the day.

So much could be thought about under each heading. We need to aim for the right balance ourselves before God. This will change in different phases of life, depending on our circumstances, opportunities, and health. What is clear, however, is that we should seek to serve our Saviour and risen Lord on the day He is in charge of. We realise it is an excellent day which we would not want to be without. The Lord's Day is an excellent idea – use it to the full!

'The Lord's Day is an excellent idea – use it to the full!'

Although we have our four 'R's we have not yet finished our journey...

4 - The Fulfilment of God's Rest Day

We have travelled through the Bible pursuing this theme in roughly three stages so far. We now move largely beyond the gospels and Acts into the final strait of the letters and Revelation. Our key text will be Hebrews 4. As so often happens, we find Bible themes reach an exhilarating climax as they are fulfilled. Before we chart this, however, we must visit an area which has provoked considerable debate.

Although it has fulfilment, it is not yet finished

There are some passages which are used to suggest that keeping 1 day in 7 as special is no longer a New Testament practice. Many commentaries and study Bibles will see Rom 14 v5-6 & Col 2 v16-17 as lessening the importance of 1 in 7.

Rom 14 v5-6 has tremendous principles for matters of conscience. People in the Jewish / Gentile blend at Rome had different views on what days to observe and what food laws to keep. The excellent principles given here deserve wide application in our lives. The thing to notice here however is that the Sabbath/Lord's Day is not referred to in the text. There were many other Jewish days and festivals now fulfilled in Christ. These weren't founded in the creation pattern or Ten Commandments. It seems reasonable to assume it is these other days & feasts that are in mind in this passage.

'The need for the 1 in 7 ...has not changed'

Col 2 v16-17 is of a similar ilk, but introduces the theme of fulfilment in Christ. Here the word *Sabbaths* is used, but in the plural. Here again it could refer to other Old Testament feasts (The word Sabbath is used for them too in Lev 23 v24,32). It could also refer to the Jewish Sabbath which, understandably some believers found difficult to release in favour of the Lord's Day which was becoming increasingly special.

'it is hard to see that the creation pattern and Ten Commandments would be set aside'

In both cases, it is hard to see that the creation pattern and Ten Commandments would be set aside by references like these. The need for the 1 in 7, given at creation, and declared by our Saviour as 'for man',

has not changed. Creation and the Ten Commandments are hefty foundation stones on this matter. It is to make these two New Testament texts to punch above their weight to undermine the 1 in 7 principle.

Moving on, we focus more fully on the theme of rest. What a word! So attractive in today's restless, hectic world. The theme of rest is prominent in Hebrews 4; the word gets a mention at least 11 times. There are four rests. There is the rest of the Seventh Day v4. There is rest for the Israelites in the promised land of Canaan in the middle of v3. But the passage makes clear that further rest is in view (v8). Here are the other two:-

Rest now in the gospel

There is an ongoing rest for God's people (v8-10). Christ offers rest (Matt 11 v28-30).

As we enjoy the rest of Sunday after the labour and stress and pressure of a week's work, people under a load of guilt, battered by their failure to meet their own and the legalistic standards of others, come to find spiritual rest through the forgiveness by Christ's work on the cross. You cannot work up God's favour by your accomplishments, but you can rest on what He has accomplished through Jesus. This rest is enjoyed by faith (v3). As the ancient quote goes *'Our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee'*. Perhaps the change in day to the first day of the week is intended to reflect a life lived out based on gospel rest rather than seeking to earn rest by work.

'people under a load of guilt, battered by their failure...find spiritual rest through Christ's work'

The Sabbath principle in the Old Testament was not just a day, but also one in seven years. There was something extra special every 50th year (after 7 x 7) – the Jubilee. It was a year to proclaim liberty, to set free slaves, to clear debts, to return servants (Lev 25 v8-10). This wonderful year pointed forward to the Messiah (Isa 61 v 1-3). The

*‘Peace comes
through Him’*

Sabbath is fulfilled in Him who gives spiritual freedom, rest & deliverance. So you can imagine the palpable shock when Jesus read these verses & applied them to Himself Luke 4 v18 -19). Jesus is the

ultimate liberator & deliverer. Peace comes through Him.

Rest in the future in glory

We have rest now in Christ, but we are not in our final resting place. Part of the rest is still to come (Heb 4 v11). It is secured now but fully experienced later.

Life on earth is characterised by labour. *‘In this world you will have trouble’* said Jesus (John 16 v33). The Israelites had a tonic in front of them. They looked forward to the Promised Land (Deut 11 v9-12), a land sixteen times referred to as a *‘land flowing with milk and honey’*. This points forward. Christians have in front of them *‘a better, that is a heavenly country’* (Heb 11 v16). Then we shall be *‘forever with the Lord’* (1 Thess 4 v17). A place where we shall be free from the sorrow, the pain, the curse, the hunger, the hard work, the darkness, the tears (Rev 21, 3-4, 22 v3-5, 7 v15-17). Sadly those who are not converted will not have this rest (Rev 14 v11). But for Christian believers, God’s day of rest will culminate in this blissful, everlasting experience.

*‘for Christian believers,
God’s day of rest will
culminate in this blissful,
everlasting experience’*

“Blessed are the dead, who die in the Lord from now on...that they may rest from their labours, and their works follow them.” (Rev 14 v13).

What a fulfilment!

What a future!



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