

A Memorial Of Redemption

by Samuele Bacchiocchi

In the Scripture, the history of redemption begins with God creating this planet and its creatures to enjoy eternal fellowship with Him and closes with the assurance that ultimately this original plan will be fulfilled when God Himself “will dwell with them and they shall be his people” (Rev. 21:3).

What role does the Sabbath play in this divine plan? Being the day when God first ceased from His creative activity in order to establish a special relationship with His creatures by entering into human time and history, the Sabbath not only inaugurates the history of mankind, but also epitomizes its ultimate consummation. The decisive divine acts of creation, redemption and the final restoration are all effectively symbolized and commemorated by this first divinely established institution, the Sabbath. In this study, we will focus our attention specifically on the redemptive meaning and function of the Sabbath.

Although the account of creation presents the Sabbath basically as a *cosmological* institution designed to express God’s concern for, and satisfaction over, His complete and per-

fect creation, the Sabbath’s *soteriological* function can already be detected there in an embryonic form. Some of the verbs used to describe its institution foreshadow the redeeming work of Christ: “And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done and he *rested* on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God *blessed* the seventh day and *hallowed* it” (Gen. 2:2-3).

What is the meaning of the divine Sabbath rest? Its first apparent function is to explain that God’s original creation was “finished” and “done” (Gen. 2:2-3). There was no need of an evolutionary process to improve God’s workmanship. There is, however, also a deeper meaning, although perhaps less apparent. By entering through the Sabbath into human time to give to His creatures not only things but also Himself, God revealed His willingness to enter into human flesh in order to become “Emmanuel, which means God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

Another redemptive implication can be seen in the assurance of divine blessings: “God *blessed* the seventh day” (Gen. 2:3; cf. Ex. 20:11). In the Old Testament, the notion of “blessing” is concrete, expressing the promise of full and abundant life (Gen. 1:22, 28; 9:1; 49:22-26; Ps. 133:3). In the creation account, the blessing of the Sabbath follows the blessing of the living creatures (Gen.

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1:22) and of man (Gen. 1:28). Being the final blessing, it expresses God's ultimate and total blessing over His complete and perfect creation. By blessing the Sabbath, God promised to be mankind's benefactor, reassuring all His creatures of full and abundant life. This sabbatical promise after the fall became the token of the coming salvation of the Lord.

Similarly, God's "hallowing" (Gen. 2:3) of the Sabbath contains redemptive implications. Since the holiness of the Sabbath is determined by the special manifestation of God's mysterious and majestic presence on this day (Ex. 31:13; Ez. 20:20; cf. Is. 1:12-15), through the Sabbath, God promises to bless His people with His holy presence. It is

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noteworthy that Adam's first full day of life was a Sabbath day which he spent not admiring God *doing* creative marvels, but *being* in fellowship with Him. Since through the Sabbath God promised not only *products* but also His *presence*, the day could adequately become after the fall the fundamental base and background of all His subsequent saving activities.

After creation, the manna is the next significant example of the redemptive function of the Sabbath. In this instance, the Sabbath is presented not as a cosmic structure expressing the completion and perfection of God's creation, but rather as a historic institution given to the new nation that God had miraculously *delivered* from Egyptian bondage: "See the Lord has given *you* the Sabbath" (Ex. 16:29).

During the week, God revealed Himself through the prodigy of the manna, but on the Sabbath, through His invisible, yet most di-

rect, voice. In order to hear without interferences the Word of God on the Sabbath, it is necessary to look up and not down, to recede from the world of things and not to move, except on the plane of faith. By teaching the people to make adequate preparation to listen to, and to trust, the Word of God, the Sabbath in the manna event becomes the medium to restore that divine-human trust-relationship broken by the fall and by the Egyptian bondage.

The manna experience was the prelude to God's greater revelation of Himself and of the meaning of the Sabbath at Mount Sinai. At this mountain, God provided to the people a fuller manifestation of His glorious presence and of His precepts. The Sabbath's role in this event of salvation history is evident in the septenary structure now used to describe the permanence of God's glory on Sinai: "The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai and the cloud covered it six days; and on the *seventh day* he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud" (Ex. 24:16). Ellen White comments that "upon the seventh day, which was the Sabbath, Moses was called up into the cloud."¹

Why was Moses invited to enter into the glorious presence of God on the Sabbath day? Does God's invitation perhaps unveil the essence of the divine Sabbath rest (which in the creation narrative hides a certain mystery), namely, the day when God especially blesses His creatures with His holy presence? Several elements of the Sinai revelation suggest that the Sabbath is now used to personalize the holy presence of God. Not only does God invite Moses into His presence on a Sabbath, but also through the Sabbath commandment He urges all the people to cultivate His holy presence by making adequate preparation for the day (Ex. 20:8-10). Moreover, from Sinai the Lord explicitly declares the Sabbath to be a perpetual covenant sign designed to remind "that I, the Lord, sanctify you" (Ex. 31:13).

These blessings of the Sabbath were designed to constantly remind the Israelites of God's past, present and future saving activities. The Exodus version of the Sabbath commandment, for instance, emphatically enjoins that rest be granted to all, including

the animals (Ex. 20:10), in order to guarantee to all the members of the Hebrew society the freedom from bondage newly granted by Yahweh (Ex. 20:2). This redemption motif is stated even more explicitly in the Deuteronomic version of the commandment: "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" (Deut. 5:15).

Hans Walter Wolff well remarks that "on every Sabbath Israel is to remember that her God is a liberator."² The liberation from the hardship of work and from social inequalities, which both the weekly and annual Sabbaths granted to all the members of the Hebrew society, not only recalled the past historical exodus deliverance, but also foreshadowed the fuller redemption the Messiah would one day bring to His people. The Messianic age of the ingathering of all the nations is in fact described in Isaiah as the time when "from Sabbath to Sabbath all flesh shall come to worship before me" (66:23). The experience of the Sabbath *rest-menuhah*, which A. J. Heschel defines "as happiness and stillness, as peace and harmony,"³ is frequently identified both in the writings of the prophets and in the Talmudic literature with the Messianic age, commonly known as the end of days or the world to come.

This prevailing Messianic - redemptive understanding of the Sabbath explains why Christ, in His inaugural address delivered on a Sabbath at the synagogue of Nazareth, announced His mission by quoting the sabbatical message of Isaiah 61:1-2 (cf. 58:6) which says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). Christ's brief comment on this passage is most pertinent: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

Christ's initial announcement of His Mes-

siahship (Luke 4:16-21) is followed in Luke by two healing episodes. The first occurred in the synagogue of Capernaum during a Sabbath service and resulted in the *spiritual healing* of a demon-possessed man (Luke 4:31-17). The second was accomplished immediately after the Sabbath service in Simon's house and brought about the *physical restoration* of Simon's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39). The healing made the Sabbath a day of *rejoicing* for the whole family and resulted in *service*: "immediately she rose and served them" (v. 39).

In the healing of the man with the withered hand (Matt. 12:9-21; Mark 6:6-11), Christ further exemplifies the redemptive value and function of the Sabbath. A deputation of Scribes and Pharisees, who had brought the invalid before Jesus, posed the testing question: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (Matt. 12:12). Christ replied first by enunciating a principle, then by illustrating it. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, *to save life or to kill?*" (Mark 3:4). To illustrate this principle, according to Matthew, Christ added a second question containing a concrete example: "What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more *value* is a man than a sheep!" (Matt. 12:11-12).

Both by the question of principle and by its illustration, Christ reveals the *original value* of the Sabbath, a day to honor God by showing concern and compassion for others. The believer who on the Sabbath experiences the blessings of salvation will automatically be moved "*to save*" and not "*to kill*" others. Christ's accusers, by failing to show concern for the physical and spiritual well-being of others on the Sabbath, revealed their defective understanding and experience of God's Holy Day. Rather than spending the Sabbath involved in a saving ministry, they were engaged in destructive efforts, *looking for faults* and thinking out methods *to kill* Christ (Mark 3:2, 6).

The redemptive significance of the Sabbath is brought out even more explicitly in the healing of the crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17). Three times, in fact, the Savior uses the verb "to free—*luein*." To the woman

who for 18 years had been “bent over,” Christ said: “Woman, you are *freed* from your infirmity.” The ruler of the synagogue became indignant over Christ’s healing act. For him, the Sabbath meant rules to obey, rather than people to love and save. To clarify the latter meaning of the Sabbath, the Lord addressed the ruler first by referring to a rabbinical concession: “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath *untie* his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it?” (Luke 13:15). Then, building upon the concept of untying an animal, Christ draws the obvious conclusion in the form of a rhetorical question: “And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan *bound* for eighteen years, be *loosed* from this bond on the Sabbath day?” (Luke 13:16).

Arguing from a minor to a greater case, Christ shows how the Sabbath had been paradoxically distorted. It was legitimate to *untie* an ox or an ass from his manger (possibly because a day without water may have resulted in loss of weight and consequently in less marketing value), yet a suffering woman could not be released on such a day from her physical and spiritual infirmity. What a perversion of the Sabbath! It was necessary, therefore, for Christ to act deliberately on the Sabbath against prevailing misconceptions in order to restore the day to God’s intended purpose.

Two Sabbath miracles reported by John (5:1-18; 9:1-41) further exemplify the relationship between the Sabbath and Christ’s redemptive ministry. Both healed men had been chronically ill: one invalid for 38 years and the other blind from birth. In both cases, the Pharisees formally accused Christ of Sabbathbreaking for instructing the invalid to carry his pallet and for preparing clay for the blind man. To defend Himself against the accusation of Sabbathbreaking, Christ made a memorable statement: “My Father is working still, and I am working” (John 5:17; cf. 9:4).

Some critics use this passage to discredit the Genesis notion of God’s observing the

Sabbath. They argue that Christ, by saying that His Father has been “working until now” in creative activities, implicitly denies that God has ever experienced the creation Sabbath rest. Is this interpretation correct? Is Christ referring to creative or redemptive activity when speaking of the “working until now” of the Father? The notion of a continuous divine creation, though present in Hellenistic Judaism, is foreign to the teaching of the Gospel of John. For the latter “all things were made” (1:3) by Christ at an indefinite distant past known as “beginning” (1:1).

In the Gospel of John, the works of God are identified with, and manifested in, the saving ministry of Christ: “This is the work of God, that you *believe* in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29; cf. 5:36; 10:37, 38; 14:11; 15:24). The redemptive nature of the works of God is absolutely clear in the healing of the blind man, since this act is explicitly described as the manifestation of “the works of God” (John 9:3). To understand the force of Christ’s defense, we need to remember that the Sabbath is linked both to the *cosmos* through *creation* (Gen. 2:2-3) and to *redemption* through the *exodus* (Deut. 5:15; Ex. 20:8-100). While, by interrupting all secular activities, the Israelite was remembering the Creator-God, by acting mercifully toward fellow-beings he was imitating the Redeemer-God. On the basis of this theology of the Sabbath admitted by the Jews, Christ defends the legality of the “working” that He and His Father perform on the Sabbath, since their works consist in raising the dead, and in conducting a saving judgment.

To silence the echo of the controversy, Christ wisely adds the example of the circumcision (John 7:22-24). The Lord argues that if it is legitimate on the Sabbath for the priests to mutilate one of the 248 parts of the human body (that was the Jewish reckoning) in order to mediate through the rite of the circumcision the salvation of the covenant, there is no reason to be “angry” with Him for restoring on that day the “*whole body* of man.” The Sabbath is for Christ the day to work for the redemption of the *whole* man. In fact, in both healings, Christ looked for the

healed men later on the same day to minister to their spiritual needs (John 5:14; 9:35-38).

We can conclude, therefore, that the expressions “the Father is *working still*” (John 5:17) and “*we must work . . . while it is day*” (John 9:4), which were spoken by Jesus to defend His saving Sabbath ministry, refer not to the works of creation but to those of redemption. God rested at the completion of creation, but because of sin, He is “working still” to accomplish its restoration.

This redemptive function of the Sabbath is further clarified in the episode of the plucking of the ears of corn by the disciples on a Sabbath day (Mark 2:23-28; Matt. 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5). To defend the conduct of His disciples from the charge of Sabbathbreaking, Christ advances two arguments. First, He reasons that if it was right for David to allay his hunger by eating of the *holy bread*, then it is legitimate also for the disciples to provide for their needs by plucking ears of grain during the *holy time* of the Sabbath. Holy bread and

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holy time can be used exceptionally to meet human needs, because the purpose of the Sabbath commandment is not to deprive, but to ensure, life (Mark 2:27). The second argument is drawn from the example of the priests. On the Sabbath, Christ points out, the priests work even more intensively in the temple (Num. 28:9-10), performing a host of activities illegal for the ordinary person. Yet, they are “guiltless” (Matt. 12:5) because of the redemptive nature of their Sabbath work, designed to provide forgiveness and salvation to needy sinners. Since Christ is “something greater than the temple” (Matt. 12:6), having come to fulfill its function and ser-

vices, He also can legitimately intensify on the Sabbath His ministry of salvation on behalf of needy sinners; and what He does, His followers must do likewise.

For Christ, the Sabbath is “mercy and not sacrifice” (Matt. 12:7), the memorial of the divine redemption from both the bondage of Egypt (Deut. 5:15) and the bonds of sin (Luke 5:18-19; 13-16; John 5:17). The order of true Sabbath service which Jesus sets up requires first a living-loving service to human needs and then the fulfillment of cultic prescriptions.

In the light of this fundamental redemptive value of the Sabbath, we should consider the meaning of Christ’s summon recorded in Matthew as a preface to the episode we have just mentioned. The Savior says:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you *rest*. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find *rest* for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

What is the *rest* that Christ promises to those who come to Him and learn from Him? Several commentators have noted that Christ’s pronouncement was apparently made on a Sabbath since it is connected with the following verse (“At that time,” 12:1) which begins the above-mentioned Sabbath episode. The possibility exists, therefore, that the rest promised by Jesus is, as stated by J. Daniélou, “the *anapausis* rest of the true Sabbath.”⁴ In this case, Christ’s Sabbath rest is viewed as an “easy yoke” and a “light burden,” possibly by contrast with the yoke of rabbinical Sabbath requirements which weighed heavily upon the people.

What is, then, the new “Sabbath rest” that Christ offers to those who labor in vain to procure rest for themselves by fulfilling burdensome legal obligations? Since we noticed earlier that Jesus made the Sabbath the fitting symbol of His redemptive mission, His Sabbath rest granted to burdened souls must be not a newer or simpler set of rules on how to keep the day, but a fuller experience on that day of the blessing of salvation. Through the Sabbath rest, Christ offers not merely physical relaxation, but the peace and joy of His forgiveness and redemption.

This redemptive meaning of the Sabbath is reflected in Hebrews (4:2-11), where God's people are reassured of the permanence of the blessings of the "Sabbath rest" and are exhorted to accept them. The author rejects the temporal notion of the Sabbath rest understood as entrance into the land of Canaan (Deut. 12:9; 25:19), since he argues that the land which Joshua gave to the Israelites is not the "Sabbath rest" which God has made available to His people since creation. The latter can be experienced by believing, obeying and accepting "today" the "good news" of salvation. The Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God is, for the author of Hebrews, not a material experience reserved exclusively for the Jewish nation, but rather a permanent spiritual blessing available to all who enter by faith into *God's rest* (Heb. 4:2, 3, 11).

This brief survey of the redemptive meaning and function of the Sabbath has shown that the day is the first and most revealing symbol of God's gracious concern for His creature. It originated as the fitting expression of a perfect divine-human relationship where God blessed His creatures not merely with things, but also with His holy presence. After the fall of man, the Sabbath was reiterated at various moments of the history of salvation to provide to God's people the assurance of the final redemption.

The supreme revelation of the redemptive meaning of the Sabbath is found in the Messianic claims and Sabbath ministry of Christ. Not only did Jesus announce His mission as the fulfillment of the sabbatical promises of redemption (Luke 4:18-19), but also on the Sabbath, He intensified His works of salvation (John 5:17; 9:4) on behalf of needy sinners so that souls whom "Satan bound" (Luke 13:16) might experience and remember the Sabbath as the day of their liberation. Moreover, Christ completed His redemptive mission on this earth on a Friday afternoon, and having said "it is finished" (John 19:30), He hallowed the Sabbath by resting in the tomb (Luke 23:53-54; Matt. 27:57-60; Mark 15:42, 46). As the Sabbath rest at the end of creation (Gen. 2:2-3) expressed the satisfaction and joy of the Godhead over a complete and perfect creation, so the Sabbath rest now at the end of Christ's earthly mission expresses the rejoicing of the Godhead over the complete and perfect redemption restored to man. In the light of Christ's teaching and ministry, the Sabbath rest epitomizes the blessings of salvation which the Savior provides to sin-burdened souls. The believer who on the Sabbath stops his *doing* to experience his *being* saved by divine grace, renounces human efforts to work out his own salvation and acknowledges God as the author and finisher of his salvation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for*

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4. Jean Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1956), p. 226.