

The Holy Day

Nehemiah 8:9-12

When I was first ordained, a small church in southwestern Indiana called me to be their pastor. Sharon and I spent the first three years of our marriage there. They were very good to us. The church owned a house which became our home, and though the church was very small, they paid me a living wage. The salary wasn't very much, but they gave freely and generously, and also paid for my insurance and offered me four weeks vacation each year. I gladly accepted.

We lived at quite a distance from both of our families during those years, and the weeks of vacation were very much needed. We always looked forward to the times when we could get away from the normal routine of life and be refreshed. And I observed those weeks of vacation very happily. They were a great blessing.

In that context, I want to introduce our subject this afternoon. The Holy Day. God's Holy Day, which in the New Testament is called the Lord's Day. In the expression of God's law it is called the Sabbath Day. And in many ways, God's Holy Day is to serve the same function as those weeks of vacation I am given in my call as a pastor. God's holy day is designed by God as a day of rest and refreshment, and it is consistently presented in Scripture as a delight and a great joy. A blessing. And yet, sadly, often to my great personal distress, it is neglected and rejected by the vast majority of professing Christians today.

I propose to you that the rejection of the Sabbath Day by Christians today is comparable to me saying to that church that called me to be their pastor, or to this church, "I will be happy to serve as your pastor. But about the vacation weeks, 'No thank

you.' I don't want them. Having a scheduled time of vacation in order to be refreshed from the normal course of my labors is too legalistic and too oppressive. I don't want to be limited and restricted by that obligation to take vacation."

You can be assured that I won't say those things! And I'm glad you smile and laugh at those words, because they are absurd, aren't they? When you called me to be your pastor, and offered me, in addition to a living wage, four weeks of vacation, and two weeks of study leave free from my normal responsibilities. And I accepted that offer! I use those weeks that you have offered me, and I suspect you would have thought me to be very strange, indeed, if I had rejected that offer which I find to be most necessary for my own physical and emotional refreshment. I certainly didn't consider your offer of vacation weeks to be oppressive and legalistic, either. I don't consider it a difficult task actually free myself from the normal responsibilities I have here from week to week. I don't feel oppressed when I have to take a vacation! I consider it a blessing for which I ought to be thankful. Anyone who has ever worked a job that didn't offer vacation understands the blessing even more, for the absence of vacation is what becomes oppressive and burdensome.

Then why do we have such a negative view of the sabbath day? Why do we reject that great offer of spiritual refreshment that the Lord gives to us one day every seven? Why do we consider the regulations and requirements of his law regarding the sabbath day to be undesirable? Perhaps, most of all, because we have never come to understand the glories of learning to enjoy a sabbath rest! Nehemiah understood those glories. He understood the great joy which came to those who delighted themselves in the holy days of sabbath rest prescribed by God. Let me read the brief text again,

v.9-12

Let me start by saying this, and saying it clearly,

I. GOD'S LAW DEFINES HOLY DAYS.

We studied last week the reading of the law.

v.1-3

Within that law, they certainly read about the festivals, especially the three annual festivals when all the Jews were to go to Jerusalem. And in verse 9, in our text today, Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest and scribe, along with the Levites, realized something very important. They had come to the time of the last of those festivals, the Feast of Booths, or tabernacles. It was the seventh month. And on the first day of that month, it began with the feast of trumpets. On the 15th of that month, the Feast of Booths actually began. It was a feast of celebration and rejoicing, a remembrance of God's deliverance.

Lev. 23:39 "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the Lord seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. 40 And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. 41 You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. 42 You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, 43 that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Likewise,

Deut. 16:13 "You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days,

when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. 14 You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns. 15 For seven days you shall keep the feast to the Lord your God at the place that the Lord will choose, because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful."

Let me summarize all of that this way,

A. Holy days are set apart by God as days of sabbath rest.

It was a holy day, a legitimate "holiday." Holy means set apart, and God set apart days for specific purpose. A sabbath rest. The word for sabbath means rest, though the main idea isn't sleeping. The idea is to cease, to be still, to stop all other normal and customary activities. And the implication, made clear in several passages, is that the purpose of the sabbath rest, the ceasing of normal activities, is in order to be refreshed!

God himself set apart the sabbath day by his own pattern of work at creation, and the Scripture said he was refreshed!

Ex. 31:14 "You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. 15 Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. 16 Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. 17 It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed."

God was refreshed. That concept has always intrigued me, because there was no exhaustion in God. There was no weariness, no sense of relief that the difficult labors were finally done. All those things we would think of in terms of our refreshment. But for God, there was the refreshment, I believe, of enjoying what he had done. Standing back, as it were, and looking upon his creation, and declaring, “It is all very good.” God delighted himself in his own work.

I have to admit that I understand that because if I’m working on a particular project, especially a home remodeling project, I can’t relax and quit work until I have just stared at my accomplishments for several minutes. I enjoy looking at work I’ve completed. How much more so for God. He rested, and was refreshed. And he set apart days for us, as his people, to be refreshed.

Now, a couple thoughts here about how these laws apply to us today, in the age of the NT. First, there were many days of sabbath rest associated with ceremonial festivals, such as the one we’re studying today. And I believe that the clear NT teaching is that we are freed from the requirement to externally observe those ceremonial regulations. We aren’t obliged to keep these Old Testament festivals, those part of the ceremonial laws that prefigured Christ. And that teaching is given clearly in,

Col. 2:16 “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

So we don’t have the ceremonial regulations. No more animal sacrifices, for example. Those sabbath festivals were only a shadow of things to come. And yet the principle of sabbath rest is a very appropriate one. Indeed, the principle of giving people a sabbatical is a very good one, and I put our experience of

“vacation” into that category. It is a time of sabbatical, a time of release from the normal responsibilities of labor.

And there are some holy days that continue into the New Testament age, still very much part of God’s revealed will for his people today to observe, specifically the holy day of the weekly sabbath, which is not given as a ceremonial festival prefiguring Christ, but rather given by God at creation, given to man, as man. Even before the fall. Man, created in God’s image, is called upon to reflect the character and pattern of God the creator. And that pattern of life is very, very simple. Six days of labor followed by one day of rest!

That pattern was then codified, that is, put into the written law, not as part of the temporary ceremonial law of the OT, not as part of the temporary civil laws for the nation of Israel, but embodied into the very definition of God’s moral law as we find it in the 10 commandments. So the holy day set apart by God as a day of sabbath rest is, today, the sabbath day. It is still a day set apart by God. As it is described in the sabbath days of this feast of booths, take particular notice of the specific way in which we are to hallow, or sanctify, or set apart, the sabbath day, Stop working!

B. Days of sabbath rest grant freedom from the responsibilities of regular labor.

That’s what the sabbath rest is, by definition. That’s what the law required for the sabbath day. “On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.”

How freely we reject this great blessing, to be freed, albeit temporarily, but freed nonetheless, for the burden of toil and labor which we now perform by the sweat of our brow as a result of the

curse upon Adam and Eve after the fall. We are freed from that curse, as it were, for one day every week. And in our foolish, worldly wisdom, we think remaining under that curse all seven days is actually better!

We are given the opportunity to be released from the requirements of labor, and we choose to remain under its slavery, seven days a week. And we wonder why people get burned out. We wonder why stress is such a problem. We wonder why we have so little joy and hope in life. We've given away, we've forsaken, the very means by which God would have us gain that joy. The sabbath rest.

And if you don't remember anything else about the sabbath, remember this: the sabbath day is a delight! Days of sabbath rest were to be days of delight!

Here is where Nehemiah's experience of the sabbath is so especially relevant for us. It is this spirit of joy!

II. HOLY DAYS PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE JOY IN THE LORD.

When the law was read, as we studied last week, in Nehemiah 8:1-8, the people understood what it said. And therefore, they understood their own sin. And they grieved because of it. Appropriate grief. Sin should cause us to grieve and be sorrowful. But that genuine sorrow ought not to be the end result. It ought to produce joy. And so Nehemiah says specifically, "don't grieve." "Do not mourn or weep."

v.9

In fact, celebrate! Have a banquet!

v.10

Put an end to your grief.

v.11

In our day, I don't believe we take sin nearly seriously enough. There is often little, if any, sorrow and grief today when people become aware of their sin. More frequently, there is anger at the person who had the courage to rebuke them and expose the sin. So we need much more experience of this godly sorrow. But that sorrow should lead to joy. The joy of salvation. In that regard, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth these words,

2 Cor. 9:9 "As it is written: "He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever." 10 Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, 11 while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God."

So you should be sorrowful when you are confronted with your sin, sorrowful that you have offended a God who loves you. And then, in that sorrow, you should come to understand all the more the marvelous love of God that is shown in Jesus Christ. So, let that sorrow turn to joy, for this is what ought to take place, in a special way, on the sabbath day.

A. We should use the holy days to delight ourselves in God's goodness in saving us from the curse of the law.

v.9 "Do not mourn or weep."

v.10 "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

v.11 "Be still." In other words, put an end to your sorrow. "Do not be grieved."

Instead, rejoice. And the people did.

v.12

Rejoice in the salvation that is yours in Jesus Christ. Rejoice that you, though you have sinned, and perhaps even sinned horribly, you are cleansed by the blood of Christ. Rejoice in those things!

That's what the sabbath day is for. It is the occasion God gives us to delight in him and in his goodness. It is the occasion we have to rest from our labors in order to taste of his goodness, the goodness that shall be ours in his presence for eternity. It is the occasion to taste the firstfruits of our eternal glory in heaven, when every day will be filled with sabbath delight, when we rest from our labors!

So blessed are you, blessed are we today, when we enjoy the foretaste of that great eternal delight. Blessed are we, when on the holy sabbath day, we enjoy the foretaste of that great wedding banquet, the marriage supper of the lamb. Blessed is this day which God gives to us for such enjoyment. God has saved us from the curse and condemnation of the law, and given us this blessing to enjoy in a tangible way on the sabbath day.

Let me continue just a bit. There is another aspect to this great sabbath blessing, one I've already referred to.

B. We should use the holy days to delight ourselves in the respite from the afflictions of this age.

The sabbath rest is a respite! A welcome relief. And only if you are able to enjoy that respite, can you understand fully what it means to delight in the Lord.

This world has many troubles, doesn't it? Many afflictions.

Many stresses and many strains. Many occasions to wear us down. Many ways to cast us down. And what does God's word say to us in that experience even of affliction?

v.10

Such a great verse, isn't it? Most of you probably knew that verse by heart, though I suspect few of you could have given the reference in Nehemiah 8:10. And even fewer, perhaps none of you, could have told me the context, which is the sabbath!

This idea of respite, or relief from the oppression and labor of our normal toils, is essential to really know and experience joy. And you will have the strength to handle those afflictions and difficulties, only if you learn to delight yourself in the Lord, and in a very specific way, to call his sabbath a delight!

It is the experience of the sabbath, the joyful experience of this great day, that God designs to be your strength for the normal routines and responsibilities of the other six days! The joy of the Lord is your strength, for this day is holy to the Lord your God. Do you see how those things fit together? In that regard, we read,

Is. 58:13 "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, 14 Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The joy of the Lord, the sabbath delight in the Lord, is your strength, enabling you to ride on the high hills! If only you would call the Sabbath a delight and stop going your own ways and stop

seeking your own pleasure! It's not a day for your own pleasure, namely the entertainments and recreations of this world, but a day to delight in the Lord.

Now, I haven't been very specific yet, in application, and that's on purpose, because I don't want you to get bogged down in the do's and the don't's before fully grasping the full context of joy and delight in the Lord. There are lots of dos and don'ts, beginning with abstaining from your labor. And abstaining from causing others to have to labor! Share this delight with others, don't make them work by employing them as your servants by going shopping or going out to eat. Let others delight in the Lord with you.

And restrict any activities that are essentially limited to this world, even good and proper activities, so that you can learn to enjoy the full respite from all the affairs of this age and more fully taste of the heavenly rest that shall be ours in eternity. In other words, don't engage yourself and involve yourself in world recreations and activities that force you to be involved with this age.

There are a lot of things I don't do on Sundays, like going shopping, going out to eat. I don't work on the house. I don't mow the lawn. And I don't engage myself in the work of the church except, of course, preaching and teaching. Except on rare occasions, I don't finish my sermons on Sunday. That happens Saturday night. I don't schedule meetings. And unless it's an emergency, I don't schedule appointments. I don't do any office work.

Let me tell you, that's refreshing! And despite the physical and spiritual labors of preaching, I fully delight myself in the sabbath day, and as I have made the specific applications to my

life, I have learned to delight in the day all the more. The restrictions are not burdensome! They are refreshing! And so it ought to be your goal as well. And in that context, most especially,

C. We should use the holy days to delight ourselves in the experience of corporate worship.

v.12

The sabbath day was to be a day of holy convocation. Again, That's the frequent description in the Bible. Time and time again, in reference to those OT festivals, there is the regulation for holy convocation. In the week long festivals such as unleavened bread and the festival of booths, the first and last days were to be sabbaths. So as we celebrate the ongoing pattern of sabbath in our own lives, may we learn to enjoy those holy convocations. And in the words of Psalm 92, which we could call a sabbath song,

Ps. 92:1 "It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; 2 To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning, And Your faithfulness every night, 3 On an instrument of ten strings, On the lute, And on the harp, With harmonious sound. 4 For You, LORD, have made me glad through Your work; I will triumph in the works of Your hands."

That Psalm has this heading, this title, "A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath Day." So on that sabbath, "It is good to give thanks to the LORD...in the morning, and Your faithfulness every night."

People of God, it is good to assemble yourselves together for worship on the sabbath morning, and good to return again as we are now meeting! So let me encourage you to continue this good habit. And if you fully consider the blessing of this sabbath day, then the joy of the Lord will truly be your strength.

And so I say to you, even as you leave this sanctuary and go home, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”