

## Chapter 1

### Why Celebrate the Sabbath?

What is a celebration?

Have you ever planned a celebration? Maybe your boss was retiring, or maybe your child was having a birthday, or maybe your parents were passing a milestone anniversary. The scenario probably went something like this: Days, weeks, or, hopefully, a month or so in advance, you began to plan the celebration to the last detail. You thought about the food you would serve, the decorations you would have, the people you would invite, the kind of entertainment you would have and the socializing you would do.

As the event approached, the excitement heightened. You arranged last-minute details. You put the finishing touches on the decorations. You made sure everything was in readiness for the special event. Nothing was left to chance. Just before the celebration was scheduled to begin, you took a shower, put on your best clothes, and made every attempt to look as festive as you felt.

Because of your meticulous planning, the celebration was a success. Photos captured the wonderful time everyone had. The honoree thinks back on the event as a special time, and you have fond remembrances that continue to bring a warm glow to your being every time you reflect on that special time. Now let's think about last Sabbath.

Since I can't begin to imagine what yours was like, you can reminisce along with me. Friday - preparation day - I managed to prepare both the Friday evening meal and Sabbath afternoon lunch. The house was reasonably clean. The children had baths.

Usually, we have a time of welcoming in the Sabbath when I get out my guitar and we sing songs. After that we read from a devotional book about God's creatures and have prayer. This particular Friday night, Rachel's teeth were bothering her, and by the time we got her to stop screaming and go to sleep, it was time to put Josh to bed as well. We settled for reading some stories from Uncle Arthur, and then we all went to bed.

Sabbath morning, Rob let me sleep in because Rachel had gotten me up numerous times during the night to nurse. By the time I got up, it was time to nurse Rachel again and put her down for her nap. Rob and Josh went to church ahead of us. I had breakfast, read from a

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Christian parenting magazine, and got ready for church while Rachel slept. Then we joined “the boys” at church, where we were able to listen to about five minutes of the sermon between quieting the children and keeping them occupied.

After church we came home, had lunch, and all took naps. We did manage to have our worship to close Sabbath, which follows the same pattern as the one which opens Sabbath. Shortly after that, the sun sank behind the mountains, and the Sabbath was over.

Now, not every Sabbath is such a poor example as that one was, but in my opinion you could pick any one of a hundred, and it would be but a moon-cast shadow of what it could be. And it's not God we are shorting - it is ourselves.

“Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil” (Isaiah 56:2, emphasis mine).

The Sabbath is a blessing. Crafted especially for us. What is a blessing, you might very well ask, because in this day and age it would be highly unlikely (though extremely praiseworthy) if the people in your life actually recited blessings over you. The blessing has somewhat lost its meaning, becoming merely an interchangeable term for grace before meals. Here's one dictionary's definition:

Blessing: 1. a. The act of one who blesses, b. The prescribed words of ceremony for such an act. 2. An expression or utterance of good wishes. 3. A special favor granted by God. 4. Something promoting or contributing to happiness, well-being, or prosperity. 5. Approbation; approval. 6. A short prayer before or after a meal.

- The American Heritage Dictionary

“Prescribed words of ceremony.” This says to me that a blessing isn't an afterthought or simple well-wishing. We Christians often say “God bless you” with as much sincerity as “gesundheit!” A blessing, in comparison, uses special “prescribed” language. The very act of blessing is a ceremony.

“To recite a blessing is a very serious thing,” Rabbi Goldberg told me. “If you were to recite a blessing for something you don't need - for example, if you were to recite a blessing for a piece of bread and then you didn't eat it, that is a sin. Because every blessing contains the name of God. If you recite a blessing for something you do not need - like for the bread you did not eat - it is taking God's name in vain. So a blessing is not said lightly.”

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“Special favor granted by God.” Little children sing “Sabbath is a special day, special day, special day. Sabbath is a special day. I love every Sabbath.” For six days a week, we have the opportunity to walk and talk and work with Jesus, but on Sabbath, the day He set apart, He meets with us just to be with us, to refresh us, to celebrate with us. The thousands of things that haunt us, the multiple forms of media that clamor for our attention, the need to do, to find, and to see is stilled for twenty-four hours as the God of the universe stoops low to meet with us for a weekly spiritual date. I think that’s pretty special favor.

“Promoting or contributing to happiness, well-being, or prosperity.” Inherent in the Sabbath is happiness, well-being, and prosperity:

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.” The mouth of the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 58:13, 14).

So the Sabbath is a blessing. Just what does God’s blessing bring to us?

He will love you and bless you and [1] increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land - [2] your grain, new wine and oil - the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land that he swore to your forefathers to give you. You will be blessed more than any other people; none of your men or women will be childless, nor any of your livestock without young. The Lord will [3] keep you free from every disease. He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you (Deuteronomy 7:13-15).

Notice the three blessings in the above scripture:

1. God will bless your children.
2. God will bless you in your employment.
3. God will give you health and keep you free from disease.

In the Old Testament the Sabbath functioned as a symbol of redemption because it contains Gods original promise of the blessing and sanctification of mankind. The scripture says: “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it” (Gen. 2:3). God’s blessing is not just a good wish, like our human blessings, but a concrete assurance of happy and abundant life. The Psalmist declares: “The Lord has commanded

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the blessing, life for evermore” (Ps. 133:3). Being the symbol of God’s gift of abundant life, when Eden was lost, the Sabbath, remained as God’s assurance to restore life to his creatures.<sup>1</sup>

1. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: The Good News of the Sabbath*, (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives).

Keeping the Sabbath results in many blessings for us. But there is a big difference between keeping and celebrating the Sabbath. We’ll discuss the difference more later on.

Why should we celebrate the Sabbath?

Oh great, you may think, just what we need, another thing to do on Sabbath. Why, we’ve barely got enough time to study for our Sabbath School lesson or prepare for special music or get our lesson plans together as it is, and here she is saying we should be putting on an entire celebration every Friday night. Just what we need.

Isn’t it?

It’s very simple to get into a comfortable pattern of observing Sabbath. Friday night comes, and the easy chair looks mighty inviting after a hard week at work. And what’s an extra hour or so of sleep on Sabbath morning? You earned it by working so hard all week. Besides, the Sabbath is for resting, isn’t it? What’s the big deal? So you miss the opening exercises of Sabbath School. You’re still there for the entire lesson, aren’t you?

And so what if you nod off once or twice during the sermon. I mean, look at Brother So-And-So. Why, he nearly snores every week. And what’s the harm of going with nonchurch friends to the beach? You could just as easily go with a group from church if one wanted to go. Besides, a church group would spend the whole time talking about secular subjects anyway. What’s the difference? And it’s not like you go every week. Some weeks you take walks in the woods or go sing at the nursing home. You pay your dues.

As sundown approaches on Sabbath evening, you can hear an announcer counting down... “10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1! We have lift-off!” And you shoot out of the bonds of tiresome inactivity to do something fun before the whole weekend is shot.

What would you do, how would you feel, if at the stroke of sundown this Friday night you were suddenly transported into the midst of a group of people who were celebrating - I mean really celebrating - the beginning of the Sabbath. What would your reaction

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be? Would you want to run? Or would your spirit rejoice that it had found kindred souls on the earth?

Don't think of celebration as "just another thing you've got to do." You wouldn't think of your child's birthday party or your wedding ceremony that way. Celebration is more an attitude and less a bunch of activities to do. After all, you can get married anywhere you choose, with or without elaborate decorations, among friends or with just a few witnesses. It's the spirit of the participants that marks it as a celebration. They are full of joy and exuberance, love and happiness.

Celebration of our special time together with God recharges us and fills us with energy to meet the demands of the coming week - much like a short break from our work. You know how it happens - you're hard at work but so tired that your productivity starts to slide backward. So you get up from your desk, maybe chat with a neighbor down the hall, get a drink of water from the cooler, and stretch your legs. When you return to your work, you catch your second wind and go right on.

The Sabbath is the jewel of the week. Spending the set-apart hours of the Sabbath with God gives us our second wind. With it we can push through the upcoming week with renewed vigor.

Why aren't we celebrating?

Have you ever been an unexpected guest? As your host hurried and scurried, alternating plans to accommodate you, did you feel somewhat embarrassed? Maybe, you thought, you should have politely declined or taken a rain check. What if there isn't enough food? They weren't planning on you, after all. As the minutes tick by and your host keeps up a steady stream of conversation to divert you from noticing all the compensatory activities, you squirm uncomfortably and begin to feel really guilty for causing all this extra work.

The only scenario I could imagine that would be worse was if the host had invited you and then forgotten you were coming. Or if the family had been too busy during the week and hadn't had time to make the necessary arrangements for your visit. Can you imagine the horrible embarrassment of that? While they are racing around trying to fit you into their plans, all you can think of is squeezing through a crack in the woodwork and disappearing.

But what if you are the host and Jesus is the unexpected guest? How do you think it makes Him feel when He arrives each Friday evening to find us as one of the otherwise occupied characters in the

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prologue? It isn't as if He springs the time on us like a pop quiz. ” OK, you get a few extra points for planning to have worship, but we've got to deduct some points for not getting everything done by the time the sun set. “Hardly. The time is set up ahead of time, every week. We have no excuse for forgetting.

Not planning, on the other hand... we have many excuses for not planning. Those are a dime a dozen. “I was too busy. My kids were sick. I didn't feel well. I had company this week.”

Felicia loved her daughter Ana very much. When Ana graduated from college, she expected her mother to throw her a big party to celebrate. Felicia had promised, and the whole family, as well as many friends, had been eagerly awaiting the party. Ana's anticipation turned to bitter disappointment when she returned to her mother's house and found that her mother had been too busy to plan the party; she didn't feel well, and she'd had company the week before and didn't have time.

Doesn't sound so plausible in the face of reality, does it? Personally, I would wonder just how much Felicia really loved Ana. And I wonder just how much we love God. I am not excluding myself. There are weeks I “endure” the Sabbath hours. There are weeks I'd just like to skip the whole thing or withdraw from life.

One of the biggest factors, I feel, in whether or not we are able to enter into the Sabbath with a spirit of celebration is how we spent the hours of the week preceding it. I know if I haven't taken time to spend with Jesus during the week, the last thing I want to do is celebrate the Sabbath with Him. However, if I have been working on my relationship with Him during the week, I can't wait for the Sabbath. We'll talk more about that in a later chapter.

But is all this really necessary? you might ask. The answer is that it all depends.

Are you content with crumbs?

We are the children of a King, yet we scabble for scraps beneath His table instead of pulling up a chair and eating with the family. Unlimited resources, that's what we have with Jesus. We are the children of a King, tremendously rich. We do not need to skulk on the edges of Sabbath joy when we have inherited all of it.

Won't you claim your inheritance with me?