

# Finished!

*Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven*

Psalter: 387

Scripture: John 19:23–42

Psalter: 47:8–11

Sermon Text: John 19:30

Psalter: 109

Psalter: 261:1, 2

*When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.*

— John 19:30

Imagine if we all spoke in one-word sentences. How much would be communicated? We would strive to find the best word that captures everything we would want to say. Key words would become so important in day-to-day speech. We are given a key word from John 19:30, a word that communicates the essence of the gospel. It is one word that contains all salvation—an exclamation mark upon Christ’s work. It is a simple Greek word: “Tetelestai.” If there is one Greek word that all Christians should know it is this word. It’s translated into English as, “It is finished, completed, fulfilled, or accomplished.” This is Christ’s cry of triumph from the cross; it is the cry of God’s grace to the world.

This is the final word of Christ to those gathered at the foot of the cross. It was not a whisper; it was a loud cry as the other Gospel writers tell us. The crucifixion, the death of Christ, the atonement—this great work was not finished in a corner. It was done so that the entire world might know and hear the great salvation that Christ has accomplished for sinners. Our theme as we

consider the final minutes of Christ on the cross is simply this: "Finished."

The road to the cross has been a long one. Christ has gone through agony of soul in Gethsemane, faced His accusers in the High Priest's house. He's come before Pilate, before Herod. He's been forced to carry His cross. He's been beaten, whipped, had His hair ripped out, was suspended on the cruel cross, made a curse in the eyes of God and man, and was forsaken of God. In the midst of it all, Jesus is other-oriented. He looked at Peter in the hall of Caiaphas, which led to Peter's sorrow over sin. Jesus spoke words of compassion to His own mother and the apostle John. He prayed for His enemies. He saved the thief. And now the end has come; His last moments come to a close. Will He go out with a whimper? No; first, He calls out, "I thirst." He cries out in His agony and suffering. There is one more thing Jesus needs to say. He needs just a little moisture on His tongue to announce to the world that redemption is accomplished: "Tetelestai! It is finished!" His cries come in quick succession and He gives up the ghost, thus finishing all that Scripture has testified He would do. He is completely sinner-oriented when He cries out the last word.

This is really Christ's victory cry on the cross. It is all accomplished. Everything is fulfilled. His work is complete. It is the stamp of authentication upon everything that Christ has done. According to the eternal plan of the Father and the covenant of redemption, Christ has done it all. Because of His work, salvation is offered to each one of us. Christ has willingly given Himself up for sinners, finishing salvation and offering it freely to sinners.

The complete work of redemption is finished. What does that include? It includes eight things that we want to consider.

### **1. Suffering is Finished**

No one can reach Him anymore. There will be no more

experience of pain or sorrow or suffering. His suffering has come to an end. The agony of soul is over. There will be one spear thrust to confirm that Jesus is really dead, but He will have been at peace already. No one can falsely accuse Him. No one can mock Him and taunt Him to come down from the cross. The shame He bore is now finished. The terrible wrath of God against sin has been satisfied. It is a cry to heaven, to His Father, saying, "Father, My suffering is finished. It is complete. I have done Thy will. I have suffered, the just for the unjust! I have been 'made perfect through suffering' (Heb. 2:10). It is finished!"

It's not only a cry to His Father, but it is also a cry to sinners. Christ's suffering is finished. He has endured hell and endured being forsaken of His Father so you don't have to, child of God. How this ought to sober us! We must not think lightly of Christ's suffering and death. He did not have to come. He did not have to finish suffering for sinners. He could have left us exposed to the all-consuming wrath of God. But He did not.

The penitent sinner hears this cry with bittersweet feelings. In His finished suffering there is life and comfort. The hell that you rightfully deserve has been finished. The God-forsakenness that you deserve is finished! The nails through the hands and feet are what you deserve, but it's finished. The hellish agony and God's wrath is what you and I deserve. We deserve this death. But glory be to God, "It is finished!"

## **2. Scripture is Finished**

All the Old Testament promises and prophecies have been finished. The seed of Genesis 3:15 has come and bruised the head of Satan. The virgin of Isaiah 7 has conceived and born Emmanuel. The Son of David will soon be seated upon the eternal throne. From the cradle to the cross to the crown, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has vanquished every foe. The experience of the psalmist in Psalm 22, 69, and 118 has been fulfilled as a complete reality for

Christ. He thirsted and drank vinegar. He suffered alone. He was the rejected Cornerstone. His hands and feet were pierced. His garments were gambled away at the foot of the cross. Isaiah's prophecies were finished. Christ was despised and rejected of men. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He gave His back to the smiters and His cheeks to those who plucked out the hair. He was numbered with the transgressors. The Passover Lamb was offered up and none of His bones were broken. The Brazen Serpent was lifted up. The second Adam came to reverse the curse. Prophecy after prophecy about Christ's birth and death are finished. One can argue, too, that Christ is looking ahead to His burial and resurrection. That is finished as well! Not one word remains unfulfilled as Christ cries out triumphantly, "Tetelestai!"

Prophecy after prophecy and promise after promise of mercy has been finished. Centuries of anticipation have culminated in this cry for undeserving sinners, "It is finished." Scripture is authenticated in this cry. The gospel is complete. Shelter under the blood of the Passover Lamb and be saved! Look to the Brazen Serpent and be healed of your poisonous sin! Flee to the second Adam and find your obedience in Him! Test the Scripture and see if there is any promise concerning Christ's life and death that has not been finished in this cry. The promises and prophecies are "yea and amen" in Him. You must test them or you will fail. You must rely on them or you will falter. You must believe them or you will doubt. You must live in them or you will perish. It is finished!

### **3. Christ's Service is Finished**

Christ came on a divinely appointed mission, a mission of redemption. Nothing could dissuade Him from finishing this mission. As a child, Jesus said, "What, don't you know I must be about My Father's business?" Luke tells us in Luke 9:51 and 53, "And Jesus set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem knowing what must befall him there."

At every turn, Jesus was faced with death threats, but He resisted because His time was not yet. Jesus Himself says in John 5:30, "I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me." In the Greek world, this word *tetelestai* was used by servants who would come to their masters and say the task has been completed. In John 17:4, Jesus reaffirms this in praying to His Father, "I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed in deep agony, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." Now, He says, "Thy will is done. It is finished!" Heaven's Missionary came to earth, carried out His mission of redemption, and now cries, "It is finished."

What resolve to redeem sinners! God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to accomplish the mission of redemption. The Savior lived with holy resolve until the will of His Father was accomplished. In the covenant of redemption, the Father and Son determined to carry out redemption for sinners. Jesus did not have to fulfill His mission. He delights to do the Father's will (Ps. 40:8). He delights to save sinners. This is grace upon grace. Will you find in His finished service what you need to do the Father's will? Or will you still remain in unbelief at the glory and grace of Christ's work?

#### **4. Sacrifice is Finished**

All the Old Testament types and figures of Christ's sacrifice have been ended in this cry, "It is finished!" Shepherds and priests used the word "tetelestai" when they found a perfect sheep, ready for sacrifice; and Christ died as the perfect Lamb of God. Day after day of bloodshed has been finished; no more blood of animals must be shed. The sacrifices are finished. There is no more anticipation on the part of the Israelites, the Lamb of lambs has been

slain. The sin offering has been made. The peace offering has been slaughtered. The blood has been sprinkled. The wave offering has been made. The Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. The veil has been rent. The blood of atonement has been sprinkled. Atonement is forever finished. The High Priest has entered into the Holy of holies, once for all. It is finished. The ceremonial law is finished and the Moral Law has been kept. The second Adam has done what the first failed to do. He did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it, to finish it for sinners. Christ lived the perfect life and died the perfect death so He could utter this saying, "It is finished."

What a comfort for sinners tonight that Christ has finished sacrifice. This is the only sacrifice that could satisfy God's wrath for sin. Hebrews 9:28 says, "So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation." Look to Him and His complete sacrifice! Or are you still bringing your own works to the table? God does not delight in what you can offer; there is no bargaining with Him. The sacrifice is already complete in Christ. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to all who believe (Rom. 10:4). Your works are imperfect, but Christ's is perfect and wholly reliable and trustworthy. Are you confessing and living out this confession with the words of the hymnist?

Not the labors of my hands  
 Can fulfill thy law's demands;  
 Could my zeal no respite know,  
 Could my tears forever flow,  
 All for sin could not atone;  
 Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
 Simply to the cross I cling;  
 Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
 Helpless, look to Thee for grace;

Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Savior, or I die.<sup>1</sup>

### **5. Satan is finished**

The battle between Christ and Satan has existed from the beginning. It is present in the mother promise of Genesis 3:15. There would be enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. This battle is waged as Christ was suffering in agony of soul. Satan attacked Christ vehemently, but in Colossians 2:15 we read that Christ made a show of Satan openly, triumphing over him in the cross. Upon Christ's return, Satan will be forever bound and cast into the lake of fire because of Christ's victory on the cross (Rev. 20:10). Satan is a defeated foe. He is finished.

Again this is a comfort for the people of God. Satan is powerless to dislodge you from your place in Christ. And for those of you who do not trust in Christ, it means you serve a defeated master. You serve a lost cause. If you continue to serve Satan, Christ's victory cry will resound in your life in a different way: you will be finished just like your master. Have you ever considered that? Is this cry your banner of victory or your cry of defeat?

### **6. Sin is Finished**

The word for "It is finished" was also used by merchants to indicate that the price was paid completely. A common word with so much meaning! John the Baptist already announced Christ as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." In 2 Corinthians 5:21, we read that Christ was made to be sin for those who knew no sin. Hebrews 9:26b says, "But now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." Sin put away forever because of Christ's work!

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1. <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh361.sht>. Accessed March 31, 2010.

Christ has canceled the record of debt that was against us. Colossians 2:14 says, "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross." When you pay a bill, you usually get a receipt on which is stamped "PAID." You and I have a statement of debt written in black ink. But Christ has stamped in blood red PAID IN FULL! Peter speaks of sin being finished, because Christ bore our sins in his own body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24). He was bruised for our iniquities; He was wounded for our transgressions. Christ has made the great exchange. His purity for sinner's impurities! His righteousness for our unrighteousness! His obedience for sinner's disobedience! His sinlessness for our sinfulness! It is finished!

Sin is finished! The price has been paid. "The cross of Christ is the grave of our sins!"<sup>2</sup> God has reconciled the world to Himself through the sacrifice of Christ, and peace is offered to desperate and sin-sick souls. His blood has been shed. It is finished. Are you wrestling with sin, working to pay off your own debt? Martin Luther tried it again and again until he realized that the righteousness of God whom he hated so much was actually his friend. The righteousness or justice of God has been satisfied by Christ's sacrifice for sin. Are there any of you toiling and struggling under a load of sin? Do you wonder if God could ever forgive you? Christ has finished sin. He calls sinners today to have stamped across their debt, PAID IN FULL! Christ's death offers complete satisfaction for sin. You cannot pay the debt. Someone else cannot pay the debt. Only Christ can and has paid the debt. That is the reality of the child of God. The currency of Christ's blood has finished sin, once and for all. He has not paid only half the debt; He does not put down a down-payment

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2. Arthur Pink, *The Seven Sayings of the Savior on the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 116.

and then pay the rest later. No, as soon as you are united to Christ by true and living faith, you can sing with Augustus Toplady:

If Thou hast my discharge procured,  
And freely in my place endured  
The whole of wrath divine,  
Payment God cannot twice demand—  
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,  
And then again at mine.<sup>3</sup>

## **7. Salvation is Finished**

Salvation is complete, full, and free. There is nothing you can add. Daniel prophesied of this completion in Daniel 9:24: “Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy.” Every aspect of salvation is complete. From the moment of calling and regeneration of the soul to repentance and faith, justification, sanctification, adoption, perseverance, and glorification, it is all sealed in this one cry, “It is finished!” It was the sole purpose of the Son of God to save sinners. He “came to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Don't turn to anything else but Christ's finished work. Calvin says, “We ought to be satisfied with his death alone for salvation, and we are not at liberty to apply for assistance in any other quarter.... It was chiefly for the purpose of giving peace and tranquility to our consciences that he pronounced this word, ‘It is finished.’ Let us stop here, therefore, if we do not choose to be deprived of the

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3. [http://www.wicketgate.co.uk/issue73/e73\\_3.html](http://www.wicketgate.co.uk/issue73/e73_3.html) accessed April 2, 2010.

salvation which he has procured for us.”<sup>4</sup> Are you stopping at Christ for complete salvation?

### 8. Christ’s Spirit on Earth is Finished

All that happened on the cross was due to the determinate counsel of God. The Roman guards did not murder Christ. The Jewish mob did not give Christ the death blow. They crucified Him, certainly. But this victory cry was issued forth because Christ had the power to lay down His life and take it up again. John 19:30 says, “And he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.” In these words, we see the voluntary action of Christ to lay down His life for sinners. Christ Himself says, “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

It is finished for poor, wandering, lost, and hell-bound sheep. What love, what compassion Christ demonstrates for sinners! Christ does not end in defeat; He ends in perfect victory. He was the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. It was in the determinate counsel of God that Christ should die for sinners. The cross is the pulpit of God’s love and what is the closing appeal of that sermon? IT IS FINISHED! The Marrow Men said, “Christ is dead for sinners.” It is finished!

The fact that Christ uttered this cry and bowed His head and willingly gave up His spirit tells you something. It is finished. Nothing can take away from its reality. Do you believe it? Is your soul’s and life’s confession, “It is finished,” or are you still going about to establish your own righteousness? Are you shutting out the final appeal of God’s love from a conquering and victorious Savior? Are you trampling underfoot God’s offer of grace to you in this call?

I want to close with an illustration.<sup>5</sup> Some years ago, a

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4. Calvin, *Commentary on John 19:30*, 236.

5. This illustration is taken from A. W. Pink, *The Seven Sayings*, 119–120.

Christian farmer was deeply concerned over an unsaved carpenter. The farmer sought to set before his neighbor the gospel of God's grace, and to explain how that the finished work of Christ was sufficient for his soul. But the carpenter persisted in the belief that he must do something himself. One day, the farmer asked the carpenter to make him a gate, and when the gate was ready he carried it away to his wagon. He arranged the carpenter to call on him in the morning and see the gate as it hung in the field. When the carpenter arrived, he was surprised to find the farmer standing by with a sharp axe in his hand. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "I am going to add a few cuts and strokes to your work" was the response. "But there is no need for it," replied the carpenter, "the gate is alright as it is. I did all that was necessary to it." The farmer took no notice, but lifting his axe he slashed and hacked at the gate until it was completely spoiled. "Look what you have done!" cried the carpenter. "You have ruined my work!" "Yes," said the farmer, "and that is what you are trying to do. You are seeking to nullify the finished work of Christ by your own miserable additions to it!"

It is finished! What hinders you from believing? Is it really your inability? Christ has finished the work; there remains nothing for you to add to it, but to embrace this complete work by Spirit-worked faith. Is it your unwillingness? It is finished; a willing Savior has given up His life for sinners! There is nothing you can add to or subtract from the finished work of Christ. God is reconciled to the world in this cry. None can now escape the objective reality of the finished work of Christ. It is either trusting in the Savior who uttered this cry of victory, or breaking to pieces His work with your unbelief.

This victory cry represents a glorious and stark reality for sinners: salvation is accomplished. Skepticism must be laid to rest. Rational arguments against this reality must be silenced. Unbelief must melt away at this astounding

cry, "It is finished!" The cross is not an arena for the intellect. It is not our duty to grasp everything about the cross with our minds, but to rest in Christ's finished work by faith. It is finished! God communicates salvation in one simple word—*tetelestai*. Do you believe it and do you find your life in this simple gospel word? Amen.

# Crying Out to the God of Providence

*Joel R. Beeke*

Psalter 311

Scripture reading and text: Acts 4:23–37

Psalter 401

Psalter 200:1–2

Psalter 112

*And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas,*

*(which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.* —Acts 4:23–37

For several decades, our nation has been pushing God, prayer, and righteousness out of the public square. Powerful forces have made Christianity unwelcome in the natural sciences, public schools, and the seats of government. This was supposedly done to promote tolerance. But the veneer of that lie is cracking, and underneath we are discovering a brutal intolerance for the things of God and the name of Christ.

We now face the very real possibility that as Christians we will be forced to choose between obedience to our God and obedience to our government. We want to be obedient to our government and serve it as good citizens, for the governing powers are ordained by God (Rom. 13:1). But Christians may soon have to choose between remaining silent about the perversion of homosexuality and going to jail. Christian preachers may have to choose between proclaiming that Christ is the only way to God and being charged with a hate crime. Christian organizations may have to choose between paying tax dollars for abortions and other services that are contrary to their consciences and paying large fines. And when we face such choices, we must say with the apostles, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

We can act with courage because our God is in control. Our God is the God of providence. The Belgic Confession teaches us to believe that “God, after He had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment; nevertheless, God is neither the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Belgic Confession, Article 13, “Of Divine Providence.”

Let us consider what the doctrine of divine providence teaches us to do when we are threatened with opposition and suffering for our witness of Christ. What difference does it make for us to know that our God governs the heaven and the earth and all that is in them by His eternal counsel and providence?<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Acts tells about the apostolic church in just such a situation. The apostles were carrying out their commission to preach Christ and to work miracles of healing in His name. They healed a man born without the ability to walk, opening a door for them to preach to thousands of people (Acts 3). The priests and rulers had the apostles arrested and brought before them. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly declared that all they had done was done in the name of Jesus Christ: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The council commanded Peter and John to stop preaching in the name of Christ and threatened them with dire consequences. They were then released, and they returned to report to the church all that had happened that day.

What did the apostolic church do in response to the threats of the authorities? What should we do? Acts 4:23–37 gives us the answer: we must cry out in prayer to the God of providence. Acts 4:24 says of the early believers, “And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord.” How did they pray? They prayed with urgency and passion: “they lifted up their voice.”<sup>3</sup> They also prayed “with one accord.” Calvin said that the apostles met with the church “that they might arm themselves with prayer against the furious threatenings

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2. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 26.

3. “Lift the voice” (*airō* [or *epairō*] *phōnēn*) appears several times with “and wept” (LXX Judg. 2:4; 21:2; Ruth 1:9, 14; 1 Sam. 24:16; 2 Sam. 3:32; 13:36). It can also describe the roaring of the seas (LXX Ps. 92[93]:3) and the cry of lepers to Jesus for healing (Luke 17:13).

of their enemies; and thus must the children of God do, one must prick forward another, and they must join hand in hand, that they may vanquish the common adversary fighting under Christ's banner."<sup>4</sup>

What did they pray? First, they offered praise to God. Second, they offered prayers for power. Those prayers were answered by God. Let us go on to see how we must join together to lift our prayers to the God of providence.

### Prayers of Praise

The apostles and the early church did not begin praying by asking God for anything. They knew they faced the immediate danger of being imprisoned, beaten, robbed of their possessions, and even killed. But they started with praise. They glorified God for who He is and what He has done. They did not rush through a quick or well-worn word of praise to get to what they thought was really important: asking God for help. In fact, more than two-thirds of their prayer consists of praise to God! Surely this is one effect of faith in God's providence. We do not need to panic as if God were asleep and cry out, "Carest thou not that we perish?" (Mark 4:38). No, we may pray with the calm assurance that He is very much in control, even in the worst of circumstances.

As we look at their praises in verses 24–28, we see they focus on God's sovereignty in the universe He has created, His sovereignty in exaltation of His Son, and His sovereignty in the redemption of His people.

#### *Praise of God's Sovereignty as the Creator of All Things*

Verse 24 tells us the church prayed, "Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is." "Lord" is not the usual word for God used in Greek but a word (*despota*) that refers to the master of a household who rules over servants and

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4. John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:181.

slaves, or a king who rules with absolute power.<sup>5</sup> God's kingdom is nothing less than "heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is," for he "made" them and rules them with total authority. All creatures are His servants (Pss. 119:90–91; 146:5–6).

Calvin said, "If we want our faith to be strong, we must consider God's power when praying and mention the promises which we rely on.... We cannot have confidence in God as we ought unless we are firmly convinced that he disposes all things in accordance with his will so that all creatures are subject to him. That stems from the fact that he created all things."<sup>6</sup>

When men begin to act like dictators and tyrants, threatening God's people with penalties for their fidelity to their God, we must begin by praising the One who is the only true Sovereign over all creation. Even if we are beaten, thrown into prison, and locked up in stocks, we may respond as Paul and Silas did by singing praises to God (Acts 16:25).

The early church constantly sang the Psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), so perhaps they had Psalm 146 in mind when they prayed:

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God: which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is: which keepeth truth for ever: which executeth judgment for the oppressed: which giveth food to the hungry. The LORD looseth the prisoners (Ps. 146:3–7).

How comforting it is for us to remember that men are mere flesh but God is the eternal Spirit who created all

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5. Greek *despotēs*. Cf. Luke 2:29; 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; 2 Tim. 2:21; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18.

6. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 1–7*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 163–64.

things! What peace we can find in His providence! Truly we can sing,

Heav'n and earth the Lord created,  
Seas and all that they contain;  
He delivers from oppression,  
Righteousness He will maintain.<sup>7</sup>

Let us therefore lift up our voices in praise of God's sovereignty as the Maker of heaven and earth.

*Praise for God's Sovereignty in the Exaltation  
of His Incarnate Son*

Acts 4:25–26 goes on to tell us that the church quoted Psalm 2, saying, “Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.” How good to pray the words of Scripture! The Bible is God's own Word, placed in the mouth of His servants who spoke it and wrote it. When we saturate our prayers with God's Word, our minds cannot help but be lifted up to Christ and our prayers are aligned with God's will.

When the apostolic church faced opposition, they turned to Psalm 2, which says that God had long before announced that nations would rage and that kings and rulers would conspire against the Lord and against His Anointed. We should not be surprised, then, when this very thing happens in our time. Rather, we should be profoundly grateful when any earthly authority stands up for what is true and good.

Though the rulers of the world war against God, their efforts are vain, empty, and futile, for, as Psalm 2 tells us, God has established His Christ as the King of kings, and

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7. *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), #400, verse 4 [Ps. 146].

He will reign forever. The Father said to the Son, “Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Ps. 2:8–9).

God’s providence is entirely in the hands of Christ as the Mediator (John 17:2). Calvin said, “God will reign in the person of his Son alone.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore we may be assured that Christ will conquer all enemies of the church, and it will not fail on earth. Jesus Christ has already risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits at God’s right hand with all authority in heaven and on earth (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20–21). William Perkins said, “Christ, [as] God and man, after his ascension is advanced to such an estate in which he has fulness of glory, power, majesty, and authority in the presence of his Father and all the saints and holy angels.” His kingdom “spreadeth itself over heaven and earth.”<sup>9</sup>

So, when we pray for God’s kingdom to come, we should lift our eyes to Jesus Christ, giving thanks that God has promised to establish the throne and kingdom of His Son over all the earth. When the church faces opposition from powerful enemies, we must take time to meditate on the promises and to lift praises to God. Fixing our eyes upon Jesus and setting our affections upon Him, we will then be able to pray with faith and not with the fear of man. We can pray, “Thy kingdom come” with the confidence that we are simply asking God to do what He promised—to give the nations to His Son as His inheritance.

### *Praise of God’s Sovereignty in the Redemption of His People*

The third part of the believers’ praises, are, according to

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8. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:185; cf. *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles*, 165.

9. William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles* (London: John Legatt, 1595), 352.

verses 27–28, “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” In the darkest hours of the church’s sufferings in this world, God’s will is being done. The counsels and deeds of wicked men were the instruments of God’s redemption of His people.

There was no darker hour in the history of God’s people than when Jesus died on the cross. It seemed to the disciples that all of God’s purposes had failed. The Messiah, anointed by God, had perished at the hands of cruel and wicked men. They had brought Him to trial, condemned Him as a criminal, beat Him, nailed Him to the cross, then mocked Him while He slowly died. If ever there was a time for despair, this was it. The apostles hid themselves in fear that they might be taken next (John 20:19). Christians in many parts of the world today might also be tempted to hide themselves for fear of what is coming next in their country.

When Christ rose from the dead, however, He told His disciples that everything had happened according to God’s providential decree as revealed in Scripture and Christ’s own words (Luke 24:25–27, 44–46). What appeared to be the darkest hour was in truth the most glorious moment in history: God had accomplished the redemption of His people. God’s providence ruled over the sins of wicked authorities and caused them “to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” God has predestined even the acts of sinners (1 Peter 2:8). The vicious and ugly murder of God’s Son was determined by God before time began (1 Peter 1:19).

The apostolic church took hold of this doctrine in the darkness and turned it into a prayer of praise. They knew the crucified Christ was not a criminal. Though rejected by men, He was God’s holy child whom God had anointed. “Child” is the same Greek word used of David in verse

25 and can also be translated “servant.”<sup>10</sup> It is the same word used in the covenant with David and in reference to the suffering servant in Isaiah.<sup>11</sup> Jesus’ death was not a defeat, but an ushering in of the kingdom promised to David. His death on the cross was God’s will for our salvation (Isa. 53:10–11). Derek Thomas said, “The doctrine of God’s absolute sovereignty is necessary if we are to understand what occurred at Calvary.... God was the Author of the cross.”<sup>12</sup>

Can you praise God at the foot of Christ’s cross? You can if you trust that Christ suffered for your sins. But can you also praise God as you take up your cross? You may if your faith grasps the doctrine of divine providence. Calvin wrote, “God doth so govern and guide all things by his secret counsel, that he doth bring to pass those things which he hath determined, even by the wicked.”<sup>13</sup> If we believe that, we can stand before wicked men, even wicked rulers, and sing God’s praises. The worst thing they can do to us is the best thing God has planned for our good (Rom. 8:28).

In Christ we are more than overcomers. Though rejected by men, we are not criminals. We are God’s children and God’s servants. Our suffering does not mean defeat for the kingdom. It is the very means that God has ordained to advance His kingdom and cause His eternal weight of glory to be revealed in our lives.

When the powers of this world threaten the church, let us lift our voices in prayer. And let us begin with heart-warming and faith-forming praise. We serve the God of providence; therefore, we can adore Him for His supremacy and sovereignty in His Son. We can sing,

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10. Greek *pais*.

11. LXX 1 Chron. 17:4, 17, 23, 24, 25, 27; Isa. 41:8–9; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1–2, 21, 26; 45:4; 49:6; 50:10; 52:13.

12. Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2011), 110.

13. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:187.

When the needy seek Him, He will mercy show;  
 Yea, the weak and helpless shall His pity know;  
 He will surely save them from oppression's might,  
 For their lives are precious in His holy sight.  
 Christ shall have dominion over land and sea,  
 Earth's remotest regions shall His empire be.<sup>14</sup>

### Prayers for Power

The first response of the church to threats of oppression is to lift up prayers of praise. We have great cause to praise God's sovereignty in creation, in the exaltation of His Son, and in the redemption of His people. We should not stop with praise, however. Acts 4:29 reminds us that we are God's servants, literally His slaves,<sup>15</sup> who live to do His will. We have commandments to keep and a mission to fulfill, and we must not allow the high cost of discipleship to deter us from doing the work God has given us to do. The apostles told the ruling council, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (Acts 4:19). We must keep on listening to God's Word and doing His will as His servants in the world.

We cannot serve God in our own strength. Nothing reveals how weak and fragile we are as does the opposition of sinners. We must thus pray for power. The last part of the church's prayer in Acts 4 teaches us how to pray for ourselves.

The early believers began their petitions with a brief request for protection. Acts 4:29 says, "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings." This is the only petition the church makes for protection against persecution. "Behold" here means "look upon our painful situation and act out of Thy compassion and love."<sup>16</sup> It is good and right for us

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14. *The Psalter*, #200, verse 2 [Ps. 72].

15. Greek *doulos*, a different word than that translated "servant" in v. 25.

16. The verb "look upon" (*ephoraō*) has a variety of applications, yet sometimes takes the special connotation of responding to trouble

to cry out to God for deliverance from those who would harm us so that He may be glorified (Isa. 37:16–20). Let us not romanticize persecution; it is ugly and evil. The Psalms are full of cries for deliverance from the assaults of the wicked, and God’s providence often spares His children from suffering in answer to such prayers. Ultimately God will send His Son to deliver us from all evil.

Note, however, that the church quickly goes on to pray for the display of divine power. Verses 29b–30 say, “and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.” The believers prayed for power for the ministry of the Word and power for ministry to the bodies of sinful men. In answer to that prayer, verse 31 tells us, “They were all filled with the Holy Ghost.” They had offered praise to the Father, taken hold of the promises made to the Son, and now they obtained the power of the Spirit. Their prayer was truly Trinitarian in scope and effect.

The heart of their request was for God to empower them by the Holy Spirit with spiritual gifts. We no longer live in the apostolic age; we are not apostles and do not have the same spiritual gifts that they had. But this text does call our church to ask God for spiritual gifts of speaking and serving. Let us consider each spiritual gift.

### *Power for Spiritual Gifts of Speaking*

First, the believers prayed for the apostles as ministers of the Word, “that with all boldness they may speak thy word” (Acts 4:29). Our ministers today are also mere flesh and blood. They may feel bold as a lion, but like Peter, these leaders may also discover all too quickly how easily

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with mercy and compassion (LXX Gen. 16:13; Ex. 2:25; Ps. 30:8 [31:7]; 112[113]:6; 137[138]:6; Luke 1:25; cf. 2 Macc. 7:6; 8:2; 3 Macc. 6:3, 12).

they can deny their Lord. Pray for your ministers, so they may boldly preach and witness for Christ.

Ministers also carry God’s treasures in earthen vessels and often feel troubled, perplexed, and cast down as they experience the dying of Jesus in their own bodies (2 Cor. 4:7–10). Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit gives them courage to speak, for He is “the Spirit of faith” (2 Cor. 4:13). Luke stresses in verse 8 that the apostle who spoke so boldly to the council was not Peter the man of flesh, but Peter, “filled with the Holy Ghost.” Verse 31 says that God answered their prayer, “and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.”

Boldness refers to being confident, frank, open, and unashamed.<sup>17</sup> We think of Paul, who said in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” But even Paul needed people to pray for him when he faced opposition. He wrote in Ephesians 6:19–20, “And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”

If we would persevere in serving the Lord, we must also seek power for spiritual gifts of speaking. Pray your preachers “full of the Spirit” and they will preach you full.

Charles Spurgeon preached with such power from the Holy Spirit that several thousand people came out to hear him every Sunday for thirty-eight years, and millions have read his sermons ever since. On one occasion, Spurgeon met some enthusiastic visitors to his church and asked them if they wanted to see the church’s power plant. They were far more interested in the preaching, but they followed him anyway. So he took them to a large room where believers were gathered for prayer. His

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17. Greek *parrēsia*.

church sought the power of God through united prayer. Spurgeon recognized this was a notable characteristic of the church, saying,

When I came to New Park Street Chapel, it was a mere handful of people to whom I first preached, yet I could never forget how earnestly they prayed. Sometimes they seemed to plead as though they could really see the Angel of the Covenant [that is, Christ] present with them, and as if they must have a blessing from him. More than once we were so awe-struck with the solemnity of the [prayer] meeting that we sat silent for some moments while the Lord's Power appeared to overshadow us.<sup>18</sup>

Ministers long to see prayer meetings full of people and full of God's Spirit, for powerful preaching in the church begins with powerful praying by the church. Acts 4:33 says what happened after the apostles prayed for boldness to speak: "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all."

Cotton Mather said that Thomas Hooker was a minister of such courage that "while doing his Master's work, he would put a king in his pocket."<sup>19</sup> God can give remarkable power to His preachers. We must seek power for spiritual gifts of speaking so that our ministers may preach boldly, even when under fire.

### *Power for Spiritual Gifts of Serving*

In verse 30, the early church prayed that God would assist the preaching of the Word "by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus." The apostles were commissioned by Christ Jesus to work miracles as they

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18. Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 270–71.

19. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), book 3, 64.

preached the kingdom of God.<sup>20</sup> They now prayed for God to empower their spiritual gifts in practical ministry as well in order to heal the sick. They could not heal at will; even apostles had to depend on God’s power to work a miracle (Acts 3:12). Such miracles are called “signs and wonders” because God used them to confirm publicly that He had sent the apostles (Acts 14:3; Heb. 2:3–4), just as God worked miracles through His servant Moses (Ex. 7:3, 9; Deut. 4:34). By healing the bodies of men, God visibly showed that His redeeming love had come to heal our accursed world and save us from our sins (Isa. 35; Luke 7:20–23).

God answered their prayer in an extraordinary manner. Verse 31 tells us that “the place was shaken where they were assembled together.” In the Bible, earthquakes were signs that God had come to bless His people with His power.<sup>21</sup> Luke reported that shortly afterwards, in answer to this prayer, the Lord struck dead some hypocrites in the church, caused amazing miracles of healing through the apostles, and used an angel to release the apostles from prison (Acts 5:1–20).

However, Acts 4 does not focus on these miracles of healing.<sup>22</sup> Instead, verses 32–37 dwell on the practical ministries of loving and caring for the poor. This makes

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20. Luke 9:1–2; Acts 5:12; 2 Cor. 12:12.

21. Earthquakes appear at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:18), the death and resurrection of Jesus (Matt. 27:54; 28:2) and at the Day of the Lord (Ezek. 38:19–20; Rev. 6:12; etc.).

22. The only possible reference to miracles in Acts 4:31–37 would be “power” in v. 33, “with great power gave the apostles witness.” It seems more likely that the singular “power” (*dunamis*) does not refer to miracles but to the “power” to convict, convert, and comfort souls through witness (Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24; 2:4–5; Eph. 1:19; Col. 1:28–29; 1 Thess. 1:5). Thus Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 174. However, miracles are called “powers” (Acts 2:22; 6:8; 8:13; 19:11; Gal. 3:5) or works done by “power” (Acts 3:12; 4:7; 6:8; 8:10; 10:38; 2 Thess. 2:9). So Acts 4:33 could mean that the apostles ministered the Word of Christ accompanied by miracles. Nevertheless, this is not the emphasis of this section.

perfect sense. The apostles had prayed for God to stretch out His hand and heal the hurting. God then filled them with the Spirit, and the believers stretched out their hands to care for the widows, orphans, foreigners, handicapped, and poor among them. The church became the fatherly hand of the God of providence. The apostles established a fund for the church to serve the practical needs of people. This was not some form of communism imposed by a church authority or political party. It was instead the voluntary sharing of property and possessions as each had ability or need.<sup>23</sup>

We must likewise pray for power to serve today. We are neither apostles nor those on whom the apostles laid their hands. We do not possess miraculous gifts. But many of us have practical gifts. If the church in America faces opposition from wicked rulers, people will suffer. The church must develop a culture of caring for each other. In that way, God's providence will turn persecution into an opportunity to glorify Christ.

Practical works of service are greater signs to the world than raising the dead.<sup>24</sup> Christ said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). The diaconal ministry of the church is the most effective gift we have to confirm the truth of the gospel.

We must also pray for God's power. It actually takes more supernatural power to produce love and practical service to needy people than it does to work a miracle of healing. Our Lord understood that only supernatural

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23. Contrast Qumran, where such community of goods was required. See Kistemaker, *Acts*, 173–74.

24. "Great grace" (v. 33) may mean "much favor," in the sense that the larger Jewish community looked upon the church with much favor because of their Spirit-empowered lives (Acts 2:47; 4:21; 5:13). So Kistemaker, *Acts*, 174.

grace can make us love each other sacrificially. He prayed that we would love one another and be one with each other so “that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me” (John 17:23).

Join your prayers to Christ’s prayer, and lift up constant requests for spiritual gifts of service! Pray that God would cause your love to abound yet more and more (Phil. 1:9). Ask the Lord to make us increase and abound in love towards one another and all men (1 Thess. 3:12). Cry out that the Lord would bless our church with rich and practical spiritual gifts for mercy and service. Pray for our deacons as they administer the funds of the church to care for those in need. In all this, pray for God to stretch out His loving hands through our ministries, and show the world that He has come to set sinful and miserable people free.

### **Conclusion**

The doctrine of providence teaches us that when the church faces opposition, we must lift up our prayers to the God of providence. We must lift up prayers of praise. Praise glorifies God and strengthens our faith and joy. Praise enthrones the Lord as the true Sovereign even as wicked leaders try to overthrow the kingdom of Christ. We must also lift up prayers for power. The Holy Spirit can give our ministers amazing power to preach the Word even in the face of enemies. The Holy Spirit can also mobilize the body to serve the poor when the church is oppressed.

To enjoy the Spirit’s blessings, we must pray for them. Do you believe that God reigns? Then show it in your prayers. God forbid that it be said of our congregation, “Ye have not, because ye ask not” (James 4:2). Rather, may our congregation be living proof of Christ’s promise, “Ask, and it shall be given you” (Matt. 7:7). Amen.

# Keeping Holy the First Day of the Week

*Rev. David Lipsy*

Psalter: 367

Scripture: Deuteronomy 5:1–22

Psalter: 419:1–3

At this time we will address a matter of some controversy amid certain segments of the Christian community, namely, the transition from seventh-day Sabbath observance to first-day Lord's Day observance. We want to consider whether this change is indeed scriptural and right. Is first-day observance truly of the Lord, or is it, as some contend, an invention of man that runs contrary to Scripture? Let us consider this matter carefully and prayerfully, looking to the Lord for guidance as we do.

Though we will consider a number of Scripture passages, let me at this time read with you Deuteronomy 5:12–15: “Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee. Six days thou shalt labor, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou, and remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.”

## Keeping Holy the First Day of the Week

1. *The perpetuity of the day of rest*
2. *The progressive nature of the day of rest*
3. *The ultimate object of the day of rest*

### I. The perpetuity of the day of rest

It is a sad day in church history when we find ourselves needing to defend the fact that our Lord would have us continue to observe the fourth commandment. I'm sure that several of us have heard or read that there are Christians who teach that this commandment is no longer obligatory in the New Testament church. Those who teach this typically do so for one of two reasons. Either they teach that *none* of the Ten Commandments really pertain to the New Testament church any more, or they teach that *all* of the Ten Commandments are *restated* in the New Testament except the fourth. The absence of positive didactic statements about it, they say, ought to be interpreted to mean it is not a part of the New Testament church's doctrine or practice and is to be abandoned even as other Old Testament ceremonial observances.

I will not now take the time to address directly the scriptural basis such people attempt to put forth in defense of their beliefs. Instead, let us consider instead the reality that God's Word clearly teaches that the fourth commandment is every bit as operative in the New Testament church as it ever was in the Old.

First, we cannot help but observe that it was our Lord's constant practice to observe the Sabbath by attending local synagogues. There are so many examples of this in the Gospels that multiplying citations to prove it seems needless. Those who opposed the use of the fourth commandment in the New Testament church might suggest that Jesus did so solely because He was Mediator and substitute for His people. In other words, He observed the Jewish Sabbath as part of that perfect obedience He lived and would give to believers as their own.

So they teach that Jesus, also in *this* matter, “is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Rom. 10:4), which, to them, means His fulfillment of the commandments *for us* means the end of our need to do so.

Of course, such persons fail to take into account passages like Matthew 5:17 where Jesus says, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfil.” He came to fulfill the law for all believers—also the fourth commandment. But in fulfilling the law, Christ clearly states that He did not *abolish* it.

Paul makes plain that this is the understanding of the New Testament church. He writes in Romans 3:31, “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.” The Greek word translated “establish” cannot in any way be twisted to mean *abolish* or *do away with* but quite the opposite. In Romans 7:7, the apostle affirms that the law of God *is* useful in the life of the elect both to acquaint them with their sins and (as in Gal. 3:24) to lead us to Christ for salvation. Finally, does not the apostle echo the Old Testament saints in their love for God’s law when he writes in Romans 7:22, “For I delight in the law of God after the inward man”? Simply put, the New Testament church has no less esteem from the law of the Lord than did their Old Testament counterpart.

As for the fourth commandment in particular, if one does not believe the practice of the Savior is normative for the New Testament because He was the Mediator, the practice of the early church will furnish sufficient proof that this commandment was still being observed, though in a Christian manner.

It is obvious, for example, that the church of Corinth met together for regular worship services, evidenced by passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:18, where we read of their “coming together in the church,” and 1 Corinthians 14, where a number of elements constituting their worship services are mentioned. Most conclusive of all,

however, are our Lord's words in Matthew 24:20 where, speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 72, He warns, "Pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day," which would be a perplexing command if it had been His will that the New Testament church cease observing the Sabbath.

Finally, just to mention one more proof of the perpetuity of Sabbath observance, let us not forget John's reference to "the Lord's Day," an expression found in Revelation 1:10, written somewhat near the end of the first century. Though we will discuss this expression in some detail in a few moments, suffice it to say that we will find through its use evidence enough that the perpetuity of the observance of a Christian Sabbath continued though the entire New Testament period.

Let us now turn to the second matter we want to carefully consider together.

## II. The progressive nature of the day of rest

As we have seen on multiple occasions, it pleased the Lord to unfold the revelation of Himself and His will gradually over time. This is also true with respect to God's teaching regarding the Sabbath. Though progressive in nature, there is a common element that spans all the Sabbath observances mentioned in Scripture, namely, *rest*.

In Genesis 2, we are told that the Lord "sanctified"—i.e., set apart—the day after He finished His work of creation. "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made" (v. 7). One can't help but wonder if Lamech, the Father of Noah, was thinking of the promise made to Adam and Eve, one of rest from sin and its curse, when he named his son Noah. "And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the LORD hath cursed" (Gen. 5:29). Noah was a kind of savior of sorts, but the true rest was not to

be found in him or brought about by him. Sin returned on the other side of the Flood and the weight of the Fall continued to rest on all mankind and the creation.

It's interesting to note that prior to the actual giving of the law on Sinai (Ex. 20), the Lord had already given instruction about Sabbath observance to His people. In Exodus 16, the Lord taught Israel to rest from their gathering of manna, promising sufficient provision the day before for both days. "See, for that the LORD hath given you the sabbath, therefore he giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day. So the people rested on the seventh day" (vv. 29–30).

There was the fourth commandment itself. In Exodus 20:8–11, we read, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it." If you read these verses carefully, you might be surprised to find that there is no mention of the day of the week upon which the Sabbath should be kept. What it does give us is a pattern: work for six days and, on the seventh, rest from your labors. Unlike the New Testament, which speaks of a specific day of the week, the Lord says nothing about that here or anywhere else in the Old Testament. More about this in a moment.

In six days, the Lord made heaven and earth and rested on the seventh day. He blessed that day of rest and set it apart from the rest. God rested from the works of creation, but not from all that He does. He continues to uphold, govern, and direct all things. In like manner are we to rest, not from all of our works, but rather from our

daily calling, unless that calling involves works of mercy and/or necessity. Rather than mere rest, we are to engage ourselves more specifically in spiritual works on that day. In this first declaration of the ten commandments, note that the reason appended for keeping the seventh day holy is the example given by God in creation. This will be significant as the Lord's revelation about Sabbath unfolds.

In Exodus 31, we come across a threat of death to those who defy God's command and work. Appended to this are two important statements. In verse 15, God says, "Six days may work be done but in the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD." In addition to the six-and-one pattern, the Lord says we are to keep that day "holy to the LORD." We are to focus more on Him that day. The next verse continues, "Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations." We might well ask what the day of rest has to do with a perpetual covenant. Is this an additional covenant God establishes with His people? No, this is not a new covenant. However, the Lord ties together in His people's thinking the idea of rest and covenant. Covenant is a bond of fellowship with Him forged in blood. So He brings together for us Sabbath rest and communion with Him, founded on sacrifice. May not we say it this way: rest and fellowship with God through the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ?

In Exodus 35 again, no mention is made of a certain day, but the ancient pattern of six days work and the seventh day rest is repeated. It will be a Sabbath of rest to the LORD, a day set apart unto Him. In verse 3, however, the Lord adds what, at first glance, might seem an unrelated stipulation. "Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day." If we listen closely with the ear of faith, however, can we not hear, "The Lamb is the light thereof," a reference in Revelation connecting eternal rest and the lack of need for any light apart from the Lamb Himself?

We are told that on the eighth day, certain animals would be given to the Lord (Ex. 22:30, Lev. 22:27, etc.). Our Savior was set apart by His heavenly Father to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. It was on the eighth day that circumcision was to take place, and we are told in Romans 4:11 that circumcision was a seal of the righteousness that believing Israel had by faith. Is not our Jesus the object of justifying faith? On the eighth day, Aaron and his sons were to be consecrated for their service. Jesus Christ is our high priest.

As the Lord continued to unfold His will for His people, we find in the book of Leviticus a multiplication of Sabbath days. He begins with the day we refer to as the Day of Atonement. As with the other passages already considered, no mention is made of a particular day of the week. We do read that on the tenth day of the seventh month, there would be a "sabbath of rest." On that day, God's people were to afflict their souls and the priest was to make atonement for their sins by going one time within the veil of the holiest of holies, carrying with him the shed blood of the lamb. The New Testament equivalent? We too are to afflict our souls (repent) and look to our great high priest, Jesus Christ, whose atonement satisfied once for all for sin. "[B]y his own blood Christ entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us" (Heb. 9:12).

In Leviticus 23, the Lord reveals the details of the feast called Passover. This time the Lord says to His people, "In the first day ye shall have an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein. But ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD seven days." In addition to the first day, the Lord also set apart the seventh day of this feast for rest. Cannot the eye of faith see in this Christ our passover sacrificed for us (1 Cor. 5:7)?

In this same chapter, the Lord went on to specify that "on the morrow after the sabbath" (the first day of the week), God's people were to wave the firstfruits of har-

vest before the Lord. Could this be a foretaste, perhaps, of when “Christ [has] risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Cor. 15:20)?

Immediately after the Passover specifications are given, the Lord proceeds to speak about the feast of the full harvest. “On the first day shall be a sabbath and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath...and ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days.” That first day of the week—the “morrow after the seventh sabbath”—would be Pentecost. Does the Lord have His people celebrate the completion of the full harvest then? Think of the day of Pentecost described in Acts 2: “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come...they were all filled with the Holy Ghost (v. 4)... The same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (v. 41). A full harvest indeed.

At the time of full harvest, we are told that on the first day of the feast the people of God were to make booths of branches and were to dwell in them seven days. Why? “That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” As a result of the atonement of Jesus on the cross, all the believing people of God are brought out of bondage, not of *Egypt*, but of *sin*. But there’s more. He also says to them, “I go to prepare a place for you. and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself,” not into temporary booths but into everlasting habitations.

Later still in Leviticus 23, again with no mention of a particular day of the week, the Lord proclaimed yet another sabbath. “In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. Ye shall do no servile work therein.” What might the ears of faith hear

now? “For the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible”; Scripture is referring there to the final resurrection on the great day of days.

All these days of rest, yet the people of God were still in the wilderness. Still, each of them was given to point in so many different ways to a rest that was yet to come, a rest that only Messiah could bring. So forceful was this dynamic—the unfolding and multidimensional understanding of the Sabbath—that Moses, the man of God, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, changed the foundational reason for the fourth commandment itself in the rendition of the Ten Commandments given in Deuteronomy. In Exodus, God's people were pointed to the Lord's resting from His work of creation. “The seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work.... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day.” In Deuteronomy 5, we find no mention of creation with respect to the fourth commandment. Instead, in verse 15, we read, “And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.” This wording was the only substantive alteration made to the Ten Commandments. Plainly, the church of God was taught early on that the true rest, the true foundation of rest, was yet to be revealed. God has not changed the commandment as such—there would still be rest one day of seven. But clearly the foundation for its observance was changed and would change again as the Lord continued to unfold His will for His people.

When you think about it, beloved, we who are Gentile believers cannot rightly celebrate our deliverance from Egypt. Neither we nor our fathers came from thence. There *is* a deliverance, however, that we can and do commemorate. One that eclipses all other deliverances. One

that provides a deeper rest than any other. One that was *sealed* to us on the first day of the week. One whose foundation is laid in the Messiah Himself, Jesus Christ, a Mediator and Deliverer far greater than Moses (Heb. 3).

We know that the generation of adult Israelites who passed through the Red Sea, because of their sinful unbelief, wandered in the wilderness for forty long years. God raised up Joshua to lead the surviving younger generation into the land of rest, Canaan. God had previously assured Moses that His presence would go with His people, saying in Exodus 33:14, “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” And they did have rest—but only for awhile because of their sin. It was not God’s will that His people sin. But He would use their colossal and repeated failures to point them to a rest beyond what Canaan could possibly give them, a rest that eluded them as long as any merit of theirs was involved. Even years later, after their restoration from captivity in Babylon, we find Nehemiah admonishing them for buying and selling with foreign merchants who pitched their wares outside the gates of Jerusalem.

Moving from the historical to the prophetic books of the Old Testament, we find Isaiah first addressing the manner in which God’s people should view and keep the day of rest (Isa. 58:13–14). But only a few chapters later, the prophet points us beyond this rest to that of the new heavens and the new earth and the sabbath rest to be enjoyed then.

Next, Jeremiah calls out to the people of God to remember their sabbaths. But Ezekiel, particularly as he writes those mysterious chapters about a temple, dissimilar in several respects from the temple of Solomon or that rebuilt in the days of Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah, and Haggai, seems to be referring to the only structure it could possibly represent—the New Testament church, consisting of believers, referred to as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19, 2 Cor. 6:16, 1 Peter 2:5). In this

light, consider these fascinating words in Ezekiel 43:27, "And when these days are expired, it shall be, that upon the eighth day and so forward the priests shall make your burnt offerings upon the altar and your peace offerings and I will accept you, saith the Lord GOD." Christ is indeed our great High Priest, but we believers are also priests unto God (1 Peter 2:5, 9) offering spiritual sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1, Phil. 4:18, Heb. 13:15).

From the perspective of the New Testament Scriptures looking back on the experience of the Old Testament people of God, we find Hebrews 3 and 4 particularly helpful in addressing the theme of rest. Chapter 3 describes God's condemnation of those who would not believe Him and subsequently perished in the wilderness. In chapter 4, the reader himself is warned to fear: "lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it." Those who believe *do* enter into rest. What rest is this? Hebrews 4:4 speaks of a rest based on the creation ordinance. Verse 5 alludes to a rest that is yet to appear. Verse 6 assures us there is a rest beyond that to which Joshua led Israel. And verses 9–10 point us to the rest we believers have in Christ's finished work of salvation, gained by faith and not merited by our works. "For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his." Still, as believers, we labor to enter into that rest (v. 11). The struggle against unbelief can sometimes be fierce. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

With all this in mind, do we not find ourselves sometimes wondering whether the rest we now have in Christ is the ultimate rest God has reserved for us? Are we really perpetually at rest? Is there not a rest that still evades us, even though we rest in Christ by faith now? If you think about it, our present day of rest is still only one day in seven, a rest amidst spiritual warfare, a rest that does not negate the strife we endure at the hands of spiritual

enemies without and within. “There remaineth therefore a rest [α σαββατισμὸς] to the people of God” (Heb. 4:9).

So there was the Sabbath rest of creation and then the Sabbath rests in Canaan; but Hebrews 4 tells us Joshua did not give them the ultimate rest. God spoke of yet another day to come. Ah beloved, where do all of these Old Testament pictures and prophecies point us? They point us to the ultimate rest that Christ has purchased for us and will one day give to us. But more than anything else, all these Old Testament types, shadows, and symbols point us where all the rests of Scripture do. Just like Jesus taught us in Luke 24:27, “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, Jesus expounded unto them in *all* the scriptures the things concerning himself” and a little later, “These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the Psalms concerning me.”

Beloved, Jesus Christ the Lord is our refuge, our rest, our peace. He is the center and object of all of Scripture, including the Sabbath!

### III. The ultimate object of the day of rest

Did it ever strike you that in all of the New Testament Scriptures, there are only two days mentioned prominently and frequently: The Sabbath and the first day of the week? Why the Sabbath? Why did Jesus attend synagogue worship? Why did His disciples do so, including Paul and his contemporaries?

Frequent mention is made of the Sabbath in the early New Testament simply because the scene in which the gospel came into being was set among the people of Israel. The Son of David, the Messiah, would come from among that people. He was sent first to His own that they might first hear the gospel. Why did Jesus observe the Old Testament Sabbath? He did so for two reasons. The first was to fulfill all righteousness, i.e., to fulfill perfectly

what God required of man morally and to fulfill everything that typified Him as Messiah. But the second reason was that which Jesus told the woman of Canaan and His own disciples, namely, that the gospel was to be first brought to the lost sheep of Israel—first to Jerusalem, then to Judea, and afterward to the ends of the earth. This is why Peter, speaking to the assembled Jews in Acts 3:26, said, “Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.”

Why did the disciples, including Paul, frequent the synagogues on the Old Testament Sabbath? First to show that they were not walking disorderly, disdaining God's law. We see this illustrated in Acts 21 when James said to Paul, speaking of the believing Jews of Jerusalem, “And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.” After giving instructions to Paul regarding how he might prove otherwise, James added, “...that...all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law.” Secondly, the disciples were very solicitous, even as their Master was, to bring the gospel to the Jews in the very setting and on the very days in which they would be gathered together for public worship. The disciples took advantage of every opportunity to bring the gospel to their brethren after the flesh. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9:20, put it this way: “unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews.” These two are the primary reasons we see frequent mention of the Old Testament Sabbath in the early Scripture narratives of the New Testament church.

But we must not allow this practice to deflect our attention from those events to which our Lord most frequently and repeatedly pointed His disciples and, by ex-

tension, us. Luke 9:22, "The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be slain and be raised the third day." Luke 9:44 says, "Let these sayings sink down into your ears: for the Son of man shall be delivered into the hands of men." Luke 13:32 says, "I do cures to day and to morrow and the third day I shall be perfected." Luke 18:31-33 says, "Then he took unto him the twelve and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: And they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again." Luke 24:4 and following says, "Behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: and they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. And they remembered his words." And after Jesus' resurrection, He said to the travelers to Emmaus, "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." Of what significance are these repeated references to the third day?

A moment ago we noted the frequent mention of the Old Testament Sabbath in the New Testament and why we find it there to the degree we do. But there is no day of the week mentioned in the New Testament except one, and that one frequently—the first day of the week. The several Old Testament sabbaths pointed in symbolic fashion to various aspects of Christ's work and the salvation He worked. But the fulfillment of almost all of these took place on one day of the week, the only day of the week

mentioned repeatedly in the New Testament. Why would God so inspire the New Testament writers to mention this day and no other if there was not great significance attached to that detail? When Matthew sits down to write his account of Jesus' resurrection—a gospel purportedly written with the Jewish reader particularly in mind—he writes that the Sabbath had ended but then adds these words “as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week.” The reason I point this out is that no other event in all the gospels, not even the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross, is associated by any of the Gospel writers with a particular day of the week. But when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, we find the rare occurrence that, not only is a day of the week mentioned, but it is specified by all four writers. And if one would look at the contexts in which these are found, there appears no real reason for mentioning it since it doesn't tell us anything we couldn't have already deduced from the histories themselves. Someone may object that perhaps it is mentioned to prove Jesus indeed rose on the third day as He said He would, and that might have been helpful if we knew what day of the week the Passover had been celebrated that year. But as it turns out, we are not given that information.

As John wrote, not only about resurrection morning, but also about the evening of the same day, he noted that Jesus appeared to the disciples the same day at evening. That's certainly clear enough. Yet John continues the narrative, adding, “being the first day of the week.” Now we know that John wrote his gospel many years after the other three and typically wrote only that which the others did not—unless it was a matter of great importance. Each of the other three mentioned the day of the week. So does John. Why would he do so if it wasn't a detail of great significance? Could it be that what prompted him to mention the first day of the week twice in his narrative was the fact that the New Testament church, which had already considerably grown by the time he wrote his

Gospel, met for worship on the first day rather than on the seventh day?

A week later, according to the Jew's way of reckoning time, the disciples gathered together again. It's understandable why they would gather the day after the first Sabbath following Jesus' crucifixion, but what would prompt them to meet together exactly a week later? Why not meet sooner or on another day? And why would Jesus appear on that particular day and not one earlier in that week? Jonathan Edwards observed that the Sabbath was meant to be a day of rejoicing. Why would not the Lord appear to His disciples on that day instead of the first day of the week? Clearly the Lord was ascribing a unique significance to that day of the week, the first day of the week. That day would be the day in which the New Testament church rejoices.

Another great event in the New Testament church, the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, took place on the first day of the week. Jesus had told His disciples that He would not leave them comfortless but would send the Holy Spirit to be with them and in them. He then added, "I will come to you," an obvious reference to His coming to them by means of the blessed Holy Spirit, elsewhere explicitly referred to as the "Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9, 1 Peter 1:11). So on Pentecost, instead of standing among them like He did in the upper room, Jesus poured out His Spirit into them to abide with them forever. He would, by means of His Spirit, never leave them nor forsake them. And this outpouring, this day of the Lord called Pentecost, took place on the first day of the week.

As we look further, chronologically, into the New Testament, we are given a relatively few number of details concerning actual Christian worship services. That being the case, Luke does not neglect to mention, in one of those rare instances given in Acts 20:7, that it was the first day of the week when the disciples came together to break bread, a reference in this context to the Lord's

Supper, and that the Apostle Paul also preached for them on that occasion.

In 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul addresses another element of New Testament worship, namely, the giving of alms for the poor. The Corinthian Christians were told to gather their alms on the first day of the week. When you think carefully about this command, the mention of a specific day of the week to gather alms would appear to be altogether superfluous if all the apostle meant to say was that the Corinthian Christians should be ready sometime before the Jewish Sabbath. And why prepare nearly a full week before the Sabbath? Clearly the command instead points to the Lord wanting His people to gather their alms on the first day of the week, alms they had already prepared beforehand, so that they might distribute it during the first-day worship service, even as had been done formerly during the seventh-day Jewish synagogue services.

Finally, there is the familiar reference John wrote in Revelation 1:10, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." Before considering the expression itself, think about what takes place immediately after he wrote this. John had been banished to the island of Patmos. But just as Jesus had suddenly appeared to His sequestered disciples after His resurrection on the first day of the week, so too now He appears to the isolated apostle John on this lonely isle on the first day of the week, a day which John refers to as "the Lord's Day." The glorified Jesus appeared to John in His full glory on that day.

As to the expression itself, some have suggested that the wording is really no different than the ancient formula "the day of the Lord," uttered previously by prophets and apostles alike and referring to God's coming day of judgment about which John would also now write. But if you compare each instance of that expression in the New Testament (there are five of them), each of them is the same but all of them are distinct from the one John

uses in Revelation 1:10. John's expression there literally speaks of ownership, as in, that day is the Lord's, reminiscent of something Jesus Himself said: that "The Son of Man is Lord also of the sabbath" (Luke 6:5).

As a final consideration, let us take up an Old Testament quotation that many have used in reference to the Sabbath day: Psalm 118:24. "This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." But consider that this verse is actually part of a prophecy concerning the change of the Jewish Sabbath to the New Testament Lord's Day. The context immediately before this verse reads, "I will praise thee: for thou hast heard me and art become my salvation." To what salvation is the psalmist referring? "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes." Jesus connects this very prophecy to Himself in Luke 20:17–19 and elsewhere. But the Apostle Peter, by the Spirit's inspiration, applied it specifically to the resurrection of Jesus: "Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner" (Acts 4:10–11). So next time we say with joy, "This is the day which the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it," think (as the psalmist and the apostles did) of resurrection day, the first day of the week, and especially of our resurrected Savior!

So it is no longer the first creation that we celebrate when we come together on the Lord's Day, but rather the new creation that we have in our risen Savior (2 Cor. 5:17). It is no longer the Passover deliverance of Israel from Egypt that we commemorate on our day of corporate worship, but Jesus Christ, our Passover, who was sacrificed for our deliverance from sin and eternal death (1 Cor. 5:7). We do not circumcise our seed but we baptize

them, no longer shedding the child's blood but rejoicing in the salvation brought to us by the shed blood of the Lamb of God, Christ Jesus (1 Peter 1:18–19). We do not celebrate the old covenant made with Israel on Sinai but the new covenant made in His blood (Luke 22:20). We worship in the church, not in the synagogue (1 Cor. 11:18a). We worship not in a temple made with hands, but instead we are the temple of the Holy Ghost because of what our Savior has done for us (1 Cor. 6:19). Is it any wonder, therefore, that we keep the Lord's Day as our day of rest rather than the Jewish Sabbath?

All this being said, let us remind one another that the Lord's Day is not our ultimate Sabbath rest. We look forward to the eternal rest that awaits the people of God. That is a rest where sin will no longer trouble us, where our Savior is with us bodily as well as in spirit, and where we all, with glorious resurrected bodies, will worship the Lord as never before! "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out" (Rev. 3:12). "Therefore are they before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them" (Rev. 7:15). "And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it" (Rev. 21:22). Indeed beloved, "There remaineth therefore a rest [αβαβατισμὸς] to the people of God" (Heb. 4:9). Let us look with ardent desire to when time will exist no longer and when our Sabbath rest will be complete. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." Amen.