
ISAIAH 58:13-14 : SUNDAY BLESSING

No. EE23

For the New Testament Christian, every Sunday is a commemoration of Christ's resurrection. The early church attached such importance to the resurrection that they usually gathered on the first day of the week for communal worship (1Cor 16:2; Acts 20:7) - rather than on the seventh day, as the Jews did in keeping with the Ten Commandments. This does not mean that they took the law into their own hands. Our Lord himself gave an indication that this is what should happen. On the first day He rose and appeared to His disciples (Jn 20:19,26). Also the Spirit was poured out on this day (Acts 2:1; Lev 23:15-16).

Moreover, the disciples began to call it the "day of the Lord" rather than the Sabbath. Quite clearly the apostles started leading the early church in this direction. John also finds it necessary to mention specifically that Jesus appeared to him on "the Lord's day" while he was praying (Rev 1:10).

Unless I am mistaken, there is an ever increasing carelessness - and this among people who call themselves Christians - towards Sunday and the importance of going to church. This sort of attitude is certainly a dishonour to God. That is why we need to think again about the way we keep the day of the Lord.

The first thing we must understand is that Sunday is a festive day. To lose sight of this is to lose something vital in the way we experience our faith. To make Sunday into a day of long faces and do's and don'ts would be a tragedy. And if our going to church becomes a duty and even a pain,

something is seriously wrong somewhere.

C.H. Spurgeon said to his congregation: "I know that many of you live by your Sabbaths. You step over the intervening space from Lord's-day to Lord's-day, as if the Lord has made a ladder of Sabbaths for you to climb to heaven by ... You have clapped your hands for very joy when redeeming grace and dying love have been the theme, and infinite, sovereign, changeless mercy has been the subject of discourse" (The Full Harvest, p.290).

ISAIAH 58

Isaiah 58:13-14 sheds light in a most wonderful way on our subject, pointing out the importance, but also the preciousness of the Lord's day.

In that chapter the prophet exposes the hypocrisy of the nation. They live in sin, but are overly pious when it comes to their religion. Quite clearly this hypocrisy manifested itself most clearly on the Sabbath. The Lord addresses this aspect in verses 13-14. If they desire to experience the privileges and joys of the Sabbath to the full, they need to comply with certain conditions.

Conditions (v13)

First of all a preliminary observation. Take note that there is no question here of mere ceremony. No, it has everything to do with the attitude of our hearts. Every New Testament Christian can therefore fully identify with it.

☐ *Verse 13a tells us for what purpose the day was instituted and thus also what it was not intended for.* The point made by the Hebrew text is this: refrain from using the day that I have sanctified for Myself, for your own pleasure. It is the Lord's day. It is not about your enjoyment and interests.

☐ *Verse 13b demands that we show the right attitude of heart in respect of the day that the Lord has sanctified for Himself.* Two things are mentioned:

- You must delight in the day. You must appreciate it. It must be your joy.

- The Lord has set the day aside for Himself. Therefore you must honour and respect it.

☐ *Verse 13c underlines the practical implications of the above principles for our daily lives.* Three things are specifically mentioned:

- Sunday is not just another day of the week. It must have a character of its own. Do not do the same as you do on the other six days. You must "rest" from your worldly responsibilities and pleasures.

- Do not utilise the day in your own interests or simply for your own pleasure. It is a day to be devoted to the Lord and His things.

- Even our conversations should honour the Lord. The Hebrew text simply states that we should not speak our own words. It implies a measure of self-restraint that keeps one from idle talk and chatter. Rather our conversation should be uplifting and glorifying to the Lord.

Promises (v.14)

There is a threefold promise and an assurance.

☐ *You will find joy in the Lord.* You will ever more clearly see the beauty and glory revealed in His attributes and works. You will all the more appreciate His greatness, goodness and holiness. And you will respond thereto in true gratitude and loving faithfulness. This is really about deep and joyful fellowship between the Lord and His people.

☐ *The Lord will cause you to ride on the heights of the land.* The expression has its origin in Dt 32:13, the song of Moses. It alludes to the victory over their enemies that the Lord grants to His people. New Testament equivalents would be the statement that

those in Christ are more than conquerors (Rm 8:37), and the fact that they sit with Him in heaven - in a position of authority over Satan, the world and the flesh (Eph 2:6).

Do you see that faithfully keeping the Lord's day is a powerful means of grace?

☐ *You will feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.* The expression in the Old Testament alludes to the covenant nation's inheritance of the land of Canaan (Ps 105:8-11), and more particularly to prosperity in that country (Ps 144:12-15). The promise therefore has to do with the way salvation is experienced in practice. In New Testament language one could say that it has to do with the privileges and joys that the Lord promises to His disciples.

☐ These promises, if we comply with the conditions, are as firm as the mountains: "The mouth of the Lord has spoken" (v14). Obedience to the Lord will certainly bring fellowship with the Lord, victory over sin and the joy of salvation.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

1. New Testament teaching should determine our interpretation of the fourth commandment.

The Lord Jesus and His disciples allowed themselves more freedom with respect to the Sabbath day than the Jewish religious leaders could tolerate. But we should understand that the scribes in no way represented the true spirit of the Old Testament. Their beliefs were formed by the *Mishnah*, a summary of Jewish oral traditions and customs since the exile, in which the rabbis tried to spell out the practical implications of the law in the finest detail. In the process they often went to ridiculous extremes. In their interpretation of the law about the Sabbath, for example, 39 different types of work were identified. So, for instance, the making of one stitch or the writing of one letter was allowed, but two were regarded as work and therefore not allowed. Even lighting or extinguishing a fire was

regarded as a contravention of the commandment.

Jesus on the other hand, by His actions and through His teaching, taught people the true meaning of the law - of which He said "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen" would be abolished in this dispensation (Mt 5:17-20). We may therefore assume that He was the living personification of everything that Is 58 teaches.

2. Let us therefore guard against two errors.

Firstly, to use the Lord's day in our own interest or for self-gratification is an ever present temptation. Secondly, getting entangled in a host of do's and don'ts - which kills the festive character of the day.

3. Let us fill the Lord's day with that for which it was intended.

It is a day of rest. If we truly keep the other component of the commandment, namely to work conscientiously for six days of the week, we are sure to experience, week after week, this opportunity to recharge our batteries as a gift of grace from our heavenly Father. But then again it is not about loafing and useless idleness. We are concerned here with constructive recuperation. I have not only left behind me a tiring week, there is a week of hard work ahead of me.

It is a day of worship. What a blessing to have enough time to spend peacefully in our inner room or meet the Lord with beloved brothers and sisters - without the hustle and bustle of the week!

It is a day for good works. Most Christians are so busy during the week that they scarcely have the time for Christian service and ministry. Let us, like Jesus, devote ourselves to good works on this day.

4. So, if necessary, let us apply ourselves to the reformation of our Sundays.

The responsibility to consider this matter thoroughly and then to exercise strong leadership rests squarely on the shoulders of parents, and especially on the heads of households.

Think again about things such as undertaking

long trips on Sundays, the Sunday papers, TV, sport, shopping, secular music - and huge meals which take up the time of housewives and leave the family in a state of total stupor for hours.

Take firm decisions about family attendance of church services. Take your children with you - they must learn to keep the Lord's day. Leave them at home in front of the TV or internet, and you will have some bitter fruit to pick in time to come!

Do I hear someone say that I am now also guilty of legalism? Certainly not! What we are talking about here is the attitude of our hearts. Self-discipline coming from a devout heart for the right reasons is not for one moment in conflict with the principle of Christian freedom - on the contrary!

5. Let us jealously treasure the Lord's day.

It is such a wonderful gift from our heavenly Father that we should do everything within our power to preserve it against the demands of the sinful flesh and a world that hates God.

Therefore, always keep Isa 58:13-14 in mind. Pay heed to the conditions in v 13 for receiving the blessing of the Lord and greet the realisation of the promises in v14 with excited expectation.

And remember the resurrection of our Lord. Embrace its joyful implications! This is how the early Christians greeted each other on a Lord's day morning: "*The Lord has risen, He has risen indeed!*"

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