Living the fourth commandment

Text: Psalm 92

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Scriptures: Exodus 20: 8-11, Deut 5: 12-15, Psalm 92, Hebrews 4:1-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 160, 122, 92, 360, 368

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD 38 Q&A 103)

Theme: The Sabbath is the Lord’s Day

Proposition: The Lord’s Day is a great blessing from God

**Introduction**

Did you know that Psalm 92 is unique in the psalter? None of the other 149 psalms have the designation ‘for the Sabbath’. We know (from the Jewish Mishnah – Tamid 7:4) that this psalm was sung by the Levites in the Temple. The Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX) allots seven psalms, one for each day of the week. Day 1 = Psalm 24, Day 2=Psalm 48, Day 3= Psalm 82, Day 4=Psalm 94, Day 5=Psalm 81, Day 6=Psalm 93, Day 7=Psalm 92 on the Sabbath.

The Hebrew word Sabbath means ‘to stop’ or ’to cease’ – to ‘desist’. The Biblical meaning and significance of this day of stopping, ceasing, resting, from labour is grounded in God’s completed work of the creation of all things visible and invisible in six days. “*And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.*” (Gen 2:2-3) The fourth of the ten commandments expresses God’s will for the way in which His people are to live with respect to the Sabbath. “*Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy*” (Ex 20:8); “*Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy*” (Deut 5:12).

Most people in our 21st century Western Society don’t view Sunday as being very different from other days of the week. Most people don’t go to work, although many more labour on a Sunday than used to be the case. Many Christians don’t view Sunday activity as being very different from other days: they won’t flinch from going shopping on a Sunday, or from choosing to work for wages on the Lord’s Day.

Some people, deriving their view from the Old Testament, believe that Saturday, the last day of the week is the day to observe the 4th commandment. These groups are often called ‘Sabbatarians’: e.g. Millerites, 7th Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Messianic Jews.

The Bible commentator J Douma has said “*No commandment has occasioned so much controversy surrounding its interpretation as the 4th commandment*”. To gain some clarity on how to live out each of the ‘sabbaths’ of our lives, we’re going to look at this unique ‘song for the sabbath’ under three headings:

1. A day of praise
2. A day of perspective
3. A day of promise
4. **A Day of Praise**

It’s very clear from this psalm that the Sabbath is to be a day of praise to God. In verse 5 God is praised for His great works. “*How great are your works, O LORD! Your thoughts are very deep!*” This is likely to be a reference to the creation of this universe which connects to the foundation of the 4th commandment in Exodus 20: “*For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy*” (v11).

The 4th commandment is grounded in God’s creation and also in His work of deliverance as we see in Deuteronomy 5:15 *“You shall remember that you were a slavein the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day”*.

God’s grace is praised in this Sabbath psalm: “*It is good….to declare your steadfast love in the morning and your faithfulness by night*”. The reference to musical instruments in verse 3 (the lute, harp and lyre) strongly implies gathered, corporate worship. Some have suggested that praising God’s faithfulness by night indicates corporate worship at the end of the Sabbath day, others (e.g. Alan Harman) suggest that ‘by night’ refers to a time after sunset when the temple would have been closed and that this is therefore a reference to personal worship. What we can most certainly say is that the day of rest is intended by God as a day to praise Him, both together as a congregation and individually as His children; both for His works of creation and redemption.

Notice also that the Lord is praised in this psalm (v15) for His uprightness; that is His perfect moral character; His righteousness. The LORD, the covenant God of Israel is the only true living God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is eternal and unchanging. Yet we are not Old Testament Israelites celebrating the Sabbath and awaiting the Messiah. Christ has come! We look back to our deliverance, not from slavery in Egypt, but from bondage to sin.

Following the outline of HCLD38, we fulfil the 4th commandment when we:

* “*Diligently attend the church of God*” – gathering together as a congregation for this special day of praise.
* “*Hear God’s Word*” – being convinced that all the Scriptures speak of Christ.
* “*use the sacraments*” – knowing that these visibly represent the sacrifice of Christ on the cross to set us free and the washing away of sins.
* “*call publicly on the Lord*” – praying with adoration and thanksgiving, bringing our needs and desires before the throne of grace.

Can we be confident that the New Testament church is to obey the 4th commandment? YES! Most certainly! As we’ve seen from Exodus 20:11 a day of rest every 7th day is a creation ordinance. Didn’t Christ bring in an age of grace so that we don’t have to obey the Old Testament commandments? Some Christians believe this, yet they don’t advocate idolatry, killing, adultery, stealing, lying or coveting. The 4th commandment is never separated out from the other nine in Scripture.

Jesus brought true teaching about the Sabbath and He did not dismiss it as being no longer part of God’s will. Remember that He said: "*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath*” (Mark 2:27). He explained the meaning of the 4th commandment, just as He did for the other commandments e.g. murder: "*But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire*” (Mat 5:22).

Our Lord Jesus Christ affirmed all the commandments of God, including the 4th when He said: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them*” (Mat 5:17). Jesus Himself obeyed all the Old Testament Law, but not the oral (man-made) law of scribes and Pharisees. These Jewish religious leaders had 39 categories of work not to be done on Sabbath (Mishnah): e.g. sowing, ploughing, harvesting, threshing, weaving and spinning (weaving one strand was permissible as was sewing one stitch).

Some people suggest that observing the 4th commandment today is not required because the Sabbath was an Old Testament law which has been abrogated/repealed/abolished/revoked in Christ. They say that we no longer need to observe a day of rest from our labours and they may point to the words of the Apostle Paul in Colossians 2:16-17: where he writes about ‘*festivals, new moons and Sabbaths*’ being ‘*a shadow of things to come*’. However, here the Apostle Paul is speaking against those who seek to make Jewish ceremonies (‘ceremonial law’) a necessary part of following Christ. We are called by the Lord to continue to remember and observe a day of rest from our ordinary labours so that we can especially focus our attention on praising our God, both together as a gathered congregation and individually. This is a day of praise and of perspective, which brings us to our 2nd point.

1. **A Day of Perspective (v5-11)**

If you are out in the countryside, perhaps in a valley or in the midst of a forest, it can be very helpful to climb up a hill or mountain, or a tall tree. This enables you to see the ‘lay of the land’ and get a clearer perspective on where you are, where you’ve come from and where you are heading. The Lord’s Day is a day of perspective on this earthly life. It is a day to be re-oriented to the narrow upward pathway which leads to eternal life. It is a day to ‘*set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth*’ (Col 3:2). As we hear God’s Word together and individually, as we see the sacraments, as we pray, as we fellowship together as a church family on the Lord’s Day, we gain an eternal perspective on this life.

As we are progressively transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2), we think God’s thoughts after Him. Divine thoughts which the psalmist declares are ‘*very deep*’ (v5). When we regain perspective on the Lord’s great works and very deep thoughts, we gain divine wisdom, in contrast to those who do not worship the Living God. They do not honour Him as God or give thanks to Him (Rom 1:21). The psalmist describes people without divine perspective this way in v6: “*The stupid man cannot know; the fool cannot understand this: that though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever; but you, O LORD, are on high forever*” (Ps 92:6-8).

We gather Sunday by Sunday as a congregation to have our minds ‘reset’ to the truth after a week living in an unbelieving world where lies and ‘fake news’ abound. A world in which the wicked often seem to do well, living in large homes, having the best health care and enjoying extensive holidays. A world in which evil often appears to triumph over good. A world where governments oppress their citizens and suppress the truth. A world where the weak and vulnerable are exploited by the powerful.

This psalm, like all true worship reminds us that the LORD is ‘on high forever’. He is almighty, victorious and will bring perfect justice. Look at verse 9: *“For behold, your enemies, O LORD, for behold, your enemies shall perish; all evildoers shall be scattered”.* This perspective enables us more readily to obey our Lord: Not to take our own revenge but to forgive, as we have been forgiven in Christ, to repay evil with good, to live at peace with all people, as much as it depends on us. *"Vengeance is Mine, I will repay says the Lord”.* (Rom 12:19b)

This perspective renews our strength, because we remember that Christ is the Victor, He is our Champion. He has conquered sin and death, He has defeated Satan, He rules in our hearts. In Christ, we can say in faith what the psalmist records in v11: “*My eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies; my ears have heard the doom of my evil assailants*”. Jesus Christ is Faithful and True; in righteousness He judges and makes war (Rev 19:11).

The psalmist in psalm 92 is strengthened, he declares in v10: “*But you have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox; you have poured over me fresh oil*”. He is re-invigorated and anointed for service to His Lord as he regains perspective. Similarly, we are strengthened as we gather for worship on the Lord’s Day. Our strength is Christ. He is the Horn of our salvation. We celebrate the resurrection victory of Christ on the first day of the week.

We follow the pattern of the early New Testament church in meeting on Sunday: “*On the* ***first day*** *of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight*” (Acts 20:7). “*Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.* ***On the first day*** *of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come*” (1 Cor 16:1-2).

Some groups of people do not agree with this change from the last day of the week (the Jewish Sabbath) to the first day (the day of Christ’s resurrection). These groups believe that the change from Saturday to Sunday was due to one or a number of the following factors: anti-Jewish sentiment in early church, an edict of the Emperor Constantine in 321AD, pagan influences of sun worship associated with Sunday, the Council of Laodicea 364 AD, unscriptural dogma from the Roman Catholic Church.

There is much historical evidence to show Sunday worship was a universal practice in the early New Testament church both within and outside of the land of Israel by early 2nd century. Church historian Philip Schaff cites the following early ‘church fathers’ as observing a day of rest and corporate worship on the 1st day of the week: Ignatius (110AD), Barnabas (120AD), & Justin Martyr (140AD). Ireneaus (155-202 AD) wrote “*The Mystery of the Lord’s Resurrection may not be celebrated on any other day than the Lord’s Day, and on this alone should we observe the breaking off of the Paschal Feast*”. Also Dionysius, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian observed the sabbath on the first day of the week. In summary we can say on the basis primarily of Scripture, but also from church history that for the New Testament church, the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) has been replaced with the Christian Lord’s Day (Sunday).

In this fallen, groaning world, we all need to get away from the toils and trials of daily living in order to be reminded that a better day is coming. Remembering and observing the Lord’s Day strengthens us in the face of persecution and difficulty. Worship on the Lord’s Day arms us against temptations to worldliness in week to come. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us ascend into the hill of the Lord each Lord’s Day (Ps 24:3). May we together stand in faith on the ‘high places’ of God and thereby gain persective. Let us pause to remember the great works of God in Christ. Let us pause to be assured that God will bring perfect justice. Let us pause to be strengthened for continued service in Christ. Let us praise our God together as we remember his promises. Which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **A Day of Promise (v12-15)**

Trees are an amazing part of the living world which God has created. Trees are generally long-lived, tall and strong. The medieval cathedral builders would plan ahead by planting acorns when they laid the foundation of those great stone structures. They knew that by the time future generations were ready to put the rafters on the high roof above the sanctuary below the oaks would be ready to mill into timber! Long-term thinking is the habit of those with hope!

Did you know that palm trees can live for more than 200 years and that they are capable of bearing fruit for up to half their life? The Jerusalem temple built by Solomon and the temple in the visions of Ezekiel were engraved with palm trees because these were symbols of eternal life and fruitfulness (2 Chron 3:5; Eze 41:18-20).

Did you know that the cedars which used to grow in great number in Lebanon were large dome-shaped trees which were symbols both of great strength and majesty? (e.g. Eze 31:3-9). In Psalm 92, the psalmist writes in hope of the promises of the Lord and declares in v12-15 that “*The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him*”. These words speak of long (eternal) life in God’s presence.

Sabbath-keeping points us to our eternal sabbath rest in the eternal and fruitful New Heavens and New Earth. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have begun to enjoy the eternal rest of God in Christ, yet the fullness of this rest, with its victory is yet to come. The writer to the Hebrews expresses it this way: “*So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience*” (Heb 4:9-11).

The Lord’s Day is a great blessing to God’s people who cease from their labours of the other six days of the week. Our attitude to this day is to be one of joy and delight in the rest which God has ordained (Isaiah 58:13-14). Brothers and Sisters in Christ: Obeying the 4th commandment as our Lord commands is for us all an impossibility apart from Christ. It is because Jesus has conquered death that we give praise to God. It is because God has changed your hearts to heartily believe that Jesus has endured God’s wrath on your sin that you have been given the strength to view life from the heights of God’s perspective. It is because Christ’s righteousness has been credited to you that you can look forward in certainty to eternal life in the presence of God.

“*It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night*” (v1-2); “*to declare that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him*” (v15).

AMEN