

“So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I guess you have to be a preacher to appreciate this, but this particular Christmas cycle is often referred to by pastors as a preacher’s Christmas. In a typical year, pastors will have two days of extra services during Christmas week, while still having to preach on Sunday. But when Christmas falls on Sunday, we only have two services in Christmas week! Yes, there is a downside: we have to be up early on New Year’s Day. But for most pastors this as an easy year compared to other years.

I’m sure we’ve all had relatively easy Christmases, but for most people, the holiday season is like a ride on a roller coaster. It seems that right after Halloween, many people begin the journey to Christmas, climbing up the track for the rush that is to come. There is growing tension and excitement with each passing day. Then, suddenly, it all picks up speed, as we start the downhill rush into the big loop and fast turns that Christmas itself brings. While we truly do look forward to the excitement, joy and wonder of the season, we also look forward to a bit of peace and calm in the days following Christmas. We love the season, but boy is it tiring!

You probably have a bit to do yet as you celebrate this Christmas season. While some already had their Christmas feast others still have that dinner to prepare. Then there is the clean-up of the kitchen, the house and all the other clutter that suddenly amassed in our houses. There may be presents to wrap, and others to open. Every family has special traditions that come with the season. We will spend time with family and friends and that may mean we still have some travelling to do or we will host other family and friends. Maybe tomorrow we can sleep in and slow down a bit; at least it should be quiet after New Year’s. After all, it can’t be this busy forever, can it? Let’s face it: we can use some rest.

Right from the beginning, God built rest into His creation. God will command His people to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest, even reminding them: *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”* (Exodus 20:8–11, ESV) Jesus will remind the Pharisees that *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”* (Mark 2:27, ESV)

God’s promise of the Sabbath was a testimony to the greater Sabbath that would come in eternal glory—a Sabbath that is possible because of Christmas. But to appreciate that, we also have to remember why we strive so much in this world, and why we long for real rest. That takes us all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Right from the beginning, man had things to do. He had work. After God created Adam we are told: *“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”* (Genesis 2:15, ESV) That work was not burdensome, but things changed. The day came when the serpent tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God and to do things their own way. From that moment, work—yes, even life itself—became a burdensome toil. God’s punishment makes that clear: *“cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* (Genesis 3:17–19, ESV)

This is why we long for rest; a real and lasting rest. If we are going to see the blessing of Christmas as God’s promise of rest, we need to go a bit further into the family line of Adam, to one of his great-great grandsons. We are told: *“When Lamech had lived 182 years, he fathered a son and called his name Noah, saying, “Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.”*” (Genesis 5:28–29, ESV) It seems that Lamech thought Noah—whose name sounds like the Hebrew word for “rest”—was the answer to God’s promise that the seed of the woman would deliver God’s people from the curse of sin. Noah wasn’t the Saviour, although he did save mankind by preserving life through the flood. But it is interesting that Lamech saw the burden of sin as the work and toil of life. He longed for rest and that rest would come through a deliverance from the slavery and condemnation of sin

Today, my dear people, loved by God, we celebrate that promise of rest. What Lamech hoped for is now revealed in that manger in Bethlehem. Finally, the rest we need is possible, because Christ is the One who sets us free from all the burden, the toil and the striving of life. Think of that very word, “rest”. We think of it as a verb, an action. Get some rest. Don’t bother me, I’m resting. We get busy on holidays to take time to rest. That was the way the Pharisees saw things, too. They saw the Sabbath as a day to work hard at not working, believing that this is the way the Lord would bless His people. The problems of the nation were tied to the fact that they didn’t *do* enough to keep the Sabbath, the very day that was to be a time of rest. But rest is the opposite of work. Rest is found in God’s promise in Jesus Christ. Rest, as God gives it, is not about doing something, but about receiving something. While they are different words, the word “rest” and the word “grace” are similar words. They both speak of what we receive, not what we do. They speak of the blessings that God gives us *“only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.”* (SC, 1st Article)

True, abiding rest is not found in finishing up all the Christmas activities or sitting back in an easy chair after the kitchen is cleaned up after the feast. It is not found in our vacations or a day off from work. It is found in all that we have in Christ. It is found as we are set free from the slavery of our sin. It is found when the worries, cares and uncertainties of life give way before the promise of God’s gracious deliverance. Rest is ours when the fears that we may have of our eternal well-being are silenced by the assurance of all that is ours in the Child, born to save us.

Yes, this Child, born for you, born for all, is the One who brings us rest. He will do what needs to be done for us and for our forgiveness and life. He lived the life of holiness that we cannot live. He fulfilled the whole work of the law for us. He came to take our place, as He takes all our guilt, sin and shame upon Himself. He will suffer our punishment, dying in our place on the cross. He will bring us rest, as He rises from the dead, to lead all who believe in Him to the joy of perfect peace, perfect joy, and perfect rest forevermore.

Again, my dear people, look at the manger. Hear the word and promise of Him who says to you: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11:28, ESV) His rest is real rest. It is rest for your soul. Even though we know that *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, God also assures us that we are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 3:23–24, ESV) We trust in Him and in His promises, and everything is different. So many think that they can work to find their own rest and even their own salvation. Yet Paul also reminds us: *“Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.”* (Romans 4:4, ESV) There is no rest by our own striving. But there is rest in the One born to save us. There is rest in kneeling at the manger, and looking to the wonder of God coming to us and taking into Himself our human flesh. There is rest in faith in the Child, born for us. Paul went on after talking about work and wages to say: *“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,”* (Romans 4:5, ESV) In other words, we rest by faith in the Son of God.

I know that we don’t tend to think of our Christmas celebration as work. Oh, we are busy and hard at it with all those things we do to get ready. But we enjoy it and are thankful for family and friends, for festive meals and gifts of love. We like our decorations and all that we put into Christmas. Yet even as we enjoy it, we are grateful for rest.

Now we have that promise of rest. In the verses before our text, we are told: *“For we who have believed enter that rest.”* (Hebrews 4:3, ESV) It is sad that there are those who find no rest because they want to do things their way. But we have that rest. The Lord’s promise stands: His divine rest is yours, and it’s yours as you dwell richly in the Word of Christ Jesus, born to save you. He has removed from you the dues of labour; upon the cross He has finished the work that was yours to bear, and now gladly calls you to rest by Word and Sacrament as they sustain you unto the eternal Sabbath rest. What a glorious promise! What a wonderful rest we have in Him! Amen.