

## “A Song for the Sabbath Day” (Ps 92)

A Sermon by Grant H. Odhner

Are you holy? ... That is the Lord’s goal for you: to make you holy. On the eve of His crucifixion, the disciples were witnesses to the Lord’s prayer to His Father. It was a prayer in which He spoke with assurance of the work He had accomplished, the work the Father had given Him to do. And He prayed for His disciples, whom He was sending out to continue His work: “[Father,] Sanctify them by Your truth. ... [F]or their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth” (John 17:17-19). “Sanctified”: “made holy.” “For their sakes I make Myself holy, that they also may be made holy by the truth.”

We tend to be suspicious of the idea of sainthood, but the truth is, it is a solidly Scriptural concept. When Jehovah tells the Israelites that they are to be a holy people (Deut 7.6, 14.2,21; Isa 62.12), He is speaking to us. It is conditional. Moses says: “Jehovah will establish you as a holy people to Himself, ... if you keep the commandments of Jehovah your God and walk in His ways” (Deut 28:9).

So, *do* we keep His commandments and walk in His ways? *Have* we let the Lord sanctify us by the truth?

What does “holy” mean? “Holy” is simply a way of labeling “Divine presence.” (We call this presence “the Holy Spirit.”) Something is holy because God is near to it, in it, has set it apart so that it can be an avenue to Him, a conduit by which He can touch us, a tool by which He can work (e.g. the “Holy Scripture”).

Why does the Lord want to make us holy? Well, so that He can be in us, with us, use us to bring His blessing to others, and to experience His blessing. So, *does* He touch you? *Do* you let Him use you to touch others, and bring His blessing? *Are* you a vessel of His holiness?

It is pretty hard for us to answer a flat “No” to these questions. I’d be very surprised if the people in this room, or watching online, could assert that they have made no effort and progress in being “sanctified by the truth.” ... But you may be squirming at the word “sanctified.”

We have the commandment, “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy, six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work,... 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 hallowed it.” — “made it holy.”

This commandment is actually about our regeneration. The Sabbath Day represents our regenerated state. The Lord works to re-create us and make us holy. That’s symbolized by the six days of creation. And when we are in a regenerate state the Lord has rest. His work is done. And *we* have rest from the conflicts and indecision of unregenerate life. That day is “blessed” and “holy” because the Lord can be *present with us* when we are regenerated. We are receiving Him “to the max.”

The Israelites were not to work on the Sabbath, because working was a symbol for our failing to grasp *what the Lord has accomplished*. To work on the Sabbath is to fail to “get” that the goodness we experience is on account of the Lord’s presence with us, and the work that He alone has been doing.

This is what the commandment means to us today: we are to practice recognizing that all good is the Lord’s—the good we experience, the good we accomplish, the insights that we have and share. These gifts—sensory, natural, spiritual, and heavenly—are *the Lord’s with us*, and in fact are *the Lord*. He shares them with us from pure mercy and grace.

In reflecting on the meaning of the Sabbath for this sermon, and trying to make this acknowledgment in my own life, I noticed how difficult it is. Yes, I can think of many things to thank the Lord for. And that is useful, to “count your blessings.” Yet imperfection always looms so large. Many things about our lives seem less than ideal, and even sullied by the seemingly

persistent realities about our character. We can easily see how choices that we've made over time limit where we are now—limit our usefulness, our wisdom, our impact on others, our connection with others. Rather than seeing the goodness of the Lord's work with us, and feeling a sense of His grace, it's easy to feel inadequate and selfish—far from holy!

Now the wiser of you have probably seen what's missing in what I've just said. One reality that the Heavenly Doctrine teaches us about, that we need to take into account, is that we are always “in process.” The good we are able to do, and experience, is always imperfect. The Lord artfully “partners” our higher aspirations with the limitations of our present state of mind. Yes, we are hoping for recognition, yet He also shares with us a desire to serve, and a delight in serving unselfishly. He shares His goodness with us in the measure that we can accept it at present. Our act of service is mixed, but each act, partnered with a higher motivation, becomes the basis for better states to come.

Another reality that's important to take into consideration (which is implied in the previous one), is that we are not monolithic people. —At least, in this sense: our minds are constantly entertaining inflowing life from different sources. We feel the thoughts and emotions that enter us as our own, yet this is not the truth. Our minds are multileveled, with higher and lower loves. And each of these loves draws influx from different sources outside of us. And yet unless we reflect, all of these sources seem to be “talking in the same room in our head,” and seem to be our own. But if we reflect, we are invited to see that we can evaluate these different influences, disagreeing with some, agreeing with others, refusing to own some, allying ourselves with others. And as we become accustomed to doing this, shunning the evil without letting it “stick,” choosing the good and attributing it to the Lord, the Lord's presence is strengthened with us, day by day.

His presence is strengthened. But it's important to realize that the old voices never go entirely away, while we are in this world of choice. It becomes easier (often) to identify our old will, and disarm it, but we do not become “holy” in a monolithic way. Rather, we come to recognize and enjoy the *holy states* with us, which are the Lord's alone: His gifts. They are the Sabbath with us. —especially when these states *prevail* with us.

Now, our Sabbath states are muted compared with the angels'. The angels are said to enjoy a "perpetual Sabbath" (AC 1618, 8510, 8888e). We read:

[W]hat was represented by [the Israelites] "not doing any work on the Sabbath day" [is] that they should not do anything from their proprium, but from the Lord. For the angelic state in heaven is that they will and do nothing from themselves (or from their proprium), and they do not even think and speak from it. Their conjunction with the Lord consists in this. ... This state with the angels is the heavenly state itself; and when they are in it, they have peace and rest, and the Lord also has rest. For when they have been conjoined with Him, they labor no more, because they are then in the Lord. (AC 8495.3)

Swedenborg adds in another passage:

It has also been given me to perceive by influx the sweetness which angels perceive from the fact that they do not think and will from themselves, but from the Lord; from this they have tranquility, peace, and happiness. (AC 6469)

Angels are able and willing to sense more keenly what is coming directly from the Lord. Again, we read:

[A]ngels manifestly perceive the influx [of life from the Lord], and also how it flows in; and likewise the fullness and quality of their reception of it.<sup>1</sup> When they are in a fuller state of reception they are then in their peace and happiness; otherwise they are in a state of unrest and of a certain anxiety. (AC 3742)

Ah, do you note here how even angels are not always in a glorious state of happiness? Their consciousness is still something dynamic and changing. They are actively discriminating what flows in and choosing to affirm and enjoy what comes from the Lord. Let me share another passage. It speaks of angels, yet brings us back to the universal human process that we (on earth) are involved in.

A person who is being regenerated is at last so far reduced by repeated alternations of desolation [i.e. being deprived of happiness] and being sustained [i.e. by good times] that he

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<sup>1</sup> Note that angels' general state is one of feeling life as their own: "[A]ngels perceive that they live from the Lord, although when not reflecting on the subject they know no other than that they live from themselves; but there is a *general* affection of such a nature that at the least departure from the good of love and truth of faith they perceive a change. Consequently they are in the enjoyment of their peace and happiness, which is inexpressible, while they are in a *general* perception that they live from the Lord." (AC 155.2 emphasis added)

no longer wills to be his own, but the Lord's. And when he has become the Lord's he comes into a state of such a nature that when he is left to self he grieves and is seized with anxiety; and when he is delivered from this state [of self] he returns into his happiness and bliss. In such a state are all the angels. (AC 6138)

Notice the reference to “alternations” here. We learn and are perfected through alternations. We learn to be angels (and are perfected as angels) by dealing with highs and lows. In the creation story the Lord makes the sun, moon and stars, and says, “Let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and for years” (1:14). In explaining this the Writings say:

In these words are contained more arcana than can be unfolded at present .... Suffice it to observe here that there are alternations of spiritual and heavenly states, both in general and in particular. These are compared to the changes of days and of years. ... From [these natural changes] come the alternations of heat and light, and also [the alternations] of the earth's fertility. To these changes are compared the alternations of spiritual and heavenly states. Life without such alternations and varieties would be uniform, consequently no life at all; nor would good and truth be discerned or distinguished, much less perceived. (AC 37)

The seven-day week, with its six days of work and Sabbath rest, represents the alternations of spiritual state through which we are regenerated. The Sabbath is that state of “knowing that we are the Lord's” and feeling joy in this, peace in this. It is not a state of believing that we are holy or pure or good. It is a state of recognizing that *the Lord is*, and “loving it to be so.” When we do this we are “singing a song of the Sabbath.”

Psalm 92 (which we read this morning) bears a title: “A Song for the Sabbath Day.” “A Song for the Sabbath Day.” That was the heading that Jesus found when He turned His eyes to reading that Psalm (probably as a young boy). “A Song for the Sabbath Day.”

Just as *we* know days, and weeks, and seasons in our spiritual lives, so did Jesus. “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.” He came to earth to undergo, in a human mind, that process that He had created for us. He came to do it in such a way that we could benefit from His “blazing the trail.” It was *His* process, foreseen from eternity. Our regeneration is simply an image of His glorification—i.e. of the process by which a mind can be educated from ignorance, purified, brought into order, and united to God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> HD 185 refs.; AC 5827

**Glorification** brings these things about in an infinite way and completely; **regeneration** brings them about only in a finite, and limited way. But the process is the same. A process foreseen from eternity.

So when Jesus read the Psalm 92 He was reading about His own process. As He once said to a group of Jews, “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me” (John 5:46). “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58). “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to [the disciples] in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). In the early church they believed this and when they read the Psalms they heard “the voice of Christ.” To them the Psalms were the “word to Christ,” the “word about Christ,” the “word of Christ.”

The Writings confirm this. In his Summary Exposition of the Psalms, Swedenborg very much opens the level of meaning that relates to the Lord when He was in the world. He says that this psalm is about the Lord’s perception of “the oneness of His Divine with His Divine Human.” “This union is the Sabbath.” It’s about His joyful sense of “cooperating” with that Divine. He’s given a strong sense that “although the evil flourish,” yet in declaring themselves, they are able to be judged and perish. That He is graciously being given “Divine omnipotence against those who rise up against Him.” And that from His process “the church will flourish, and will sing praises” to Him.

So as we reflect on the Sabbath today, it is wonderful to think of the Lord working beside us in His Divine Humanity. Like us, He knew states of obscurity and combat. He engaged in effort to open His mind to the inflowing Divine. And He enjoyed Sabbath states in which He felt more keenly the burning Love that was present in Him, sanctifying His Human, ordering heaven and hell, and bringing power and peace to humanity. In these states His heart, and mind, and maybe even His vocal chords, joyfully sang this “Song for the Sabbath Day.”

<sup>1</sup> *It is good to give thanks to Jehovah,  
And to sing psalms to Your name, O Most High;*

<sup>2</sup> *To declare Your mercy in the morning,*

And Your faithfulness in the night,  
<sup>3</sup> On an instrument of ten strings, and on psaltery,  
And on harp, with harmonious sound.  
<sup>4</sup> For You, Jehovah, have made me glad in Your work;  
I will sing aloud in the works of Your hands.  
<sup>5</sup> How great are Your works, O Jehovah!  
Your thoughts are very deep.  
<sup>6</sup> A brutish man does not know,  
Nor does a fool understand this.  
<sup>7</sup> When the wicked spring up like grass,  
And when all the workers of iniquity flourish,  
*It is* that they may be blotted out forever.  
<sup>8</sup> But You, Jehovah, *are* on high forevermore.  
<sup>9</sup> For behold, Your enemies, O Jehovah,  
For behold, Your enemies shall perish;  
All the workers of iniquity shall be dispersed.  
<sup>10</sup> But My horn You shall lift up as a unicorn;  
I have been anointed with fresh oil.  
<sup>11</sup> And my eye shall look on my foes,  
My ears shall hear the evildoers  
    who rise up against me.  
<sup>12</sup> The righteous [one] shall flourish as the palm tree;  
He shall grow as a cedar in Lebanon.  
<sup>13</sup> Planted in the house of Jehovah,  
They shall flourish in the courts of our God.  
<sup>14</sup> They shall still bear fruit in old age;  
They shall be fat and flourishing,  
<sup>15</sup> To declare that Jehovah is upright;  
My rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.

*Amen.*

Lessons: Ps 92; Mark 2.23-3.6; AC 8893.

AC 8893.

*And [Jehovah] rested in the seventh day. ...* By "rest in the seventh day" is signified peace and the good of love. This is because before a person is regenerated, or created anew, he is in an untroubled and restless state, for his natural life then fights with his spiritual life, and wishes to rule over it. Consequently at this time the Lord has labor, for He fights for the person against the hells which assault. But as soon as the good of love has been implanted, the combat ceases, and rest ensues, for the person is then introduced into heaven, and is led by the Lord according to the laws of order there, thus in peace. These things are signified by "the rest of Jehovah in the seventh day." (AC 8893)

*Prophets and Psalms* n. 342.<sup>3</sup>

Psalm 92

title

The oneness of the Lord's Divine with His Divine Human. This union is the "Sabbath."

vv. 1-5

Song in praise of the Father's cooperation with Him.

v. 6

The evil do not understand this.

vv. 7-9

Although the evil flourish, yet they perish.

vv. 10, 11

Thus He has Divine omnipotence against those who rise up against Him.

vv. 12-14

From this the church will flourish,

v. 15

and will sing praises to the Lord.

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<sup>3</sup> I left out alternate verse numbers and refs. to general themes (what Schreck calls "table of subjects") and changed translation a bit. (GHO)