

*Tyler Thompson*  
*2009 Jerry B. Jenkins Writer Awards, Second Place*

### Every Other Scene Below

Titus is the only epistle in the bunch. He is fittingly short, I might add. We have a gospel, a prophet, an angel, a judge, some fruits of the Spirit, and three expressions of praise in the Family Thompson. Luke, Isaiah, Gabriel, Joshua, Faith, Joy, Hope, Grace, Gloria, Selah, Hosanna...and then there's me, Tyler. I'm not the only pagan, though. Tiffany, Ashley, Liberty, Violet, and Parker bring the family total to 18 children, some adopted, some biological, some Biblical, some free, some floral, and then the rest of us.

There is not time or space here to describe what life is like in a family of 20 people. However, one simple practice that is basic to our survival has left an indelible mark on my life: Sabbath. Just as mighty ships must dock and refuel before setting out to sea again, the Family Thompson must also come to port. Our Sabbath-keeping is far from legalistic, allowing for lapses and sheep-in-the-cistern reasonableness. After church, we stay home as a family and take a required afternoon nap or "reading rest." Granny and Grandpa come over, we eat dinner as a family, gather in the family room for singing, Bible-reading, laughter, and games, and hopefully go to bed early to prepare for the week ahead. It is the one day of the week when no one is rushing off to school, going to and from basketball practice, practicing violin, slaving over homework, having friends over, or doing laundry.

At the reluctant end of a Sabbath, we are bunched together in the living room. The little kids are all in their pajamas, the girls are doing one another's hair, and the guys are lying around, receiving backrubs or dozing off. As the last song ends or the discussion is dying down, there comes a natural, definitive pause. Dad breaks the silence by taking a deep breath, and in that moment you can feel the sun in the room slip below the horizon. There is an immediate and subtle shift in the tone of the room, the way a field becomes dark and dusky gray after the fiery orange sun vanishes, taking its golden glow and hearty warmth with it. Dad blesses us and then people slowly get up, reluctantly stepping from the sacred to the profane, last-minute checklists invading the calmness of our minds as we consider what will be necessary for Monday morning. And while the transition may seem to happen silently or effortlessly, the effect after Father's final "Amen" hangs in the air as the sublime moment of intimate and weighty silence that presses

down on the collective chest of an audience between the final note of a violin solo and the thunderous applause that follows.

When I left for college, I found it extremely difficult to keep the Sabbath. I tried to make Sunday special, but Old Testament Survey class was fast upon me, and I soon found myself doing as much homework on Sunday as every other day of the week. It was hard to set apart a day as sacred when six days there were incessant sirens wailing outside my window on the street below, and on the seventh, there were still sirens. Six nights the lights of the city drowned out the starry canopy of heaven, and on the seventh, the twinkling host still could not breach the urban front. My soul began to shrivel. And to make matters worse, no one else around me seemed affected by the dial-tone trajectory of unbroken time. In fact, I soon learned that keeping the Sabbath was not hip or trendy or relevant, and that I was perceived as Amish or maybe Jewish and probably from the Deep South, undoubtedly legalistic and ignorant, hung up on some old-fashioned tradition. So I gave it up.

But then, one quiet summer at home, as unexpected as a blizzard in mid-July, I abruptly realized that I was beginning to think differently about the Sabbath.

It all started with fireworks one Saturday night as I stood on the church lawn, watching the post-reception, pyrotechnic finale of a wedding. As the summer sky danced in flashing colors and eruptive splashes of light, the thundering reports began to fall upon my ears as the sound of masculine, triumphant praise...they at once sounded to me like a liturgy of cannons shouting deep, resounding Hallelujahs up from cold earth. Realizing that it was nearly 10 p.m. and the Sabbath would soon be upon us, the scene before me changed from nuptial splendor to sacred anticipation. Dressed in our wedding formals, we were arrayed in our finest clothing, expectantly awaiting the arrival of the Queen of the Sabbath as she bounded doe-like toward our time zone, having already lavished the sweetening balm of rest upon the beaches of the Atlantic and the Appalachian Mountains where the hour had struck midnight and the Lord's Day had already begun.

A fragment of Scripture flashed in my mind, "If you call the Sabbath a delight..." (Isaiah 58:13). That was all I could remember of the verse, but what mattered was the realization that we, the church, seem to have thoughtlessly lost all manner of true delight in the Lord's Day. The arrival of the Sabbath at midnight should be celebrated! I called my friend Tim to tell him of my new conviction and invited him to join me. By 11:50 p.m., he and I were standing in a wheat

field west of my home in the country, a unique stretch of land that is remarkably unfettered by intrusive cell phone towers and electric lights that worm their way into every other scene below. As the clock struck midnight, we sang in the Sabbath with hymns of longing, welcoming its arrival with prayers of thanksgiving and consecration as a crescent moon silently witnessed our unadorned ceremony.

The next weekend, we invited more friends to join us in our Sabbath-welcoming. This time we gathered to sing in a vast, empty grain bin--a cavernous, hollow, steel sanctuary that sits quiet and dignified atop a lonely hill south of our old horse pasture. The acoustics in the bin were like that of a cathedral, carrying the sound of our songs into the echoing chambers of its spiraled heights, returning the echo of our voices back to us with haunting reverberation as though the mere eight of us were a fully-orbed choir. As the weeks went on, our numbers grew and so did the volume of our sound, filling the bin every Saturday night with rich harmonies that brought tears to my eyes when “awed by the lauds sung thrillingly and anthems undefiled,” I would blissfully forget that a world existed outside the grain bin and our revolutionary Sabbath delight.

It was there, in that haven of rest from the profane, I began to think of the Sabbath not only as a unit of time but truly a *place* as well. The Sabbath is, after all, the emblem, the sign, the seal of a place we are striving to reach. As the hymn writer says,

*Thine earthly Sabbaths, Lord, we love,*

*But there's a nobler rest above;*

*To that our laboring souls aspire,*

*With ardent pangs of strong desire.*

The Sabbath is but a type and a shadow of the true Rest to come. Our weekly late-night worship in the “prairie cathedral” was our Mount Pisgah, from which we surveyed the landscape of the Promised Land and hoped longingly for the Day when we might settle there in glory.

My Sabbath times at home with the family have become much more endearing, as they now offer not only a mere ceasing from maddening busyness but also a scintillating glimpse of the restful satisfaction that the family of God is promised some day in a much larger Living Room. And my choice to delight in the arrival of the Lord's Day has now transcended the contrast between home and college, because Tremont, Illinois and Chicago are but earthly, finite, fading places, while 1 Peter tells me that the Place I am seeking is “imperishable, undefiled, and

unfading.” So when I am hundreds of miles away from the grain bin on a Saturday night at 11:56 p.m., I dash up the stairs to the roof of my dorm building and peer up past the tallest spires of the skyscrapers, gazing intently into the dense, formless void beyond, gloriously knowing that it is not void, and the promise of a Sabbath that will never end is not drowned out by the loud city lights. “Abraham was seeking a city that is still to come,” I think to myself as I quietly sing,

*What a Day that will be,  
When my Jesus I shall see,  
When I look upon His face,  
The One Who saved me by His grace.  
When He takes me by the hand,  
And leads me to the Promised Land  
What a Day, glorious Day that will be!*