

# Holiday Sundays

If Jack and Jill talk to you about the first summer holidays that they took after their conversion, you will detect a note of sadness in their voices. After all, they were new Christians at the time, and there was a host of subjects about which they knew nothing. They certainly had no idea that there is a distinctively Christian way of taking your holidays. All they knew was that they had come home restless, unsatisfied, and feeling hungry inside.

Because Jack had stopped drinking and Jill no longer gambled, they had had more money than usual that year. So, they spent their three weeks in the best accommodation, ate exceptional food, and passed their time mountain biking with Beth (9) and Gary (8), surfing, or lazing in the Mediterranean sunshine—not to mention the special outings to try their hands at caving, canoeing and (best of all!) white water rafting. 'Dad, can we go there again next year?' the children repeatedly cried in unison. But Jack and Jill knew deep down that their 'holiday of a lifetime' had left them feeling cheated and impoverished, and that they did not want to repeat it.

It was Sunday, the day after they got home, and they did not enjoy it at all. Several Christian friends asked them what sort of church they had attended while they were away. They had no answer. Then there was the sermon on Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 which stressed that the Lord holds us accountable for all our words and actions. The last straw was their good friend, Hamish. They were very glad to see him again, but why did he have to be so blunt? 'Well,' he said to them, 'the summer has now come and gone. What have you done for the Lord over these past few weeks?'

## Never again

Jack and Jill made up their mind that they would never have another holiday like that one. Yes, they had had good experiences, but what's the point of that if you come home unsatisfied and with a troubled conscience? As they thought about things, they could see that the chief characteristic of their summer had been self-indulgence. They knew enough about the things of God to know that self-indulgence is a sin that every believer is to shun.

So, what were they going to do? They had a few good Christian friends, but no pastor in their church to help them through their questions and struggles. They decided that during the coming months they would do some sustained Bible study in the hope of sorting themselves out.

What an eventful autumn it was for them both! For the first time they were really struck by the Bible's teaching about the Sabbath. It caused turmoil in their minds, but eventually—albeit slowly! — they came to settled convictions: 'Sabbath' means 'rest', and is the name of a sort of day, not the name of a day of the week; the Sabbath is God's weekly gift to mankind as mankind, and has been so since creation; how you observe it will decide the whole tone of your life...

Jack and Jill came to see that the Bible's teaching on the Sabbath is only part of a bigger picture. For example, besides its weekly Sabbath days, Old Testament Israel had quite a lot of holidays each year. All of them had the same purpose—not to provide people with 'leisure' (for such a concept is foreign to the mind of God), but to give them 'recreation' (i.e. re-creation). We have to take time out of the normal routine of life so that we can be refreshed spiritually, mentally, physically and socially, and thus give ourselves with new energy to our calling to glorify God on the earth. This is the purpose of holidays in general and of the Lord's Day (the Christian Sabbath) in particular. Both Jack and Jill understood that if they did not reform their holidays, and especially the Sundays during those holidays, the harmful effects of their neglect could carry over into the rest of the year.

### **Everything changed**

That simple realisation changed everything. The following year they were already planning their summer holidays in mid-January. They did not settle on their choice of destination until they were sure that there was a gospel-loving church within easy reach. They found this out by asking friends and surfing the Internet. They were in contact with the church there well before Easter and shortly afterwards received an invitation to spend their first Sunday away having hospitality with a couple in the church!

When they at last arrived in their holiday town, they did some exploring on the Saturday evening to make sure that they knew exactly where the church building was, and to confirm the time of the services. On the Sunday they arrived in good time for both services and did not rush away afterwards. They also went to the mid-week meeting on the Wednesday, which meant that on the second Sunday they knew even more people in the church. On both Sundays they invited people back to their caravan after the evening service; a family on holiday like themselves, and then a family who lived locally.

It was a wonderful two weeks! People from the church were obviously encouraged by their interest in the local work, and this in turn led to some new friendships which have endured through the years, and been maintained by letters, e-mails, phone calls—and repeat visits! Beth and Gary enjoyed playing with church children, and the whole family benefited from the local knowledge which the church people passed on to them, thus discovering beaches and places of interest which they would never have known about. They had a far better holiday than the previous year, and at less expense!

### **Going abroad**

It is not surprising that they returned to the same town for several years after that; and they still go there from time to time. But, after a while, Jack and Jill had a thought: if simply getting involved in a church in a holiday destination gives that church such encouragement, why not try the same thing with a church abroad? So, the following year, that is what they did.

It was strange worshipping with people who lived their whole life speaking another language! Neither Jack nor Jill, nor Beth and Gary, understood very much of what was going on, but oh what a joy it was to be in the company of other Christians! By arriving early, and lingering afterwards, they quickly found that some people present could speak a little English, and these were the people they invited to their holiday flat several times during their two weeks.

And how astonished the local believers were when the Jones family turned up for the mid-week prayer meeting! They had never known visiting British people to do this before, and were obviously heartened. These simple gestures led to even more new and lasting friendships, and, once again, to the family benefiting from the local knowledge which tourists are not normally given.

But that was not all. The fact is that their approach to holidays had made each family member a richer person. They have a deep awareness of the fact that the church of Jesus Christ is found in every country and in countless cultures, and that equally faithful Christians 'do church' in very different ways indeed. As a result, they are much better able to discern which aspects of their own church life are biblically necessary and which are simply culturally or traditionally defined. The outcome has been that some things in their home church have changed, simply because the Jones family, on holiday, discovered a better way of doing them.

### **Hamish's question**

There is now only one thing to add. Despite their sincerity in exercising a ministry of encouragement through many years, Jack and Jill will admit that it is only more recently that they have given deeper consideration to Hamish's pointed question. In addition to their two weeks together as a family, the Joneses now split up for a week. The children go off to camps and conferences. Jack, who loves striking up conversation with strangers, is on a beach mission team. Jill, who has an obvious gift in getting through to teenage girls, is a camp officer. And none of them looks the other way when Hamish approaches! Many friends have asked whether it is hard for them to spend a week apart during the holiday period. The answer is that it has greatly improved their conversation throughout the rest of the year! They have so much to tell each other! And they have so many new subjects for their family prayers. In addition, their circle of friends continues to widen, because Jill accompanies Jack to beach mission reunion, and Jack accompanies Jill to hear camp officers' training day. And no one can stop the children talking about their annual week away from home!

Children? Beth is now engaged to be married to Peter. A few weeks ago, she was telling him what their family holidays used to be like, and what happens now. She was complaining that in the old days they went away and did great things, but that they never knew anybody. Now they enjoy the strengthening friendship of many Christians in several parts of Britain, as well as in some countries abroad. 'They are so much part of my life,' she said, 'that I could never go back to the way things were before.'