

Introduction

Although God is the same yesterday, today and forever, He has dealt with His people throughout the ages in very rich and unique ways. The Sabbath is one such way. But there is much debate and controversy today over the nature of the Sabbath. What did it mean to Old Testament Israel? What was God teaching them in the Sabbath? How were they supposed to respond to it? How did they actually respond to the Sabbath? Furthermore, there are many Christians today who recognize the Sabbath as a “creation ordinance”, something instituted by God for all mankind when He finished His creative work; therefore to be observed in the way that Israel was to observe it. Is this biblical? How do the New Testament authors handle the Sabbath? Now that Christ has come, does this change the way we are to understand the Sabbath?

The Sabbath: Shadow and Substance

Please turn with me to Exodus chapter 20:8-11: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. (9) Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, (10) 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. (11) 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.”

(Exodus 20:8-11).

We recognize this as the fourth of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, or Decalogue, or even more literally, “ten words” were first given to the Israelites of the Exodus generation at Mount Sinai through God’s prophet Moses three months after the Exodus from Egypt (Mathison, 2009, p. 55). Before the giving of the Ten Commandments, God reiterates what he has done for Israel in redeeming them out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 19:4). Keith Mathison observes that “God has kept the promises he made to Abraham concerning his people... This

great nation is now to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...As a kingdom of priests, Israel is also to be a mediator of God's blessing to the nations" (Mathison, 2009, p. 55). God emphatically declares to them that he is the only God and all the earth is indeed his (Exodus 19:5).

The Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law were given to Israel to show them (and the other nations) how God's covenant people were to live. The law was given to set God and His people apart from the pagan nations around them. Bruce Waltke notes that the Ten Commandments can be divided into three groups, "The first three commandments pertain to Israel's relation to God, their King; the last six pertain to Israel's relationship to its neighbors. The fourth, to keep the Sabbath, is a transition: keep the Sabbath to remember the Creator for the benefit of his creation" (Waltke, 2007, p 411). It is also worth observing that God was already in an established covenant with Israel, through Abraham, as noted above. This is the context and setting of the giving of the Law to God's covenant people.

What did this commandment mean for Israel? As we see from the very beginning of this commandment that God tells the Israelites to

“remember the Sabbath”. The root of the Hebrew word *sabbata* means “to cease” or “intermission” (Vine, 1996, pp.33-34; Pfeiffer, et al, 2008, pp. 1493-94). It came to be known as “to rest”. Of course, Israel was already familiar with the Sabbath in some sense, for Exodus 16:22-27 tells us that God instructed Israel not to collect manna on the seventh or Sabbath day, but that He would provide a double portion on the sixth day to be kept for the seventh. So as God had provided for them up till this point in their history, God tells them to “remember” or observe, indicating that He will continue to provide for them. Also, Calvin is insightful as he notes, “we know how prone men are to fall into indifference, unless they have some props to lean on or some stimulants to arouse them in maintaining their care and zeal for religion” (Calvin, 2005, p. 433). It shows us the depth of depravity of the fallen human mind and heart: Israel had to be reminded of their God and His great works of creation and redemption (cf. Deuteronomy 5:12-15). They would soon forget these great acts of God unless they were reminded weekly!

God tells them to do no work on the Sabbath day and even goes so far as to command that no one or nothing among them should work- livestock and servants included- but should rest and consecrate it, set it apart –“make holy”- to the Lord (v. 8, and again v. 11). Then God instructs them in verse 11 as to why they must do this: He points them back to His own creating work at the dawn of history. God created everything in six days and rested from His work on the seventh. As God’s emissaries and representatives on earth, Israel was to imitate their King. As Vos notes, “This duty is based in Exodus not on something done to Israel in particular, but on something done in the creation of the world” (Vos, 1948, p. 139).

God, again through Moses, upon reiteration of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy, nearly 40 years after the initial giving of the commandment, and at the end of Israel’s wilderness wanderings and on the very cusp of their entrance into the Promised Land, adds another reason to “remember the Sabbath” and “keep it holy”. “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord

your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 5:15).

We should note here that the remembrance and observance of the Sabbath by Israel was not separate from the rest of the commands to them. It was an integral part of the entire Mosaic Covenantal structure. This included the tabernacle (later the temple), the priests and the sacrificial system. In fact, Calvin notes in regard to several other Old Testament passages, which are beyond our scope here, that “...it is manifest that the service of the tabernacle was annexed to the Sabbath, and that the two things were not only connected by an indissoluble tie, but that the rest from labour had reference to the sacrifices” (Calvin, 2005, pp. 441-442). In other words, the entire structure of the Mosaic Covenant was knit together as one unit -from the tabernacle, to sacrifices to the Levitical priestly system, to the Sabbath.

Having come out of Egypt as slaves, Israel should have taken great pleasure and delight in resting and reflecting upon God’s works of creation and redemption. Edmund Clowney notes well, “What a relief the hard-driven Israelite slaves must have felt when they realized that

their God was not like their tyrannical slave masters in Egypt who would work them to death” (Clowney, 2007, p. 54). So added to the other reasons why Israel was to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, was the benefit of physical rest from their hard labor.

Furthermore, God in his economy has associated with every one of his covenants with man a sign for that Covenant. Waltke, “God’s covenant with Noah involved hanging up the bow of the rainbow as a promise that he would not wage war against the earth with water again, In the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision was the sign that the seed was set apart, holy to God. The Sabbath is the sign of the Mosaic covenant” (Waltke, 2007, p. 423). This is stipulated in Exodus 31:12-17.

As is true with any command of God, we would expect this commandment to be taken with utmost seriousness. Calvin again, “It is to be gathered without a doubt from many passages, that the keeping of the Sabbath was a serious matter, since God inculcates no other commandment more frequently, nor more strictly requires obedience to any” (Calvin 2005, p. 435). Indeed we do see in Jeremiah 17:21-27 that Israel had forsaken the observance of the Sabbath (v. 23), and Jeremiah

was calling them to restore the Sabbath (vs. 24-27). In fact, failure to do so would result in devastation to the people and Jerusalem as judgment (v. 27). In Ezekiel 20:1-26, God highlights failure to keep the Sabbath as key in Israel's rejection of God and his Law. Continuing God's displeasure and wrath, Ezekiel 22:8 notes that Israel had "despised [God's] holy things and profaned [his] Sabbaths." Ezekiel 23:38 decries that in profaning His Sabbaths, Israel has directly offended God. This failure to obey God's Sabbaths (which were for their own good), combined with and tied together with Israel's overall rejection of God, ultimately resulted in their ejection from the land and their captivity to Babylon.

In brief summary then, God had given Israel the Sabbath command, so that they would remember His work of creation and his work of deliverance. They would have the added benefit of physical rest. They were to cease from their labor on the seventh day of the week to reflect and rejoice upon their God. "The Sabbath is a time to celebrate and enjoy what has been done the previous six days. It [was] a reminder that God does not value humans by their ability to produce" (Waltke, 2007,

p. 421). Indeed, the Israelites would be reminded that it was God who gave them everything!

How are Christians to view and treat the Sabbath? As we might expect of such an important and distinctive command, the Sabbath is written of often in the New Testament. The New Testament does deal with the Sabbath at length. How we understand if the Sabbath command is binding upon Christians (or all people for that matter) today is dependent upon our understanding of the nature of the Decalogue in general and the nature of the Fourth commandment specifically. As noted earlier, many see the commandment as rooted in Creation itself. It is seen as a “creation ordinance”. The reasoning is this: Since the Ten Commandments reflect the absolute moral nature of God, and since Moses in Exodus 20:11 linked the Sabbath to God’s creation pattern, then this commandment came about prior to the Mosaic covenant and is therefore binding upon all men, for all time throughout history. Waltke states that the Ten Commandments “apply to people of all nationalities and all time periods” (Waltke, 2007, pp. 413-14). He does go on to qualify this statement by saying that these commands must be

contextualized for application to different cultures and that “[t]he practical application of this is that the concept of theonomy, using the biblical laws for government today, is not feasible” (Waltke, 2007, p. 414). Walter Chantry is insistent throughout his book *Call the Sabbath a Delight* that the Sabbath was instituted by God at creation. In a particularly bold statement Chantry proclaims, “At the time of creation the Almighty published his claim that one day in seven had been devoted to him and at that same time he proclaimed blessing upon that day” (Chantry, 1991, p. 26). But we are told in Nehemiah that the Sabbath was first instituted by Moses, “[Y]ou made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant” (Neh 9:14). Obviously, this was not at creation, but at Sinai.

Many are familiar with the passage in Mark 2:23-28 in which there is great controversy between the Pharisees and the Lord Jesus himself. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ claims that He and his disciples were violating the Sabbath by walking through a field and picking and eating heads of grain is striking. His response is paraphrased thusly: The

Sabbath wasn't intended to be a burden to the people, but that it was designed for their benefit; further, Jesus made the astounding claim that He was the Lord of the Sabbath. He had authority to use it how He saw fit! Even Sabbatarian Walter Chantry agrees, "It is *Christ* who once for all has ceased from his own works of redemption as God did from his of creation" (Chantry, 1991, p. 94).

Other New Testament passages are not only in agreement with this but expand upon it. The Apostle Paul in Romans 14:5, in a section of Scripture in which he is promoting love and unity among the saints, declares that Christians should not judge each other for some esteeming certain days better than others, while others esteem each day the same. Furthermore, in Galatians 4:9 Paul chastises the Galatians for returning to "weak and worthless elementary principles of the world" and in verse 10, rebukes them for slavishly observing "days and months and years!" In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul gives, perhaps the clearest and most definitive commentary on the subject. He writes that the Colossians (who were a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians) should not let others dictate to them whether they should observe the

Jewish “festival[s] or new moon[s] or Sabbath[s].” He then very explicitly writes that these things were a “shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:17). Certainly, Christ has fulfilled the command! Certainly, He has become the very real and visible expression of resting from works and trusting in God the Father! Chantry unconvincingly argues that these days, and seasons and Sabbaths weren’t the weekly observances of the Sabbath but that they were something different. “Weekly Sabbath-keeping as required in the fourth commandment does not fit the description of days described in Romans 14, Galatians 4 and Colossians 2. It was not instituted in the time of Moses when other temporary ceremonies were introduced. The weekly Sabbath day is a creation ordinance just as is marriage” (Chantry, 1991, p. 100). In commenting on this passage, he almost seems to stubbornly disagree with the Apostle Paul that the Sabbath has been subsumed in Christ. He even goes on to write, “The Decalogue’s fourth commandment does *not* point forward to Christ with shadowy images of him” (Chantry, 1991, p.101, emphasis added). However, it must be asked, if these are not the Sabbaths in view, then what are they?

Chantry never really answers the question, but dismisses them as some sort of mysterious “temporary ceremonies”.

Hebrew chapters 3 and 4 give the proper place to the theme of “Sabbath rest” which pervades the entirety of the Scriptures. The Author of the letter uses Psalm 95 in comparing and contrasting Israel’s “rest” in the land of Palestine with the believer’s eschatological rest in Christ! Briefly, he writes that the Exodus generation failed to enter into the land because of unbelief and disobedience (3:16-4:4:8). He then goes onto say that a “rest” still stands and that Christians are in a similar position as the Israelites were: they could either persevere in Christ, and therefore enter the rest, or they could stumble, disobey and fall away, thereby not entering in that rest (4:9-13). He even wonderfully gives us a picture of the Gospel, of which the Sabbath is also a picture in verse 10: “for whoever has entered God’s rest has rested from his works as God did from his”. As Phillip Ryken wonderfully instructs, speaking of God’s rest, “This rest was not a temporary state, but God’s abiding condition...Unlike the other days, this Sabbath day of rest does not end;

it is not brought to completion, but goes on forever” (Ryken, 2006, p.119).

In closing, let us briefly look a little deeper. If we look at the creation account and see God resting on the seventh day, we see “God’s abiding condition” as mentioned above. If we believe that all Scripture speaks to the reality of Christ, then certainly we should see the greater spiritual reality undergirding the physical institution of the Sabbath, that indeed an eternal rest would come. John Reisinger is extremely insightful when he writes that “[t]he Sabbath constantly reminded Israel of the rest that Adam lost in the Garden of Eden because of his sin...the Sabbath was a weekly, constant visible reminder of the wages of sin...The Sabbath preached the gospel as clearly as any ceremony in the whole Old Testament! The Sabbath was a clear picture of Christ and the rest that he would give” (Reisinger, 2004, p. 4).

Furthermore, Christ himself often spoke of his “work”, which was the work His Father gave him to do. The Apostle John frequently quotes Jesus as “working”, doing the work of his Father, and finishing His work (John 4:34; 5:36; 5:17; 17:4; 9:4). What was this work? It is the work

of redemption, the work of earning salvation for his people, the work of doing what we could never do! He took the punishment and wrath of God upon himself that was deserved by us. He died in our stead on the cross! “The work which issues into the rest can now no longer be man’s own work. It becomes the work of Christ” (Vos, 1948, p. 141). And what happened when Christ accomplished this work? He rested! “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:9; cf. Heb 4:14; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:33; 7:56; Romans 8:34; Eph 1:20-22; Col 3:1; 1 Pet 3:22; Rev 3:21). The abiding state of God, His rest, which Adam forfeited through his transgression in the Garden, Christ secured forever for his people! It is the abiding rest of God in the New Creation!

It is no wonder then, that a passage like Matthew 11:28-30 is so sweet in the ears of a believing sinner, when Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you *rest*. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find *rest* for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my

burden is light.” “The Sabbath then, not only looks back to God’s rest after he completed his work of creation (Gen 2:2-3), but also looks forward to the final peace given through Jesus Christ” (Clowney, 2007, p. 57).

While we would certainly affirm that there is wisdom in taking rest from our physical labors, and while it is always beneficial and glorifying to God to reflect on His goodness and mercy, we would suggest that the Sabbath principle is larger and grander than any one day can hold! Much like the tabernacle or temple, and much like the sacrificial system tied to it, the Sabbath has been subsumed and fulfilled in Christ! As Christians now worship God through Christ anywhere, since the Holy Spirit of God dwells within us, and as Christ is the true atoning sacrifice, He is also the true Sabbath!

Even if we acknowledge that there were shadows of the Sabbath ordinance in God’s creation, “It must be remembered that the Sabbath, though a world-aged observance, has passed through the various phases of the development of redemption, remaining the same in its essence but modified as to its form, as the new state of affairs at each point might

require” (Vos, 1948, p. 139). And we would boldly proclaim here that at this stage of redemption, Christ himself is the believer’s Sabbath rest, both now and into eternity! Christ has gained for us more than was lost in Eden (Reisinger 2004, p.11). Christ himself is the substance of the reality that the Sabbath only foreshadows! May we joyfully sing with William Gadsby:

“The Sabbath was a day of rest;
The day the Lord Jehovah blest;
A lively type of Christ;
The labouring poor may venture here;
The guilty banish all their fear,
And lean on Jesus’ breast.

When foes without, and foes within,
Wrath, law, and Satan, guilt and sin,
The child of God molest;
Fatigued with sin, distressed with fear,
He enters into Christ, and there
He finds a settled rest.” --From Gadsby's Hymns #636

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