

Understanding the Seventh-day Sabbath

The Sabbath of the Ten Commandments and the Sabbaths of the ceremonial law distinguished the people of God from all other nations and bound them to God as His covenant people.

God called the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments a sign between Him and His people forever, because it was He who sanctified them (Exodus 31:17).

The Ten Commandments are a transcript of God's character. The first four commandments pertain to our relationship with God and the last six commandments pertain to our relationship with people. Taken together they can be summed up with the words of Jesus:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Taken individually, there is an inescapable logic to each of these commandments. It is obvious why we should not kill, why we should not lie to each other or steal from each other.

The Fourth Commandment, or Sabbath commandment, however, is different from the other nine. There is no implicit logic in this commandment. There is no specific reason why we should keep the seventh-day Sabbath, other than that God specifically commanded it. More than any other commandment, the Sabbath is thus a test of faith.

The Origin of the Sabbath

In order to understand the significance of the Sabbath, we have to turn to its origins. The Sabbath is not a Jewish institution, but was established at Creation (Genesis 2:1-3). The Sabbath commandment serves as a reminder of God's creative act (Exodus 20:11). And in Deuteronomy 5:15, the Sabbath serves as a sign of God's redemptive act:

And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day (NKJV).

All humans are slaves to sin, and God in Jesus Christ brought us out of sin with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. The Bible teaches us that Christ Himself is the

Creator (Ephesians 3:9, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 1:2). The Sabbath, therefore, was a test of obedience and an everlasting memorial of Christ's goodness.

The significance of the Sabbath as a test cannot be overestimated. God could have chosen any memorial to His creative act, but He chose a memorial set in *time*. Time cannot be eliminated in the same way that a physical memorial, such as a city or holy place, could be.

The knowledge of the seventh-day Sabbath has been preserved by God through the centuries since the days of Jesus and has been observed in many areas around the world. Never has there been a time in which God's people somewhere did not observe the seventh-day Sabbath.

If Christ Himself instituted the Sabbath for us (Mark 2:27), would He change it? Jesus kept the Sabbath day faithfully. The disciples of Jesus likewise kept the Sabbath day (Acts 13:14, 16:13). The seventh-day Sabbath is taught throughout the Bible, while Sunday sacredness is not mentioned once.

The Sabbath is a Royal Seal

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God (Name). In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made (Title: Creator) the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them (Jurisdiction), and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it (Exodus 20: 8-11 NKJV).

The Sabbath commandment contains elements not contained in any of the other commandments. It states the name of the Lawgiver (LORD), His territory (heaven and Earth), and His title (Creator).

These three components comprise what is known as a seal, and lend authority to the law. The Ten Commandments gain their validity only from the royal seal of the Creator God embodied in the Sabbath commandment.

In ancient times, kings were required to ratify decrees or commands with the royal seal (1 Kings 21:8). Without a royal seal, no law would be valid. Moreover, even with a royal seal, a law is only valid in the area of the king's jurisdiction.

For example, Canadian law is not applicable in Switzerland. So in a sense, it can be said that without a seal, no law would be valid anywhere. The law of the Ten Commandments is no different.

Jesus and the Sabbath

Jesus used the Sabbath day to announce His mission on Earth (Luke 4:16-19). In Isaiah 42:21, the prophet predicts that the Messiah would come to magnify the law, not to change it. In Matthew 24:20, Jesus alludes to the Sabbath in connection with future generations. Jesus also told his followers that He did not abolish that law:

Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets, I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17 NKJV).

If you love Me, keep My commandments (John 14:15 NKJV).

For I am the LORD, I change not (Malachi 3:6).

God's law is a transcript of His character. It cannot change, just as God does not change.

Did Jesus change the law or the Sabbath? No. He kept His Father's commandments, for He said, "I have kept My Father's commandment and abide in His love" (John 15:10 NKJV).

He kept the Sabbath according to Luke 4:16: "as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day" (NKJV).

Jesus also indicated that the Sabbath would be sacred even after His death. With reference to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, He said, "Pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day" (Matthew 24:20).

Disciples and the Sabbath

The disciples and followers of Christ kept Saturday Sabbath according to the law:

And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and ointment; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment (Luke 23:55-56).

After Jesus ascended back to heaven, the disciples of Christ continued to keep the seventh-day Sabbath for many decades. The Ten Commandments, including the Saturday Sabbath, were not done away with when Christ died. Every single commandment can be found reiterated in the New Testament.

Paul and the Sabbath

The inspired Word of God in the book of Acts, as written by Luke, records the keeping of 84 Sabbaths by Paul and his companions. We note first in Acts 13:14 that "when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day."

Paul and his associates were still observing the Sabbath in 45 AD, 14 years after the resurrection.

And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath: And the next sabbath came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God (Acts 13:42-44).

The Gentiles also observed the Sabbath with Paul, and they heard the "word of God." No indication of a change is found. Besides worshipping in the synagogues, they also "on the sabbath...went out of the city by a river side" (Acts 16:13). This was 22 years after the resurrection, in AD 53.

And Paul as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures (Acts 17:2). Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth; and he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks...And he continued there a year and six months teaching the word of God among them (Acts 18:1,4,11).

Christ's followers in the early Church continued to celebrate the seventh-day Sabbath, just as Jesus did.

Colossians 2 and the Sabbath

Modern theologians use Paul's writings in Colossians to criticize the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.

In Colossians 2:11-17, Paul admonishes the followers of Christ not to have a religion of legalism. He refers to "the handwriting of ordinances" which were nailed to the cross, and finally admonishes the believers in this way:

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ (Colossians 2:16-17 NKJV).

"The handwriting of ordinances" refers to the ceremonial law, which pointed to the ministry of Christ. It does not apply to the Ten Commandment law.

The sabbaths referred to in verse 16 are mentioned together with food, drink, and festivals, none of which occur in the Ten Commandments. Paul is stating here that the ceremonial law and all the special sabbaths find their fulfillment in Christ.

He also states in Ephesians 2:15, "Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances." This law of ordinances was a "shadow of things to come" (Colossians 2:17). Upon His death, Jesus fulfilled the first step of the sanctuary service—the sacrifice of the lamb to take away the sinner's

guilt.

Colossians 2:14 describes the handwriting of ordinances as being “against us” and “contrary to us.” Paul writes that Christ “took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.” Many people say that this is the proof that the law of the Ten Commandments was nailed to the cross, and it is no longer applicable to us. But careful reading shows that Colossians 2 is not discussing the Ten Commandment law at all.

In Deuteronomy 31:24-26, we learn which book of the law was against us:

And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark fo the covenant of the Lord saying, Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God that it may be there for a witness against thee.

So it is the ceremonial law written by Moses, the very law contained handwriting of ordinances, that was against us. The Ten Commandments is never called a "law against us. It was always called the “perfect law of liberty” or even the "royal law" (James 1:25; 2:8-12). This law is also called just and good, pure, righteous, and perfect (Psalm 19:7,8; 119:172; Romans 7:12).

The ceremonial law or handwriting of ordinances pointed to a future event—the death of Christ—serving to remind people of their salvation only through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The Sabbath of the Ten Commandments is a memorial to Creation and redemption.

Eight Sabbath Scriptures

Some Christians, who are determined to prove that the Sabbath has been transferred from Saturday to Sunday, use eight texts in the Bible to support their viewpoint. These verses in fact support the seventh-day Sabbath rather than deny it.

1. "In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre" (Matthew 28:1).

The New English Bible (NEB) renders the verse this way:

The Sabbath had passed, and it was about daybreak on Sunday when Mary of Magdala and the other Mary came to look at the grave.

Where the Authorized Version or King James Version says “the first day of the week,” the NEB says "Sunday."

Two days are mentioned. One is given a sacred title, “the end of the Sabbath,” and

the other numerical value, "first day of the week." Note also the first day did not begin until "the end of the Sabbath." There is no transfer of the Sabbath day here.

Sunday sanctity is missing here, and it is not explained in the surrounding verses either. In fact, Mary did not attend to Jesus on the Sabbath day, because she rested in accordance with the commandment:

Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath, according to the commandment (Luke 23:56 NKJV).

2. "And when the sabbath was passed, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun" (Mark 16:1-2).

Mark's record was, according to some scholars, written approximately ten years after the resurrection. Mark refers to the same event as was described by Matthew, and he agrees with Matthew that the Sabbath was passed.

Again, we have Biblical evidence that the Sabbath and the "first day" are two distinct and separate days. Certainly Mark places no sacredness on the first day in this reference. Jesus' followers had come on Sunday to engage in labor the customary "embalming" of the body of the crucified Christ. They knew no sacredness attached to the day and were prepared to toil at a very unpleasant task.

3. "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene out of whom He had cast seven devils" (Mark 16:9).

There is not a word in this verse indicating that Sunday should be the new Christian Sabbath.

4. "And that day was the preparation, and the sabbath drew on. And the women also, which came with Him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulcher, and how His body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment. Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them" (Luke 23:54-24:1).

Christ was crucified on Friday afternoon before sunset and "that day was the preparation, and the Sabbath drew on." Friday was called "the preparation," implying preparation for the Sabbath.

The Sabbath began at sunset. The Sabbath was observed from Friday evening until Saturday evening. God ordained the reckoning of the day from sunset to sunset right from the very dawn of history:

And the evening and the morning were the first day...the evening and the morning were the second day (Genesis 1:5,8).

5. "The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre" (John 20:1).

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each give parallel accounts of the work of Christ on Earth. This is the reason for the repetition in the above verses quoted. Nothing is said about Sunday sacredness, nothing to suggest that Sunday should be kept as the Sabbath.

6. "Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you" (John 20:19).

The text says nothing about the disciples holding a meeting in honor of Christ's resurrection. In fact, they took the resurrection report of Luke as "idle tales, and they believed them not" (Luke 24:11).

As is stated clearly in John 20:19, "the doors were shut" not for a meeting or celebration of the resurrection, but "for fear of the Jews." The disciples were hiding from the Jewish persecutors.

They assembled from fear, not for worship. While it is true that Christ rose from the grave on Easter Sunday, there is no evidence for keeping Sunday in honor of the resurrection. The Bible teaches that baptism, rather than Sunday, is the memorial to the resurrection of Christ.

7. "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us...by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21).

While there are as many as 84 Sabbath services recorded in Acts, there is only one mention of the first day, and it does not support Sunday sacredness:

And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight (Acts 20:7).

The New English Bible identifies the time:

When the disciples came together to break bread, on the Saturday night in order to assemble for the breaking of bread, Paul, who was to leave the next day, addressed them, and went on speaking until midnight (Acts 20:7 NEB).

An evening meeting is recorded on the first day of the week. This means that since

the Sabbath ended at sunset, the first day of the week began according to Bible reckoning. The New English Bible puts it in modern language and uses the words "on Saturday night." It is recorded that Paul continued his speech until midnight on Saturday.

Evidently, Paul had visited all day Sabbath with them, and was persuaded to stay on that night and speak further. According to Acts 20:11, "talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed."

Paul did not stay on the Sunday, which would have been the case if Sunday was the new Sabbath. Indeed, it was only after the Sabbath that the disciples came together to have a meal together, and Paul spoke to them until daybreak on Sunday morning, and then left on a long journey by foot, an act that would never have been sanctioned on the Sabbath day.

The fact that Paul undertook a long journey by foot alone shows that the first day of the week—Sunday was not held in any special regard. The text is thus in support of Sabbath sanctity, rather than Sunday sanctity.

The fact that the disciples broke bread together on the Sunday is often used as a support of Sunday worship. This is however not the case, as the disciples ate together every day of the week. The partaking of communion is not limited to Sunday:

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their food with gladness and singleness of heart (Acts 2:46). For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come (1 Corinthians 11:26).

8. "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

Paul is referring to tithes and offerings set aside for God's work. This was to be done on the first day of the week. Paul regarded the sanctity of the Sabbath so highly that he suggested that the calculating of tithes and offerings should not be carried out until after the preparation day and the Sabbath.

He suggested rather that this work be done on the first day of the week, so that it wouldn't be spent on other less necessary items in the course of the subsequent week. Rather than to detract from the Saturday Sabbath, this verse supports it.