

9 The Sabbath

Two men, A and B, were talking together after the morning service. (This is a true story, but I will not say which denomination it was to which they belonged.) A was showing B the car he had for sale. The following conversation took place:

B: Now, if this wasn't a Sunday, and if I asked you how much you were wanting for the car, what would you say?

A: Well, if this wasn't a Sunday, and you asked me how much I was wanting for the car, I would say . . .

B: Now, if this wasn't a Sunday and you told me you were wanting . . . for the car, and I offered you . . . what would you say?

And so the bargaining continued until a satisfactory figure was reached, each man happy with a business deal completed and yet the Sabbath left unviolated.

Does each Christian really have to keep Sunday in the same way that Israel of old had to keep the Sabbath? Do we also need to ensure that our society as a whole respects Sunday, and calls a halt to trade, planes, trains, ferries etc? This chapter sets out to investigate the way the Sabbath is presented throughout the Bible, ending up with its position in the New Testament, and to trace the lessons for us today.

The Sabbath in the Old Testament

The Sabbath originates at the start of the Bible, when the creation is described as taking place over six days. 'On the seventh day God rested from all his work,' we are told (Genesis 2:2). 'And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy' (v. 3).

Keeping the Sabbath was included as the fourth of the ten commandments: 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy' (Exodus 20:8). The reason for the Sabbath was that 'in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy' (v. 8).

The Sabbath was principally a day of rest, one in seven. On the Sabbath day no fire was to be kindled in houses (Exodus 35:3); nor sticks gathered (Numbers 15:32–6); nor burdens carried (Nehemiah 13:19; Jeremiah 17:22, 24, 27). Buying or selling were prohibited (Nehemiah 10:31). Those who violated the Sabbath were to be put to death (Exodus 31:15; Numbers 15:35).

The Sabbath was more than a mere cessation of work. It was to be God's day, a day holy to (set apart for) the Lord (Jeremiah 17:21, 24, 27; Ezekiel 20:20; 44:24). Every Sabbath the showbread was set out afresh in the tabernacle or temple (Leviticus 24:8). Two extra lambs were sacrificed (Numbers 28:9–10). In Ezekiel's vision of the new temple the people were to worship at the gate each Sabbath (Ezek. 46:3).

Isaiah has much to say about the way the Sabbath should be observed as a holy day for the Lord: 'If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord' (Isaiah 58:13–14).

The Sabbath was a sign that the people were the Lord's and that he would make them holy (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12, 20). When the Jews failed to keep the Law, including the Sabbath, one purpose fulfilled by them being exiled to Babylon was that 'the land enjoyed its Sabbath rests' (2 Chronicles 36:21).

Since we are no longer under the Law, we should not necessarily expect that such observance of the Sabbath applies to us.

The Sabbath in the New Testament

In the New Testament we find that a traditional custom had become established for Jews on the Sabbath. This custom, followed both by Jesus and Paul, was to go to the synagogue (Matthew 12:9; Acts 13:14; 17:1–2; 18:4), where the Old Testament would be read (Luke 4:16–20; Acts 13:15, 27; 15:21) and expounded (Luke 4:21–7) and teaching given (Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:31; 6:6; 13:10; Acts 13:15).

It is in the nature of legalism to specify and measure the limits of the laws. So the Jews had defined how far one might travel on the Sabbath—the Sabbath day's journey (Acts 1:12). By New Testament times the Sabbath had become one of the laws about which the Jews were most keen.

Christ encountered some of the fiercest opposition against himself when the Jews accused him of not keeping the Sabbath. There was, for instance, the time when he and his disciples went through a grainfield on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–8; Luke 6:1–5). His disciples plucked grain and rubbed the seeds in their hands to remove chaff, operations which were seen as harvesting and threshing, activities which were not permitted on the Sabbath. Many times he healed on the Sabbath, despite the protests of those who claimed it was not lawful (Matthew 12:10–14; Mark 3:1–5; Luke 6:6–10; 13:11–16; 14:2–6; John 5:2–16; 7:22–3; 9:14–16). His defence was two-fold. On the one hand he pointed out that 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27). On the other hand, he claimed that 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' (Matthew 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5). It was for him to determine how the Sabbath should be kept, or even to abrogate the laws concerning it.

God's Sabbath rest

We have seen so far in this book several cases where the Old Testament teaches literal truth which is transformed in the New Testament into spiritual truth. The literal events in the Old are taken in the New as pictures of the spiritual reality into which we now enter. Paul tells us: 'Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or

drink, or with regard to . . . a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ' (Colossians 2:16–17). So we can expect to find an explanation in the New Testament of the reality which is pictured by the Old Testament Sabbath.

The New Testament has radical teaching concerning God's rest day, which we have seen from Genesis 2:2 was the day following his creation of the universe. When Jesus was persecuted for healing on the Sabbath, he said 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working' (John 5:17–18). The import of Jesus' words here needs to be carefully followed. What he seems to be saying is:

1. This current age is the time of God's Sabbath;
2. Despite this, God is still at work in this day and age;
3. If God can work during the age of his Sabbath, Jesus can heal on the Sabbath day.

If this interpretation is correct, then it opens up other questions. If this present age is God's day of rest, then perhaps the six days described in Genesis 1 might also be not literal days of 24 hours but ages. Are we justified in bending the word 'day' to such an extent?

One problem with literal interpretations is that words will sometimes not keep still enough for us to pin them down literally. The word 'day', for instance, may be used to mean 12 hours (Genesis 1:5), 24 hours (Exodus 20:10), or may span a whole week: 'The day the Lord God made the earth and the heavens' (Genesis 2:4 Hebrew). There are many references in the Bible to 'the day of the Lord', but it is hard to say that a day of 24 hours is meant. It is surely not surprising that God's time does not necessarily parallel ours. After all, Peter reminds us that 'with the Lord a day is like a thousand years' (2 Peter 3:8).

Some may object to making the days of creation into epochs. After all, in the ten commandments, the requirement to keep holy one day in seven is linked to the fact that God took six days over creation and rested on the seventh (Exodus 20:9–11). So God's seven days of creation are made the reason for us resting one day in seven, therefore, so it is said, God's seven days are of the same duration as our days.

However, one could interpret the verses in Exodus 20 as follows. God set the pattern of work and rest by working for six 'cosmic' days then resting on the seventh. This pattern is to be followed by Israel working for six earthly days and resting on the seventh. We need not be surprised if God's clock does not run to the same time as ours.

A friend of mine was listening to a cricket match on the radio. This was being played at Lord's cricket ground, north London. He was electrified when the commentator said, 'It's now five to twelve by the Lord's clock.' Perhaps the commentator's words were truer than he realised!

The interpretation which I have presented here may seem very strange to those who have been brought up to see things very differently and quite literally. More light may be shed on this matter as we see more of what the New Testament says about the relation of God's Sabbath rest to us.

Entering God's Sabbath rest

The writer to the Hebrews has much to say on the subject of Sabbath rest. He speaks of some individuals being able to enter God's Sabbath, and others who failed to enter.

He quotes Psalm 95, in which God says of the Israelites who rebelled when they came out of Egypt, 'They shall never enter my rest' (Hebrews 3:11). In chapter 4 the writer exhorts his readers to take the promise of entering into God's rest. When Joshua took the people into the promised land, they did not enter into the fulness of rest which God intended (v. 8). The rest about which he speaks is God's Sabbath rest, which believers enter into: 'We who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest." ' And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work" ' (Hebrews 4:3-4).

The truth which the writer to the Hebrews is seeking to convey is this. Because God finished his works at the foundation of the world, it has been possible to enter into God's rest ever since that time. This is the age of God's Sabbath which his people may share in: 'There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his' (Hebrews 4:9-10).

For people, the Sabbath is a day of rest at the end of the week. For God, however, the Sabbath during which he rests is this present age. Just as he ceased from his work when the world was finished, so those who trust in Christ cease from trying to earn salvation by their own efforts, and accept by faith what God gives.

The Lord's day

The Sabbath was the seventh day of the week, or Saturday. The day which Christians have observed as special throughout the ages is, of course, the first day of the week, Sunday.

The first day of the week is the day on which Christ rose from the dead (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19). In Troas it is recorded that on the first day of the week the believers gathered to break bread (i.e. to eat the communion meal) (Acts 20:7). Contributions for believers suffering hardship were to be laid aside (presumably into the church treasury) 'on the first day of every week' (1 Corinthians 16:2), leading us to suppose that the church met then. However, it is not to be supposed that Christians necessarily had a day of rest then. Some of them were slaves and would not be allowed a day off. This is perhaps why in Acts 20:7 it appears that they met late at night, and so Paul 'kept on talking until midnight'.

The only specific reference to 'the Lord's day' in the New Testament is Revelation 1:10, where John tells us, 'On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit'. This can only mean the day when the Lord rose from the dead, i.e. Sunday, the first day of the week.

From such slight references a large tradition has grown. It has always been the custom for Christians to meet on Sunday. Some have even referred to Sunday as 'the Sabbath'. The idea has developed in some circles that it is wrong for us to do any laborious work on this day, or indeed to cause others to perform undue work. One's best clothes are worn on this day. In earlier times children were restricted in their play on Sundays, and were given special toys for this day only. Old Testament scriptures which referred to the Sabbath were invoked as applying to Sundays. In other words, Sunday observance has replaced Sabbath observance as a law enjoined on us.

The New Testament never commands us to keep the Lord's Day, to make it holy. We need to beware lest, having exchanged the restrictions of the Law for the freedom of the gospel, we proceed to make fresh laws out of the gospel freedom.

'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (Galatians 5:1). We are free in Christ. We are free to meet together on a Sunday if that is what we wish. We are free not to do this, if we would rather meet together on another day. We are free from bondage to the Law, including the law about the Sabbath.

Conclusions

The provision of one day in seven for rest and refreshment is a necessary one. God knows what is best for our human bodies and minds, and we neglect this provision to our cost. Employers who care for their workers' welfare will ensure that they are able to spend time in recreation and enjoying their families. As Jesus said, 'The sabbath was made for man' (Mark 2:27).

So long as Christians continue to meet on a Sunday, it is beneficial for believers to have this as their day off so that they can have fellowship. This is not always possible for those in certain occupations, but good employers will allow their workers to have this day free if they so wish.

As Christians, we must ensure that we do not lose our freedom from the Law. If we are not careful, tradition will saddle us with restrictions. We will be faced with deciding what is permissible on a Sunday and what is not. Such petty decisions are the hallmark of legalism. Every day of the week we are to enjoy the Sabbath rest of reconciliation and peace with God, which does not depend on our works.

And finally . . .

To this day the Jewish Sabbath has been from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday. You can see the effect of this in Mark 1:32. So as not to break the Law, the people waited during the Sabbath and only brought the sick to Jesus after sunset. If Christians are to keep the first day of the week as once the Jews kept the seventh day, should they not start the Lord's Day at sunset on Saturday, and finish it at sunset on the Sunday? Have you thought of that?