

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Part 1)

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Few questions raise such strong emotions amongst God-fearing people as this, "Should we keep the Sabbath?"

For Sabbath-observers the question is a 'no brainer'. When propositioned on the matter, they ask incredulously, "Didn't Jesus Christ himself keep the sabbath? Wasn't the apostle Paul a Torah-observant Jew? They believed the command to keep the Sabbath day holy is therefore, an integral part of the Ten Commandments, surely? God did not give us the Nine Commandments, did He? And since the other commandments in the Decalogue all concern man's spiritual and moral obligations towards God and fellow man, what makes anybody think they can arbitrarily just cut this fourth commandment out? And where does the NT change or abolish the Sabbath? The command is crystal clear; **Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy (Ex. 20:8)**. Period."

Representative of this view are these comments from one of my correspondents: **I personally find it quite shocking, but also very illuminating, that persons like you with your knowledge and wisdom can still not see the Sabbath issue with the clarity that I think is warranted.** For such persons, sabbath-observance is automatically the test of one's obedience to God, if not of one's 'spirituality' --- or apparently as in my case --- is also a test of one's wisdom and intelligence!

For non-Sabbath-keepers there is an equal and opposite danger --- the temptation to judge those who do so as being legalists. There are many believers in the Lord Jesus Messiah who observe the weekly Sabbath with the heart-felt conviction that they are pleasing God. They will even assure you that because they keep the Sabbath, that they are happier, healthier, and yes, even richer, because they are so honouring the God of the Bible. And who are we to say that for them this is not the case?

I have no intention of judging the motives --- or intelligence! --- of those who may disagree with me on this one. I consider those who believe in Jesus as their Lord to be my brothers and sisters in Christ, whether in all good conscience before God they keep the Sabbath or not.

To my mind --- as I hope to prove from the Scriptures --- Sabbath-keeping is not a salvation issue. Perhaps we should all take a chill pill, and recall the apostle Paul's observation;

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind (Rom. 14: 4). In this matter, I am convinced the most important test of our relationship with God the Father is how we treat each other while discussing and reasonably debating the issue.

THE CREATION MODEL

So let's try to make some sense of this heated question. As Maria in the film *The Sound of Music* reminded us, **"Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start!"** Such sage advice from Hollywood of all places!?

But it's right in the very beginning, that we run into mass confusion. A lot of folks assume that the first place where the Sabbath Day is mentioned is in the Genesis account of creation --- you know the one --- where God has finished creating the heavens and the earth, and when He **rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done (Gen. 2:2)**. But as we have also often been reminded, to *ass-u-me* is to make an *ass (of) you and me!*

To read of God's resting from His creating activity as though it is the universal model for all mankind to keep the Sabbath Day holy for all time is to impose on the text what is not stated. This argument is often appealed to by well-intentioned folks and appears convincing --- but not so fast! Let's assemble all the facts.

The recurring statement at the end of each day of God's creating activity is expressly written, **And there was evening and there was morning, day one (Gen. 1: 5). And the evening and the morning were the second day (v. 8). And the evening and the morning were the third day (v. 13).** This repetitious pattern appears for the next three days as well; **And there was evening and morning the fourth, fifth and sixth days (v.19,23, 31).**

However, this formula does not appear at the end of the seventh day. The anticipated pattern, **And there was evening and morning, the seventh day,** is missing. This is not an oversight. It's deliberate;

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made (Gen. 2: 1-3). Where is the usual formulaic statement about the evening and the morning being the seventh day? It's not there!

Furthermore --- and this will come as a shock to a lot! --- there is *no mention of the words "Sabbath Day"* in the Genesis account either. In fact, we may even state this in stronger terms; **the word *shabbat* is not used!** We read of **the seventh day**, but **not** of the sabbath day! So let's not add to the text. In fact, the word "Sabbath" does not appear until we get to **Exodus 16:23**, and there is a good reason for this which we will arrive at in good time.

The verb "rested" or "ceased" is used, but it is **not** used for mankind resting, but of God Himself resting. This seventh day is **God's** rest. ¹

The Jewish community recognizes that the Sabbath ordinance was not mandated for all humanity, nor is it so stated here in the beginning in Genesis either. Jewish rabbinical commentary verifies this. *Genesis Rabbah* for example, reads that the seventh day of creation was *God's* sabbath, but not humanity's.

Why did God Himself cease or rest from his creative works? Certainly not because He was exhausted and tired like we get at the end of a big day or busy week! No. The idea is that God Himself took great pleasure and huge satisfaction in the perfection of His work(s); **On the seventh day He rested and was refreshed** is a statement emphasizing God's enjoyment of His completed creation (**Ex. 31:17**).

No doubt, part of God's joyful satisfaction came from His knowledge that everything in His universe was in sync, beautifully balanced and harmonious in all its parts. From the most distant galaxy and star to the minutest living cell and right down to the atom, everything sang in perfect unison. We are told that after the creation of mankind (the pinnacle of His physical creation), that God saw it all as **very good (Gen. 1:31)**.

That [seventh] day stands out in Scripture as the *one* day when everything was in right relationship to God. The world sparkled with the freshness of a tropical morning. Adam and Eve held open fellowship with their Maker. Sin and its resulting curse were still unknown. ²

The fact that the seventh day is not bounded by an evening and a morning shows this restful, peaceful state was open-ended, meant to indefinitely continue. Just how long this harmonious universal goodness lasted, we are not told. Surely it lasted longer than the first perfect seventh day of twenty-four hours? But it is fair to assume that God wanted this state of permanent "rest" to continue *ad infinitum*, with all His creation in perfect communion and harmony. The conditions of that perfect seventh day were not meant to end! (Is this not the perfect environment all of us in these days of pollution, degradation, human suffering and trouble yearn for?)

¹ The Greek LXX correctly captures this distinction in the original Hebrew by not calling God's resting "the Sabbath". When we get to **Exodus 16:23** for the first time we find the two words used together, "the Sabbath rest", and that is another context altogether!

² Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Glendale, USA. 2003, p 23-24.

No wonder the Lord God **blessed and sanctified** this perfect seventh day. That is, God called this state, this condition, sacred. He called it holy, and because it was **very good ... He rested** being satisfied... (Gen. 2:3). It was indeed a day totally different to all the previous six days of unfinished business. And it's been often pointed out by Bible scholars for generations, that the first full day of Adam & Eve's consciousness was a day when they entered into and enjoyed God's rest. Their first full day was God's seventh day of rest and delight!

The tragedy is that Adam's rebellion and Eve's sin interrupted big-time this perfect state of affairs. Women would experience multiplied labour in childbirth, and men would know frustrating days of futile toil. Raising families and enjoying fulfilling work were intended to bring huge satisfaction to men and women. It was not the childbirth nor the good work that were the problem. But now there was a curse and the harmony was smashed. No more rest!

Now here is something well worth pondering. At this tragic moment, God's own rest was abruptly shattered. Notice the Scripture says that God Himself began to work again, **Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them (Gen. 3:21)**. Whoa! Don't rush over this. God Himself **made** clothes of skin for Adam & Eve. God Himself **clothed** the guilty and naked couple. God is working again!

This event was the beginning of a work which would continue throughout the centuries until its significance would become fully revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ. The death of that first lamb, while not mentioned as such in the Genesis account, was the acorn of the great truth which, through the following centuries, would grow into the great, spreading oak of righteousness by faith. It pointed forward to Christ's substitutionary life and death for lost mankind. Naked Adam and Eve were clothed with robes made from the skin of the slain lamb ...³

Thousands of years later Paul would put this same truth in these words: **He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5: 21)**. All of you who were baptized into Christ have **clothed yourselves with Christ (Gal. 3:27)**.

The day man's rebellion interrupted God's rest and enjoyment of his finished creation, was the very day God again started to work! Evidently He slew an innocent animal --- in all probability a lamb. Evidently He tailored the tanned hide(s) to snugly fit the different physiques of the man and the woman. Then, God drove out mankind from his Edenic rest. Nor will God Himself rest again from His saving work until His creation is restored to its intended rest by His own gracious redemptive work in Christ Jesus. His grace will prove greater than sin. His rest will prove more lasting than man's sinful turmoil. We will enter His everlasting rest!

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

When God Himself sanctified and blessed that first seventh day, it was His rest and His enjoyment that is emphasised. No universal sabbath-keeping is mandated here! There is no mention of the weekly Sabbath, or other special sabbaths here. They will be later introduced in the Torah. The text in Genesis will not support the weekly Sabbath institution *per se*.

Some will of course, suggest that Sabbath-keeping does find its origin in God's own creation example in such passages as **Exodus 20 verses 8-11**;

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant, or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

There is a wonderful truth here, of course, but we are jumping the gun.
(To be continued)

³ Dale Ratzlaff, *Ibid*, p 26

