

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Part 2)

The Abrahamic Covenant

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When discussing the sad effects of Adam & Eve's sinful rebellion, most of us tend to think anthropocentrically. That is, we concentrate on how mankind and his environment in this world were irrevocably affected on that dreadful day: Mankind would die, women would have serious gynaecological issues, men would experience futility and frustration in their work, nature itself would be out of whack, and so forth.

However, very few of us consider the sad effects of "the Fall" theocentrically. In part 1 of this series, we pointed out that God Himself was deeply affected by Adam's sin. How long He was able to enjoy His rest as He pondered His **very good** handiwork after the heavens and the earth and all their works were completed, we do not know.

What we do know is that God's rest was shattered sometime shortly afterwards --- and slipping back to anthropomorphic language for a moment! --- God picked up his tools again. God **made** coats of skins and clothed the guilty pair. God started to work again. And it was work designed to bring us back into His rest. God has been tirelessly engaged in the work of redemption ever since. His love is now working hard for the restoration of the world! He has promised to again bring men and nature back into His rest. ¹

THE EVERLASTING COVENANT

As we move along systematically, we come to the next part of the story relevant to our topic --- God's **everlasting covenant** with Abraham (**Gen. 17:7**). We will not appreciate nor understand the part the Sabbath played in God's work of redemption unless we first understand the covenant God made with Abraham.

To some this might appear to be an *ad hoc* statement, but let's for the moment recall that the Bible teaches that Abraham is not only the "father of the Jew according to the flesh", but also the "father of the faithful" who are saved by following his exemplary faith. Abraham is significant for Jew and Gentile, for Israel and for the nations. He is the prototype of the righteousness that saves in all ages, the blueprint for salvation. So, how did God work to bring Abraham and his descendants ---according to the flesh and the spirit --- back into the fellowship of His eternal rest?

THE GOD OF GLORY APPEARS TO ABRAHAM

In his retelling of Israel's redemptive history, the martyr Stephen made the statement, **The God of Glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia ... (Acts 7:2)**. There is no doubt that God had spoken to some significant figures before we get to Abraham. But God's glorious appearing to Abraham in Mesopotamia, the land of idolatry, is the *first recorded* Personal Divine manifestation since Adam was banished from Eden! Read this again: *The God of Glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia.*

We do not read of God appearing in glory to Enoch or Noah, even though they were men of significant faith and righteousness before the LORD. But when **the God of Glory** appeared to Abraham in some kind of awesome and splendid manifestation --- while Abraham was an uncircumcised Gentile before he became the father of Israel--- this was all by God's initiative and grace! God appeared to Abraham in glory *before* Abraham believed in the one true God of Creation. What is this but pure unmerited favour to an idolatrous sinner in the land of Mesopotamia?

We do know that falteringly, imperfectly, Abraham believed God and obeyed His call to leave his homeland. Abraham did not know where God was taking him. Even though by the time Isaac came along, he was 100 years

¹ Remember Jesus' words, **My Father is working until now, and I am working (John 5:17)?** See also e.g. **Matt. 19:28; Acts 3:19.**

old and Sarah well past child-bearing age at 90, Abraham learned the lesson along the way that God does not need any help in performing His promises! When God told Abraham that his offspring would be numberless as the stars in the sky and the sand on the beach, **Then he believed in the LORD and He reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15: 4-6)**. Abraham was made righteous by the glory of God's grace apart from works!

Now the interesting thing, is that after declaring Abraham righteous because of his faith, God solemnly again promises that He will give Abraham the land of promise (**Gen. 15: 7**). But Abraham dares to ask God a seemingly impertinent question, **"Oh LORD God, how may I know that I shall possess it?"** And God graciously meets Abraham at this point ...

GOD CUTS AN EVERLASTING COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

God asked Abraham to prepare an offering of a three year old heifer, a three year old female goat, a three year old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon. Then follows this rather weird-sounding incident. Abraham cut the larger animals laying them opposite each other. But birds of prey swooped in trying to steal the fresh meat.

As the day wore on, Abraham had his hands full trying to keep those pesky carrions away. Then, just as the sun was going down, God prophesied to Abraham about the certainty of the coming bondage his descendants will undergo in Egypt, and of the coming exodus from Egyptian oppression, and how Abraham himself will die of a ripe old age, but with numberless progeny (**Gen. 15: 13-16**).

Then Abraham fell into a deep sleep. The Bible says, **Behold, a terror of great darkness fell on Abraham (Gen. 15: 12)**. An eerie scene unfolds while Abraham sleeps. **A smoking oven and a flaming torch appear and pass between the pieces of sacrificial meat. And on that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram ... (v. 17-18)**.

Please note. During the cutting of this covenantal agreement, Abraham was asleep. He did nothing! But when he awoke, Abraham found himself eternally joined in a binding agreement with none other than the Eternal God forever! Imagine that, an eternal covenant of grace all guaranteed by nothing less than the sworn oath and action of God.

Yes, of course Abraham must continue to **walk blamelessly before God Almighty (Gen. 17: 1-2)**. His part was to continue to trust God. And this would soon enough involve, amongst other trials of faith, offering up Isaac, the child of promise. But in that severest of trials (it seems Abraham did not even tell Sarah of God's intentions!) because he believed God could even raise Isaac up from the dead, God knew He had found in Abraham a man who would trust and obey no matter what (**Gen. 22:12; Heb. 11:19**).

Isaac was spared at the point of Abraham's raised knife. Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thorns of a thicket. God Himself provided the lamb for the sacrifice. Abraham was learning more about grace and God's faithfulness to His covenant promise.

THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT

Once the covenant had been cut, Abraham was told that he must circumcise every male in his household if they also wanted to share in the blessings of the covenant. Circumcision was directed as the sign of the everlasting Abrahamic covenant (**Gen. 17:9-11**). The male descendant of Abraham who was not circumcised **shall be cut off from his people and has broken My covenant (Gen. 17: 14)**.²

But, for the moment, let's get this fact clear: the sign of circumcision was given **after God had already declared Abraham righteous by faith (Gen. 17:9-11)**! So, Abraham was not saved because he kept any ritualistic laws or statutes. He was saved by God's grace through faith in God's word of promise;

For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law [i.e. Torah-observant Jews] but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham [the context means he is referring to Gentiles who have grown up not

² We shall develop how the Bible treats Abraham's **everlasting covenant** and its sign of circumcision under the New Covenant, in a future article.

keeping Torah but who believe in God's salvation promise through Christ], **who is the father of us all (Rom. 4: 16).**

Jew and Gentile are saved the same way: By God's gracious provision in Messiah Jesus, apart from ritualistic or nationalistic keeping of the Law of Moses. The apostle Paul will sum this truth up by the simple declaration;

Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also --- if indeed God is one --- and He will justify the circumcision by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (Rom. 3: 28-30).

And how about these verses as a clincher, **Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are sons of Abraham ... For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise (Gal. 3:7, 18)?**

By now, you will be wondering where all this is going? What has any of this to do with the question of whether we should keep the Sabbath? Well, some have quoted **Genesis 26:4-5** as showing that Abraham kept the Sabbath as part of his covenant with God. Those verses addressed to Isaac by God say, **"I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham, and I will greatly multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed; because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws."**

But to suggest that part of Abraham's covenantal agreement included Sabbath-keeping because Abraham kept all of God's **commandments, statutes and laws**, is to read into the text what is nowhere stated. As we pointed out in the first article, the noun 'Sabbath', or the plural, 'Sabbaths', or any mention of the weekly Sabbath-observance does not occur in Genesis, nor indeed until we come to the giving of the Mosaic Law after the exodus.³

We have said that **Exodus 16:23** is the first mention of **a sabbath observance, a holy sabbath to the LORD** in Scripture. Let's not jump the gun --- as we have already said!

Furthermore, the plural word **"laws"** only appears once in Genesis, and that's right here in **Genesis 26:5**. We must ask, What **"charge", "commandments", "statutes",** and **"laws"**, did Abraham keep?

Let Scripture answer. **Genesis 22: 15-18** gives the identical promise about God saying, **"By Myself I have sworn because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of your enemies. And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."** Carefully compare the underlined portions from both Scriptures ...

It is **"because you have done this thing"** --- the offering up of Isaac, not the keeping of a Sabbath --- that caused God to swear by an oath the promised blessing.

It is clear that Abraham's obedience was an obedience of faith to the *specific commands* of God given to him and not to any Ten Commandment law. There are numerous New Testament texts which show that Abraham's promises and blessings were *not* based on law or law keeping but only on faith. Therefore to argue that Genesis 26: 4,5 implies that Abraham kept the Sabbath is in direct contradiction to the clear statements of Scripture.⁴

³ This is not to suggest early mankind did not know about the weekly cycle. See **Genesis 7:4; 8:10, 12; 29: 27-28; 50:10**. Genesis teaches that God set the heavenly luminaries in place to **separate the day from the night**, and to be **for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years (Gen.1:14)**.

⁴ Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Glendale, Arizona, 2003, p37.

Abraham was not saved by law-keeping. He was declared righteous because he believed God's personal promises made to him;

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4: 13).

It is surely obvious then, that the nature of Abraham's obedience was centred on the promises that God made to him personally. Abraham was declared righteous by God because he trusted God's personal word to him.

Putting this rather starkly and bluntly then: *Abraham was not God's friend because he kept the Sabbath!* Any argument over this ought to become silent before this statement made by Moses long after Abraham;

The LORD did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all alive here to this day (Deut. 5:3).⁵ We know that Moses and the Law came about four hundred years after Abraham.⁶ Which is to state the obvious fact: the covenant based on faith in grace alone came in history hundreds of years before the covenant of Law under Moses at Sinai.

When Abraham believed the word of God to leave Ur in Mesopotamia and to go to a country he had never seen, he was proving his complete abandonment to God's promise(s). And God counted this faith as righteousness. As a result of his faith-obedience, God "cut a covenant" with Abraham. God promised that He would make Abraham a great nation, bless those who blessed him, give him a great name, give him a promised land, and all who cursed him would be cursed. This covenant is called **an everlasting covenant, established between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you ... for an everlasting possession ... (Gen. 17: 1-8).**

WHO WAS THE FIRST GOSPEL PREACHER IN THE BIBLE?

Let's pause and ask a question. Who was the first Gospel preacher in the Bible? And who was the first audience who heard the Gospel of salvation by faith?

When I have asked that question, the usual answer is the apostle Peter and those who heard him on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2**. Didn't Jesus give to Peter **the keys of the Kingdom?** Surely Peter, leader of the apostolic band, was the first to turn the Gospel key opening the door for Jews and Gentiles to be saved in this so-called Christian or Church Dispensation? Didn't Peter preach that oft-quoted Gospel text,

Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children [Jews], and for all who are afar off [Gentile nations], as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself (Acts 2:38-39)?

Other astute folks have answered that Jesus was the first Gospel preacher in the Bible. After all, we are clearly told that our **so great a salvation ... was first spoken through the Lord [Jesus]**. Then the message of salvation **was confirmed to us by those who heard [him ... which is to say the apostles] (Heb. 2:3-4)**. Surely our Lord Jesus himself was the first Gospel preacher?

But we must let the Bible answer our question; **And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer (Gal. 3: 8-9)**. God Himself was the first Gospel preacher, and He preached the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith to Abraham long before there

⁵ The objection that **our fathers** in this verse is not a reference to the patriarchal fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that it somehow means the parents of the living Israelites at Sinai who perished in the desert is weak. See for instance, **Ex. 3:15; 4:5; Deut. 1:8; 6:10; 9:5; 30:20** as some examples where **our fathers** is the term used to refer to the patriarchal fathers --- Abraham, Isaac & Jacob..

⁶ **Acts 7:6**

was any old covenant law laid down by Moses and --- dare we say it? --- long before Jesus the Messiah himself appeared with his renewed call to repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom! ⁷

In fact, the apostle goes on in the next verses to warn that if anybody would try to keep the works of law, they are already **under a curse (Gal. 3:10)**! We will be saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, or we will not know the Gospel of God at all. This is the very essence of the 'eternal covenant' given to Abraham. After all, even Jesus stated that **Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad (John 8: 56)**. Abraham believed God's prophetic promise about the coming Messiah, and God counted that trust as righteousness.

This much ought to be clear: Abraham was not declared righteous because he kept the Sabbath! Abraham was not God's friend because he obeyed the Mosaic Law! The Bible is clear in both the Old and the New Testaments; Abraham was counted righteous by God --- in popular parlance he was 'saved' --- **because he believed God (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4: 3)**.

Now unless you misunderstand this, we are not saying that Jews who kept their Mosaic Torah were not God's people. No indeed. Indeed, God forbid! Every single Jew who trusted in the God of the Old covenant and who looked to Him to fulfill His covenant on their behalf was declared righteous and enjoyed everything promised. It was all by God's grace and has always been so.

We have now come to one of the critical junctures in our study. What part did the Sinaitic Covenant play in God's redemptive scheme? And in particular, was the Fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath holy, a part of God's *moral law* for all time, or was it only a part in *the ceremonial and ritual law*?

(To be continued)

⁷ The statement that **the Scripture ... preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham...** is a circumlocution meaning that God Himself proclaimed to Abraham the saving gospel. What Scripture says is nothing less than the word of God Himself, for the Scriptures are the living breath of God, His in-spirited truth.