

The Words of a Covenant

Part 5 - The Fourth Commandment

April 19, 1998

Exodus 20:8-11

8 "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 the Sabbath of the Lord your God. 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.¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. NKJV

• **Review and Introduction**

We come now to the final command in the first table of the Law where God commands the observance of the Sabbath. It is rather curious that the single commandment in the decalogue providing for a rest for God's people is the single commandment which the people of God have given the least rest. There have been decades of controversy, some well intentioned and others not.

• **The Sabbath In The Old Testament**

- The word Sabbath simply means rest. Given that the first occurrence of the term Sabbath is in Exodus 16, it would appear that the Lord had not required the observance of the seventh day rest until this point. However, it is clear that the concept of the rest was instituted at the creation apparently as an example of the commandment that would follow centuries later. The first instruction on man's observance of the was in relation to the collection and preparation of manna. The Lord provided twice as much manna on Friday so that the people could collect enough for both Friday and Saturday. When normally the manna would decay and not be fit for eating after one day, on the Sabbath, the manna remained in tact.
- Later in Exodus 31:12-18 the instruction and laws regarding the Sabbath are expanded. Another basis for the command is given in that the Lord tells them that they are to remember that it is He who sanctifies them and that this kind of rest would be an everlasting sign of the covenant between God and His people. It was given that profaning the Sabbath was a capital offense.
- In the first giving of the command in Exodus 20, we see that the basis for the command is the example provided for by the Lord Himself at creation. Later in Deut. 5:12-14 when the command is given again, we see another aspect to the Sabbath where the basis of the command is the redemption provided by the Lord in bringing the people of Israel out of bondage of Egypt.
- The Lord also instituted other Sabbaths other than the weekly one. Most of the festivals had additional Sabbath days associated with them but all of them were called holy convocations. Therefore, there were gatherings on the Sabbath and we see that the Law was read, taught and the people spent time together and tithes were brought to the temples. Leviticus 23.
- With the threat of death for profaning the Sabbath, it is easy to see why the observers became legalistic in their keeping of the day. However, they lost the meaning of the day in that it was meant to be a blessing for the people and a time of refreshing. But the people seeking a righteousness of their own, turned the day into a dower day of strict religious servitude. Where the gracious Lord provided them a day of rest, the people became enslaved to their own standard of righteousness. As the Lord Himself told the people, if they would give up their own righteousness and return to His then the Sabbath would be a delight. The Sabbath was to focus more on what they were allowed to do, that is rest, rather than it was about what they were restricted from doing.

• **The Sabbath in the New Testament**

- Our Lord kept the Sabbath and we see that the day was the common occasion for His teaching in the synagogue. As the people convoked, He frequently took the opportunity to teach from the Scriptures. But it is also very clear that Christ intended to correct the legalistic, Pharisaical understanding of the Sabbath. Seven times He performed miracles which were violations of the Jewish Halakah which was the legal part of the Talmud where the laws for Sabbath observance were delineated.
- Jesus also taught that the Sabbath was given as a blessing for man. (Matthew 12, Mark 2) The common practice had turned the blessing on its head and made it into something where the Sabbath was itself being served. In no way did Jesus abolish the Sabbath, but He did seek to restore the proper understanding of the day.
- It appears now in the teaching of the Apostolic era, that the Sabbath changed. Not that it changed days from the seventh to the first but rather that the Sabbath days' rest appears to have become fulfilled or even blossomed. Paul's first related teaching comes in Romans where, speaking to Gentiles, he teaches that some hold a day to be important and others hold all days to be equally important. Each person was to be convinced in his own mind without imposing his observance or lack of observance upon his brother. Paul does not mention any specific days but it would be unimaginable that the Sabbath was not in view in this instruction.
- Paul's next teaching comes in Galatians where he rebukes the Galatians for succumbing to the bondage of observing specific days and months and seasons and years. (Galatians 4:10-11) He refers to these observed things as weak and beggarly. Paul's final

instruction related to this topic is the clearest and most pointed. In Colossians 2:16-17 Paul teaches that the festivals and Sabbaths were a picture of something fuller to come. The context of the verse is the fact that because we are in Christ, we have been properly circumcised (spiritual heart circumcision) by Him, and because we have been baptized into Him we have also been raised in Him and therefore are seated in Him. Because of this new relationship of being in Christ, the old Sabbaths are now fulfilled and complete.

- We can see further evidence of this completed Sabbath in Hebrews 4:1-13. Here we are instructed that the Israelites who failed to enter the promised land failed to do so because of a lack of faith. Even though they had the Gospel proclaimed to them as to us, their lack of faith kept them from entering into God's rest—His Sabbath. The entering into the promised land was a picture of this fuller Sabbath rest promised in Christ. If entering the land later under Joshua had provided the Sabbath rest then David would not have needed to teach about another day when the people would be given rest unlike when they entered Canaan. Therefore, we who stand in Christ by faith are the ones who enter into the full Sabbath rest that both the weekly observance and the promised land pictured. This means that all days in Christ as Sabbath days.
- **The Lord's Day**
- It is very obvious that something significant changed under the post resurrection Apostolic church. We can see that the shadow command to observe the Sabbath on a particular day is no longer binding on our conscience because our observance is now the reality of being in Christ. What then are we observing when we gather on Sunday? It appears from New Testament instruction that the Holy convocation day became the first day of the week. The basis for this move is that the Lord rose from the dead on the morning of Sunday and it was this day that He first met with the disciples. The second post-resurrection time Jesus met with the disciples was a week later on the subsequent Sunday.
- There are two places where Sunday convocations are alluded to in the Scriptures. First we see an Apostolic example in Acts 20:7-11 where they gathered to celebrate communion and hear Paul teach on the Scriptures. The second occurrence is tied to an Apostolic command in 1 Cor. 16:1-4 where Paul gives instruction for them to set money aside on the first day of the week for the gift to the suffering church in Jerusalem. Paul's objective here was to avoid taking up a collection when he arrived so this setting aside must have occurred at some common gathering place. It is a reasonable deduction that this was their weekly convocation.
- The only place where the term Lord's Day is used is in Revelation 1:10 where John states that he received the Revelation on this particular day. Extrabiblical writings of even the earliest writers confirm that this first day of the week was known as the Lord's Day and was the customary day of meeting.
- Therefore, the Lord's Day should not be equated with the Sabbath. The Sabbath expanded beyond a single special day to those who through faith enter God's true rest by faith. The Lord's day is a new day of celebration commenced by the Lord on the day of His resurrection and observed by the Apostolic church.
- **Today's Physical Rest**
- What are we to say though of a day of physical rest today? We rejoice in the true rest given to us by being in Christ. We also know that the day of rest was a practical blessing of refreshing. Those who toil endlessly for gain are those whose lives do not reflect the rest of faith. However our rest is not because the fourth commandment is binding on our consciences but rather, because we are in Christ, we can rest spiritually by faith and we can enjoy the physical rest by faith.