

The Significance of the Sabbath

Merrill F. Unger

THE Sabbath is not Sunday, nor does the latter represent a mere change from the seventh day to the first day of the week. Sunday, the first day of the week, is a wholly new day instituted to commemorate the beginning of the new creation with the resurrected Christ as its Head.

The only similarity of Sunday to the Sabbath is that it perpetuates under grace the principle that, although all redeemed man's time is God's, one seventh is to be especially sacred and ought to be set aside in voluntary gratitude for the purpose of worship and for ministry for God in behalf of men's spiritual needs, and for rest and recuperation for the body, soul, and spirit.

In all other respects Sunday is in contrast to the Sabbath. Even in the matter of preserving the principle that one seventh of redeemed man's time is especially sacred to God, there is a radical difference between the two days. One is observed on the basis of gratitude and spontaneous love. The other on the basis of strict legal obligation, infringement punishable by death. One calls to devotion in worship and consecrated work, rest being a secondary benefit. The other entails rest from all work.

THE SABBATH AND CREATION

The Biblical Sabbath commemorates God's rest or cessation from His creative work of refashioning the earth (Gen. 1:1-31) for the habitation of His masterpiece--unfallen men (Gen. 2:2-3). The reason God could "rest" was because He saw that everything He had made, including man, "was very good" (Gen. 1:31). Sin had not yet entered the abode God refashioned for man nor into man's heart. Therefore, God

could and did "rest."

It was to memorialize His finished work of refashioning a chaotic and judgment-ridden earth (Gen. 1:2) that God established and sanctified the seventh day. "And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which God created and made. And God blessed the seventh day." He made and declared it especially sacred, attaching to it the memorial that He was satisfied with all that He had done in making it a suitable abode for man and that He was pleased with man whom He had created to occupy it.

God is also said to have "sanctified" the seventh day by setting it apart as a day of rest from the other six days of work, thus distinguishing it as a reminder to unfallen man that God had created him innocent and free of sin. The Creator's rest was possible because the creature He had made rested in perfect and unbroken fellowship with the Creator, undisturbed by sin. God therefore revealed and imposed the sanctity of the Sabbath upon *unfallen* man.

Soon, however, the fall occurred (Gen. 3:1-24). Man sinned and his rest in fellowship with the Creator was broken as well as God's rest in a creation unsullied by sin, which He could no longer pronounce "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Man's fall consequently made it impossible for God to impose the seventh day upon fallen man because the very thing memorialized, namely, the divine rest in a "very good" creation, had been destroyed by the entrance of sin into the human race. No longer was God's creation "very good." No longer could God rest in the old creation. He must begin to work in redemption toward a New Creation.

Hence the Sabbath revealed and imposed at the beginning upon an unfallen race vanishes from the pages of revealed truth in the long era from Adam to Moses, appearing with startling suddenness in connection with the revelation of the law from Sinai. There Sabbath observance was not only made a part of the Mosaic code (Ex. 20:8-11), but constituted its unique and dominant feature as a significant sign between the Lord and His newly chosen and *redeemed* nation Israel (Ex. 31:12-18).

Through this elect redeemed nation God had a special pur-

pose in restoring His Sabbath rest disturbed by sin. Therefore, the Sabbath was revealed anew and imposed upon a redeemed elect nation, through which the earth and man eventually would be restored to the rest the day commemorated. As the Sabbath was originally imposed upon unfallen man, now it is imposed upon a nation of redeemed men, destined to fulfill "God's purposes of restoration for the earth and the nations.

Despite the fact that God never enjoined the Sabbath upon fallen mankind, but only upon the race before it fell into sin and broke His Sabbath rest, it is apparent that fallen man from Adam to Moses attempted to observe the seventh day without divine sanction.

The seven-day week and the Sabbath are a very ancient Semitic institution, prominent in Assyrian-Babylonian civilization, antedating the time of Moses by many centuries. The so-called Pinches tablet lays restrictions upon the king on the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21st, and 28th days of the month (the 19th marking the Sabbath of weeks). However, apparently no restrictions were placed upon ordinary men, but only upon the king as divine, and the Sabbath being for replenishment.¹

The oldest calendar of the Semitic peoples, in use long before the Mosaic era, was also based upon a seven-day week, with a secondary time unit of fifty days. It consisted of seven weeks, plus one additional day, celebrated as a festival of conclusion or termination of the fifty-day period. Agricultural in nature, this reckoning of time was made up of seven pentecosts (fifties) plus two festival periods of seven days (one week) with a concluding day of supremely sacred character, 365 days in all.²

Among pagan Semites this farm calendar was of course interwoven with idolatry. From it the ancient Babylonian Sabbath (*shabattu*) was derived. When the Lord redeemed Israel out of Egypt, and gave them the Mosaic laws, He employed existing time reckonings and customs, purifying and adapting them when possible to the special revelation of His redemptive truth to His chosen people Israel. This fact appears in the historical and archaeological backgrounds underlying Israel's festal calendar (Lev. 23).

¹ Herbert C. Alleman, "The Book of Genesis," *Old Testament Commentary*, p. 175.

² Morgenstern, "Sabbath," *The Interpreter's Bible*, IV, 135-36.

THE SABBATH AND SINAI

The fourth commandment given from Sinai enjoining the holy observance of the seventh day is unique in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:8). Although this law, like all the moral laws expressed in the Ten Commandments, had been revealed and was operative upon the human race from its creation, this commandment alone had been enjoined only upon unfallen man (Gen. 2:2-3). All the other nine commandments had been operative upon unfallen man and remained unchangeably operative upon fallen man as well, since God's holy requirements of His creatures are as unchangeable as His holy character.

But the Sabbath day was different. Its original significance as a day commemorating God's rest and satisfaction in a perfect creation was nullified by the fall and man's sin. No longer was the old creation, notably man the crown and goal of that creation, "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Instead it was very bad, and God immediately began working in redemption (Gen. 3:15, 21; John 5:17) to restore the divine rest disturbed by man's sin.

As a result God could not impose the Sabbath rest upon His fallen creatures when the very thing commemorated by it had been obliterated by sin. He now began working in redemption, no longer resting in a perfect creation. Only as He could choose and redeem a people through whom He could restore the earth and man from the curse of sin that had broken His rest, could He impose Sabbath observance that would be consonant with the true meaning of the day.

The fourth commandment from Sinai enjoining Sabbath observance is not only unique in the Decalogue. This commandment, it must also be emphasized, was never imposed upon any nation or people except Israel. All the other commandments express eternal and omnitemporal moral principles obligatory upon all of God's creatures from the creation of man--before the fall as well as after the fall.

These abiding laws of God were not altered because man changed when he fell. God never changed, nor did His holy requirements of *all* His creatures. Nor are these eternally abiding principles to be abrogated or set aside in any age or dispensation. They are simply adapted and applied to the char-

acter of that particular age or dispensation.

All the moral principles thundered as stern law from Sinai find expression under grace in the New Testament epistles with the sole exception of one. Nowhere is Sabbath keeping ever imposed upon a Christian in this age of grace. Indeed, the very opposite is true.

Keeping new moons and sabbaths, the unique and dominant feature of the Mosaic covenant of legalism--a pedagogue conduct to Christ--is declared to be completely at variance with the gospel of grace (Col. 2:16-17; Gal. 4:9-10; Heb. 4:4) now that Christ has come and given us His wonderful salvation.

Although the Sabbath was never divinely imposed upon fallen man, the custom from Adam to Moses of setting apart the seventh day, like divinely ordained as well as nondivinely ordained customs in general, degenerated as the fallen race strayed from God and became engulfed in idolatry.

Instead of a day of rest reminiscent of the Creator's satisfaction in His fashioning of the earth for His unfallen creature, man, under the deterioration of creature worship the seventh day came to be looked upon as a day of ill-omen controlled by evil spirits in which labor would not only not succeed but stir up evil powers to work mischief on such activity.

In giving the Fourth Commandment to Israel, the Lord accordingly took a well-known day, which paganism looked upon with ill-omen and popular superstition, thereby desecrating it, and He sanctified it by restoring it to its original significance of commemorating the Creator's rest in a perfect creation, enjoining it upon His people recently redeemed out of Egypt (Ex. 20:1-2). Moreover, the Lord invested the day with suitable meaning as a sign that Israel was the Lord's blood-bought people, His own elect nation separated by redemption from the surrounding pagan nations and joined to the Lord, their Redeemer (I Cor. 10:2). Through this chosen delivered nation He would restore the earth and mankind, so that His divine rest, broken by man's fall, would be restored by redemption.

What the Lord never enjoined upon fallen man, nor upon the nations, at Sinai He imposed upon His one nation. He did

this because this nation was chosen to be an example of His redemptive power to all other nations sunk in idolatry, and its Sabbath was to be a badge that God's rest would eventually be restored through this people.

As circumcision had been given as a token or badge of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:9-13), so Sabbath observance was instituted as a sign and symbol of the Mosaic covenant to Israel (Ex. 31 :13). This covenant marked Israel as a separated people through whom Messiah would come and God's rest would be restored through salvation brought to the nations and the earth.

Even in the latest period of the Jewish nation before its destruction in A.D. 70, Sabbath keeping was still regarded as the peculiar stamp of the Jew. Juvenal (c. A.D. 55-135), a Roman poet, notes this particularly in his famous *Satires* and the fact was well known and recognized in the ancient world.³

Moreover, since Sabbath observance was more than merely keeping a day, but actually a sign between the Lord and His chosen nation that He has established with them a perpetual covenant, profanation of the day was accordingly tantamount to violating the covenant.

For this reason Sabbath keeping was rigidly enforced. Infraction of it meant death (Ex. 31:14-15; Num. 15:32-35). Breaking the sign of the covenant, the offender broke the covenant itself. By this act he in essence denied that God's people Israel were different from the pagan nations. He thus violated the principle of separation. The penalty was his separation from God's people.

THE SABBATH AND PROPHETIC CONSUMMATION

The Sabbath was not only enjoined solely upon the nation Israel, never upon any other people since the fall, either the nations or the church or God. It was also enjoined as a reminder that God's creation rest would be restored through that nation. Israel's Sabbath had accordingly a double role, retrospective and prospective.

Retrospectively the Sabbath looked back and memorialized God's creation rest undisturbed by sin, when He finished the

³ VI, 159; XXII, 18-20.

earth for the habitation of unfallen man (Gen. 2:2-3). Prospectively it pointed ahead to Israel's future as a Messianic' nation through which God's creation rest would be restored as a result of Christ's redeeming work received by that nation and mediated by it to all the nations of the earth in the future kingdom age (Isa. 11:10-16; 60:1-22; Acts 1:6; Rom. 11:26-36).

The Sabbath is now in abeyance because of Israel's unbelief and violation of it, occasioning her world-wide dispersion and long centuries of chastisement (Hos. 2:11). Upon the completion of God's *ad interim* purpose in the church, the Sabbath will be reinstated in the tribulation (Matt. 24 :20) and in the kingdom over Israel set up at Christ's return in glory (Rev. 19:11-20:8). Not until Israel's spiritual restoration will the nation realize the true meaning of its Sabbath (Isa. 66:23; Ezek. 46:1; cp. Deut. 30:8).

As a sign of a "perpetual covenant" between the Lord and the Israelite nation, the Sabbath points to the great consummation of God's purpose for the earth. This plan centers in restored Israel in ministry to the nations of the earth. Israel will be in the midst of the nations, and Christ will be in the midst of Israel, ruling "till he hath put all enemies under his feet" and delivers up "the kingdom to God, even the Father . . . that God may be all in all" (I Cor. 15:24-28).

At that grand finale God's creation rest will be restored through redemption. This redemption brought to mankind and the earth, so long cursed by sin, will be realized through His elect redeemed nation and the Redeemer it produced. Meanwhile the Sabbath imposed upon that nation is a sign and symbol to all the people of the earth that that nation was set apart from all others for this high and holy calling.

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3909 Swiss Ave.
Dallas, TX 75204
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Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu