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A Bible Study

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The Sabbath Question

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy." Exodus 20:8

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Traveling recently along I-40 east of Knoxville we were struck by a large billboard declaring,

"Sunday worship = the Mark of the Beast

Saturday worship = the True Sabbath."

Throughout Church history this has been a hotly debated question: Is the Sabbath Saturday? Or is it Sunday? Should we go to church on the Sabbath? Should we keep the Sabbath as a holy day? Or should we not worry about the Sabbath day?

Some have attempted to answer this question by declaring Sun day to be the "Christian Sabbath." But when did God change the Sabbath from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week? Or did He change it?

And exactly who "Christianized" the Sabbath? Certainly not God! The Sabbath was given to the nation Israel as a special possession. Exodus 31:17 is clear concerning the Sabbath: *"It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever."*

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul declares:

"Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days:

"Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ (Col. 2:16, 17).

"Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.

"I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain" (Gal. 4:10,11).

"One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5).

How can you "esteem every day alike" if you are to obey Exodus 20:8? *You can't!* So you need an explanation about why one passage says to keep the Sabbath and another says you don't have to keep it.

First you have to recognize that the Bible really does contain both sets of instructions. Attempts to explain away these passages simply do no justice to the plain reading- not to mention honest handling of God's Word.

The answer to the Sabbath Question is once again a dispensational one. To use the Bible but fail to "*rightly divide the Word of Truth*" (II Tim. 2:15) is to court confusion and cloud the wonderful truth contained in the doctrine of the Sabbath.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

In Exodus 20 the importance of the Sabbath is clearly set forth for the nation of Israel. There is no question about its origin or exactly what it was when God gave it. Through the hand of Moses God said to Israel:

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

"Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

"But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

"For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it" (Ex.20:8-11).

There was no question about the requirement for Israel to observe the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath. They were to "*keep it holy*"-keep it set apart for the purpose for which it was created-and "*not do any work*" in it. In fact, the Sabbath day was very far reaching in the life of Israel in that regard. Consider these instructions:

"And Moses gathered all the congregation of the children of Israel together, and said unto them, These are the words which the LORD hath commanded, that ye should do them.

"Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest to the LORD: WHOSOEVER DOETH WORK THEREIN SHALL BE PUT TO DEATH" (Ex. 35:1, 2).

Obviously this is a serious matter! This is not simply "taking a day off" once a week. Rather they were to take the day to rest and remember the reason for it *or* suffer the consequences of capital punishment. No laughing matter, indeed! (cf., Num. 15:32-36). Exodus 35:3 goes on to say,

"Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day."

In other words, if you are observing the Sabbath you cannot go home and cook dinner for the family! Doing "*no work*" would include cooking dinner--no small task! Obviously there is quite a difference between what the Bible actually says about these things and what many of us have grown into doing by virtue of tradition.

Also, note that the reason the Sabbath is so significant to the nation Israel is explained quite clearly in Exodus 31:12-17.

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,

"Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: FOR IT IS A SIGN BETWEEN ME AND YOU THROUGHOUT YOUR GENERATIONS; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you.

"Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

"Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.

"Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant.

"IT IS A SIGN BETWEEN ME AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL FOR EVER: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed."

Thus the promise of God is that the Sabbath will always-"forever"-be a sign of the special relationship between Jehovah and the nation Israel.

And it is not only in the law but in the prophets too that God makes this pledge to the nation Israel. Speaking to that favored nation, Jehovah says,

"I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them;

"And hallow my sabbaths; and THEY SHALL BE A SIGN BETWEEN ME AND YOU, THAT YE MAY KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD" (Ezek. 20:19, 20).

The same is true in the Psalms. For example, in the fourth Book of the Psalms, Psalm 92 is titled, "*A Song For the Sabbath Day.*" Thus all three divisions of the Jewish Bible- "*the law, the prophets and the psalms*" (Luke 24:45) -bear united testimony to God's pledge contained in the Sabbath-- "*It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever.*"

This is why when we come to the ministry of the Apostle Paul we are told that Sabbath observances are no longer in order. God has *changed the program*. We are now in the dispensation of grace and the nation Israel has been temporarily set aside in order for God to form the Body of Christ (Rom. 11:11-15, Eph. 2:11-16, Gal. 3:28).

That this is a dispensational issue is not surprising to anyone familiar with the history of Sabbath observance in the Bible. Nehemiah 9 recounts God leading Israel out of Egypt by telling us:

"Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments:

"And MADEST KNOWN UNTO THEM THY HOLY SABBATH, and commandedst them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant (Neh. 9:13, 14).

Notice that God began to educate the nation Israel in the doctrine of the Sabbath when He gave them the law through Moses. Prior to that, no one ever observed the Sabbath. Why? That brings us to

THE MEANING OF THE SABBATH

Exodus 20:11 is clear that the Fourth Commandment rests on the fact that *"in six days the Lord made heaven and, earth...and rested the seventh day."*

The Sabbath thus had its foundation in Genesis 2:1-3, where we are told:

"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 from all his work which he had 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."

The Sabbath day of rest symbolized God's "rest" when He "finished" His work of creation. Does this mean that God had to "mop His brow," as it were, and sit down to rest because He was tired? Hardly!

This "rest" is more that of an artist or sculptor who finishes his masterpiece and then sits back, the job done, and enjoys his work, exclaiming, "It's *finished!*" God's "rest" is the *entering into and enjoyment of a finished and perfect work.*

The doctrinal significance of all this is set forth in bold relief in Psalm 132. This Psalm looks to the future and has in view the ultimate end of God's purpose in creation. Looking to the kingdom reign of Jesus Christ over the earth in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, we hear the prayer:

“ARISE, O LORD, INTO THY REST; thou, and the ark of thy strength.”

"For the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation.

"THIS IS MY REST FOR EVER: HERE WILL I DWELL; for I have desired it"
(Psa.132:8, 13, 14).

Notice that God's "rest" is identified as the accomplishment of His purpose in creation to make a place where He "will dwell." Isaiah 40:21 says He created heaven and earth "as a tent to dwell in" and Revelation 21:3 demonstrates that He will indeed ultimately "dwell with men."

This is what God was doing when He rested on the seventh day. He was remembering and rejoicing in all He did in creation and that now He could say, "*My dwelling is ready!*"

God "*blessed*" and "*santified*" this seventh day so that it became a Sabbath for man. To *bless* is to speak well of it; to *sanctify* it is to set it apart for the purpose for which it was created. In other words, God was giving to man an opportunity to enter into His rest, to have the same appreciation He had for His plan and presence in creation-and thus to enter into the enjoyment of His purpose and person.

But the first man did not enter into the rest of God. Rather he violated God's trust and became a friend of Satan, the enemy of God. Thus he, and the whole of humanity with him, plunged into that which is the very antithesis of the Sabbath of the Lord-the labor and toil, the guilt and unrest of sin.

Yet God had a plan to redeem and restore not only man but His whole creation. His purpose in the *earth* focused on restoring His headship over the earth through the instrumentality of a kingdom which He ultimately vested in the nation Israel.

As He formed the nation Israel He declared His purpose for them: "*ye shall be unto me a, kingdom of priests, and an holy nation*" (Ex. 19:6. cf. Isa. 60:1-3; 61 :4-6).

And this is the point of the Fourth Commandment: "*Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.*" This is not an instruction simply to remember to take a day off! They were to take one day each week and *remember God's purpose for creation and Israpl's role in accomplishing it.*

With an understanding of God's purpose for the Sabbath--that it was the embodiment of His purpose in the earth- we can understand why it belongs to the nation Israel-God's vehicle to accomplish that purpose in the earth-and hence why it was not revealed until that special nation was formed.

This also provides us "the full assurance of understanding" why the Sabbath is not only *unnecessary* but actually *inappropriate* for the Body of Christ--God's vehicle to accomplish His purpose in the *heavenly places*. God has presently set the nation Israel aside so that He can form the Body of Christ as His agency to reconcile the government in the heavenly places unto Himself.

As members of the Body of Christ-a *heavenly* people, blessed with all *spiritual* blessings, meant to execute God's *heavenly* purpose--the Sabbath Day is not of any significance to us. We are to *set our affection on things above* (Col.3:1, 2). We do not need a Sabbath to remind us of who we are in Christ. We just need to *rest in who God has made us in His Son*, as revealed in Paul's epistles
