

# The Sabbath as a Sign

I heard a well-meaning Protestant minister refer to *Acts 20:7* as a proof that the early church met on the first day of the week (Sunday), as opposed to the seventh day (Sabbath).

## What was the Custom of the Early Church?

If you do a word search on “sabbath” in the book of Acts you will find many references like this:

### Acts 13

<sup>42</sup> And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath.

There are many references to the sabbath in Acts, but similar verses about the first day are lacking. Let's take a closer look at that verse in Acts:

### Acts 20

<sup>7</sup> And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.

Since they reckoned days from the evening (after sunset, see *Genesis 1:5*, etc.), and not by midnight as we do, the “first day of the week” would start on Saturday night sometime after 6:00 PM, by our reckoning. This would make sense with Paul’s late-night speech. So, “upon the first day of the week” or Saturday night after sunset, they “came together to break bread” and “Paul preached...until midnight.”

He was “ready to depart on the morrow” which would be our daytime Sunday. He devoted that day to traveling, so there was nothing particularly sacred about it (if it is thought that the Sabbath rest was transferred to Sunday).

The usual two verses used to prove Sunday observance are the Resurrection (first day, *John 20:1*) and the day of Pentecost

(first day, *Acts 2:1*).

But these were simply anti-typical fulfillments of two Old Testament feasts (of which there were 7 major ones):

- the Firstfruit offering, and
- the Feast of Weeks.

God gave the spiritual reality that the symbol was pointing to. Those two celebrations happened to be on the first day of the week that year, but this did not thereby sanctify that day as a holy day thereafter. We know this because Christ's death on Friday (a fulfillment of another feast day, the Passover) did not thereby sanctify Friday as a holy day.

Also, the testimony of the early church documents (from the "church fathers"), which I will not quote here, would show that there was not a clear move to replace Sabbath with Sunday until around the third century. The idea that Sunday was instantly the new day for Christians to replace the Sabbath, is just a tradition...but traditions are not easily dispensed with.

## **Was the Sabbath a "shadow"?**

But what about these verses?

### **Colossians 2**

<sup>16</sup> 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:

<sup>17</sup> Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

Here there is reference to "sabbath days" as being a "shadow of things to come." But the Ten Commandment Law of God was never a shadow. We must not confuse it with the ceremonial laws of the Old Covenant:

### **Hebrews 8**

<sup>4</sup> For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law:

<sup>5</sup> Who serve unto the example and *shadow* of heavenly

things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, said he, that you make all things according to the pattern shown to you in the mount.

There were ceremonial sabbaths associated with the Old Testament sanctuary service. That whole sanctuary service, with its offerings, sacrifices, festivals, and sabbaths, was a shadow of the true heavenly temple and service, and the spiritual realities, by which sin is dealt with.

But the Ten Commandments are not a “shadow,” but actually define what sin is, and reveal it:

### **Romans 7**

<sup>7</sup> I had not known sin, but by the Law: for I had not known lust, except the Law had said, “You shall not covet.”

And that better be an accurate revelation, for our salvation depends upon it. If we don't know what sin is, then how will we be saved from it? And so the Law must endure, and go along with the Gospel; the one revealing sin, the other bringing the remedy.

Consider it again. If the Law has been changed, then the definition of sin has changed, for:

### **1 John 3**

<sup>4</sup> ...sin is the transgression of the Law.

And then the Gospel would also have changed, for the Gospel is:

### **Romans 1**

<sup>16</sup> ...the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes...

But salvation is salvation from sin (*Matthew* 1:21), and the Law defines what sin is! They stand or fall together.

However *Revelation* 14 mentions an “everlasting gospel.” Since the Law and Gospel go together, therefore this everlasting Gospel must be built on an everlasting Law.

The Law is the definition of God's righteousness (as applied to man), and God's righteousness does not change:

**Psalm 119**

<sup>142</sup>Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and Your law is the truth.

So the Ten Commandment Law was not a shadow, but an eternal reality. And therefore neither was the Sabbath of that Law a shadow.

**The Law is a Whole**

The Law, although divided into 10 commandments, is a whole. It defines what love is. Love to God (the first 4 commandments) and love to man (the last six) make up the total. Therefore,

**Romans 13**

<sup>10</sup> ...love is the fulfilling of the law.

Since they are a whole, to break one precept is to break them all:

**James 2**

<sup>10</sup> For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

If one commandment can be set aside, then they all can be. This is the danger of picking and choosing with respect to the Law. This "whittling away at the Law" and setting it at naught is given as the reason for the bad condition of our world:

**Isaiah 24**

<sup>5</sup> The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the Everlasting Covenant.

We don't have to repeat the mistakes of the past. But whenever the builders reject a "stone" of truth, it eventually becomes the "chief cornerstone":

**Psalm 118**

<sup>22</sup> The stone which the builders refused is become the head

stone of the corner.

<sup>23</sup> This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

<sup>24</sup> This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

## **The Sabbath: a Day to Hear God's Voice**

There's nothing "ceremonial" about meeting with God and hearing His voice speak life. And if He appoints the day, then it does very much matter whether we keep it or not. The day itself is just a vessel in which the presence of God draws near; but God chooses His vessels, and if we discard the vessel, we also discard the treasure.

Now it is possible to have the correct vessel (the seventh day), but put some other treasure into it that is not from God or His gospel. This is what the Jews did, and we face the same danger. Therefore we must be sure that on that day, we are listening to men of God's appointment, and not those Jesus warned about:

### **John 5**

<sup>43</sup> I am come in my Father's name, and you receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him you will receive.

### **2 Timothy 4**

<sup>3</sup> For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

Clearly, to go to a meeting place on the Sabbath day, and listen to all sorts of error and false doctrine, can never be called "keeping the Sabbath," for there is nothing of God's voice in it. So the Sabbath, and the clear teaching of the truth of God for this time, go together.

## **The Law is Perfect**

The Law of the Lord is perfect, and a perfect thing needs no changing:

## **Psalm 19**

<sup>7</sup> The law of the Lord [all of it, not just 9 commandments out of 10!] is perfect, converting the soul.

## **Psalm 119**

<sup>96</sup> I have seen an end of all perfection: but Your commandment is exceeding broad.

But didn't the apostle Paul refer to a law that was put away because it was weak and unprofitable?

## **Hebrews 7**

<sup>18</sup> For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.

<sup>19</sup> For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.

The context of these passages are a comparison of the Old Testament sanctuary service with the heavenly priesthood of Christ. It is this law, that made priests from the sons of Aaron, and which ministry involved the blood of bulls and goats, that was imperfect. For the blood of bulls, and human priests, can never remove the stain of sin from the soul.

But the Ten Commandment Law, on the other hand, was perfectly suited to revealing sin, and "converting the soul." It was not imperfect, and if applied properly, in tandem with the cleansing blood of the Lamb, it brings perfection. The one reveals sin, the other cleans it away.

## **The Sabbath and the Covenants**

But, some may say, wasn't the Sabbath a sign of the Covenant between God and Israel, and so therefore doesn't apply to us Christians? Let's look at those verses:

## **Exodus 31**

<sup>13</sup> Speak also unto the *children of Israel*, saying, Verily my sabbaths you shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that you may know that I am the Lord that does sanctify you.

## **Ezekiel 20**

<sup>12</sup> Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them.

<sup>13</sup> But the *house of Israel* rebelled...

<sup>20</sup> And hallow my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God.

These texts are easily explained. After being saved out of Egypt, the nation of Israel was introduced to God's law. They made a Covenant to keep it in Horeb, not realizing the sinfulness of their own hearts. So they broke that Covenant shortly after in the worship of the golden calf, and so were brought to feel their need of forgiveness of sin. And so God offered them another Covenant:

## **Deuteronomy 29**

<sup>1</sup> These are the words of the Covenant, which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, *beside* the Covenant which he made with them in Horeb.

<sup>12</sup> That you should enter into Covenant with the Lord your God, and into his oath, which the Lord your God makes with you this day:

<sup>13</sup> That he may establish you to day for a people unto himself, and that he may be unto you a God, as he has said unto you, and as he has sworn unto your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

<sup>14</sup> Neither with you only do I make this Covenant and this oath;

<sup>15</sup> But with him that stands here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day:

## **Deuteronomy 30**

<sup>6</sup> And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your seed, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live.

<sup>11</sup> For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not hidden from you, neither is it far off.

<sup>12</sup> It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?

<sup>13</sup> Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?

<sup>14</sup> But the word is very nigh unto thee, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.

<sup>15</sup> See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil;

First of all note that this Covenant was one that had been “sworn” to “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” This marks it out as the New Covenant, or Gospel (see *Galatians* 3:8,16), by which all nations would be blessed through Christ, who came of the seed of Abraham, to bring forgiveness of sins and restoration to all men.

Also compare these verses with various verses in *Romans* and you will see this confirmed. First, the circumcision of the heart is mentioned:

### **Romans 2**

<sup>29</sup> But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

And next, the very words from *Deuteronomy* 30:11-14 are taken to apply to the gospel:

### **Romans 10**

<sup>6</sup> But the righteousness which is of faith speaks on this wise, Say not in your heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:)

<sup>7</sup> Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.)

<sup>8</sup> But what does it say? The word is near you, even in your mouth, and in your heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach;

<sup>9</sup> That if you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in your heart that God has raised him from



the dead, you shall be saved.

Now aside from the Old Covenant, which they broke, this other Covenant was available to Israel in the Old Testament, and some certainly entered into it; those are the ones mentioned in Hebrews 11 as “faithful,” for the “just shall live by faith” (*Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17*). Now notice how this New Covenant is described in the New Testament, using the words taken from *Jeremiah 31:33*:

### **Hebrews 8**

<sup>10</sup> For this is the Covenant that I will make with *the house of Israel* after those days, says the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:

This Covenant was to be made with “the house of Israel.” Are you of that house? You better be, because this is the Covenant that brings salvation, of which Christ is the Priest, and by which we are sanctified!

### **Hebrews 8**

<sup>1</sup> Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such a high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens;

<sup>2</sup> A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man.

<sup>6</sup> But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better Covenant, which was established upon better promises.

<sup>7</sup> For if that first Covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second.

<sup>8</sup> For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new Covenant with *the house of Israel* and with *the house of Judah*:

Notice again, this New Covenant would be made only with “the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” Again I ask, “do you belong to that house?”

You see, people want to think that they have the blessing

of the New Covenant, with its forgiveness of sins, and promise of heaven, so they have no problem applying these promises, which were made to “the house of Israel” to themselves.

But when it comes to the Sabbath, which they wish to avoid, they excuse themselves by saying, “It was a sign for the house of Israel, and not for Christians!” Is this consistent?

But more! This New Covenant provides “eternal redemption”:

### **Hebrews 8**

<sup>11</sup> But Christ being come a high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;

<sup>12</sup> Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.

Are you sure this only applies to the fleshly “house of Israel” from the physical lineage of Abraham? Because I’m sure you, oh Christian, are going to claim this Covenant as yours, but it is repeated twice now that it is for the “house of Israel.”

Notice also that this New Covenant brings sanctification:

### **Hebrews 10**

<sup>29</sup> ...the blood of the Covenant, with which he was sanctified...

## **The Sabbath is a Sign of Which Covenant?**

Now we have only to look again at those verses from Exodus and Ezekiel and ask, of which Covenant is the Sabbath a sign, Old or New?

It’s not hard to determine, because God specifically says in both cases that they are to keep the Sabbath so that they may know that “I am the Lord who sanctifies you.”

The Old Covenant only purifies the flesh, by washing of water, and so forth (*Hebrews* 9:13), but the New Covenant purges the conscience from dead works.

Notice again *Hebrews* 10:29, “...the blood of the Covenant, with which he was sanctified...” Only one Covenant truly sanctifies, and that is the New, the Abrahamic, the Everlasting, or what we commonly call, the Gospel.

This is the Covenant that “sanctifies,” and of which the Sabbath is a “sign,” that we may know that “I am the Lord who sanctifies you.”

The Sabbath is all about resting from our own works, and listening to the voice of God speak life to His children. Only those whose consciences have been purged from sin can truly keep the Sabbath, for God has given them rest from sin. Wherever God has given spiritual rest, the Sabbath stands as a sign:

#### **Hebrews 4**

<sup>9</sup> There remains therefore a rest [margin: a sabbath] to the people of God.

### **Old Covenant and New Covenant Sabbath-keeping**

Is there an Old Covenant way to keep the Sabbath? Certainly! It is done by outwardly ceasing from manual labor and meeting with others in a worship service. Sunday may be kept in exactly the same way.

And is there a New Covenant way to keep the Sabbath? Of course, for it was established in Eden before sin ever arose. It was also the way Christ kept the Sabbath, for “he did no sin,” (*1 Peter* 2:22) so certainly His way of keeping the Sabbath was entirely New Covenant.

Christ kept the same day as the rest of the Jews, but His experience of God's power, and connection with His Father in doing His Father's work, was far above most of the others. While their thoughts were mostly on themselves, and the glory that they thought God was going to give them (above all other nations), His thoughts were on His Father's work, and how His Father's character could be revealed to others.

Now consider, is there a New Covenant way to keep Sunday as a sabbath? No, because the New Covenant is based on God's promises, and there is no promise or blessing associated with Sunday as a day of rest, anywhere in the Bible.

The Gospel, or New Covenant, does not change the Law. But it changes the hearts of people so that the living Law flows out of them naturally.

The role of the Law may change during the process though. First the Law comes to convict the sinner and condemn sin (*Zechariah* 5:1-4). When this brings us to Christ, who cleans the sin away, the Law then stands, no longer as a condemner, but as a witness to the pristine quality of the work that Christ has wrought in the soul (*Romans* 3:21). But remove the Law from this process, and there is no cleansing, for people will be blind to their sins and therefore never confess them.

We can take a few verses from the New Testament and substitute the word Sabbath for Law, and we will quickly see what relationship the Gospel has to the Sabbath:

**Romans 3**

<sup>31</sup> Do we then make void the [Sabbath] through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the [Sabbath].

**Romans 8**

<sup>3</sup> For what the [Sabbath] could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:

<sup>4</sup> That the righteousness of the [Sabbath] might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

Are we justified in making these substitutions? Certainly, for the Sabbath was part of the Law, and so what applies to the whole, applies also to the parts. It takes holy people to keep a holy Sabbath, and therefore it is only through the Gospel that true Sabbath-keeping will be realized.

## The Sabbath existed before Sin

The Sabbath was instituted before sin ever entered (*Genesis* 2:1-3), as a sign and seal of a perfect creation. And it will kept in the perfect world that Christ re-creates:

### **Isaiah 66**

<sup>22</sup> For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain.

<sup>23</sup> And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, says the Lord.

The Sabbath is the only sign that endures and spans the gap from Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained. Like the closing salutation on a letter from a friend, the Sabbath is God's signature on a perfect work. The saints are called on the Sabbath to admire His working in, for, and around them, so that they will never turn to their own works again.

The Sabbath, and true Sabbath-keeping, are emphatically a part of the New Covenant, and will teach those who take it that way, and see their need of every gift that the Lord gives, that "I am the Lord who sanctifies you."

*Where God's perfect work is,  
there His Sabbath will be also.*

And therefore, that generation of holy saints, mentioned in the book of Revelation as the 144,000 who have "his Father's name written in their foreheads," (*Revelation* 14:1) and who are "without fault before the throne of God" (*Revelation* 14:5), will be Sabbath keepers.