

## **When and Why Sabbath?**

### *The Seventh-day Sign of God's Creative and Redemptive Work*

Gold Medallion book award winner *Boundaries* took the Christian market by storm in 1992. The book promoted what seemed at the time to be a new idea: that a Christian should have boundaries, personal limits, and the ability to say “no.” The success of the book spawned a school of sequels, including *Boundaries in Marriage*, *Boundaries with Kids*, and *Boundaries in Dating*, each with their own workbook, DVD, CD, softback and hardback. The cumulative sales continue to climb into the millions.

Consider this: God had boundaries before boundaries were cool.

Often when humans get hold of the concept of boundaries, they twist it into license for selfishness. We run to extremes from being doormats to brats. In contrast, God's boundaries never conflict with His love. He sets boundaries for the good of everyone.

One boundary that God set at Creation has been largely forgotten by the Christian church. He embedded it at the center of the decalogue. Because this commandment has been overlooked, we will spend extra time focusing on it, unburying this timeless truth. Remember as we launch into this study, that God's end-time people will “keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12).

### **The Forgotten Commandment**

The forgotten commandment is found in Exodus 20:8-11:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 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. 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.

Let's boil this down. Concerning the Sabbath, God says:

- Remember it
- Hallow it
- Work six days—the 7<sup>th</sup>, keep it
- Don't work on it
- Don't let your family work on it
- Don't let people living with you work
- God rested on it
- God blessed it
- God hallowed it

We're told God *rested* on the Sabbath. Was He tired? No, but His rest was one of reflection and repose. At creation, God sat back as the Master Artist, breathed a satisfied sigh, and "saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). He then *rested* on the seventh day, *blessed* the seventh day and *hallowed* it.

Clearly God has special plans for the Sabbath!

We may be tempted to believe that all God wanted to establish was a weekly rhythm, and that the day doesn't matter. But it does matter! To receive the full blessing, our rhythm must synchronize with God's rhythm. Can you imagine a fan showing up on the wrong day for a sporting event such as the Summer Olympics? In the same way, what if we show up on the wrong day for the Sabbath event? There was one day which God blessed and sanctified, and that was the seventh day. No-show means no blessing.

In order to understand this choicest of God's blessings, let's examine the timeline of the Sabbath.

### **Old Testament**

The Sabbath existed before there was such thing as a Jew, which didn't exist until Abraham. Jesus Himself set it aside as a day of worship. Consider these facts:

- Jesus, called "the Word," is identified as the Creator in John 1:1-3& 14.
- Christ is identified as the Creator in Colossians 1:15-17.
- Christ is the One who led the children of Israel through the wilderness in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11.

The Creator who "blessed and sanctified" the Sabbath was Jesus Christ. The patriarchs kept God's law, including Abraham, of whom God said, "Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Genesis 26:5).

Two weeks before Sinai, God commanded His people to gather and prepare twice as much manna on the preparation day (See Exodus 16). Then after the arrival at Sinai (See Exodus 19), God gave the law in codified form. God did not *instate* the Sabbath at Sinai, but rather He *upheld* it in writing.

### **New Testament**

We see the Sabbath in the New Testament. Consider Luke 4:16-21. Just after His wilderness temptations, Jesus came to Nazareth, where "as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read." The passage He read prophesied of the Messiah, who would "preach the gospel to the poor," "heal the brokenhearted," and "set at liberty those who are oppressed." Jesus closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. After that, "the

eyes of all were fixed upon Him.” Finally, He said, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

The air must have been thick with angels in that significance-fraught moment. Here was the Jesus who had blessed the Sabbath in Eden and commanded the Sabbath from Sinai, rising to read a prophecy of Himself on a Sabbath in Nazareth.

In New Testament times, a sect called the Pharisees were known for turning the Sabbath into a drudgery by loading it down with rules and regulations. Jesus worked against this trend by healing on the Sabbath, making statements like, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). He knew that if the Sabbath could be twisted into a boring, difficult day, it would create a desire to escape what should have been a delight.

But while Jesus worked hard to correct perversions of Sabbathkeeping, He didn’t cast off the Sabbath itself, but dignified it through joyful observance. He said, “The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Jesus kept the Sabbath even in His death. We see in this passage that Jesus died on the “the Preparation day” or the day before Sabbath (Luke 23:53), then rose again on “the first day of the week,” Sunday (24:3). Jesus rested in the tomb one day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday—the Sabbath day.

### **Post-Resurrection**

Did God change the Sabbath to Sunday after the resurrection? Notice that in His warning of the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus warned His disciples, “pray that your flight be not in winter or on the Sabbath” (Matthew 24:20). The destruction of Jerusalem took place in 70 A.D., 39 years after Jesus spoke these words. Clearly, He expected His disciples to keep the Sabbath for at least 39 years, long after the resurrection.

Nor did the early church change the day of worship. The Apostle Paul and those who ministered with him kept the Sabbath in Antioch, where they “went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day” (Acts 13:14). 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 contains direction from Paul to the Corinthians to lay aside offerings on “the first day of the week.” We might be tempted to cite this as evidence that the day of worship was changed to the first day of the week. Actually, it better proves that the Sabbath was kept by the early church because of the nature of the offerings. In an agrarian society, people gave offerings of grain or even livestock. To haul these large offerings around on the Sabbath would have been too much work. Very possibly Paul instructed that this collection take place on the first day in order to avoid undue labor on the Sabbath.

Millions of Jews throughout the centuries have fastidiously kept the Sabbath day since Old Testament times. There is no logical way all of them could slip up and lose count. This is evidence for the weekly cycle remaining in place. Additional evidence can be found in the fact that in over 100 languages, the word for Saturday is “Sabbath” or a similar, derivative word. Here are a few examples:

Ancient Syriac: Shabatho, Babylonian: Sabatu, Arabic: Assabt, Etheopic: Sanbat, Armenian: Shapat, Polynesian: Hari sabtu, Swahili: Assabt, Latin: Sabbatum, Italian: Sabato, Spanish: Sabado, Russian: Subbota, Polish: Sobota, Assyrian: Sabata, Tigre: Sanbat, Kurdish: Shamba, Georgian: Shabati, Morduin: Subbota, Portuguese: Sabbado, New Slovenian: Sobota, Prussian: Sabatico.

Although the monthly and yearly calendars have changed since the time of Jesus, the weekly cycle has not. The most popular calendar in use today is the Gregorian calendar, named after Pope Gregory XIII, who reformed it from the Julian calendar in 1582. Because the Julian calendar year was slightly too long, the celebration of Easter drifted forward with each passing year. The change to the Gregorian calendar, with its inclusion of leap years, remedied that. But while the monthly and yearly cycles were changed, the weekly cycle remained intact. The U.S. Naval Observatory has reported that, "There has been no change in our calendar in past centuries that has affected in any way the cycle of the week."<sup>i</sup>

### **Now for the Why of the Sabbath**

Those of us who honor the Sabbath may be tempted to gloat in our scriptural and historical correctness. But a glimpse into God's purpose for the Sabbath will humble our self-righteousness in the dust.

Notice that God created the world, then rested the seventh day. Humans, however, being created on the sixth day, rested first on the seventh day, then worked. God worked, then rested, we rest, then work. Even before sin, God established Himself as our Source of life.

Notice also that after sin, God reinforced this lesson. Adam and Eve made fig leaf garments in an attempt to cover their sin. Afterward, God made garments of skin and clothed them (See Genesis 3:21). They attempted to right themselves; God, through death, made them truly right.

Since that day in Eden, human beings display a natural bent toward fig leaves—attempts at self-salvation. We want to cover, correct, heal, restore, and regenerate ourselves without God's help, thank you! And truly, all of day-to-day life on earth being a meritocracy in which we must work and strive for everything we have, we often let that reality eclipse the truth that we depend fully upon God, and that all we have ultimately comes from Him. This is why God reminds us every seven days to rest from our labors. Sabbath keeping cuts across our natural inclination toward spiritual self-sufficiency.

The Sabbath is an outward sign of an inward principle. Many non-Sabbathkeeping believers understand what it means to rest in Jesus' righteousness. Many Sabbathkeepers have forgotten this, and in the height of ironies have turned being "right" about the Sabbath into a source of self-righteousness. God must groan from heaven.

God's time-tested method of saving people from idolatry is to lead them to recognize His creatorship. To the idolaters at Lystra, the apostles said, "We. . . preach unto you that ye should

*turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein*” (Acts 14:15). Notice the allusion to the creation as cited in the fourth commandment: “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*” (Exodus 20:11).

In idolatry, we worship our material things, our relationships, our pleasures, our celebrities and our achievements—God’s gifts instead of the giver, “the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (Romans 1:25). The Sabbath gives us an opportunity to break from the rat race, cultivating intimacy with the Creator on the day He set aside for such a purpose.

Throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity we will worship God on His appointed day. He will make a “new heavens and a new earth” to replace this worn-out planet where His redeemed ones will “come to worship” before Him, Sabbath after Sabbath (Isaiah 66:22-23).

### **The Takeaway**

Why do we forget this day He said to remember? How must God experience the Sabbath, as He beholds a planet that has largely turned its back on His commandment? Do you want to be one who remembers Him? Let us admit our great need, turn to Him, and say, “Thank You.”

### **Quiz**

1. God has always had limits, or \_\_\_\_\_.
2. In reference to the Christian world, which commandment has been forgotten? \_\_\_\_\_
3. According to Genesis 26, Abraham kept God’s \_\_\_\_\_, statutes, and laws.
4. Two weeks before Sinai, Israel gathered twice as much manna on \_\_\_\_\_ day.
5. God did not *instate* the Sabbath at Sinai, but rather He \_\_\_\_\_ it in writing.
6. True or false: The weekly cycle may have changed since the first Sabbath. \_\_\_\_\_
7. God worked, then rested. Humans rest, then \_\_\_\_\_.
8. The Sabbath is an outward sign of an inward \_\_\_\_\_.

## Answer Key

1. Boundaries
2. The fourth
3. Commandments
4. Preparation
5. Upheld
6. False
7. Work
8. Principle

<sup>i</sup> James Robertson, Director American Ephemeris, Navy Department, U.S. Naval Observatory, Washington, D.C., March 12, 1932.

