



A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact *you*

Entering True Sabbath Rest

Understanding the Christian's Relationship to the Sabbath

By Ryan Habbena

A few years ago an area pastor took out advertisements in one of our local Christian periodicals. These ads issued both a proclamation and a challenge: “Christians are required to observe the Sabbath on Saturdays, and I invite anyone to debate me on this subject.” The challenge was eventually accepted and I proceeded to attend the public debate. At the time of this debate I was engaged in expository work on both Galatians and Hebrews. As I listened to these two men debate the issues, I compared their views to what I was learning through my studies. What struck me was this: the theological issues that the first century church struggled against are just as pressing 2,000 years later.

Perhaps you have read the commands to observe the Sabbath in the Old Testament and asked yourself: “How does this command apply to me?” The history of biblical interpretation has produced several answers to this question. Many teach that Christians are called to keep the Sabbath, in the sense that the Old Covenant commands (i.e. no work on the seventh day of the week [Saturday]). These teachers are quick to point out that Sabbath keeping is one of the “Ten Commandments.” They argue: “Since we believe that the commands against murder, stealing, and adultery are still binding, why should we think the command of Sabbath keeping has been abolished?”¹)

In this article I will demonstrate that the New Testament teaches that true “Sabbath rest” is not found through obeying an Old Covenant ordinance, but rather through trusting in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ. Since the teaching of the New Testament is primary, let us now explore the teaching of Christ and His commissioned apostles regarding the place of the Sabbath in the Christian life.

Entering True Sabbath Rest

The first text we will interact with is in the book of Hebrews. The entire thrust of the book of Hebrews is to exhort Christians to remain in the perfect, completed work of Jesus

Christ and not return to the elements of the Mosaic Covenant. In fact, the Messiah and his work are described as being greater than all that was held dear under the Old Covenant: Moses, the priesthood, angels, sacrifices, and the Sabbath. In chapter four of this epistle we are granted keen insight into the New Covenant view of “Sabbath.”

The precept of “the Sabbath” is related by the Spirit-led author to the promise of entering God’s eternal, enduring rest. He declares that those who refuse to listen to God’s word of salvation *will never enter* (see 3:11, 19) and those who listen and believe the message brought by His Son *have already entered*. He writes:

Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. For we who have believed enter that rest. (Hebrews 4:1-3a)

Consider that the **means** of entering God’s “Sabbath rest” is **belief**. The faithful are at rest, not through the works of the Law, but rather through faith in Jesus. The author of Hebrews continues to note “the Sabbath” rest that we find in the New Covenant: “*So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His*” (Hebrews 4:9-10). The Sabbath day observance, like the Old Covenant sacrifices and the priesthood, pointed towards the day when God’s people would find rest for their weary souls through the power of the cross. Jesus fulfilled the Law and we who believe have entered true Sabbath rest.

In light of these precepts, we must always remember Paul’s exhortation to the Colossian church, who were being troubled by those who advocated a return to the elements of the Old Covenant:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)

These are powerfully instructive words. The elements of the Old Covenant were *shadows* of the Savior. Since the substance, Jesus, has come and fulfilled the Law, we dare not return to the shadows.

In a related text, Paul, in writing to the Galatians, was so distressed by those who were returning to elements of the Old Covenant rather than remaining in the simplicity of faith in Christ, he severely admonished them, stating:

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (Galatians 4:9-11)²

We are warned not to return to the shadows of the Old Covenant, or fear those who would judge us for not observing them. Instead, our fear should be directed elsewhere. The author of Hebrews continues: “*Let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it*” (Hebrews 4:1).

When we consider the intent of the book of Hebrews and its implications, we encounter a subtle irony. We, as readers, are warned to not return to the elements of the Old Covenant because of the great salvation that has arrived, superseding the Mosaic Law (see Hebrews 1:1-3, 3:1-6, 8:6). If one adheres to observing the Sabbath as a *necessary means* of being at peace with God, they are falling short of entering His rest.³ They have become “Sabbath-breakers” because they have not entered true rest through belief in the terms of the New Covenant established by Christ and His apostles. On the other hand, those who believe in Christ and His work alone as the way to peace with God have entered the eternal rest brought about by His blood. By His grace, these are the true “Sabbath-keepers.” *That*, is irony.

Saturday, Sunday, Any Day?

Given the centuries of Jewish tradition preceding the coming of Christ, it is not surprising that this teaching of the New Testament caused great controversy in the Jewish culture of the time. As the controversy crept its way into the church, questions arose: When should we worship? How should we view those who set aside a specific day for worship? How should we view those who see all days alike? These questions have continued to be asked throughout the age of the church, and have received a wide range of answers.

In Romans 14, the Apostle Paul answered these inquiries in this way:

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. (Romans 14:4-5)⁴

If Paul wanted to command mandatory Sabbath keeping for New Covenant Christians, this was the perfect place to do so. One of the issues he addressed in this text was

“regarding one day above another” referring to days of worship. Yet rather than command a specific, binding day of worship, the Apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, established something different: *Freedom* in worship under the New Covenant.

Some time ago in a debate about mandatory Sabbath keeping, I challenged my opponent with this passage and its implications. He replied: “Peter tells us that Paul often writes things that are hard to understand. This passage is one of them.”⁵ While his comment was cleverly elusive, his response spoke volumes: He had no good answer to this text.

Sunday “Sabbath?”

Beyond teaching that there is no mandatory Saturday Sabbath observance under the New Covenant, this text also implies there is no mandatory *Sunday* “Sabbath.” Some have answered the Sabbath question by asserting that the Sabbath has been moved from Saturday to Sunday in light of Jesus’ resurrection. An example of this is the so-called “Puritan Sabbath.” M. James Sawyer explains some of its dynamics:

The Puritans established a Christian Sabbath (Sunday) during which Christians must “not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of [God’s] worship and the duties of necessity and mercy.” The Puritans saw this Sabbath as binding and honored it with the utmost seriousness. In fact, they believed so strongly in Sabbath adherence that they thought natural disasters resulted from a lack of obedience.⁶

To address this teaching, it is significant to note that there is no text in the New Testament where the authors equate the first day of the week (Sunday or “the Lord’s day”) with the Sabbath. When this is considered along with Paul’s teaching regarding days of worship in Romans 14, it is well established that there is no binding command to New Covenant believers to worship on a specific day. Instead, Christians are given freedom in the Gospel to gather and worship according to their conscience. Yet, do not misunderstand, it is essential *that* we worship and gather, “*not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*” (**Hebrews 10:25**) Yet, under the New Covenant, we are free as to *when* we engage in worship, and are called to not impose our personal conscience upon others. If a community desires to gather, rest, and worship on Saturday, they are free to do so. The same applies to Sunday. The perilous practice we need to avoid is mandating that all Christians *must* observe a specific day.

Resting in Jesus' Perfect Work

Many hearts become troubled by those who advocate the need for a Christian to observe the Old Covenant Sabbath. Misguided teachings such as the following do such:

The overwhelming evidence of the Bible and history proves that the Seventh day Sabbath—Saturday today—is the true day of rest and worship of God. God puts His presence into that day. He fellowships with His people on that day, as well as, the annual holy days which, He has commanded to be observed in worship of Him. Now that you have this knowledge and God holds you responsible for it, what will you do? Jesus Christ commands, “Repent and believe the Gospel.” Will you repent sins [sic] and turn to God, or will you continue in your sins? Your eternal life, or eternal death is at stake.⁷

On the contrary, we must *never* allow such distorted views of salvation to eclipse our view of Jesus' perfect, finished work.

Whenever I have debated the “Sabbath” issue with those who believe we are required to observe it to be pleasing to God, I am grieved by their focus: Jesus and his perfect work are minimized and in its stead is a misplaced zeal for the Law of Moses. We well remember that:

What the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3-4)

Since our King has come and fulfilled the Law, we need to continue to rely on Him for salvation, sanctification, and security. When we meet people who condemn us as not pleasing to God because we do not obey the Old Covenant Sabbath observance, we should announce to them the Gospel of grace and keep our eyes fixed on the all sufficient Savior. We will then know what it means to heed Jesus' invitation:

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28-29)

End Notes

1. The short, proper answer to this objection is that the whole Law is fulfilled in Christ and His work. We who believe then proceed to live our lives according to His word through the teaching of the New Covenant.
 2. De Lacey rightly concludes regarding this passage: “The situation seems to have been that Paul viewed any attempt to impose Sabbath keeping (or indeed the keeping of any regular festivals of the Jewish or astrological calendars) upon Gentiles as wrong, and any tendency on the part of converts to submit to this coercion as a retrograde step.” D.C. Delacy, *“The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus”* in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D.A. Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999) 181.
 3. In the book of Galatians, Paul makes a parallel point. Those who are preaching (and receiving) a different gospel than “Paul’s Gospel,” are anathematized because they have insisted on the necessity of receiving circumcision for justification (Galatians 1:6-9, 5:1-4). As noted above, the Sabbath is implicated in Galatians as well.
 4. “The balance of probability, then, is in favor of the Sabbath being included in the days of Romans 14:5. Paul allows that the keeping of such days is purely a matter of individual conscience.” De Lacey, 182.
 5. The passage he was alluding to was 2 Peter 3:16.
 6. M. James Sawyer, *The Survivor’s Guide to Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 323. It is notable that the much of Puritan thought had the view that they were the “New Israel” with this producing “replacement theology” in portions of their doctrine and practice. Thus, “Sunday Sabbath” replacing “Saturday Sabbath” is part of this paradigm.
 7. www.cbcbg.org/true_sabbath_4.htm accessed October 1, 2007.
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