

God's perpetual gift to man

This We Believe

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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, . . . 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. —Exodus 20:8-11.

The search for an extra-Biblical origin of the Sabbath has been going on now for about one hundred years. Scholars have developed hypotheses that the Sabbath is derived from astrological, agricultural, or sociological backgrounds. However, so far, neither a single hypothesis, nor any combination thereof, has been successful in providing an answer to the question of the origin of the Sabbath.¹ To our present knowledge, the Sabbath as a weekly day of rest and worship is unique to Biblical religion and faith. No pagan nation or people in the ancient world are known to have kept the seventh-day Sabbath or worshiped on it.

Secular sources may be silent on this topic, but Scripture is unambiguous about the origin of the Sabbath. It presents the seventh-day Sabbath as a lasting gift of God from Creation to all mankind. Its beginning is linked to the climax of Creation week (see Gen. 2:1-3; Ex. 20:11; 31:17). The Inspired Record states, "Thus the heavens and earth were completed, and all their hosts. And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made" (Gen. 2:1-3, N.A.S.B.).* This first scripture on the Sabbath expresses a number of key ideas: 1. Creation reaches its goal of completion and perfection in the seventh-day Sabbath. Thus the seventh day of each week is a renewed Creation Sabbath, a day of sacred time derived from the beginning of history. While ancient cosmogonies of the Canaanites and the Babylonians concluded in temple building,² that is, in sacred space, the Biblical Creation narrative concludes with the inauguration of the Sabbath, that is, the origin of sacred time. 2. God *rested* from all His work that He had done on the Sabbath. God's resting (cf. Ex. 20:11; 31:17) provides an example for man. Mankind, made in the image of God, is to follow his creative Exemplar by resting on the seventh day as the Creator has done.

Resting in the sense of cessation from regular activity means for every person a gift of time for communion with one's Creator and Lord. 3. God *blessed* the Sabbath. When in Scripture God blesses a thing or a being, that thing or being is imbued with the power of fruitfulness and prosperity, providing life, happiness, and success. The Lord of life who in His creative work had blessed fishes and birds (see Gen. 1:22) and then Adam and Eve (see verse 28), also blessed the Sabbath as the day of rest, thus equipping it with enlivening, vitalizing, and beneficial power. This blessedness of the Sabbath is to enrich mankind's existence and life. 4. God *sanctified* the Sabbath. This divine act of sanctifying and thus dividing the Sabbath from the remaining days of activity imbues it with a holiness not possessed by any other day. "This division between the day of rest and the working days is to prove itself as much of a benefit to man as the division of light from darkness." ³ We must also note that holiness is an act of God's bestowal and not of man's doing. Holiness for the day of rest is derived, not from man keeping this day holy, but from a prior divine action.

These foundational aspects of the Sabbath, rooted in the divine activities at the climax of Creation, provide bountiful and meaningful life for man and invoke in him a worship response. G. H. Waterman's insightful summary is worth quoting: "It seems clear, therefore, that the divine origin and institution of the Sabbath took place at the beginning of human history. At that time God not only provided a divine example for keeping the seventh day as a day of rest, but also blessed and set apart the seventh day for the use and benefit of man." ⁴ It is fully evident, then, that the Sabbath originated at Creation and not at Mount Sinai or later in Israel's history.

Biblical support for the origin of the seventh-day Sabbath at Creation is found not only in the Old Testament (see particularly Ex. 20:11; 31:17) but is also explicitly supported in the New Testament in Hebrews 4:1-11 and implicitly by Jesus Himself in Mark 2:27: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath." Jesus affirms that the Sabbath was made for the benefit of man, protecting his physical, spiritual, and social well-being.

Lord of the Sabbath

Jesus Christ announced that He Himself is "Lord . . . of the sabbath" (Mark 2:28; Matt. 12:8). The New Testament gives ample evidence that the world was made by Jesus Christ (see John 1:3; Col. 1:16, 17; Heb. 1:1-3), indicating that He is the active agent in Creation. At the beginning of human history, the Creator of man and the world made the Sabbath for the benefit and blessing of mankind.

The Old Testament has repeated references to the seventh day as "the sabbath of the Lord" (see Ex. 20:10; Lev. 23:3, 38; Deut. 5:14), and time and again the Lord speaks in Scripture of "my sabbaths" (see Ex. 31:13; Lev. 19:3, 30; 26:2; Isa. 56:4;

Eze. 20:12-24; 22:8, et cetera). Jesus' affirmation of being "Lord of the Sabbath" may reflect this Old Testament emphasis on His Lordship over against all others who claimed to be able to put a fence around it. His Lordship over the Sabbath is related to His Lordship over man. As man, fallen under the domination of alien powers, is freed from all false, ritualistic, and legalistic ways, so the Sabbath is also freed by Jesus Christ from its multitude of ritualistic and legalistic regulations superimposed on it by human powers in post-exilic Judaism. (One source cites 1,521 derivative Sabbath laws.)⁵

As "Lord of the Sabbath" Jesus Christ is the great restorer of the Sabbath. In His life and ministry, Jesus in no way abrogated or annulled the Sabbath. He lifted it to its rightful and proper place, restoring its meaning and dignity and putting it back as a center of blessing for mankind. The Gospels record no less than seven Sabbath healing miracles. At the very beginning of His public ministry, Jesus healed a demon-possessed man in a synagogue on the Sabbath (see Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37) and followed this act with the Sabbath healing of Peter's mother-in-law (see Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38, 39). The redemptive liberation of humans from evil powers or disease is thus linked to the Sabbath. The Sabbath healing of the man with the withered hand (see Mark 3:1-6) demonstrates that in spite of legalistic Jewish restrictions it is "lawful on the sabbath to do good . . . [and] to save life" (verse 4, R.S.V.).^f Jesus was again teaching in a synagogue on another Sabbath when He miraculously healed an infirm woman. He defended the healing as an activity completely appropriate for the Sabbath day—a release of the woman from Satan's bond (see Luke 13:10-17).

The Messianic liberator also liberates the Sabbath from human tradition. The healing of the man with dropsy on the Sabbath (see chap. 14:1-4) demonstrated this once again. The two Sabbath healings recorded in the Gospel of John (chaps. 5:1-18; 9) indicate the intimate connection between Christ's redemptive work and the Sabbath. In both actions Christ broke again with the Sabbath laws of the rabbis (see chaps. 5:10, 16; 9:14-16), liberating the Sabbath from human restrictions and setting it free to be the kind of blessing He originally designed it to be for mankind. These incidents reveal that Christ's claim to be "Lord . . . of the sabbath" (Matt. 12:8; Mark 2:28) was a claim to be the restorer of the true meaning and purpose of the Sabbath, revealing its divine intention, aim, and goal for the benefit of men and women at every stage of life and in every age.

The famous incident of the plucking of the ears of grain by the disciples on a Sabbath day (see Matt. 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5) was regarded by Jewish authorities as Sabbathbreaking, because "by plucking the ears of grain they were guilty of *reaping*, by rubbing them in their hands they were guilty of *threshing*, by separating the grain from the husk they were guilty of *winnowing*; and by the whole procedure they were guilty of preparing a meal on the Sabbath day."⁶ In defense,

Jesus referred to David eating the shewbread in the temple when he was hungry (see 1 Sam. 21:1-7), arguing that if it was right for David to eat bread dedicated for sacred use, then His disciples could surely allay their hunger by plucking grain on sacred time. Thus Jesus set aside rabbinical laws and freed the Sabbath from legalistic restrictions and casuistry.

These various incidents reveal that Jesus restored the Sabbath to its intended meaning, freeing it from human traditions that tended to enslave both the Sabbath and its keeper in legalism. Jesus Himself kept the Sabbath in its real intent and thus set an example for His followers through out time. He is the exemplar and model of true Sabbathkeeping from the day early in His ministry when He read the Scripture in the Nazareth synagogue and observed the Sabbath "as his custom was" (see Luke 4:16), through the days of doing good on the Sabbath, to His rest at last in the grave on the Sabbath. Indeed, Jesus Christ is in every sense the Lord of the Sabbath, as the Sabbath is in every sense the day of the Lord. We believe there is no scriptural evidence that either Jesus or His disciples ever changed the Sabbath to Sunday.⁷ This change took place much later.⁸

Gift of divine rest

The Creator's own rest provides a foundation for man's rest on the seventh-day Sabbath (see Gen. 2:1-3). The fourth commandment in the Decalogue affirms explicitly, "In it you shall not do any work, ... for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day" (Ex. 20:11, R.S.V.). The seventh day is identified as Sabbath. This distinction had already been illustrated in the earlier manna experience (see chap. 16:23, 25, 26). It should also be noted that "the seventh day is a sabbath to [or for] the Lord" (chap. 20:10, R.S.V.; 16:23, 25; 31:15; 35:2; Lev. 23:3; Deut. 5:14), indicating that the Sabbath is owned, as it were, by God, who graciously gives it as a gift of rest to His people following the six days that are designated for human labor.

The Sabbath commandment requires men "to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8). We have already noted that the Sabbath derives its holiness from an act of God at Creation (see Gen. 2:3; Ex. 20:11). God's command "to keep it [the Sabbath] holy" is both a charge and an invitation and involves: (1) following the divine Exemplar's pattern of rest; (2) acknowledging the Exemplar as Creator; (3) accepting God's gift of rest every seventh day; (4) participating in divine rest; and (5) refraining from work and activity appropriate for the six days during which humans shall labor and do all their work. Indeed, "cessation from work on the seventh day amounted to a rite of communion with the cosmic creator."⁹ All in all, it is what God has done for man that causes man to keep holy the Sabbath day by laying aside all the activity usually associated with his livelihood. After all, God graciously provided enough time, six days per week, for these pursuits. The gift of six days of purposeful

activity each week is followed by the seventh-day Sabbath, a greater gift of holy time in which man is freed from the normal cares of life. Simply put, the Sabbath is the divine gift of sacred time, hallowed and set apart by God for man, to provide rest from labor, freedom for fellowship and communion with both God and fellow man, and a weekly foretaste of the rest for which the whole creation yearns (cf. Isa. 66:22, 23; Heb. 4:1-10).

A gift of redemptive liberation

At times some claim that the Sabbath was first instituted at the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. But Israel kept the Sabbath and were taught its meaning before the Mount Sinai experience. Exodus 16 clearly indicates that Israel were provided with the miraculous gift of manna for physical food on each of the six working days of the week. The manna kept Israel alive after their redemptive release from Egyptian slavery, and it was the occasion of renewing in their minds the greater gift, the seventh-day Sabbath, for on the Sabbath no manna fell, in order to teach God's people that physical liberation is but the prelude to the Sabbath experience when redemption is celebrated as God's gift. The Sabbath is a "sabbath feast" (Ex. 16:23; *sabbaton*), not a day of taboos, fasting, and mourning. It has a festive ring, designed in its celebration to express joy, happiness, and satisfaction.

It is also striking that the Sabbath was designed as well to remind Israel that "" "you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day"" (Deut. 5:15, R.S.V.). This text elaborates the soteriological aspect of the Sabbath. In Exodus 20:11, God's Creation and His subsequent rest are given as a motivational reason for celebrating the Sabbath as holy; in Deuteronomy 5:15 the divine act of redemption and liberation is cited as a motivational reason for Sabbath celebration. We need to keep in mind that the Exodus event is an act of "Creation" in which a people is brought into existence (cf. Isa. 43:1, 7), and thus it forms an analogy to God's Creation at the beginning when a world is brought into existence. The creative act of deliverance from servitude is to be remembered and thus celebrated and reexperienced by each one who keeps the Sabbath. The believer himself is a new creation and becomes joined to God's people, the body of Christ. Therefore, on the Sabbath day we are recalling and remembering our Maker, and One who acted in the creation of the physical world (see Gen 1:1, 2; 3; Ex. 20:11) and who acted again in the creation of His people (see Deut. 5:15) and in our own re-creation. The Sabbath is a gift day, celebrating God's Creation of world and man, of His people, and of our own individual re-creation to new life in Him.

This liberation aspect of the Sabbath extended to the entire household, including those of an inferior status such as manservant and maidservant (see Ex. 20:10). On the Sabbath everyone in society, high and low, resident and alien, is to rest

together. This liberation from work and freedom to rest makes all human beings equal, whatever their status in life. On the Sabbath men stand as equals before God and in society. As such, the Sabbath is a present anticipation of the eschatological removal of every sort of inequality. Even in the here and now the Sabbath already functions as a gift and points to the liberation of humans from all sorts of societal inequities and inequalities.

A gift of belonging

Once God had created His people in the liberating and redemptive Exodus event, He graciously offered to enter into a profound covenant relation with them in order to provide them the power and the means to remain a redeemed, liberated, and free people under Him. A basic part of this redemptive covenant given to Israel on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19-24) was the Ten Commandments, at the heart of which is the Sabbath commandment. According to Exodus 31:13, the Sabbath is singled out as "" "a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you"" (R.S.V.; cf. Eze. 20:12, 20). It is revealed here that the Sabbath is God's covenant "sign" between Himself and His people, who are to observe ""the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant"" (Ex. 31:16, R.S.V.).

The Sabbath's nature as a "sign" relates both to God and to man. As the rainbow is a perpetual guarantee that God will never again destroy all flesh on earth by a universal flood (see Gen. 9:13, 15), so the Sabbath is a "sign of guarantee" whereby God assures in His efficacious grace that He will sanctify His people and make them holy. Because the Sabbath is part of the covenant that establishes the beneficial relationship between God and His people, it has been pointed out that "the Creator has stamped on world history the sign of the sabbath as his seal of ownership and authority."¹⁰ Indeed, the Sabbath commandment identifies (1) the Lord of the Sabbath as Creator (Ex. 20:11; 31:17); and (2) the sphere of His ownership and authority—" "heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them"" (Ex. 20:11, R.S.V.). The Sabbath functions as a "sign" or a "seal" having characteristics typical of seals ratifying ancient Near Eastern international treaty documents. This nature of the Sabbath as a sign of seal allows the true Sabbathkeeper to acknowledge God as the Creator and Re-Creator who has ownership and authority over all creation and also over himself or herself. In keeping the Sabbath, the believer manifests that he or she belongs fully to God and His commandment-keeping people. Thus the Sabbath is a sign that communicates the unique relationship between God and those who belong to Him who is both their covenant God and sanctifier.

The intent of the new covenant is not to abolish or abrogate the old and the law; it renews the true intent of the covenant and internalizes the law (see Jer. 31:31-34). The old and the new covenants have the same law. There is nothing wrong with

the law. The covenant made with Israel became old because the law remained something outside the Israelite; in the new covenant God will write the law in the heart (verse 33), internalizing it, making it a part of the innermost being of man for him to accept, assimilate, and live from within his being. In the new covenant the law, with the Sabbath at its center, will not be satisfied with mere mechanical obedience and lifeless gestures, but with a new life of the Spirit (see Rom. 7:6) that leads to genuine, profound, and authentic obedience and heart worship. Sabbathkeeping is a love response on the part of the Christian to the greatness of God, His creative, liberating, and sanctifying purposes accomplished in the free gift of life for service through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Sabbathkeeping reveals that one belongs to God and Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath, then, is sacred time that holds together past, present, and future. It provides holy time for profound communion and fellowship with the Lord of life. It grants a present experience of renewal, redemption, and liberation. It brings joy and peace and frees the believer for the worship of God and for service to Him and to fellow men. The Sabbath transforms present realities, pointing forward to the promised future reality of a new heaven and a new earth undisturbed by sin.