

Gospel Pictures: The Sabbath

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God

The first instance of a special day of rest in Scripture occurs with the seventh day of creation when God rested from his work of creation (Genesis 2:1-3). The first mention of a special day called a Sabbath day occurs much later in Exodus 16:21-30 when the Israelites were commanded to gather two days' worth of manna on the sixth day so they wouldn't have to gather any on the Sabbath day of rest. Here's a look at part of the account:

Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted. On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers each. And when all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.'" So they laid it aside till the morning, as Moses commanded them, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none." (Exodus 16:21-26)

For six days the Israelites gathered manna, but on the seventh day they were prohibited to do so. A few chapters later, with the receiving of the Law and the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath was restated and even expanded to include one's animals and livestock and any non-Israelite who happened to be visiting.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Moses received the Sabbath commands while on Sinai and the Sabbaths that Israel observed were a sign of the Old Covenant given to Israel.

And the Lord said to Moses, "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, *observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel* that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.'" (Exodus 31:12-17, emphasis added.)

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The Sabbath and the Westminster Confession of Faith

In both instances above, the Sabbath commands are directed to Israel. There is no indication in Scripture that a Sabbath concept or command existed prior to God establishing the Sabbath with Israel (Nehemiah 9:13-14). Chapter 21 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (*WCF*) also speaks of the Sabbath:

VII. As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, He has particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week: and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

VIII. This Sabbath is to be kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do 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 His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

The *WCF* picks up the Sabbath theme from the Old Testament and attempts to make it perpetual. The *WCF* reasons that the Sabbath day is perpetual because of the reason given for the Sabbath in Exodus 20. If you glance back up to that passage, it is clear that the reason Israel rested on the seventh day is because God rested on the seventh day in the creation account. It is therefore, according to the *WCF*, a perpetual creation ordinance that the church must observe. In the words of the *WCF*, the Christian Sabbath is a perpetual obligation of man to be observed until the end of the world. But when we read the account in Deuteronomy 5, we are given a different reason for the Sabbath:

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. *You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.* Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15, emphasis added.)

In the Deuteronomy account, creation is not mentioned. The reason the Israelites were given the Sabbath in the Deuteronomy account is because God delivered them out of bondage in Egypt.

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But in the *WCF's* list of Bible texts in support of its view, Deuteronomy 5 is missing. Since both reasons for a Sabbath observance are equally important, the *WCF's* assertion that a special creation ordinance mandates a perpetual Sabbath observance is called into question.

The *WCF* also insists that the Sabbath was set apart as a time of worship, drawing the conclusion that the Christian Sabbath a time of worship. But in the Sabbath commands given to Israel, any reference to worship is missing. Instead, the Sabbath was a time of *total rest*, self-denial, and self-mortification. There is no mention of worship being part of the Sabbath commands.

Sabbath Rest is a Picture of Salvation and Heaven

The Sabbaths that Israel observed weren't an end in themselves, but they pointed to something far greater. The Sabbath pointed to Jesus, the true source of salvation rest for the true people of God.

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)

Jesus gives us true Sabbath rest when we repent and believe the gospel (Matthew 11:28). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us of how to interpret the types and shadows contained within the Law of Moses and the Old Covenant. The Sabbath was a picture of the true rest that is found only in Jesus.

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. (Hebrews 10:1)

The writer of Hebrews also reminds us that Israel's Sabbath rest and the physical rest they enjoyed upon entering the Promised Land were a picture of salvation and ultimately, heaven.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. *For we who have believed enter that rest*, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter my rest," although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest." Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." *For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered*

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God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. (Hebrews 4:1-11, emphasis added)

Gospel Pictures: The Sabbath Prefigured Salvation Rest

We see that in the Hebrews passage above, Israel's Sabbath rest pictured or prefigured salvation rest which is accomplished when one embraces the gospel of grace and rests from his own works or efforts, finding acceptance with God by faith alone. The Sabbath was a picture of belief and justification by faith, apart from works, held out in the gospel.

Paul warns believers against observing special days. He warns the Galatian churches against returning to the practice of observing special days because as types and shadows, they are "weak and worthless" principles in light of the coming of Christ into the world as their fulfillment. The observance of special days is considered harmful in the New Testament. Paul warns against being enslaved to the observance of special days.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. (Galatians 4:8-11)

The Sabbath finds its fulfillment in Jesus (Matthew 12:8) and today, every day is holy and everyplace is holy (1 Corinthians 10:31). The early church may have met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), but we are not commanded to do so and we're never told that the first day of the week has become a Christian Sabbath. The only mention in the New Testament of a day called "the Lord's day" is in the book of Revelation and its meaning continues to be a matter of debate (Revelation 1:10).

The Issue of the Conscience and the Weaker Brother

The observance of special days was practiced by some in the Corinthian churches, as was the issue of eating foods only allowed in Jewish food laws. Paul begins his discussion of these subjects by saying,

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Romans 14:1-4)

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In this passage, Paul says that the one who is convinced that only certain foods can be eaten, is the weaker brother. The stronger brother (the one whose conscience will allow him to eat anything) is not to scandalize or pass condemning judgment on the weaker brother, and the weaker brother is prohibited from passing judgment on the stronger brother. They are to accept one another as brothers in Christ. This doesn't mean that the stronger brother should avoid constructive discussion with the weaker brother about his convictions in order to help him grow in the faith, but he is prohibited from flaunting his liberty to eat whatever he wants just to prove a point, or to prove that he is right (1 Corinthians 14:13-23). This weak brother/strong brother discussion continues, but moves away from the issue of food, to the issue of observing special days.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. (1 Corinthians 14:5-6)

While there are no special days under the New Covenant, those convinced otherwise are to be accepted by the stronger brother for the sake of the weaker brother's conscience. If the weaker brother's conscience is violated, it can cause him to sin (Romans 14:23). The stronger brother has an obligation to gently teach and instruct the weaker brother (Romans 14:13-19)

In summary, the Sabbath was given only to ancient Israel and it functioned as a sign of the Old Covenant and a picture of salvation rest. It was not a creation ordinance that is binding on all in every era, nor was it ever intended as a day of worship. The church is never commanded to meet on a particular day, and Paul calls the observance of special days "weak and worthless elementary principles."