

The First Sabbath and the lasting Sabbath Genesis 2:1-3 Exodus 20:8-11

There was this preacher who was an avid golfer. Every chance he could get, he could be found on the golf course swinging away. It was an obsession.

One Sunday as he was preparing to go to church, he looked out the window to see a picture perfect day for golfing. The sun was out, no clouds in the sky, and the temperature was just right.

The preacher was in a quandary as to what to do until the urge to play golf overcame him. He called an assistant to tell him that he was sick and could not do church today, packed the car up, and drove three hours to a golf course where no one would recognize him.

Happily, he began to play the course. But an angel up above was watching and was quite perturbed. He went to God and said, "Look at what that preacher is doing. Shouldn't he be punished?" God nodded in agreement and assured the angel that appropriate punishment was forthcoming.

The preacher teed up on the first hole. He swung at the ball, and it sailed effortlessly through the air and landed right in the cup three hundred and fifty yards away (as they say in basketball, nothing but net). A picture perfect hole-in-one. He was amazed and excited. The angel on the other hand was a little shocked. He turned to God and said, "Begging Your pardon, but I thought you were going to punish him." God smiled. I did. "Think about it -- who can he tell?"

Other than skipping out on his Church duties, just the act of golfing on Sunday was not necessarily – for this pastor - a violation of the sixth commandment. Because, according to the Bible, apparently God's command to keep the seventh day as holy only applies to Jewish people, not Gentiles. Why? Because the Bible's laws on Sabbath keeping versus the practice of "entering into God's day rest" are not necessarily the same thing; but this difference is a bit complicated to explain. So let's first deal with the known facts of Sabbath day law and then try to sort out the complications near the end.

Thus the heavens and earth were finished, And on the seventh day God rested from all the work that He had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, Genesis 2:1-3
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According to Genesis chapter 2, Having finished all His work, on the seventh day God rested. Not that God was tired, the Bible assures us that God never grows weary (Isaiah 40:28). **So what was God up to?**

The answer is, **that having created work**, by Himself working for six days and designing work for His humans to do - farming, herding, fishing, having dominion over and caring for the planet – What God created by blessing the seventh day was **REST as an appropriate God honoring alternative to work**. Since God also devised the concept of a seven day week as opposed to the Roman 10-day week, or some of the other ancient variations of counting the days, **you might also say that God set the appropriate balance between work and rest: work for six days rest for one**.

Realize that it wasn't until the early 20th century and the advent of strong labor unions, that the idea of a five day work week, followed by a two day weekend became the common practice. Still we think of Saturday as the day to catch up on chores at home and Sunday as the day of rest. But, to these former Egyptian slaves who perhaps never knew a day of rest in their entire life, the idea of stopping every seventh day just to rest would be a truly liberating idea.

But also, as distinct from the other six days, after blessing the seventh, God then "hallowed it," declaring it to be a holy day ... a day set apart for His purposes.

We don't hear any more about this idea of a sacred seventh day until in the book of Exodus when Moses brings the Israelites God's Ten Commandments. Right there in the middle sits the sixth commandment making Sabbath keeping an unbreakable law for the Hebrew people to always obey.

The word Sabbath literally means to STOP, to cease doing whatever you are doing. Interestingly, in the Exodus version of the sixth commandment, the reason given for this work stoppage was that God had rested, blessed, and hallowed the seventh day (as was noted in Genesis). So the Sabbath became a day for humans – being made in God's image – to also stop and rest as God had rested (Exodus 20:8-11).

Then, in the book of Deuteronomy, with the second giving of the law, Moses added that the Sabbath commandment was also there to specifically remind the people of Israel that they had once been slaves in Egypt having been brought to freedom by God. So Sabbath keeping would be a way for them to celebrate their freedom from slavery (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

But notice that in both commandments the idea was only to cease working and rest. Adding a worship component to the Sabbath day was not a requirement but was later done by post-exilic Jews who used their mandated rest day as an opportunity for study and worship in their local Synagogue. Because to the Jewish mind, neither the study of Scriptures or the saying of prayers is ever "work."

But for the Hebrew people, keeping this Sabbath rest day was not an option as God would often remind them both through Moses and the later prophets.

'You shall keep my sabbaths,
for this is a sign between me and you
throughout your generations, given in order that
you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.

Exodus 31:13

So strict Sabbath keeping, more than any of the other commandments, uniquely identified the Hebrews as God's chosen people – an entire nation declared to be "holy", to be set apart for God's unique purposes.

And Hebrew law strictly enforced what Sabbath keeping should look like:

- people were not to leave their home,
- or kindle a fire,
- or cook food,
- or do any form of work;
- they were to rest (Exodus 16:29, 35:2-3).

In illustration of the strictness of these commands, the book of Numbers recounts that while the people of Israel were still in the wilderness, a man was caught on a Sabbath day, "gathering sticks." When the people asked Moses for God's verdict on this man's sin; the answer came back that he was to be stoned to death (Numbers 15:32-36).

Now that to us seems an overly severe punishment for such a small sin of Sabbath breaking. But since stoning was also ordered as the standard punishment for most other commandment breaches – from adulterers to disobedient children – it did prove to the Hebrew people that God took their Sabbath keeping as seriously as He took their obedience to all His other commands.

God also gave the Israelites Sabbath laws not only for the seventh day, and for the seventh year in which the land was to be given rest, and then for the Jubilee year (the 50th year) which was to be a national time of rest and restoration.

Sadly, there is no Biblical record of those ancient Hebrews ever keeping a Sabbath year or the Jubilee year. And in a similar way they eventually ceased to honor the Sabbath day, even while the prophets warned them that doing so would cause them to be exiled from the land ... which eventually they were (Isaiah 58:13, Jeremiah 17:27).

Now you know why both the Jews of Jesus day and modern orthodox Jewish people still to this day go to great lengths to keep the seventh day, Saturday, as their Sabbath according to the sixth commandment. And to not break this commandment in any way by very laboriously, convolutedly defining exactly what constitutes "a home" (how big of an area in which they can walk on a Sabbath) and what activities might be construed as "work:" such as sewing on a garment? Or starting a car? Or pushing an elevator button? They rightly recognize themselves as still living under the strict orders of the sixth commandment.

Now, if it all stopped here, then we Sunday worshipping Gentile Christians would have to acknowledge that the Seventh Day Adventists were correct all along and that we were in deep trouble with God. But then along came Jesus, who apparently changed the Sabbath rules. Which is where things get complicated.

Jesus, as a recognized rabbi, intentionally defied Sabbath laws as they were understood in his day by pointedly healing people on several Sabbaths while challenging the other Rabbis to condemn him for doing so. Noting that no Jew would let Sabbath rules stop them from pulling a sheep out of a ditch or a child out of a well, **Jesus concluded, *it is [always] lawful to do good on the Sabbath*** (Matthew 12:10-12, Luke 13:15, 14:5).

And to the Sabbath breaking charge leveled against his disciples because while they had hungrily walked through a wheat field they had plucked some of grain to eat, Jesus apparently turned the common understanding of the Sabbath on its head by declaring that ***the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath***. An idea to which that unlucky wilderness stick gatherer would have heartily agreed.

Then more astonishingly, Jesus went on to declare himself as "**Lord of the Sabbath**" thus giving himself the authority to change Sabbath rules as he saw fit (Mark 12:27-28). And apparently he did. Because his disciples took a completely different understanding of Sabbath keeping out with them onto the mission field: **teaching Gentiles Christians that they were just as free to ignore the mandatory Sabbath work stoppage as they were other kosher rules.**

The sixth commandment no longer applied to Christians!

In his letter to the Colossian Christians, Paul wrote, *erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. [Jesus] set this aside, nailing it to the cross... triumphing over them by it...*

Therefore **do not let anyone condemn you** in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, **or sabbaths.** Colossians 2:14-16

Then, in his letter to the Roman Church Paul specifically contrasted Gentile Christian privileges with Jewish laws:

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds... Romans 14:5

Paul concluded that since each of us will be personally accountable to God for our actions in accordance with our beliefs, we should never judge other's differing ways – or days – of honoring God, but instead we should determine to personally live in such a way that will not cause another to stumble in their faith.

So if we Gentile believers have been officially freed from having to keep the strict interpretation of the sixth commandment, meaning that we can go to Church on Sunday or any other day as we wish, or not at all – what then remains within the seventh day rest of Genesis and Sabbath commands of Exodus for us to benefit from ? ?

This is certainly a question we need to have answered. Which brings us to a strange conversation that the author of Hebrews is having with his readers.

Hebrews chapter 3 begins by urging believers (Gentile and Jewish) not to fall away from their faith in Christ Jesus by making an example of the wilderness Hebrews who through their lack of faith were denied entrance into the promised land.

do not harden your hearts as [did] your
ancestors who put me to the test, though they
had seen my works for forty years...
in my anger I swore,
"They will not enter my rest."
Hebrews 3:7-11

It is a rather intricate rabbinic argument but eventually the author of Hebrews comes to this conclusion...

So then, a Sabbath rest still remains
for the people of God; for those who
enter God's rest also cease from their labors
as God did from his. Hebrews 4:9-11

And as you read on through chapters three and four you will discover that the way to enter into a rest similar to God's Sabbath rest is to believe, to keep believing, in his son Jesus.
Which is the big clue in helping us to understand and benefit from the same kind of "rest" that God blessed and sanctified on the seventh day.

Basically, according to the author of Hebrews, when we put our faith in Jesus as our savior and continue to live our lives by faith in him, we get the "rest" -- the peace of mind, the confident spirit that comes from living by faith and trusting our lives to God's care.

- This was the kind of rest that Adam enjoyed but lost due to his lack of faith in God's sustaining powers.
- This is also the kind of rest that those early Hebrews failed to enjoy because they refused to trust God to care for their lives.
- This was the kind of rest that the sixth commandment intended to teach those stubborn Hebrews. That for one day a week they had to stop all work so that they might learn to trust in God's care for them.
- Which is the lesson – like that unlucky stick gatherer – that they failed to learn as evidenced by their by failing honor the Sabbath and Jubilee years and eventually even the Sabbath day, as God had commanded them.

So enjoying God's rest – like what He did on the seventh day – all boils down to lodging your continued faith firmly in the salvation Jesus offers you along with the daily care and provision he promises to provide as you and your savior move together through this life into the next.

This is why Jesus gives us this invitation....

<p>Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me... and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:28-29</p>

We can only enjoy "rest," like what God enjoyed on that seventh day, as we learn to live by faith his provision for all of our lives. **Which only leaves us with the question of what exactly then are we doing during Sunday worship?**

According to pastor/theologian Warren Wiersbe, we should not to confuse Christian worship on the first weekday, the Lord's Day (Sunday) with Jewish Sabbath keeping on Saturday because they symbolize two completely different things.

The seventh day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath, symbolizes the old creation and the covenant of law: first you work then you rest. The first day of the week, the Lord's day, symbolizes the new creation and the covenant of grace: **first you believe in Christ and find rest and then you work** (Eph. 2:8-10). In the new creation, God's Spirit enables us to make the entire week an experience of worship, praise, and service to the glory of God. (The Wiersbe Bible Commentary, OT, page 19)

For as scripture teaches us

by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God ...
**For we are what he has made us,
created in Christ Jesus for good works,**
which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.
Ephesians 2:8-10

So our Sunday worship services to which we come – like those early Christians - on the first day of week are in remembrance and celebration of our new life and our “rest” in Christ and of course to give glory to God for our salvation. **But if Sunday worship is a privilege and not a law, why should we continue doing so every week?**

Because in contrast to the Hebrew’s seventh day work stoppage as mandated by the sixth commandment, **Sunday worship is meant to help keep Christians going strong all week long for the Lord.** A day for rest is still a good thing, but living our entire life in the strength of our faith is so much better.

As the author of Hebrews concluded:

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope
without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.
**And let us consider how to provoke
one another to love and good deeds,**

not neglecting to meet together,
as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another,
and all the more as
you see the Day approaching.
Hebrews 10:23

This is what we do on Sundays.