

The Sabbath – Sign of the Covenant

Introduction and Review

One of the biggest keys to a deeper and fuller understanding of the Bible is an understanding of Covenant. A Covenant in the Bible is something that brings two people, or two parties, into a clearly defined, formally established relationship with one another. (cf. marriage vows; contra, “contract”)

Here in Exodus, the covenant between Yahweh and Israel has four important ingredients: Preamble; Prologue; Terms; Sanctions. We saw last week that these four ingredients are really what ties together the first five books of the Bible as a single, unified covenant document. The Ten Commandments, then, are *meant* to be seen in the “big picture” of this covenant. They are embedded within the covenant as the “terms” that will formally govern and shape this relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

➤ Deuteronomy 4:13–14 — [Yahweh] declared to you *his covenant*, which he commanded you to perform, *that is, the Ten Words*, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone.

So, as the formal “terms” of a Covenant that’s now completely obsolete, what is the relevance of the Ten Commandments for us today? New Covenant Theology says that we can’t **extract** the Ten Commandments *out from* that of which they are the *center*. Therefore, as soon as the Covenant becomes obsolete, the Ten Commandments are no longer morally binding commandments that govern and shape our relationship with God under the New Covenant. As just one example of what this means, we’re no longer formally bound today by the fourth commandment (the Sabbath commandment), but *rather* by what God has clearly revealed about His will for special days *under the New Covenant*.

Covenant Theology, on the other hand, says that there’s clearly some sense in which the Ten Commandments are set **apart** as something special and unique within the covenant. Covenant Theology argues that the Ten Commandments are *bigger* than the Covenant. They’re a timeless, eternal expression of God’s moral will, and so even under the New Covenant, the Sabbath commandment (along with all the rest) is still a morally binding commandment that governs and shapes our *relationship* with God. But if this is so, then how do we justify changing the seventh day to another day of the week without **any** command from God? And how do we justify our very liberal “heart observance” of the “Sabbath” commandment? So which view is right? Or is neither view right, and we’re meant to see something in the middle? (Progressive Covenant Theology) What does the Sabbath commandment mean for us today?

The Sabbath *is unique* among all the rest of the Ten Commandments as the special *sign* of the Covenant.

➤ Exodus 31:12–18 — *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...* Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, *observing the Sabbath* throughout their generations, *as a covenant forever*.

Keeping the Sabbath is shorthand for keeping the entire covenant by faith. Sandwiched in between the first three commandments (which are vertical and God-ward and summed up in the commandment to love God) and the last six commandments (which are horizontal and man-ward and summed up in the commandment to love one's neighbor) we have the Sabbath commandment, which is the perfect outward **sign** of both categories – the outward **sign** of the entire Covenant. I believe that the first three and the last six commandments are no less morally binding upon us—governing and shaping our relationship with God under the New Covenant—than the two commandments that sum them up (love God and love your neighbor; cf. Mat. 22:37–40; 19:17-19; Rom. 13:8-10). I would suggest, however, that as the *only sign* of the Covenant, the Sabbath commandment becomes obsolete when the covenant *of which it is the sign* becomes obsolete. It's the Sabbath commandment that **ties** the Commandments and the Covenant together. So therefore, if the commandments were **separated from the covenant**, I'm suggesting that there would be only nine of them – nine commandments summing up the eternal, moral will of God. Of course, we saw last week how grateful we can be that God's commandments are never *given* to us just by themselves, but always embedded in Covenant.

So is that it? Does the Sabbath commandment no longer mean anything to us today? Well, we have to be careful. There *is* a sense in which even the fourth commandment is far, *far bigger* than the covenant. Let's go back now to the very beginning. After six days of God creating, and forming, and shaping the heavens and the earth, we read in Genesis chapter two:

I. Genesis 2:1–3— Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested [katapauo/katepausen] on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested [katapauo/katepausen] from all his work that he had done in creation.

It's very important for us to see how explicit the Bible is. God rested on the *seventh* day, and for that reason it is specifically the *seventh* day that God Himself blessed and made holy. If we still believe that the Sabbath commandment governs and shapes our relationship with God and yet we “observe” the Sabbath on Sunday, then we not only have to change the fourth commandment, but we also have to contradict the order of “creation” itself.¹

So what *is* God's rest on the seventh day all about? Well, when *we* get to day seven (Saturday), our week starts all over again on day one, so that one week follows another, follows another, follows another. Sunday always follows Saturday. But for God, the week *never* started over. God did not rest on the seventh day and then begin creating again on Day 1 of Week 2. Remember what we read: “Thus the heavens and the earth were *finished*, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God *finished* his work that he had done.” So when God rests on the seventh day, that day, *for God*, is a day that goes on *forever*, and ever, and ever, without end. “Today,” for God, is *still* Day 7. The rest that God began on Day 7 still continues, uninterrupted, even now.

And God's rest is not for His recovery and recuperation. If that were the case, He would have recovered and recuperated long ago. Instead, God's rest shows us His continual, unceasing

¹ We know there was nothing “ceremonial” about God's choice of the seventh day as the day on which He rested.

enjoyment and *celebration* of all His creative work. (cf. **Gen. 1:31**; Ps. 104:31; Prov. 8:31) God’s rest is a festive, joyful thing – a blissful, glorious, happy, unending celebration of His own infinite *goodness*. And so for God, Day 7 goes on, and on, and on for all eternity. But what does this have to do with *us*? The answer is simple – and staggering.

God has always intended, from the very beginning, that *we* should enter into His rest and share with Him in His blissful, festal, joyful, unending celebration. The grand finale of creation is not so much the creation of man as it is the “creation” of an *eternal day* of divine rest in which man—in which *we*—were meant to *share* and *participate*. This explains why it’s the seventh day that God blessed and sanctified.

How was the seventh day sanctified? Very simple. It was set apart as the only day that God blessed. But beyond that, we can’t go. There’s no evidence that in the beginning, God instituted a “Sabbath” or Sabbath observance.² There’s no evidence that Adam and Eve were to keep a “Sabbath” in the garden, but only that they were to *look forward* to themselves one day entering into *God’s unending* day of festive joy and celebration. Even after the fall, there’s still no biblical (or even extra-biblical) historical evidence that there was ever any Sabbath to be kept or observed by men like Seth, or Noah, or Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The first time *we* ever hear about a “Sabbath” day is in Exodus 16 when God gave His people instructions about gathering the manna. (cf. Exod. 16:4-5, 22-30) And if you read that chapter, it looks like this is the first time even *Israel* has ever heard about a “Sabbath” as a special day for them to keep and observe. It seems that what’s happening is God is preparing Israel for the coming of the covenant – the sign of which will be this *brand new* thing called the Sabbath. But *why*? Why should the Sabbath be the sign of the covenant? We’ve already seen one reason. Can you guess another?

II. 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 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 [katapauo / katepausen] on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.**

Can you see it? For the first time ever, Israel is to *observe* a Sabbath as the *sign* of God’s plan that *they* should be the people who will one day enter into the joyful, blissful experience of God’s own eternal rest. Remember what we read in Exodus thirty-one: “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...**”³

The covenant is what actually creates and brings into being the offspring (singular). And with the brand new creation of this offspring (singular), God gives them the brand new Sabbath commandment as a sign, and a constant reminder, of what His saving purposes are – *for them*. The Sabbath commandment reminds the people that these purposes go all the way back to the day that man was created. Back then they weren’t saving or redemptive purposes because the

² Exodus 20:11 need be saying no more (and most likely *is* saying no more) than that God blessed *what is now to be called* the Sabbath day and made it holy.

³ Sabbath keeping is an exclusive, redemptive sign given to Israel, but never required of all the world.

“offspring” hadn’t sinned. But they were still *gracious* and *eternal* purposes. In other words, **before the fall** God blessed the seventh day as a sign of His *gracious* and *eternal* plans for the man and the woman He had created – that they should one day share with Him in His eternal rest. **After the fall**, and **with the creation of the offspring (singular)** at Mount Sinai, God gave His people the Sabbath as a *sign* that these *same* gracious and eternal plans (revealed at creation) are now also His saving and redeeming plans (revealed in covenant). This explains the very different version of the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy.

- Deuteronomy 5:12–15 — Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy... 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.

So, Exodus explains the Sabbath as a sign of the Covenant by pointing us back to God’s *gracious and eternal* purpose **revealed in Creation** — *rest*. Deuteronomy explains the Sabbath as a sign of the Covenant by pointing us to God’s *saving and redemptive* purpose **revealed in the deliverance from Egypt** — which is *still rest*. The whole point of Israel’s deliverance from the *hard labor* of Egypt was that they might ultimately experience “*rest*” in the Promised Land.

- Deuteronomy 12:9–11 (cf. Exod. 33:14; 1 Kings 5:4; 8:56) — You have not as yet come to the **rest** and to the inheritance that the LORD your God is giving you. But when you... live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you **rest** from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety...
- Joshua 1:12–15 (cf. Deut. 3:18–20) — “The LORD your God is providing you a place of **rest** and will give you this land.’ ... All the men of valor among you shall pass over armed before your brothers... until the LORD gives **rest** to your brothers as he has to you, and they also take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them.”

This “rest” in the land of Canaan is a *picture* of the eternal rest that the people will one day share with God Himself. In fact, God’s rest and the people’s rest are actually joined together in Psalm 132:

- Psalm 132:8, 13–14 — Arise, O LORD, and go to your **resting place**, you and the ark of your might... For **the LORD has chosen Zion**; he has desired it for his dwelling place: “This is my **resting place forever**; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

The *temple* on *Mount Zion* in the *land of promise* became the ultimate *symbol* of the place where God’s people should one day find their eternal and final rest – in and with God Himself. Canaan, and Mount Zion, and the temple were all temporary pictures of the eternal rest that God had planned for His people even **before** the fall – from the very, *very* beginning. The Psalmist makes all this very clear in Psalm 95:

- Psalm 95:6–11 — Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said,

“They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.”
Therefore I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest [katapausis/katapausin].”

What “rest” was God talking about? On one level, we know He was talking about “rest” in the land of Canaan. Because of Israel’s rebellion and disobedience, God said that instead of inheriting the land, they would all die in the wilderness. But it’s also obvious from Psalm 95 that this rest *in the land of Canaan* is only a picture of the eternal rest *that’s been available ever since the beginning of creation*. Why is this obvious? First of all, because God refers to this rest as *His* rest (“*My* rest”), which *is* eternal and which we can only understand in light of Genesis two. And second of all, because the Psalmist clearly implies that even for his own generation already living in the land of Canaan, God’s rest is still something that *remains* for even them to enter.

The Bible tells us that under the New Covenant the symbols and types and shadows of our eternal rest (such as the temple, and Mount Zion) have actually given way now to the *heavenly realities*.

- Hebrews 10:19–22 — Therefore, brothers, *since we have* confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, *by the new and living way* that he *opened* for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and *since we have* a great priest over the house of God, *let us draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith.
- Hebrews 12:22–23 — *You have come* to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

We have “*not yet*” fully entered into these heavenly realities. And yet we *have “already”* tasted of them and experienced them in part. The writer of Hebrews speaks of those who have “*tasted* the heavenly gift, and have *shared* in the Holy Spirit, and have *tasted* the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.” (Heb. 6:4-5) So in light of these things, we’re ready now to read what he says in chapter four:

- Hebrews 4:1–11 — 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 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... “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” For if Joshua had given them rest [in Canaan], 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 God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest.*

Did you feel the constant tension between the “already” and the “not yet” – between the rest we’ve already tasted through the Gospel of God’s Son, and the rest that still awaits us when we sit down to feast at the table with Jesus? “So then, there remains a **Sabbath rest** for the people of God.” “Sabbath rest” is *one* word in the Greek. This is the first use of this word in all of Greek literature, and this is the only place it appears in the entire New Testament. It’s a word that expresses **festivity** and **joy**. (Lane; O’Brien) It’s a word that points us to the coming reality of “**celebrating** in the presence of God the eternal Sabbath with unceasing praise and adoration.” (Lane) “The... deliberate use of [this word]... is intended to spell out the fact that life for the people of God... in his resting place will be ‘an eternal, festive Sabbath **celebration**.’” (O’Brien; quoting Laansma) Our own future is to be an eternal sharing in God’s own blissful, glorious, happy, unending celebration of His own infinite **goodness**. These are unspeakable pleasures – inexpressible joys. We still await them, and yet through the Gospel of Jesus Christ they have already broken into the present age so that we **taste** them even now. (Acts 13:52; Rom. 14:17; 15:13; Gal. 5:22; 1 Thess. 1:6; Eph. 1:13-14; Rom. 8:15-17, 23-25)

Conclusion

As long as the **offspring (singular)** was experiencing “rest” only in terms of the symbols and types and shadows connected with the covenant at Mount Sinai, it was appropriate that the **offspring** should have an **outward** covenant sign reminding them that their true, eternal rest wasn’t something new that just came in with the Promised land, but something that had been in existence ever since the beginning of creation and which even now still remained for them to enter. **This** was the meaning—**this** was the ultimate **beauty and loveliness** of the *weekly Sabbath* as the sign of the Covenant.

But now the New Covenant has come, and all the symbols and types and shadows of our eternal rest (such as the temple, and Mount Zion) have actually given way to the heavenly realities. We’ve already tasted of our eternal Sabbath rest, and so the sign of the weekly Sabbath has been **fulfilled** in a way that none of the other commandments ever were. In fact, the sign of the Sabbath has been superseded by the reality to which it always pointed – the **rest** which God Himself has been celebrating ever since the seventh day of creation, and which He has always intended that *we* should one day experience **with Him**. If there’s no longer any Sabbath commandment that governs and shapes our relationship with God under the New Covenant, it’s only because today God actually comes to us **in Christ the Savior**, and He says to us:

- Matthew 11:28–30 — “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you **rest**. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find **rest** for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Even as you work, and labor, and strive, are you living in the reality of this **eternal Sabbath rest** that’s **already** your present possession? Even as you fight, and wrestle, and struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, do you still experience and know this **rest** that is found in Jesus? Are you worn out, and weary, and tired? “Come to me,” Jesus says, “and I will give you rest.” But always, there is the tension. Even as we’re finding rest, we still work, and labor, and strive. We still fight, and wrestle, and struggle. And so the more we taste and experience His rest, the

more we know, and feel within ourselves *how much more* there must be to come. The Apostle John writes:

- Revelation 14:13 (cf. Rev. 6:11; 14:11) — I heard a voice from heaven saying, “...Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may *rest* from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

As you work, and labor, and strive in this life – as you fight, and wrestle, and struggle – be daily encouraged by the eternal festival of Sabbath celebration that will one day be ours *in fullest measure. Rest and festival; rest and celebration; rest and worship, adoration, and praise; rest and the unending, perfect enjoyment of the goodness of God.*

*“So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,
for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.
Let us therefore [by faith] strive to enter that rest.”*