

The Christian's Sabbath

“He that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.”
—*Hebrews 4:10*

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT the word sabbath in most instances is a translation of a Hebrew word which means “intermission,” according to *Strong’s Hebrew Dictionary*. The texts in which it appears

indicate that the intermission being spoken of was for rest from servile and gainful work. Our word rest, or repose, comes closest to defining the word sabbath.

In the New Testament the word sabbath appears, in all, sixty times. Many of these uses are in narratives of events which occurred on the Jewish Sabbath Day, such as the reading or teaching of the Scriptures in the synagogues. We are also informed of the accusations against Jesus for healing the sick on the Sabbath Day. In reply to these charges Jesus explained, “My Father is always working, and so am I.” He also explained that “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath.”—John 5:17; Mark 2:27, *New Living Translation*

Jesus gave no direct commands concerning the Sabbath Day, nor did any of the apostles. The only use of the word in all the epistles of the New Testament is found in Colossians 2:16, which reads, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath."

Beginning with Cornelius, Gentiles began accepting Christ and coming into the Early Church. Their background of religious thought and experience was vastly different from that of their Jewish brethren, and this presented a problem regarding those first believers in Christianity. To what extent should the Gentile believers be expected to conform to Jewish customs and viewpoints?

An apostolic conference was called at Jerusalem to consider this matter. The conclusions reached are set forth in a message, or letter, drawn up at this gathering which was then sent to the various churches. This letter reads, in part, "It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well."—Acts 15:25-29

It is noteworthy that in these "necessary things" from which the Gentile believers were to abstain,

no mention is made of refraining from work on the seventh day. Undoubtedly the reason is that the apostles understood that the Jewish Law was not binding upon the followers of Jesus, except those fundamental principles pertaining to idols, blood and moral defilement. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus had given these a higher, magnified meaning.

Moses summed up the intent and spirit of the Ten Commandments to mean that we should love Jehovah with all our hearts, and our neighbors as ourselves. (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18) Jesus, when asked about which was the greatest commandment, quoted the foregoing words of Moses, and added the comment, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:37-40) Thus, Jesus was indicating what the spirit of the Decalogue involved.

On the night before his death, Jesus then added a “new commandment” for his disciples to follow, “That ye love one another; as I have loved you.” (John 13:34) This additional instruction went beyond the two great commandments given by Moses, for it calls for sacrifice and service. We are invited to “lay down” our lives for our brethren in Christ.—John 15:13; I John 3:16

To have such a love for God as would lead one to follow in the sacrificial footsteps of Jesus would most certainly, and of necessity, result in purity of life and conduct. One who is laying down his life in the service of God and of his fellow brethren does not need to be told not to steal; not to covet; not to bear false witness; not to commit adultery; and not to murder.

The Sabbath Day commandment called for abstention from servile and gainful employment on the seventh day. The true Christian is one who has consecrated all that he has and is to God and to his service. All that he may gain by working he acquires for the Lord, so that all his work is holy before him. Those who have such a viewpoint and purpose in life need not be told to consider one day a week more holy to God than another, for they have already dedicated every day to him.

EARLY CHURCH CUSTOMS

It is clear from the Bible record that the apostles, when opportunity afforded, visited the Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath Day. This was not because they were strict observers of the Jewish Law, but because they knew they would find devout Jews in the synagogues on these days to which they could witness the Gospel of Christ.

The apostles were also just as alert for opportunities to serve on the first day of the week, when early Christians formed the habit of meeting on that day in commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus, a most appropriate honor to their Redeemer and Savior. One notable example of this was Paul's experience at Troas where, on the first day of the week, he preached and had fellowship with the brethren throughout the night, until his departure the next day.—Acts 20:7-12

This does not mean that the apostles had adopted the first day of the week to be observed as the Christian Sabbath Day. It simply showed that they were ready and glad to serve their brethren and to bear witness to the Gospel wherever and whenever

opportunity offered, regardless of what day of the week it might be.

A REST DAY BENEFICIAL

In connection with the Sabbath Day, Moses reminded Israel of their time as slaves in Egypt when, apparently, no day of rest was provided. (Exod. 5:4-19; Deut. 5:15) It is a recognized fact that human beings need a time of rest from their ordinary occupations. Indeed, for many today, two days a week are provided as a rest from paid employment. As Christians, we should especially rejoice in the opportunities these afford us for worship and service to the Lord and to our brethren.

The commandment relating to the Sabbath simply stated that there were to be six days of labor, and the seventh was to be a day of rest. No indication is given as to when the six days would or should begin to count. Evidently the spirit of the commandment is that one day in seven was to be a day of rest. Some may insist that man has kept such accurate time that the exact same seventh day of the week which we now call Saturday is the same seventh day on which God rested when he had finished the creative work, and therefore no other day could properly be called the Sabbath.—Gen. 2:2,3

In this, certain difficulties are encountered. One is that God's rest day was not one of twenty-four hours. The word "day" in the above citation is translated from a Hebrew word which denotes a "space of time," with no stipulation as to its length. In addition, it is rendered by many different English words in the Bible, such as day, age, life, season, time, and numerous other words. Thus, we see

that no specific twenty-four hour period can be arrived at for calculating the Sabbath.

Scriptural days in the Old Testament were measured from sundown to sundown. (Gen. 1:5,31) This meant that as far as the passage of time was concerned, “evening,” or darkness, came first and “morning,” or daylight, followed until the next evening. However, depending on the time of year, and the geographic location where one lives, the specific period constituting a “day” of darkness followed by light varies widely. In an extreme, but valid, example, those who live in the maximum northern or southern latitudes experience months of nearly continuous darkness, followed by similarly long periods of daylight. In these areas of the earth, particularly, twenty-four hour time divisions are wholly arbitrary, being governed solely by humanly made time measuring devices.

All of this may seem relatively unimportant to our subject, but it emphasizes the difficulties of endeavoring to establish a particular day out of seven as one which God has made holy, or sacred, above the others. We have already quoted Paul’s instructions that Christians are not to be judged upon the basis of whether or not they observe certain days above others or keep the Jewish Sabbath. When we take all the facts into consideration we can see how truly wise Paul was in giving Christians such advice.—Col. 2:16

GOD’S REST

Our opening text indicates that Christians enjoy a sabbath, or rest, which is similar to the rest that God began when the work of the six creative days,

or spaces of time, was finished. Did God cease all activity in order to rest, in the sense that we think of resting? Was God weary or tired? The Prophet Isaiah wrote, “Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?”—Isa. 40:28

God was not tired and did not need to rest physically or mentally from his labors. It is apparent, therefore, that there is a deeper meaning attached to the statement that, as Christians, we have ceased from our own works, “as God did from his.” Examining the general lesson of which our text is a part, some interesting facts appear. The first verse of the chapter reads, “Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.” (Heb. 4:1) The rest here referred to is something far beyond physical rest during one day in seven, whether it be the first, the seventh, or any other day.

Verses three and four read, “We which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works.” Here is a direct reference to the seventh day of God’s rest, with the explanation that the Israelites had failed to enter into his rest, though the works he rested from were “finished from the foundation of the world.”

How revealing are these texts! It was not that God had been resting one twenty-four hour day in seven from the foundation of the world, and that the Israelites had failed to rest with him on those

seventh days. Rather, the works were finished from the foundation of the world, and God had been resting ever since. His rest had been continuous, but the Israelites had failed to share it with him because of their unbelief.

The apostle then explains that because, as a nation, the Israelites had not entered into God's rest, "therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein." (Heb. 4:6) Verse seven quotes a prophecy from Psalm 95:7 referring to a "certain day," or period, when God's people of this age would be given an opportunity to enter into his rest. Paul explains that if Joshua [*Marginal Translation*] had given rest to God's people in the Jewish Age, Jehovah, through the psalmist, would not have spoken of another day.—Heb. 4:8

The point we wish to emphasize here is that the apostle's lesson pertaining to Christian sabbath keeping could not possibly be applied to resting one day in seven from physical labor. Paul is not discussing the importance of one day above another but is encouraging the Christian to enter into a rest of faith every day.

Verse nine continues the lesson and reads, "There remaineth therefore a sabbath rest for the people of God." (*Revised Version*) This refers to a far more comprehensive sabbath, or rest, which the people of God will attain in the future by being "faithful unto death." (Rev. 2:10) Again, however, the reference is to a continuous rest, not an intermittent one day in seven cessation from physical labor.

Then comes our theme text. It speaks of those who enter into God's rest, explaining that those who do so cease from their own works as God ceased

from his. Here, also, the reference is to something far more comprehensive and important than resting one day in seven. A Christian ceases from his own works, not merely for the seventh day of each week, but for every day. His rest is as continuous as God's rest has been, and, as previously noted in verse three, his has been an uninterrupted rest from the "foundation of the world."

What, then, are the works from which Christians are to cease? Is it their daily employment by which they make a living? Surely not! We believe the Scriptures reveal clearly that they are our fallen works by which we might attempt to secure the favor and blessing of the Lord. Paul refers to them as the "works" and "deeds" of the Mosaic law by which there "shall no flesh be justified."—Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16; 3:11

We cease from these works by placing our faith and trust in the finished work of Christ. Our Lord, through his shed blood, has provided justification and salvation for us which we could not attain by our own imperfect efforts, or works. Our peace, our rest of faith, is in him, and it is a blessed rest we enjoy, because that which we struggled unsuccessfully to attain has been provided by another.—Rom. 5:1,8-11

"AS GOD DID FROM HIS"

From this standpoint, Paul's comparison of the Creator's rest with ours is most interesting and enlightening. During all those "days" or long periods of creation Jehovah and his beloved Son together carried forward the work of preparing the earth to be man's eternal home. John wrote concerning Jesus in his prehuman existence that "without him was

not any thing made that was made.” (John 1:3) God directed the work, so we hear him saying to his Son, “Let us make man in our image.”—Gen. 1:26

With the creation of man, the work of those six days was completed. Man had been created in the image of God, with the ability to know right from wrong. He was told that it was wrong to disobey the Creator’s law, and that disobedience would lead to death. He had been created with free will to choose whether to obey or disobey. Divine power would not therefore be used to restrain him from sin. Adam knowingly partook of the forbidden fruit and was sentenced to death.—I Tim. 2:14

Then began the long night of sin and death. The Creator still loved his human creation, but justice demanded that the death penalty continue to be carried out. However, in his wisdom and love, God had formulated a plan for mankind’s recovery from sin and death. It would permit man to experience evil, and to profit therefrom, thus adding to his original perfection that which could be acquired only by experience.

The Heavenly Father’s plan called for a Redeemer, one who would take the sinner’s place in death, and being raised from the dead, serve as the reconciler of the world to God. (I Pet. 3:18) The one chosen for this was his own beloved Son. (John 3:16) Now, God’s Son, who had worked under divine supervision in creating all things, was assigned the responsibility of redeeming and recovering fallen man.

God, therefore, rested from his creative work in the sense of entrusting its completion to another, even to his own beloved Son. Since the Creator’s confidence in his Son was complete, his rest has

been complete. He knew from the beginning that his Son would willingly, gladly, and faithfully carry out every detail of his plan for the redemption and recovery of fallen man from sin and death.

Paul wrote, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.” (II Cor. 5:19, *New International Version*) The Creator is the author of the plan of reconciliation; but, as Paul explains, it is accomplished through Christ, and God rests the matter with him. Now we can see how it is that our rest is similar to God’s rest. We have ceased from our own works as God did from his because, like our Heavenly Father, we look to Jesus to accomplish what we cannot do ourselves.

God could not set aside the death penalty and restore sinful man to life because the sentence of death was just, and divine justice could not be violated. However, the perfect man Jesus became a “ransom,” an exact corresponding price for the perfect man Adam who disobeyed, thus making possible the release of man from sin’s penalty—death. We, as members of the fallen race, are imperfect, and cannot approach God in our own merit. Upon the basis of the ransom provided by Jesus, he becomes our “Advocate” before the Father, so we can be at peace with God, and enjoy a hope of life through our Lord Jesus Christ.—I Tim. 2:5,6; I John 2:1,2; Rom. 5:1-5

The Creator’s confidence in his Son has always been complete. The extent of our rest in Christ depends upon the degree of faith we exercise in this loving provision which our Heavenly Father has made for us. God is active on our behalf even while resting. Jesus said that no one could come to him unless drawn by the Father, and he further promised

that those who are thus drawn, he would “in no wise cast out,” but would raise “up again at the last day.”—John 6:44,37,39

God draws the sinner, not directly to himself, but to Jesus. (vss. 44,45) The sinner cannot go directly to God in his undone condition, but must first recognize the need of redemption through Christ. (John 14:6) What is true in the case of one individual member of the fallen race is true of all. Having brought upon himself the divine penalty of death by transgressing God’s law, if man were ever to live again something must be accomplished for him. He must be redeemed, and God gave his Son the opportunity to be man’s Redeemer.

The divine permission of evil in the long-term view of human experience might properly be considered as the completion, in the sense of a refining, of the human creation. It is a refining work involving the operation of man’s free will. God saw that inexperienced man would transgress his law. God knew, too, that he could not overlook this transgression. The Creator also knew, however, that his beloved Son would gladly take the sinner’s place in death, and thus provide the means for his recovery.

Thus, Jehovah could look down the stream of time to the close of his day of rest and know that the earth would be inhabited by restored man. Mankind would not only be perfect mentally, morally, and physically, but would possess also that strength of righteous character which could be acquired only by experience. With this eternal perspective in view, then, God rested from his work pertaining to man that this ultimate attainment might be reached through the ministry of his beloved Son, Jesus.

The seventh creative day, God's rest day, like the others, began in obscurity. Actually, from the standpoint of light and darkness, it has been more like night than day. However, this long period during which evil has been permitted for the further development of man, is to end in a glorious morning of joy. The psalmist prophesied, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."—Ps. 30:5

The work of the final thousand years of this seventh day is described in the New Testament as the time of Christ's reign. (Rev. 20:4,6) Not only has Jesus provided redemption for the human race, but during his Mediatorial reign he will actually restore redeemed humanity to life and to harmony with God. Paul says that Christ must reign until all enemies are put under his feet, and that the "last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."—I Cor. 15:25,26

With the recovery of man complete, and with all the willing and obedient of mankind restored to perfection and able to obey the Creator's perfect Law, Christ's work will have been completed. Then the Creator will resume his direct relationship with his human creation. The work of the last creative day shall then be finished.

Meanwhile, what a glorious incentive we have for fully resting in Jesus to accomplish the divine purpose both in ourselves as individuals, and on behalf of the whole world. Our rest in the Lord is as complete as is our belief in him. If we have only partially believed, we will rest but partially. If we have fully believed, then we can fully rest in faith, and our peace and joy in the Lord will be deep, full and rich. ■