



GOD CHOSE A DAY OF

REST

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE SABBATH

BY DANIEL L. SEGRAVES

Objective: The objective of this article is to explore the prophetic significance of the fourth of the Ten Commandments.

ON MOUNT SINAI, THE Lord gave Israel Ten Commandments, the fourth of which prohibited any work on the Sabbath day. No family members, servants, cattle, or strangers among the Israelites were permitted to work (Exodus 20:8–10.) The severity of this command was demonstrated when a man picked up some sticks on the Sabbath and was stoned to death by the command of the Lord (Numbers 15:32–36).

In the first account of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath recalled creation, followed by the Lord's rest (Exodus 20:11). When Moses recounted Sinai, he did not mention creation relating to the Sabbath. Instead, the Sabbath recalled Israel's slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15).

Does this mean today's Christians must refrain from all work one day each week? After all, the Lord said to Moses, "Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 31:15, NKJV).

It is remarkable how many times the Gospels tell of Jesus working miracles on the Sabbath. One such event was when a man was healed at the pool of Bethesda. Jesus told this man, who had been unable to walk for thirty-eight years, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." The Jews told this man, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed" (John 5:10, NKJV). Their statement was based on scriptural passages like Jeremiah 17:21–22, NKJV: "Thus says the LORD: 'Take heed

to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work.'"

When the Jews learned that Jesus was the one who commanded this man to carry his bed, they "sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath" (John 5:16, NKJV). We might expect Jesus to explain to them that it was not work for Him to heal someone. But instead, He answered, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working" (John 5:17, NKJV). In response, "the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18, NKJV).

On another occasion, Jesus walked through fields of grain on the Sabbath with His hungry disciples. The disciples began to pluck and eat heads of grain. Seeing this, some Pharisees complained to Jesus, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" (Matthew 12:2, NKJV).

Rather than correcting His disciples, Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would

not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:3–8, NKJV).

How is it that Jesus and His disciples could, without guilt, do things like these on the Sabbath? The answer is found in some of Jesus’ last words to His disciples before His ascension:

“All things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me” (Luke 24:44, NKJV). After saying this, Jesus “opened their understanding, that the might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45, NKJV).

The point here is that there are things throughout the entire Old Testament that are prophetic; they point in some way to the coming Messiah, aspects of His life, His works, and the covenant He would introduce. If we do not understand that, we do not comprehend these verses of Scripture.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17, NKJV). This does not mean Jesus came to obey the Law, as we have already seen. The word translated “fulfill” (plēroō) does not mean “obey.” Some form of this word is used fifteen times by Matthew to speak of the way Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in Christ. (See Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9, 35.)

The Sabbath day was one of those things in the law of Moses that looked ahead to Christ and the work He would do on behalf of those who believed on Him under the auspices of the New Covenant. This is why Paul wrote, “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Colossians 2:16–17, NKJV). Neither the dietary laws nor the holy days required under the Law are binding on New Testament believers. This is because their prophetic purpose is fulfilled in the person of Christ.

What was the prophetic significance of the Sabbath day? This is explained in the Book of Hebrews, written to first-century Jewish Christians who were considering turning away from Christ and going back to the law of Moses.

There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. (Hebrews 4:9–11, NKJV)

The writer of Hebrews coined a word here, sabbatismos, which is translated “rest.” It obviously comes from the Hebrew shabbath, frequently transliterated “sabbath” and the essential meaning of which is “to cease.” By extension, it means “to rest,” for it signifies ceasing from one’s labor.

God did not intend the fourth commandment to be an end in itself. He intended it to point toward the ultimate rest found in Jesus Christ. The law of Moses concluded with

the coming of Christ (Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:19, 22–25; Hebrews 10:9). The Sabbath was a shadow of Christ in that it was a day of complete and absolute rest. Likewise, in Christ, believers find salvation as they cease completely from their own efforts to earn salvation and rest in the work of Christ on their behalf. **PL**

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Personal Reflection:

1. Why was there a death penalty under the law of Moses for working on the Sabbath?
2. What was Jesus’ attitude toward the Sabbath?
3. Why did Jesus use the example of David violating the Law to explain that His disciples were guiltless for plucking and eating corn on the Sabbath?
4. Why are Christians not to allow others to judge them regarding sabbaths?
5. Does an understanding of the Sabbath principle help you better to appreciate the work of Jesus Christ on your behalf?



Notes:



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