

Major Bible Themes

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1871-1952

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ISBN: 0-310-22390-3

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE SABBATH

Beginning with His own work in creation, God has chosen to sanctify, or set apart, one-seventh of all time. To Israel He commanded the seventh day as a day of rest; the seventh, or sabbatic year in which the land was to rest (Exod. 23:10, 11; Lev. 25:2-7); and the fiftieth year as a year of jubilee in recognition of seven times seven years. In various details both the sabbatic year and the year of jubilee were typically prophetic of the kingdom age which is the seventh and last of the dispensations, and which is characterized by the enjoyment of a sabbatic rest for all creation. Though in the present age the day to be celebrated is divinely changed from the seventh to the first day of the week because of the New Creation's beginning, the same proportion in the division of time -- one day in seven -- is perpetuated.

The word sabbath means cessation, or perfect rest, from activity. Apart from the continual burnt offerings and feasts, the day was in no sense one of worship or service.

In view of the wide-spread confusion which exists regarding the sabbath and especially in view of the effort which is made to recognize it as in force in this present age, it is imperative that the precise teachings of the Scriptures concerning the sabbath shall be carefully weighed.

A degree of clarity is gained when the sabbath is considered in its relation to various periods of time:

1. The Period From Adam to Moses.

It is recorded that God rested at the close of His six creative days (Exod. 2:2, 3; 20:10, 11; Heb. 4:4); but there is no intimation in the Word of God that man was appointed to observe, or ever did observe, a sabbath until Israel came out of Egypt. The book of Job discloses the religious life and experience of the patriarchs, and though their various responsibilities to God are therein discussed, there is never a reference to a sabbath-day obligation. On the other hand, it is distinctly stated that the giving of the sabbath to Israel by the hand of Moses was the beginning of sabbath observance among men (Exod. 16:29; Neh. 9:10-12; Ezk. 20:12). Likewise, it is evident from the records of the first imposition of the sabbath (Exod. 16:1-35), that on the particular day which was one week, or seven days, previous to the first recorded sabbath, the children of Israel took a sabbath-breaking journey of many miles from Elim to the wilderness of Sin. There they murmured against Jehovah, and on that day the supply of food from Heaven began which was to be gathered for six days, but was not to be gathered on the seventh day. It is evident, therefore, that the day of their journey which would have been a sabbath had a sabbath obligation, been in force, was not observed as a sabbath.

2. The Period From Moses to Christ.

In this period the sabbath was rightfully in force. It was embedded in the law (Exod. 20:10, 11) and the divine cure for its non-observance was likewise provided in the law of the offerings. In this connection, it is important to observe that the sabbath was never imposed on the Gentiles, but was peculiarly a sign between Jehovah and Israel (Exod. 31:12-17). Among Israel's sins, her failure to keep the sabbath and to give the land its rest, are especially emphasized.

In the midst of this period of the law, Hosea predicted that, as a part of the judgments which were to come upon Israel, her sabbaths would cease (Hosea 2:11). This prophecy must at some time be fulfilled, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

As the preceding age continued to the death of Christ, His earth-life and ministry was under the law. For this reason, He is seen as keeping the law, expounding the law, and applying the law. Finding the sabbath law obscured by the traditions and teachings of men, He pointed out that the sabbath was given as a benefit to man and man was not to be made a sacrifice for the sabbath (Mark 2:27). Christ was faithful to the whole Mosaic system, which included the sabbath, because that system was in force during His earth-life; but that obvious fact is no basis for the claim that a Christian who is under grace and living in another dispensation is appointed to follow Christ in His sabbath observance either in example or precept.

3. The Period of the Church.

Following the resurrection of Christ, there is no record in the New Testament that the sabbath was observed by any believer, even in error. Doubtless the multitude of Judaized Christians did observe the sabbath; but no record of such observance was permitted to appear in the Word of God. In like manner, following the resurrection of Christ, there is no injunction given to Jew, Gentile, or Christian to observe the sabbath, nor is sabbath breaking once mentioned among the numerous lists of possible sins. On the contrary, there are warnings against sabbath observance on the part of those who are the children of God under grace.

Galatians 4:9, 10 condemns the observance of "days and months and times and years." These were usually observed with a view to meriting the favor of God and by those who would be thoughtful of God at one time and careless at another.

Hebrews 4:1-13 contemplates the sabbath as a type of the rest (from his own works) into which the believer enters when he is saved.

Colossians 2:16, 17 plainly instructs the child of God not to be judged with respect to a sabbath day, and infers that such an attitude toward the sabbath is reasonable in view of all that Christ has become to one who is now of the New Creation (Col. 2:9-17). In this passage, most evidently reference is made to the weekly sabbaths, rather than to those special or extra sabbaths which were a part of the ceremonial law.

Romans 14:5 declares that when the believer is "persuaded in his own mind" he may esteem all days alike. This does not imply a neglect of faithful worship, but rather suggests that, to such an one, all days are full of devotion to God.

Because of the fact that in the New Testament the sabbath is never included as any part of the Christian's life and service, the term Christian sabbath is a misnomer. In this connection it may be noted that in place of the sabbath of the law there is now provided the Lord's Day of the New Creation which far exceeds the sabbath in its glory, its privileges, and its blessings.

4. The Sabbath in the Coming Age.

In full harmony with the New Testament doctrine that the new Lord's Day is related only to the Church, it is prophesied that the sabbath will be reinstated -- thus superseding the Lord's Day -- immediately upon the completion of the out-calling of the Church and her removal from the world. Even in the brief period of the Tribulation which must intervene between the end of this age and the age of the kingdom, the sabbath is again in view (Matt. 24:20); but prophecy especially anticipates the sabbath as a vital feature of the coming kingdom age (Isa. 66:23; Ezek. 46:1).

QUESTIONS

1. What portion of time has God sanctified?
2. Name the apportionments of time prescribed for Israel.

3. In what particular is the apportionment of the present age similar to the age that is past?
4. a. What is the meaning of the word sabbath?
 - b. How was the sabbath observed?
5. What evidence have we that the sabbath was not observed in the time of Adam and Moses?
6. a. When rightfully in force in the period between Moses and Christ, to whom did the sabbath law apply?
 - b. Did God treat the failure to keep the sabbath laws as a serious sin?
7. At what time in the history of the world would Hosea's prophecy (2:11) naturally be fulfilled?
8. a. What was Christ's attitude toward the law and the sabbath?
 - b. Is His sabbath precept and example binding on the Christian?
9. What evidence have we that the sabbath is not to be kept after the resurrection of Christ?
10. What Scriptures bear on sabbath keeping in this age?
11. What is their teaching?
12. What day has now superseded the sabbath?
13. What Scriptures disclose the fact that the sabbath will be observed in the Tribulation?
14. What Scriptures disclose the fact that the sabbath will be observed in the Kingdom?