

What is the Lord's Day?

Part 2: Biblical Background, New Testament

The Redeemer has come, and we have rest.

The New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament we need to pay careful attention to what Christ did on the Sabbath. As He came into the world, as He ministered to God's people, as He preached the gospel, true Sabbath was breaking into the world. His preaching and his healing brought Sabbath rest to the people of God. As Hebrews 4 teaches, the Joshua of the Old Testament could not bring the people of God into the final rest. A better Joshua had to come. Jesus Christ came to bring rest. He is the Lord of the entire Sabbath rest legislation. We've been set free from slavery. The Redeemer has come, and we have rest.

Luke 4:14-21 – Sabbath fulfilled

Luke tells us that when the Lord began his earthly ministry, He attended the synagogue service in Nazareth and there read from Isaiah 61 about the Year of Jubilee. Then He said that this scripture was fulfilled in their hearing, fulfilled that very day. He had come to proclaim the good news, the rest to which the Old Testament Jubilee was pointing forward. All the Sabbath legislation of the Old Testament which came to a climax in the Year of Jubilee was fulfilled that day as Christ began his gospel-preaching ministry.

Let us now look at those places in the gospel and see what the Lord Jesus did on various Sabbath days in order to

put into effect that gospel Sabbath rest – to be the body that cast a shadow back to the Old Testament Sabbaths.

Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 6:1-11

In these parallel passages, two events are recorded. The disciples plucked some heads of grain on the Sabbath and, as Luke tells us, rubbed them in their hands. Effectively, they were harvesting and threshing. The Pharisees objected to this Sabbath day work.

With the coming of the Messiah a new era has arrived.

Their objection would have been based on Exodus 34:21 ("Six days you shall labour, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest") and on the prohibition of picking up manna (Exodus 16).

How did the Lord respond? He did not debate different interpretations of the Old Testament texts (and those debates were current). Rather, He told the Pharisees that they needed to understand that the Son of Man, the Messiah, was now in their midst. He made reference to how David broke the law by eating the holy temple bread and

how the priests desecrate the Sabbath day by working at the temple without incurring guilt. Then He solemnly told them that one greater than the temple was in their midst. They needed to realize that. The Son of Man, the promised messianic king of the house of David, the fulfilment of the Sabbath day gospel, was in their midst. What were they arguing about?

Then Jesus healed the man with the shrivelled hand on the Sabbath day. The scribes and Pharisees objected to this, as they considered it work. Since the man's life was not at stake, Jesus ought not to have healed him. The Lord responded by saying that it was good to do good on the Sabbath day.

The contexts in which the gospel writers place these episodes are also very instructive. Matthew places these episodes right after he records Jesus speaking those famous words:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matt 11:28-30)

Matthew tells us that these Sabbath day episodes happened "at that time." This is instructive. Jesus came to give rest – the redemptive rest proclaimed by the Sabbath day. Especially the healing of the man with the shrivelled hand shows how Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, the royal

Messiah, the one greater than the temple, came to give rest. The man no longer had to worry about his bad hand. He could function again in the community.

Mark and Luke place these same episodes in a different context. For example, Mark places them right after he records how Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the bridegroom. The time for festivity has arrived with the coming of the bridegroom. The new kingdom order has come. The new comes in place of the old. The new cannot be sewn on to the old, just like a new patch cannot be sewn on to an old garment. The new cannot be poured into the old, just like new wine cannot be poured into old wineskins. With the coming of the Messiah a new era has arrived. He has brought the redemption proclaimed by the Sabbath day.

Other Sabbath healings in Luke

In Luke 13:10-17 the Lord heals a woman who was chronically deformed for eighteen years on a Sabbath day. The synagogue ruler objected because there were six days to do such things and work ought not to be done on the Sabbath day. Jesus showed the hypocrisy of such sentiments. Any Jew would “unbind” his ox or donkey to let it drink on a Sabbath day. How could they object to his “unbinding” this woman and setting her free from Satan?

In Luke 14 we read about the Lord Jesus healing a man who was afflicted with dropsy on the Sabbath. These passages show us what our Lord Jesus Christ is about. He is about healing, setting people free, liberating those who had been bound by Satan, and bringing Sabbath rest. He sets us free from the

dominion of the evil one, sin, and all its miserable consequences.

John 5:1-15

In the Gospel according to John, we find similar teaching. In John 5, on a Sabbath day, the Lord healed a man paralyzed for thirty-eight years. He told him to pick up his mat and walk. The Jewish leaders met the man walking through Jerusalem carrying his mat and told him that he was breaking the law.

The New Testament calls us to be a worshipping community.

We should not brush this objection aside too quickly. Both Nehemiah 13 and Jeremiah 17 forbade the carrying of burdens on the Sabbath day. The man was carrying a burden. It was an open and shut case. Neither should we try to rationalize the matter by debating how to define “a burden.” The Lord does not enter that debate. He does not say: “Oh, but carrying a mat does not qualify as carrying a burden.” Rather, the Lord spoke of his relationship with God the Father and declared Himself to be God. He said, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”

And so the Jews hated Jesus for two reasons: “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him; not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God his own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18). He revealed Himself here as the one who came to do the good work of the Father, to bring healing, joy, and life to God’s

hurting people. They saw Him as a Sabbath-breaker – covenant-breaker – and so wanted to kill Him. They did not recognize Jesus as the Mediator of the covenant, the one who fulfilled the Sabbath day. They did not see that He was bringing rest from God.

Summary of the Sabbath day in the gospel

The gospel shows that the Lord Jesus often healed the ill and distressed on the Sabbath day. What better day to do so? He came into this world as God Incarnate to bring about the redemption that the Sabbath day of the Old Testament looked forward to. He came to inaugurate the final and everlasting Jubilee. He forgave sins and healed God’s people of the miserable consequences of sin. In these Sabbath day episodes, He was bringing into effect the true and definitive meaning of what the Sabbath day was about. He was giving rest. He is the true Prince (Ezekiel 46) of God’s people, who opens the doors to the heavenly temple – the very presence of God – and bring us in to Sabbath rest. As Lord’s Day 38 says, we may today live in the joy of that eternal Sabbath rest. When Jesus Christ died, rose again, and ascended to heaven, He brought us into that Sabbath. And so, the Old Testament Sabbath, with all of its regulations, is fulfilled and no longer binding upon us.

The epistles

The apostle Paul makes it clear that the Sabbath day no longer binds us. In Colossians 2:16-17 he wrote:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.

These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

The Judaizers were insisting that the gentile Christians keep the Sabbath day. Paul said that in Christ it is over. There is no continuing legal requirement to keep a Sabbath day for the New Testament church. The Sabbath day was a shadow; the reality is found in Christ. The Sabbath day did not give way to the Lord's day; rather, it gave way to Christ. Christ is the body; the Sabbath day is part of the shadow He cast back over the Old Testament. Christ is, now, the Sabbath.

Just like the food laws of the Old Testament, just like the law of circumcision, so the Sabbath day was a shadow of Christ. Just like you don't need to be circumcised to be part of the people of God, and just like you don't need to keep the Old Testament food

laws or observe the Old Testament feast days, neither do you have to keep the Sabbath day. To insist upon keeping the Sabbath day would be to bring us back to the shadows of the Old Testament.

In Galatians 4:10-11 Paul said that by insisting on observing special days with legalistic rigor, one undoes the work of Christ. Paul also said that the observation of days is a matter of conscience: "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom 14:5). There is no longer a holy place or a holy time; rather, all is holy.

The Lord's day

The Old Testament Sabbath day is gone. However, there is the continuing command to worship. The New

Testament calls us to be a worshipping community. The New Testament shows us in several places that the first day of the week came to be the day for Christian worship in celebration of the resurrection of Christ, the better Joshua, who brought us real rest.

By what is the first day of the week to be characterized? By joyful worship proclaiming and rejoicing in the completed work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord's day is a new day. It is not the Old Testament Sabbath day in New Testament clothes. It is not a day to be hedged in by all sorts of rules and taboos. It's about worship.

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