

The Real Meaning of the Sabbath

by David A. Huston

This article is presented to explain how New Testament believers are to keep the Sabbath.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work” (Exodus 20:8-10).

AFTER DELIVERING THE ISRAELITES from bondage in Egypt and giving them the law at Mount Sinai, God came to Moses and said, “And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). It is curious that God did not say, “Let them make me a sanctuary that the people may dwell near me.” Or, “Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in it.” Does God’s instruction to Moses imply that without a sanctuary He is not among His people?

God continued to talk with Moses for six more chapters in which He described in great detail the construction of this sanctuary, which is also called the tabernacle. He then abruptly changed the subject, saying, “Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you’” (Exodus 31:13).

Why did God suddenly switch from a discussion of the tabernacle to this instruction to keep the Sabbath? The Rabbi’s suggest that the work God intended the people to cease from on the seventh day was the work of constructing the tabernacle. In other words, whatever was involved in building the sanctuary was forbidden on the Sabbath.

The Mishnah, an ancient rabbinical writing, lists 39 categories of work expressly forbidden on the Sabbath. It begins by prohibiting plowing and planting and ends with kindling a fire. These categories can be roughly grouped together as general prohibitions against farming, the making of clothing, the making of leather, and construction. In others words, all of the activities that relate to the ways we acquire the three primary necessities of life—food, clothing, and shelter—are forbidden on the Sabbath.

We can now begin to grasp the true significance of the law of the Sabbath. We know from other Scriptures that working to obtain the necessities of life is both necessary and proper. It is even commendable, for the Bible says, “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” and “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (2 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:8). But we can also say that this is not the ultimate purpose for which humanity was created.

God created us, first of all, to live in fellowship with Him. To seek after this personal relationship with God is the highest priority of life. David put it this way: “O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory” (Psalms 63:1-2). Paul put it this way: “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings...” (Philippians 3:8-10).

But a personal relationship with God is not our only purpose in living. We are also created to be like God, to imitate God, to demonstrate the attributes of God to others. Among all of the creatures God has made, man was uniquely designed with the capacity to express the love, the compassion, the grace, and the truth of God, which are the hallmarks of His character. For this reason, God gave the children of Israel the Sabbath Day—one day out of seven when they could forego their pursuit of “making a living” and focus their attention on pursuing “life.”

The tabernacle was a special building designed to provide a place where God and humanity could come together. God told Moses: “And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat...” (Exodus 25:22). Moses was to focus, not on the tabernacle itself, but on the relationship with God that was available through the tabernacle.

In conjunction with this *place of meeting*, the Sabbath was designed to provide a *time of meeting*—a special period at the end of each week when God and humanity could come together for fellowship. It was to be a day set aside for prayer, study, and intimate fellowship with family and friends. In a sense, the Sabbath was the end toward which the tabernacle pointed. Perhaps this is why the Mishnah teaches that whatever was involved in the building of the tabernacle was not to be done on the Sabbath. The end must always supersede the means.

One Jewish sage described the temple in Jerusalem (modeled after the tabernacle) as a “sanctuary in time.” In other words, it existed in time, not in eternity, and would therefore have a limited duration. This was because the temple was a physical structure, by its very nature temporary and subject to destruction. But a true sanctuary is a spiritual structure that can never be destroyed.

What God wants us to understand is that the tabernacle was never intended to be anything more than an illustration of His desire for relationship. It was the shadow, not the substance. And the same is true of the Sabbath. God never intended that He would be confined to a single building, and He never intended that He would be confined to a single day of the week.

God’s moral law is settled and did not change with the coming of Jesus Christ. If anything, it became even more rigorous. But the ceremonial aspects of the law did change. They came into fulfillment. Their true purpose was realized. No longer were the shadows and illustrations sufficient. As Paul explained, “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). Now that the substance has come, we must allow the shadows to vanish away (Hebrews 8:13).

By definition a sanctuary is a holy place—a place where God and man unite together. Today, Jesus Christ is the union of God and man. He is the sum and substance of all that the Old Testament looked forward to. When we think of building a sanctuary “that the Lord may dwell among us,” let us think in terms of constructing our lives, every minute of every day, as a place where God can dwell. We certainly need periods of time for rest and relaxation (at least one day out of seven), but it is also true that God has called us under the New Testament to serve Him every day, regardless of what we may be doing.

God wants us to be His dwelling place—the place where He dwells among mankind. He wants to express Himself through us to the world around us. Paul wrote that we “serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:22). And Jesus said that He is “Lord even of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8). To serve Jesus, regardless of the day of the week, is the heart of what it means to keep the Sabbath.

The real meaning of the Sabbath is not being at rest and being focused on God one day out of seven; it is being at rest with God seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. This only comes by total submission to Jesus Christ. He has extended the invitation to all: “Come to me and I will give you rest.”

This is not something to be experienced only in a church building. It is to be our everyday experience. We are supposed to pray every day, study every day, live in

fellowship with family and friends every day, glorify God every day. But it is not always easy to live every day as God’s dwelling place, to live in a continual state of rest. There are many forces that work against us. But Paul exhorts us with his words to the Hebrews: “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).

Yes, we have to work to make a living. But working to make a living is not our ultimate purpose for living. We must learn to see our work as simply another part of our service to God. We work, not to make a living, but as an act of faith. We work to the glory of God. Jesus asked, “Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” He then said, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:25, 33). When our priority is to seek and serve God every day, we can have confidence that He will supply our needs. This is what it means to keep the Sabbath.

The tabernacle was the means to an end. The end was expressed in the Sabbath—being with God, communing with God, glorifying God. Likewise, our lives are nothing more than the means to an end. The real purpose of life is to know and glorify our God. As Paul admonished, “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). “To Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:21).

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