

Chapter 9

Was the Sabbath commanded at creation?

Now we are better prepared to study the specific issue of the Sabbath, which may be the most controversial of the Old Testament laws. Some people believe that Christians should keep the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week; some advocate the first day. Many say that the Sabbath is an old covenant ritual law and does not apply to Christians. But in some ways the Sabbath is not like sacrifices or other old covenant laws. We need to examine those differences and see the arguments for and against. The arguments can be complex, so we will take several chapters to examine them thoroughly.

“Remember the Sabbath day,” the Ten Commandments say. “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:8, 11). So here the Law of Moses sends us back to the creation of the world. The Sabbath goes back to what God did at creation (Genesis 2:2).

The Sabbath in Genesis

So the question is: Was the Sabbath commanded at creation? If so, it would seem to apply to all the descendants of Adam and Eve, to all humanity. If God wanted the first humans to keep the Sabbath, then it is more likely that he wants us to keep the Sabbath today. What do the Scriptures say? Genesis tells us:

- God created the world in six days.
- By the seventh day, creation was complete.
- God rested [the Hebrew verb used for “rest” is similar to the Hebrew noun for Sabbath] on the seventh day.
- He blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3).

However, there are several things that Genesis does *not* tell us, although some people have assumed

or claimed these things.

- It does not say that humans rested or were told to rest.
- It does not say that humans were told to follow God’s example.
- It does not say that God taught Adam and Eve on the Sabbath.
- It does not say God created the Sabbath, or that humans kept it.

On the seventh day of creation, God “rested.” But he was not tired; what it means is that he stopped creating. The creation was complete. He stopped creating when he came to the seventh day. But he didn’t stop every week — he stopped only once, and he did not create at all on the seventh day.

But he didn’t create on the eighth day, either, or the ninth, or the tenth, etc. Perhaps this is why Genesis does not say that evening and morning were the seventh day — God’s noncreation continued from that day on. To God, all those days were like the seventh. He was resting on those days, too, until sin entered. (Jesus said that God is now working — John 5:17. He is redeeming the world, re-creating his people. This work became necessary when Adam and Eve sinned.)

In all of created history, God stopped creating once. He does not stop every week; he does not live by a six-one cycle of work and rest. The six-one cycle does not describe God’s moral nature or righteousness. God does not keep the Sabbath.

Were humans included?

What about humans? Genesis tells us that humans were created on the sixth day of creation, and they were “very good” — without sin. They were in a state of peace with God, trustful and obedient. They did not need to work in the way they later did, and they did not need to set aside a day for rest. They did not need to rest on the seventh day of creation week

(the second day of their lives). Nor did they need to set aside a day for communion with God, for they had it continually. In other words, they did not need a weekly Sabbath — and the Sabbath, as a command, was not given until after sin entered.

Creation week was unique. We do not expect God's activity on the first day to be repeated on every first day. What God did on the fourth day does not affect subsequent Wednesdays. And what he did on the seventh day of creation — cease from creation — is not repeated every week thereafter. He ceased only once.

Humans are not able to imitate God's activity. Humans cannot create for six days. Therefore, they cannot cease from creation on the seventh. They cannot imitate everything God did. If humans were to imitate a specific aspect of creation week, rest, they would have to be told about it. Scripture records various commands given to Adam and Eve, but there is no hint of a Sabbath command either before or after they sinned.

Even if every seventh day were holy, we are not told *how* it was to be kept. Holiness does not automatically mean rest (in Israel, every 50th year was holy — the entire year). Holiness just means that the day is set apart for God's use. God later used it as a pattern for the Israelites, but we are not told how he used it before then. God's end-of-creation rest provided a pattern for a Sabbath command centuries later (just as it provided a pattern for the sabbatical year), but the pattern does not prove that the Sabbath command itself existed at creation.

If God commands the Sabbath for Christians, then of course we should keep it, even if it costs us our jobs and divides our families. But before we do that, we need a clear command from God — and the creation account does not have it.

Nevertheless, some people call the Sabbath a creation ordinance, or a creation command. Perhaps it would be helpful to compare it here with reproduction, which *is* commanded in Genesis 1:28. Despite this creation command, physical reproduction is not a requirement for all Christians. Single people do not lose out on salvation. So there are exceptions allowed even in a clear command; we must be even more flexible when it comes to the Sabbath, which does *not* have a clear command. The Sabbath is commanded only after sin enters the world.

Did Abraham keep the Sabbath?

The word "Sabbath" does not occur in the book of Genesis. It does not say anything about the Sabbath for Adam, Noah, or any patriarch. The Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 31), but Abraham was given a different sign. If the Sabbath marked the people of Israel as distinctively God's, couldn't it just as easily mark Abraham as distinctively belonging to God? But Genesis says nothing about the Sabbath.

When Jacob was fleeing for his life, willing to make promises to God if God would protect him, Jacob promised to worship and to tithe (Genesis 28:22), but he said nothing about the Sabbath. It seems that he did not view it as a major component of worship. It is a mark of historical accuracy that Genesis does not say anything about the Sabbath for the patriarchs, for the Sabbath was not yet a command.

What can we learn from silence? It shows that the author was not worried about whether Abraham kept the Sabbath. Indeed, Jewish interpreters believed that Abraham did *not* keep the Sabbath. Abraham kept God's requirements, commands, decrees and laws (Genesis 26:5), but we cannot assume (from what Israel was told to do later) that Abraham sacrificed all his firstborn male animals, or that he kept the Passover and other annual festivals, or that he did anything different on the seventh day of each week. The verse tells us that Abraham was obedient, but it simply doesn't tell us which statutes and decrees were in effect in his day.

No Sabbath before Moses

The Jewish Talmud says: “The children of Noah...were given seven Laws only, the observance of the Sabbath not being among them.”¹

The seven laws of Noah’s time are listed in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 16:6 (Soncino edition, p. 131), *Sanhedrin* 56 a, b; and *Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:2(5) (Soncino edition, pp. 26-27).² Gentiles could be considered righteous if they observed these laws, which did not include the Sabbath. Nor did they include restrictions about pork. Rabbi Judah could say that there was a time for the “sons of Jacob when unclean beasts were still permitted to them.”³ Clearly, these Jewish rabbis did not believe that Abraham had to observe these laws that were later given through Moses — and that would have included the Sabbath.

The rabbis did not think that the Sabbath had been given to Gentiles: “Why does it say, ‘The Lord hath given you’ (Exodus 16:29)? To you hath he given it [the Sabbath], but not to the heathen. It is in virtue of this that the Sages stated [*Sanhedrin* 56b] that if some of the heathen observed the Sabbath, then not only do they not receive any reward [but they are even considered to be transgressing].”⁴

“A non-Jew who observes the Sabbath whilst he is uncircumcised incurs liability for the punishment of death. Why? Because non-Jews were not commanded concerning it.... The Sabbath is a reunion between Israel and God, as it is said, ‘It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel’ (Exodus 31:17); therefore any non-Jew who, being uncircumcised, thrusts himself between them incurs the penalty of death.... The Gentiles have not been commanded to observe the Sabbath.”⁵

Further evidence of the antiquity of this Jewish understanding comes from the second-century B.C. book of *Jubilees*: “The Creator of all blessed it, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel. He granted to them alone that they might eat and drink and keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth.”⁶

These historical sources show the traditional understanding of the Jews: The Sabbath was *not* commanded at creation, and was not commanded for Gentiles. It applied to Israelites only. This is important for our understanding of Genesis, and it also helps explain the way the New Testament church approached the question.

Review 9

- Adam and Eve did not need to rest on the seventh day.
- Genesis does not command anyone to keep the Sabbath.
- Jews understood that Abraham did not keep the Sabbath.
- God called the seventh day holy, but he did not command it as a day of rest until the days of Moses.
- Question: Must all Christians obey the command God gave Adam and Eve to have children?
- Even a law God gave in Genesis (circumcision) does not apply to Christians.
- If the Sabbath is commanded today, we must find proof for it in other books of the Bible.

¹ *Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 (Soncino edition, p. 23), as quoted in C. Mervyn Maxwell and P. Gerard Damsteegt, eds., *Source Book for the History of Sabbath and Sunday* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1992), p. 75.

² Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 74.

³ *Hullin* 7:6, as quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 74.

⁴ *Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 25:11 (Soncino edition, p. 314); *ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵ *Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 (Soncino edition, pp. 23-24); *ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶ *Jubilees* 2:31, James Charlesworth, editor, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), vol. 2, p. 58.