

Chapter 11

The prophets and the Sabbath

Let's now consider two facts about the Sabbath in the Old Testament:

- The Israelites were punished severely for breaking the Sabbath. Doesn't this indicate its importance?
- Israelites and Gentiles were praised for keeping the Sabbath, and the prophets predicted a time when Gentiles would keep the Sabbath. Doesn't this indicate that it is God's ideal for us today?

Punishments for Sabbath-breaking

In ancient Israel, Sabbath-breakers were stoned to death (Exodus 31:14; 35:2; Numbers 15:32-36). By breaking the covenant laws, they were showing that they were not part of the covenant people.

But a similar punishment was given for people who broke other old covenant laws. Exodus 31:14 shows that "cutting off" was the same severity of punishment as execution (see also Leviticus 20:2-3). Numbers 15:30-31 says that any blatant, willful sin should be punished by cutting the person off from the people. This was then illustrated by the case of a man who gathered sticks on a Sabbath. His rebellion was defiant, and that is why he had to be stoned. He was deliberately rejecting the covenant. He was "cut off" by being killed.

Violations of the Sabbath law were not the only covenant violations with severe punishments, however — covenant violations also concerned worship rituals such as using a sacred recipe for incense (Exodus 30:33), an unclean person eating some of the fellowship offering (Leviticus 7:20-21), sacrificing an animal in the wrong place (Leviticus 17:4), going too near the tabernacle at certain times (Numbers 1:51) and prophets who claimed divine authority but whose predictions failed (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). All such were to be cut off or killed.

The severity of the punishment is not proof that those laws continue to be in force in the new covenant. They were punished because the law applied to them; it does not mean that it also applies to us.

National captivity for Sabbath-breaking

Hundreds of years later, the Jewish nation was punished for breaking the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:17-18; Jeremiah 17:27). They were also promised blessings for keeping the Sabbath (verses 21-26). This shows the importance of the Sabbath in the old covenant system. As a sign, and as part of the tablets of the covenant, it showed covenant allegiance.

The Israelites' disobedience regarding the Sabbath, and their disobedience in worship rituals, was a visible sign of their unbelief. The Israelites broke all aspects of the covenant, and they were punished with the curses that were part of the covenant (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28), but this does not mean that the same covenant blessings and cursings apply to us today. We are under a different covenant.

The Jews were punished again in a.d. 70, but Sabbath-breaking was not the reason. Their primary sin in the first century was the rejection of the Messiah, who was far more important than the Sabbath. They were keeping the Sabbath but had rejected the new covenant. Jesus was the "test commandment" of the first century. Faith in Christ is the requirement on which our salvation and eternity depends.

In brief, God punished the Israelites for Sabbath-breaking because the Sabbath was a requirement for the time they lived in, for the covenant they lived under. It is not so today.

Praise for Sabbath-keeping

The Sabbath was a blessing for both Jews and Gentiles (Isaiah 56:2-8). Isaiah predicted that God, through the Suffering Servant (the Messiah) would establish a new covenant with his people (Isaiah 42:6-7; 49:8-10; 54:9-10; 55:1-3). However, in describing this new relationship, Isaiah also described old covenant customs that in some cases apply only *figuratively* to the new covenant. In Isaiah 56:7, for example, he said that Gentiles will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices at God's house. This is

certainly not a requirement today.

Isaiah's main point is that God not only cares for Israelites, but also for Gentiles. God's house will become a place for all peoples, and he will gather Gentiles as well as Israelites (verse 8). Eunuchs, who were excluded from the temple in the old covenant (Deuteronomy 23:1), would also be accepted. The terms of relationship between God and humans would be changed, and a new covenant would be made.

God's house would "be called a house of prayer for all nations." Jesus quoted this scripture in Mark 11:17, but the real fulfillment of the prophecy is not in the physical temple, but in people in whom the Holy Spirit lives. Both Jews and Gentiles are invited into God's household, the church.

The physical details of Isaiah's prophecy — physical offerings and a physical temple — are not required for Christians today. Since we interpret these physical details according to spiritual counterparts, as we must, it is possible that Sabbath-keeping should be interpreted in a spiritual way, too. We should turn to the New Testament to understand whether the Sabbath is to be applied literally or figuratively in the new covenant.

Isaiah also had positive things to say about the Sabbath in chapter 58. As part of his call to repentance, he calls the Sabbath a delight and honorable (verse 3). He is declaring to the house of Jacob their sins and rebellion (verse 1). Although the Israelites had an outward appearance of worship (fasting, for example), they did it for selfish reasons (verses 2-5). Although they claimed to worship God, they did not obey his more important ethical laws: justice, liberty and charity (verses 6-7).

If the Israelites did the weightier matters of the law, then God would be responsive to them (verses 8-11). He would give physical blessings to the nation (verses 11-12). And the same is true of the Sabbath — and of other old covenant laws, too. If the people were obedient to the covenant they were under, if they kept it without complaint, if they used time and material things the way God wanted them to, then God would bless them physically.

Isaiah 58 is appropriate to old covenant conditions, and it does not necessarily tell us anything about new covenant requirements. We cannot assume that the requirements are the same, for

we know they are not. All the old covenant laws were good, but their value was temporary. They were designed to lead us to Christ, and they applied until he came. The ritual laws had some benefits, but it is permissible for us to abandon them after we are led to something better: Christ.

Peter was inspired to say that the Law of Moses was "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Peter did not specify which aspects of the law were the most burdensome, but it is clear that the old covenant package was stricter, in external regulations, than the new covenant is. We must look to the new covenant to see whether 1) it tells us to look to the old covenant for worship days or 2) whether it gives new instructions regarding worship days and customs.

Prophecies about the Sabbath

Scripture also praises the Sabbath in prophecies that describe a worship of God that includes the Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 44:24). Does this show that the Sabbath will continue to be part of God's law?

The prophets described an ideal time in which all peoples worshipped God. To communicate this concept to the Jewish nation, the prophets described old covenant forms of worship, including new moon observances (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3) and sacrifices in the temple (Zechariah 14:20-21; Ezekiel 20:40; 45:17; 46:4). They also describe discrimination against uncircumcised peoples (Ezekiel 44:9; Isaiah 52:1-2) and avoidance of ritual uncleanness (Ezekiel 44:25-27). But neither circumcision nor sacrifices are religious requirements in this age. Prophecies (whether New Testament or Old Testament, whether about Sabbaths or sacrifices or circumcision) are not a reliable source of proof regarding Christian practice. Our doctrines must be based on scriptures that are applicable to the age we live in. Moreover, another prophecy indicates that the day-night cycle will cease (Revelation 21:25), which would mean the end of the Sabbath, too. Our question is not really about the future, though — it is about right now, and we want scriptures that apply to us now. For that, we must examine the New Testament.

Review 11

- Israelites were punished for rejecting the old covenant and the Sabbath, the sign of the old covenant.
- The prophets praised obedience to various old covenant details.
- Question: Can we assume that something praiseworthy in Isaiah's day is also praiseworthy today? (see Isaiah 6:7, for example)

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