

# The Sabbath: A Test Case

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It may be an oversimplification to say that disagreements regarding the subject of divine law are all settled on the question of the Sabbath. Then again, perhaps in some sense this is no oversimplification at all. It is common knowledge that disputes concerning the subject of divine law eventually and almost inevitably make their way to this subject and often with considerable energy. Moreover, much of what has been discussed in this book regarding the anticipatory function of the law of Moses would—at least could—find wide acceptance on all sides of today’s theological fences. Even with this much agreement, the question of the Sabbath remains. Did the Sabbath have a similar forward look? If not, why not? If so, does it also retain its former shape and significance? What transformation, if any, has the Sabbath undergone with the coming of Christ? And what warranted such changes?

The Sabbath question is admittedly complex and problematic, and it would be rash to claim to have settled the matter for all concerned. This chapter will offer an attempt to demonstrate that the Sabbath need be treated no differently and with no different hermeneutic than the one expounded throughout this book and which is commonly employed in the NT treatment of all other aspects of OT law. It can serve as an illustration and a test case for the thesis presented thus far. Answers cannot be given to every opposing opinion at each step of this discussion, but some of the leading alternatives will be considered along the way.

## Old Testament

### Genesis 2

Sabbath discussion usually begins in Genesis, chapter 2. Although the word “Sabbath” does not appear at this climax of the creation narrative, there is enough relevant material here for all sides to recognize at least a small and suggestive beginning to a larger discussion.

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had made. (Gen.2:1-3)

This passage is significant as the capstone of the creation narrative (Gen. 1:1 - 2:3). God has spoken the whole world into being and has clothed it with beauty and grandeur and has given it inhabitants. Now he has “finished” (*kalah/sunteleo*) his work, and in his own estimation it is all “very good” as it stands in its completeness and perfection (1:31 - 2:1). His handiwork—”all the host” of it—displays his glory, and God “rested” (*sabat/katapauo*) and was “refreshed” (Exod. 31:17) from his labors. To be sure, God has never tired or needed rest or refreshment. This is the rest of accomplishment, the rest of satisfaction. On the seventh day, God sat back, as it were, and took pleasure in what he had done. Twice it is stated “God rested.” This is

in every sense *God's* rest (Ps. 95:11), his delighted rest in his finished work. The creation narrative climaxes in God's contentment.

This was *God's* rest. But was this a delight to be enjoyed by himself alone? Why does the week end in the Creator's rest? In what way is this significant? Notice that the closing formula "the evening and the morning" is absent—the day remains open. Also, in Genesis 2:2-3a "the seventh day" is mentioned three times, each in a sentence composed of seven words (Hebrew text). Moses has carefully and creatively built a sense of anticipation into the narrative and even the sentence structure itself. Further, God "blessed" the seventh day and "sanctified" it. For whom was it thus made sacred? There seems to be both an outward and a forward look. Indeed, we have it on Jesus' own authority—"The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27). Clearly, Moses has structured this passage (Gen. 1:1 - 2:3) in such a way that it reaches its high point, not in the creation of man (day six), but in divine, contented rest (day seven). This, God's rest, is the point to which the passage drives. Put another way, Moses is portraying the fact that creation—human history—finds its goal in God's rest. God's rest is a rest in which creation itself is to enjoy and have a share. "The declaration mounts, as it were, to the place of God himself and testifies that with the living God there is rest . . . . The way is being prepared, therefore, for . . . the final, saving good."<sup>290</sup> Little more information is given here, but the note of anticipation is sounded already, an anticipation of universal rest. Will newly created man enjoy this rest also?

In the next chapter, (Gen. 3), Moses records for us how the enjoyment of God's rest was forfeited. As a result of his rebellion, mankind has fallen under a curse, a curse which involves labor, toil, sweat, pain, and death. The state of sin and death now dominates, and rest is but a hope. Life now is one of toil and labor and sin and death. Indeed, Moses has told us that God's work (*asah* and *bara*) was "finished . . . ended . . . done" (2:1-2). Now, after man's sin, God begins to work again; he "made (*asah*) garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" (3:21). On the seventh day God rested. "But not for long. As soon as man sinned God went to work again."<sup>291</sup> God has again taken up the work of preparing rest, even for his fallen creatures. This is evidently Jesus' point of reference in John 5:17 (in context)—"My Father has been working until now, and I have been working."

That the initial seventh day had this sense of anticipation built into it is precisely the affirmation of Hebrews 4:4, which will be surveyed later. There are other later biblical passages that seem to view Genesis 2:1-3 similarly, and they will be noted in due course. But it should be recognized at the outset that this passage (Gen. 2:1-2) is *intended* to be understood as a small beginning of a much larger theme which later biblical writers will progressively unfold. It is a theme that is pregnant with hope and anticipation.<sup>292</sup> Creation has as its goal the divine rest. As Oehler noted,

That the whole course of human history is not to run on in dreary endlessness; that its events are to have a positive termination; are to find a completion in an harmonious and God-given order,—is already guaranteed by the Sabbath of creation . . . . The Divine rest of the seventh day of creation, which has no evening, hovers over the world's progress, that it may at last absorb it into itself.<sup>293</sup>

Keil and Delitsch remarked similarly: The original seventh day—

"was the beginning and type of the rest to which the creation, after it had fallen from fellowship with God through the sin of man, received a promise that it should once more be restored through redemption, at its final consummation."<sup>294</sup>

So Genesis 2:1-3 sounds the first note of eschatology in Scripture, and this anticipatory function of the seventh day of creation week, in turn, provides the interpretive clue to understanding this rest/Sabbath motif as it is revealed throughout the history of divine revelation.

## The Pentateuch

As the narrative of human history unfolds, there are subtle reminders along the way of mankind's want for rest (e.g., Gen. 2:15; 3:16-17; 5:29, etc.). The reality of toilsome restlessness is never absent and is brought to the fore again in the opening chapters of Exodus, with the people of Israel in bondage, and at this point the "rest" theme moves a large step forward.

The first record of seventh day/Sabbath observance by men appears in connection with the Exodus, just prior to Sinai (Exod. 16).<sup>295</sup> Murmuring because of hunger, Israel is given "manna" (literally, "what is it")—to eat and be filled. Each day, God graciously provided plenty for each person, but it must not be hoarded. Each day will see new provision. Israel must learn to trust God. On the sixth day the Lord provided double, and each was to take two days' supply. No manna would be harvested on the seventh day, for on the seventh day "the Lord has given you the Sabbath" (*sabat/sabbaton*, v. 29). "So the people rested (*sabat/sabbatizo*) the seventh day" (v. 30). Rest is provided, and God's people were reminded weekly of God's grace. This is not yet the Jewish Sabbath as such; it is much less restrictive than the Sabbath soon to be given at Sinai. The only restriction here concerns the manna specifically. There is no prohibition from work of any other kind. But this does prepare Israel for what is to come shortly, and it is itself a regular and vivid reminder that rest can come only by God's provision.

It was at Sinai that God "made known His holy Sabbath" to Israel (Neh. 9:14). In Exodus 19-20, God constituted Israel as a nation and gave them his law, a law summarized in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2-17).<sup>296</sup> The fourth command assigns to Israel strict and regular Sabbath day observance.

Remember<sup>297</sup> 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: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six day the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. (Ex. 20:8-11)

The first four and the last six commands of the Decalogue are today commonly referred to as "the first table" and the "second table" of the law, respectively. Kline has shown by a comparison with suzerainty treaties of this time period that such covenant documents are written out in their entirety on both tables.<sup>298</sup> It seems that our terminology needs revision, then, for both "tables" of the law would have contained the entire Decalogue. Further, Kline shows that in the center of the document appears the suzerain's dynastic seal. Of course, God has no such "image" with which to seal the document; instead, it is the Sabbath law that is central to the document and which stands as the "sign" or "seal" of God's covenant with Israel. This is the repeated affirmation of Exodus 31:12-18—"You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign (*ot*) between me and you for the generations to come" (Exod. 31:13; cf. Ezek. 20:12, 20). As the rainbow stood as the sign of the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:12, 13, 17), and as circumcision stood as the sign of God's covenant with Israel. This explains the expression in Isaiah 56:4-6, "hold fast my covenant." This also explains the command's frequent repetition in the Torah (e.g., Exod. 23:12; 34:21; 35:2-3, etc.). This also explains why Israel's neighboring nations, though condemned for many sins, were never criticized for a failure to observe the Sabbath day—it was the sign of God's covenant with Israel.<sup>299</sup>

That the Sabbath stood as the sign or seal of God's covenant with Israel further explains the careful strictness and importance attached to its observance. Violation of Sabbath in any way resulted in death (Exod. 31:14). No work was to be done (Exod. 20:10; 31:14-15). Singular importance was associated with Sabbath observance, for to violate it was to violate the very covenant sign. For example, as wrong as it would be for an angry husband to throw a chair or a lamp across the room, it would be viewed with much more concern if it were his wedding ring being thrown; to throw away the ring would carry more symbolic, and thus more solemn, connotations. The wedding ring is the solemn sign of the marriage covenant, and to treat it lightly or with contempt would be a very serious matter. So also, it was a matter of utmost concern to God for Israel to give the Sabbath due respect, and to violate it was an act worthy of death. Plowing and harvesting (Exod. 34:21), bearing burdens (Jer. 17:21), merely gathering sticks (Num. 15:32-36), or even lighting a fire (Exod. 35:3) were all to be carefully avoided. Israel's violation of God's Sabbath was the reason assigned to her destruction and captivity (Ezek. 20:10-26; 22:8, 26, 31).<sup>300</sup> God had given Israel "rest," and this rest, the very token of the covenant, was to be duly honored and observed. God's rest must not be profaned (*halal*) by man's work (Ezek. 22:26).

But the seventh-day/Sabbath is more than a weekly reminder. Grounded as it was, not in God's nature, but in his work, it had a ritual/ceremonial character. In the Mosaic economy, it served "as the foundation for all Israelite festivals."<sup>301</sup> In Exodus 23:12 and Leviticus 23:1-3, the Sabbath command begins the transition to the commands regarding Israel's annual festivals to the Lord (Exod. 23:14ff; Lev. 23:4ff). In Exodus 35:2-3, Leviticus 19:30, and 26:2, the Sabbath command appears in association with matters concerning the tabernacle. The Sabbath day forms the rationale for the Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:1ff). These, and the feast of trumpets (23:24-25), the day of atonement (16:29, 30), and the feast of tabernacles (23:34) are all Sabbath-rests to the Lord.<sup>302</sup> Perhaps most compelling of these for our purposes are the Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee, both of which shout of rest, freedom, and restoration (Lev. 25). The theme born at the climax of creation week continues to grow as God multiplies these reminders of his rest.

The Sabbath had a still more significant feature. It was both commemorative and prospective. The Mosaic command reaches back to find its significance in God's creation rest—"For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day" (Exod. 20:8-11). This Sabbath observance was reminiscent of God's rest, which itself is prospective of a rest to come—the toil and labor imposed on man by sin and a curse is to end in final rest, and of this rest there is a weekly reminder.

This connection explains why the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, unlike the command in Exodus 20:8-11, was grounded not in God's creation rest, specifically, but in God's deliverance of Israel from slavery.

"And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore, the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." (Deut. 5:15)

This note of labor giving way to rest, and rest as a gift from God, links this to the "rest" theme introduced in Genesis 2. Since earliest times, man's toil was reminiscent of the curse (Gen. 3:17-19) and prospective of divine rest (Gen. 5:29<sup>303</sup>), and here the theme is highlighted again. The idea of divine redemption is not foreign to that of divine rest but of a piece within it. Indeed, for fallen man, rest is redemption.

## **The Old Testament as a Whole**

In this regard it should be noted that Israel's "rest" was realized not in the seventh day only, but in Israel's land itself (e.g., Exod. 33:14; Deut. 3:20; 12:9-10; 25:19; Josh. 1:13; 21:44; Ps. 95:11, etc.; cf. Lev. 25:2).<sup>304</sup>

Similarly, in Babylon, Israel “found no rest” (Lam. 1:3; cf. 5:5). The OT emphasizes that this “rest” or “resting place” is God’s own provision for his people, and in this connection Israel is taken up into this theme of divine rest; it too is both a token of God’s gracious provision and prospective of a fullness of rest still to come.

Similarly, when Israel enjoyed deliverance from her enemies, the resulting peace is described as a time of “rest” (Josh. 11:23; 14:15; 21:44; Judg. 3:11, 30). David was a “man of war” (1 Sam. 17:33; 2 Sam. 17:8), so named for his successful defeat of all Israel’s enemies. But by his labors he brought Israel into rest (2 Sam. 7:1, 11). Thus his son Solomon was “a man of rest” (1 Chron. 22:9; cf. 1 Kings 8:56). Here also, as Solomon’s name implies, the language of “peace” is brought into the theme of rest—“Behold, a son shall be born to you, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies all around. His name shall be Solomon (*selomoh*), for I will give peace (*salom*) and quietness (*sequet*) to Israel in his days.” This link appears to provide warrant to include in this “rest” theme the various prophetic announcements of the coming age when peace will prevail in the rule of God’s Servant and as a result of God’s intervention in human history (Isa. 11, 65, etc.).

Further, there is a frequent association of rest with the presence of God/dwelling place of the ark in Zion (Ps. 132:8, 14; Isa. 66:1; etc.).<sup>305</sup> This is reminiscent of God’s promise to Moses—“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exod. 33:14). This highlights again the ideas of rest as found in God and rest as God’s gracious provision.<sup>306</sup>

The Psalms offer only a few, but highly suggestive, references to this theme of rest. In Psalm 116:7, the psalmist expects to return to God’s rest in his resurrection.<sup>307</sup> And in Psalm 94:13 (*sequet*) and 95:11 (*menuhah*), two enthronement psalms heavily loaded with an eschatological outlook, rest “from days of adversity” and rest in the promised land are made the object of happy expectation. These contributions to the theme are suggestive in that they associate the fullness of rest with the eschaton.<sup>308</sup> Psalm 95 adds to this an invitation to this divine rest and warns, by the example of the wilderness generation, of missing this rest by rebellion and unbelief. Rest here takes a decidedly soteriological as well as eschatological connotation.

The eschatological fullness of rest is an often-repeated hope resounding in the prophets also, particularly Isaiah. Over and over again God’s “salvation” is promised with great excitement, and the related terms “rest” and “peace” and “safety” often highlight the announcement (Isa. 52:7; 55:12; 57:2; Jer. 30:10; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26). The close association of this rest with Jehovah’s Servant (Isa. 52:7; cf. 9:6-7) points again to the idea of redemption.

The Sabbath, then, as the word itself indicates, speaks of rest. It is not a human rest only but a divine rest in which man may one day share. The Sabbath speaks of grace, of divine provision, and of redemption. It is not surprising, then, that the worship of the Israelite religion was elevated on the Sabbath. The Sabbath offered time and reason for praise in the house of the Lord, as Psalm 92, “A Psalm for the Sabbath Day” and a psalm of deliverance and provision, illustrates. It was a day of special sacrifice and offering (Num. 28:9-10; cf. Ezek. 46:1-3). There is no indication that the observance of the Sabbath by the Israelite people at large was to be marked by any special religious functions other than the fact that true observance of the Sabbath focused on a cessation from work. Since this rest pointed to divine provision, the note of worship is not far behind, at least insofar as the day’s redemptive-historical purpose is concerned. The Sabbath speaks of more than a sign by which God’s covenant people are identified. It is a ceremony which points beyond itself. It looks ahead to a fullness of rest which in God’s grace and time will be given to his people. It remains for the NT to reveal how this rest will come to fruition, but the expectation of it is a matter of constant and repeated reminder throughout the OT.

## New Testament



As with all biblical themes, it is in the NT that this Sabbath-rest motif is given clearest and final definition. As noted above, the OT associated the promised rest with the Servant of Jehovah and with the ideas of redemption and eschatology. Although the OT did not give great detail to the discussion, it did give enough information that the fulfillment realized in the Lord Jesus should not strike us as surprising. He is, after all, the the Servant-Redeemer, and he is the Eschatos (eschatos, Rev. 22:13). “All the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen” (2 Cor. 1:20). In the NT, the revelation of Jesus Christ, we expect to see the theme made clear and brought to full realization.

With the note of redemption and peace brought by the Lord’s Servant already sounded in connection with the rest motif in the OT, as we turn to the NT, we are tempted to include in our tracing out of this theme all the passages which treat of Christ and his work in any way. This would be entirely legitimate, as passages like Hebrews 4 will make clear. For our purposes here, we must be more restrictive, though it sometimes is difficult to know precisely what constraints to observe. Simeon’s words in the temple could surely be taken into account—”Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation” (Luke 2:29-30). A still closer link may be found in Matthew 1:21 where “Jesus” is the name give to the Savior who is born. “Jesus,” of course, translates into the Greek from the Hebrew “Joshua”—in the same way that “Caesar” translates to “Czar” in Russian and “Kaiser” in German, or as the Greek *kuriakon* (“belonging to the Lord”) becomes “church” and “Kirche” in English and German respectively. This identification of Jesus with Joshua immediately points to him as the one who, like the earlier Joshua, will lead God’s people into rest. There are other passages, such as Luke 4:16ff, where Jesus announces himself to be the Servant of the Lord who has come to proclaim the Sabbatical year of release (Jubilee), and Matthew 11:28ff, where Jesus offers his “rest” to the weary who come to him for it. So also Romans 8:18-24, with echoes of Genesis 2-3, notes with the prophets that not mankind alone, but all of creation awaits a coming rest. Just as the narrative of Genesis 1-2 culminates in God’s rest, so also shall history itself (cf. Eph. 1:10). These kinds of notes along the way illuminate the study considerably and confirm that the OT Sabbath looked forward to the reality to be enjoyed in Christ. It was the “shadow” of which Christ is the “substance” (Col. 2:16-17). But lest this chapter rival the size of the book, we will restrict our remarks here primarily to those passages in which the “Sabbath” theme is treated explicitly.

## The Gospels—Jesus and the Sabbath

Jesus’ most memorable teaching about the Sabbath came in the context of controversy. Sampey remarked,

It is worthy of note that, while Jesus pushed the moral precepts of the Decalogue into the inner realm of thought and desire, thus making the requirement more difficult and the law more exacting, He fought for a more liberal and lenient interpretation of the law of the Sabbath. Rigorous sabbatarians must look elsewhere for a champion of their views.<sup>309</sup>

This may be so, particularly in reference to the many regulations which had been added to the Sabbath law in the various rabbinic traditions. And “while none of [Jesus’] actions clearly infringes the written law, the non-emergency healings of Jesus certainly ‘stretch’ it.”<sup>310</sup> But Jesus’ comparative “leniency” with regard to the Sabbath must be understood within its proper framework.

In Matthew 12:1-8 (cf. Mark 2:23-28; and Luke 6:1-5), Jesus comes under attack for his disciples’ actions. On a Sabbath day, while walking along the edge of a grainfield, the disciples plucked some of the heads of grain to eat. Luke adds the detail that the disciples were rubbing the grain in their hands (6:1),

doubtless to winnow away the chaff. The Pharisees were aghast, and since it was Jesus' disciples who had done this, the Pharisees rightly assumed that it was with Jesus' approval; implicitly, they accused Jesus of contravening the Mosaic law. Moses specifically allowed one to take of his neighbor's grain by hand (Deut. 23:25), but harvesting on the Sabbath was specifically forbidden (Exod. 34:21). Further, the Pharisees may well have perceived the disciples' "rubbing out of the grain as threshing and their blowing away of the chaff as winnowing."<sup>311</sup> It is significant also that the charge was never brought against Jesus or his disciples formally; it evidently would not have stood even in their own religious court.<sup>312</sup> The disciples' actions were hardly what was in view in the Mosaic prohibition.

What first strikes us about Jesus' response is that he does not answer on these grounds. He does not argue that they have over-extended Moses, however accurate such an argument would have been. Instead, he argues from 1 Samuel 21:1-6 that he constitutes an exceptional case.<sup>313</sup> David and his soldiers, during their flight from King Saul, took and ate the showbread in the house of God. This action constituted a violation of the law; the consecrated bread was to be eaten by the priests only (Lev. 24:5-9). Yet David, when hungry and in need, allowed—demanded—this exception from the priest, and that on the Sabbath day.<sup>314</sup> So Jesus' opponents are faced with a dilemma: they must choose between their traditions and interpretations of the law on the one hand, and David their great and revered king on the other. In opting for David, they would thereby exonerate the activities of Jesus' disciples, whom they have already pronounced guilty, and implicitly acknowledge the narrowness of their own teachers. The conclusion was an obvious one, however difficult it would have been for them to admit it.

The justification for the actions of David and his men, and by extension, the actions of Jesus' disciples, is still unexplained. Jesus makes mention of David's hunger, thus demonstrating a parallel situation. David "needed" (*chreian eschen*) to eat, and so now do Jesus' disciples. But this is not the point at issue, really, for unlike David's men, the disciples of Jesus were not hungry to the point of exhaustion. David's was an extreme case; not so for the disciples of Jesus. By implication Jesus lends some insight into the nature of the Sabbath law itself. If the Sabbath were, as is often assumed, a part of God's "unchangeable moral law," it would be very difficult indeed to admit such an exception as this, especially given that this is an exception grounded in human concerns.<sup>315</sup> Jesus does not classify the Sabbath as unchanging moral law, and this brought him into conflict with the Pharisees. The Sabbath was not an end in itself, an absolute that admitted no exceptions. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). It was intended for man's benefit, his well-being. To elevate it to a place of tyranny over man is to make more of it than was intended; indeed, it would overthrow it altogether.<sup>316</sup>

More to the point, it is *Jesus* who possesses the authority to decide these things—he is "Lord, even [ascensive *kai*] of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8). "As lord of the sabbath he stands above the law and implicitly claims the right to define it . . . It is the Son of Man who decides what is and what is not acceptable behavior on the sabbath."<sup>317</sup> That is, the question is not so much Jesus' relation to the Sabbath but its relation to him. As B. B. Warfield stated, "It [the Sabbath] belongs to him. He is the Lord of it; master of it—for that is what 'Lord' means. He may do with it what he will: abolish it if he chooses."<sup>318</sup> Jesus "continually subordinates the Sabbath to the demands of His own mission."<sup>319</sup> It is not so much a question of the extent of Sabbath regulations but of Jesus' lordship. In the words of Plummer, "The Son of man controls the sabbath, not is controlled by it."<sup>320</sup> This is the point at issue, and this is the high point of Jesus' defense (*hoste*, Mark 2:28<sup>321</sup>). If David had the right to make an exception to Israel's ceremonial laws, Jesus has more. Jesus' defense claims the highest possible ground: he has an authority that surpasses even the Sabbath itself. His greatness gives certain rights to his disciples: they may pluck this grain and eat, even on this day of rest.

As a second illustration of his point, Jesus continues, "Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?" (Matt. 12:5). The priests continue their work on the Sabbath; indeed, on the Sabbath they are busier than on any other day! But this does not

“profane” the Sabbath, for (it is implied) the temple takes precedence over the Sabbath. Again, Jesus claims higher ground—”in this place there is One greater than the temple” (v. 6). Jesus’ rights surpass not only those of the priests but even the temple itself. He is greater. He is greater than David, greater than Jonah (v. 41), greater than Solomon (v. 42), greater than the temple (v. 6), and greater than even the Sabbath (v. 8). Jesus justifies his disciples’ actions on the ground of his unsurpassed lordship.<sup>322</sup> “This does not mean that Jesus here actually breaks the Sabbath or overrides it, at least as far as Torah is concerned, but it does mean He claims authority to do so, and in a sense questions the Pharisees’ right to question Him.”<sup>323</sup>

Jesus only hints here that the Sabbath is being transformed. Some significant change is taking place. He does not specify exactly what that change is, but it is impossible to think that his lordship over the Sabbath will not be exercised in some way. A claim to authority over the Sabbath demands definition. Accordingly, there are some contextual clues as to what changes the Sabbath would undergo. In the preceding paragraph, Jesus offers “rest” to those who are weary (Matt. 11:28), and it is in connection with this (“at that time,” 12:1) that Jesus asserts his lordship over the Sabbath. Matthew seems to imply that the “rest” which Jesus offers is that to which the Sabbath pointed. Here, *in Jesus*, the Sabbath finds its true meaning. Mark casts this incident more explicitly in redemptive-historical terms. The question of fasting was used to show something of the epochal significance of Jesus’ person and presence on earth and the newness of this Messianic age (2:18-22—the question of fasting, the new cloth, the new wineskin). The epochal shift marked by the coming of Jesus Christ had ramifications even in regard to the Sabbath day and how it is to be observed in this age. The Lord Jesus has ushered in an age in which God’s promised rest is realized. The fuller details of this await the apostolic writings (see below), but our Lord himself here lays the groundwork for that teaching. The statement, as it is, neither confirms nor disallows the continuation of Sabbath observance, in explicit terms. But it emphatically affirms Jesus’ inherent right to do with the law as he pleases, and so the foundation for an epochal change is clearly implied. The arrival of God the Son has forever changed the whole significance of the Sabbath day. He has brought about that which it only anticipated.

It was most often Jesus’ works of healing on the Sabbath that gave rise to controversy (e.g., Matt. 12:8-14/Mark 3:1-6/Luke 6:6-11; 13:10; 14:1-6; John 9:1-41). Brown asserts that Jesus “*went out of his way* to heal on the Sabbath,” but he offers no explicit support.<sup>324</sup> He does note later that Jesus intends by his Sabbath healings to demonstrate his lordship over the day, and this may lend some weight to the point. Jesus remarked that it was “necessary” (*dei*) for the woman with the spirit of infirmity to be healed on the Sabbath, and Moo concludes from this that “Jesus regarded the day as a particularly appropriate time for his ministry of healing.”<sup>325</sup> It would seem, then, that Jesus’ Sabbath healings are designed to illustrate the rest and release from Satanic “bondage” (Luke 13:16) that Jesus brought and which is typified in the Sabbath. Jesus’ emphasis in these passages, however, generally falls on the harshness of the rabbinic Sabbath regulations and the appropriateness of doing good on *any* day of the week, Sabbath included.

In John 5:1-18, however, there is a further twist. Jesus’ emphasis here is similar to that of Matthew 12:1-8 (and parallels)—it is his inherent right to determine what is good on the Sabbath. “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17). Moreover, his superior authority affects not only his own behavior on the Sabbath, but also that of others (namely, the man whom Jesus commanded to rise and carry his pallet). Beyond that, the illustrative function of his healings is something Jesus himself notes. This particular sickness was evidently due to sin (v. 14), and thus “this Sabbath cure is more directly related to the soteriological work for which the Lamb of God came into the world (1:29).”<sup>326</sup> This is both Jesus’ and his Father’s “work”—a work which they had been at for some time. Presumably, this statement—”My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17)—points back to mankind’s fall into sin and Genesis 3:15 and the work of redemption/rest which God then took up. It also presupposes a soteriological/eschatological view of Genesis 2:2-3.<sup>327</sup> This is the Father’s work which Jesus has come to do (John 4:34: 9:4), and it is a work of redemption (John 6:37-40). “Until now” seems to imply that the work is soon coming to completion; this Jesus affirms later—the work will be “finished” when he dies on the cross (John 19:30; cf.



17:4). With these connections in place we have clearer indication of the meaning of the Sabbath—it pointed to a finished work of God in providing redemptive rest for his people through the death of his Son.

## Hebrews—Entering into Rest

Hebrews 3:7 - 4:13 confirms that our tracking of this theme has been on the right lines. First, the inspired writer explicitly connects the rest which we enjoy by faith in Christ (4:2, 6), with God's creation rest (vv. 3-4), with the rest of the land under Joshua (v. 5), and with the rest of the Sabbath (*sabbatismos*, v. 9). For the writer to the Hebrews, this observation arises from a simple chronological reading of the Bible. He notes that in Psalm 95:7b-11, the psalmist invites the people of his day to partake of that rest which that first wilderness generation forfeited because of rebellion and unbelief. He further notes that the psalmist inserts the word "today." From this, he reasons that since in the day of the psalmist (tenth century B.C.) God's rest was still available, then clearly Joshua's rest, although of a piece with it, did not exhaust it (v. 6). He further concludes that this offer of Sabbath-rest (*sabbatismos*, v. 9) "remains" for us "today." In calling the creation rest a "Sabbath-rest" (v. 9) he links together the ideas of creation rest, the Sabbath day, the rest of Canaan, and the soteric rest that is yet available.

There are indicators that this rest involves still more, a future blessing of which all these have been but a preview.<sup>328</sup> This rest "remains" for the people of God (v. 9). This rest is that of Genesis 2:3 (v. 9); that is, it is the final goal for which history was created. Verse 11 also hints of the believer's prospect of rest—"Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience." The concept is an eschatological one, and all these previous "rests" are but pointers and samples of it.<sup>329</sup> The point is that this rest is available "today," for those who believe (v. 2) and "cease from their works" (v. 10). So the writer to the Hebrews, like the psalmist, extends the same invitation along with the same warning—"The gospel is preached to you, and this rest is available; be careful that you do not miss it by unbelief as they did." All this is to say that the creation Sabbath portrays a rest which God intended to share with redeemed mankind; all Sabbaths and "rests" since have been in view of this. "Today" the rest of salvation—yes, the rest of the eschaton—is available to those who cease from works and believe.

## Conclusion

Several ideas have now converged. Finished work, rest, Sabbath, peace, Christ, redemption, cessation of works, faith—these all are taken up into the concept of rest which was first announced at the end of creation week. It is difficult not to notice further connections, such as the "new creation" passages of the Epistles (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10). Likewise, it is doubtlessly beyond coincidence that it was on the sixth day of the week that Jesus finished God's work of redemption (Mark 15:42). Further, unlike the Mosaic priests who must "stand ministering daily and offering the same sacrifices which can never take away sins" (Heb. 10:11), Jesus "sat down," having accomplished the work of redemption "once for all" (Heb. 9:12; 10:12; cf. 1:2). Redemption is done, and rest may now be enjoyed. "No work allowed" is the watchword of this new creation. "Do not even pick up that stick!" "No gathering of manna today! God has provided plenty—just trust him." "No sowing or harvesting this year—God has given enough—believe it!" "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). "Do not work," God says, "just trust me." Only that person who "does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5) enters this rest. This rest is a celebration of *God's* work, a work taken up long ago and now accomplished in the Lord Jesus Christ. The invitation is to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and *his* work that saves. To enter this rest we must come, saying (to borrow the words of Isaac Watts),

*No more, my God, I boast no more  
Of all the duties I have done.  
I quit the hopes I held before*

*To trust the merits of Thy Son.*

*The best obedience of my hands  
Dares not appear before Thy throne;  
But faith can answer Thy demands  
By pleading what the Lord has done!*

## **Observing the Sabbath Today**

This is the meaning that is given to the Sabbath since it has reached its fulfillment in the Lord Jesus. Robert Garner, the seventeenth century English Particular Baptist, wrote,

Therefore by Sabbath here, we are to understand the Lord Jesus only, Who Alone is the Sabbath or Rest of Believers under the Gospel. And to keep this Sabbath from polluting it, is to believe in Him only unto righteousness. For to do any work, I mean to seek righteousness, or peace, or reconciliation with God by any work, is to pollute this Sabbath or this Rest; by Whom Alone, such as believe in Him, do and shall enjoy a glorious, an everlasting rest.<sup>330</sup>

It is here the Sabbath finds its true significance, and only by resting in faith in him do we truly observe what the day symbolized. Like circumcision (Col. 2:11), the feast of tabernacles (John 7:37), the Jubilee Sabbath (Luke 4:16-21), the cities of refuge (Heb. 6:18), the Passover (1 Cor. 5:7), the day of atonement (Heb. 10:1-14), and all the ancient Mosaic institutions, the Sabbath has reached its fulfillment in Christ (Col. 2:17; Heb. 4), and it is by trusting in him that we preserve its significance today. Justin Martyr hints of this interpretation in his criticism of Trypho the Jew:

You have now need of a second circumcision, though you glory greatly in the flesh. The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you.<sup>331</sup>

Just as the temple with all its rituals and sacrificial system gives way to Christ, the reality to which it pointed, so also the Sabbath. These Mosaic institutions are not thereby nullified; they are fulfilled. Moreover, it is our Lord himself who led in this direction—”he redirects attention from the law to himself, the Lord of the Sabbath, and thereby sets in place the principle on which the later church would justify its departure from Sabbath observance.”<sup>332</sup>

Only this can account for the reckless way in which the apostles write of the Sabbath’s abrogation. The stronger brother does not observe any day as holier than another (Rom. 14:1-6), and no one must be judged in such terms (Col. 2:16). The shadow has given way to the substance (Col. 2:17), and we dare not look back to the “weak and beggarly elements” (Gal. 4:9-11) of the Old Covenant. The sign and seal of the Old Covenant has given way to the reality of Christ in the New Covenant (Matt. 26:28). The Sabbath no longer has significance *as a day*; its significance is in that to which it pointed—in him who gives rest (Matt. 11:28) and in whom we have ceased from our works (Heb. 4:10). For those who rest in Christ, every day is a Sabbath (cf. Rom. 14:5).

## **Observing the Sabbath Forever**

Unlike the wicked who have followed the beast, who in the end will have “no rest day or night forever” (Rev. 14:11), we who have followed the Lamb will one day find “rest from our labors” (Rev. 14:13) in the very presence of God (Rev. 21:3). All the painful toils of this life will be “no more” (Rev. 21:4; 22:3, 5). John’s “back to Eden” allusions at the end of the book of Revelation (e.g., the bride, the tree, the river) hint further of the fullness of rest that awaits the return of the one who gives rest. History will reach its goal, and in that day fullness of rest will be realized in his “glorious resting place” (Isa. 11:9-11).

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## Footnotes

290. G. von Rad, *Genesis*, 60. Cited in Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (reprint, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 53. This of course is the interpretation given by the author of Hebrews (3:7-4:13).

291. Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1976), 14. See also James M. Boice, *Genesis*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 104.

292. In light of this, the view that Genesis 2:1-3 establishes and enjoins Sabbath observance as a creation ordinance, whether right or wrong in itself, seems to miss the main point. Von Rad spoke more strongly: it “would be a complete misapprehension of the passage” (*Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1; cited by Ralph Smith, *Old Testament Theology* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993], 185). No command regarding Sabbath day observance can be found here. Nor is there any religious significance attached to the day, so far as man’s obligations or behavior are concerned. No mention at all is made as to what bearing this day has on man, if any. See James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 368. The passage reveals that God rested on the seventh day and that he gave it a special, sacred significance. With this is an intimation of God’s purpose to open this rest beyond himself. There is a note of expectation. But beyond this the text does not go. Exegetical ground for the Sabbath as a “creation ordinance” must be found elsewhere. Notice John Bunyan’s more thorough response to this issue in Appendix 6, pp. 293-294.

293. Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. George E. Day (1873; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1978), 332.

294. Keil and Delitsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 70.

295. Attempts to find a reference to Sabbath observance in the expression “in the end of days” (*miqes yamim/met hemeras*, Gen. 4:3) are merely speculative. See 1 Kings 17:7 where the identical expression occurs and connotes, simply, “in the course of time,” “many days later,” or the like. Cf. Jeremiah 13:6.

296. Cf. Warfield, “The Sabbath in the Word of God,” 311.

297. Some argue that “remember” (Exod. 20:8) indicates that the day was observed before this command was given, perhaps as far back as creation week. But this places more weight on “remember” than the word need sustain, particularly give that there is no evidence in Genesis 2 that such a command was then given. “Remember!” is a common way of phrasing commands, one which every parent will recognize immediately. So also in Scripture it may simply connote “keep” or “observe” or “obey” or “act in accordance with” (Lev. 26:42, 45; Judg. 8:34; Eccles. 12:1, 6 [cf. vv. 13-14]; Jer. 14:21; Amos 1:9; Mal. 4:4; Luke 1:72; Heb. 13:7). In fact, when Moses repeats the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy 5:12, he simply uses the word “observe” (*samar*). Frequently in the Bible, “remember” is followed up immediately with the appositional phrase “to keep” or “to do” which serves to define it. (Num. 15:39-40; Ps. 103:18; 1 Cor. 11:2). It is not necessary to read any more than this into the command (Exod. 20:8). The word by itself does not require any prior observance. Perhaps the “remember” of Exodus 20 refers to the Sabbath first given in Exodus 16. But

we should note that here (Exod. 20) Moses gave instruction as to *how* the Sabbath was to be remembered; God forbade *all* labor. This appears to be new legislation. Finally, Nehemiah 9:14 specifically states that the Sabbath was “made known” to Israel at Sinai. When all this is considered, the command to “remember” the Sabbath day does not seem to reflect a prior observance of the day as a creation ordinance.

298. Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (1989; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 120.

299. Boice is more direct: “It is difficult to see how anything other than prejudice could apply those words to any nation other than Israel or miss the fact that the sabbath was a part of the law and as such was intended to distinguish the nation of Israel from others.” Boice, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 369.

300. Israel’s continued violation of the Sabbath year for a period of approximately five centuries meant that the people owed seventy years to the Lord, and they were made to pay this back in Babylon (2 Chron. 36:21; Jer. 25:11; cf. Ezek. 20:10-26).

301. Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 146.

302. Hence, the plural, “Sabbaths” (Lev. 19:3, 20).

303. “Noah” means “rest.” “Comfort” translates *nuah/dianapauo*. Cf. the *nuah* group of words below. Note also the echo of Genesis 3:15ff.

304. The primary terms used for “rest” are *nuah/menuhah*, and then *saqat* which the Septuagint translate with *katapauo* and sometimes *kopazo* or *hesuchazo*. See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest,” *BibSac* (April 1973), 4-51.

305. Cf. Kaiser, “Promise Theme,” 140.

306. A. T. Lincoln, “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament” in Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, 208.

307. Cf. Kaiser, “Promise Theme,” 140, 148-149.

308. Kaiser, “Promise Theme, 142-3.

309. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. “sabbath.”

310. Moo, “The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses,” 354.

311. D. Edmond Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 77. For a list of thirty-nine classes of prohibited work extrapolated from the prohibition of Exodus 34:21, see Mishna Shabbath 7.

312. For that matter, not even at Jesus’ trial was the accusation of Sabbath violation brought against him. He lived “under the law” successfully (Gal. 4:4).

313. This reference to David’s “unlawful” activity seems to allow, at least for the moment, that validity of the charge. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 33.

314. So says rabbinic tradition; see B. Men. 95b.

315. Cf. Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Mark*, ICC (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 50. Nor does this statement lend weight to the idea that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance, and to press *egeneto* so would be unwarranted. See M. Max B. Turner, “The Sabbath, Sunday, and the Law in Luke/Acts,” in Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, 103.



316. See *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, s.v. "sabbath."
317. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 33. Wilson later continues in this vein: "The general drift, however, seems clear. The disciples disobey the sabbath law and Jesus defines their action by allusion to the OT and, above all, by a claim to personal authority which implicitly gives him the right to make or break sabbath commands (p. 35).
318. Warfield, "The Sabbath in the Word of God," 310.
319. Turner, "Sunday, the Sabbath, and the Law in Luke/Acts," 113.
320. Cited in Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 65.
321. "Therefore" (*hoste*) identifies the statement of v. 28 as a conclusion that has been reached by what has preceded. Mark explicitly affirms that the passage is intended to show the authority of Christ. See also Boice, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 364-5.
322. Note the explanatory conjunction "for/because" (*gar*), Matthew 12:8.
323. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels" in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 67.
324. Michael L. Brown, *Israel's Divine Healer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 221.
325. Douglas Moo, "Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law," *JSNT* 20 (1984), 17.
326. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," 81.
327. Lincoln, "Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology," 204.
328. The eschatological outlook of Psalm 95 was noted above. For details, see Kaiser, "Promise Theme," 142-3. Also Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, "The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1 - 4:13" in *BibSac* 145, no. 578 (April 1988), 187-8.
329. Note also Rev. 14:13 (*anapauo*).
330. Robert Garner, *A Treatise on Baptism* (1645; reprint, Paris, AR: The Old Faith Baptist Church, n.d.), 30.
331. Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 12. The chapter is entitled, "The Jews Violate the Eternal Law, and Interpret Ill that of Moses."
332. Moo, "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses," 356.