

## Keeping the Sabbath: Some Questions and Answers

By Nick Block

Numbers 25:32-36 clearly establishes the seriousness of keeping the Sabbath that even God himself kept during the time of the creation. The fourth commandment of the ten doesn't just advise us to keep it, it *commands* us to remember it by "keeping it holy," meaning to set it apart from within our lives. It's not just about slowing down; it's about stopping. But, when we move from the Old Testament to the New, many aspects of life change for the people of God. What does "stopping for God" look like now? Here are a few questions and answers on the subject of keeping the Sabbath in our lives today:

### **Does it matter which day of the week you should keep as the Sabbath?**

In the letters of the Apostle little is written about Sabbath-keeping. The men who were seeking to convert non-Jewish Christians into keepers of the Jewish law most likely made an issue of the Sabbath, so Paul did bring it up in several of his letters. Paul never questions keeping the commandment, but he points out that there is nothing to be gained from insisting that one day in particular is exalted above the rest. Rather, there is a need for every Christian to come to his/her own convictions on this issue: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Rom 14:5)."

**What exactly can you and can't you do during the Sabbath?** There is no specific guidance for this in the New Testament, and the Old Testament can give us only very general guidelines. Rest, reflection, fellowship, Scripture study, and enjoying beauty were discussed in the sermon on 3/20. Even Scripture study, though, can be tiring if done without a devotional posture. The goal is to finish one's Sabbath refreshed, and ready more than ever to serve God. If that isn't happening, you need to prayerfully rethink your Sabbath-keeping. God made it for you.; He will guide you to keep it wisely. Jesus taught that he is the Lord of the Sabbath (Mk 2:28). In the process of developing convictions about how to observe the Sabbath, then, trust and seek out the Lord of the Sabbath to guide out in how He wants you to keep it. For many of us today, it means disconnecting a bit – even electronically. For others, it might mean reconnecting.

**Why did Sabbath-keeping move from Saturday to Sunday?** Celebrating the resurrection on Sunday obviously had a lot to do with this beginning with the first century church, but changes on this occurred gradually. All things being equal, keeping Sabbath on Sunday along with the majority of the Christian community makes sense, and makes for better community life. For some folks, that's just not possible. In fact, in certain circumstances, just a full 24 hours in a row isn't workable. Two half days can add up to a whole, in that case, but going back to a full day should be a priority.

### **Is it possible to go “too far” in keeping the Sabbath?**

Absolutely. Jesus had numerous confrontations with the religious leaders of Israel on the issue the Sabbath. In fact, the initial plan to kill Jesus appears to have emerged when Jesus insisted that it is not illicit to do good on the Sabbath. (Mk 3:1-3:5). During another confrontation, he had taught that the Sabbath was made for human beings, and not humans for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27)

Keep in mind that these teachings were for a Jewish population that had gone “Sabbath-crazy.” Our tendency today is in the other direction – not taking the Sabbath seriously enough. Nevertheless, Jesus’ teaching provides a limit that we shouldn’t cross in the direction of making Sabbath-keeping part of our “righteousness.” Our righteousness is found in service to others, not in Sabbath-keeping. (Surely keeping the Sabbath, though, supports our service.)

### **Is there a deeper truth about the Sabbath that we need to discern?**

Yes again. The 10 Commandments are delivered twice to the Jews – once soon after leaving Egypt (Ex 20) and again 39 years later in anticipation of entering into the promised land (Dt. 5). The main difference is precisely in the fourth commandment: The first time God links it to following his example of resting after 6 days of creation; the second time, it is linked to remembering his act of deliverance in the Exodus from Egypt. We see development here. Follow the dots to the New Testament and you read the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (4:9-10) describing a new Sabbath rest for the people of God. This Sabbath rest comes when one rests from one’s own work and puts his/her trust fully in Jesus, and it permeates all aspects of life. This is way beyond rest one day per week.

Paul in Col 2:16-17 says that keeping the Sabbath is but a shadow, while “the reality is found in Christ.” Keeping the Sabbath, though, doesn’t disappear just because we believe in Jesus. Rather, for us as Christians, Jesus himself becomes the source of rest during the time that we “keep holy” – a rest that is as whole as is our salvation: for body, soul, and spirit.