10-20-24

Exodus 20:8-11

In Exodus 20, Yahweh thundered the ten commandments in the midst of smoke and fire from the top of Mount Sinai. This is the only time I know of that the Almighty spoke directly to all the people of Israel. The people were terrified; and that was a reasonable reaction. Furthermore, God Himself wrote these commands in stone. From all this, we might gather that the ten commandments are important; and they are. But we need to understand how they relate to us; we who are the church of Christ.

To begin with, the ten commandments are the foundation of the Mosaic covenant. This is the covenant that God delivered to His people through His servant Moses. Israel was to be set apart from the other nations which involved following all the rules God gave them. If they followed the rules, they received blessing; if they broke the rules, they received curses. All of this points to God providing a way for His sinful people to be redeemed; a way for them to avert the wrath they were due and enjoy fellowship with God.

The first thing for us to grasp as Christians is that we are not under the Mosaic covenant. We are under the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. In the New Covenant we are redeemed by the blood sacrifice of Jesus; by His work on the cross. Our requirement is to accept Him as our Lord and Saviour; to believe on Him for salvation. Our redemption is no longer based on faithfully following commands; again, we are not under the covenant given through Moses.

Does that mean that the ten commandments are no longer important? No, that is not what it means. The commandments tell us what is pleasing to Yahweh; they tell us of His character. Because we are redeemed by the terrible yet perfect sacrifice of Jesus, we want to cling to God by doing what is pleasing to Him and by trying to conform our character to His. The ten commandments are a guideline in how to do this.

For the most part, the commandments are straight forward and we have no trouble understanding how to follow them. Jesus and the apostles spoke of the commandments and gave insight to their depth and meaning. Nine of the commandments offer little problem. But the fourth commandment can give us some issue. It appears that something has changed and we sometimes wonder if we are doing things in a way that is pleasing to God. The Sabbath command applies to Saturday; but we go to church on Sunday.

So let’s consider the Sabbath. We all know that the Sabbath day is what we call Saturday. But keep in mind that there were also other days; special occasions during the Lord’s feasts that were Sabbath days. So although the seventh day of the week that we call Saturday is the day of the week that the Hebrews call the Sabbath day, that’s not the basic meaning of the word. The verb that the word Sabbath is based on means to desist or to cease; it refers to stopping work; in other words “rest”. The Sabbath day is a day of rest.

This concept of rest is extremely important when considering all the ramifications of the Sabbath. It spans from creation to eternity. It is a powerful indication of God’s love and concern for us. Far more than just a rule to follow, it is there for our well-being and as a foreshadowing of our eternal reward.

The concept of the Sabbath is first introduced back in the first three verses of Genesis 2: *Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed 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 created and made.*

Obviously, God wasn’t tired and needing to rest for a while and recuperate. He is all-powerful God who never runs short on energy and never needs to take a breather. The way we might consider His rest was that He ceased from His work of creation. He had made what He was going to make of the universe and everything in it and so He stopped creating. Nor should we make the mistake of thinking that God took His hands off His creation and just let it go. No, the Bible is clear that God is very much involved in His creation; maintaining it and directing outcomes in accordance with His plans.

Now, God blessed the seventh day which gives it special meaning and He sanctified it which means He set it apart. God had already established the seven-day week and now He made one day different; it was designated to be distinct. The thing to notice is that the seventh day is not brought up again until Moses. For thousands of years, there is no indication that the seventh day had anything special connected to it. So while the day of rest is a creation ordinance, here in Genesis it is a foreshadowing of what was to come, beginning with Moses and reaching fulfillment in Jesus.

The next time we hear about the day of rest is here in Exodus, listed as the fourth commandment. And here God shows His love and concern for His people. Human beings need rest. God doesn’t need rest, but in His wisdom He made His creation to require it. People tend to be stubborn and greedy so we will work continuously to get more stuff. God made it very clear to His people that to labor for six days was plenty and for their health and well-being they needed to rest on the seventh day. This was the day God had set apart in the beginning; it was holy.

And God showed His concern, not just for His own chosen people, but for all His creation. The people of Israel were not to work on the Sabbath; and neither were any of their servants or even their animals. God even established a Sabbath rest for the land that took place every seven years. While sloth is certainly prohibited, we need to rest.

Providing for our physical need is only the beginning of Sabbath rest. In Exodus 31:13, the LORD said to Moses: *“But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you.”* So the Sabbath is not simply a day of rest, it is a sign. It is a symbol of something for the Israelites to think about and to bring about remembrance. It is for us also.

We have to do a little digging to see how the Sabbath commandment is for a sign. There are actually two things. The first is in our reading for today in verse 11. That is the verse that reminds us that the Lord made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them; and then rested on the seventh day where He blessed it and made it holy. Thus we are reminded that God is the Creator. But the fact that God rested after His work points to another rest that is coming. Right now He is working to save people from His wrath by calling them to acceptance in Jesus. We know that a day will come when He will cease from that work at the end of history as we know it.

And this brings us to the other sign of the Sabbath which we find in Deuteronomy 5:15. The book of Deuteronomy is primarily a collection of Moses’ final speeches to the Israelites before the get to enter the Promised Land. In chapter 5, Moses again lists the ten commandments. When speaking of the fourth commandment he says in verse 15: *You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.*

The Sabbath day becomes a sign of redemption. That is the true picture of the exodus from Egypt. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. They worked daily; there were no days off or times of rest. The Lord brought them out of that and led them to a place where they could enjoy the fruits of their labor and have rest for their bodies. In the same way, we are slaves in a metaphorical Egypt; we are slaves of sin. In a demonstration of great strength and power, God has provided a way out of that slavery and into a Promised Land of peace and rest.

God let the people of Israel know that the Sabbath was a sign for them to remember creation and their deliverance from slavery. They were to practice Sabbath rest in obedience. But it was not until the Jesus and the New Testament that the mystery of redemption would be revealed so that we could get a clearer picture of what the Sabbath meant. This is the beginning of our understanding of how Jesus is our Sabbath.

We should also consider what is meant by “rest” and by “work” on the Sabbath day. We know that by Jesus’ time, the religious leaders had instituted all manner of rules regarding what was work. Jesus often ran afoul of the Pharisees by doing what they considered work. Even today, practicing Jews deal with rules such as not pushing elevator buttons. The day of rest had become a burden. The answer is contained in Exodus 31:14, *“Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people.”*

The key word to look at here is “profane”; your translation might have something like “defile”. God set the Sabbath day apart as holy; to profane or defile it was an act of direct defiance against God. Last week, we considered the case of the man in Numbers 15 who gathered wood on the Sabbath. He was given the death penalty. The reason for this was that he was working in direct defiance of God; it made no difference to him that God had made the day holy, he defiled it.

Notice the difference with the times Jesus had controversy with the religious leaders. Jesus healed people; not as a defiance of God’s command, but to give aid to a human-being who was created in the image of God. It did not concern Jesus that His disciples picked some wheat on a Sabbath. They were hungry and were satisfying a basic human need; not blatantly defiling God’s Sabbath. Jesus even rebuked the leaders by reminding them that they would tend to their animals on the Sabbath. That was providing for God’s creatures, not profaning God’s holy day.

Jesus proclaimed that He is Lord of the Sabbath; therefore, He knows exactly how it is to be treated and what can be done. It’s also very important to remember that He said that the Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath. We don’t exist to serve a day; that day is for our rest and to point to our redemption. So, where does all this leave us as Christians?

The first thing to remember is that we are not under the Mosaic covenant; we are not required to keep the Sabbath. In Colossians 2:16 the apostle Paul tells us: *Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.* And more directly in Romans 6:14 he says, “*For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace*.” Our salvation comes by an undeserved favor, Jesus having paid the price for our sins; we now rest from working for salvation and are free to please our Master through simple obedience.

The ordinance of the fourth commandment has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is now our Sabbath rest. Hebrews 3 and 4 explain that God offered the Israelites rest in the Promised Land but they rejected His offer. Therefore, God would not allow them to enter His rest and they wandered the wilderness forty years until that entire generation had died. God now offers us a way into the Promised Land; into His eternal rest. To accept Jesus is to accept God’s gracious offer of Sabbath; to reject Jesus is to reject God’s offer and die in the wilderness.

In all this we see that attending church services on Sunday is not a problem. There are several places in the New Testament that indicate that Sunday was a special day of worship for the new Christian church. Additionally, there is no indication of the Christians attending synagogue, unless it was to evangelize those attending the service. In fact, in Acts 2, it mentions that the Christians gathered together daily.

Although we are freed from the command of the Sabbath and now understand the mystery that it pointed to of God’s redeeming plan, there is still something there for our life now. It is still good to rest. That has not changed; God created us to work but not to work nonstop. It is good for us to enjoy a day of rest, of relaxation; a day dedicated to fellowship with our Lord. It is physically good for us and will energize us to be more profitable servants of God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You came to set captives free. You have set us free from sin and the just wrath of God. But You have also set us free from the Law. While the Law is good and prefect, it bound us and in our sinful nature caused us to transgress, thus adding to our sin. In that freedom, we can hold any day as special, or treat all days alike. We have that liberty in Christ.

But with that, Lord, we now have the freedom to worship You always. And You have torn the veil so that we have direct access to the Father. All days are holy to the Lord and we Your people are set apart to worship You at all times.

Precious Lord Jesus, thank You for being our Sabbath rest. We no longer work to achieve our own salvation, but rest in You since You have done the work for us. We also look forward to the rest that is coming in our Promised Land. Lord God, You have offered us Sabbath in Jesus; we gratefully and humbly accept and praise You for it.

It is in Jesus’ name we pray

Amen