



The Sign of the Sabbath

Further Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tisa

by John J. Parsons

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE IDEA OF THE SABBATH day to you? Are you a Christian who goes to Church on Sunday, believing this is the “Lord’s Day?” If so, please prayerfully consider the following entry, which hopefully will challenge some of your assumptions and help you better discern the truth of the Scriptures...

Recall that after the people heard the Voice of the LORD speak at Mount Sinai, they drew back in fear and begged Moses to be their mediator before God. The LORD then called out to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction” (Exod. 24:12). The “tablets of stone” (לֶחֶם הָאֲבֶן) referred to the sapphire blocks engraved with the Ten Commandments, of course, whereas (as explained before) the “law and the commandment” (וְהַמִּצְוָה וְהַתּוֹרָה) referred to the detailed instructions for creating the Tabernacle and establishing the sacrificial system of the Torah. In this week’s Torah portion (Ki Tisa), just after God finished explaining the final details of the Mishkan and named Betzalel as its chief architect, He turned his attention back to the Ten Commandments. Before He actually handed the physical tablets to Moses, however, the LORD elaborated on the importance of observing the Sabbath day:

Above all you shall keep (שָׁמַר) my Sabbaths, for this is a sign (אוֹת) between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you (כִּי קֹדֶשׁ הוּא לָכֶם). Everyone who profanes it (חָלָל) shall be put to death (מָוֶת). Whoever does any work (מְלָאכָה) on it, that soul shall be cut off (כָּרַת) from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest (שַׁבַּת שְׁבֻתוֹן), holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day (מְלָאכָה בְיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת) shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever (בְּרִית עוֹלָם). It is a sign forever (אוֹת לְעוֹלָם) between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.” (Exod. 31:12-17)



Before commenting on this passage, I'd like to point out how *remarkable* it is that God would repeat and elaborate upon the Fourth Commandment just before He was about to hand the tablets to Moses (Exod. 31:18). After all, God could have reviewed each of the Ten Commandments with Moses at this time; or, in light of the subsequent narrative concerning the dreadful sin of the Golden Calf (Exod. 32:1-29), God could have repeated the warning against idolatry. So why did the LORD stress the importance of observing the Sabbath at this critical moment?

As this passage makes clear, the Sabbath was intended to commemorate God as our personal Creator, King, and Judge (Gen. 1:31-2:2). It is a "sign" that God has set us apart as His own treasured people. In Moses' restatement of the Torah given later, we are further commanded to remember the Sabbath day in light of God's redemption: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day" (Deut. 5:15). In other words, the Sabbath is a weekly reminder that the LORD is both our Creator and our Redeemer....

Some commentators believe that the commandment to "guard" the Sabbath is placed at *this* point in the narrative in light of the work that was required to create the Tabernacle. Even though its construction was sanctified work, the workmen must not overlook the sacred institution of the Sabbath, since that would confuse the means with the end of the Sanctuary itself. Indeed, the sages regarded the word *shavat* (rest) as a technical term, understood to be the opposite *melakhah* (work). What is work, then? The sages identified 39 creative activities that were required for the creation, set up, and maintenance of the Mishkan and its furnishings. These 39 activities are called the *Avot Melakhah*, the "fathers of work," and are regarded as foundational categories for understanding other types of work which are similar and derived from them.

The Sabbath is called *brit olam* (בְּרִית עוֹלָם), an "everlasting covenant," like the sign of the creation itself (Gen. 1:31-2:2), the sign of the rainbow (Gen. 9:16), the act of ritual circumcision (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19), the promises made to the patriarchs (Psalm 105:8-10), the promises given to King David (2 Sam. 23:5; Isa. 55:3), and the promises that one day God would restore the Jewish people by renewing covenant with them (Jer. 32:37-40). The fact that the prophet Ezekiel lamented that Israel did not honor the sign of the covenant and therefore experienced God's wrath (Ezek. 20:12-14) did not imply that the LORD had abandoned the Jewish people, of course, especially since the prophet later speaks of the renewal of the covenant with the Jewish people in the latter days (e.g., Ezek. 37:26). The Sabbath is the sign (אוֹת), the identifying mark, of a Jew. It is a "statement of faith," a visible practice of bittachon, that honors the LORD as both our Creator and our Redeemer.



The penalty for desecrating the Sabbath was severe, namely death itself. The sages discuss this at some length, wondering how the death penalty is to be understood in light of the law that saving a life (*pikuach nefesh*) must take precedence over the laws of the Sabbath. Doesn't *pikuach nefesh* imply that no Jew should ever be put to death for the sake of the Sabbath? The sages answer by noting the qualification given in the text itself: "for whoever does any work on it shall be cut off (כָּרַת) from among his people." This "cutting off" means being severed from his or her roots, and therefore the profane person has effectively become dead to the things of the spirit already.

Now whatever else your theology of "Sabbath" might imply, one thing is clear: the Sabbath *day* (יום השַׁבָּת) begins on Friday at sundown and lasts until after sundown on Saturday (i.e., Havdalah). The idea that Sunday replaces the Sabbath in the Divine Calendar is therefore simply not true, and there is no evidence whatsoever that Yeshua called for His followers to rest on a different day of the week other than the Sabbath. Indeed, it is unthinkable that the King of the Jews - the LORD of Glory who spoke from the midst of the fire at Sinai to Moses - would repeal this commandment or otherwise contradict Himself, especially since the Sabbath foreshadowed His deeper work of salvation in our lives. On the contrary, Yeshua no more repealed the Fourth Commandment in light of the Cross than He repealed the commandment against adultery (Matt. 5:28) or murder (1 John 3:15).

Of course there is some controversy regarding the issue of what day might be best to corporately worship the LORD, whether it is Shabbat or another day of the week (Rom. 14:5), but it needs to be remembered that the Sabbath day was primarily set apart as a time for *kedushah* (holiness), *menuchah* (rest), and *oneg* (joy), and later synagogue services were intended to serve these ends. The quarrel Yeshua had with the Pharisees of His day concerned the addition of "fences" (*gezerot*) that obscured the deeper meaning of rest as a means of healing and life. "Shabbat was made for man, and not man for Shabbat" (Mark 2:27), which means it is a gift of God to us, a time of rest and reflection, a joyful time set apart from the busy week when we can focus on what is really important in our lives. Yeshua's acts of healing on the Sabbath were intended to teach that there is no rightful law against meeting the needs of others before fulfilling religious obligations...

Nonetheless, there is a nagging question about what day of the week we should regard as the "Lord's Day." Of course Christian tradition, following the lead of the early church fathers of Rome, taught that Sunday was the "new" Lord's Day, and the weekly Sabbath was to be consigned to the "Old Testament" of God's wrath. Of course this is a cartoonish viewpoint that is blind to the grace revealed in the Torah, but it is a view that nevertheless has prevailed in Christendom, and many followers of the Messiah have long suffered by this confused perspective.



Of course it is important to always read the Scriptures in context, since that often eliminates potential sources of misinterpretation. For example, those who seek to justify the change from Saturday to Sunday as the “Lord’s Day” have argued that Paul’s instruction to offer contributions on the “first day of the week” (i.e., not on the Sabbath) reveals that the earliest Christians worshipped on Sunday (1 Cor. 16:2). However, given the Jewish background of the Apostle Paul, it is more likely to understand his request in terms of avoiding the prohibition of handling money on the Sabbath day (which was traditionally regarded a profane practice). Furthermore, while it is true that Yeshua was raised from the dead on Saturday night (i.e., *before sunrise* on the first day of the week), it is clear that God’s act of raising His Son was performed only *after* the Sabbath day was complete.... God did not even perform the work of the resurrection on the Sabbath day!

Perhaps the most popular argument offered that Sunday should replace the Sabbath as the “Lord’s Day” comes from the argument that the Holy Spirit was given on “Pentecost Sunday.” However, it begs the question whether Pentecost (i.e., Shavuot) indeed occurred on Sunday rather than on another day of the week. Recall that the Torah commanded that 49 days were to be counted from the “day following the Sabbath” of Passover until Shavuot, or “Pentecost.” This is called the *Omer Count* in Jewish tradition. The Sadducees (and later the Karaites) believed that the count should begin following the first weekly Sabbath after Passover (i.e., Sunday), whereas Jewish tradition maintained that countdown should begin on the day following the Sabbath of the Passover day. The key phrase is *mi-machorat ha-shabbat* (מִמָּחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת), “the day after the Sabbath.” Does this phrase refer to Sunday or to the Sabbath of Passover? Jewish tradition has held that this refers to the day after the Sabbath of Passover, and this of course implies that Pentecost could occur on any day of the week, not just on a Sunday, as some Christian theologians attempt to argue. Indeed, the Greek text of Matthew 28:1 uses the plural word for Sabbath (σαββάτων) to indicate that just this sort of distinction was used during the time of the resurrection of Yeshua....

Another verse that is sometimes cited to establish the idea of “Sunday” worship is Rev. 1:10, where it is written, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.” Some teachers will claim that the Apostle had his vision on a Sunday, since it says, “on the Lord’s day...” The Greek text for this phrase, however, (i.e., ἐν τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ), does not suggest a particular day of the week, but rather refers to the great “Day of the LORD,” that is, *Yom Adonai* (יוֹם יְהוָה), of which the apostle John was to receive his great vision.

Finally, it is clear that the Sabbath will be honored in the Millennial Kingdom to come, and indeed, in the heavenly state. Speaking of the coming Kingdom of God that will be established upon the earth, the prophet Isaiah foretold: “From new moon to new moon,



and from Sabbath to Sabbath (שַׁבָּת בְּשַׁבָּת), all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD” (Isa. 66:23). Since this vision concerns the prophetic future, it is clear that the Sabbath day (as well as *Rosh Chodesh*, the “new moon”) will be observed. Likewise, in the heavenly Jerusalem to come, the Tree of Life is said to yield “twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month” (Rev. 22:2). Notice that the “twelve fruits” (καρποὺς δώδεκα) from the Tree of Life are directly linked to the “twelve months” of the Jewish year (ατὰ μῆνα ἕκαστον ἀποδιδόν τὸν καρπὸν αὐτοῦ: “each month rendering its fruit”). In other words, the sequence of the holidays (*moedim*) - including the Sabbath - were always intended to teach us great revelation about God. That is why God created the Sun and the Moon for signs and for “appointed times” (Gen. 1:14). As it is also written: “He made the moon to mark the appointed times (עֲשֶׂה יָרֵחַ לְמוֹעֲדִים); the sun knows its time for setting” (Psalm 104:19). Note further that the Majority Text of Revelation 22:14 reads: “Blessed are those who do His commandments (Μακάριοι οἱ ποιοῦντες τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ) so that they may have access the Tree of Life...” Faith and obedience are two sides of the same coin.

There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. The Sabbath is a *delight* – not a burden; a time for celebrating your personal rest in our Messiah Yeshua (Isa. 58:13; Heb. 4:9). Indeed, all those who honor the Sabbath - including the “foreigners” of Israel - reveal that they honor the LORD and hold faith in His promises:

Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.” Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. “And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant - these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.” (Isa. 56:1-8)



Addendum

Just as there is a deeper sense of Torah that Paul appealed to make his case that he was not teaching “against the law” (e.g., Gal. 3:16-18), so there is a deeper sense of rest (שָׁבַת) that God promised those who are trusting in Him (שְׁבוּתָהּ, Heb.4:9). This rest comes from trusting in the *finished work* of Yeshua as our Torah righteousness before the Father. The *principle* of Sabbath is valid, just as the principle of adhering to faithful love is (i.e., the positive expression of the commandment not to commit adultery). Of course the statement that “there is a rest for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9-10) refers to the deeper sense of peace that comes from resting in the Lord’s provision given in the Messiah...

As God’s children, we are given precious liberty in the Messiah (Gal. 5:1). We no longer need to observe rituals to call upon the LORD and to be in a relationship with Him. The question of what day of the week we should set aside for corporate worship is addressed in Romans 14:5. We are to be “fully persuaded in his own mind” (ἐκαστος ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ νοῷ πληροφορεῖσθω) and to act accordingly.

My point in this article is pretty simple, however. The Torah plainly teaches the sanctity of the Sabbath day, and there is no compelling reason to think that day was ever “changed” or to be “replaced” by Sunday, even in light of the fact of the resurrection of Yeshua on the “first day of the week.” Churches that teach that Sunday replaces the Shabbat are simply wrong and need to be corrected, though that does not necessarily invalidate Sunday worship, of course. We are free to worship the Lord on any day or night of the week -- at *any* time.... I only take issue with teachers in the Christian tradition who dogmatically insist that we should regard Sunday as a “type” or “fulfillment” of Sabbath. For example, a well-known Evangelical teacher writes: “the early church embraced Sunday rather than Saturday as “the Lord’s Day,” because God’s new creation was decisively purchased on Good Friday and inaugurated by the resurrection on “the first day of the week.” This statement is wrong for several reasons, since Yeshua was *not* crucified on a Friday, and the first day of the week was never intended to replace the Torah’s plain teaching about the Sabbath, as explained above. The idea that Sunday is the “Christian Sabbath” is yet another expression of “replacement theology” and its theological assumptions.

At any rate, in all things we are called to follow the path of peace (Heb. 12:14). Ask the Lord to give you wisdom regarding these matters. Shalom, chaverim.



Q: But what if I have to work on the Sabbath day?

A: That's a common problem these days. God knows your heart, and if you cannot rest on the literal Sabbath day, I am certain that God is honored if you will find another time to do so. This is not unlike the idea of *Pesach Sheni*, a “second chance Passover” that God gave to those who were otherwise unable to attend the seder. The rule of thumb is to follow the path of peace... “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”