

Behold what God has done

Why do we have the Sabbath Day

by Rev. T. Aicken

We're presently studying the Ten Commandments of the Moral Law, and, as different from one another as they all may seem to be on the surface, if we probe a little deeper we find that they do run in some logical order. This is particularly true of those commandments in the first table of the law. Let's look at them.

The first commandment is about the one living and true God, the fact that we are to acknowledge Him alone. How do we come to Him? We come to Him through faith in Jesus Christ. "No one comes to the Father but by Me," said Jesus, and again He tells us, "He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent Him." (See Acts 4:12.)

Alright, having established this exclusive principle, that there is but one God who is known only in Christ, we come to the second commandment, which is about how we are to worship this one true God. He is a holy God, after all, high and lifted up. The heavens cannot contain His majesty, and none of His creatures can behold His shekinah glory and live.

Think about it. If even the angels hide their faces before Him, then we, too, as the fallen sons of Adam had better not flaunt ourselves in His presence nor worship Him in any other way than what He has prescribed for us in His Word. Once again, we find this exclusive principle: As He is one, and there is no other, so there is but one way to worship Him, namely, as He has commanded. "You shall not worship the Lord your God (as the heathen do)," He tells us ... "Whatever I command you," says the Lord, "be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."

We come next to the third commandment. How does it fit into this logical order? Well, honouring the Lord's name is about honouring the Lord Himself, who He is and what He has shown Himself to be. If the second commandment is about how to worship Him, the third is about being totally committed in doing so, holding nothing back, allowing no compromise, nothing that would discredit His integrity, shame His character or cause the heathen to blaspheme. Let's face it, we owe everything to Him, the Lord our God, in whom we live and move and have our being!

We come now to the fourth commandment – observing the Sabbath day in order to keep it holy – which is about honouring the Lord's work, what He has done, and what He has done for His people, particularly, when we could do nothing for ourselves or make even the slightest contribution to that end. Please note this carefully, that, while the third commandment is about honouring the Lord, His very being, the fourth is about what He has done.

Now for anyone who may think that this is not what the fourth commandment is about, that here I'm steering you off course, let's look further into it. The word "sabbath" means rest; it refers to a work stoppage. I was doing something, whatever it was; but now I rest from my labours, i.e. I may be doing something else, but I'm not doing that particular task anymore. Thus, the whole idea of a sabbath is that I set aside the work, that specific project, which up to now has occupied my time and taxed my energy. Does that make sense? This idea of resting is not about my putting my feet up, necessarily, but about my not doing what I was doing because, for whatever reason, I have stopped doing that. This is fundamental to our understanding of the fourth commandment.

The sabbath institution, as we find it in the Bible, did not come to us, originally, from the Moral Law in Ex. 20, but from the seventh day of creation in Gen. 2. Notice, the fourth commandment enshrines that moral obligation for us – it preserves what the Lord has sanctified and is to be observed in every generation to the end of the world – yet the day itself is a creation ordinance, and we're not going to understand what this special day is for unless we go back to that. So, let's go back to this creation ordinance in Gen. 2:1-3, and from that passage I want you to note three things:

(1) This first sabbath has nothing to do with any man resting from his labours, does it, but has everything to do rather with the Lord our God resting from His. He made everything in the space of six solar days, and then rested (He stopped making things) on the seventh day. Now there is something with regard to this point that I want you

to observe with very special care.

The Lord continued to do things – He continued to do a great many things, in fact – even on the seventh day. When the Jews accused Jesus of doing things on the sabbath, you remember, which was an accusation that they often levelled against Him, He answered them (Jn. 5:17), “My Father has been working until now (which means He works 24/7), and I have been working.” Think about that. The Lord who works all things for our good, believer, for your good and mine, doesn’t He also do that on the sabbath? Do we not find such evidence of His blessing particularly on the sabbath?

So, then, even though the Lord stopped creating things on the seventh day, even though He terminated that previously busy endeavour, He did not stop all activity or make Himself inaccessible to His creatures. No, beloved, and we can be very thankful that He did not!

(2) We have to ask here, “Why did God rest from His labours? Why, specifically, did He stop creating things?” Clearly, it wasn’t because He was tired. He doesn’t get tired. Nor was it because He was distracted by some other more important things that He wanted to do. He doesn’t get distracted and He had nothing more important to do at that time. No, He rested rather, He stopped His creative enterprise, for a very good reason. And we are told what that reason was: it was because He had finished the job. Gen. 2:1, “Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished.” There it is.

If He finished what He was doing – if He had successfully completed it to His own satisfaction – why would He continue as if He still had more to do? That wouldn’t make sense. The thing is that man’s work is never finished, and we do need regularly to rest from our labours because we do get tired. But the whole basis of our Lord resting on the seventh day is that He finished and fully perfected what He had set out to do!

(3) Besides God finishing His work, and so resting from His labours, there is also the point, Gen. 2:3, that He blessed the seventh day and sanctified it for posterity. In other words, He made this day to be a monument, a landmark in time if you like, a day that was to be set apart every week to commemorate His finished work in creation.

The Lord rested on this seventh day, and an important part of what He did that day was to reflect on what He had successfully completed in the first six days. Man, similarly, was also to rest from all his labours on the seventh day, partly because he needed to refresh himself physically, but primarily because he needed to refresh himself spiritually. And how was he to acquire this spiritual refreshing? It was by reflecting, as the Lord Himself did, on what the Majesty on High had done and had fully achieved in creating the world and everything in it in those first six days of creation week. This is fundamental to our understanding the sabbath day, and, of all the rules we establish to govern what we do on that special day, we miss the whole point of it if we don’t reflect on our Lord’s finished work!

When, therefore, we come to the fourth commandment which Moses brought down with all the other commandments from Mt. Sinai, we find that the sabbath institution was not a new thing, but was something that was already long in place, going all the way back to creation itself. Adam, Noah, Abraham – and many others, too – they had all observed the Lord’s sabbath before the Mosaic code had elevated it to a universal moral principle.

It’s instructive to note that, while the basis of the sabbath in Ex. 20:11 is God’s perfect work in creation, the basis of the sabbath in Deut. 5:15 is His perfect work in the exodus, His delivering His people Israel, rescuing all of them, out of Egypt and from the house of bondage. Have you ever noticed that? It’s not a mistake. No, now there are two reasons for celebrating the sabbath, the first is creation, and the second is deliverance. In each case, what is important to mark is that the sabbath is intended to be a lasting monument, a weekly celebration, to commemorate something that the Lord Himself had done, something that only He could do, something that He finished and perfected on behalf of His people.

This is what I mean when I say that the whole focus of the fourth commandment is on what God has done, and on honouring Him for completing that task. The third commandment would have us to remember who He is, and the fourth would have us to remember what He has done. And right here we see the two great incentives for our worship in the second commandment, namely, who He is and what He has done. Do we need anything else?

No day of the week is special in itself. How could it be? Yet from the beginning of the world the Lord established the last day of every week a special day, a unique day, for men to cease from their regular labours and to remember what the Lord Himself has done, to remember every good thing He has done, and, in doing that, to worship Him, to give thanks for it, and to learn thereby to hope in His mercy toward us more and more as all our days go by.

This ties in with the doctrine of justification by faith only, doesn't it? As with our being declared righteous before God, so with the sabbath day, it's not about what we have done, or could ever do for ourselves, but it's entirely about what the Lord Himself has done for us – period. Relying on that (that's what faith is, relying exclusively on what the Lord has done for us when we couldn't do anything for ourselves), we have peace with God, forgiveness for all our sins, and the hope of everlasting glory. How appropriate, then, that we should have such a day, a day not to focus on what we've done, and not to plan what we might do next, but a day to meditate rather solely on what the Lord has done, the work He has finished for us, and to rejoice in that!

This leaves us asking, of course, the obvious question: If God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, why is the sabbath as we presently celebrate it on the first day of the week? It's not as if Christ has revoked the sabbath obligation. As "Lord of the sabbath," He might have done that, but He didn't. Instead, He changed the day from Saturday to Sunday, and we want to know why.

Alright, let's think about that. Every time the Lord creates anew He marks that change, that transitional event, by altering somehow the day He has set apart to commemorate it. This is more significant than we may at first realize. The change of the day draws attention to the fact, "Hey, the Lord has done something new. He has given us something even better than what we had before." The very idea of this may be something new to you, my friend, but I want you to note very carefully that there are three times in history, and only three such times, when the Lord announces that He has finished creating something. Do you know when they are?

The first time, as we've seen, was on the seventh day of creation. The Lord announced on that day that He finished this work of creation, what we might call the first creation, and so He sanctified the seventh day (Saturday) – i.e. He set it apart – to be a memorial of what He had done, of what He had perfected at that time on our behalf.

The second time the Lord announced, "It is finished," was on the cross (Jn. 19:30). This marked how the Son of God had fulfilled and successfully completed all that the Father had sent Him into the world to do, the fact that He had obtained the eternal redemption of His people. By His rising from the dead on the first day (Sunday), in turn, here was confirmation that the Father was fully satisfied with what His Son had done and had achieved in doing it.

This is what the Scriptures call a second work of creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10), and shall we not celebrate this new creation, or shall we be surprised that the Lord Himself has changed the day of celebration to take in the fact that Christ was delivered up for our offenses, and was raised from the dead for our justification? The cross of Christ, after all, is the focal point of history, the event that overshadows everything else that happens, and the key to understanding our continued existence. It's not so much that God has erased the Saturday sabbath, as if to say that the first creation no longer matters, but that He has done something else, something even better, and the Sunday sabbath is intended to keep this new thing (the perfect work of Christ) before us.

The third and final time that the Lord announces that it's finished, that it's done, will come at the end of the world when He makes all things new. This is recorded for us in Rev. 21:5 and 6. Here at last is a third work of creation, one that introduces a change so radical, a transformation so thorough, we sometimes call it, after John Milton, "paradise restored." "He who has begun a good work in you," says Paul, "will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ," which is to say that this creation, too, will be a perfect work, one that will show for all eternity the exceeding riches of God's grace in His lovingkindness toward His people in Christ Jesus.

Shall we not celebrate this change as well, and shall we not anticipate the day with holy longing until it comes at last? The sabbath that we observe right now, believer – this new covenant sabbath, or Lord's Day as we call it – points ahead to a time when it won't be Saturday or Sunday, but an eternal sabbath, an eternal resting and rejoicing in all that Christ has done for us from first to last.

Three times God creates; He does so at the beginning, then in the middle, and finally at the end of our history. Three times He declares that He has finished the job, that He has so perfected it nothing can be added to improve it in any way. And three times He changes the time appointed to reflect on what He has done, so that our attention is drawn to each new thing as it occurs.

In all this, however, let's be careful that we don't over-emphasize the negative, what we don't do, on the sabbath. There are good reasons for our not doing many things, that's true, but keeping ourselves from the workplace, or whatever else we might refrain from doing on this holy day, is not what defines the sabbath. Let's consider instead, and make this our focus, the positive side of this moral obligation. If what I've said is really true, that the fourth commandment is about our honouring the Lord for what He has done on our behalf, then hearing that preached, meditating on it, talking about it with others and celebrating it in song – these are the very things we need to do – and, failing that, we really haven't observed the sabbath at all!

What I'm talking about here is making diligent use of both the private and public means of grace, especially on the Lord's Day, and not thinking that we can somehow prosper, spiritually, apart from that. See Is. 58:13 and 14. The reason for not going our own way on the sabbath is to give ourselves time and opportunity to honour the Lord instead. I can tell you this, that, until we discover by experience how delighting in the Lord is its own reward, better and richer than any earthly pursuit, we'll never learn to call the sabbath a delight.

Once we can call the sabbath a delight, however, and already look forward to the next one, that's when we'll serve the Lord with grateful hearts the rest of the week as well, and will learn, increasingly, to hope in Him! O that we might come to call it a delight, and, if we have never done so before, that we begin to do that today!