

XII. Sacred Time: Sabbaths

August 20, 2017

Chapters 15 & 16

Purpose: To see the significance of Sabbath in creation, redemption, covenant and law, recognizing that Christ makes all days holy; and to practice Sabbath-keeping in recognition of its significance and eschatological fulfillment.

Key Verses: ¹³If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and **call the Sabbath a delight** and the holy day of the Lord honorable; **if you honor it**, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; ¹⁴**then you shall take delight in the Lord**, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 58:13-14).

Longman: The Sabbath is, if not the most important, certainly the most foundation of sacred times in the Old Testament... Sabbath observance is also a hotly debated issue among many Christians even in the twenty-first century. A number of devoted believers suggest that the Sabbath is still to be observed today, and to “break” the Sabbath by working or by non-religious recreation is a serious offense against God, as well as a cause for many of today’s social and psychological problems. A large number of other faithful and Scripture-loving people believe that the Sabbath is a thing of the past, and to observe the Sabbath is an act of legalism (p. 163).

A. The Sabbath: The Focus of Sacred Time

1. Pentateuchal Festival Calendars

a) Leviticus 23 describes the calendar of festivals

(1) Sabbath stands at the head of all the other festivals

¹The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts. ³Six days shall work be done, but on **the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work.** It is a Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwelling places (Leviticus 23:1-3).

(2) All other sacred times flowed from the Sabbath

b) The seventh day of every week is a Sabbath

c) Hebrew *shabbat* is derived from the verb *shabat*, which means “cease, rest”

(1) One of the main characteristics of Sabbath is the cessation from regular work

(2) Emphasis in OT is on rest from work

(3) Occasional mention of special acts of worship performed on this day

d) The practice of Sabbath rest is grounded in law, creation, redemption, and covenant

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2. The Law of the Sabbath

a) Sabbath is the only ritual action that finds a place in the Ten Commandments

⁸“**Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.** ⁹Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11).

b) The Ten Commandments are the fountainhead of Biblical law

Longman: The Ten Commandments are the fountainhead of Biblical law. They are the ground principles from which all the other laws flow (i.e., Ex. 20:22-23:19). The latter laws, as well as the similar laws in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, may be traced back to and seen as particular expressions of general laws found in the Ten Commandments. The inclusion of the Sabbath law in the Ten Commandments underlines its importance and encourages us to reflect on the Sabbath’s continuing relevance for today (pp. 165-166).

3. Sabbath and Covenant

a) God saves His people by grace, and then He gives them laws to live out their new relationship with Him

b) Covenant is a legal term (Hebrew *berit*)

c) Treaty between a great King, God, and His servant people, Israel

(1) A covenant has legal requirements on servants, plus penalties for disobedience

(2) Observance of the Sabbath is one such covenant requirement (cp. Ex. 31:13-17)

(3) Keeping the Sabbath was serious business in the OT; failure to do so was utter rebellion against God (cp. Num. 15:35)

d) Sabbath is highlighted as a sign of the covenant, indicating its centrality (cp. Ex. 31:13, 16-17); see also Ez. 20:12, 20)

¹³“You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all **you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations**, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. ¹⁴You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. ¹⁵Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, **observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever.** ¹⁷**It is a sign forever 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” (Exodus 31:13-17).

4. Sabbath and Creation

a) The motive for ceasing from work on the Sabbath is based in creation

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- b) The pattern of God’s creative work is six days of work followed by a final day, the seventh, of rest

¹Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ²**And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.** ³So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation (Genesis 2:1-3).

DSB: Longman’s commentary on length of creation days is not particularly helpful or instructive. In particular, the following statement is questionable: “The bottom line is that Genesis 1 and 2 do not intend to answer our questions concerning God’s procedure in creation—how God created the universe.” I am a strong six-day creationist, as are all the members of the Covenant PCA Session.

Longman: In any case, the fact that the Sabbath was, in a sense, built into creation cautions us not to hastily dismiss the Sabbath as a temporary institution. The Sabbath, along with marriage and work, are institutions established at the time God created humanity. While the pattern of creation does not make an institution or activity unchangeable for eternity, it certainly is a strong argument for the continuing validity of the Sabbath as an institution.

5. Sabbath and Redemption

- a) The retelling of the Law in Deuteronomy gives a new motive clause for observing the Sabbath

¹²“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵**You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.** Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

Longman: On comparison, we can immediately see that Deuteronomy has what we might call a more social-justice orientation. There is a strong concern to see that the benefits of redemption are applied beyond the people of God to foreigners and slaves who labor in their midst. Furthermore, and more to the point, the motive for keeping the Sabbath is God’s work of redemption. Israel’s redemption was won by God Himself, not through their own labor. God owns them and controls their destiny. Resting from work on the Sabbath is a way, first of all, to enjoy the redemption that God has won for them. Second, it is a way of giving up control and the idea that we gain in life only by working hard (p. 170).

- b) Sabbath is thus clearly an important institution – it is closely connected to creation, redemption, covenant, and law

6. The Sabbatical Year

- a) The weekly Sabbath finds larger expression in the sabbatical year

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- b) Leviticus 25 describes the sabbatical year concept
 - (1) Every seventh year was a Sabbath where the land rested from planting
 - (2) Israel's observance of this regulation was totally a matter of trusting God – believing He could and would take care of His people
- c) The Year of Jubilee – also described in Leviticus 25
 - (1) The seventh seven-year period had special significance
 - (2) Fields lay fallow, but property was redeemed and slaves were released

Longman: Thus, we can see what a picture of redemption the sabbatical year and the Jubilee year were in ancient Israel. They were outgrowths of the weekly Sabbath and required utter dependence on God. They were symbols of the rest that only God's redemption could supply. Unfortunately, Israel rarely, if ever, actually observed sabbatical years, according to biblical testimony (cp. 2 Chr. 36:21) (pp. 171-172).

B. Christ and Sabbath: Sacred Time Reconfigured

- 1. The Gospels and Sabbath
 - a) Mark 1:21-28 – teaches in the synagogue in Capernaum
 - (1) The Sabbath was a time for rest and worship
 - (2) Jesus went to the synagogue on Sabbath days
 - b) Mark 2:23-28 – pick grain on the Sabbath
 - (1) Pharisees prohibit harvesting on the Sabbath (cp. Ex. 34:21)
 - (2) Double portion is gathered the day before the Sabbath (cp. Ex. 16:25-29) – principle seems to be that Sabbath observance requires foresight
 - (3) Jesus refers to David and his men eating the consecrated bread – their urgent requirements took precedence over the strict requirements of the law
 - (4) “The Sabbath was made to benefit people, and not people to benefit the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:27)

Longman: That verse is cryptic and somewhat ambiguous, but minimally it insists that the Sabbath was not made to be a burden, but rather the occasion for the enjoyment and improvement of Christ's followers. To interpret the Sabbath in a way that brings additional burdens and restrictions and guilt on oneself or others is to clearly misunderstand the intention of the day (p. 175).

- (5) Jesus is the ultimate interpreter of the Sabbath – “I, the Son of Man, am master even of the Sabbath!” (Mk. 2:28)
 - (6) Jesus is the fulfillment of David, a messianic king who foreshadowed the ultimate Messiah
 - c) Mark 3:1-6 – Jesus goes on offense; heals man on Sabbath
 - (1) “Is it legal to do good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing harm? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?” (Mk. 3:4)

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(2) This is one example of many other Sabbath healings (cp. Lk. 13:10-17)

d) Jesus is the “master of the Sabbath” – the preeminent lawgiver and interpreter

(1) “My Father never stops working, so why should I?” (Jn. 5:17)

(2) The Jewish leaders sought to kill Him in response (Jn. 5:18)

Longman: According to the Gospels, Jesus is the one who unsettles contemporary strict observance of the Sabbath even during His lifetime (p. 176).

2. Paul on Christ’s Impact on the Sabbath

a) Paul leads us to believe that it is wrong-minded to worship God in exactly the same way as was done in the Old Testament

(1) Galatians 4:8-12

(2) Colossians 2:16

b) Christ has fulfilled sacred time – all time is holy

Longman: In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus applies the teaching of Isaiah 61:1-2 to Himself, and this agitates the crowd. After all, the Isaiah passage was understood as anticipating the Messiah, the one who would establish the eschatological Jubilee, when the redemption would once and for all be accomplished. Jesus is the Messiah; He is the one who announces and accomplishes our final salvation. He is the Sabbath (pp. 177-178).

3. Summary on Sabbath

Longman: We have seen how Christ’s coming has brought an end to the existence of a holy place. Now every place is holy, imbued with the presence of God.... We have seen how there is no longer a special caste of people, like the priests, who are holier than everyone else. Everyone is a priest, set apart in intimate relationship to God. We have seen how there are no longer particular acts that are more sacred than others. Christ is the once-and-for-all sacrifice. We do not perform these holy acts any longer. These facts lead to a strong presumptive argument that there is no longer only a limited time that is considered holy; rather all time is fraught with the possibility of being in God’s presence. This is good news! Because of Christ’s fulfillment of sacred space, acts, persons, and time, we all have full access to Him any place and all the time (p. 178).

4. Continuing Observance?

a) Summary of survey points that might be in tension with each other

(1) The Sabbath principle is embedded in creation, redemption, covenant, and law

(2) On the other hand, the pattern of fulfillment would lead us to expect that Christ fulfills holy time in a similar fashion to how He fulfills holy space, actions, and people so that all time, space, actions, and people are holy

(3) Christians are told to gather for worship (cp. Heb. 10:25) on the first and not last day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2); Jesus is with His people in a special way in corporate gatherings (Mt. 18:20; 1 Cor. 14:25)

Longman: It is not that non-sabbatarianism are faithful to Scripture and those who observe the Sabbath are adding human-made laws. It is not that sabbatarianism are faithful to Scripture and

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non-sabbatarians just want to live a lawless life. Both viewpoints struggle with the biblical material and want to live in a manner pleasing to God (pp. 179-180).

b) Sabbath observation has shifted from Saturday to Sunday

Longman: Everyone recognizes that Christ's coming brought a shift in Sabbath observance. This may be seen in the fact that the vast majority of Christians, and all Reformed Christians of whom I am aware, meet formally for worship on Sunday and not on the Sabbath instituted at creation and recognized throughout the Old Testament, namely Friday-Sunday until Saturday sundown (p. 180).

Longman: Interestingly, though, there is no explicit biblical injunction to make this move.... Sure there are hints from the New Testament that the early church met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). We may even affirm good theological reasons for meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week rather than the last, now that Christ has come. Further, if Christ was raised on what we call Sunday, then meeting on that day would be a perpetual reminder of that central redemptive act.... Even though we do not have an explicit command to change the day, I think that the church is more than justified to meet on Sunday rather than Friday evening or Saturday. After all, Christ has made every day holy, though there is also the command to meet together in formal worship of God. We are not to forsake the assembly of the saints (Heb. 10:25). The early church met regularly in worship and fellowship. What better day to meet than Sunday? All days are holy, but there is a need for a special day. The early Christians met on Sunday (pp. 180-181).

Longman: We cannot think of Sunday as a uniquely holy day, but it is a special day. An analogy may be drawn with the other three areas of place, action, and people. There is no longer an exclusive holy place like the tabernacle or temple, but ... Jesus did say He would be with a gathering of three or more of His people in a special way (Mt. 18:20). There are no more specifically holy acts like sacrifices, but there are special acts like baptism and the Lord's Supper.... All redeemed people are holy, and all legitimate vocations are holy and may be used by God, but Paul does call on us to pay "double honor" to those who are engaged in ministry (1 Tim. 4:17) (p. 181).

Longman: Thus, perhaps the category of a special day stripped of the ceremonial qualities of the Old Testament may apply to Sunday. The structure of the week is built into the world as God created it (Gen. 1:1-2:4). It is in keeping with the Sabbath principle to set aside one day to give our focused attention to the worship of God. It would be wrong to meet on a less frequent basis and irregular to meet on a different day than Sunday, given the long traditions within the New Testament and the long history of church tradition (p. 181).

5. The Final Sabbath: Eschatological Sacred Time

¹Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ²For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.... ⁹So then, **there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God**, ¹⁰for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. ¹¹Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience (Hebrews 4:1-2, 9-11).

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Longman: The author of Hebrews uses Sabbath imagery to describe the future blessings of heaven. Whether we commemorate a day of rest on the first, seventh, or another day, there is more yet to come.... We should anticipate a final Sabbath, a day of ultimate redemption and rest in God.

C. Selection of Questions for Further Reflection

1. How do we know that the Sabbath was such a fundamental Old Testament institution?
2. Articulate your present attitude toward the Sabbath. Is it a day like any other day? A day of rest and refreshment? A boring day?
3. In what way is heaven going to be like the final Sabbath?

Next Week: Read Longman chapters 17-19