

Commentary — From the Margins *Sabbath Rest & Worship*

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

He went on from there and entered their synagogue. And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him. He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. (Matt 12:1–14)

1.

The issue central to Sabbath observance is what does it represent? The Lord [*YHWH*] told Moses to speak to Israel in the wilderness and say, “Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths [plural], for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you know that I, the Lord [*YHWH*], sanctify you” (Ex 31:13). So, first, plural Sabbath observance is a sign that Israel knows that the Lord sanctifies the nation, with “sanctification” a euphemism for being set apart as special, set apart so that the eyes of the Lord are continuously on Israel (Deut 11:12), with “Israel” being both a people and a land. Sabbath observance is an identifying sign that distinguishes who is special to the Lord, with failure to

observe the Sabbaths of God marking those who are not special or who are “common.”

Before proceeding, it is needful to remind readers that since the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel, meaning (linguistic objects or signifieds) has to be assigned to words (linguistic icons or signifiers) by auditors (readers or hearers). Words do not come with little backpacks containing their meanings; rather, a word means whatever a particular reading community says the word means. Thus, both those individuals who are special (sanctified) and those who are common (unclean) will read the same words, but will assign differing meanings to those words. It is only those individuals who hear Jesus’ words (John 10:27) who will assign the same or similar meaning to the words of Scripture as Jesus assigned.

Mainstream Christendom, by its failure to observe the Sabbath, discloses that it is not special, not sanctified; that it doesn’t think of itself as special although it believes it is sanctified; that from God’s perspective makes it indistinguishable from the world, hence unclean. And this is truly the case.

Jesus told Pharisees that their father was the devil (John 8:44) because their desire was to kill Him in their worship of God. Likewise, John says that those disciples who practice sinning, with sin in the passage defined as the transgression of the law, are the seed or offspring of the devil; for those disciples who are truly born of God cannot keep on sinning (1 John 3:4–10). Mainstream Christendom by its habitual transgression of the Sabbaths of God practices sinning and is, according to the standard set forth by the disciple whom Jesus loved, the seed of the devil just as Pharisees were in the 1st-Century the seed of the devil; yet in both cases (Pharisees and mainstream Christianity), the desire is to serve God in purity and integrity. So how is it that a sincere people in their worship of God can find themselves being enemies of God? And this question should concern every Christian. Unfortunately, most Christians, like the Pharisees before them, will in their self-righteousness smugly assure themselves that are “right with the Lord” and they will not change what they are presently doing.

Jesus identifies Himself as the Lord of the Sabbath ... why?

In the context where He said He was Lord of the Sabbath He also said that something greater than the temple was present: what is this something if not Himself? And it is here where understanding begins; for in speaking of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, the Psalmist records,

Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your fathers put me to the test
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, “They are a people who go astray in their heart,
and they have not known my ways.”
Therefore I swore in my wrath,
“They shall not enter my rest.” (95:7–11)

The referenced “rest” was the Promised Land, Judea, a land that the Lord continuously watched. The nation that left Egypt could not enter into this rest because of unbelief (Heb 3:19; Num 14:11); this nation died in the wilderness, and it was with the children of this nation that the Lord, with Moses as mediator, made the eternal second covenant (Deut chap 29–32), the covenant to which better promises were added when its mediator became the glorified Christ Jesus. It was the children of Israel that entered the Promised Land. And the writer of Hebrews makes the juxtaposition that the Sabbath rest on the seventh day (Gen 2:2) is the mental or spiritual equivalent to the children of Israel bodily entering Judah on the 10th day of Abib, the day when the selected Passover lamb is penned, the day when Jesus entered Jerusalem as the selected Lamb of God ... ancient Israel was “penned” in Judah as endtime disciples are “penned” in Sabbath observance. As long as ancient Israel obeyed God, the nation physically prospered. As long as endtime disciples obey God, this spiritual nation will spiritually prosper. But when ancient Israel defiled itself with disobedience and could no longer be redeemed as an unblemished lamb, the Offspring of Israel was chosen as Israel’s redeemer. Christendom has likewise defiled itself with willful disobedience; thus, another people who also were not before a people (1 Pet 2:10) will be chosen (the third part of humankind — from Zech 13:7–9) as from all of Israel Christ Jesus was chosen. Except for the remnant that holds the testimony of Jesus (Rev 12:17), the offspring of Christianity as the Body of Christ will be, in the first 1260 days of the Tribulation, sacrificed as Christ Jesus was sacrificed, with the loss of their lives functioning as a type of how the loss of Jesus’ life at Calvary functioned.

Within the offspring of the Woman (from Rev chap 12) a division exists: some of the offspring keep the commandments of God, and some of the offspring that keep the commandments also hold the testimony of Jesus which is the spirit of prophecy (Rev 19:10) — and of this latter “some,” a remnant will bodily pass alive from the first 1260 days of the Tribulation into the second 1260 days, where this remnant will function for the third part of humanity as the two witnesses functioned during the first 1260 days. During these latter 1260 day period, the 144,000 natural Jews (12,000 from each of the 12 tribes, with the tribe of Dan excluded) will be with the Lamb of God (the glorified Christ Jesus), following the Lamb wherever He goes (Rev 14:1–5). These 144,000 spiritual virgins will have entered into the Lamb’s presence as Moses entered into the Lord’s presence atop Mount Sinai, with the remnant and the third part of humankind being likened to Joshua and the nation of Israel that remained below. The 144,000 are, therefore, directly analogous to the twelve original disciples who were with Jesus when He said that He was the Lord of the Sabbath. And it is with the 144,000 that Jesus will complete His seven year ministry that was cut off midweek at Calvary.

What all of the above suggests is those human beings who do not keep the commandments will not enter the kingdom of heaven, with Sabbath observance being the visible sign of who is and who isn’t committed to keeping the precepts of the law. Thus, entering into Sabbath observance outwardly marks the person as being of God, but Sabbath observance by itself says little about the person’s relationship with God other than that the person has one; whereas failure to observe the Sabbath places the person outside the fellowship of God ... the person

born of God cannot continue to practice sinning and will, when the pricks are strong enough, begin to worship God on the Sabbath or in the case of backsliding delinquents, return to worshipping God on the Sabbath. So at any moment within lawless Christendom will be some disciples genuinely born of God who have not yet begun to worship God on the Sabbath.

The writer of Hebrews warns, “Therefore, while the promise of entering his [Christ’s] rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it” (4:1), the implication being that the promise of entering into His rest doesn’t stand forever, that disciples can fail to enter into Christ’s rest and can, as a result, be permanently cut off from God.

Although Moses did not cross the Jordan with the children of Israel, Moses had entered into God’s rest forty years earlier:

Moses said to the Lord, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” And *he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”* And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?” (Ex 33:12–16)

When the Lord’s presence went with Moses, the Lord gave Moses rest ... entering into the Lord’s rest is a euphemistic expression for entering into the Lord’s presence. Thus, when disciples keep the Sabbaths of God, disciples bodily enter into God’s presence even though they see no one there with them.

In a passage about binding and loosening, Jesus says,

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matt 18:18–20)

When these two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, Jesus promises to be present—but is He visibly present? He isn’t, is He? Likewise, He is not visible to human eyes when the equally invisible new creature drags the tent of flesh in which this new creature dwells into Sabbath services ... Jesus will be in the same realm or dimension as the new creature born of the divine breath of God [$\piνεϋμα θεοϋ$].

When a disciple begins observing the Sabbath, bodily resting from his or her mundane labors, the disciple does no more than ancient Israel did. The disciple’s hand no longer pursues his or her chores, but the hand doesn’t belong to the new self or new creature that has been born of spirit. The hand belongs to the tent of flesh [*soma*— $\sigma\omegaμα$] and is regulated by commandments written on tablets of stone. But the new self or creature dwells within the heart and mind of the

disciple, and this new self is under commandments written on hearts and placed in minds. This new self has continuous access to the throne of God through Christ Jesus, its high priest and elder brother, so this new self is (or should be) in a continual state of prayer or communication with God. This new self exists outside the constrictions of time and space; thus, this new self “rests” or enters into God’s presence as the Lord’s presence went with Moses from Egypt on.

As the 144,000 will follow the Lamb of God wherever He goes and will sing a new song that no one can learn except the 144,000, the invisible new self dwelling within the fleshly body of the person goes where it wills (John 3:8) as it follows Israel’s high priest, Christ Jesus ... Israel is no longer the physically circumcised nation that descended from the patriarchs, but is now a nation circumcised of heart (Rom 2:28–29; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Col 2:11) that was not before a nation (1 Pet 2:10).

A problem exists: Israel, today, is the Christian Church, but unfortunately, the visible Christian Church is as abhorrent to the Father as ancient Israel was to *Yah*. Whereas Israel should be distinct from all other people on earth (Ex 33:16), a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s possession, a people called out of darkness/death into God’s marvelous light/life, a people called to proclaim the gospel of Christ Jesus (1 Pet 2:9), Israel is not today a distinct people but a part of this world, governed by the prince of this world. As the nation that left Egypt ran to riot, demanding that Aaron make other gods (*elohim*) for them while Moses was on the mountain (Ex chap 32), Christianity has defiled itself with gods other than the Father and the Son; thus, when Moses returned Moses asked, “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me” (32:26), and the sons of Levi gathered around Moses. And at the cost of brother, companion, and neighbor, the sons of Levi ordained themselves for service to the Lord (v. 29). ... Separating oneself from this world comes at the cost of losing sons and brothers, who think the Sabbatarian disciple has gone completely whacky.

In moving from physical to spiritual, death as Moses ordained death becomes separation from God, and delivery of the person to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. Christians do not bodily kill another person; they do not swing swords or participate in the institutions of this world that require a person to bodily harm another. Yet, a Christian should not hesitate to condemn evil, or to deliver the evildoer into the hand of Satan; for disciples are to purge evil behavior from within the Church (1 Cor 5:11–13). And the disciple who does not have the stomach for delivering an evildoer to Satan will find himself or herself in a situation like Aaron faced when Israel demanded that he make for Israel other gods: the Father and Son will place the person in a situation where the decision to condemn evil and the evildoer must be made.

When a person, either of Israel (i.e., a Christian or a Jew) or of the world, begins to keep the Sabbath and bodily enters into God’s rest, the new self or creature is to fully focus the thoughts of the mind and the desires of the heart on God, thereby causing the physical body to cease its weekday activities. The disciple consisting of πνεῦμα (deep breath or the spiritual breath of life), σῶμα (body), and ψυχῆ (shallow breath or human breath of life), will fully rest by entering into Christ Jesus’ presence even though He cannot be seen ... the example of the 144,000 following the Lamb wherever He goes serves as the

visible model of what the new self or creature invisibly does when entering into Christ Jesus' presence. Thus, what the disciple bodily does on the Sabbath will also follow this model.

The question arises, what does the body do now that it is in the presence of Christ Jesus? Sing praises? Yes, singing praise to the Father and the Son will keep the mind focused on both, and will keep the desires of the heart pleasing to both. The same can be said for studying Scripture, and for getting together with other brethren if any are geographically near by. But the Sabbath is 24-hours long, and how long can a disciple keep his or her mind focused on the Father and the Son unless the disciple is bodily doing something that pertains to the Father and the Son?

I write about theological matters when not meeting with others in services that resemble graduate collegiate seminars. If I do not actively focus my thoughts on Scripture, my mind wanders, sometime too far a field. I get to thinking about Dutch Harbor and south Bering Sea islands and the reef off Priest Rock and about how many very large halibut I caught in the hole behind the reef and about how many I didn't get. I have to reel my thoughts back in, change their orientation, and get to work using the visible things of this world to reveal the invisible things of God.

The Puritan preacher Edward Taylor wrote religious poetry to keep his mind on God (unfortunately, Taylor wasn't a Sabbath keeper; yet he strived to keep Sunday as he imagined the Sabbath should be kept), and such an activity would seem appropriate, especially when the poetry or song lyrics seek to praise God.

Jesus proclaimed Himself the Lord of the Sabbath because disciples enter into His presence when they keep the Sabbath; for it is He who was greater than the earthly temple. His body was rebuilt after three days as the temple of God (John 2:19). And His disciples form His Body (1 Cor 12:27). They are the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16).

A disciple worships the Father and the Son when the disciple keeps the commandments by faith; for to keep the commandments requires that the disciple hear the words of Jesus and believes the One who sent Him (John 5:24) and thereby pass from death to life without coming under judgment. A disciple can express praise with his or her lips, but if this praise is not backed up by obedience, the words are merely wind blown slowly.

But it is what Jesus said about it being lawful to do good on the Sabbath where the answer to what constitutes true Sabbath worship lies: again, the idle mind does not stay focused on the Father and the Son for long, and to keep the Sabbath, the thoughts of the mind and the desires of the heart need to stay focused on both; therefore what James writes about true religion—"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (1:27)—serves as the Sabbath worship model. Keeping oneself unstained equates to keeping the commandments by faith as an ongoing activity, and to visit the afflicted in their affliction is what the Father did when Jesus, performing the speech-act of the Father, healed the man with the withered hand.

For the disciple who is alone on the Sabbath—there are, in this era, many more disciples alone than with anyone in services—keeping the thoughts of the

mind and the desires of the heart focused on the Father and the Son is difficult and is worthy of praise and is true worship. But keeping thoughts on God would be easier if the person visited the afflicted in their affliction, doing whatever the disciple can to end or to ease the affliction. If this means visiting nursing homes on the Sabbath, then visiting nursing homes is a lawful Sabbath activity. If this means doing physical work for the afflicted, then this work is a lawful activity. But this freedom to do good can be easily abused, as many Seventh Day Adventists do when they work their regularly scheduled shifts in medical institutions, giving to the church their pay for the day. And because of their abuse of the freedom to do good, the Churches of God have been hesitant to permit any form of physical work on the Sabbath, erring as far in the opposite direction as Adventists err in working their regular jobs ... emergencies are, obviously, exceptions to the rule.

The Father and Son have given to disciples both the freedom to do good and the obligation to remain unstained by the world as disciples follow the Lamb of God wherever He leads. There will again be a time for public miracles to occur on the Sabbath, but that time is not now. Thus, accepting a job that requires the disciple to regularly work on the Sabbath is outside of the bounds of remaining unstained by the world; yet if a caregiver needs an emergency relief for a Sabbath day, the disciple has the freedom to do good. If these “emergencies” begin occurring on consecutive Sabbaths, then these *emergencies* are not really emergencies.

A disciple will inevitably err in either withdrawing so completely from the world on the Sabbath that no one can find the disciple if an emergency occurred, or in engaging with the world to such an extent that the Sabbath is no longer special — and whenever a disciple finds that the disciple has gone too far in one direction or the other, the disciple need to return to Matthew chapter 12 and consider how priests labored on the Sabbath and were not condemned ... disciples are today spiritual Levites who have been ordained for service to God at the cost of sons (children) and brothers (relatives). This is really a high price to pay for being ordained to serve God; so disciples should consider this price whenever entering into Sabbath observance, and should respond appropriately.

The Apostle Paul said (in a differing context), “So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil” (Rom 14:16). Do not let the freedom a disciple has to do good be called evil by another son of God; for in doing so, the disciple has set a stumbling block in front of the one who calls the activity evil. However, remember, today there are few Christians who have been truly born of spirit. Most are the seed of the devil. Thus, engaging with other “Christians” who are not like-minded in activities that are inherently good will almost always result in having good called evil, and these other *Christians* proposing to do evil that good may come (Rom 3:8). That will never happen.

Again, because meaning must be assigned to words, visible Christianity does evil but calls it “good”—and calls those things “evil” that keep the disciple unstained by the world.

Christ Jesus trusts disciples to enter into His presence on the Sabbath, and to bodily remain in His presence. What it takes for the disciple to remain in His presence (with thoughts and desires focused on God) is left up to the disciple,

with visiting the afflicted in their affliction an easy answer to how a disciple can transform “rest” into “worship.”

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