

Newsletter December 2013

This newsletter contains edited excerpts taken from Book II, Chapter 13.3, *The Sabbath and the Lord's Day*. Today, many confuse the weekly worship day of Christians with the Jewish Sabbath Day (Ex.31:12–17) – a misconception that we shall attempt to fully resolve in this newsletter. God rested from all his labors on the seventh day after having created the Earth and all that dwells upon it (Ge.2:2,3). Yet, actual Sabbath-day observance by mankind is not mentioned in Scripture until the Israelites, aimlessly wandering in the wilderness as a penalty for their disbelief, were told not to collect manna on the seventh day (cf. Ex.16:26). They were given a double portion of manna on the sixth day so that they could rest from their toilsome journeys on the seventh day (cf. Ex.16:29,30). In doing so, God granted them the opportunity to meditate on his divine being, survey His works, and contemplate the glory of His creation, thus sharing for one day in seven the rest that they had previously rejected when they refused to enter the promised land at His express command.

Later, this one day of rest was formally constituted in the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) that God gave to Israel (cf. Ex.20:8). The more elaborate ceremonial law contained in the Book of Leviticus centered upon Temple worship that was both public and ritualistic, while the Decalogue specifically referred to inward thoughts that led to the outward moral conduct of individuals. Unlike the ceremonial law, the Ten Commandments were never intended to be ritually observed; they were to be responded to with spontaneous obedience from within the hearts of individual men and women. Nevertheless, it was not long after the Decalogue was given that a great amount of outward ritual and legalism became falsely associated with it – specifically so regarding the keeping of the Sabbath – thus trivializing and concealing its true moral character. By the time of Jesus' ministry on earth, the Scribes had stacked up so many restrictions regarding the keeping of the Sabbath Day that it had made its observance a burdensome legalistic ordeal that was not at all restful to body or mind. It is impossible to create inward moral obedience from mere outward ritual, since hypocrisy is the inevitable result (cf. Mt.23:25). Jesus had many disputes with the Scribes and Pharisees over the observance of the Sabbath because He took a firm stand that the Sabbath was established for man's personal benefit, not as an outward legalistic exhibition to appease God (cf. Mk.2:27). It should be noted that Jesus repeated all of the Ten Commandments in his teaching with the one exception of the keeping of the Jewish Sabbath day. Nevertheless, we read in Luke 4:16 that Jesus attended worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He often taught in the synagogues on the Sabbath day when the Jews gathered together. Therefore, Jesus had not set Himself against the proper observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship, but against the strict ritualistic legalism that had undermined its true meaning and purpose.

All of the early first Christians were Jews – the faithful remnant of Israel who had readily embraced their Messiah. They at first continued to observe the Sabbath as was the manner of their tradition on the last day of the week, but in addition they began celebrating the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week. Early Christian gatherings were being held to comfort and encourage each other and to celebrate the Lord's Supper (cf. Newsletter July 2013) not to observe a day of rest as a substitute for the Sabbath Day. Moreover, there is no explicit mandate recorded anywhere in Scripture for making a change from the last day of the week to the first as a day for the corporate worship of God. Rather, that change came about quite naturally because of the sharp division that had occurred between Jewish Christians and unbelieving Jews, which had soon made the Temple and Synagogues off limits to them, and from the simple gatherings of Christians that were spontaneously taking place on the first day of each week in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus had appeared to his disciples at various times on the weekly anniversary of his resurrection; it is specifically recorded that He appeared to Thomas on the first day of the week (cf. Jn. 20:26). Therefore, we observe that Christ Himself encouraged the weekly resurrection-day gathering of the faithful to worship God.

Jewish Christians worshiped exclusively on the first day of the week, while they continued to observe the seventh day as a day of rest from their labors. Unfortunately, many of them also continued in the ceremonial worship of Temple ordinances, which also often resulted in them neglecting Christian gatherings on the first day of the week (cf. He.10:25). In order for the Jew to fully accept redemptive grace, it was necessary for him to leave behind the legalistic and ceremonial foreshadows, which had only pointed to Christ, in order to accept the reality that Christ had come in fulfillment of those Old Covenant ordinances. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews greatly exhorted them to do so lest they hopelessly fall back away from the true faith and subject Christ to open

disgrace (cf. He.6:1-6). All observance of the ceremonial law finally came to an end in A.D. 70 when Herod's massive Temple of Jesus' day was destroyed by a Roman army (cf. Book III, Pages 64, 574, 575).

Later as Gentiles came into the Church, they also worshiped Christ on the first day of the week in commemoration of his resurrection. The Jerusalem council had ruled that Gentile Christians should not be placed under the strict ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic Law such as circumcision and various dietary restrictions (cf. Ac.15:10,24). That also would have included any ceremonial observance of the Sabbath Day as well, such that Gentile believers never acknowledged it as a day of rest. Gentile Christians were not only free from being judged under all ceremonial aspects of the Law through an abundance of God's grace that had been extended to them in Christ, they also did not have any of the past traditions of the Jews that they should desire to follow them. It is important for us to note that the first day of the week in the early Christian era was never set aside as a full day of rest; that is, it was not in any way observed as a second "sabbath day." Christians met together very early in the morning, perhaps for a few minutes up to an hour or so, and then went on to perform their regular daily labors. From Scripture as well as various historical documents, it can be demonstrated that Christians may have regularly met after a day of work in the evening hours on the first day of the week as well (cf. Ac.20:7).

The first day of the week is most often referred to today by evangelical Christians as "The Lord's Day." We actually find those words in various English translations of the book of Revelation (Re.1:10). Here, we find that the Apostle John said he was in the Spirit on the "Lord's Day." We must realize that some difficulty is found when translating the Greek expression *kyriake hemera* from which this translation is taken, especially since this is the only place in the New Testament where this exact expression is used (cf. Book II, page 234). Yet, John's use of the expression "day of the Lord" may very well have referred to the day on which Christians commonly met together each week, and in the absence of any better scriptural term it is much more appropriate to use "The Lord's Day" than to confuse two distinct worship days by incorrectly applying the Hebrew word "*shabath*," which referred specifically to the last day of each week. There is in fact a grievous danger in referring to the Christian meeting day as the "Sabbath Day" or as a "Christian Sabbath," as many do. We must always be on guard against placing ourselves back under the strict letter of extreme Pharisaic legalism – especially so since we have been so wondrously released from legalism by having been redeemed through a glorious dispensation of grace. As we have discussed repeatedly in this series of studies, law and grace cannot ever be mixed together, such that any attempt to do so disqualifies us from experiencing redemption through grace alone (cf. Ro.11:6). We must not worship a specific day of the week, as if it is holy in itself, but instead worship Jesus Christ the Lord and Creator of all days. Therefore, we would do well to oppose the strict legal and ceremonial observance of any day, whether Saturday, Sunday, or any other day of the week as a "Christian Sabbath Day."

In the early fourth century during a time of great political chaos, the flailing Roman empire assimilated itself within the Christian church for the sake of its political survival, thus corrupting the church with pompous Roman ceremonialism and paganism (cf. Book III, Chapter 17.7). It was not until or about the year A.D. 325 that Sunday was officially established as a "day of rest" for Christians. The Roman Emperor Constantine, a devout worshiper of the Roman sun god, (Sol), openly professed to believe in Christ as well through a strange form of religious syncretism (cf. Book III, page 134). As a part of his general toleration and even preference for Christians, he established Sunday (i.e. Sun Day) as a day in which no ordinary work could be done. In so doing, he also officially mandated Sunday as the day when all Christians should assemble together for worship. Therefore, the erroneous correlation of the Lord's Day with the Jewish Sabbath Day was actually the consequence of a decision made by corrupt secular political authority in the fourth century; it was not derived from any careful consideration of Scripture or even by a declaration of the established church. Therefore, Sunday observance as a ritualistic sabbath day is at best traditional; at its worst it can be seen to be of pagan origin.

As we observed earlier, Sabbath day observance is found in the moral Law, not as a part of the ceremonial Law. The purpose of the ceremonial Law was totally fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ to which it had pointed. Jesus also fulfilled all of the requirements of the moral Law in his own flesh as the perfect man in our place. As Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Mt.5:17,18). God's moral Law in the Decalogue unquestionably states that the Sabbath must be honored by ceasing from work (cf. Ex.20:10). Although we are no longer judged by the law, having been justified by grace through faith alone, we now have an inner desire to please God in all that we do. However, what

we must realize is that the Sabbath Day as it was given to the Jew actually foreshadowed a coming sabbath age that was later to be established in the person of Christ. It prefigured a day in the future in which fallen man would cease from impossible attempts to make himself worthy of God's approval through hopelessly corrupt works – a day in which God would unilaterally work to save man from his sins – this very day in which we now live and in which we can now fully rest in the finished work of Christ.

When we fully reside in the grace of God and cease from all of our own corrupt works in an impossible attempt to justify ourselves, we morally keep the Sabbath – a Sabbath rest that is no longer dictated by law or veiled in ritual, but fully realized in an abundance of grace and peace. No longer is the Sabbath observed in dark ceremonial shadow, but in brilliant reality – no longer in the letter that slays us, but in spirit and revealed purpose that bids us live. Therefore, when we reject a rigid legalistic and ritualistic observance of any day of the week as a Sabbath, we actually uphold the true character of sabbath-keeping in the moral sense that was originally intended in the Decalogue. As Christians, we now have in substance what the Jews only had in legal form. We rest daily in Jesus Christ, and in that sense, Christ Himself is our true Sabbath over which He is also fully Lord (cf. Lu.6:5; Newsletter November 2013). We read about this in Paul's letter to the Colossians (Chapter 2 vs. 16–17) as he is warning them against formalism and mysticism: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." Therefore, we should not consider any one day above another considering it holy in itself because the Old Covenant observance of various days was but a shadow of things to come, while Christ is the objective substance of that shadow – He whom we now embrace.

The Israelites were promised rest in the land of Canaan after their miraculous deliverance from bondage in Egypt, as we briefly mentioned at the beginning of this Newsletter. Yet, they did not trust God to provide that rest so they first sent spies into the land, and seeing many obstacles, they failed to trust God to deliver on his promise (cf. Nu.14:3). Later, in prideful presumption, they attempted to take the land through their own efforts (cf. Nu.14:40–45) and were miserably humiliated and defeated. Israel could not enter into God's rest that He so graciously offered them because of their lack of faith in the supremacy of his Word over their own abilities (cf. He.3:11). Such is an example today of one who has been offered the rest of redemption in Christ, but fails to accept it at face value. Instead, he constantly "spies" on the offer of salvation as being insufficient. Because of his distrust in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, he constantly struggles through life in an attempt to grasp salvation through adding baseless laborious works, which can never be enough to provide the assurance he seeks. Because of his lack of faith in the finished work of Christ on his behalf, he cannot enter into God's rest. "He that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his" (He.4:10). God rested on the seventh day because his work of creation was completed. As Christians we should rest from all our laborious works in this our wondrous "Sabbath Day" because our salvation is fully complete in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. In doing so, we enter into the "peaceful land" of God's redemptive promise and receive full assurance in our lives here on earth. Performing ritualistic works of any sort is not rest; faith and trust in Jesus Christ is rest. He alone is our true Sabbath and this age of grace is our wondrous day of rest. Hear again Jesus' invitation, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Mt.11:28).

Therefore, whatever works of labor we may attempt to add to God's grace, whether Sabbath day observance or other works of any kind, prevents us from fully entering into God's rest. Failing to trust in Christ's completed redemption, we wander through a wilderness of legalism, ritualism, and despair – wasted effort upon wasted effort with no hope, and no assurance of salvation. Therefore, since we must strive to make our salvation sure (cf. Ph. 2:12), let us struggle to hold fast through faith to God's promise that we may cease from a fruitless labor of meaningless works – really believing – and finding everything we need completed in Him (cf. He.4:11). In recognizing all of this as being true to Scripture, how should today's Christians regard the Lord's Day? While we have the liberty to do as we wish with the day without any legal entanglements, let us rejoice that so many of us have the opportunity to set aside an entire day from our ordinary labors to diligently study God's Word in depth, to contemplate the glories of His vast creation, and perform needed works of mercy. But more importantly still, we have time set aside each week to assemble ourselves together as his Church – openly worshipping our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in warm fellowship with other believers of like faith (cf. He.10:25).