

2. The Seventh Day

Last week, I have traced the scope of the fourth commandment. It has its basis in creation. We have seen that the understanding of the Sabbath is not confined to one day a week, the seventh day but to the seventh year and the jubilee. We have also seen that it spans from creation to the eschaton. We will say more about that later.

As the fourth commandment is the basis of the Ten Words, and the Ten Words gives to us the image of God, then the Sabbath command undergirds the restoration of the relationship we have with our Creator. We have to see it this way because of the grace given in the commandments.

We have come to regard the seventh day as the day of rest with church attendance. As I said last week, we have turned theology into anthropology. In other words, we have turned what God has done and provided for us into what humanity needs to do in obeying the commandment. This is the problem in understanding this commandment and that is why its interpretation is clouded with legality. The seventh day does not belong to the natural law nor the ceremonial law. It belongs to the creational covenant, a covenant of love. Thus, it is the expression of the relational and not the legal as is commonly understood.

Of the Ten Words, the fourth is the most important one as it is the fulcrum on which the rest sits. Yet in most people's thinking, the fourth is the optional one. It is like the corner stone that the builders rejected.

The Biblical Framework

When we refer to the seventh day, we are referring to the Sabbath. It is only too easy to take scripture verses and put that into the context of our culture and then we make a doctrine out of it. Much of our thinking starts from the cultural which is what we are familiar. We need to reason from the biblical framework.

Changes have taken place in our society and the time for God is crowded out by our work and personal pursuits. Our understanding of the Sabbath or the 'seventh day' often starts from those premises. Simply by attending church on Sunday does not address these issues. The Sabbath relates to the whole of life. What I want to do in these studies is to re-orient our way of thinking, i.e. from the scriptures and from creation we come to understand what the 'Seventh Day' really is and then we can arrange our life-styles accordingly. This is not meant to be a legalistic demand on people.

We need to reason biblically and that is what we will do through these studies. In other words, we need to reset our thinking and then we can decide how we want to live. Of course, the Spirit of God will help us in doing that. We cannot understand the things of God or the bible from our cultural framework. We need to alter our framework of thinking from the biblical teaching.

Our bodies are the dwelling place of God. Why the dwelling place? So that God can work from within us, that is, to be in communion with the creator so that we can be and act from within by His presence. The problem with us is that we think and act from without, i.e., outside of His presence. We start with the 'I' and work towards God. The 'I' with all its baggage cannot get close to God. We need the cross and the redemption that Christ offers to us. In this way, we are restored. It is redemptive reasoning that we need. It is thinking from God to man, not from man to God.

The 'Seventh Day'

The seventh day is not just a term that we know as Saturday or the Sabbath, but it is a term full of spiritual significance. Next week, I will deal with what it means for God to rest. Of course, we will need to talk about the continuing work of God and that is not really appreciated or understood by the church. We talk of Sunday as the holy day, the day we go to church, but that is about all. Some would go further to express how they think the holy day ought to be celebrated and this approach of necessity will have to go into all kinds of legalism. There are others who think little of this day, regarding the fourth as the optional commandment. Of course, there are those outside of Christianity who have little regard for this day. The

‘Seventh Day’ is not about legalism, but about who God is and what He has purposed for humanity. It is a command (the Fourth Commandment), but firstly it is grace which frees humanity from servitude. Far too often the fourth commandment is used to add to that bondage.

I need to make one more point here before we start our discussion on the Seventh Day. I want to point to the fulfillment given to us in Revelation that God’s ultimate goal is to dwell with humanity. In other words, we are here talking about what God has purposed for humanity in creation.

So, what is the Seventh Day? We use the term ‘Sabbath’ to refer to the Jewish day of rest. The Sabbath is the seventh day, our Saturday. The ‘Seventh Day’ needs to be considered in the context of creation as this is where the term originated. God created the world in six days. Humanity was created on the sixth day. At the end of each day, God pronounced that what was created on that day was good. There is no such pronouncement on the seventh day. Instead, it was said that God rested on the seventh day, and He blessed it and made it holy. We will consider what all that mean in the next few weeks.

We have come to make the first day of the week, Sunday, for our worship instead of the Saturday. The Seventh Day Adventist still holds on to the Saturday, the seventh day, for their day of worship. The reason the rest of the Christian world does not do that is because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:9). The New Testament told us that the Christians in those early days were already practicing that (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2).

This change to the first day of the week took place in the early church and was affirmed by the early church fathers and the reformers. We have come to accept this change without question, but what about the fourth commandment. Is it obsolete? By no means. Our Seventh Day Adventist friends maintain that it is not obsolete. I think we need to look further than simply basing it on Christ’s resurrection. The Seventh Day Adventist also acknowledges Christ’s resurrection but kept the Sabbath.

We need to go back to see that the point of the commandments is the presence of God with His people. This is the preface to the giving of the commandment on Mt Sinai.

⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.

⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” (Ex. 19:4-6)

‘You shall be my treasured possession’ prefaced the commandments. We need to see that the fourth commandment is firstly grace and secondly law. It is firstly a statement of divine providence and secondly it requires a response of obedience from humanity. It is a statement of the faithfulness of God and not of humanity.

Last week I mentioned that the reformation of Nehemiah did not do much to aid the cause of the fourth commandment. It focused on the human response and as a result it impeded the response from the heart. It was a form of captivity. Having legislated on what can or can’t be done on the Sabbath, these then become the cultural norm for the believers. Paul made an astounding statement in writing to the Colossians.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ... ¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col. 2:8-10, 16-17)

This is a serious statement by Paul. The Colossians were taken captive by human tradition and various forms of legality. If they did not conform to these traditions, they were judged. These traditions included the Sabbath observance. We wouldn’t dare to make that statement from our Christian tradition. However,

Paul pointed out that the Sabbath is a shadow of things to come, the reality is already here now in the person of Christ. In other words, the Sabbath observance is not the end point. It points to the reality of our union in Christ. It is like the sacrifices that the people of Israel made in the tabernacle. Those sacrifices points to the reality that the death of Christ brings. So, it is with the Sabbath.

In other words, if we teach that coming to church on a Sunday shows our obedience to the Sabbath command, then it is like telling the Israelites that bringing a sacrifice to the temple is obedience to God. The prophets denounced that practice when it was carried out without the true repentance from the heart. Let us not be simplistic about the Sabbath teaching.

The point of the Sabbath is the presence of God with His people, and we will see this again in the last two studies. Christ came as the fulfilment of this presence, the reality of the presence of God. It is in this way that we understand Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath. He brought in the reality of the Sabbath through what He did on the cross.

It is finished' Jesus said

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

'It is finished'. These are emotive words from Jesus on the cross. We must not understand these words as the finish of the second phase of God's plan. These words echo the finished work of creation. This is the echo of the completion of creation on the sixth day. The work of redemption is completed. It was the ninth hour of the sixth day. The body of Jesus had to be taken down because the next day is the Sabbath. Last week we read what Isaiah wrote regarding the new heavens and the new earth.

²² "For as the new heavens and the new earth
that I make
shall remain before me, says the Lord,
so shall your offspring and your name remain.

²³ From new moon to new moon,
and from Sabbath to Sabbath (*from a Sabbath to his Sabbath*),
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
declares the Lord. (Isa. 66:22-23)

'From a Sabbath to his Sabbath', the unending covenant of God expressed by our acknowledgment and homage to the creator and redeemer will continue as the sign of the divine-human relationship. Let us not collapse this great theological statement into mere anthropology, by regarding it simply as a day to remember the Lord. The fourth commandment is about the presence of God with His people, expressed as the Sabbath observance and finally fulfilled in Christ, as Calvin wrote.

But there is no doubt that by the Lord Christ's coming the ceremonial part of this commandment was abolished. For he himself is the truth, with whose presence all figures vanish; he is the body, at whose appearance the shadows are left behind. He is, I say, the true fulfillment of the Sabbath. ... This is not confined within a single day but extends through the whole course of our life, until, completely dead to ourselves, we are filled with the life of God. (Calvin's Institutes, II.viii.31 (p. 397)

Calvin gives to us the true meaning of the Sabbath. Christ is the true fulfillment of the Sabbath. This finished work of Christ marks the completion of the work of the new creation. After His death on the cross, Christ was buried in the tomb. He laid there on the Sabbath day. His resurrection marks a new beginning and thus the eighth day is observed, i.e. the first day of the week. However, as Calvin wrote, 'This is not confined within a single day but extends through the whole course of our life'.

Keeping the ‘seventh day’ (Sabbath)

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but 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. ¹¹ For 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. (Ex. 20:8-11)

The ‘seventh Day’ is a day of our acknowledgment of the creator as we are created in His image as ‘in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it’. So in like manner we are told to ‘remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ‘Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God’ (Ex. 20:9-10).

We live in the ‘Seventh Day’ – a continual remembrance of the creative work of God. In other words, we live in the rest of God, we live in the ‘Seventh Day’ because the ‘Seventh Day’ is the day of God’s rest. As Augustine prayed, ‘You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless, until it finds its rest in You.’ We need to do likewise. We will explore what this means next week.

Last week, I mentioned that Barth said, ‘Creation as the External Basis of the Covenant’, ‘The Covenant as the Internal Basis of Creation’. (K Barth, *CD* III.1). Thus, the creational relationship is set up and humanity is the respond to the love of God. In the creation God expressed His covenantal love and the fourth commandment is put in this context, not just mere legalism. In other words, God has given to humanity His creation and humanity needs to respond in acknowledgment of this gift of God. Yes, while we need to tend and keep this God-given creation, yet we need to acknowledge the creator for all that He has given and done for us. The fourth commandment is not about what we do, but about our relationship with the creator. We live in the seventh day, the rest of God. Ultimately, we need to find our rest in Him.

Sign of the divine-human relationship

¹² And the LORD said to Moses, 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. ¹⁴ You 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. ¹⁵ Six 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. ¹⁶ Therefore 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.” (Ex. 31:12-17)

Observing the sabbath is a sign of the covenant which is based on creation. It is the expression of our relatedness to the creator. That is the reason why Barth said the fourth commandment should be at the head of all the other commandments, i.e. the fulcrum on which all the other commandment are balanced. In other words, while we may be caring for humanity as in the sixth to the tenth commandment, not observing the sabbath puts all that care to void. That is the significance of the seventh day.

Anthropology tells us that we rest on the seventh day after the six days of work. Theology tells us that humanity’s first full day on earth is the seventh day, the day of God’s rest, after which follows six days of work.

The Seventh Year and the Jubilee

The principle of the seventh day is extended to cover the seventh year and the year of the Jubilee, i.e. seven of the seventh year. However, before we consider that we need to look at the fourth commandment as given to us in Deuteronomy. It grounds the fourth commandment in the liberation of Israel from slavery.

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. ¹⁵You 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. (Deut. 5:12-15)

So far, I have only referred to the fourth commandment in Exodus which gives the creation as the basis of the commandment. Deuteronomy grounds it on the liberation from Egypt. We should not read an inconsistency in these two records. Rather, the two bases of the fourth commandment as set out in Exodus and Deuteronomy complement one another. Creation and redemption are one and form the principles of the sabbath. The sabbath looks back to the creational covenant and it also looks forward to the future liberation, the fulfilment of the covenant. Therefore, the legalism of the Sabbath observance robs the Sabbath of its meaning. It denies the freedom we have in the Lord. It denies us of the true meaning of the Sabbath.

As humanity lives between the time of creation and its eventual fulfilment, ‘therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it’ (Ex. 20:11). We will consider the blessing and the consecration of the seventh day in the last two studies. These have implications on the way we live and relate to the creator and the creation. It is on this understanding that the principle of the seventh day is extended to the seventh year and the year of jubilee. But before we consider that, we must not forget that Pentecost is the fiftieth day after the Passover, i.e. after seven sabbaths.

The Seventh Year

²When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. ³If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. ⁵But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ ⁶then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever. (Ex. 21:2-6)

The principle of the sabbath relates not only to seventh day, but to the seventh year and the jubilee, seven of the seventh year. To honour the sabbath is to honour the rest of God, the completed work of God in creation. In so doing, we also acknowledge the ‘rest’ of creation, the restitution of creation to its former state.

No one needs to be a slave forever in Israel. The seventh year is the year of release for the person to start life again as a free person. Israel needs to remember that they were slaves in Egypt before and it is God who gives them the release. They need to do likewise to others.

¹¹For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’ (Deut. 15:11)

The poor and the needy are the concern of God. In releasing them from their debt and from the predicament of the situation they find themselves in, we are honouring the creator. This is not merely a social concern. We need not separate the social and the religious as we tend to today. This has to be seen as our worship of God. This is also the principle of tithing. John sums it up succinctly, ‘But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?’ (1 John 3:17).

The Jubilee of rest – rest for the land and rest for the servants

⁸ “You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. ⁹ Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. ¹⁰ And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. ¹¹ That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. ¹² For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field.

¹³ “In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property. ¹⁴ And if you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. ¹⁵ You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops. ¹⁶ If the years are many, you shall increase the price, and if the years are few, you shall reduce the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you. ¹⁷ You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 25:8-17)

The jubilee spells out the rest for the land and the for the servants. While the jubilee is indeed the expression of caring for the land and also the care for the destitute, its overarching principle is the year of restitution of all things. In other words, it is the restoration of what it was at the beginning. It is the looking forward to a hope of restoration, the poor will not continue in poverty while the rich will not continue to accumulate wealth ad infinitum. ‘For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. ... you shall fear your God, for I am the LORD your God’ (Lev. 25:12, 17).

Jesus saw His task was to ‘proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’.

¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Lk. 4:16-19)

He gave a new meaning to the jubilee. While it was every fiftieth year, now the year of the Lord’s favour is in perpetuity because Jesus fulfilled it in Himself for all eternity. It is because of this that, Jesus said,

²⁷ And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27-28)

So, from the seventh day to the fiftieth year, from the sabbath to the jubilee, what has to be remembered is the gift of God to humanity in the proper functioning of the covenantal relationship that God has established. It is time set apart for communion with God, our creator. Humanity, created in the image of God, needs this time that is blessed and made holy by God, in order to find and know the rest in God. These will be considered in subsequent studies.