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HAS SUNDAY RESTED SABBATH DAY?

Today's text: Exodus 20: 8-11; Mark 2: 27-28

Extracts:

1. **“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work” [Ex. 20: 8-10]**
2. **“And [Jesus] said unto them [the Pharisees], The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore, the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath” [Mk 2: 27-28]**

*The word, ‘Sabbath,’ means ‘rest.’ We first came across the matter of rest in **Genesis 2: 2-3**, and “God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because that in it He had rested from all His work.” However, Sabbath day became one of the Ten Commandments given to man through Moses on Mount Sinai [**Ex. 20: 8-11**]. The word, ‘Sunday,’ originally meant the day for the worship of the sun god [just as Saturday was for the worship of Saturn, a Roman god]. However, Sunday is the first day of the week, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead [**Jn 20:1**]. In 321 A.D., Constantine the Great made a law proclaiming Sunday the day of rest for the whole Roman Empire [*Encyclopedia Americana*, article “Sabbath”]. Since then, Sunday became the Sabbath day for Christians, while the Jews have maintained Saturday as their Sabbath day.*

However, in the 16th Century, there was a move among some Christian groups who felt that keeping the Sabbath on Sunday was a political, not a spiritual decision. By the year 1844, the Seventh-Day Adventist movement was born.¹ Its position is that the true Sabbath day is Saturday, not Sunday, and that any Christian who breaches that is breaking one of the Ten Commandments of God. The debate is so strong and so long on either side that some theologians have written doctoral theses on the subject!

In today's lesson, we shall show that the matter is not as complicated as it has been made, and the glory goes to God for the revelation knowledge.

¹ <http://www.bible.ca/H-sunday.htm>

1. Saturday as the day of rest

In commanding that the seventh day of the week be observed as Sabbath day, God related it to His creation activities, “for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it” [Ex. 20: 11]. The assumption that Sunday was the first day and Saturday was the seventh could be accepted because the counting of days in the Bible seems to synchronize with it. For example, Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week [Jn 20:1], and we call it Easter Sunday. Therefore, we can accept that God made Saturday the day to observe the Sabbath.

There is no biblical evidence that the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, observed the Sabbath, nor were they required to do so. We do know that during their wilderness travels, the children of Israel received twice as much manna on Friday as their daily supply because manna did not fall on Sabbath day [Ex. 16: 22-25]. God told them, “six days ye shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, in it there shall be none” [v. 26]. Then, on Mount Sinai, God made the observance of the Sabbath on the seventh day one of the Ten Commandments [Ex. 20: 8-10].

How should such a holy day be observed? It is a day of complete rest for both human beings and animals [Ex. 20: 10; Jer. 17:21-22], to be spent in prayer and worship in God’s house [Is. 56: 2-7]. As for the nature of worship, God said “their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon Mine altar; for Mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people” [v. 7].

2. Jesus on the Sabbath

Jesus observed the Sabbath on a Saturday. However, He had a running battle with the synagogue rulers who felt that He and His disciples were not observing the Sabbath as prescribed by God! They condemned Him for healing the sick on Sabbath day [Lk 13: 10-17]. They persecuted Him and sought to slay Him because He saved lives on Sabbath day [Jn 5:16].

One Sabbath day, Jesus passed through a cornfield with His disciples who were very hungry. They plucked the corn and ate, to the indignation of the Pharisees who said, “Behold, Thy disciples do that which was not lawful to do upon the Sabbath day.” Part of His answer is very instructive:

Have ye not read in the law, how that on the Sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? But I say unto you, that in this place is one greater than the temple. But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day [Matt. 12: 1-8]

Mark's report of the same story adds the following as part of Jesus' answer, "And He said unto them, The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath " [Mk 2:27]. Jesus Christ, as Emmanuel [God with us] [Matt. 1:23] and a member of the Triune God, *Elohim* [Gen. 1:26], knows more about the Sabbath day [He made the rule!] than any of us. So, if He says that He is the Lord of the Sabbath day and that the Sabbath was made for man, and not the other way around, what is He telling us? Why did Jesus rise from the dead on Sunday and not on Saturday? We shall come back to this theme later!

3. The disciples and Sabbath day

Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, that is, Sunday [Mk 16:9], and showed Himself to His disciples on that day, and thereafter, every first day of the week [Jn 20:26]. But, after His ascension to heaven, His disciples kept the Sabbath day [Acts 13:14]. However, as the power of the Holy Spirit began to manifest mightily in the disciples, and they drew crowds to Jesus, the Jews became envious and started to throw the followers of Christ out of synagogues [Acts 13: 44-52]. The persecution got worse when the early Christians voted to admit Gentiles into their fold, not by circumcision but through faith in Jesus [Acts 15: 1-29]. So, even when services were organized on Sabbath day, the Christians would go to a separate location, usually by a riverside [because of the need for water baptism] to offer their own prayers [Acts 16: 13].

In due course, the early church shifted their separate Sabbath worship to the first day of the week. For example, when Paul visited Troas on his way from Philippi, "upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them" [Acts 20:7]. In other words, the Holy Communion had replaced the burnt offerings of the Old Testament that they still practised in the synagogues. By 100 A.D., when the Apostle John had become old, the first day of the week became known as the Lord's Day [Rev. 1:10]. Early church history outside of the Bible confirms the trend. For example:²

- *The Letter of Barnabas, 15:6-8 (74 A.D.):* "We keep the eighth day [Sunday] with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead."
- *DIDACHE (90 A.D.):* "And on the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's day, meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent Him to us, and condescended to let Him suffer, and raised Him from the dead" [*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7, p. 423*].
- *321 A.D., Emperor Constantine promulgated an edict making Sunday the "Sabbath" day throughout the Roman Empire. This law enabled Christians to fully observe the day without working.*

² "Saturday (Sabbath) or First day? What day did early Christians worship on?" <http://www.bible.ca/H-sunday.htm>

4. Matters arising

The fundamental question has remained unanswered: is Sabbath day to be observed on Saturday or Sunday? If the issue of Sabbath were not one of the Ten Commandments, the question would be academic. On the commandments, James has said, “whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” [Jam. 2:10]. On the same subject, Jesus Himself has said:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 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. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven [Matt. 5: 17-19]

If Sabbath day is Saturday, it means that all believers who observe it on Sunday are wrong, and living in disobedience of God’s commandments. To address that question, we need to first answer another question. Why did Jesus resurrect on Sunday and not on Saturday? Would not that have saved believers this “ordeal”?

Let us go to **Leviticus Chapter 23** where God gave Moses the feasts (holy convocations) that the children of Israel had to keep. Let us examine some of them:

a) *The Weekly Sabbath* [vv. 1-3]

As we saw earlier [Ex. 20:11], this was to commemorate God’s work of creation. It was to be observed on the seventh day of the week. This is the subject we are discussing today.

b) *The Passover* [vv. 4-8]

This was to commemorate the deliverance of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. It involved the killing of a lamb without blemish and it was connected to the Feast of Unleavened Bread [vv. 6-8]. As we saw in an earlier Bible class [‘Freedom is not free!’ Vol. 3, No.15: 26 May 2002], the Passover symbolizes the crucifixion and death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, “which taketh away the sin of the world” [Jn 1:29].

c) *Firstfruits* [vv. 9-14]

The people were to offer the first fruits of their harvest in the Promised Land to the priest who was expected to “wave the sheaf before the Lord to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.” While presenting the harvest, it should be offered with a “he lamb

without blemish of the first year for a burnt offering unto the Lord” [vv. 11-12]. This is analogous to the resurrection of Jesus, and “now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept” [1 Cor. 15:20]. Jesus, the lamb without blemish [1 Pet. 1:19] rose from the dead “on the morrow after the Sabbath,” the first day of the week [Jn 20:1]!

d) *Pentecost* [vv. 15-22]

Counting “from the morrow after the Sabbath”, “even unto the morrow after the seventh Sabbath shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the Lord” [vv. 15, 16]. This is the Feast of the Pentecost. Instructively, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples on Pentecost day [Acts 2:1-4], which is exactly fifty days from Easter!

Now, if Jesus has fulfilled the Passover, the Firstfruits and the Pentecost, and has called Himself the Lord of the Sabbath day [Lk 6:5], He also has the power to make Sunday a Sabbath day, *without violating God’s commandment* on the matter! How?

5. Saturday or Sunday is okay as Sabbath day!

It is unbelievable how God in deed uses common things around us to explain profound spiritual issues! Now, you examine the common rules on traffic control. In most countries of the world, traffic lights are installed in busy road intercessions to control vehicular traffic. Green means go and red indicates to stop. Yellow light means to get ready to go [yellow to green] or to stop [yellow to red]. All must obey these regulations; otherwise you could be cited for violation and fined. Green means go, red means stop.

However, here comes the ‘lord of the traffic,’ the traffic police officer. The law recognizes him/her as superior to the traffic lights. Once he/she is standing at the intercession, it is immaterial what the traffic lights say! They can tell you to go even when the light is showing red, and you must obey; otherwise you could be cited for violations and fined! They usually come in at emergencies. Once the problem is over, they leave and the traffic lights take over once more.

God’s commandment on observing the Sabbath on the seventh day is like the use of the traffic lights. It worked before the coming of Christ in flesh to fulfil God’s promise to redeem us from the clutches of sin and Satan. After His sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus Christ has become the Mediator of the New Testament [Heb. 9:15] and our Advocate with the Father [1 Jn 2:1]. All power has been given to Him in heaven and on earth, and He will be with us always to the end of the world [Matt. 28: 18, 20]. So, as the Lord of the Sabbath day, He is standing right now in the intersection of our road to eternity, controlling the traffic of our spiritual walk. Therefore, *irrespective* of the traffic rules [on the Sabbath], we are

looking up to Him, the author and finisher of our faith [**Heb. 12:2**], “for the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” [**Jn 1:17**].

6. Conclusion

Saturday is Sabbath day and Sunday is the Lord’s Day, but the owner of the Lord’s Day is also the Lord of the Sabbath day. Historically, early Christians began by worshipping on Saturday. However, as they began to admit the Gentiles, there was open hostility against them to worship in the synagogues. So, after experimenting with separate worship on Saturday, they decided to move their Sabbath day to the Lord’s Day, that is, Sunday.

Was it a mere political decision? As we have demonstrated above with the traffic light concept, it was a spirit-filled decision for the Lord of the Sabbath day led His followers to understand that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath [**Mk 2:27**]. Moreover, “if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven,” so promised Jesus [**Matt. 18:19**]. The Sabbath-keepers, a tiny minority of Christians, are also on solid scriptural ground to hold on to Saturday as practised during the 1st Century church until it moved its worship to the Lord’s Day [**Acts 20:7; Rev. 1:10**]. However, they run into trouble when they condemn those who keep Sunday as their Sabbath day. That will be like somebody who parks her car rather than obey the traffic police officer passing vehicles on red, on the ground that the officer has violated the traffic code!

Speaking by inspiration on the subject, Paul has said:

One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth everyday alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it [**Rom. 14:5-6**]

May the Lord accept our Sabbath day worship, whether it be on Saturday or Sunday.