



## Reflections on the Sabbath: A Bridge to Creation and the Heritage of Jacob

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**W**hy does Scripture connect a weekly period of twenty-four hours of holy time with Creation? Why does God as Creator link the Sabbath not only to Himself, but to our relationship with Him? This article explores four encouraging scriptural illustrations in which God discloses deep meanings of the Sabbath.

### Twenty-four Hours of Holy Time with the Creator

One seventh of our weekly schedule is a large amount of time to set aside exclusively for sacred thoughts and activities. From this, we may infer that God is deeply serious about the meaning and experience of Sabbath. In the fourth commandment, human beings are

lovingly reminded that they are to “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” (Exod 20:8),<sup>1</sup> a command which seems impossible for wicked, sinful human beings to fulfill. How can human beings, who are naturally sinful and unholy (Rom 3:23), keep

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any portion of time holy? It is as if God is asking humans to fly, or, as Yeshua mentioned, to add length to one’s life simply by worrying (Matt 6:27). Why, then, does God ask us to do something that is completely beyond our power to accomplish?

### The Sabbath and Spiritual Intimacy with a Good Creator

In a recent seminar, “Jewish and Christian Mysticism: Convergences and Divergences,” Professor Arthur Green of Brandeis University referred to the time-honored practice of reading the Song of Songs in the synagogue on Friday evening at the beginning of the Sabbath.<sup>2</sup> The link between the Song of Songs and the first Sabbath following the Creation is powerful. It seems that the creation week built to the summit point of the Sabbath, during which nothing new was created except a deeper spiritual intimacy between God and the two recently created masterpieces of the *imago Dei*, Adam and Eve.

Scripture describes a God who is good and merciful (Exod

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33:19; 34:6-7) and, thus, One to be desired and worshiped. The God of Scripture created by means of a brief, merciful method, which lasted six days and in which all animal forms were created by His word. God did not create by a cruel method, which employed death, suffering, and predation throughout millions of years. The seventh-day Sabbath, then, is a memorial of a good method of creation, as clearly stated in the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. . . For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the 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” (Exod 20:8, 11). While the subsequent exercise of God’s mighty power in redeeming Israel from Egypt can be mentioned as another reason for the Sabbath, the original six-day-creation rationale for keeping the Sabbath continues in force as evidenced in God’s final message to humanity in Rev 14:7, which, among other things, uplifts the Sabbath commandment recorded in Exod 20.<sup>3</sup>

Another important factor in the concept of Sabbath is that the Sabbath hours are specifically set apart for building special relationships between the Creator and the creature. God, as with the Beloved in the Song of Songs, expresses divine love to His bride, who is the result of His prior acts of creation. Conversely, the bride—represented in this case by Adam and

Eve—rejoiced over and articulated their personal love to God, whom they appropriately addressed and knew as Father because He created them. This means that the Sabbath, in its profound essence, is a beautiful opportunity for and method of fulfilling the most important command ever given to humans: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5). There is, indeed, a pressing need to recapture in the Sabbath this deepest of human experiences.

### **Healing by the Creator: A Sign of Sabbath Blessing**

After our first parents sinned by disobeying God’s instruction not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3), the experience of Sabbath became even more striking in that it became a time of necessary healing. The fallen human heart does not love God, think holy thoughts, or turn from sin. Viewed in light of God’s commandments, our natural condition implies, as Roger Haight notes, that “human being is ordained to an end that is radically transcendent to this being.”<sup>4</sup> This means that in order for one to keep a day holy, one must be holy. But how can humans be holy?

God tells Israel to “not follow after your own heart” (Num 15:39) and to “remember to do all My commandments, and be holy to your God” (Num 15:40). God, in poetic symbol, tells us

that our motives and actions are driven by our heart and, by implication, that our natural heart will not enable us to keep Sabbath holy. This means that for humans to keep the Sabbath holy, we need to be holy, meaning that we need a different heart. And this is a seemingly impossible task.

However, God is faithful. In the powerful new covenant promises of Scripture, the Creator becomes the re-creator and transforming power of the human heart, which humans can experience in spiritual Sabbath intimacy. Through the prophet Ezekiel, we learn that God makes a connection between the new heart experience and His holy Sabbath: “I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them” (Ezek 20:12). And later He says: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes” (Ezek 36:26-27). In other words, when a human being truly keeps the Sabbath day holy, such behavior is a sign that God has performed a spiritual heart transplant, enabling the individual to do what is naturally impossible—to love God and to keep the Sabbath holy.

### **The Sabbath and the Heritage of Jacob**

The prophet Isaiah states that

one special blessing of honoring the Sabbath is that the Lord “will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father” (Isa 58:14). What could be a special meaning of the heritage of Jacob in this context and how might it be related to Sabbath observance?

delight and joy. Could this be a significant spiritual dimension of the heritage of Jacob mentioned in Isaiah 58 in connection with the Sabbath blessing? If so, how might this be related to Sabbath observance? The discussion below responds to this question.

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Several passages in the Hebrew Bible join to suggest a deep significance and connection between these realities.

In the introduction to the blessings Moses pronounced upon the sons of Israel (or of Jacob), the following words shed light upon the question: “He loves the people; . . . *everyone* receives Thy words. Moses charged us with a law, a possession for the assembly of Jacob” (Deut 33:3-4). Here, Hebrew parallelism links receiving the words of God with receiving His law and equates these laws of God or the words of the Lord with a possession or heritage of the sons of Jacob. David also characterizes the words of the Lord as an inheritance: “I have inherited Thy testimonies forever, for they are the joy of my heart” (Ps 119:111). Jeremiah underscores the joy of receiving the words of God and adds an interesting dimension to the act of receiving divine instruction: “Thy words were found and I ate them; and Thy words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jer 15:16). Not only does one hear the words of God, but one can be said to eat the words of God which then become one’s

Isaiah describes a future age in which the Lord will “create new heavens and a new earth” (Isa 65:17). Importantly, there the Sabbath will continue to be observed on a weekly basis, as the following words indicate: “And from Sabbath to Sabbath, all mankind will come to bow down before Me,” says the Lord” (Isa 66:23). Here is the literal fulfillment of the Mosaic blessing of Deuteronomy. The sons of Jacob will come before their Lord on Sabbath to sit at His feet and to receive His words. The Lord will not be silent before them. Rather, the sons of Jacob will be fed with the heritage of Jacob by the Lord as promised. They will feast with joy and delight on the words of God on Sabbath forevermore. To receive the words of the Lord is to receive God Himself. These concepts represent some of the deeper spiritual dimensions of the inheritance of Jacob.

### **Conclusion**

The Sabbath and the Creation introduce a relational linkage between God the Creator and His creatures, yielding the most profound experience possible to humans—a mutual love relation-

ship of the deepest kind. The choice of the seventh day as the Sabbath memorializes a merciful method of Creation, thus helping to establish the goodness of God, who is, thereby, worthy of worship and love. Subsequent to Adam and Eve’s sin, the Sabbath became a sign of the divine healing and restoration of humanity into a restored *imago Dei*, which reflects the love of God. Understood in light of God’s creative work, Sabbath becomes a day of blessing. We eagerly await the weekly return of this special and intimate holy time spent with our divine, spiritual marriage partner, the Creator of heaven and earth. And we look forward to that time in the new creation when, on every Sabbath throughout eternity, believers will feast on the words of the Lord, the heritage of Jacob. The power and beauty of Sabbath continues forever. *Shabbat Shalom.*

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1 The NASB version of the Bible is used in this article.

2 The seminar, sponsored by the West Shore Committee for Jewish/Christian Dialogue, was held on November 10, 2004, in Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan. See also, Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: A Theology of Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, forthcoming).

3 See Jon Paulien, “Revisiting the Sabbath in the Book of Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9, nos. 1-2 (1998): 179-186.

4 Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 59.