

Covenant Sign



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:2, 3; Exod. 20:11; Exodus 16; Heb. 4:1–4; Exod. 31:12–17; Deut. 5:14.*

Memory Text: “Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant” (*Exodus 31:16*).

The seventh-day Sabbath is like a nail that—*Thwack!*—with unbroken regularity returns us each week to the foundation of all that we are or could be. We are so busy, running to and fro, spending money, making money, going here, going there, going everywhere, and then—*Thwack!*—Sabbath comes and reattaches us to our foundation, the starting point of everything that follows, because everything that is anything to us becomes that only because God created it and us to begin with.

With unceasing regularity, and with no exceptions, the Sabbath silently hurls over the horizon and into every crack and cranny of our lives. It reminds us that every crack and cranny belongs to our Maker, the One who put us here, the One who “in the beginning” created the heavens and the earth, an act that remains the irrefutable foundation of all Christian belief and of which the seventh-day Sabbath—*Thwack!*—is the irrefutable, unobtrusive, and unyielding sign.

This week we look at this sign in the context of the Sinai covenant.

The Week at a Glance: Where does the Sabbath have its origins? What evidence proves that the Sabbath existed before Sinai? What makes the Sabbath such an appropriate covenant sign?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 29.

Origins

How often we hear the phrase, the “old Jewish Sabbath.” Yet, Scripture is clear that the Sabbath existed long before there were any Jewish people. Its origin is found in the Creation week itself.

Look up Genesis 2:2, 3 and Exodus 20:11. Where do they clearly, and unambiguously, place the origin of the Sabbath?

Although Genesis 2:2, 3 does not identify the “seventh day” as the Sabbath (this identification comes first in Exodus 16:26, 29), it is clearly suggested in the phrase “he rested on the seventh day” (*Gen. 2:2*). The word *rested* (Hebrew, *shabat*) is closely related to the noun *Sabbath* (Hebrew, *shabbat*). “The word ‘sabbath’ is not employed [in *Gen. 2:2, 3*], but it is certain that the author meant to assert that God blessed and hallowed the seventh day as the Sabbath.”—G. F. Waterman, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), vol. 5, p. 183. Evidently, Genesis 2:2, 3 teaches the divine origin and institution of the Sabbath as a day of blessing for all humanity.

Read Mark 2:27. Jesus says that Sabbath was made for, literally, “man,” meaning humanity as a whole, as opposed to the Jews alone.

Why would God Himself rest on the seventh day? Did He need it? What other purpose might His resting have served?

Although some commentators have suggested that God needed physical rest after Creation, the true purpose of God in resting was to provide a divine example for humanity. Humankind also is to work for six days and then to rest on the seventh-day Sabbath. Theologian Karl Barth suggested that God’s resting at the end of Creation was a part of the “covenant of grace,” in which humankind was invited “to rest with Him . . . to participate in [God’s] rest.”—*Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, Ltd., 1958), vol. 3, p. 98.

God in His love called the man and the woman on the day after their creation to fellowship in rest, to establish intimate communion with Him in whose image they had been made. That fellowship and communion was to last forever. Since the fall of humankind, the Sabbath has offered a weekly high point in one’s life with the Savior.

If someone were to ask you, “How has keeping the Sabbath benefited your relationship with the Lord,” how would you respond?

Sabbath Before Sinai

“And he said unto them, This is that which the LORD hath said, To morrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the LORD: bake that which ye will bake to day, and seethe that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning” (*Exod. 16:23*).

Skim through Exodus 16, the story of the manna provided to Israel, in the desert, before Sinai. Notice what this account reveals:

1. Only a regular portion of manna could be used each day; but on the sixth day a double portion was to be gathered.
2. No manna was given on the Sabbath.
3. The extra portion needed for the Sabbath was preserved from the sixth day unspoiled, while the manna would not keep on any other day.

What does this story reveal about the sanctity of the Sabbath before the giving of the law at Sinai? (*See Exod. 16:23–28.*)

“In fact, the equation of the Sabbath with the seventh day, the statement that the Lord gave the Israelites the Sabbath, and the record that the people, at God’s command, rested on the seventh day, all point unmistakably to the primeval [at Creation] institution of the Sabbath.”—G. F. Waterman, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), vol. 5, p. 184.

There is a lot more about the Sabbath in Exodus 16 than first meets the eye. Look at the questions this passage answers for us:

1. Which day is the preparation day for the Sabbath?
2. Which day of the week is the Sabbath?
3. Where did the Sabbath come from?
4. What kind of day should the Sabbath be?
5. Is the Sabbath a day of fasting?
6. Is the Sabbath a test of loyalty to God?

How does your understanding of the Sabbath today match with what is taught about the Sabbath in Exodus 16?

Covenant Sign

“ ‘ “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” ’ ” (*Exod. 31:16, 17, NIV*).

Four times in Scripture the Sabbath is designated as a “sign” (*Exod. 31:13, 17; Ezek. 20:12, 20*). A “sign” is not a “symbol” in the sense of a thing that naturally typifies, represents, or recalls something else, because both share similar qualities (for example, a symbol of a fist often denotes “might” or “power”). In the Bible, the Sabbath as a “sign” functioned as an outward mark or object or condition intended to convey a distinctive message. Nothing in the sign *itself* particularly linked it to the covenant. The Sabbath was a covenant sign “ ‘ “between me and you throughout your generations” ’ ” (*Exod. 31:13, RSV*) only because God said it was.

Why would the Lord use the Sabbath as a covenant sign? What is it about the Sabbath that would make it so appropriate as a symbol of the saving relationship with God? As we remember that a crucial aspect of the covenant is that we are saved by grace and that works cannot save us, what is it about the Sabbath itself that makes it such a good symbol of that relationship? (*See Gen. 2:3, Heb. 4:1–4*.)

What is fascinating about the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant of grace is that for centuries the Jews have understood the Sabbath to be the sign of Messianic redemption. They saw in the Sabbath a foretaste of salvation in the Messiah. Because we understand redemption as coming only from grace, and because we understand the covenant to be a covenant of grace, the link between the Sabbath, redemption, and the covenant is made clear (*see Deut. 5:13–15*). Thus, contrary to common opinion, the Sabbath is a sign of God’s saving grace; it’s not a sign of salvation by works.

How do you understand what it means to “rest” on the Sabbath? How do you rest on the Sabbath? What do you do differently on that day that makes it a “sign”? Could someone who knows you look at your life and see that the Sabbath really is a special day for you?

Sign of Sanctification

“ “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” ’ ” (*Exod. 31:13, RSV*).

An exceptionally rich Sabbath passage is Exodus 31:12–17, which follows the Lord’s directions for the building of the sanctuary and the establishment of its services (*Exod. 25:1–31:11*).

The concept of the Sabbath as a “sign”—a visible, external, and *eternal* sign between God and His people—is expressed here in this manner for the first time. The text itself contains some fascinating concepts worthy of our study. Two new ideas are joined together in this text:

1. The Sabbath as a *sign of knowledge*.
2. The Sabbath as a *sign of sanctification*.

Consider the sign aspect related to knowledge. The Hebrew understanding of knowledge includes intellectual, relational, and emotional aspects. “To know” did not simply mean to know a fact, particularly when a person was involved. It also meant to have a meaningful relationship with the one known. Thus *to know the Lord* meant to be in a right relationship with Him—to “serve” Him (*1 Chron. 28:9*), to “fear” Him (*Isa. 11:2*), to “believe” Him (*Isa. 43:10*), to “trust” Him and “seek” Him (*Pss. 9:10*), and to “call on” His name (*Jer. 10:25*).

Look up each of the texts in the above paragraph. In what ways do these texts help us to understand what it means to “know” the Lord?

In addition, the Sabbath has significance as a sign of sanctification. It signifies that the Lord “sanctifies” His people (*compare Lev. 20:8*) by making them “holy” (*Deut. 7:6*).

The sanctification process is as much the work of God’s redemptive love as is the saving and redeeming work of God. Righteousness (justification) and sanctification are both activities of God: “ ‘I . . . the LORD . . . sanctify you’ ” (*Lev. 20:8, RSV*). Thus, the Sabbath is a sign that imparts the knowledge of God as Sanctifier. “The Sabbath given to the world as the sign of God as the Creator is also the sign of Him as the Sanctifier.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 350.

Consider the Sabbath day and the process of sanctification, that of *being made holy*. What role does Sabbath keeping have in this process? How can the Lord use our experience of keeping the Sabbath to help sanctify us?

Remembering the Sabbath

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (*Exod. 20:8*).

The Sabbath was and is a sign for humanity to “remember.” The use of the word *remember* can serve various functions. First, *to remember* something implies looking backward, looking to the past. In this case, the Sabbath points us to the fiat Creation, which climaxed in the institution of the Sabbath as a weekly day of rest and special communion with God.

The injunction to remember also has implications for the present. We are not only to “remember” the Sabbath (*Exod. 20:8*); we also are to “observe” and “keep” it (*see Deut. 5:12, RSV*). Thus, the Sabbath has important implications for us now, in the present.

Finally, remembering the Sabbath also points us forward. The person who remembers the keeping of the Sabbath has a promising, rich, and meaningful future with the Lord of the Sabbath. He or she remains in the covenant relationship, because he or she remains in the Lord. Again, when we understand the covenant to be a relationship between God and humankind, the Sabbath, which greatly can help strengthen that relationship, comes into specific prominence.

Indeed, in remembering Creation and its Creator, God’s people also remember God’s gracious acts of salvation (*see Deuteronomy 5:14, where the Sabbath is seen, in this context, as a sign of deliverance from Egypt, a symbol of the ultimate salvation found in God*). Creation and re-creation belong together. The former makes the latter possible. The Sabbath is a sign that communicates that God is the Creator of the world and the Creator of our salvation.

“By keeping His Sabbath holy we are to show that we are His people. His Word declares the Sabbath to be a sign by which to distinguish the commandment-keeping people. . . . Those who keep the law of God will be one with Him in the great controversy commenced in heaven between Satan and God.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 160.

Look at this statement from the Lord’s servant. What is it about the Sabbath that makes it something that can distinguish us as “the commandment-keeping people,” perhaps more so than any of the other commandments?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, pp. 968–970, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7; “The Observance of the Sabbath,” pp. 349–351, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6; “From the Red Sea to Sinai,” pp. 295–297, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

The Ten Commandments define comprehensively and fundamentally the divine-human and human-human relationships. The commandment at the center of the Decalogue is the Sabbath commandment. It identifies the Lord of the Sabbath in a special way and indicates His sphere of authority and ownership. Note these two aspects: (1) the identity of the Deity: Yahweh (LORD), who is the Creator (*Exod. 20:11, Exod. 31:17*) and who thus holds a unique place; (2) the sphere of His ownership and authority—“the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them” (*Exod. 20:11, NASB; compare Exod. 31:17*). In these two aspects, the Sabbath commandment has the characteristics that are typical of seals of international, ancient Near Eastern treaty documents. These seals are typically in the center of the treaty documents and also contain (1) the identity of a deity (usually a pagan god) and (2) the sphere of ownership and authority (usually a limited geographical area).

“The sanctification of the Spirit signalizes the difference between those who have the seal of God and those who keep a spurious rest day.

“When the test comes, it will be clearly shown what the mark of the beast is. It is the keeping of Sunday. . . .

“God has designated the seventh day as His Sabbath [Ex. 31:13, 17, 16 quoted].

“Thus the distinction is drawn between the loyal and the disloyal. Those who desire to have the seal of God in their foreheads must keep the Sabbath of the fourth commandment.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 980, 981.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Read Leviticus 19:30. Notice how it links the sanctuary and the Sabbath. Considering what we have learned so far about what the Sabbath is a sign of, why does that linkage make so much sense?
- ② Ask yourself this question: Has Sabbath keeping helped strengthen my walk with the Lord? If not, what changes can you make?

Summary: The Sabbath is a covenant sign that reaches forward to the time when the plan of salvation will be consummated. It points back to Creation, and as a sign of the covenant of grace, it points us to the final re-creation, when God makes all things new.