

Sabbath and Creation

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
World Session, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
June 28, 2010

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Introduction

God connected the Sabbath to Himself and all of His creation, including human beings, during the creation week. God, the Creator, pronounced the seventh day as the Sabbath as He ended His work of bringing our world into existence.

If God were not the Creator, then the Sabbath would merely be a human memorial to the unplanned and chaotic process of evolution. If we do not recognize God as the Creator, including the Creator of the Sabbath, then the Sabbath holds only a symbolic meaning assigned by humans.

Apart from God and His creation, the Sabbath may have some value, but it could not be considered as a special day created by God. You can take away the Sabbath as a symbol of freedom from bondage in Egypt (Deut. 5:12, 15), but you still have the Sabbath of creation. You can take away the ceremonial Sabbath (Lev. 16:31; 23:32; 25:2, 4, 6; 26:34, 43), but you still have the Sabbath of creation. In some instances the Sabbath amplifies certain temporary or symbolic functions, but cannot be defined by them, nor does its existence or role depend on them. Thus, God gave the Sabbath as a holy gift to His creation.

The Sabbath has meaning in a sinful *and* a sinless world because this sacred day was given by God and is one of the definers of the relationship between God and His Creation. Genesis announces the Sabbath is for all—God and God’s Creation—including human beings. At the other end of the Bible, in the context of final events, God as Creator, reminds us of the centrality of God in Creation (Rev. 14:6-7).

This paper will purposely focus on the relationship of the Sabbath to God, God’s Creation, and the implication of these perspectives to the humans created by God. (There are many other biblical, theological, historical, and practical aspects of the Sabbath not addressed.)

God, Sabbath, and Creation

In the remainder of this paper, we will focus on the relationship between God, the Sabbath, and creation, and explore some of the ways this relationship impacts our lives.

1. THE SABBATH IS MOVEMENT FROM CHAOS TO ORDER

“... *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*” (Gen. 1:2).¹

This description from the New Revised Standard Version stays faithful to the Hebrew text describing the region in which God steps as a region with darkness over the deep—a region without form. It is a sea of chaos. The text literally states that these primeval waters were covered with blackness. They were like a chaotic ocean, a cosmic abyss covered by a deep, impenetrable darkness. In effect, the declaration of this verse describes complete and utter confusion. When the storm of God swept over this ocean of lifelessness, God began His work of creating an inhabited world with words and actions (Ps. 33:6, 9), which brought order out of this chaotic, lifeless abyss.

“*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation*” (Gen. 2:1-3).

The seventh day was the day God *completed* His work; it was not completed on the sixth day as the LXX² says. The words of Genesis 2:1: “*the heavens and the earth were finished*” emphasize what is going to be said in verses two and three. In verses two and three, God brings to completion His work *on* the seventh day. The completion of His work consists of cessation of the labor of creating: *God rests*. God, also, in completing His work, blessed and sanctified the seventh day. In sanctifying the seventh day, God set it apart to be exclusively dedicated to Himself, even though God presented the Sabbath in such a way that it would be a blessing to humanity. Among other blessings, the Sabbath brings into remembrance the entire week, specifically, God’s role as Creator. The Sabbath ends the week as the exclamation point, which started in chaos but ended in perfect harmony. Creation was now completed and approved by God since He rested on, blessed, and sanctified the seventh day.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version (NSRV).

² Greek translation of the Old Testament.

2. THE SPECIFICITY OF THE SABBATH

“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy . . . For 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” (Ex. 20:8, 11).

We now move from the creation, through the Fall [which allowed Sin³ to enter followed by death (Rom. 5:12)] to Mount Sinai. Israel has come to Mount Sinai to be established as a nation with God as its Lord. The Lord delivers the Ten Words on two tables of stone, which are the essence of the covenant between God and His people, Israel (Ex. 31:18; 32:15; 34:28-29). In the heart of these two tables of stone, we have the fourth commandment that directs all to *remember* the Sabbath day. God set apart the seventh day to be wholly dedicated to Himself. One must cease from labor as God did. Indeed, on the Sabbath day, every occupation is to cease and everyone rest. The Sabbath’s significance is found in God’s blessing and sanctifying the seventh day of the week at creation. When we worship on the Sabbath, we recognize God as our creator and sustainer. We have ceased from our normal pursuits and enter into a day of enjoyment (Isa. 58:13-14), recognizing God for who He is—the Creator and Sustainer of all life in the universe. Thus the Sabbath is not any day—it is the seventh day. The Sabbath is not for any purpose—God designated its purpose.

3. THE SABBATH, JUST AS CREATION, WAS GIVEN BY GOD FOR THE BENEFIT OF HUMANITY

“Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath’” (Mark 2:27-28).

Mark 2:27 is written in a chiasmic⁴ form:

- (A) Sabbath,
- (B) humankind
- (B’) humankind
- (A’) Sabbath

The emphasis lies in B and B’—humankind. The Sabbath was made for humanity and was not to be a burden on the people.⁵ We could literally write: *the Sabbath came into being (was made) for humankind and humankind did not come into being on account of the Sabbath*. The word *egeneto*, translated *came into being*, is an allusion to John 1:3 that reads, “all things through him came into being (*egeneto*) and apart from him not one thing came into being” (*egeneto*). All creation has its source in God and all things “came into being” through God. In fact, the creation of humans took place *before* the Sabbath. Thus, humans existed before the Sabbath was set apart as a day to be sanctified. The Sabbath was instituted in order to be a blessing to God’s creation. This statement (Mark 2:27-28) of Jesus not only brings out the true intent of the Sabbath but also of the Law. The Sabbath commemorates God’s creative and saving action for the benefit of humanity. Therefore, Mark 2:27 means that when humanity receives the Sabbath as a gift, humanity recognizes God as its Creator and Sustainer and recognizes God as the One Who brings joy and peace with the promise of an eternal future.

4. IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GREAT CONTROVERSY THE SABBATH RECOGNIZES GOD AS CREATOR

“He said in a loud voice, ‘. . . worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water’” (Rev. 14:7).

The part of this first angel’s message concerning us is the command to worship the Creator. The Greek expression *tō poiēsanti* translated *him who made* in the New Revised Standard Version is *the Creator*. It leads us to three Old Testament texts: Exodus 20:8, 11 (the Sabbath commandment); Genesis 1:1 (stating that God created the universe) and Genesis 2:1-3 (stating that God finished His work *on* the seventh day, thereby setting it apart by blessing, sanctifying, and resting on it.)

Revelation 14:6 addresses all humanity when it addresses *every* nation, tribe, language, and people. Thus, in the heart of the book of Revelation, we have the command to worship the Creator. This command means that the controversy between Christ and Satan is over the issue of who is Lord. Is the Creator Lord or is it Satan who is our accuser? When we worship the Creator, who made the heaven, earth, seas, and springs of water, we give our allegiance to the Creator as Lord. When we worship the Creator, we worship as the Sabbath commandment specifies, *on* the seventh day, for it was on the seventh day that God brought His work to completion, and blessed and sanctified it.

5. THE SABBATH IS A CONCRETE REMINDER THAT GOD WILL RESTORE HIS CREATION

“For the creation was subjected to frustration [transitoriness], not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay [corruption] and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20-21, NIV).

In Romans 8:19, creation awaits the revelation of God’s sons and daughters. Creation awaits the redemption of God’s children because it has been subjected to worthlessness by the One who rules. This reminds us of Ecclesiastes’ expression “vanity of vanities,” which, in the LXX, uses the same word for vanity (*mataiotēs*) that is used here for frustration, worthlessness, or transitoriness. The word means “emptiness,” “vanity,” “fruitlessness,” “futility,” as well as “frustration,” “worthlessness,” or

³ When the word sin is capitalized, it refers to an anti-God power.

⁴ In rhetoric, a chiasmus is when two or more units are related to each other in reversed order, as here, with the emphasis on the middle term(s).

⁵ In a sinful world, the Sabbath may seem to be a burden because the world does not recognize the need for a Sabbath, thus Sabbath keepers face challenges of keeping the day holy.

“transistoriness.” The text says that creation did not willingly choose to be subjected to this uselessness. But when Adam committed the transgression, the One who subjects (that is God⁶) subjected creation to frustration (*mataiotēs*). God had to do this because Adam was sentenced to die. If God wanted Adam and all of Adam’s descendents to have a second chance, God had to change His original design of creation to accommodate the rule of Sin and death. In Romans 8:21, the Greek word, translated “decay,” is *phthora* and means corruptibility, which gives or explains “frustration.” *Phthora* is the “corruptibility” that must pass away as flesh and blood must pass away (1 Cor. 15:50). *Phthora* is to *sarx* (flesh) as *zōē* (life) is to *pneuma* (Spirit). Thus *phthora* indicates more than mere decay. It indicates eternal destruction. Therefore, both *phthora* and *zōē* should be understood eschatologically. The basic idea is that Adam’s transgression subjected the world to ruin. The subjection of creation was in the hope (certainty) that the curse of Genesis would be reversed. That is, the human race, which defaced the world, will one day be redeemed and the curse removed. Human sin had terrible effects on the world (Gen. 3:17-19). On the other hand human redemption brings hope. The ultimate destiny is transformation and redemption (Rev. 21).

Humans, not creation, incurred guilt. Nonetheless, the world, as a whole, suffers corruption and decay because of Sin. Thus, the rule of death becomes the world’s reality. Romans 1:21 tells us what happened in the sense of the darkening of the human heart and human understanding. This darkening came about because humans, knowing God, did not give God thanksgiving or glory. Honoring the Sabbath gives God glory and thanksgiving. The Sabbath honors God as Creator and Sustainer of all life, every living thing.

If we take a look at the world before the Fall in regard to how humans and animals were to live, we have God’s instructions on what kind of lifestyle creates optimal health. Genesis 1:29-30 describes the original diet of living things, it reads, “*God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so.*”

Thus, before the Fall, humans were to eat essentially fruits, nuts, and grains, and after the Fall vegetables were added (Gen. 3:17-19). After the Flood meat was added (Gen. 9:3-4). Today science has shown that the best diet for humanity is the vegetarian diet: fruits, nuts, grains, and vegetables. *US News and World Report* noted that Adventists live longer because of their life-style, which encourages vegetarianism.

“Americans who define themselves as Seventh-day Adventists have an average life expectancy of 89, about a decade longer than the average American. One of the basic tenets of the religion is that it’s important to cherish the body that’s on loan from God, which means no smoking, alcohol abuse, or overindulging in sweets. Followers typically stick to a vegetarian diet based on fruits, vegetables, beans, and nuts, and get plenty of exercise. They’re also very focused on family and community.”⁷

Genesis 1:30 depicts the diet for animals as plants. Little Tyke was a lacto-ovo-vegetarian lion, that would not eat meat and lived on essentially a plant based diet. Little Tyke a 350 pound lioness ate “cooked cereals, raw eggs, and milk” as well as at times “...she would...[eat] the succulent tall grass in the fields.”⁸ (cf. Isa 11:7: ... *the lion shall eat straw like the ox*).

Humans originally were not to slaughter animals for food, nor were the animals to prey upon each other. God never intended death to take place when He created the world and its inhabitants. Isaiah 11:6-9 describes an age to come when harmony and eternal life will be the rule of creation, no death or destruction. Revelation 21 also describes an age to come when everything will be recreated in accordance with God’s original design for humanity when humanity becomes redeemed. It must be remembered, as Romans states, that death entered the world because of Sin (Rom 5:12). Hence, God’s original design was to create the human race for eternal life. When we worship on the Sabbath, we express faith that God will, one day, recreate the world to be what He intended it to be in the first place since the Sabbath was given before the Fall.

We live in a world that has an ecosystem that depends on death and corruption for its very existence. Thus we can hardly conceive of a different ecosystem. Indeed, we see everything through this same dying ecosystem. Hence it becomes incomprehensible for us to see things as God sees them. We, perhaps, need to become like Job who heard God out of the whirlwind. Job’s entire view of the world and understanding of God changed. Job says, in response to God’s questioning:

*I recant and relent
Being but dust and ashes*⁹ (Job 4:6)

Job, who was mortal (being nothing but dust) in effect, tells us that he cannot fathom the whys of God’s actions. Perhaps our attitudes would also change if God were to speak to us out of the whirlwind about the questions we ask and endeavor to answer in regard to the universe we see because we cannot fathom the *whys*. Nonetheless, we do indeed express our confidence in God’s creative and redeeming power by our observance of the Sabbath since God completed His work on the seventh day. He rested, blessed, and sanctified the day. Therefore, our observance of the Sabbath expresses our faith that God will one day rid the world of Sin and death, replacing both sin and death with sinlessness and life ever-lasting.

⁶ It is certainly clear that the expression “the one who subjects” could be sin. But when one reads Job 1 and 2 with the discussion between God and Satan, it becomes clear that nothing can happen without God’s permission. Hence Sin may do the subjecting, but only with God’s permission (note Job 1:7-12 and 2:3).

⁷ “Ten Health Habits that Will Help You Live to 100: You don’t need to eat yogurt and live on a mountaintop, but you do need to floss” by Debora Kotz posted February 20, 2009 at <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/family-health/articles/2009/02/20/10-health-habits-that-will-help-you-live-to-100.html>.

⁸ Georges H. Westbeau, *Little Tyke: The True Story of a Gentile Vegetarian Lioness*, Revised ed. (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1986), 34, 35.

⁹ Jewish Publication Society’s translation.

6. THE SABBATH OF CREATION, WHILE GIVEN FOR OUR BENEFIT, IS GOD’S SABBATH THUS IT IS AN ANTIDOTE FOR LEGALISM AND SALVATION BY WORKS

“The LORD said to Moses: ‘You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD;Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. 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).

The Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, is to be celebrated after six days of work because God rested, blessed, and sanctified the seventh day to bring the creation week to completion. Is this passage in Exodus only for Israel of the Old Testament? Based on Galatians 6:16 (“...peace...and mercy...upon the Israel of God”) and Romans 9:6-8 (“...for not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but ‘It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.”), it is reasonable to conclude that these verses in Exodus also refer to God’s people today.

Sabbath observance by believers, the true Israel of God, becomes a sign between the believer and God. The Sabbath is a sign that the believer is God’s child, and that the believer recognizes God as the Creator of the universe. This same believer looks to God for salvation—the God of the Sabbath. Creation, salvation, and the Sabbath are all gifts from God. God’s gifts, by their very nature, are not legalistic. Legalism is a human effort to define how humans obtain salvation. The Sabbath is a living reminder that God is our Creator, Savior, and Sanctifier.

Conclusion

The Sabbath was created by God and given to humans at Creation; God brought to completion His work *on* the Sabbath. The Sabbath was given for the benefit of humanity but does not belong to any people or church—it belongs to God. As a gift from God, the Sabbath is one of the definers of the relationship between God and His creation, including the creation of humans.

When we worship on the Sabbath, we enter into a relationship with God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe (Heb. 1:3). God willingly, graciously, accommodates Himself to our framework of human time. Sabbath time becomes a place or sphere of God’s blessing. It is temporal in nature. It gives life, well-being, and wholeness to our existence. The Sabbath is certainly a gracious gift when received, embraced, and celebrated in an atmosphere of freedom and fellowship. In the writings of the prophet Isaiah, there are promises connected with Sabbath observance “*if you call the sabbath a delight . . . then; you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth*” (58:13-14). “*Happy is the mortal . . . who keeps the sabbath*” (56:2). “*All who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer*” (56:6). “*For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me . . . From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord*” (66:22-23).