

The Sabbath

Our reading in Mark chapter 3 describes one of the healing miracles of Messiah:

“He entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the Sabbath day; that they might accuse him. And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth. And he said unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil? But they held their peace” (Mark 3:4).

Then following the healing of the man’s hand, we read that:

“the Pharisees went forth and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him” (Mark 3:6).

This occasion therefore, marked a turning point in the ministry of the Lord: from that point onwards the Pharisees and Herodians sought his destruction, because he healed on the Sabbath day. No wonder we read that: “when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts ...” (Mark 3:5). Instead of rejoicing that the power of Yahweh was present to heal the sick, they sought occasion against the Good Physician, that he performed this healing on the Sabbath day. For our exhortation for the day, we shall consider the Sabbath day, and how appropriate it was for Messiah to heal on that day.

We first read of the Sabbath day in the record of Genesis, and chapter 2:

“... And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all the work which God created and made” (Gen. 2:2-3)

Here, the seventh day was considered to be “blessed” and “sanctified,” because this was the day when the Creator ended his work: but at this stage there appears to be no command to refrain from work on that day, nor was there any punishment for working then. But working in the Edenic paradise would not have been arduous, or tiring, it would have been a delight and a pleasure. The observance of the Seventh Day as a Sabbath of rest was instituted later in the Law of Moses:

“The seventh day is the sabbath of Yahweh thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, the sea, and that all in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore Yahweh blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Exo. 20:10-11).

The point here, is that just as Yahweh ceased from his creative work on that day, it should be kept as a day of rest for his people, that they also would cease from working then. Of course, Yahweh who only hath immortality has no physical need for rest – it was so in order to establish a pattern for his people to follow later. The sense of “rest” in the passages above conveys the sense of ceasing from work, rather than a need for recuperation. So we read in Hebrews chapter 4: “there remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his” (Heb. 4:10). We shall consider this passage of Hebrews chapter 4 more particularly later.

Numbers chapter 15 records a violation of the Sabbath Law, by a man who gathered sticks on that day:

"While the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put him in ward, because it was not declared what should be done to him. And Yahweh said unto Moses, The man shall surely be put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp ..." (Num. 15:32-35).

A superficial consideration might suggest that the punishment was disproportionate to the crime. All the man was doing, was gathering sticks – why should he be stoned to death for doing that? But we might as well argue that Adam only ate a piece of fruit – why should he be condemned? A more thoughtful approach, however, reveals that here was a direct and flagrant violation of what the Creator had commanded. The issue was not to do with sticks, it was rather a deliberate rebellion against the Laws of Yahweh. So we read in Hebrews chapter 10, probably alluding back to this incident:

"... if we **sin wilfully** after that we have received the knowledge of the Truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins ... **he that despised Moses' law** died without mercy under two or three witnesses" (Heb. 10:28-29).

EXCEPTIONS

Although the command was to do no work, life still had to go on, and duties needed to be attended to. Hence, there were certain exceptions to the rule. This emerges from a consideration of Matthew chapter 12. In this chapter, we find a number of exceptions spoken of by Messiah, following the criticisms of the Pharisees at Jesus' disciples plucking out and eating ears of corn on the Sabbath. So the Master speaks of the priesthood:

"... have ye not read in the law, how that on the Sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are blameless?"

Even on the Sabbath days, the priests still had to tend to their duties of offering sacrifices, maintaining the Lampstands, and ordering the Shewbread. Their work had to continue on the Sabbath, yet they were blameless. This illustrates the point that the real spirit of the Sabbath law was not simply abstaining from anything that could be categorised as work (such as the list that the Jews had), but ceasing from the works of the flesh. Work in Divine Service could continue – and indeed, had to continue. This is why in Mark 3, we read of Messiah blamelessly healing on the Sabbath – he was working the works of Yahweh.

In addition, shepherds were allowed to rescue their sheep on the Sabbath, even though this would be work. So, Messiah said: "what man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then, is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days" (Mat. 12:11-12).

Again, in order to fulfil the law of Circumcision, the priests were permitted to circumcise on the Sabbath. So the Master spake:

"Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the Sabbath day circumcise a man. If a man on the Sabbath day receive

circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken: are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the Sabbath day?" (Jno 7:22-23)

The spirit of the principles that lay behind the Sabbath laws are again brought out in the occasion of the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 23 describes how that the Day of Atonement was a Sabbath:

"ye shall do no work in that same day: for it is a day of atonement, to make an atonement for you before Yahweh your God ... and whatsoever soul it be that doeth any work in that same day, the same soul will I destroy from among his people. Ye shall do no manner of work: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. ***It shall be unto you a Sabbath of rest***, and ye shall afflict your souls" (Lev. 23:29-32).

Notice again, however, that despite this prohibition, the High Priest still had to perform the work set before him of entering the tabernacle/temple, offering animal sacrifices, and taking the incense into the Holy of Holies. He was blameless, because he was doing the work of God.

Isaiah 58 appears to be alluding to the Day of Atonement, which incidentally, was the only day when fasting was commanded under the Law of Moses. Both these aspects of fasting, and abstaining from one's own work are brought out in this chapter. Verses 6 and 7 describes the reasons for fasting, whereas verse 13-14 describe the cessation of personal work:

"... If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath ***from doing thy pleasure*** on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of Yahweh, honourable; and shalt honour him, ***not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words:*** Then shalt thou delight thyself in Yahweh; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed the with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of Yahweh hath spoken it." (Isa. 58:13-14).

Here is the point: on the Sabbath a man or woman could not engage in their own pursuits: it was a day devoted to Yahweh. A person could not even speak his own words! The implication here, is that being a day devoted to Yahweh, a person should have spoken the words of God, rather than his own words. A number of times in Scripture, the Israelites were commanded to teach certain things to their offspring, such as in Exodus 10:2:

"And Yahweh said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I may show these my signs before him: ***And that thou must tell in his ears of thy son, and of thy son's son***, what things I have wrought in Egypt, and my signs which I have done among them: that ye may know how that I am Yahweh" (Exod. 10:1-2).

(see Exodus 10:2, Psa. 78:1-5, Psa. 44:1). Free from the distractions of daily living, the Sabbath would have been the ideal time to teach the children what Yahweh had done for the nation. Then, the family could gather round to thank and praise the Most High God without the toil of each working day to hinder their devotions.

Ezekiel chapter 20 describes part of the purpose of the Sabbaths:

"Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, ***that they may know that I am Yahweh*** that sanctify them" (Ezek. 20:12).

Part of the means by which this knowledge would be known, is seen in that this time would be ideal to speak of, and encourage each other in the way. But Israel failed to honour the Sabbath law:

“... they walked not in my statutes, and they despised my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; and my Sabbaths they greatly polluted” (Ezek. 20:13).

And again in verse 16:

“... they despised my judgments, and walked not in my statutes, but polluted my sabbaths: for their hearts went after their idols” (Ezek. 20:16).

As we are saw earlier, Israel had stoned a man for despising the Law and gathering sticks, but now they themselves had disregarded the Sabbath by defiling it with their own thoughts, ways, and words. They “despised” Yahweh’s judgements, and deserved no less a punishment as did this man.

IN THE FUTURE

Although in our current dispensation, there is no command for us to observe the abstinence of work on a fixed day of the week, things will be different in the future. According to the prophet Isaiah, the Sabbaths will be reinstated, for all nations to keep:

“... it shall come to pass that from one new moon to another, and ***from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh*** come to worship before me, saith Yahweh” (Isa. 66:23)

Earlier, we considered a passage from Hebrews chapter 4, which uses the Sabbath law to illustrate how that there is a future day of rest for the believers, when they shall cease from their mortal toil:

“For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works. And in this place again, If they shall enter into my rest ...” (Heb. 4:4).

The central message is that just as Yahweh ceased from his work on the seventh day, even so in the 7th Millennium-day kingdom, Messiah’s rule will be established, and the work of cleansing the earth will begin. But there is another important point here: if the day of rest is yet future, that means that the day of labour is now!

“For he that is entered into his Rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that Rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief” (Heb. 4:10-11).

Here is the exhortation: if we take our rest now, there will be no rest for us in the Kingdom – we will already have received our reward! But if we labour now in the things of the Truth, there lies ahead a glorious day of rest. That will be when the earth shall be at peace, and cleansed from all the filthiness of idolatry and human philosophy. Let us labour in the Lord therefore, looking forward to that great day to come, when we shall be changed, and our bodies made like to Messiahs’ glorious body. This changed body will never grow tired, or need sustenance, and we will not need to recuperate from arduous work. May that Sabbath Day of Rest come quickly!

Christopher Maddocks