

Christ's Thousand-Year Kingdom

CHAPTER I

THE EVERLASTING GOSPEL

“I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting Gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.” —Revelation 14:6

The word Gospel means glad tidings. The angel who announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds said, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10,11) This angel, even as the symbolic angel of our text, declares that the good tidings are for all people.

The Apostle Paul informs us that the Gospel was preached beforehand unto Abraham, when the promise was made to him that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. (Gen. 12:3) Paul explains that the “Seed” mentioned in this promise to Abraham was in reality Christ. (Gal. 3:8,16) So we see that in the original statement of the Gospel, which was made to Abraham, there was an assurance of blessings for all mankind. When the Seed came, and his birth was announced by the angel, the good tidings had not in any sense become restricted—it was still “glad tidings” to “all people.”

Paul provides further and very vital information concerning God’s plan of salvation which the Bible describes by the word Gospel. He wrote, “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” To this he adds, “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Gal. 3:27,29) There is abundant scriptural testimony giving assurance that the faithful followers of the Master will be associated with him in the glory of his kingdom, and here Paul is explaining that they are also a part of the Seed promised to Abraham. This means that the true church, with Jesus as its Head, will be the channel of blessing to “all the families of the earth.”

An essential feature of the plan of God through the Seed to bless all the nations is the redemptive work of Jesus. It was necessary that Jesus die as man’s Redeemer, otherwise the promised blessings of life could not flow out to mankind, for all were under condemnation to death through Adam. Because Jesus did die to redeem the world Paul could write, “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”—I Cor. 15:22

Since the true followers of Jesus are to be associated with him as the channel of blessing to the world, the Scriptures reveal that the work of blessing will not begin until all these—that is, the number foreordained by God—have been called from the world and proved worthy. These are spoken of as the “called, and chosen, and faithful.” Peter speaks of them as those who make their “calling and election sure,” and thereby have an abundant entrance into the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.—Rev. 17:14; II Pet. 1:10,11

The first disciples, in becoming the followers of Jesus, did so in the belief that he was the promised Messiah, the great King who was to come and establish a world-wide kingdom. (Isa. 9:6,7) They were right in this, but wrong in their belief that the foretold kingdom was to be established immediately. Jesus corrected this viewpoint for them with a parable concerning a certain nobleman who went into a far country to receive a kingdom, and then returned. (Luke 19:11,12) From this it is clear that Christ did not expect to establish his kingdom until after he returned from that “far country,” even heaven. This, of course, would be at his second advent.

Only after our Lord's return, therefore, should we expect a fulfilment of God's promises to bless "all the families of the earth" through the Seed of Abraham. Many students of the Bible have lost sight of this fact, and have adopted the restricted view that there will be no opportunity to accept Christ and be blessed after he returns. Instead of rejoicing in anticipation of the fulfilment of God's promises to bless the people under the rulership of Christ's kingdom, some have gone so far as to believe and teach that the earth will be a desolate wilderness during that thousand years when Christ and his saints are reigning over it.

Object of Christ's Return

Let us examine the testimony of the Apostle Peter as to the purpose of our Lord's return. It is recorded in Acts 3:19-21. Here Peter informs us that "times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord"—Jehovah. The expression, "presence of the Lord," translates Greek words which more literally mean "from the face of the Lord." The thought is identical with the one expressed in Numbers 6:25,26, where we read, "The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

Peter's thought obviously is that the return of Christ will be an expression of God's good will toward the world, resulting in a "refreshing" experience. Then Peter continues, explaining that God will "send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." In view of this inspired summary of the prophetic testimony concerning the great objective of Christ's second advent, why should anyone suppose that he returns to destroy the earth, or to make it desolate for a thousand years?

Peter cites, and partially quotes, a revealing example of the prophetic testimony on this point: "Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you." Then Peter adds, "it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people."—Acts 3:22,23

This is most revealing. Moses prophesied to the "fathers"—those of Israel who lived contemporaneously with him—that the Lord would raise up a prophet to them whom they would have an opportunity to hear and believe; and Peter explains that this would be fulfilled by Jesus after he returned. This proves that the Israelites of Moses' day will be raised from the dead and given an opportunity to accept Christ during the time of his second visit to earth.

In Romans 11:25-32 Paul reveals that the Israelites who refused to accept Christ at his first advent will have mercy shown to them after "the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." This expression refers to the work of God during the present age of calling out from the world those who will be associated with Jesus as the Seed through which all the families of the earth are to be blessed. (Gen. 22:18) In Revelation 14:1 these are represented as being on Mount Sion with Jesus, and Paul says, that "there shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob."

In verse 32 Paul explains that God has counted all the Israelites in unbelief in order that he might have mercy upon all. How wonderful this is! Our restricted viewpoint would cause us to say that God cannot show mercy to unbelievers following Christ's second advent, but Paul believed and taught otherwise. No wonder he added, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"—vs. 33

Paul's inspired declaration that when Jesus returned he would show mercy to the Jews who rejected him at his first advent is supported by Jesus and by the Prophet Ezekiel. Those who have any doubt of this should make a careful study of Ezekiel 16:48-63; Matthew 10:15; 11:22,24; Mark 6:11, and Luke 10:12,14. In these passages the fact is revealed that Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as those who opposed Jesus, are to be restored to life, and that it will be favorable for them in the judgment day.

Their resurrection is described as a returning to their “former estate,” and Jesus says that it will be “more tolerable” for those wicked cities of the past than it will be for those who disbelieved and opposed him. Jesus explained the principle which will apply here, saying, “Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.” (Luke 12:48) The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were not highly favored of the Lord in their day, and they were given no information concerning the divine will. On the other hand, God had sent his prophets to Israel, and finally the Messiah himself, so their sin of unbelief was against greater light, hence warranted a greater degree of punishment.

But the point is that both groups are to be dealt with in the judgment day, following the return of Christ, and it will be tolerable for both, but more tolerable for one man than the other. Only by distorting the Word of God can anyone get a different thought out of these inspired declarations by Ezekiel and Jesus. They show clearly that favor will be shown to sinners following Christ’s return.

Learning Righteousness

The Scriptures clearly teach that the world’s judgment day follows the return of Christ; and the Prophet Isaiah wrote, “When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.” (Isa. 26:9) The word judgment as used in the Bible is by no means limited to the pronouncement of sentence. It includes the thought of trial, or probation, and sometimes of corrective discipline.

In the next verse Isaiah wrote, “Let favor be showed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord.” (vs. 10) It is certain from this text that the day of judgment is a time when favor will be shown, even to the wicked. That favor will be the opportunity, based upon a comprehensive understanding of the issues involved, of learning and practicing righteousness.

This favor will be shown to the people in what the prophet describes as the “land of uprightness.” This is a poetic description of conditions throughout the earth during the thousand years of Christ’s reign, which will also be the judgment day of a thousand years. Isaiah says that the “wicked” will not, even then, learn righteousness. This is a reference to those who at heart are willfully wicked. They are the ones referred to by Peter who, during the “times of restitution,” refuse to obey “that Prophet” and are destroyed from among the people.—Acts 3:23

We are not to conclude that there will be no evil in the world during the thousand years of Christ’s reign. Paul wrote that Christ must reign until all enemies of God and of righteousness are put down. He explained that death is the last enemy to be destroyed. (I Cor. 15:25,26) Not until the close of the thousand years will the earth be completely freed from evil. It will be then that no one will need to say to his neighbor, “Know the Lord,” for all shall know him. And it will be then that there shall be no more sickness and death.—Jer. 31:31-34; Rev. 21:4

Kingdom—Judgment—Resurrection

From the Scripture texts already examined it is clear that the kingdom of Christ, the judgment day, and the resurrection day promised by God, are all the same period of time. These terms are descriptive, each in its own way, of the one great work to be accomplished during that thousand-year age in the divine plan.

From one standpoint it will be like a kingdom reign, in that it will result in the re-establishment of God’s will in the hearts of the human race, of all, that is, who obey the laws of that kingdom. It is for this that we have been taught to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

From another standpoint the work of that thousand years will be one of trial, judgment, and discipline. With each individual a final verdict will be rendered, denoting worthiness or unworthiness of eternal life. The

Scriptures teach that Jesus will be the Judge supreme during that time, as well as the great King.—Ps. 72:8; Acts 17:31

Besides this, the people are to be raised from the dead and given an opportunity to live forever. Thus the word resurrection is also used to give us a still more comprehensive understanding of the manner in which “all the families of the earth” are to be blessed through the Seed of Abraham. (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Gal. 3:8,16,27-29) Paul affirmed that there “shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.”—Acts 24:15

This threefold work of The Christ, the promised Seed of blessing, is what Peter describes as “times of restitution of all things.” (Acts 3:19-21) And as Peter so clearly sets forth, it follows the return of Christ. It is then that God’s will is to be restored by the rulership of Christ. Righteousness is to be restored by the educational and disciplinary processes of the Lord’s judgments. And everlasting life is to be given to those who qualify for it by obedience to the will of God and by demonstrating their love for righteousness.

Satan to Be Bound

The work of the Millennium is brought to our attention in the 20th chapter of Revelation. In the opening verses we are assured that Satan, the Devil, will be bound at the beginning of the thousand years—“that he should deceive the nations no more.” By some this has been misconstrued to mean that Satan is bound by virtue of the fact that the nations are all dead, hence there will be no one for him to deceive.

What this interpretation really means is that the nations will be bound rather than the Devil—bound, that is, in the great prison house of death. The Devil, according to this distortion of scriptural meaning, will be roaming up and down in a desolate earth for a thousand years, “bound” because his subjects will all be dead.

The principal passage used in an effort to prove the theory that during the thousand years of Christ’s kingdom and judgment day the whole earth will be empty and desolate is Jeremiah 4:23-27. The basis of the “proof” is the fact that some of the language used in this passage is similar to that used in Genesis to describe the earth previous to the creation of man. This is taken to mean that during the Millennium the earth will again be “void,” or empty.

However, this passage of Scripture is not even remotely related to the thousand years of Christ’s reign. It is part of Jeremiah’s prophecy of doom which was coming upon natural Israel forewarning the people that they were to be removed from their land, and that their cities and land would lie desolate. This prophecy was fulfilled during the seventy years of their captivity in Babylon. This same desolation was also foretold in Leviticus 26:31-35, where similar language is used.

This true interpretation of Jeremiah’s prophecy is borne out by the fact that the Hebrew word “erets” which is translated “earth” in verse 23, is translated “land” in verse 27. The prophecy does not, therefore, relate at all to a desolation of the entire earth, but merely to the “land” of Israel.

The Bottomless Pit

Revelation 20:2,3 speaks of Satan being cast into a “bottomless pit.” According to the untenable interpretation that Satan is bound by virtue of the fact that there will be no one to deceive, this would mean that the “bottomless pit” is a desolated, uninhabited earth. But do the Scriptures substantiate this notion? We do not think so.

This bottomless pit is also referred to in Revelation 11:7 and 17:8. By no stretch of the imagination can it be interpreted in these instances as referring to the earth emptied of all human inhabitants. Both of these speak of a “beast” that comes out of the bottomless pit to resume activities among humans dwelling on the earth. In the second instance a “harlot” woman is seen riding on the “beast.”

It is generally agreed among students of the Bible that this beast is symbolic of a corrupt government which

once ruled Europe, whose rulership became eclipsed for a time. Regardless of how definitely we might be able to identify this evil power, it is obvious that while it is in the bottomless pit, nations continue to exist on this earth. So, just as millions lived on the earth during the time this beast was in the bottomless pit, the human race will live throughout the thousand years that the Devil is in the same bottomless pit. Just as the bottomless pit symbolizes a condition in which the beast was restrained of its power to rule, so it also is symbolic of a similar restraint which will be imposed upon Satan, that he may deceive the nations no more until after the thousand years of Christ's reign.

In ancient times prisoners were frequently held in custody by chains. Sometimes they were chained to heavy iron balls, sometimes to guards. So the Lord informs us that Satan is to be bound with a "great chain." Satan is a spirit being, so in his case we must think of the chain merely as symbolic of the divine power which will hold the fallen Lucifer in restraint during the thousand years when he is not permitted to deceive the people.

Reigning with Christ

Revelation 20:4 tells us of those who live and reign with Christ a thousand years being brought forth from death in the "first resurrection" for this purpose. These are the ones who suffer and die with Jesus in order that they might live and reign with him. They are "beheaded" for the witness of Jesus; that is, they accept the headship of Christ in their lives, and thus become members of his mystical body.

These are the ones referred to by Paul as being "baptized into Christ" and thus becoming associated with him as the promised Seed of Abraham through which all the families of the earth are to be blessed. (Gal. 3:27-29) Yes, all true Christians who gladly suffer and die with Christ may rejoice in the hope of reigning in his kingdom. When the disciples marveled at the miracles performed by Jesus, he told them that they would do even greater works—a reference, no doubt, to their future privileges when glorified with Christ and reigning with him in his thousand-year kingdom.

"The Rest of the Dead"

The first sentence in Revelation 20:5, reads, "The rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished." This is a strange interruption in the train of thought introduced in verse 4 which, in speaking of Christ's joint-heirs, concludes with the statement, "They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years." Without the interruption pertaining to the rest of the dead not living, the conclusion of verse 4, together with verse 5 would read, "They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years; this is the first resurrection." Verse 5 as it stands reads, "The rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection."

This is a flat contradiction, for it says that the first resurrection consists of the "rest of the dead" not living. God's inspired Word contains no contradictions, so it is obvious that an interpolation has crept into verse 5 of this chapter. This is further proved by the fact that the expression, "The rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished," is not found in the oldest Greek manuscript—Codex Sinaiticus, the Vatican 1106, or the Syriac manuscripts. This means that these words were added by some zealous but misguided copyist during the Dark Ages, possibly to substantiate the claim that the kingdom of Christ was then established and reigning.

Perhaps some were then wondering why, if Christ was reigning, the dead were not being raised. The statement that the rest of the dead would not live until the thousand years were finished may first have merely been penned in the margin of a manuscript as an observation, and at a later time copied into the text. But regardless of how it happened, these words are an interpolation, and are now so recognized by eminent Bible scholars, and in fact by all unbiased students of the Word.

To recognize such interpolations is not “higher criticism” of the Scriptures, no more than is the effort to secure correct translations of the original texts. How richly many students of the Bible have been blessed by recognizing that the Hebrew and Greek words translated “hell” in the Bible do not mean eternal torture!

It is equally important to discover interpolations of the sacred texts in order not to be misguided by them. Indeed, not to recognize these interpolations when they are so clearly established as such would tend to bring one into the position of adding to the Word of God. This would be especially true if the interpolation in question is used as the principal supporting text of a basic doctrine to which one may have subscribed.

Contrary to the thought expressed in this particular interpolation, the very purpose of the thousand-year reign of Christ is to restore the dead to life. As we have seen, Christ returns to usher in “times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:19-23) How strange it is that just a few uninspired words added to Revelation 20:5 during the Dark Ages should be used to contradict the testimony of all God’s holy prophets!

Kings and Priests

Verse 6 of Revelation 20 reiterates the blessedness of those who are raised to life in the first resurrection, and tells us again that they reign with Christ a thousand years. It speaks of them as being both “kings and priests.” Revelation 5:9,10 explains that these are redeemed from among men, and that their reign is on the earth.

Kings exercise authority over subjects, and priests are those who serve and bless the people. How aimless and useless would be the work of these kings and priests during the thousand years of their reign on the earth if not a single human being was alive over whom to reign, and no one anywhere to be the recipient of the blessings of life they were prepared to dispense! It seems to us that to reign over the earth at such a time would place these kings and priests in a similar “bound” situation as this same false reasoning has explained would be the position of Satan.

But the Revelator explains that at the conclusion of the thousand years when Satan is released, the people on the earth are in number as the sand of the sea.” (Rev. 20:8) There is nothing in the narrative to indicate these are raised from the dead just at that time in order to give the Devil someone on whom to practice his deceptions. It is clear, rather, that this multitude of humans are those who have been brought forth from death and dealt with during the Millennium. It is these who are referred to as coming forth from “death and hell.”—vs. 13

The Three-Phase Work

The first eleven verses of Revelation chapter 20 describe the work of the Millennium from the standpoint of the kingdom reign of Christ in which he subdues and destroys all enemies of God and man. It is appropriate that the binding of Satan should be shown in this picture, and also his release and destruction at the close of the thousand years.

Beginning with verse 12 the judgment aspect of the Millennial Age is brought to our attention. It is not that the narrative beginning in this verse is descriptive of a work that follows the thousand years of Christ’s reign. Rather, it is a description of further details pertaining to the work of Christ during the same thousand years, that is, the judgment work.

The last three verses of the chapter remind us that during this same thousand years the dead are to be restored to life. Here also, and appropriately, we are assured that “death and hell” are to be destroyed. That is why, in the 4th verse of the next chapter, the Revelator tells us that as a result of Christ’s reign “there shall be no more death.”

The Judgment Work

Having examined somewhat the kingdom aspect of the Millennium as presented in this chapter, let us note how clearly it sets forth the work of judgment. We read, "I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works." (vs. 12) In the preceding verse John tells us that he saw a great white throne—symbolic of kingdom authority—and that the symbolic heavens and earth fled away from the face of him who sat upon the throne.

John therefore sees the dead stand before God, in contrast to the symbolic heavens and earth—Satan's empire—which do not stand, but flee away. The fact that the dead stand before God suggests that he is dealing with them. Obviously the reference is to those who have been dead and are now awakened to life, and are standing before the "face" of him who sitteth upon the throne. We have already noted that "times of refreshing" will come from the "face of the Lord."—Acts 3:19-21

The beauty of this picture of the judgment-day work has been marred by the false notion that the books which are opened contain the records of the past deeds of the dead. It is claimed by some that those who come forth in the first resurrection will spend a thousand years poring over these books to discover if any of the rest of the dead may be worthy of life. Discovering that there are no more worthy ones, the "rest of the dead" will then be awakened, told that they are not worthy to live, and then destroyed.

But what is written in these books that are opened? This is important to know because the judgment of the people is to be on the basis of what is written in the books. We believe that Jesus clearly indicated the contents of the judgment-day "books" when he said, "if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not into the world to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."—John 12:47,48

Here Jesus is plainly stating that his teachings, his interpretations of the will and law of God, will be the basis of judgment during the judgment day. It is undoubtedly the revealing of these teachings to the people that is symbolized by books being opened. Certainly, the true teachings of Christ have been to the vast majority throughout the ages like a sealed book.—Isa. 29:18

The "works" of the people are mentioned separately from the things written in the books. They are to be judged by the things written in the books "according to their works." That is, their works are to be compared with what is written in the books. And it will not be their past works, but according as their "work shall be."—Rev. 22:12

A book of life will then be opened. Obviously the thought is that as the restored dead bring their works into line with the will of God as revealed by the opened books, their names will be placed in the book of life. This, indeed, is the very purpose of the judgment-day work; namely, to give the world an opportunity to know and do the will of God as expressed through Christ, and thus prove worthy to live forever.—John 12:50

No purpose would be served in examining the past works of the world of mankind, for the Lord knows that none are worthy of life. Jesus came to give his life as man's Redeemer, but the truth concerning the divine plan of redemption has become terribly confused, so that very few indeed have really had a fair opportunity to hear and believe. Besides, there are countless millions who have not heard even a confused message of the Gospel. But Paul wrote that it is the will of God that all shall be "saved" and come to a knowledge of the truth.—I Tim. 2:4-6

Here the word saved simply denotes an awakening from the sleep of death in order that those who are dead might have an opportunity to learn the truth concerning Jesus. They will learn this from the "books"

which will then be “opened.” Paul states it in plain language in this passage, saying, “There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all to be testified [or made known] in due time”; that is, when the books are opened.

Those Who Have Done Evil

John 5:28,29 is another judgment-day passage of Scripture. It reads, “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice and shall come forth: they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation [*Revised Standard Version*, ‘judgment’].”

A correct understanding of this passage is indicated in the 24th verse of the same chapter. Here Jesus says, “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” Here the Greek word translated “condemnation” is *krisis*. It is the same word that is mistranslated “damnation” in verse 29. Its true meaning is “judgment.”

Jesus explains that those who believe in the present life will not come into the future judgment of unbelievers. Of course not, for they will be associated with him in that future work of judgment. They enter into life now by faith, and actually in the first resurrection. That is why Jesus speaks of them as being resurrected to life.

But the others, Jesus said, will come forth from death to a “resurrection of judgment.” It is then that they will enter into judgment. Their coming forth from the tomb will be simply an awakening from the sleep of death. If they are fully restored to perfection in that time of restitution and live forever, it will be because, when enlightened, they conform their lives to the things written in the books.

This is best understood by remembering the basic meaning of the Greek word *krisis*, which in the Revised Version is translated judgment. Actually it has the same meaning as our English word crisis. We know what is meant by a crisis in one’s life. It is a time of testing and possible change. It will be so with the unbelieving world when they are awakened from the sleep of death. If in that crisis time they turn to the Lord, instead of away from him, they will be restored to full human perfection and live forever, as Adam would have lived had he not transgressed divine law. If they refuse to hear and obey, they will be destroyed in the “second death,” for their names will not be entered in the book of life.—Acts 3:23; Rev. 20:14,15

The “Sheep” and “Goats”

Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is very revealing. (Matt. 25:31-46) He identifies the time when the parable applies as being when the Son of Man comes, and sits on the throne of his glory with all his holy angels. Here the saints of the present age are shown with Jesus as “angels,” or “messengers,” as the word is in the Greek text. Paul wrote, “Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?” (I Cor. 6:2) These are the ones who will sit with Jesus in his throne. (Rev. 3:21) They are the ones who “appear” with Christ in “glory.”—Col. 3:4

This means that the “sheep” of the parable are not the believers of the present age. No, just as the parable states, it is all nations that are gathered before the judgment throne, and it is from all nations that the two classes represented by the sheep and the goats are developed. Are these all asleep in death while they are being separated? It does not appear so, for the parable indicates that the “sheep” are very active visiting the sick, etc. In other words, they are alive and demonstrating their love for righteousness—their harmony with the divine law of love.

These symbolic sheep have restored to them the “kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world.” This is the dominion over the earth that was given to our first parents. They forfeited it through sin. It was redeemed by Christ, and in the judgment day it will be restored to all of Adam’s race who pass the tests of

belief and obedience then placed upon them. They also will be rewarded with life everlasting.

“The Accepted Time”

The Apostle Paul wrote, “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (II Cor. 6:2) This text is often used to prove that there will be no probation after death, as though Paul wrote that the present life is the only day of salvation. Actually Paul did not use the word “now” as a reference to one’s present life span, but to the present age in the divine plan. In this text he quotes from Isaiah 49:8,9, where the Lord says, “in an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages, that thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Show yourselves.”

Paul is simply saying that now is the time when the Lord is preserving and helping those whom he will later give as a covenant of the people, and who will then establish the earth, and restore the desolate heritages, and call forth the prisoners of death. This is just another way in which the Scriptures reveal that the followers of Jesus in this age who are willing to suffer and die with him will have the opportunity of living and reigning with him.

Now is the time, in other words, when God will accept the sacrifices of those who are willing to die with Jesus. And now is the time when those who prove worthy will attain to the “great salvation,” the prize of the “high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” It does not mean that this is the only age in which salvation will be offered to the people. To the contrary, those who are sacrificing and suffering now are thus being prepared to join with Christ in extending the blessings of restitution to the whole world of mankind during the thousand years of the kingdom.

Yes, there will be times of restitution when “death and hell” are to give up their dead. Jesus said that the “gates of hell” will not prevail against this church. Those gates will be opened and the prisoners of death will be brought forth—paroled for a time until they prove their worthiness of a permanent release from death. It is thus that those “baptized into Christ” and thereby becoming with him the Seed of Abraham, will bless all the families of the earth.

This is the meaning of the Gospel, the good news that was first preached to Abraham. (Gen. 12:3) This is what the angel meant who announced the birth of Jesus, declaring him to be “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” This is the meaning of the “everlasting Gospel” referred to in our text. This is the “Gospel of Christ” of which Paul said he was not ashamed. (Rom. 1:16) It is a Gospel of which every true lover of God and of righteousness can be truly thankful and enthusiastic.

Let us proclaim it to all who have a hearing ear!

CHAPTER II

THE CHRISTIAN’S SABBATH

The word Sabbath is a prominent one in the Christian vocabulary. Its literal meaning is “to rest.” The word first appears in the Bible in Exodus 16:23. In gathering the daily manna which the Lord provided for them, the Israelites were to gather twice as much on the sixth day that they might have a supply for the seventh, which the Lord declared was to be a Sabbath, or day of rest. Later, when the Law of God was given to Israel, keeping the seventh day of the week as a Sabbath, or time of rest, was made the fourth of the Ten Commandments. Keeping the Sabbath was to Israel a vitally important part of their service to God, so much

so that the penalty of death was to be inflicted upon those who did not obey this commandment. (Exod. 35:1,2) The New Testament contains no instructions on the matter of weekly Sabbath-keeping, but it has been assumed by many that the Sabbath commandment of the Law was intended by God to carry over to the Christian church.

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Think not that I have come to destroy the Law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." To the condemned and dying race of mankind, fulfilment of the Law was impossible, for none could measure up to its perfect standard of righteousness. But Jesus, being perfect, was able to keep the Law inviolate. Being a Jew and under the Law Covenant, he kept the seventh-day Sabbath, although he had a different concept of its meaning than the religious leaders of his day.

Because Jesus healed a sick man on the Sabbath his enemies "sought to slay him," which was their obligation to do had he actually broken the sabbath. Jesus' answer to his enemies was, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." (John 5:17) This emphasizes that simply refraining from all activity was not the real meaning of the sabbath, for both the Heavenly Father and Jesus work on this day. Jesus healed the sick.

In Mark 2:23,24,27,28 we have another important lesson brought to our attention by Jesus. He and his disciples walked through a corn field on the sabbath day, and as they went the disciples plucked some of the corn, evidently for their own use. This was different from healing the sick on the sabbath, and according to the strict letter of the fourth commandment it was wrong, so the Pharisees asked, "Why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?" Jesus' reply was, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath; therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath. "

The thought here evidently is that the commandment which required the Israelites to rest every seventh day was designed for their good, not their injury. The disciples were hungry, and it would have been a wrong understanding of the purpose of the sabbath to suppose that the law concerning it meant that they should refrain from satisfying their hunger. And we are glad for Jesus' assertion that he became the "Lord of the sabbath," for we know that his interpretation of it is correct. Whatever Jesus enjoined upon his followers concerning the sabbath should be obeyed.

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "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." (Matt. 5:19) To what commandments did Jesus refer? We can be quided only by his following remarks in which he partially quotes four of them—two from the Decalogue and two that were not. The first two were moral requirements—"Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not commit adultery."—vss. 21,27

The third commandment quoted by Jesus was the Law's expression of justice—"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." (vs. 38) In each instance when referring to one or another of the commandments Jesus gave a higher meaning to them than had ever been taught before. Instead of exacting "an eye for an eye" he admonished his followers not to resist evil, "but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."—vs. 39

The fourth commandment quoted by Jesus was, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor," to which Jewish tradition had added, "and hate thine enemy." (vs. 43) It will be seen that all four of these commandments which Jesus said should not be broken pertain to human relationship, emphasizing the high standard of moral ethics which should govern them, especially when viewed in the light of the finer, more exacting meaning which Jesus gave.

Did Jesus, in any of his teachings, command his followers to observe the seventh-day sabbath? Besides, if it was God's design that the fourth commandment be carried over into the Christian dispensation, then it would be obligatory for those in positions of church authority to impose the penalty stated in the Law for failure to obey it. As we have seen, that penalty was death. Is this what Jesus taught?

Jesus opened his Sermon on the Mount by setting forth the Beatitudes—"Blessed are the poor in spirit";

“Blessed are they that mourn”; “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness”; “Blessed are the merciful”; “Blessed are the pure in heart”; “Blessed are the peacemakers”; and “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”—Matt. 5:1-10

If keeping the seventh day of the week as one of rest had been considered by Jesus as vital to salvation, it would have been logical for him to add, “Blessed are they who keep the sabbath day holy,” but he did not. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus touched upon many details of Christian living—domestic relationships, the taking of human life, loving our enemies, prayer, etc.—but said nothing about keeping the sabbath.

No mention is made of the sabbath in Jesus’ many parables.

His Final Command

Shortly before Jesus left his disciples and returned to the heavenly courts, he said to them, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”—Matt. 28:19,20

Here again we find no mention of the seventh-day sabbath. Nor can we assume that it is included in the statement, “Whatsoever I have commanded you,” for Jesus had never given any such command to his disciples. Honesty in handling the word of God compels us to acknowledge that so far as the personal and direct commands of Jesus are concerned, they do not include seventh-day sabbath-keeping.

Beginning with Pentecost the apostles wrote and spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Peter’s first sermon, preached on the Day of Pentecost, made no reference to the sabbath. (Acts 2) A little later Peter preached another sermon, but again he made no reference to sabbath-keeping.—Acts 3

Throughout the Book of Acts we find many outstanding testimonies to the truth by the apostles and others—some to the Jews as a people; some to their rulers; some to civil rulers of the day; and some to Gentiles—but in none of these is there any mention whatsoever of seventh-day sabbath-keeping. The martyr Stephen said nothing about it. When Paul witnessed before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa to the Jews in Jerusalem, and to the Greeks from Mars’ Hill, he said nothing about it.

Necessary Things

One of the difficult issues which confronted the Early Church was how to deal with Gentile converts to Christ who were seeking fellowship among Christians of Jewish birth. This issue became so serious that a conference of the apostles was called in Jerusalem at which the subject was discussed and conclusions reached. (Acts 15:1-10) Here is the full statement of the apostolic edict which was sent out from that conference:

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these NECESSARY things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well.”—Acts 15:28,29

Shall we charge the apostles with neglecting to mention one of the vitally “necessary” things when delivering this message to Gentile converts? Surely not! Yet, this was certainly the logical place to mention the sabbath if they did consider it to be an essential part of divine law which Gentile Christians should observe. Let us ponder well the significance of this omission as we consider our own relationship to God.

In Acts 20:27 the Apostle Paul is reported as saying that he had “not shunned to declare . . . all the counsel of God.” In view of this it is interesting to note that in all of Paul’s epistles and sermons he omits to mention the necessity of keeping the seventh-day sabbath. From this it is impossible to escape the conclusion that seventh-day sabbath-keeping is not a part of the counsel of God for Christians.

Dead to the Law

In the Book of Romans Paul does touch upon the Law of which the Sabbath commandment was a part, not to impose that Law upon Christians, but to emphasize that faith in and obedience to the Gospel makes one free from it. He wrote:

“Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the Law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God . . . But now we are delivered from the Law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the Law: for I had not known lust, except the Law had said, Thou shalt not covet.”—Rom. 7:4,6,7

Some claim that the Law to which Christians are dead is merely the ceremonial Law, not the Ten Commandments. But Paul does not agree with this, for in his statement that Christians are dead to the Law he quotes one of the Ten Commandments—“Thou shalt not covet.” There is absolutely no doubt, therefore, as to what Law Paul is referring.

Again, some take the extreme position that if the Law of the Ten Commandments is not binding upon Christians then we are free to commit adultery, to covet, to lie, and to murder. This is shallow reasoning. It is morally wrong to do all these things. They are gross sins. They are an injury to self and to others. Jesus and the apostles taught that these things were wrong and enjoined against them. But they did not command that the seventh-day sabbath should be kept. This is not a moral issue, and the fact that Jesus and the apostles failed to command its observance, but did speak out against the sins forbidden by the commandments, simply emphasizes the fact that they did not consider the keeping of the seventh-day sabbath a necessity for Christians.

Judge Not

In Romans 14:5,6 Paul wrote, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day 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. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.”

Two points should be observed in this argument. One is that Paul does not condemn those who esteem every day alike. The other is that he places the observance of one day above another in the same category of importance as eating or not eating meat. Regardless of the reason some of the converted Jews in Rome had for esteeming one day above another, certainly those who believed that every day was alike did not consider seventh-day sabbath-keeping a necessity. And it is obvious that the Apostle Paul did not think so either, else he would have sounded a timely warning to nonsabbath-keepers.

Things Which Abide

Paul wrote two letters to the church at Corinth, but in neither of these is there any mention of sabbath-keeping. In the 13th chapter of I Corinthians he emphasizes the fundamental importance of love as a governing principle. Gifts of the Spirit were to vanish away; also the limited knowledge enjoyed in this life. But three things were to abide, Paul wrote—faith, hope, and love, the greatest being love. If the seventh-day sabbath was to be an abiding ordinance in the church, why did the apostle fail to mention it? Why did he not say that the sabbath was to abide as well as faith, hope, and love?

The Law That Was on Stones

In II Corinthians 3:3-7 Paul presents another important lesson in which he explains that it was the Law

“written and engraven in stones” which is “done away.” It was the Law of the Ten Commandments that was written on tables of stone, not the ceremonial Law. Thus we see that while Paul does not here specifically mention the sabbath commandment, he does declare that the entire Decalogue is “done away,” and that during this present age God is writing his law on “fleshy tables of the heart.”

In Paul’s letter to the church of Galatia he expresses concern over those who observe “days, and months, and times, and years.” (Gal. 4:10,11) Criticizing this group, Paul wrote, “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?”—Gal. 3:1

In Galatians 3:16-19 Paul refers to God’s covenant with Abraham, and explains that the Law, which was added “four hundred and thirty years after,” could not make void that original covenant. “It was added,” he explains, “because of transgression till the seed should come to whom the promise was made.” If the Law was “added till the Seed should come,” why is it necessary, now that the Seed has come, to continue under the Law?

Some will argue that the seventh-day Sabbath had always been observed. But this was a part of the Law which Paul states was added. This proves that it did not exist prior to Sinai. It is merely an assumption that the seventh-day Sabbath was observed prior to this. There is not a single text of Scripture which so states. If it had been the custom of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others of the patriarchs to observe the seventh-day Sabbath, why is there no reference to it in the historical records of their lives?

The Law of Commandments

In Ephesians 2:15 Paul tells us that Christ has abolished the “Law of commandments.” The King James Version adds the word “contained” in translating the remainder of the text, making it read, “contained in ordinances.” This has been seized upon to prove that it was merely the ordinances of the Law that were abolished. Certainly the ordinances of the Law were abolished. An ordinance is simply an act of religious worship, such as baptism. Thus the Sabbath commandment is in reality an ordinance. It was not a commandment regulating moral conduct.

In Colossians 2:16 we read, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink or in respect to an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath [‘days’ added by translators].” From this it is obvious that Paul did not consider the keeping of the Sabbath essential to salvation. True, there were other sabbaths observed by Israel in addition to the seventh-day Sabbath. There were the yearly “holy days,” and also the “new moon,” or monthly holy days. Since Paul mentions these separately, his reference to the Sabbath is therefore definitely to the seventh-day Sabbath.

God’s Rest

In Paul’s letter to Timothy he wrote, “We know that the Law is good, if a man use it lawfully.” To this he adds, “Knowing this, that the Law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners.” (I Tim. 1:8-10) Here is an important consideration. Christians who have devoted themselves entirely to the service of the Lord, and who are endeavoring to set their affections on things above, should be living above the necessity of the “Law of commandments.”—Eph. 2:15

In Hebrews 4:1-11 Paul presents a very important and revealing lesson with respect to Christian sabbath-keeping. In the 10th verse he sums up the matter for us, saying, “He that is entered into his [the Creator’s] rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.” Here is another important point, for the claim is made that the seventh-day Sabbath is and always will be binding upon the Lord’s people, because this day was made sacred by the fact that on it God rested from his work of creation. God’s Sabbath is Sacred, and here the apostle explains how it can be kept sacred by Christians. It is not by resting on the

seventh day of each week, but rather by continuing to exercise faith in the finished work of Christ.

We are told that the Sabbath was given to Israel for a “sign.” (Exod. 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:12-17) It was, or should have been a sign, or token, of God’s ability to care for all their needs. When they rested on the seventh day they refrained from that which helped to provide their living. This, in turn, became a picture of a far more important rest for Christians.

For centuries the devout Israelites struggled to obtain life under the terms of the Law. (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12) They failed, not because the Law was imperfect, but because it was beyond the ability of any member of the fallen race to keep. But with the coming of Christ there was opened “a new and living way”—not a new way of works under the Law, but a way of faith which enables a consecrated believer to cease depending upon works to obtain life, and to accept instead the provision of life made for him by God through Christ.—Heb. 10:20; Rom. 3:30; 5:1,2

It is thus that the Christian enters into rest with God, ceasing from his own works, as God did from his. When God finished his original work of creation he ceased his efforts on behalf of the human race; not in the sense that he no longer cared for his human creatures, but because he entrusted their ultimate destiny in the hands of another, even Christ Jesus, the Redeemer and Savior.

The perfect pair whom God created and placed in Eden transgressed his law and came under condemnation to death. His justice demanded that they die, but his love provided an escape from death, that way being through his beloved Son. Jehovah knew that his Son would willingly come to earth, be “made flesh,” and suffer death in order to meet the demands of divine justice against the fallen race. His faith in the outcome of this loving plan of redemption through Christ enabled him to “rest.” And if we can also have full confidence in the Redeemer, and in his “finished work” for us, we can also rest from our “works, as God did from his.”—Heb. 4:3

This is Paul’s explanation of God’s rest, and of how we share in it. How much grander it is than to think of God actually being inactive for twenty-four hours, as though he had become weary! This could not be, for the Prophet Isaiah wrote, “Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?” (Isa. 40:28) Besides, there is much evidence in the Scriptures that the creative days of Genesis were not twenty-four hour days, but long epochs of time. On this point we refer the reader to our booklet entitled “Creation.”

Difficulties present themselves when we try to think of God’s sabbath as being limited to a twenty-four hour period each week. The scriptural day begins at sundown and continues until sundown the next evening. The seventh day of the week is made holy, it is claimed, by the fact that it is on this day that God rests. So if we rest on this day, we are resting with God.

But what are we to do with the fact that the sun sets at various times, depending in which part of the globe one lives? There are eight hours’ difference between the time the sun sets in Western Europe and in California. There are also hours of difference between sundown in the North and sundown in the South. In the Arctic and Antarctic Circles there are six months of day and six months of night. To keep a seventh-day sabbath in these regions would mean resting for a whole year at a time every seventh year. Would God be conducting his rest on this basis? Or, if we should establish the length of day by our watches, would this be in harmony with the Bible?

Besides, how can we be absolutely certain that Saturday is now the seventh day of the week that was established at Sinai, or at creation? Even if it were so in America, it would not be so after crossing the international date line. We raise these questions merely to emphasize how flimsy a thread secures our hope of salvation if it depends upon resting one day each week, and on the selfsame hours during which God is supposed to be resting. Each Christian must decide for himself how important this thread is. We think it is

better to base our hope on the solid rock of Christ Jesus and rest by faith in him.

The “Mark” of the “Beast”

In Revelation 13:16 reference is made to a “mark” which is placed on the right hand, or the forehead, of those who worship a certain “beast,” or the “image” of the “beast.” This mark of the beast is also referred to in Revelation 15:2; 16:2 and 20:4. Revelation 7:2-4 makes reference to the “seal of the living God.” The mark of the beast has been interpreted to mean the observance of the first day of the week as the Christian sabbath, and the “seal of the living God” has been taken to symbolize adherence to the seventh day of the week as the sabbath.

Actually, the word sabbath is not used in the Book of Revelation at all, nor is seventh-day sabbath-keeping even remotely referred to. There is not the slightest suggestion anywhere in the Bible that first-day sabbath-keeping is the mark of the beast. This is an arbitrary interpretation which is based on nothing more substantial than theological imagination.

In Revelation 22:14 we read, “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.” The “city” here mentioned is described in detail in chapter 21, and is identified as “the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” (Rev. 21:2,9,10) The twelve foundations of the city are said to be the “twelve apostles of the Lamb.” (vs. 14) The twelve gates carry the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, those referred to in chapter 7 as having the “Seal of the living God.”

The setting of chapters 21 and 22 is of this city being complete, and of the nations of the world walking in the light of it, and the kings of the earth bringing their glory into it. The bride, the Lamb’s wife—one of the biblical titles given to the church of Christ—is shown in chapter 22:17 as inviting whosoever will to “partake of the water of life freely.” The evidence is clear, therefore, that those referred to in verse 14 as having the right to the tree of life by keeping the commandments, are not Jesus’ followers of this age, but the world of mankind during the Millennium.

We have considered this text because it uses the word commandments. But are we arbitrarily to decide that the reference is to the seventh-day sabbath-keeping? We do not believe that this would be a proper handling of the Word of God, especially since there is not a single text in the entire New Testament which states that keeping the seventh-day sabbath is essential to the obtaining of everlasting life.

And what about the claim that seventh-day sabbath-keeping is the “seal of the living God”? This also is based merely upon speculative imagination. There is no scriptural authority for it. In Ephesians 1:13 the Apostle Paul speaks of Christians being sealed with “the Holy Spirit of promise.” The sealed of God, then, are those who have received of his Holy Spirit, and are being led and blessed by it. In Revelation 7:3 the seal of God is said to be in the forehead. This, evidently, is a symbol of the enlightening influence of God’s Spirit, enabling the Christian to understand the plans and purposes of God.

“Marks”

Since, as we have seen, there is no scriptural authority for supposing that the mark of the beast is first-day sabbath-keeping, do we have any indication in the Bible as to what this symbolism might represent? We think so. We believe a clue is provided by the Apostle Paul in his reference to “the marks” of the Lord Jesus. (II Cor. 1:5; 11:23-25) In Galatians 6:17 Paul wrote, “From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.”

This language is based upon the custom of slave owners in the apostle’s day of branding their slaves with a particular mark to identify ownership. Paul had become a bondsman of Jesus Christ, and in this text he reminds the brethren at Galatia of this fact, and that now, being marked for the service of Christ, none should try to induce him to serve other masters. These were the marks or indications of his relationship to Christ.

The mark of the beast is evidently referred to by Jesus in Revelation as in contrast to his mark. To bear the mark of the beast, therefore, would denote a state of bondage, of enslavement to that great antichrist system of iniquity symbolized by a beast, which in the Book of Revelation is in contrast with the Lamb. Paul wrote, "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey?" (Rom. 6:16) Those who obediently serve the beast are its bondslaves, and have its mark.

Whose Law?

Some interpreters of the Bible claim that what they refer to as the ceremonial Law was given to Israel by Moses, whereas the moral Law was from God. There is, of course, a difference between ceremonial observances and moral requirements. The keeping of the seventh-day sabbath was not a moral requirement. However, the Bible does not support the view that God is the Author of one, while only Moses' authority was behind the other.

Anyone wishing to satisfy himself on this point can do so by consulting a concordance, comparing such expressions as "the Law of the Lord," "the Law of God," and "the Law of Moses." These are used interchangeably, thus proving that the laws of Moses are as much the laws of the Lord as those which are declared to be written by the "finger of God" upon tables of stone.

To claim that the laws accredited to Moses are not the laws of the Lord is a form of higher criticism. It repudiates the fact that this faithful servant of God wrote and spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. That the ceremonial features of the Law were from the Lord, as well as its moral requirements, is shown in Luke 2:22-24. Here the ceremonial of purification following childbirth is referred to three times. Once it is called the Law of Moses, and twice the Law of the Lord.

When God spoke to Israel out of the cloud, the people heard the Ten Commandments directly from him. The people were terrified by the voice of the Lord, and petitioned Moses to change the arrangement, which he did. Deuteronomy 5:22 declares of the Lord that "he added no more. "This does not mean that the remainder of the Law was not from the Lord. Nor did the Israelites understand it in this way, for they said to Moses, "Go thou near, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say; and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it and do it."—Deut. 5:27

The Great Commandment

A lawyer inquired of Jesus, "Master, which is the great commandment in the Law?" Did Jesus say that it was the commandment to remember the sabbath day, and explain that those who did not would have the mark of the beast? No! In answer to this question Jesus did not refer to any of the Ten Commandments. He quoted two commandments, neither of which was among the ten. He said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets."—Matt. 22:37-40; Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18

What Jesus referred to as the great commandment was written by Moses, but of course under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' reference to it certainly proves that he considered it to be just as much one of the divine commandments as though, like the ten, it had been written by the "finger of God."

Jesus said to his disciples, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34,35) How different is this mark of distinction which distinguishes the disciples of Christ, from observing the ceremonial of seventh-day sabbath-keeping! Had this also been necessary, surely this would have been an appropriate time to include it. Jesus did not do so.

Perpetual

That the Sabbath commandment was to be a “perpetual” one is interpreted to mean that it had always existed, and will forever remain binding upon mankind as a prerequisite to obtaining eternal life. (Exod. 31:16) But this is an unscriptural viewpoint. The Sabbath commandment was a part of the Law Covenant, and the Bible distinctly says, “The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us (the Hebrews), even us, who are all of us here alive this day.” (Deut. 5:2,3) It had not existed before.

The Hebrew word translated perpetual does not always carry the thought of being without end. It sometimes means without interruption until a designed purpose is accomplished. Paul explains that the Law was added to God’s original covenant with Abraham “till” the Seed of promise should come. (Gal. 3:19) This is God’s own time limit upon the Law Covenant.

Exodus 35:1,2 reveals that Israelites who failed to keep the seventh-day Sabbath were to be put to death. This also was to be a perpetual requirement. Are those today who insist on the necessity of keeping the seventh-day Sabbath also practicing this aspect of the same law? This might be interpreted to mean that those who do not now keep the Sabbath will die “the second death,” and thus be deprived of future life. But this is not what the text says, and it was not thus understood by Moses and the Israelites in general.

No Historical Evidence

It is true, as claimed, that some pope or civil ruler, or possibly church council, made an arbitrary change from the seventh to the first day of the week for the Christian Sabbath. Is this the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy concerning the Antichrist, that he would “think to change times and laws”? (Daniel 7:25) There is nothing in history to indicate that this was ever done. Some claim that Pope Gregory made the change; others that it was done by Constantine. Others insist that such a change was made by some unknown pope. The Roman Church claims that the change was made, but this proves nothing. Apparently it came about gradually through the centuries as an outgrowth of the custom in the Early Church of commemorating the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week.

However, we are not advocating the idea that the first day of the week is now the proper one to be observed as the Christian Sabbath. What we have noted concerning the scriptural testimony and lack of testimony on Sabbath-keeping is as true concerning the first-day Sabbath as it is with respect to the seventh-day Sabbath. As we have noted, Paul considered those who esteemed every day alike to be just as faithful to the Lord as those who did not.

The original Sabbath commandment contained nothing about worshipping the Lord on the seventh day. It was simply to be a rest day, and human experience has proved the need of such rest days. The commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week was more particularly an occasion for meeting together for praise and worship. Certainly it is appropriate, and to the glory of God, that his people thus assemble for worship. And why should it not be on the first day of the week? Certainly the first day of the week should serve as a reminder of the Christian’s hope of life in Christ, the resurrected One.

With Christians who are fully devoted to the Lord and his service, every day is a holy day. To them every day is to be devoted to the service and glory of God. Even their secular duties are to be performed as unto the Lord (I Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17,23) At the same time they welcome the opportunity of a day of cessation from these toils, that their thoughts and strength may be used more directly in the service of God.

Because the first day of the week is, in the professed Christian world, looked upon as a day of rest and worship, Christians should be glad thus to observe it. If living in a community made up preponderantly of those who rest on the seventh day, the spirit of Christ would lead a true follower of his also to refrain from secular work on that day, and devote himself to the worship of God.

But neither on the first nor on the seventh day of the week should a Christian refrain from secular work in the belief that failure to do so would result in dire punishment by the Lord. Nor should either of these days be observed as a day of rest, in the belief that God has so commanded the Christian; for as we have seen, no such commands have been given to us by Jesus, nor by his apostles, who spoke for him.

We are told that Jesus would magnify the Law, and he did. (Isa. 42:21) He said that one who hated his brother without a cause was guilty of murder; that one who looks upon a woman to lust after her is guilty of adultery. So the New Testament has also magnified the sabbath commandment, as we have found from Paul's comments in the 4th chapter of Hebrews. And what a glorious "rest" is enjoyed through faith in the finished work of Christ!

The seventh-day or typical sabbath, taught faith in God's ability to provide the necessities of life. And if we are now resting in the Lord it is because of our faith in the provision of life he has made for us, and a recognition of the fact that we cannot obtain eternal life through works of our own. Let us, then, continue to rest in him, and enjoy the peace of God which passeth all understanding!

Dawn Bible Students Association

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