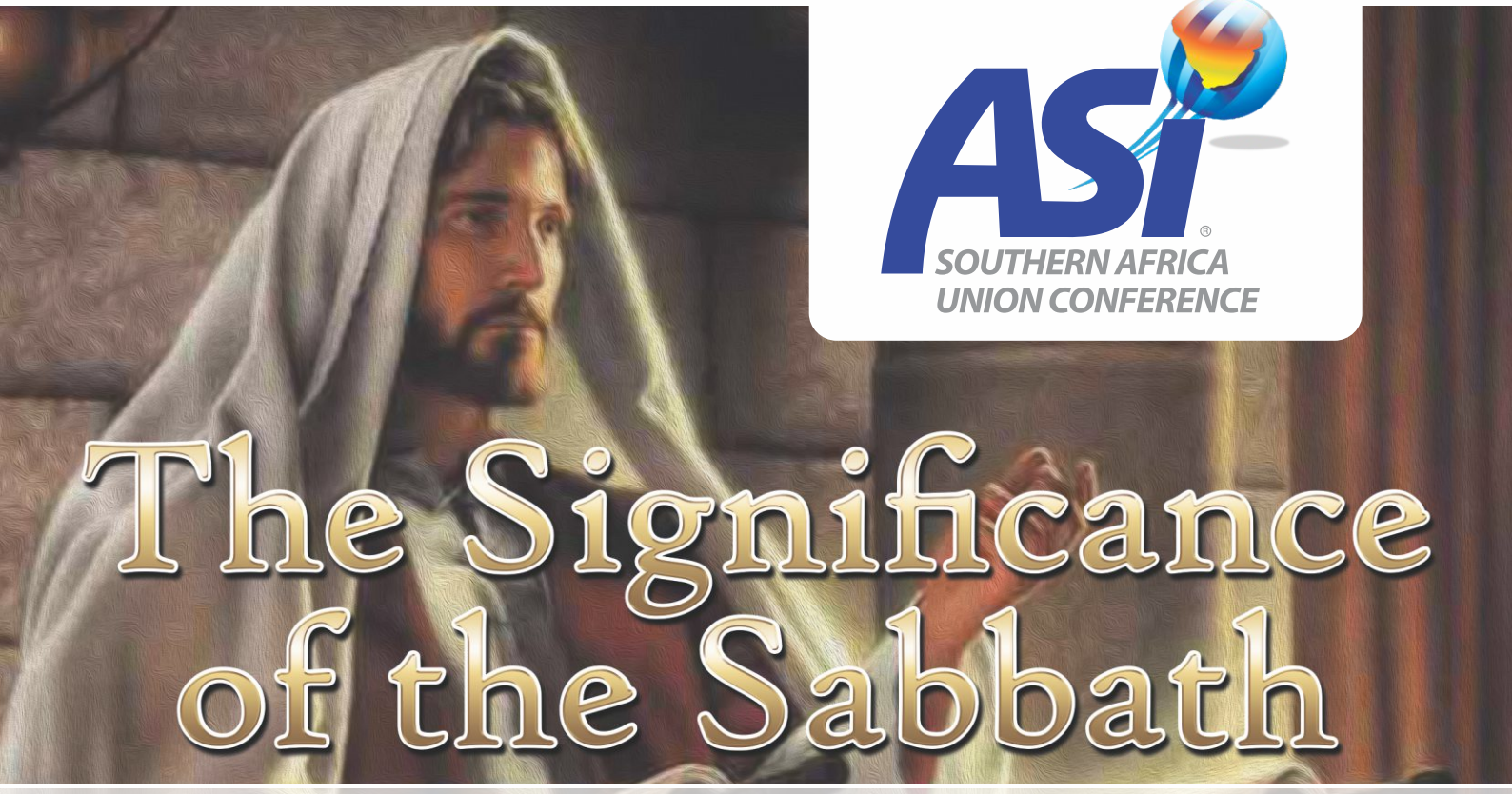
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The Significance of the Sabbath

Exploring the Richness of the Sabbath

The purpose of this study is to explore the fullness and richness of the Sabbath. Why did God give us the Sabbath? What is its meaning and significance?

1. Adam's first full day was a Sabbath, thus signifying that his first duty was to God (compare Genesis 1:26-31 with Genesis 2: 2, 3). His first Sabbath was to rest in *God's* completed work, not his own.

2. The Sabbath is part of the covenant – Deuteronomy 5:2 onwards. From this we can note two things:

   a. When a covenant is made, stipulations are set so that **both parties know** what the implications of the contract are. By linking the Sabbath to the covenant, God is firstly saying that He plays open cards with us. His will for our lives is not a secret affair – known only by an initiated few. It is public and 'out in the open,' so that no one has an excuse in the Judgment about not being able to know His requirements.



b. Secondly, a contract also **binds both parties** to the deal. That means that God even binds Himself to keep His part of the agreement. What an amazing thought! He is a faithful, covenant keeping God. This gives us peace of mind, especially considering the fact that He is the Almighty and does not need to bind Himself to anyone or anything. When understood in the light of the Canaanite religions at that time, this is particularly touching since their 'gods' never entered into a covenant with their subjects and could therefore act in very unpredictable ways; resulting in their worshippers serving them out of fear. Israel's God was not like that.

3. Deuteronomy 5:15 says the following about the Sabbath: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. ***Therefore*** the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath." Deuteronomy 5 puts the Sabbath command in the context of deliverance from slavery.

   Notice, on the other hand, the motivation for Sabbath observance in Exodus 20: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, your son or your daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant…. ***For*** in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day…"

   When one compares these two motivations for Sabbath keeping – deliverance from slavery (i.e. redemption - Deuteronomy 5) and God's creatorship/sovereignty (Exodus 20), on the surface they appear to be two different motivations. In reality however, they are 2 sides of the same conceptual coin. Redemption is actually re-creation.

   When God created the world He took a 'dark, formless and empty' planet (Genesis 1:1) and gave it beauty, life and meaning. As Creator, His speciality is to make something out of nothing. So when He delivered His children out of Egypt, He was once again doing an act of creation. He took His enslaved children out of 'dark, formless and empty' Egypt, and desired to re-create His image in them, both personally and corporately.

   Thus the Sabbath links the themes of creation and redemption. The God who creates is also the God who redeems. This concept takes on added significance when we think of sin in terms of slavery (see Romans 6:16-18). Just as sin defaces the human race and "de-creates" it, so God "re-creates" (i.e. redeems) those who accept His salvation. In other words, when a sinner accepts Jesus as his personal Saviour, our Lord takes his "dark, formless and empty" life and "re-creates" it, breathing into it life, meaning and wholeness. As seen above, it is the Sabbath that ties these concepts together so beautifully.

4. There were 2 things that God instituted in Eden before man's Fall, viz. marriage (Genesis 2:23, 24) and the Sabbath (Genesis 2: 2, 3). This means that these 2 institutions were part of God's original plan for His perfect creatures, even before they sinned. The Sabbath was not an after-thought instituted subsequent to the entrance of sin. It was intended for mankind right from the very start.



5. The Sabbath is a weekly reminder of our benevolent Creator and our accountability to Him. (Exodus 20:11). The commandment says we should worship "the Lord [who] made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them." It is a call to worship the Sovereign of the Universe – the One who spoke the heavens into existence (Ps 33:6); who made the lofty sequoia trees (that can reach heights of up to 115m), the giant blue whale (that weights close to 200 tons, with arteries so big a grown man could swim in them), the majestic sun (into which one million 'earths' can fit), the migratory birds (who somehow have built-in maps, charts, clocks and compasses) and the complex human body (which in many respects is still a mystery to man in an age of great scientific advancement). It is this very God who wants to enter into a relationship with us, of which the Sabbath is a weekly reminder and commemoration.

6. The Sabbath is a sign of God's sanctifying work in the lives of His children – see Ezekiel 20:12. To *sanctify* someone or something is to "make it holy." The concept of holiness is integrally linked to the presence of God. In Exodus 3:5 Moses was told to remove his sandals because the ground on which he stood was holy. Ordinary desert soil became holy because of God's presence in the burning bush. Similarly, the temple was called holy because God resided there (Psalm 5:7; 11:4).

   God's ultimate desire was to have a holy *people* (see Leviticus 20:7; Deuteronomy 14:2; 1 Peter 1:15-16; 1 Peter 2:9) set aside from the pagan world, who would reflect His character. So when the Bible says that the Sabbath is a "sign" between God and His people, "that they might know that I am the LORD who **sanctifies** them [makes them holy]," He is referring to the Sabbath as a symbol of His abiding *presence* and work in the life of His people. As He dwells in them, His presence sanctifies them and moulds them into His holy image.

7. Through His Sabbath miracles, Jesus tried to counteract false rabbinic concepts concerning the Sabbath and to bring out its true, original meaning. Although he healed people on that day, He also wanted to 'heal' and liberate the Sabbath from the legalistic rules the Jewish leaders had made to 'protect' it. Here are Jesus' Sabbath miracles as found in the Bible: the woman stooped over (Luke 13:10-17), the man at the Pool of Bathesda (John 5), the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-6), the man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6), the man born blind (John 9).

Notice how these miracles differed from His normal ones:

a. First, they were initiated by Jesus Himself. At other times people sought Jesus for healing, but not so with His Sabbath miracles.
b. Second, these cases were chronic and could have been healed the next day. There was no emergency.
c. Third, they were done in a setting of controversy and Jesus did nothing to avoid the confrontation. In fact He faced it head on.

Thus these Sabbath miracles were purposeful, designed to teach the fact that although the Sabbath was made for man, it was still a **divine** institution. Man by his rules should not feel that he owns the rights to this day. He should not burden the day with things God did not want to burden it with. The Sabbath is to be a delight. [John Brunt]

8. The Sabbath differentiates **G**od from false **g**ods – see Jeremiah 10:11; Acts 14:15; 17:24; 2 Kings 19:15. No other god can create - this is *His* identifying mark. The fourth commandment points to Him who made the heavens and earth, the seas and fountains of water. It tells us that when we worship God on His Sabbath, we are worshipping the true God, the God with a capital G. Sabbath observance is thus a **confession** that Yahweh is the Great God, the Lord of lords.

9. The Sabbath is the seal or mark of God's ownership over us. Ancient royal seals had 3 characteristics on it:

a. Name – For example: King George VI
b. Title - King
c. Territory – of Great Britain and Dominions



The Sabbath is the only commandment that has all 3 elements of a seal in it:

a. Name: "The Lord" (Yahweh)
b. Title: "Maker/Creator"
c. Territory: "Heaven & Earth."

A seal had 2 main purposes in Bible times:

a. It was a guarantee that something was genuine (for example, if a royal seal/stamp was placed on anything it would ensure that the contents were genuine, that it came from the king, see Esther 3:12). The Sabbath is a seal of those who are genuinely God's. Some are however ignorantly keeping Sunday holy, thinking it to be God's day. God is working with such and many of them will come to a true understanding of the Lord's Day. It is not our duty to judge and decide who are genuine believers and who are false.
b. It protected. Those who received the seal of God were protected by Him (see Ezekiel 9:1-6; Revelation 7:1-4). By keeping the Sabbath we can be assured of God's ultimate protection in the Judgment.

In the book of Revelation the Mark of the Beast is the opposite of the Seal of God (compare Revelation 7:1-4 with 14:9, 10).

The end time remnant will receive the Seal of God because they are loyal to God and keep *all* the commandments including the Sabbath (see Revelation 14:12 and 12:17) while those who spurn the Sabbath, will receive the Mark of the Beast.

10. The Sabbath is a sign that we are stewards of God's creation. As Creator, God has given us the task of looking after His creation. The Sabbath commandment reminds us of His creatorship (Exodus 20:11). A true Sabbath keeper does not destroy nature – he has a respect for ecological issues while at the same time keeping in mind that this world is becoming old like a garment. It is important for us to care for nature while at the same time realising that the gospel is not found in the 'green movement' but in Christ.



11. The Sabbath is a protest against the exploitation of people, resources, etc. The commandment says that your "manservant and maidservant" should also rest (Exodus 20:10). [Fritz Guy]

12. The Sabbath stands for liberation from enslavement to material goods. On a Sabbath we rest from earning our bread and chasing after material goods. It tells us that our value and dignity is not dependent on our economic status. It also reminds us to seek God's kingdom first, because in so doing, God will supply our material needs anyway (see Matthew 6:25-34).

13. The Sabbath has therapeutic value – an antidote against stress. Physical and mental rest (which the Sabbath provides) combat the effects of stress caused by our hectic modern-day lives.

14. The Sabbath is a sign of equality. On the Sabbath the servant and master sit next to each other. There are no role distinctions. True Sabbath keepers therefore cannot align themselves with practices that encourage inequality.

15. The Sabbath is a safeguard against idolatry. Ellen White says that "Had the Sabbath been universally kept, man's thoughts and affections would have been led to the Creator as the object of reverence and worship, and there would never have been an idolater, an atheist, or an infidel" (*Great Controversy*, pg 438). It is because of the rejection of the true Sabbath that God's place has been taken by idols (of whatever nature) as well as false schools of thought such as materialism and evolution.

16. The Sabbath creates **time** for relationships to grow, both vertically (with God) and horizontally (with man). It is this vertical relationship with God that will enable the believer to retain his faith to the end. John 17:3 says that by *knowing Him* we will inherit eternal life. We can only know Him if we spend time with Him, something of which the Sabbath especially reminds us.

17. On the horizontal side of the above point, the Sabbath leads to greater love and respect for our fellow beings. If we come closer to God, which the Sabbath fosters, we will definitely come closer to man. In fact, the Sabbath is the hinge commandment that joins the first 4 commandments of the Decalogue (love to God) to the last 6 (love to man).

18. In Hebrews 4:9 it speaks of a "Sabbath rest" that remains for the people of God. What does this mean? As we look at the whole context of that verse (Hebrews 3:7- 4:11), we find a sad account of Israel's history. God rescued them from Egypt but that 'desert generation' failed to enter His rest (viz. Canaan, which was to be rest from their desert wanderings, rest from war & enemies, etc). This was due to their unbelief and disobedience.

    Afterward, Joshua did however lead the new generation into the Canaan 'rest' God had promised them, yet he was not able to lead them as an entire nation into the deeper spiritual rest God offered them in Himself, through faith in Him. If he had, God would not have continued appealing through David (Psalm 95), who lived hundreds of years after Joshua, for the Israelites to enter His rest (Hebrews 4:8). In Hebrews 4:9 the author of Hebrews now links God's continuing appeal to enter His rest to the origin of the Sabbath at creation when "on the seventh day God rested from all his work." The Sabbath is here used as a symbol of rest from the futile works of unbelief. The Sabbath thus serves as a reminder to rest from saving ourselves. There is nothing we can add to our salvation. The true rest which God always offered His people was that "rest" which the soul finds in fully surrendering to Him (see Isaiah 30:15; Jeremiah 6:16; Matthew 11:29) – and of which the Sabbath is a symbol.

19. The Sabbath shows a personal God who is interested in us, a God who stopped His creative work, not because He was tired, but to spend time with His creation. In no other religion except Christianity, is there an opportunity to enter into a *personal* relationship with God.



20. Love can only be developed in the medium of **time**. You cannot love someone if you don't make time for him or her. *Love* and *time* go hand in hand. The Lord created special time every week on the Sabbath to celebrate with the creatures He loves. Thus the Sabbath is a symbol of God's love. [Karl Barth, pg 213]

21. The Sabbath commandment is found in God's Law and according to Romans 7:12, the words used to describe the Law are the very same words used to describe God. This means that the Law is a transcript of God's character. So if we want to understand and experience God's character, we need to study and obey His Law (not in a legalistic way, but out of a heart of love), of which the Sabbath is a part. Thus when God says He will write His Law on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33), what He actually means is the He will reproduce His character within us.

22. There were 2 sister institutions of the Sabbath, viz. the sabbatical and Jubilee years (see Leviticus 25). A sabbatical was every **seventh** year, while a Jubilee was the year following **seven** sabbatical cycles, viz, in the 50th year. Notice the strong emphasis on the number *seven*. At every sabbatical year the following took place:

    a. The land was to rest, i.e. the soil was to lie fallow
    b. Debts of poor Hebrews were cancelled

During a Jubilee, in addition to the land that was to lie fallow, the following also occurred:

    c. All Hebrew slaves were freed
    d. Land reverted to its original owners

The Sabbath lessons from these sister institutions respectively are:

    a. We need to depend on God for our sustenance and not just chase material gain

b. God cares for the poor and dispossessed and made provision every 7 years for their debts to be remitted

c. We are not really in charge of our fellow beings, they are God's property

d. God does not want a few super wealthy land owners to possess all the land – He wanted equal distribution of land (which was a means of sustenance and security)

Thus these sister Sabbath institutions taught of a God who was fair, who wanted His children to depend on Him, who was interested in their welfare, who deeply and passionately cares for the poor, who did not want some to gain at the expense of others. What an amazing God! And all these lessons are taught in the context of the Sabbath.

23. The Sabbath points forward to eternity - it is like a weekly instalment of heaven. Heaven will be having God's presence with us all the time, almost like a continuous Sabbath. The Sabbath therefore gives us a faint weekly glimpse and foretaste of what the afterlife will be like.



24. The Sabbath is a celebration of hope in a hopeless world. Hope is the longing for a better Day, a day when justice, peace and happiness will reign. The Sabbath points forward to that Better Day, by reminding us that God will not leave us here forever. He who made us, who gave us a weekly reminder of His love and presence, will not forsake us in this world of sin and despair. He will soon take us out of this hopeless situation.

25. Abraham Herschel, a Jewish writer who wrote a few books on the Sabbath makes a distinction between Time and Space. He says we live under the tyranny of Space – of conquering the Space of the world around us. But Time cannot be conquered, it conquers us; we are subject to it. God wisely did not make the Sabbath in the realm of Space, where man could conquer and control it. "In the week we conquer Space, on the Sabbath Time conquers us."

He then goes on to say that Space is occupied exclusively - if a person occupies a spot, no one else can occupy that spot as well. On the other hand, Time is something that can be *shared*. The Sabbath is clearly therefore for *all* mankind. The Lord did not make the Sabbath a shrine that only a few privileged could visit, i.e. He did not place it in the domain of Space, but placed it in Time so that everyone could share in it. [Heschel, pp. 2-10]

26. The Sabbath is not a 'logical' commandment from a rational human perspective and is therefore an ideal one to test true loyalty to God. It makes sense not to steal or lie or kill or have other gods before God. But the command to worship God on a *specific* day of His choosing does not seem to be logical. It is for this very reason that people feel **a** *day* and not ***the*** *day* is an acceptable offering to God. A test of loyalty to God is often found in doing things we don't fully understand, but obediently submitting just because God said so. [Jon Paulien, pp. 126-129]. The story of Abraham offering Isaac illustrates this point. God asked Abraham to do something he did not fully understand when commanded to sacrifice his only son (Genesis 22). Abraham obeyed because God said so, even though he did not have all the answers. That proved his loyalty and obedience to God.



Here are some other examples of 'illogical' commands, proving loyalty to God:

a. The command for Adam and Eve not to eat from a *specific* tree (Genesis 3:2). This tree looked like any other tree in the Garden of Eden, yet ***God chose*** the tree which our first parents had to shun. He did not give any reasons for His particular choice. It could have been any other tree, but once He had singled it out to be avoided, it was their responsibility to obey, even though they did not fully understand the reasons behind God's choice.

b. The command to collect daily manna throughout the week, but twice as much on the sixth day in preparation for the Sabbath (Exodus 16). When the excess manna was left over for the next day, it stank and was infested with maggots (Exodus 16:24), yet this did not happen when collected on the sixth day. This command was *specific* and seemingly 'illogical.' Why could the Israelites not choose the day they wanted to collect excess manna? Why could a double portion only be collected on the sixth day? The Bible is clear that ***God chose*** the day on which the manna would not go bad and Israel had to obey ***His*** specific command, thus showing their obedience and loyalty to Him, even though it did not make sense to them.

c. Similarly, ***God chose*** the seventh day as His Sabbath, and although it may appear 'illogical' to the world, who feels that *any* day can suffice, yet because ***He*** gave the command, we are to obey it, thus proving our loyalty to Him.

As we can see, the Sabbath is one of the most comprehensive Christian symbols.

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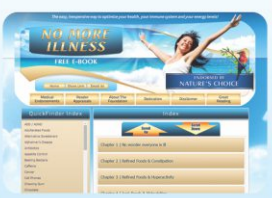
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