

The Giving of the Law at Sinai

Consider the word ‘remember’ in the fourth commandment:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy (Ex. 20:8-11).

As we have seen, sabbath-observance among men began among the Jews in the Wilderness of Sin before Sinai. Sabbath-observance by man is unknown in Genesis. Indeed, the sabbath is not even mentioned in Genesis. The command to ‘remember’ at Sinai, therefore, if it is a backward look – *if*, I stress – does not refer to creation, but to the establishment of the day for the Jews at the giving of the manna in Exodus 16, a few weeks earlier. In fact, the word ‘remember’ may not be referring back at all. I go further. The call to remember addresses the future.

In Exodus 20, God is making an analogy with *his* rest after his work in creation (Gen. 2:2-3), whereas in Deuteronomy 5:15, God’s supporting argument for sabbath-observance is Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. But both references are analogies: ‘Just as God rested after his work of creation, so you must rest after your work; God rescued you from the enslaving toils of Egypt, therefore you must rest’. See also Exodus 31:12-18; 35:1-3; Deuteronomy 5:12-15. In this latter passage, the giving again of the law, where the reference is not to creation but to the release of the Jews from Egypt, note the ‘therefore’ in verse 15. In other words: ‘This is why the LORD commanded you to keep the sabbath: you must keep the sabbath *because* he released you from Egypt’.

This is important. Should Gentile sabbatarians today keep the sabbath in memory of, and because of, their release from

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Egypt? Or the release of the Jews from Egypt? What redemption or salvation are pagans commemorating when they keep the sabbath? Do they know it? Should they know it?

As I say, the word ‘remember’ does not necessarily point back to a previously known truth. As a matter of fact, it is highly unlikely that it does so. Take, for instance, an anxious mother’s injunction to her departing child, leaving home for the first time: ‘Remember to wrap up warm in the cold weather!’ Or to that child just off to a party: ‘Remember to say thank you!’

Scripture often uses the word in this way. As we do. The word ‘remember’ at its root has the idea of ‘marking’; it means ‘call to mind, keep in mind’.¹ The command to remember the sabbath was God’s call to the Jews not to forget it in the future; rather, they must keep it. Take Christ’s injunction to his disciples: ‘Remember the word that I said to you...’ (John 15:20). In other words: ‘Do it!’ And this: ‘Remember Lot’s wife!’ (Luke 17:32); that is: ‘Learn from her disobedience, never forget it, and never repeat it’. When Elihu told Job to ‘remember to magnify [God’s] work’ (Job 36:24), he was telling him not to forget this duty *in the future*, not to let it lapse. When the psalmist appealed to God: ‘Remember how short my time is’ (Ps. 89:47), he was asking God to keep it in mind in his dealings with him *in the days to come*. The same goes for: ‘Remember me, O LORD, with the favour you have toward your people’ (Ps. 106:4). God remembered both Noah and Hannah (Gen. 8:1; 1 Sam. 1:19); that is, as time went on he thought on them for good, he kept them in mind. What did the malefactor want when he said to Christ on the cross: ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom’ (Luke 23:42)? Was he asking the Lord to remember the agony of the cross? Or what? When Paul asked the Colossians to ‘remember [his] chains’ (Col. 4:18), he wanted them to keep his sufferings in mind and remember him in their prayers. He was afraid they

¹ In Yorkshire (in the UK), if a mother tells her child: ‘Think on!’ she is really saying: ‘Remember what I told you. *And do it!*’ Compare: ‘Mind your P’s and Q’s!’

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would forget him as time passed – a case of ‘out of sight, out of mind’. He was not making a historical point. It was the present and the future he was thinking of. The same goes for: ‘Remember the prisoners as if chained with them’ (Heb. 13:3). In short, the word ‘remember’ has a *future* emphasis. Indeed, it is its *main* emphasis.

We may go further. The command to ‘remember’ means more than ‘do not forget’. It has the sense of ‘observe and celebrate’. I draw your attention to the parallel passage to Exodus 20:8 – namely, Deuteronomy 5:12 – which actually does use ‘observe’. And when Christ instituted the Lord’s supper, he told his disciples: ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ (Luke 22:19). This presents us with a very powerful parallel with the ‘remember’ in the fourth commandment. Just as Christ was instituting his supper when he said it, so God was *instituting* the sabbath. Christ was *instituting* the supper; it did not exist before.

The parallel between the supper and the sabbath merits a further look. In both cases, there was (for the sabbath) and is (for the supper) an in-built endpoint. From the time of Christ’s institution of the supper, believers have had to observe it, and will do so as long as its remit runs – until Christ’s second coming. Likewise, the Jews had to observe the sabbath as long as its remit ran – until Christ had come, fulfilled the law, rendered it obsolete, and thus established the new covenant: ‘The law... was added... *until* the Seed [Christ] to whom the promise referred had come’ (Gal. 3:19). The Lord Jesus has now come and done it all (John 19:30); the law is fulfilled (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:1-6; 8:1-4; 10:4; Heb. 7:18; 8:13). As the sabbath was in force for the Jews, under the law, *until* its fulfilment and abrogation by Christ, so the supper has to be observed by believers *until* his return. In both cases, this is what ‘remember’ means. Just as the supper will not be observed once Christ has returned, so the sabbath has had no purpose ever since Christ established the new covenant.²

² Old-covenant observance did not cease at a stroke. There is clear New Testament evidence that grey areas existed for a time. See for

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Finally, take the Passover (Ex. 13:3-10). God commanded the people to celebrate, to keep, to observe, the Passover every year. As the NIV puts it: ‘Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the LORD brought you out of it with a mighty hand... You must keep this ordinance at the appointed time year after year’ (Ex. 13:3,10). ‘Commemorate’, please note, and ‘you must keep...’. It is interesting to see how other versions translate this:

Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place... You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year (ESV).

Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the LORD brought you out from this place... Therefore, you shall keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year (NASB).

Remember this day, in which [you] came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out from this place... [You shall] therefore keep this ordinance in his season from year to year (AV).

In fact, this translation (‘remember’) is almost universal. Putting it all together, the NIV has done us a good service in this text. Clearly, the main point is one of Israel’s remembrance of their deliverance from Egypt by way of commemoration, by their continual observance of the feast.³ And the same was true of the sabbath. The Jews, keeping the day, should have used it as a weekly reminder of their deliverance from Egypt (parallel to their annual remembrance at the Passover). Above all, if only

example Acts 21:17-26. Nevertheless, just as the temple veil was torn down on the death of Christ (Matt. 27:51), so, in reality, the temple, the sacrifices, the altar, the temple, the priesthood all came to an end, all having been fulfilled and abolished by Christ. The sabbath is not the sole exception to this principle. The fact that the apostles used the sabbath to evangelise the Jews does not mean they were sabbatarians. Just as Jesus, eating with prostitutes and profligates, did not become one, neither did Paul become a sabbatarian by attending the synagogue or going to a meeting by the river (Acts 13:5,14; 14:1; 16:13, and so on). He went to preach the gospel!

³ See also Deut. 16:1-8.

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they had had eyes and hearts to see it, every sabbath they were being pointed to the rest to be introduced by the coming Messiah in the salvation he would accomplish. And ‘accomplish’ is the word! What a weight of meaning there is in Christ’s *tetelestai* on the cross: ‘It has been accomplished!’ (John 19:30).