

Challenging the Sabbath

Happy Sabbath to all.

It was good to see many Church members on that chat program earlier this evening, and I hope we will find one that works for everybody.

Tonight's study is called "Challenging the Sabbath." The topic discusses, not the challenge to the Sabbath doctrine, but the challenge to the Sabbath spirit, or the Sabbath rest principle, that is integral to both the justification and sanctification of the saints.

It might be taken to be a coincidence, but it has been my experience that when it comes to Friday evenings, as it approaches sundown, the temptations toward anxiety, worry and discontent seem to multiply. Now, to clarify my meaning, I am not saying that I am more likely to give in to these temptations, or that they arise from within with greater frequency. What I mean is this: it seems to me that at that time in particular Satan tries to bring about circumstances that – if allowed to affect us negatively – would disrupt the state of mind that our Father is pleased to have us adopt as we enter into the sacred hours.

As I said, some may see this as mere coincidence, but I think it is more likely the subtle influence on the enemy on those around us, as they rush about to get things settled for the weekend, because He does not want human beings (whether commandment-keepers in practice or not) to think of the seventh day as one of rest and blessing.

Relatively recent inspiration has told us several interesting things about the seventh day of the week. One of the most memorable to me is the statement that, if mankind had diligently kept the Sabbath that we have been given from our Father in Heaven, there would have never been a murderer, a thief, an adulterer, or any other kind of sinner. This may seem to be an amazing statement, because surely Cain (whom we were discussing a couple of weeks ago) became a murderer extremely early in human history, and no mention of Sabbath-breaking (or even anything about the Sabbath at all, really, beyond its creation) accompanies that passage.

If we really understand the commandments, however, then the meaning here becomes plain. The purpose of the Sabbath is to teach humanity to rest in the Almighty, to trust in His care for us, to remind us of His authority over our lives and all creation, and to remind us also that we cannot advance in matters of everlasting consequence through our own works. These are things that are easy to say, and easy enough to acknowledge; but our Father knows our needs, and He has given us a weekly reminder that He has declared necessary for our lives and our growth.

One does not kill, steal, or commit any other sins if the heart is content. This is the reason why all the commandments may be summed up by the single word, "Love," and the simple instructions, to love Yahweh supremely, and our neighbors as ourselves.

These are simple lessons that the enemy of souls does not want people to learn. Just as he may seek opportunities to distract and trouble the saints with regard to the physical Sabbath day, so he is constantly seeking opportunities to disrupt the Sabbath rest that is ours on any day of the week.

We read, “For the son dishonoureth the father, the daughter riseth up against her mother, the daughter in law against her mother in law; a man’s enemies are the men of his own house.” (Micah 7:6) When I first learned about this verse in the mainstream SDA Church, the understanding promoted was that in the time of trouble, the members of one’s own household would be the ones to turn the saints over to the authorities to be persecuted under the various Sunday Laws that would abound in the earth.

While I do not doubt that the withdrawal of the Spirit would prompt even former loved-ones to do just that, I believe that if we focus only on the last-day scenarios, we miss the danger that arises beforehand, for we know that the principle must always be broken before the literal law.

Just as Cain violated the spirit of the Sabbath before he became a murderer, so those who believe that they could withstand any temptation because of their beliefs (whether it is the Sunday Law, the Trademark Law, or any other manifestation of this idea) will certainly fall short if they do not overcome the “little” temptations that they face week-to-week. I knew one individual who studied with the Church for a time who was convinced that, when it came down to a situation in which she had to stand up for her faith against the secular authorities, she would prove faithful. And yet, she was not able to overcome her little flashes of anger at simple things like being cut off in traffic. She was not faithful in the “little” temptations and, as a result she was sifted out and is no longer among us.

Yahweh allows us to come into trials so that we will overcome, so that we will come to rest ever more deeply in His providence, and it is vital that – as in the example I am giving here – there be sufficient discernment to understand exactly what is happening in our own houses, and our own hearts.

Our enemies can often be the members of our own households. Even if they do not deliberately and actively betray us to Caesar, those who are not themselves settled into the faith can easily fall into Satan’s snares, and they become snares themselves in their stumbling around. They may “cut us off in traffic” spiritually speaking, and Satan will use these to explore any weaknesses of character that we have not yet been recognized and put away in order to keep us from the true Seal of Yah.

So how do we meet these temptations? How do we overcome?

The answer is simple: Learn from the Sabbath.

Satan will challenge both the physical Sabbath day, and the spiritual Sabbath rest. We have Bible verses and, since we are Adventists, we have Spirit of Prophecy writings, which speak a great deal about how to approach the Sabbath day and its observance. What we must do is apply these things not only physically, but spiritually as well, and then we not only have continuous victory, but also set a perfect testimony before even those who would be used as instruments of our distraction. This is nothing less than exactly what we have been called forth to accomplish.

With regard to observing the Sabbath, we read this from Nehemiah, who was one of the faithful Israelites involved in rebuilding Jerusalem after Babylonian captivity – an antitype of the work of the Creation Seventh Day Adventist Church:

“And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the Sabbath; and some

of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the Sabbath day.” (Neh 13:19)

Some, in examining the Old Testament, come to doubt Adventists’ claims of how important the fourth commandment was to Israel. They note that there are relatively few verses that mention it as a commandment, and that the Bible does not go out of its way to showcase its observance by such important individuals as Elijah, David, or most of the prophets. Yet, every time it IS mentioned, there is a general expectation that people should know what it is, and how to properly honor it.

In the New Testament, similarly, the apostles did not spend much if any (recorded) time lecturing converts about the Sabbath day, and this is sometimes taken as evidence that the instructions regarding the seventh day did not survive the Cross. Yet, this is merely consistent with the Biblical record. When the apostles mentioned that the new Gentile converts ought to learn about Moses’ instructions from the Synagogues in all the reasonably-sized cities, this was said with such casualness that it seemed that they were just stating an obvious fact of society. Before established and dedicated Church buildings, the Christians would fellowship in one-another’s homes, and they were well within doctrinal bounds to learn what they could from their Jewish forefathers (spiritually speaking). Just as Gentile converts needed to be educated regarding the observance of the Sabbath day, so those who have come out of the world must be educated about how to “observe” the Sabbath Rest.

Here in Nehemiah, we have a period during which the Hebrews were subjected to pagan captivity, and yet – as soon as they were given the freedom to remove themselves from such a situation – we find reforms being instituted, including a reformation of Sabbath observance. The people were expected to know the instructions regarding the Sabbath, and to accept whatsoever measures the governor instituted to ensure the smooth and faithful operation of the population.

As I have said, education is needed, and we can learn a lot about this week’s topic from examining Nehemiah’s statements. The reformer did not merely tell the Israelites, “Remember the Sabbath.” No, instead he institutionalized its observance. He began “before the Sabbath,” preparing the city to enter a state of rest. He posted guards to ensure that no workers or merchants would sneak in, and he specified to these guards that “there should be no burden brought in on the Sabbath day.”

Now, the Pharisees took a good principle to bad extremes. By the time of Yahshua, the religious authorities had surrounded the Sabbath day with so many precautionary and preventative rules that it became more “work” than “rest” to prepare for and keep the sacred hours. But we who are of Yah have been given an understanding of how to apply this properly. We know that the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem is a symbol of rebuilding the “character” of Christ Yahshua in those who have been redeemed from lives of iniquity and bondage.

We may not have as many “rules” as the Pharisees did with regard to how the commandments of our Father must be kept in every least detail; however, we have the highest of standards with regard to the quality of the worship that this involves. We have the city of our own souls to defend, and the walls that surround it are representative of the character of Christ – a perfect defense, and a shining example to those who pass it by. The Scriptures give us verses such as this:

“He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.” (Pro 25:28)

“In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah. ‘We have a strong city; salvation will Elohim appoint for walls and bulwarks.’” (Isa 26:1)

The walls of a city were an indication of the quality of that city, and a testimony to the rest of the world about its worth and its state of being. The same may be said for the character and testimony of a Christian, and Nehemiah’s Sabbath reforms began not with what was done within the city, but what was allowed to enter into it when the Sabbath began to draw near.

Ellen White, in her writings, instructs the Church to “guard the edges” of the Sabbath, to prepare for it mentally, spiritually and physically, so that we may enjoy the great blessings that our Father has in store for those who are prepared to receive them. This is the same principle Nehemiah was employing in Jerusalem, and what I have drawn from that principle is this: whatsoever advice we may find in the Bible and the later inspired writings regarding the physical Sabbath day... the same must be applied to the Sabbath rest on a daily basis. This is how we become settled and sealed in the faith of our Father.

We must guard the edges of our Sabbath rest. We must take measures to ensure that when we approach each day, we approach it as a spiritual Sabbath. How many of us think of each day as a “spiritual Sabbath?” It may be an interesting exercise to see how our outlook changes if we realize that this is indeed the case.

Nominal Christians, in rejecting the Adventist dedication to the fourth commandment, will say, “I do not need the Sabbath, I worship the Lord every day.” While the application is erroneous, the core concept does contain a grain of truth from which even Adventists can benefit. For those who are always in Christ, every day IS a day of rest. Every day is a Sabbath, a holy time for drawing closer to Him. We may not observe all the forms of the seventh day on the other six, and this is where the “instructions” of the commandment come in on a physical level, but if Sabbath-keepers in general would guard their peace as they guarded their time of the day, then we would see the victory that our Father has promised us on a much broader scale.

Now, how exactly we apply these things may differ based on our circumstances, our challenges, and so on, but there is quite a bit that may be commonly applicable.

We approach the Sabbath day with a sense of reverence, and with prayer. We will object if an individual attempts to engage us in commerce or trade – sometimes zealously, sometimes gently, depending on the reasons for these attempts. We firmly avoid having our Seventh-day blessings polluted by the “common” things of the ordinary world, and inasmuch as we do these things, they are good.

But we must also take this same approach with our spiritual state of rest. We must approach each day, each moment, with earnest prayer, with a reverence that says, “This moment is dedicated to my Father. Nothing shall shake me from my sense of peace, trust, and joy.” Remember our topic last week... Christians have an obligation to be joyful – it is a part of our spiritual “work.” It is certainly a part of our testimony. And if we see this as a commandment every bit as vital as the keeping of the Sabbath day, we will jealously guard the gates of our souls through the walls of character.

We must object – sometimes zealously, sometimes diplomatically – if an individual is attempting to cast stumbling-blocks in our way. This is NO different than if they were attempting to buy from us, sell to us, or require any work of us on the seventh day. And remember, it is those who are in the closest proximity

to us – the members of our own households – that have the greatest potential for this. But any attempts, whether deliberately or through ignorance, to trouble our Sabbath rest must not be accepted passively. They are challenges to the Sabbath, and must be met as such, firmly and with a testimony that will both rebuke and educate them if they are willing to learn.

If any lack wisdom regarding how to do this, let them ask Yahweh in prayer, and seek counsel of the brethren, but it is certain that there are many who will hear this study, or see this transcript afterwards, and know their need. Do not let this opportunity to learn about the Sabbath-more-fully pass by unexplored. It is for your health, and your everlasting benefit, to learn of these matters.

Finally, brethren, the most important lesson to learn about overcoming challenges to the Sabbath, is that the victory is not ours to obtain at all. Yes, it is our responsibility to learn of these matters, and to apply what we learn faithfully – both to the Sabbath Day and the Sabbath Rest – but it is our Father's responsibility, and certain promise, to bring forth fruits from these circumstances and occasions. We may plant, and we may water, but it is Yah who gives life, and brings forth the harvest. Of course, we cannot sit back and say, "Yah will bring forth the harvest." The seeds must be planted and watered. But they must be planted and watered in the expectation of blessings, of the harvest, and this is when we see miracles unfolding.

Yahshua has won the victory for us already. A part of the Sabbath Day, and the Sabbath Rest, is to learn to accept what we have already been given, what we have already been transformed into, and to let the world know the joy of this great salvation.