

**THE SABBATH: ITS ORIGIN,
OBLIGATION,
CHARACTER, AND
ADVANTAGES**

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The sabbath: its origin, obligation, character, and advantages by John W. Johnston

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JOHN W. JOHNSTON

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BY THE

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THE SABBATH.

A DAY of rest, releasing man from toil, both of mind and body, giving him space for recruiting his exhausted powers, and returning at regular intervals, ought surely to be welcome. But, on the ground that man is endowed with great capacities, intellectual and moral,—is capable of indefinite improvement, and has been made for God and immortality,—how joyfully should he hail a season that affords him the opportunity for acquiring the knowledge needful to make him truly wise, and the means for his moral and spiritual culture. Now such a period is the Sabbath. It sets man free from labour; it gives him time for reflection; it supplies him with the means of instruction in the things that belong to his peace; it brings him directly into the presence of the great God, and

into contact with His truth ; and it stands forth as an impressive emblem of the bright world above.

Yet, strange to record, it is only by a very small portion of the vast human family that the holy Sabbath is received and welcomed. Some deny its sacred authority ; some confidently assert that it is not obligatory upon Christians ; others, who profess to regard it, rank it no higher than a holiday, that requires relaxation from the active business of life, but yet sanctions worldly thought ; while the multitudes despise its Divine authority and spend it in amusements—in wicked and degrading practices—in low and sordid pleasures. Now it is surely proper to inquire,—Are men justified in spending the Sabbath as their disposition may lead them ? Are they under any obligation to keep it holy—to devote it to the service of God and their spiritual interests, or are they at liberty to convert it to any use ? It would appear that, on the ground of temporal interest, the Sabbath ought to be kept. “There are indications, in the present constitution, that periods of rest are necessary for man and beast. The recurrence of night and the necessity of repose show that the principle of rest enters into the present system as much as that of labour. And

besides, it is found that animals which are allowed one day in seven for rest, live longer and enjoy better health than those which are worked without intermission. The same may, to a considerable degree, be said of man.* This, then, would be a strong reason why the Sabbath should be universally observed; but it is not sufficient to *secure* this observance. It must stand on a firmer basis—on higher grounds. Well, there is such a foundation for keeping holy the Sabbath. There is the obligation resting upon all intelligent and accountable creatures to devote some portion of their time to the immediate worship of God, to the devout study of His will, to the contemplation of their spiritual interests, and to such other exercises as are fitted to raise the mind to the perfection of which it is capable. But yet it might not be possible for unaided reason to determine *how much* time should be set apart for these spiritual purposes, and in what manner it would be best employed in attaining them. Here, then, you see the occasion for Divine legislation. God, our Creator and moral Governor, has specified what portion of our time is to be spent in these sacred exercises. He has instituted the Sabbath, and solemnly enjoined its observance. It is to the inspired volume, there-

* Dr. Wayland.

fore, that we must appeal for accurate and trustworthy information on this subject.

The question of the Sabbath presents four leading aspects for investigation.

I. Its Divine institution.

II. Its perpetual obligation.

III. The manner in which it is to be observed.

IV. Its advantages.

Let us examine the evidence for the proposition—

I.

THAT THE SABBATH IS A DIVINE INSTITUTION.

1. The first account of the Sabbath, proclaiming its Divine origin, is found in the second chapter of the book of Genesis, verses 1 to 3:—“ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because that in it He had rested from all His work which God created and made.”

In regard to this passage observe,—

(1.) The specific appointment:—God *sanctified* the seventh day,—that is, set it apart from a common to a sacred, religious use; and He *blessed* it,—which means, either that this day received peculiar

expressions of His approbation, or that it would be a source of peculiar blessings to man.

(2.) The reason assigned for this is general,—“God rested.” The idea has been brought out with great perspicuity and force by Hugh Miller, in his “Testimony of the Rocks.” “God’s seventh day’s work,” he says, “is the work of redemption. And read in this light, His reason vouchsafed to man for the institution of the Sabbath is found to yield a meaning of peculiar breadth and emphasis. God, it seems to say, rests on *His* Sabbath from His creative labours, in order that by His Sabbath-day’s work he may save and elevate you. Rest ye also on your Sabbaths, that through your co-operation with Him in this great work, ye may be elevated and saved. Made originally in the image of God, let God be your pattern and example. Engaged in your material and temporal employments, labour in the proportion in which He laboured; but, in order that you may enjoy an eternal future with Him, rest also in the proportions in which He rests.”*

(3.) The institution is coeval with the human race, and was manifestly, as Jesus has taught us,

* Miller’s elucidation of this passage holds good, I think, quite independent of his speculations on the Mosaic record of creation. He has seized its very spirit.

made for man. According to the sacred narrative, man was called into being on the sixth day; and hence the first perfect measured period of his active existence was the sacred Sabbath. It was consequently introduced during man's innocency, before there was any change in the character or condition of the species.

All this clearly goes to prove the existence of a primeval Sabbath.

2. Against this view of the subject it has been objected that the Sabbath does not date from the creation; that its observance took place first under Judaism, under the circumstances recorded in the 16th chapter of Exodus; and that it is properly a Jewish institute. The ablest and most distinguished advocate of this hypothesis is Dr. Paley. The proof which he alleges in support of this opinion is that, according to him, there is no *mention* of the observance of the Sabbath, not even the obscurest allusion to it, from the early record in Genesis, till after the departure of the Jews out of Egypt; and he imagines that the passage in Genesis, already cited in proof of the original institution, is not inconsistent with this notion. "For, as the seventh day was erected into a Sabbath," he says, "on account of God's resting upon that day from the work of creation, it was