

Lord of the Sabbath

Program #26

As the Last Apostle Dies

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Two Sabbaths ago we studied the Book of Acts of the Apostles. We found no indication that in their teaching or worship practice to build the church, these men, hand-picked by the Lord of the Sabbath, believed that the Day of the Lord had been changed by Jesus. Neither did any of them claim that, because of His resurrection, the seventh-day sanctified by the Father since creation was now to be remembered on the first day of the week.

Last Sabbath, we went through the Epistles of the Apostle Paul focusing on several of the verses that some Bible students use to suggest that the Sabbath day had either been done away completely for Christians or was changed to Sunday, at least for Gentile Christians.

Today's Christian religious leaders are NOT the only ones who had an impression that the Apostle Paul, previously known as Saul who persecuted the disciples of Jesus, began to teach the Gentiles against the "Law of Moses." When Paul returned to Jerusalem, the disciples confronted him with some rumors they had heard as we find in Acts 21: 17-21:

And when we [referring to Paul and his companions, apparently including Luke who is relating the situation] had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor walk according to the customs.

Here we see Jewish brethren in Jerusalem during the Feast of Weeks questioning Paul about whether he has been teaching the believing Jews among the Gentiles abroad from Israel to forsake Moses and the customs of the Jews. James, the brother of Jesus, and the head of the Jerusalem church, tells Paul to show his continued dedication to Moses and the law by being purified with four other Jewish men who took a Nazirite vow. Paul did so, even paying their Temple ceremony expenses as their sponsor.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that Paul continued until the day he died to keep all the law of Moses that was not specifically changed by Christ. Paul was not only a Jew, but a Pharisee, who taught the law and customarily and meticulously kept the commandments of God in his behavior.

Jesus acknowledged this when He chastised the Pharisees in Matt. 23:23:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

Here we see Jesus explaining that while the Pharisees should pay the commanded tithe, even on their herb gardening, it was even more important that they should also be faithful to the LORD and His laws and deal with the people using justice and mercy.

But, it was also clear that Paul taught Gentiles that they too could become children of God WITHOUT doing certain physical things that God commanded Israel to do to be His peculiar and special treasure of all the nations and peoples on the earth.

A clear and prominent example is the commanded circumcision of the male foreskin. The study of what else in the Torah does NOT need to be observed by Gentile believers in Jesus as the Messiah could take many programs by itself. In some so-called Messianic Jewish or “Hebrew Roots” congregational groups, there is a tendency to want to be “Torah observant.” For Gentiles who join them, this can become a snare where the law of Moses and Jewish customs take priority over the weightier matters of the law of the LORD in Christ.

While a number of laws and ordinances DID change from the Law of Moses for the nation Israel under the Old Covenant, I find no evidence that the Fourth Commandment regarding Sabbath keeping changed.

It is stupefying how some Christians think that God through Jesus retained nine of the Ten Commandments in the New Covenant but changed or eliminated the one dealing with a day of the week that God blessed and sanctified at the creation of all things. Later He wrote the Sabbath commandment with His own finger on stone tablets at Mt. Sinai. And, Jesus, the very Son of God and promised Messiah of Israel, proclaimed that He was the Lord of the Sabbath! Do you suppose the Sabbath was important to the Lord of it?

As we study the Apostolic era according to the Bible, there is general agreement that the last living apostle was John, a son of Zebedde and Salome, one of the “sons of thunder” chosen as an apostle by Jesus. John’s older brother, James, was put to death with the sword by King Herod Agrippa I around Passover in Jerusalem about 42-44 AD. To my recollection, this is the first apostle of Jesus to be martyred according to the Bible. Of course, Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus, was the first of the twelve original apostles to die having committed suicide.

It is well documented in the Bible how the Jewish religious leaders hated not only Jesus but His apostles and disciples. But, many Jews and Gentiles believed the gospel preached by the apostles and accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Little is said in the Bible about the ministries, locations and deaths of the apostles other than Peter, Paul, James (the brother or half-brother of Jesus) and, of course, John the Evangelist. Various

writings of early Church fathers refer to many of the original Apostles, where they went to preach and how they died, supposedly being martyred. There is some supporting Biblical evidence, and a fair amount of historical writings, that suggest both Peter and Paul end up in Rome where they are martyred around 67 AD.

It is important to understand that for decades after the crucifixion of Jesus, the pagan leaders of the Roman Empire were not too concerned with either the Jews in and around Jerusalem or those scattered about the Empire. Nor was the Empire bothered by the newer sect of Nazarenes and even the rapidly growing group of Gentiles who now trusted in Jesus as the Messiah due to the preaching of the apostles all around the known civilized world. However, by about 49 AD, Emperor Claudius perceived the Jews in Rome as instigating trouble and even riots and expelled them from the city.

Back in Judea, we see Paul defending himself in chains before King Herod Agrippa II against accusations by the Jews. He gave his testimony convincingly to the King who responds in Acts 27: 28:

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”

In a private conversation with Governor Festus, and his wife Bernice, we find in Acts 27: 31-32, Agrippa also saying:

“This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.” Then Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

We can see almost a pleasure displayed toward Paul by the Governor of this Roman territory of Judea about 60 AD. Paul is clearly recognized as a Jewish disciple of Jesus the Christ; a Christian. One can only imagine what Agrippa felt about the high priest of the Jews and his reasons for the unsupported accusations against Paul.

James, the brother or half-brother of Jesus, known as James the Just, an apostle and the bishop of the church at Jerusalem, was murdered with a sledgehammer to the head by a Jewish mob at the temple a couple of years later. This is the same James that made the ruling at the Jerusalem Council regarding Paul and his ministry to the Gentiles which removed the requirement for circumcision of male children by Gentile believers. He, along with Peter and John, were considered notable pillars within the church. All of them were Sabbath and Holy Day keeping Christians.

However, the attitude of the Emperor Nero and the people of Rome would soon turn sharply against the Christians. A major historical event led to this transition in perception. It began with the great fire in Rome in the summer of 64 AD that ravaged the city for six days. This is the story you may have heard where “Nero fiddled while Rome burned.”

Actually, it was just a story as there were no fiddles in Rome during those days. However, Nero was an avid singer and performed in public by playing his lyre. This was

to the chagrin of the senate who suspected Nero was going mad and acting unlike a world ruling Emperor. Other writings suggested that Nero climbed the top of his palace and sang the song “The Capture of Troy” while the city was aflame. However, no one claimed to be an eye-witness of this version either.

In any event, Nero needed a scapegoat on which to blame the fire and the massive amount of property destruction. Of the fourteen districts of Rome, four were completely destroyed. Ten were left without inhabitable homes and only three were unharmed. In the burned-out area, Nero later built his Golden Palace with a manmade lake at the center of his pleasure gardens. Having seen this happen, many Romans were suspicious that this was a reason that Nero had did very little to control the fire and may have even started it.

Nero, wanting to remain popular with the people, blamed the fire on the new but still obscure Christian sect that had been steadily growing in the Empire and in Rome itself. So, an intense persecution of Christians was begun in Rome. Christians would be dressed in animal skins and attacked by dogs at the Circus Maximus. They would be thrown before hungry wild beasts to be eaten alive to the cheers of the Romans. Many Christians were crucified to mock their Master. Others were burned alive at night to provide “light” in Nero’s gardens for the public’s enjoyment.

It was this false and brutal persecution of Christians that led to Nero being viewed by the Christian Church at Rome as the first Anti-Christ. You may recall that the Roman Catholic Church later viewed Martin Luther as the second Anti-Christ. You probably do not know that Nero was an Olympian. He actually traveled to Greece to compete in chariot races and won a gold medal, as no one dared to beat him!

Rome did suffer while their Emperor focused on his personal pleasure whether it be orgies, races, athletic competitions, singing, dancing, acting, or just reading poetry, instead of carefully governing the Empire.

In 67 AD, a revolt began in Judea. Nero sent General Vespasian to put down the rebellion against Rome. More rebellions occurred within parts of the Empire and military leaders began to renounce their allegiance to Nero. By the summer of 68 AD, the senate could tolerate no more of Nero’s personal and detached antics and condemned him to be flogged to death. Hearing of their decision, Nero committed suicide. His last words were, “What an artist the world loses in me.” I don’t think so!

A calamity in leadership now befalls the mighty Roman Empire. There is a power struggle among four men vying to become the new Emperor. A proven military general, Vespasian returns to Rome in 69 AD to claim the throne leaving his son Titus to squash the rebellion in Jerusalem.

In fact, Titus brutally vanquishes Jerusalem in 70 AD. He not only wins a military victory, he destroys the temple of God. Only a part of its western wall is left standing, the one you often see on television that is called the “Wailing Wall.” This victory in

Judea brings Titus acclaim in Rome among its legions. A massive arch to Titus still stands triumphantly in Rome today. In a strange twist, Titus has an affair with a beautiful Jewish princess named Berenice, ten years his senior. She is the daughter of none other than King Herod Agrippa II. She returns with Titus to Rome in AD 75 and lives openly in the palace with him. But, the hatred for the Jews among the Romans is so strong, Titus is forced by public opinion to send her back to Judea.

By 79 AD, Vespasian dies and Titus, who has been groomed by his father to replace him, becomes a rather unpopular Emperor of Rome. Only one month into his reign, a disaster befalls him that is also burned into the pages of history. The Mount Vesuvius volcano erupts destroying Pompeii and several other cities. This disaster haunts the historical memory of Titus to this day. Many Jews believed this was a divine punishment for the destruction of God's Temple.

And calamities continued to strike Titus. There was another large fire in Rome that burned for three and a half days. And, finally, a record epidemic plague befell Rome despite the sacrifices made to the Roman gods by Titus. Yet, he persevered and tried to win the support of the people by governmental reforms and public investment. He opened what we know as the famous Roman Colosseum. By 81 AD, Titus apparently contracts an incurable disease and succumbs. By then he has become a Roman hero. Having no heir, his brother, Domitian, gains the throne. Some believe Domitian poisoned Titus with a fish.

While Rome had changed, with anti-Semitism soaring, can you imagine the change in the Jewish world? Their beloved city and the very Temple of God was now in ruin. And they were hated by those in power.

Domitian reigns from 81 to 96 AD. He is regarded as the worst of the Roman Emperors. He exhibited personal depravity and was highly superstitious. He revived the political and social excesses of Nero. That included a second persecution of Christians along with a requirement to worship the Emperor. It was under Domitian that the Apostle John, who was overseeing the Churches in Asia and living in Ephesus is arrested and exiled to the island of Patmos. It is while on Patmos that John receives the Revelation of the Apocalypse of the things to come from the resurrected Jesus Himself and writes the letter to his beloved seven churches in Asia. As best we know, John dies there of natural causes being perhaps the only apostle to have not been martyred.

At the end of the first century, we have the Jews removed from the land given to them by God. Their Temple lies in ruin. We find the Christians being persecuted, not just by Judaisers everywhere, but now also by the Roman government. With the last of the Apostles having died, we now must ask, who is in charge or control of the Christian Church? Who will keep pure the doctrine of the apostles as given them by Jesus Himself?

There is a hint of trouble brewing in the church as false teachers, heresies and the spirit of the Anti-Christ are already identified as creeping into the church by the Apostles Peter,

Paul, John and especially Jude. Jude is the brother of James of Alphaeus, a brother or half-brother of Jesus. But, as Peter in his second letter warns about the false teachers and a coming apostasy, Jude's entire message seems to confirm them as a present reality. The date of Jude's letter is not well established. Many claim that since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Titus is not mentioned, it may have been written in the last part of the 60's AD.

Jude is referenced in letters from Clement of Rome, considered by most to be the successor of Peter as the bishop of Rome. The persecution of Christians and Jews by the Roman Empire would have been an experienced reality to the Apostle Jude. Also evident is the spiritual infiltration of the gnostics into the church sowing much doctrinal error. With only the Apostle John still alive, Jude seems to sense a growing vulnerability of the church to apostasy, a falling away from the true faith. Jude calls the believers to fight for the truth amidst intense spiritual warfare.

Unfortunately, Jude does not clearly address specific false doctrines. He focuses more on the false teachers themselves. He describes their character and personal corruption. He suggests their teaching is clever and subtle, deceptive and enticing. But, putting their lives under the light of Biblical truth, you will see them to be wicked men...like wolves in sheep's clothing. This echoes the teaching of Jesus in Mat. 7: 15 as He describes how to spot a false prophet:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn-bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

Here we have Jesus describing men who claim to speak for God but do not. How do we tell whether they are false or true men of God? By their own fruit and spirit! What comes out of their teaching and how do you assess their own lives? If the results are evil and not good, you can be reasonably sure they are a false teacher.

One of the sure signs of bad fruit to look for, mentioned both by Jesus and by Jude, is a desire for personal gain, especially monetary gain. We see this in Jude 1: 11:

Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.

Especially the antics of Balaam as described in Numbers chapters 22-24, and also referenced by Peter in 2 Peter 2: 15, we see the apostate working the word of God for a large personal monetary profit. This contains the rather well-known story of the talking donkey which Balaam beat because it would not continue down the road where God had sent an angel to stop Balaam's evil plan.

We have pretty much milked the Bible to find where any of the Apostles through the end of the first century of the church taught against seventh-day Sabbath keeping or clearly introduced Sunday as a new day of weekly rest and worship for Christians. We have come up empty.

What we have found are warnings by several of the key apostles about false prophets and teachers who would introduce doctrinal heresies and would especially want to use the word of God for personal power, fame or financial profit.

And, right at the end of the century, in the third and very short epistle of John, we find evidence of petty rivalry brewing among the Christian leaders. We find John writing to Gaius, an elder in the church, whom he loves as he walks in truth. And, John praises Gaius in 3 John 5 for sending Demetrius as a traveling missionary to the Gentiles:

Beloved [referring to Gaius], you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers [presumably non-believing Gentiles], who have borne your witness of your love for the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles.

Here we see a man worthy of God going forth in the Name of Jesus in love witnessing to the lost Gentiles yet taking nothing from them. In contrast, instead of cooperating with such a missionary, we find Diotrephes, apparently an elder in another church, refusing to meet with John or his missionaries as found in 3 John 9:

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves the preeminence among them, does not receive us.

John goes on to describe how this Diotrephes will not receive traveling brethren and forbids any disciples in his congregation from receiving them or they will be put out of his church. Such petty self-importance of keeping his flock to himself for his own prestige is called evil by John. And, John plans to go visit Gaius and meet him face to face with hospitality and in love demanding nothing from him or his church.

I feel somewhat embarrassed when I see missionary teachers and preachers of the gospel not being welcome at a local church assembly or receiving lodging because they are perceived as not worthy of entering and addressing the assembly to speak in place of a protective, self-serving local church elder.

At the same time, I am more embarrassed when someone will only come to address a local assembly if they are promised a financial gift. I see this everywhere in the Christian media of radio, television or personal appearances. They preach the word of God only for a fee as a wage or profit for themselves above any costs actually incurred in their travel.

Well, I see the time this Sabbath is getting short. Next Sabbath we will begin to study the

early Church fathers who took oversight and even control of various local churches after the apostles had all died off. Did some of them begin to teach falsely and to try to gain a preeminence among the other church elders? Did some of them refuse to hear one another and cooperate for the good of the church, the body of believers? And, did some seem to hold positions of power and leadership in a way to benefit personally and financially from the hearers of the word of God?

I was surprised to learn of the divisions that broke out among the overseers in the various geographical centers of Christian worship. We see factions developed by men seeking power over the church of Jesus who eventually begin to change the times of worship as practiced and taught by the apostles as they had in turn been by the Lord of the Sabbath. The role of government is especially critical as the new religion of the Roman Empire is decreed and ordered under the penalty of imprisonment or death.

In closing, I have received a number of requests for some free pamphlets available from LawstSheep Ministries. One is titled "Ten Reasons to Keep the Seventh Day Holy." A companion pamphlet covers the "Ten Reasons Christians Don't Keep the Fourth Commandment." This one is especially helpful in studying how and when the Sabbath was changed to Sunday by the teaching of religious men which we will discuss next Sabbath.

If you would like a free copy of either or both pamphlets, just let us know where to mail them to you. Get ready to write down the contact information. You can contact LawstSheep Ministries either by writing to LSM, PO Box 203, Delmont, PA, 15626, or send an E-mail to LawstSMinistries@aol.com or call me at 724-468-6032. Or, you may call your local radio station to get the desired contact information.

Until next Sabbath, this is Brother Kenny praying that God will be gracious to you next week as you glorify our great God by your labor.