

Religious Liberty Sabbath Sermon
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Worshiping the God of Liberation

Religious Freedom and the Three Angels' Messages

The expression "Religious Liberty Sabbath" is actually an excellent entry point into the sermon for this day because religious liberty and the Sabbath intersect in significant ways. Religious liberty is about freedom. Freedom, of course, to worship, freedom not to work on the Sabbath, not to take an exam on the Sabbath day and freedom to really celebrate the Sabbath, focusing explicitly on God's sovereignty, on God's wonderful love, and God's beautiful creation.

When we think of the Sabbath, we usually we think about a commandment connected to creation, and this is true. When we read the book of Exodus chapter 20 it is very explicitly said, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." But there's another dimension of the Sabbath that is worth considering. According to Deuteronomy chapter 5, the Sabbath was given to God's people as an anniversary, a commemoration of God's people's liberation. When God liberated his people from Egypt suddenly he gave them the Sabbath to remember that liberation, that Exodus from bondage, from slavery into fellowship, freedom to live with God and to worship him.

The major theme of the book of Exodus actually revolves around these three key themes. One is liberation. For example, the children of Israel were liberated. That liberation was announced when God told Moses to go to Pharaoh to tell him, "Let my people go." That liberation was announced, but as we know the liberation that was announced was not fulfilled immediately. Why? Because Pharaoh refused to let God's people go, so God had to allow plagues, the famous ten plagues, and it is only after the ten plagues that God's people were liberated.

The first major theme of the book of Exodus is actually that of liberation. Liberation announced, liberation delayed and, finally, liberation fulfilled. But after this liberation a significant event happened. God gave his people an appointment, a rendezvous if you please,

and that appointment was to meet him at Sinai. There, God made a covenant with his people. As in every covenant, there is a gift. God gave his people the law, the gift of the law, the Torah, but more to the point, at the heart of this covenant, at the heart of that gift was the Ten Commandments.

In essence, the Ten Commandments are also a story of liberation. It is as if God is telling his people, "Listen, I have now liberated you from Egypt. Do not go back to slavery, into bondage. If you want to keep your freedom, here is what I'm giving you to maintain you within the boundaries of freedom." For example, first, "Do not have another God, because that will take you back to bondage. Two, "do not bow down or make graven images because, again, that is below your dignity and it will put you back to slavery."

Third, "do not try to manipulate my name, take my name in vain or use me for anything because I'm the Lord who's sovereign. But if you do that, you will again go back to slavery and into bondage." And, "if you want to really maintain your freedom, remember the Sabbath day." The Sabbath was actually also a commemoration, not only of creation—as I mentioned earlier—but also of liberation. This is explicitly said in Deuteronomy chapter 5. All the other commandments were given in order for God's people not to go back to slavery—in essence, they were given so God's people would remain free.

There's something else. Right after the covenant was enacted there on Mount Sinai, God then announced that his people were supposed to build a sanctuary so that he may dwell among them. With this, the worship is announced, so to speak, but the sanctuary was not to be built immediately. Why? Because again the worship that is announced is not fulfilled immediately. It was delayed, in essence, because of the sin of the golden calf. This story is told in Exodus chapter 32.

Aaron and the children of Israel went into apostasy by worshiping an idol, again transgressing the second commandment. Of interest, however, right after that, the sanctuary was then built, the glory of God manifested itself, and finally worship could take place. In fact, the three major themes of the book of Exodus are here displayed: liberation, covenant, and finally worship. This is extremely important. This language is taken up later in the book of Revelation, but I will come back to that soon.

In essence, then, God really wanted his people to be free, to enter into a covenant relationship with him, and finally to worship him. Notice that it all started with the story of liberation. The story of liberation then connects at a deeper level—religious liberty—because in order to enter into a covenant, one has to choose to enter into a covenant. This is the reason why God gave the gift of liberty, the freedom to choose, free will, because without this freedom to choose, without the freedom of religion of choice, it is impossible to have a covenant.

God is love and love cannot be forced. God had to give the gift of freedom so that people could choose freely to enter into a loving relationship with him. Love cannot be forced, so therefore freedom is necessary. Freedom is given so that worship and fellowship may take

place and so that covenant may be a reality. Religious freedom, therefore, is much more than just, "Oh, my right to do this. My right to do that." The essence of the covenant is bound with this reality and with the Sabbath, which is the commemoration or the anniversary of freedom. Sabbath is like a weekly Independence Day for God's people.

So every week we celebrate our freedom, we celebrate our redemption. But there is another key element that can help us as Christians, and particularly as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, understand the deeper connections between religious freedom, the Sabbath and the essence—the very core mission—of the church. I am talking about the three angels' messages. The three angels' messages, are revealed in the context of the book of Revelation, particularly at the heart of the book, chapter 14. It is commissioned just prior to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

This section of the book, Revelation 12, 13, and 14, is essential to understanding the issue of freedom, starting from creation through to the restoration of everything when Jesus comes again. But focusing on the end time period, this section of the Great Controversy, at the heart of the book of Revelation in chapter 14, where the three angels' messages are now revealed. It starts with symbolic language—there's no question about that. This section of the book of Revelation is framed with a symbolic language because this language starts in chapter 14 verse 1.

"And I look and behold a lamb"—that, in itself, is a symbol. Of course, we can jump in and say, "Well, this is about Jesus," but there is a reason why this designation is used here, in particular, to talk about Jesus Christ, and specifically his function as the redeemer. Again this word in itself echoes the story of liberation, the story of redemption, and deliverance. But we will see that the whole section is actually framed by this idea of liberation and salvation. Even the eternal gospel that is mentioned here is connected to this core theme that Jesus came to share—the theme of liberation.

Well, it starts with a lamb standing on Mount Zion, and then we are told of the 144,000, having his name and the name of his father written on their forehead. Then we are also told that this 144,000 is actually a singing group. What do they sing? They sing their liberation, their freedom, but there's something else that is mentioned. We are told that they have not been defiled with woman. Again that they follow the lamb wherever he goes and also they have been purchased. Also we are told there is no lie found in their mouths and they are blameless.

This is a symbolic language to designate a group saved, liberated by Christ, and who are determined to follow him out of gratitude. They follow him because he liberated them, he purchased them. But then, interestingly, the text of these three angels' messages begins in verse 6. "Now we have an angel flying in the midst of heaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on earth," a gospel that is not restricted, that has to go to all inhabitants of the earth, and more than this, a gospel that is eternal.

Actually, this word "eternal" could also be translated as "complete" or "comprehensive." But what is the nature of this gospel? Why was it preached here? Interestingly, the context shows that this gospel is preached just prior to Jesus' second coming, and Jesus' second coming is enacted here starting from verse 14. Here, John sees a vision, a white cloud we are told, and sitting on the cloud is one like the Son of Man, having a golden crown on his head. And the Son of Man is coming to harvest the earth; it is the end of the world, the end of history the way we know it on this side of Eden.

There's more. The message of the three angels that we are told here is actually deeply connected to themes that were developed throughout the scriptures. I imagine here, that people who do not have biblical literacy, who do not know about biblical symbolism, may find it difficult to understand. How can we explain simply what is going on here? For example, it starts with fear God. What does it mean? Now we don't have to second-guess or try to imagine, or maybe use dictionaries for the definition of this, because what the Bible says is explained from the Bible itself.

By the way, this is called inner-biblical interpretation. When we have a word in the Bible that we want to understand what it means, we have to look at the internal database, so to speak, of the scripture. If I take, for example, the book of Proverbs, it talks about the fear of the Lord in various ways. It begins in chapter two, "The fear of the Lord is actually the beginning of wisdom," and then a little later we are told, "Do not be wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord," and what? "Turn away from evil." So this time, the fear of the Lord is connected to turning away from evil.

In other words, if you tell a person, "Fear the Lord," it is as if you are telling that person, "Turn away from evil." But there are other definitions of fear of the Lord. Proverbs chapter 8 verse 13, "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil." And there are others. "The fear of the Lord prolongs life," so the fear of the Lord is connected to life. In chapter 14 we are told, "In the fear of the Lord, there's strong confidence." And then we are told in chapter 14, verse 27, "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life." So the fear of the Lord is repeatedly connected to the idea of life, of living.

Now there is another one here. "The fear of the Lord is the instruction for wisdom, and before honor comes humility." Another one, "By the fear of the Lord, one keeps away from evil." In other words, the fear of the Lord is to keep oneself away from evil, but there's more. Interestingly, in Proverbs chapter 19, verse 23, "The fear of the Lord leads to life." In other words, just from these few examples, and there are others, I can say very clearly, when I'm trying to explain what the book of Revelation is saying here, that the fear of the Lord is in fact an invitation to life.

Let's look now at the idea of "death" in the context of the book of Revelation. It is interesting that in chapters 12, 13 and 14 there is war in heaven, a great controversy between Christ and Satan. And then on earth, also, there is the wrath of Satan against a particular group. Well, first of all, Satan tried to kill Christ. This is the story of Jesus told in symbolic language; the

Dragon trying to kill the child when the woman gives birth and then not succeeding in the destruction of the child because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christ died, yes, but he resurrected. When Satan could not eliminate or destroy the child, what happened? The Dragon focuses his attention on the remnant, and the remnant is clearly defined here as those who keep God's commandments and the faith of Jesus, or the faith in Jesus, and those who have the testimony of Jesus.

Now let me just say in passing, for now: When we say that these people keep God's commandments, this includes the Sabbath, no question about it. This is a distinctive mark of God's end time people, the remnant. This is clear. But the text doesn't say just one commandment. It says, "Those who keep God's commandments," all of them. This talks about total dedication to God and his sovereignty, his will, his commandments. It is all of them, including the command to love God with all one's mind, heart and soul and to love one's neighbor, also.

"All the commandments" includes the commandment to honor all people, because in doing so we honor God himself, in whose image everyone is created. It is interesting to note here that this great controversy is also an attempt to restrict the ability of God's people to really worship Him. The two entities described in chapter 13, for example, especially the first beast, are trying to restrict the freedom of God's people, actually calling for their allegiance.

This is where God's people resist. The word "endurance" or "perseverance" is used in the third angel's message as we see a little later, when it says, "Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus." Again, this is a conflictual context, a context in which Christ was threatened and murdered, but ultimately resurrected. Satan then tried to destroy the church, and particularly the end time remnant. He is in wrath, in rage, the text says, against the remnant, pursuing them, trying to destroy them, or to force and restrict their religious freedom. But what should be registered here?

These people resist. They resist, and the core of the three angels' messages is a rallying cry, an invitation, calling all people to do several things. What they are called to do is expressed in the language of the book of Exodus, the experience of God's people in Israel. They are called to fear God, meaning come to life rather than death, to know the Holy one, to turn away from evil. Now, this is not new because Jesus asked us, and taught us, to pray, "Deliver us from evil."

Again, it is a story of liberation, of deliverance, but this time from something broader—evil. In the context of the three angels' messages, the deliverance is expressed in a magnificent way. For example, it says, "Fear God," so come to life. Shun evil, hate evil, consider God. And then the next thing that is said is, "Not only fear God, but give him glory." Human beings are addicted to fame, to being recognized, trying to get recognition or being affirmed and so forth but here is a rededication of one's life to what reality really is all about. That is, God deserves all the credit. God deserves all the praise.

He is the only one who is really worthy and then the text continues because the hour of his judgment has come. In other words, God is going to do something now, being involved in order to reestablish his sovereignty and judge those who usurped his glory, those who did not take really into account that God is sovereign and the only one deserving of being worshiped. Then what comes right after, is worship him. Why? Well, because he is the only one who is the creator of heaven, earth, and the springs of water. Only the creator should be worshipped.

So then, God is the only one worthy, and this is actually said in Revelation chapter 5. Someone was sought in the whole universe who was able to open the book of history and give meaning to life in human existence. Nobody was found in heaven, on earth or under the earth. But then John revealed that the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb of God, has actually gained victory and he is worthy. And because he is worthy, life is possible, praise is possible, worship is possible. In the context of the book of Revelation, though, it is the second angel who gives a decisive element connected also to the history of liberation.

Before I spell out this second aspect—the connection to liberation—let me conclude the first angel's message by saying this: Knowing the first angel's message liberates us from atheism, from idolatry, from even self-centeredness—because God is recognized as the only creator, as the only one who is worthy of our worship, as the only one who should receive glory. And that really settles it for God's people, because God then becomes the center of our freedom. We are freed from atheism, from polytheism, from anything that does not affirm the uniqueness, the oneness, of this God, who is the only creator.

Then the language of liberation continues with the second angel's message and this time we are told Babylon is fallen. What does it mean? What is the connection? Well, for all readers of the Bible when they hear Babylon is fallen, this of course refers to a story in the Old Testament. God's people were in captivity in Babylon. By the way, before Babylon they were in captivity in Egypt also and God delivered his people from Egypt. Incidentally, the word "Egypt" is used in the book of Revelation chapter 11 to describe another entity that is against God's sovereignty and God's reign; that is, against God's kingdom.

Here, Babylon, in the Old Testament in particular, was the place where God's people were also in captivity. In Egypt, they were in slavery. In Babylon, captivity. So when the messenger says that Babylon is fallen, it is a way of saying, "Oh, the Exodus is now possible." In other words, God's people can go home. It was under Cyrus, who conquered Babylon, that God's people were allowed to go back home. In the book of Revelation, in the end time setting, in the setting of conflict and restriction of religious freedom, of powers competing against God's sovereignty to usurp his glory, to usurp his prerogatives, God is telling his people, "You know, Babylon is fallen."

In other words, again, you can come to God. This is the restoration of the truth of the uniqueness of God, of the truth about God's unique prerogatives as the only God, the truth of God's sovereignty, of the truth about God's unique worth to be worshipped. No other being in the entire universe is deserving of worship. Again, the story of the three angels' messages is

connected to the idea of liberation. In the context of today, Religious Liberty Sabbath, it is totally appropriate to celebrate freedom; but not just religious freedom—the freedom to worship on the Sabbath, for example—but also for the freedom of being delivered from evil, the freedom of being delivered from the powers that are hostile to God. Evil is defeated. It is also the freedom to know the true God.

Any other power, regardless of which one, that competes against the sovereignty of God is defeated. Why? This is the announcement, "Babylon has fallen," so God's people can go home. There is more in this context of the three angels' messages about the good news of liberation, the gospel of the everlasting liberation. The third angel's message adds a new dimension. Interestingly, here the chapter begins with the 144,000 who have the name of Christ and of his father on their forehead, meaning they belong to God. Their allegiance, their total commitment is to God.

Now, this is a message of warning to all the inhabitants of the world. You want to remain free? There's only one way: to have the mark of God, the name of God in one's life, entire life. The center of our thoughts, of our whole being, dedicated to God like the 144,000. Why? Each of the three angels' messages begins with this interaction with people totally dedicated to God. Now in the third angel's message we are told again, "If anyone worship the beast in his image and received the mark on his forehead and on his hand, he will drink of the wine of the wrath of God," and so on.

There is something important here: after these developments we are told, "Here is the perseverance of the saints." This is where the saints have focused their attention, because they belonged to God in last days, before the second coming of Christ. This is a conflict context. The Dragon and the beast and the image of the beast, they are partnering to destroy the saints in various ways.

Somebody has said that Satan tried to destroy the early church by killing many Christians. After the death of thousands of martyrs, he still could not succeed in defeating the church. So what did he do? He joined the church! However, even though he joined in, God has always had a remnant. These are people who are attached to God's freedom, people attached to his commandments, to his will, people reflecting his very character, undefeatable. Why? Because they are freed by Christ; these persevering saints "keeping God's commandments."

They keep all of God's commandments—including, as Jesus summarized, the command to love God and love one's neighbors. Christians cannot be haters. As we celebrate freedom, we even pray for those who persecute us. "Bless," says Jesus, "those even who persecute you." That is the Christian mindset. We celebrate freedom and kindly, gently with love, inviting other people to join us to prepare for Christ's second coming.

Notice again the 144,000 at the beginning of the chapter; they are those who are singing because they are liberated, purchased by God, redeemed so their song is a song of liberation. Those who are before the throne, they also sing but this time we are told they sing the song of

Moses. What is that? A reference to Exodus, liberation. They sing the song of the Lamb. What is that? The song of liberation, freedom. We can clearly see the three angels' messages are really woven with this idea of freedom. Freedom from Babylon, freedom from idolatry, freedom from polytheism, freedom from all kinds of distortion of who God is, and the freedom from usurping his glory, freedom to affirm God's sovereignty as creator of all things. Freedom to worship God as the only one worthy to be worshipped.

We have many reasons to celebrate our religious freedom, but as we do, we are celebrating in a deeper way our freedom in Christ and Christ's soon coming. He has promised to complete this liberation but this time, we will be liberated from evil, the presence of evil itself. Somebody once said that we are liberated from three things. One, liberated from the condemnation of sin. Two, liberation from the power of sin because now, as Romans chapter 6 says, sin has no power over us. Third, we will soon be liberated from the very presence of sin when Jesus comes again. But when Jesus comes again, we will also be liberated from not only the presence of sin but also from evil.

The universe will be purged from all evil and then the prayer that Christ taught us will finally be fulfilled. We will be able to say, "Lord, thank you for delivering us from evil." Today, as we celebrate Religious Liberty Sabbath day, we celebrate more than just the gift of freedom. We also anticipate a cosmic liberation soon to be completed when Jesus comes again. God has also given us something that is most precious. Christ, in his first public discourse, said something we should always remember. He says in Matthew chapter 5 verse 20, "If your righteousness does not surpass that of the scribes and of the Pharisees, you shall by no means enter God's kingdom." This righteousness that Jesus talked about is actually his own righteousness.

When anyone says that the third angel's message is actually the message of Christ righteousness, they are spot on. Why? Because Christ is our sufficiency. We are delivered from idols, from the dragon and from the beasts, but we're also delivered from self. We may now be covered by Christ's righteousness. Human righteousness is like filthy rags, but if Christ becomes our sufficiency, then he gives us his own righteousness, his own character. His own spirit dwells in us and with it the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, temperance, faithfulness, all these things. All glory will go to God. Why? Because he's the one acting through us.

God is indeed the God of freedom. He has masterfully and artistically woven the theme of freedom into the three angels' messages, which he has entrusted to our care for the salvation of the people of the whole world.