

The Sabbath in Acts 4:24

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^{NIV} **Acts 4:24** When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them."

Introduction

The background for the verse quoted above is that Peter and John had been used by God to heal a cripple as they were going into the temple area to worship (see Acts 3:1-10). Afterward they preached to the people about Jesus raising their loved ones who had died back to life again at the last day.¹

For this they were arrested and spent the night in jail. The next day they had to answer for what they had done to the religious leaders and gave a clear and bold answer to the effect that the power to heal came from Jesus Christ, whom the leaders had crucified but God raised back to life on the third day.

When Peter and John got back to the body of believers again, they all united in prayer praising God for what He had done through and asking that His name would be honored and praised. They were looking for the most exalted, worshipful language to use in saying this, and so they said, "'Sovereign Lord, . . . 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them'" (Acts 4:24).

They Were Quoting Scripture

When the disciples said what they did in vs. 24, it wasn't original. They were quoting Scripture. Which part of Scripture were they quoting? It turns out that they were quoting Exod 20:11. That's a part of fourth commandment of the law – the one that speaks about Sabbath keeping. Let's put the two verses side by side. I'll do this first in English, then in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that the author of Acts uses when He quotes the Bible of that day.²

"[T]he LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them (Exod 20:11)

"Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them."

¹ See <http://www.thebooklet.org/Documents/NavBibleActs04a.pdf>.

² This was within only a period of weeks since Jesus had returned to heaven. The New Testament had not been written at this time. The only Bible the earliest Christians had – before they were called "Christians" (see Acts 11:26) – was the Old Testament.

The differences are minor: (1) "The LORD" (Exodus), "Sovereign Lord" (Acts); (2) "made" (Exodus), "you made" (Acts); (3) "all" (Exodus), "everything" (Acts). Now let's do it in Greek. Greek was the language Luke used to write the book of Acts. When we read the various books of the New Testament, we're reading something translated from Greek. I'll give this to you in the original letters, which will look strange to you, and then in English letters to show what the sounds are. You won't need to know what the words mean. Just notice that they're all the same.

ἐποίησεν κύριος τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς (Exod 20:11).

σὺ ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς (Acts 4:24).

Those are the original letters. Now here are the same two lines in English letters so you can get an idea of the sounds.

epoiēsen kurios ton ouranon kai tēn gēn kai tēn ghalassan kai ānta ta en auois (Exod 20:11)

su ho poiēsas ton ouranon kai tēn gēn kai tēn ghalassan kai ānta ta en auois (Acts 4:24)

Notice where the differences are now. They are only in the first two or three words: "The Lord made" (Exodus), "You who made" (Acts). The rest is the same. I mean it is identically the same. In English the translators are giving the same sense, but in Greek the author of Acts is given the exact words. The disciples were not just kind of remembering that Exod 20:11 said something along these lines, and then going on to say something similar. They were quoting the passage. Starting with "ton ouranon" ("the heaven," i.e., "heaven") every letter of the Greek is the same in both lines,³ every accent mark is the same. There are no differences. This is a quotation.

Why Did the Disciples Quote This Particular Passage?

If the question is why the disciples quoted this particular passage – and quoted it rather than just giving the sense – we will first have to ask why they were saying anything at all. Why were they praying on this occasion? And when they say they were praying to give praise to God, what were they thanking Him for? Why did they want to speak as they did?

Let's start with what they were not trying to say and work back. They were not trying to get those who were present to keep the Sabbath. One reason for this is that

³ Bear in mind that the Old Testament passage is itself a translation. The Old Testament was written originally in Hebrew, except for a few passages and complete chapters that are written in Aramaic. Both Hebrew and Aramaic are Semitic languages spoken by Jews in the centuries just before Christ.

they were already keeping it. If this had been their focus they could have included any one of three other clauses from the same verse. (1) "For in six days . . ." was one they could have put in, but did not. (2) The next such clause was, "but he rested on the seventh day." They left that out. (3) And finally they could have added, "Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." For whatever reason they didn't feel it was necessary to include any of these other clauses from vs. 11. So that's what they were not trying to do.

As stated earlier, what the disciples *were* trying to do was praise God. They wanted to do this in the most profound and reverent way they possibly could, so they chose Exod 20:11 – the last verse of the fourth commandment – as the best source of words that would convey the thought they had in mind. Why did they choose that verse?

The fact is that the Sabbath exists for the purpose of reminding us who God is and of bringing us into close fellowship with Him. It says things about God that can only cause us to praise Him as holy and indescribably powerful. He created the heavens and the earth – all of it. He's the One who made those things. He created the seas and the springs of water. They all have their origin in His loving mind. And so do we. We owe our existence to God as well. That's the reason why we worship Him, and I might add it's the only reason. The creatorship of God is the only reason why it's wrong to worship idols. They didn't make us, but the Lord did.

So this is the context. When the disciples wanted to praise God in the most exalted and worshipful way they could think of, they quoted the Sabbath commandment. Is this something we need to change? God deserved our praise and worship back then, but not now? Is that it? Did Christ die on the cross to change His status as our Creator? Before the cross He was our Creator (see John 1:1-4, 10), but afterward He's not any more? Is there something wrong with this picture? In Jesus' words, "An enemy has done this" (Matt 13:28). Something, somewhere, has gone wrong. Really wrong.

There's Another Passage

On one other occasion in the book of Acts someone quotes Exod 20:11 – and quotes it exactly. That's Acts 14:15. Notice what the context is there. It's widely different from what we find in Acts 4:24. One might say that the two contexts are logical opposites of each other. Here's the verse.

^{NIV} **Acts 14:15** "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.

In English we have "heaven and earth and sea" on the one hand (Acts 14:15), and "the heaven and the earth and the sea" on the other (Acts 4:24). That's English. In Greek, however, the last part of the line, the part about "heaven and earth and sea and everything in them," is fully identical in Exod 20:11 (LXX), Acts 4:24, and Acts 14:15 – letter for letter, accent for accent.

The context here is that Paul and Barnabas had come to a pagan city where people had no concept at all who God was. They went there to preach Christ. In the

process they healed someone. Then the people thought Paul and Barnabas were not men, but gods. They brought out a bull to sacrifice to them and were about to slaughter it in the public square when Paul saw what was happening and rushed out to stop them. Paul quotes the fourth commandment here because his purpose was to lead these people who did not know anything about God to worship the one true God of heaven instead of worshiping rocks, trees, the sun and moon, idols – or other people like themselves.

Conclusion

Peter does not quote the Sabbath commandment in Acts 4 in order to get people to keep the Sabbath. He was surrounded at the time by committed Christians who were already keeping it. He quotes the commandment because he wanted to praise God in the most exalted way possible. Did he take the words out of context? That's what the Sabbath itself is designed to do. It's designed to lift up the Creator to praise on the basis of His immense power as displayed all around us in nature.

Similarly, Paul does quote the commandment in order to tell people to keep the Sabbath, although if he had stayed in Lystra any length of time they would have seen from his own example that he kept it. When he quotes the same commandment under such widely different circumstances, though, he comes to the heart of what the Sabbath is all about. It exists in order to keep people from worshiping who knows what. It exists to remind us that God made us and that on this basis He alone is deserving of worship.

The reasons why the Sabbath was needed before are still with us today. God is still our Creator. We still need to remember who He is. He still deserves our worship and our praise. The Son is still the One through whom God made our world (see John 1:1-3) – and every other world (see Heb 1:1-3). All of these things are still true. And the Sabbath is still holy. These are pretty good reasons for keeping it now. Some things don't change.