

## “SABBATH OR SUNDAY?”

When God revealed the Ten Commandments for the children of Israel to keep, the fourth commandment was to “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Since that time, the Sabbath day was viewed as the most significant day of the week to the Hebrew. It was one of God’s most basic laws, and historically, one of the worst signs of spiritual apostasy and neglect was when God’s people under the law of Moses would profane the Sabbath day. Whenever a revival would later take place, the Sabbath would be restored to its rightful place in Jewish life. It was a very serious thing to defile or neglect the Sabbath day. So much so, that God would later say that the person who defiled it was to die. So, where did the Sabbath come from? What was it to mean to God’s people then, and are we to observe it today? Interestingly, the first time the word “Sabbath” is used in the Bible is in **Exodus 16**. This is where God was raining down manna in the wilderness, and the people were told to gather it as food to eat. Moses said the following to the people:

**Exodus 16:23-30 “And he said unto them, This is that which the Lord hath said, To morrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the Lord: bake that which ye will bake today, and seethe that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning. And they laid it up till the morning, as Moses bade: and it did not stink, neither was there any worm therein. And Moses said, Eat that to day; for to day is a sabbath unto the Lord: to day ye shall not find it in the field. Six days ye shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is the sabbath, in it there shall be none. And it came to pass, that there went out some of the people on the seventh day for to gather, and they found none. And the Lord said unto Moses, How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws? See, for that the Lord hath given you the sabbath, therefore he giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day. So the people rested on the seventh day.”**

This is an interesting passage because it is the very first occurrence of the word “Sabbath” in God’s word. Now, the idea of a day of rest was established by God in the creation, as we’ll note today. But this is the first time that it is called “the Sabbath.” Some people will say that this passage implies that God’s people had long been observing the Sabbath day, before we even read about it here in this passage. That is largely due to an unfortunate translation in the King James Version where it renders verse 23 as “*the rest of the holy sabbath to the Lord*,” implying that the holy sabbath was an established day already in the minds of the people. But if you go back and look at the original Hebrew, the article “the” is not there. Furthermore, there are a number of arguments that could be made to show that, to the Jews to whom Moses spoke here, this was a new thing for them to observe the seventh day as a holy day unto the Lord. God would solidify that when He spoke to Moses upon Mt. Sinai and revealed the Ten Commandments.

Well, why was this day significant to those people? And should it be significant to us? We’ll let the Bible speak to determine those answers.

The seventh day of the week was set apart by God as a special day in the Old Testament. To the Jew, it was to be a day of rest and a day of corporate worship, or as the Old Testament calls it, a day of holy convocation. It was a very serious sin for God's people to disregard the Sabbath or profane it by treating it just like any other day. God literally wrote it in stone, along with nine other moral laws, when He revealed the Ten Commandments in **Exodus 20**.

**Exodus 20:8-11** "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it."

In fact, in **Exodus 31**, God said that if a man should defile the Sabbath, he was to be put to death. That tells us that the Sabbath was a holy day that was to be strictly kept, and it was central to the lives of His people. But 3,500 years after God gave that commandment, is the Sabbath to be a holy day to us, or was it rather an Old Testament shadow of a better reality in the Lord Jesus?

**Hebrews 8:3-6** "For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices: wherefore it is of necessity that this man have somewhat also to offer. For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law: Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount. But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises."

So, the Old Testament law, with its ceremonies and its sacrifices, served as a mere shadow or preview of what we now have in Christ Jesus. The Hebrew writer says that what we have is "*a better covenant...established upon better promises*" (**verse 6**). Those things before were only a shadow of that which was to come.

**Colossians 2:14,16-17** "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;...Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ."

So, Paul says that the keeping of sabbath days was, again, merely a shadow of something better to come. Shadows are images that are created by a light shining on a solid object, which then casts a shadow onto the ground or a wall, for example. We know that the shadow is not the substance, but merely a vague picture of the substance. Paul says that the keeping of sabbath days was a shadow, or picture of the substance, which is Christ and the salvation found in Him. You see, the Sabbath isn't the substance. It was merely the preview of what was to come in Christ Jesus. We'll study that passage more later, but the New Testament clearly shows that the Sabbath day was a shadow of what was to come in Christ.

Where did the idea of keeping the seventh day of the week as a Sabbath come from? It's important to see the development of the seventh day as a special day in the eyes of God. The word "sabbath" which first appears in **Exodus 16** simply means 'a cessation or a time of rest.' That's all the word means. God first of all established the seventh day of the week as His own day of rest in the creation.

**Genesis 2:1-3 "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 he rested on the seventh day from all 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."**

Now, there's no doubt that God made the seventh day a special day from the very beginning. God established a principle that we can identify with, even now. That is, that our bodies need a day of rest. But, you see, God is God, and He never sleeps or slumbers. He is a spirit and He is not confined to time and space and the limitations of physical existence. Rather, God was establishing a precedent for man's own well-being: that a man physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually needs a time of rest and refreshment. Jesus said, in **Mark 2:27**,

**"And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath."**

In other words, it was not originally designed as a day for man to keep, but as a day to keep the man. Interestingly, did you know that the only explanation for the seven-day week comes from the Bible record of creation? The same seven-day week that the skeptic, the infidel, the agnostic and the atheist counts his time according to—the ONLY record we have of it is in the Bible. There is absolutely no basis in the lunar calendar for the week as we know it. Days are defined by one full revolution of the earth upon its axis. Months are defined by the phases of the moon, and years are defined by the orbit of the earth around the sun. But what's the basis of a week? It's that in six days, God created the heavens and the earth, and He rested on the seventh day. And God sanctified the seventh day as a day of rest and rejuvenation. But it is important to note that it was not until the formation of the Hebrew people and their subsequent flight out of Egypt and their time in the wilderness, that God enjoined the Sabbath upon people as a religious observance. Isn't it interesting that we read nothing—not one single word—in the book of Genesis about the Sabbath. That covers nearly 3,000 years of history that we don't read about the Sabbath as a holy day or a day of religious observance. The word is not found in the book of Genesis. It was when God gave the law through Moses that the Sabbath became legally a day of worship, and a day that was given spiritual significance. Not one mention of the word 'sabbath' until mere weeks before the Ten Commandments were given upon Mt. Sinai. Now, when Moses later gave the law concerning Jewish holydays, he said this:

**Leviticus 23:3 "Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, an holy convocation; ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings."**

The word 'convocation' means 'a public meeting or assembly.' In other words, it wasn't until the law of Moses was given that the Sabbath had any significance beyond being a day of physical rest. Then when the law was revealed, the Sabbath became a day of worship, and a legally binding sacred, holy day which was an identifying mark of the Jew who was faithful to God.

As we noted earlier, Paul said in **Colossians 2:14** that the old law, with its ceremonies and stipulations had been nailed to the cross, that it was taken out of the way. Let's reread part of that passage.

**Colossians 2:16-17** "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days. Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ."

Later on, the writer of Hebrews gives us a hint of what the Sabbath was a shadow of. In **Hebrews 4:3-11**, he talks about the fact that one day His people would enter into His rest, and he likens that to the six days of creation and the fact that God rested on the seventh day. God said that the establishment of that Sabbath, which was fully developed as a law given by God in Exodus, that all of that pointed forward to the rest that God's people would one day ultimately enjoy from their labors. So, the Hebrew scribe is telling us that the rest that God established for man on the seventh day of the creation week was a foreshadowing of the rest that we have in Christ Jesus, and the rest that we will enjoy eternally when the labor of life is over.

So, the keeping of the Sabbath day was a shadow. It wasn't the substance. It was given to the Jewish nation, and not to the christian Church. There are a number of arguments that people will try to make against that, and I want to consider some of them with you.

**Argument 1.** When Paul said in **Colossians 2** that the law of Moses was taken away, and therefore we aren't to be judged by the keeping of Sabbath days, that merely refers to special or yearly Sabbaths, and not to the weekly observance of the Sabbath.

Admittedly, there were what were called "high Sabbaths" in the Old Testament. Remember that the Jews didn't want Jesus' body left on the cross after He died because it was considered a high Sabbath. This wasn't Saturday. The word 'sabbath' itself doesn't denote the seventh or Saturday. It just means to rest or to cease. God declared that Saturday was to be a holy Sabbath for the Jews, but there were yearly Sabbaths, and at the time of Jesus' death, this was the Passover Sabbath, which came each year. So, people that insist on keeping the Sabbath will make the argument that all that Paul was referring to in this passage were these ceremonial Sabbaths, these high or yearly Sabbaths which pertained to the ceremonial law, as opposed to the moral law contained within the Decalogue.

Let's look again at **Colossians 2:16**. Notice that Paul mentions three types of observances that he says are not binding upon Christians today. He mentions Holy Day, New Moon and Sabbaths.

**Colossians 2:16** "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days."

What is a holy day referring to? That's talking about annual or yearly observances. Those holy days came each year. What was the new moon? That was a monthly observance, coming every 28-29 days. So, what would the Sabbaths be referring to? If holy days were yearly observances and new moons were monthly observances, then the keeping of the Sabbath that Paul is talking about is a weekly observance. And in that, Paul takes in all of the ceremonies and all of the stipulations and convocations and the holy

days and observances, including the Sabbath Day that was given in the Ten Commandments to the Jews. He takes it all out of the way and says that these are not the basis for judgment on Christian conduct in this age and time.

Not only that, but in **Romans 7**, Paul shows that Christians are no longer under bondage to the law of Moses, which brought death and condemnation. But, we now enjoy liberty in Christ Jesus.

**Romans 7:6-7 “But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.”**

He was talking about the role of Mosaic law, and what I want you to see there is this: The Ten Commandments were a part of the law that we were delivered from as well. We now serve God according to a new and better way, the law of Jesus Christ. Paul says that law that brought death has been taken out of the way. What law is he talking about? He says he wouldn't have known anything about lust had the law not taught him, “thou shalt not covet.” One of the Ten Commandments. You see, that law in the fourth commandment that enjoins the Sabbath Day was taken out of the way in the death of Jesus.

**Argument 2.** How can the law of the Sabbath be done away when God said in the Old Testament that the observance of it was to last forever? This question arises from the following passage.

**Exodus 31:16-17 “Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.”**

You know, that sounds as though the Sabbath Day was to be observed as long as the earth stands and time goes on. But notice, that is not the only thing to which God attached the word ‘forever.’

**Leviticus 16:34 “And this shall be an everlasting statute unto you, to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year...”**

Here, God was talking about the placing of sins upon a scapegoat as an animal sacrifice. Yet, no Christian today would think of sacrificing an animal. Oh, no. We understand that that figure has been fulfilled, and we now enjoy the real thing, in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And then, there's the Passover.

**Exodus 12:14 “...ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever.”**

But believers in Jesus don't keep the Passover today as the Jews did then. Why? Because we understand what the New Testament means when it says that Christ was our Passover in **I Corinthians 5:7**. So, all of these things in the Old Testament were spoken of as *everlasting, forever, perpetual*. You see, what the

word 'forever' means is *continuously*. Just as the day of atonement and the Passover were to be *continually* or *perpetually* kept until their purpose was fulfilled in the death of Jesus and the institution of the new covenant, so it is with the Sabbath. It has been nailed to the cross.

**Argument 3.** Didn't the Old Testament prophesy that the Gentiles would also keep the Sabbath? First of all, keep in mind that the Sabbath commandment included a provision for the stranger who was within the gates (**Exodus 20:10**), and it also made allowance for the stranger among them to keep the Passover and to be circumcised (**Exodus 12**). But look at what Isaiah says in this passage.

**Isaiah 56:1-2,6-7 "Thus saith the Lord, Keep ye judgment, and do justice: for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man that doeth this, and the son of man that layeth hold on it; that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil...every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant; Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people."**

But, my friend, if God is saying there that Gentile Christians would observe the Old Testament Sabbath in this day and age, then He is also saying that we would literally offer animal sacrifices and burnt offerings in the church today. If you have Sabbath-keeping for Gentiles in the church, you also have animal sacrifices for Gentiles in the church. If not, then why not?

**Argument 4.** Didn't Jesus honor the Sabbath and go to the synagogue every Sabbath according to **Luke 4:16**?

**Luke 4:16 "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read."**

Well, Jesus and His twelve disciples were Jews, who lived under the time frame of the Jewish law. That law was not fulfilled and taken out of the way until Jesus died, as we noted earlier in **Colossians 2**. Jesus and His disciples also kept the Passover, but we don't do that in the church today. Neither are we told to keep the Sabbath today. Later, when the apostle Paul went to the synagogues on the Sabbath, that was merely because that was where the Jews were gathered, and it would give Paul the opportunity to reason with them about the scriptures and teach them about Christ. He was simply meeting them where they were. In fact, the only time the Sabbath is referred to in the book of Acts, it was referring to the activity of the Jews who thought they were still living under the law, and hadn't come to faith in Christ. There was still a temple in Jerusalem where Mosaic worship and sacrifice took place for forty years after Jesus was crucified. But what happened in AD 70? God used the invasion of Titus and his Roman Army to destroy the temple and forever end that form of worship and the practice of that old economy. So, friend, the fact is that the literal observance of the seventh day of the week as a special or holy day is of no significance to the Christian, who now can lay hold on the actual thing that the whole concept of the Sabbath prefigured or pointed forward to.

With that established, the question becomes, why the first day of the week? Why do Christians worship on Sunday? What's special about Sunday? Some may ask, is Sunday the Christian Sabbath? Let's think about that. Please understand that the New Testament never commands any Christian to observe any kind of day as a sabbath. It's simply not in the New Testament. As we noted, sabbath simply means rest or cessation. It doesn't mean Saturday; it just so happens that under the law, God made Saturday to be a sabbath for the Israelites, and God made that day a day of rest, a holy day, and thus, a day of worship. Because of that, I think people end up confusing the Sabbath of the Old Testament with the First Day of the Week of the New Testament. Therefore, they'll call Sunday the Christian Sabbath, when really, they are two entirely different things. Nowhere does the Bible call Sunday a "day of rest," but it does refer to it as "The Lord's Day." Some very, very significant things to the Christian took place on that day. So, the early church, under the auspices of the Holy Spirit, set aside the first day of the week as a day to remember Jesus and come together for worship and edification. Besides the revelation of God in the matter, what was significant to them about the first day of the week? Aside from the fact that we have the example given to us in the New Testament, why should that day be significant to us?

First of all, it is the day upon which Jesus rose from the dead. We often call Saturday and Sunday "the weekend," but really that is a misnomer. From the time of the Roman Empire before the 1<sup>st</sup> century, until now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Sunday has been and IS the first day of the week. Jesus often prophesied that after His death, He would be raised again on the third day from His crucifixion. Well, what day did this third day fall upon? **Matthew 28:1-8** and **Mark 16:1-8** are parallel scriptures in which Mary Magdalene and the other women came to visit the tomb of Joseph, where Jesus had been buried, around dawn, the Bible says. The record plainly tells us that early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, and they were wondering amongst themselves how they would roll the stone back, but they found that it was already rolled away and the tomb was empty!

**Mark 16:9 "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week..."**

Think about the fact that all history pivots on what took place on that glorious Sunday morning. Jesus came out of that tomb to never die again! That good news is the gospel that has been proclaimed around the world for almost two thousand years!

But, God isn't finished. There was another promise to be fulfilled, and that was the establishment of the Church of Christ. God chose a special day to bring that to pass, and it was not the Sabbath. Jesus said that His kingdom would come with great power when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles in Jerusalem after He ascended to Heaven (**Luke 24, Acts 1:8**). Well, what does the record say?

**Acts 2:1-7 "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this**

**was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marveled..."**

You see, the Holy Spirit brought down and He poured out this power upon the apostles, marking the beginning of the Lord's kingdom on earth, on what was known as "the day of Pentecost," a Jewish feast day. That was the date that the Church of Jesus Christ came into being and the kingdom of the Lord Jesus was established in this world.

Well, what was "the day of Pentecost?" Pentecost was a Jewish feast day, and that's why there were Jews from all of these different nations gathered in Jerusalem on this day. Pentecost harkens back to the word "fifty" and it was actually 50 days after the first Sabbath following the Passover. Now, the Passover was a day of the *month*, not a day of the *week*. The Passover could fall on any day of the week, but then would come the next Sabbath afterwards, which would be the seventh day of the week, or Saturday as we call it. They would then count 50 days forward. Exactly 7 weeks from Saturday would be 49 days from that Saturday, falling on a Saturday ( $7 \times 7 = 49$ ), and if you add one more day, making it the 50<sup>th</sup> day, that would be Sunday. So, the Lord's church was established in this world on Sunday, the Lord's Day.

**Acts 20:7 "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them..."**

Paul, on his missionary journey, delayed his travels to be with the church at Troas on the first day of the week. He later gave this instruction to the church at Corinth.

**I Corinthians 16:2 "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."**

They were to set aside a portion of their income for the relief of the needy saints on the first day of the week. Even later, at the close of the first century when the aged John was banished to the salt mines of Patmos, he opens the revelation that was given to him by saying this:

**Revelation 1:10 "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day..."**

That phrase, "the Lord's day" there could mean one of three things:

1. Was it referring to the Sabbath? This was likely written 65 years after Jesus nailed the law with its Sabbath observance to the cross. It wasn't referring to the Sabbath.
2. Could it mean the day of judgment or the second coming of Christ? While the coming of Christ is sometimes called "the day of the Lord," John here says, "*I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day...*" In other words, the Lord's day to which John refers was past, and the coming of the Lord is yet to come.
3. The other choice is the first day of the week, the Lord's day, the day upon which Jesus rose in triumph and victory. The day on which He took up His reign and His rule in the hearts of men and became head of His church. The day upon which the first fruits were brought to God in that great harvest or ingathering of souls when that first gospel sermon was preached and obeyed on that Sunday, the day of



Pentecost. The day on which multitudinous disciples across the known world were coming together while John was on Patmos. They were coming together in homes and catacombs and other meeting places to celebrate the death and resurrection of the Savior. Friend, that's why we worship on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, because not only of its significance, but by the divine precedent set for it as being a day of worship and remembrance.

The Catholic church didn't change the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday, as some allege. That happened long before the Catholic church or Constantine came to be. The Bible tells us that the 1<sup>st</sup> century disciples hallowed it as a special day, and so should we.