

Milk & Honey

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Spiritual Food and Encouragement for Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ

The Sabbath Should We Keep It?

Tom Irwin

The Issue

There is great confusion today for some people on the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath as taught in the Bible. Some believe, teach and live that we today in the Church are supposed to keep the Sabbath (and, in fact, the whole Old Testament Law). Others believe that the Sabbath was an Old Testament institution and therefore was only for the Jew. Obviously what one believes concerning this issue will have tremendous bearing on how one lives and worships. Questions arise which demand answers. What is the Sabbath? Why was it given? What did Jesus teach? What did the apostles teach? Is Sunday the "Christian Sabbath?" Are we supposed to observe it today in the Church? Is our salvation dependent on our keeping the Sabbath? As with all issues, the important thing is not what we think but what the Bible teaches. This booklet will use the Bible as the authority in answering these questions.

What is the Sabbath?

The word "sabbath" simply means "to cease from labor or work, to rest." The first reference to the Sabbath is found in Genesis 2:2-3, "*And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it...*" Over 2500 years passed before there was another mention of the Sabbath. The children of Israel had just been released from 430 years of bondage in Egypt. As they began their journeys as a people of God, He gave them rules and regulations concerning how they should live. Hence we read in Exodus 16:23, "*Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.*" Here the Sabbath is presented as a day of rest from daily labor. The question, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?"¹ suggests that Israel had known about the Sabbath before this time. The fourth com-

1 Exodus 16:28

mandment given at Mount Sinai² made the Sabbath observance part of the Jewish Law. It is important to note that the Law as given on Sinai was distinctly given to the Jew.

The Purpose of the Sabbath

What was the reason for the Sabbath? Exodus 31:13-17 answers this, "*Speak also unto the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy unto you...Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between you and Me and the children of Israel forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.'*" So we see from this passage that the Sabbath was instituted as a covenant between **Israel** and the Lord. The Lord sanctified the children of Israel; that is, He set them apart as His own special people. The Sabbath was to be a reminder and a sign of that truth. Further, it was to be a day of rest.³ Because the Lord rested on the seventh day after His creative acts,⁴ the people of Israel were to do the same after six days of work.⁵ They were also commanded to keep the Sabbath because the Lord delivered them from bondage in Egypt.⁶

There were basically only two commands that made up the observance of the Sabbath. They were: 1) It was to be observed every seventh day by all. 2) They were to cease from their labor.⁷ Violating the Sabbath was a serious offense which could result in being cut off from among the people,⁸ and even death.⁹ The Sabbath, however, was not a day of total inactivity. The priests carried on their duties about the tabernacle.¹⁰ The Sabbath Day was a holy convocation,¹¹ which meant it was regarded as a day for the calling together of the congregation of Israel to worship. The Sabbath was meant to be a blessing to man and not a burden.

2 Exodus 20:8-11

3 Deuteronomy 5:14

4 Genesis 2:1-3

5 Exodus 31:15,17

6 Deuteronomy 5:15

7 Exodus 20:8-11; 35:2-3; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

8 Exodus 31:14

9 Exodus 35:2-3; Numbers 15:32-36

10 Leviticus 12:3, 24:8; Numbers 28:9-10

11 Leviticus 23:3

As time went on the Sabbath became ritualistic and formal. The prophets found fault with the worship on the Sabbath, because it was not spiritual nor prompted by love and gratitude.¹ The destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of the Jews was caused, in part, by their abuse and neglect of the Sabbath.² So, we see that the Sabbath was instituted for, and deeply rooted in, the life of the Jew of the Old Testament.

Christ And The Sabbath

During the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament many regulations and restrictions were added to the observance of the Sabbath—and God’s Law in general. These rules did help to preserve the observance of the Sabbath but its observance became nothing but externalism and a formality. Jesus collided head-on with this externalism. On six different occasions He came into conflict with Jewish authorities pertaining to the Sabbath.³ One of these episodes involved getting his disciples something to eat and the others involved healings. Jesus was demonstrating that He regarded human need above the mere external observance of the Sabbath. That is why He told them, “*The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.*”⁴ He was trying to show them that they only kept the Sabbath because it was a ritual. Since Christ is without sin, then everything He did was right, including His activities on the Sabbath. And it must be remembered, “*The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.*”⁵

Did the Lord Jesus Christ keep the Sabbath? There is no reason to think that Jesus meant to discredit the Sabbath as an institution. It was His custom to attend worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath.⁶ Jesus Himself said, “*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.*”⁷ Jesus was “*...born under the Law.*”⁸ The Law was still in effect until Christ went to the cross, so the Jews, the disciples, and Jesus Christ, functioned under the Law, which would of course, include observance of the Sabbath.

The Church And The Sabbath

When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, He said, “*For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*”⁹ In the book of Hebrews we read, “*But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.*”¹⁰ It is clear in reading

1 Isaiah 1:12-13; Jeremiah 17:21-22; Ezekiel 22:8; Amos 8:4
 2 Nehemiah 13:15-18; Jeremiah 17:27; Ezekiel 20:23-24
 3 Matthew 12:1-4; Mark 3:1-5; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6;
 John 15:1-16; 9:1-14
 4 Mark 2:27
 5 Mark 2:28
 6 Luke 4:16; Mark 1:21; John 18:20
 7 Matthew 5:17
 8 Galatians 4:4
 9 Matthew 26:28
 10 Hebrews 8:6

of the sacrificial death of Christ and reading the book of Hebrews (especially chapters 1–10) that the Old Testament Law has been replaced by a dispensation of Grace which began after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. After Jesus ascended back into heaven and the New Testament Church was formed,¹¹ a time of transition began. Many Jews were still keeping the Law, including observance of the Sabbath. In fact problems arose in the early Church because the Jewish Christians tried to impose those laws on the Gentiles who had become Christians. The Church leaders got together and decided it was not right to impose Jewish laws on Gentile converts.¹²

Paul met with Jews on the Sabbath, but his purpose was not to keep the Sabbath but rather to preach the Gospel to Jews who were lost. Did Paul teach that we, in the church today, should keep the Sabbath? Paul wrote a letter to the saints at Galatia (called Galatians) because they professed to be Christians, and at the same time, were trying to live under the Jewish law. He writes to them, “*Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?*”¹³ He also says, “*For as many as are of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘the man who does them shall live by them.’ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us...*”¹⁴ Paul is simply saying the Christian is not under the law. He further states, “*But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.*”¹⁵

It is a serious thing to try to put oneself back under the law after professing Christ. Again we turn to Paul’s words to the Galatians, “*But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements to which you desire again to be in bondage. You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.*”¹⁶ Paul specifically addresses the question of the Sabbath in Colossians 2:16-17, “*So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.*” The Sabbath has served its God

11 Acts 2
 12 Acts 15:1-7
 13 Galatians 3:2-3
 14 Galatians 3:10-13
 15 Galatians 3:23-24
 16 Galatians 4:9-11

ordained purpose in the lives of the Old Testament Jews. The Sabbath was just part of many types and shadows of the Old Testament which find their fulfillment in Christ. So Paul not only provides no grounds for keeping the law (and of course the Sabbath) but, in fact, condemns it.¹

Is Sunday The Sabbath?

Some say that the Sabbath is still to be observed, but that the day of its observance has been changed to Sunday instead of Saturday. This view claims that God intended one day out of seven to be observed by all men in all ages as a sacred day of rest and worship. Since the fourth commandment states *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,”*² they say men in every age are obligated to keep the Sabbath. It is true there is a moral element in the fourth commandment; that is, to worship God, but there are ceremonial elements in the commandment which applied only to the Israelites. If the Sabbath commandment was a **moral** law only, then it could never be disregarded for humanitarian needs such as Jesus did in feeding His disciples or healing someone in need.³ Furthermore, the Bible teaches that the Sabbath day is the *seventh* day, not any day we want it to be.⁴ Nowhere in the New Testament do we read that Jesus or anyone else changed the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week. If one is going to keep the Sabbath as the Bible teaches, then he must keep it on the *seventh* day of the week.

If the day of the Sabbath observance has not been changed to Sunday, are we obligated by Scripture to keep the Sabbath on the seventh day—that is, Saturday? The answer is no, for the following reasons. First, the fourth commandment, as well as other references concerning the Sabbath, were clearly given to **Israel**. Nowhere in the New Testament is a commandment or teaching given which instructs us to keep the Sabbath. It simply is not there. Second, the teaching of the Sabbath is part of those ordinances and ceremonies which were under the Mosaic Law. The apostle Paul writes, *“And you, being dead in your trespasses and the circumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross...So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”*⁵ Paul included the sabbath command among those ordinances which were *done away* in Christ. He taught in the book of Galatians that we are no longer under the Law.⁶ The book of Hebrews (especially chapters 8-10) teaches that the Old

1 Colossians 2:16-17
2 Exodus 20:8
3 Mark 2:23-3:5
4 Exodus 16:29, 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14
5 Colossians 2:13-17
6 Galatians 2:19-25; 4:8-11

Covenant was superseded by the New Covenant.

Third, the early church came together on the first day of the week for worship and celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁷ The resurrection is at the heart of the Christian Gospel, and it occurred on a Sunday. The early church Fathers of the second and third centuries taught and practiced that the church met on Sunday, the first day of the week. They also taught that the Hebrew sabbath was not binding on the Christian.

The Gospel And The Sabbath

The most important question a man can ever ask is, “What must I do to be saved?” Is the answer “believe” or, “believe and keep the law?” What does the Scripture say? *“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”*⁸ *“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”*⁹ Salvation is *“not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He has saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”*¹⁰ The Scripture teaches us again and again that salvation cannot be earned by good works, including keeping the law and/or the Sabbath. Paul writes in Galatians 3:11, *“But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith.’”* And again the apostle writes, *“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying ‘In you all nations shall be blessed,’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.”*¹¹

To distort the Gospel by making it something to be earned by our works is a serious offence which will have its judgment. Hence, Paul writes through the Holy Spirit, *“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.”*¹²

This article is available in a free 14 page booklet.

Write to address shown on page 4

7 Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2
8 Romans 4:28
9 Romans 10:4
10 Titus 3:5
11 Galatians 3:8-9
12 Galatians 1:8

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*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If
any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*

1 John 2:15

September, 2014

Gathered Fragments

J.N. Darby

God intends that His people should find out that the world is a place of trial and difficulty in order to wean them from it and that their hearts may be tested as to where their confidence lies.

Circumstances may be trying, but He would have them to be joying in Himself, who is not affected by the circumstances, that they may prove what He is for them under the pressure, so that every resource but Himself may be abandoned. It is best, indeed, if when the pressure comes they are found going on with Him, satisfied with His love, His care, and His sufficiency.

For in no way does He so fully reveal Himself as the only stay and strength for the heart as when He is conducting and guiding us through the circumstances of testing and trying character (only fully known to Himself). Then it is we are learning the meaning of that lovely phrase: "We also joy in God."

We are passing through our education under His tuition, who is training us for eternity and with eternity in view, our school term is drawing to a close, soon to end in glory and rest with Him who is there resting now.

Then, and not until then, shall we understand what wondrous objects of His interest we have been down here! As sinners the objects of God's sovereign grace, as saints the objects of the Father's love, the Shepherd's Care, and the Spirit's guidance. What more could we ever have, what more could we ever want, what more could we ever need?! *

Quotes

"It is impossible to find anyone in the Bible who was a power for God who did not have enemies and was not hated."

"It is better to ultimately succeed with the truth than to temporarily succeed with a lie."

"It is not love and it is not friendship if we fail to declare the whole counsel of God."

Supplied by Stan Engle

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