

What Does the Bible Say About the Sabbath?

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By Michael D. Morrison



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Part 1: The Books of Moses

Some Christians observe the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week – Friday sunset to Saturday sunset – as it was commanded in the old covenant. But the New Testament treats the Sabbath in a significantly different way than the Old Testament does, and it is not required for Christians today. This does not mean that Sabbath-keepers must *cease* keeping the Sabbath. Christians who choose to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, and Christians who do not choose to do so, should be tolerant of each other's convictions. Let us look at answers to questions often asked about this subject.

On the seventh day of creation, God rested. Is this when he made the Sabbath?

Genesis tells us:

- God created the world in six days.
- By the seventh day, creation was complete.
- God rested [a literal rendition of the Hebrew could be *sabbatized*] on the seventh day.
- He blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3).

However, there are several things that Genesis does not tell us:

- It does not say that humans rested.
- It does not say that humans were told to follow God's example.
- It does not say that humans were told to rest.
- It does not say that God taught Adam and Eve on the Sabbath.
- It does not say that God created or made the Sabbath.
- It does not say that humans kept the Sabbath.

Creation week was unique. We do not expect God's activity on the first day to be repeated on every first day. What he did on the fourth day does not affect subsequent Wednesdays. And what he did on the seventh day of

creation — cease from creation — is not repeated every week thereafter. He ceased only once.[1] [See end of chapter for the endnotes]

Humans are not able to imitate God's activity. Humans cannot create for six days, so we are unable to cease from creation on the seventh. We cannot imitate everything God did. If humans were told to imitate one specific aspect of creation week, rest, we are told nothing about it in Genesis. Scripture records various commands given to Adam and Eve, but there is no hint of a Sabbath command either before or after they sinned.[2]

Moreover, even if every seventh day were holy, we are not told anything about how it was to be kept.[3] The way in which Israel was commanded to keep holy time is not necessarily how the patriarchs would have kept holy time.[4] God's end-of-creation rest could provide a pattern for a Sabbath command centuries later, just as it provided a pattern for the sabbatical year, but the pattern does not prove that the Sabbath command itself existed before Moses.

A Sabbath doctrine cannot be based on speculations about creation ordinances or assumptions about pre-Mosaic worship practices. Genesis does not command the seventh day to be observed in any particular way. The Bible does not say that the Sabbath command existed before Moses.

Nevertheless, some people think that the overall impression of Scripture is that the Sabbath existed ever since the seventh day of creation. They are of course free to keep the Sabbath. However, we cannot use an implied or inferred "creation ordinance" as proof of what God's people are required to do today. We cannot use Genesis to prove that everyone must abide by this rule or else miss out on salvation. If Christians should rest on the Sabbath, the doctrine should be based on other passages of Scripture.

If an individual were the only one involved, he or she could perhaps decide to keep the Sabbath "just in case." But when we are teaching others

what is required, we must be careful not to add burdens that Christ does not require. Therefore, we must study the matter thoroughly.

The Sabbath was commanded in Exodus 16, before the old covenant was made. Does this mean that it remained in force even after the old covenant ended?

We cannot assume that every command given before Sinai is still in force simply because it was given before the old covenant was made. Sacrifices were instituted before Moses. Circumcision was commanded for Israelites before Moses, but it is not required for Christians today, except in a spiritually transformed way.

Likewise, various other pre-Sinai commands are no longer in force under the new covenant. We do not select lambs on the 10th of Abib or smear their blood on our doorposts. We do not consecrate to the Lord every firstborn male. We do not gather food each day, gathering twice as much on the sixth day. We do not stay in our tents on the seventh day.

When the early church met to decide whether Gentile converts should keep the “law of Moses” (Acts 15:5), pre-Sinai commands given through Moses would have been considered part of the “law of Moses.” The Torah of Moses included not just sacrifices, but all the other regulations that Moses wrote about, whether before Sinai or after.[5] “The law of Moses” is not required for Christians today. Peter said that those regulations were an unbearable yoke (Acts 15:10) and were not required for Gentiles (verses 28-29).

In Paul’s analysis, too, Exodus 16 would not be considered binding on Christians. Exodus 16, just like other parts of the law of Moses, was added 430 or more years after the promise had been given to Abraham and therefore it did not affect the promise (Galatians 3:17). False teachers wanted the Galatian Christians to keep not only ceremonial laws, but the “whole law”

(Galatians 5:3). The entire Torah went with circumcision.[6]

Some pre-Sinai laws are still valid, of course, as can be demonstrated from New Testament scriptures. But other pre-Sinai laws are not. We cannot use Exodus 16 to prove anything about Christian requirements today. If the Sabbath is still required, we need to demonstrate it from other scriptures.

In Exodus 16, Moses told the people that the seventh day would be a day of rest, a holy rest day (verse 23). Nothing in the account implies that the seventh day was holy before this.[7] The Lord, through Moses, gave some new instructions in conjunction with the manna that the Lord was giving the Israelites. He told them to cook all their food in advance (verse 23) and not to travel away from their tents (verse 29).

Simply because these Sabbath commands were given before Sinai does not mean that they are required today. Paul's point in Galatians 3 is that obligations given after Genesis 17 do not apply to the covenant of promise, which Christians have inherited. Circumcision also shows that the antiquity of a law does not prove its continuity into the new covenant.

When God declared the seventh day holy, did that mean that he was present in that day?

God is present in every day. He is present in every place. God is holy, but holiness does not necessarily indicate the presence of God in any extraordinary way. The Levites were holy, the sacrifices were holy, the temple utensils were holy, etc., but that holiness doesn't mean that God's presence was in these things. Rather, holiness means that the things were set apart for specific uses. God specified how the Sabbath was to be used. He never said that he is "present" in that particular day.

Today, Christ is present among his people in a special way. He has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 18:20; 28:20).

God made the seventh day of every week holy (Exodus 16:23). If God makes something holy, does it remain holy forever?

No. In the Old Testament, various locations were holy — the ground around the burning bush, the ground covered by the holy of holies in the various tabernacle locations, and an area on the temple mount, but we have no reason to believe that the soil in such places is still holy. The showbread was holy, but a human need could cause it to become usable for ordinary purposes.

The Levites were once holy, having a special role in worship, but they no longer have that special status. After the Exodus, the Israelite firstborn male children and animals were holy (Exodus 13:1-2), but they are no longer holy, at least not in the same way. The jubilee year (Leviticus 25:12) is no longer holy. In the temple, the holy of holies was holy, but its holy role was negated at the death of Christ, when the veil was torn in two. Jesus said that the time had come for worship to be disassociated from holy places (John 4:21-24).[8]

In the Old Testament, people, times and places were declared holy, but such things can also become ordinary — all according to whether God designates them for his special use.[9] We cannot assume that the Sabbath is still holy simply because it once was. If we are to teach it as a requirement, we must have evidence that God still separates the day and tells his people to use that specific day in a specific way.

The fourth commandment begins with “remember.” Doesn’t this indicate that the Sabbath existed long before Sinai?

No. It need not have any historical reference at all, and it certainly does not require an ancient one. It could simply be a reference to Exodus 16, or it could be saying that the Sabbath should be remembered in the future. When God made a covenant with Noah, he promised to remember it (Genesis 9:15).

He was not referring to anything in the distant past, but something that he had done that very same day.

Are the Ten Commandments a permanently valid “core” of God’s spiritual law? Do all 10 stay together as an eternal law?

God has communicated a lot of words to humans that are not requirements today. Many God-given laws are obsolete. He spoke the law of circumcision just as much as he spoke the law of the Sabbath. God himself commanded that the firstborn males be set aside for him — he also commanded the building of altars. To discern which of his laws are still valid, we need careful study, not sweeping assumptions.

The old covenant was glorious, but the new covenant is much more glorious and has made the old fade away (2 Corinthians 3). The Ten Commandments were a glorious package of laws, but the new covenant has superseded that package. Although the covenant was inscribed by the finger of God in stone, it is obsolete.

Hebrews 8:6 tells us that the new covenant has been established, and verse 13 tells us that the old covenant is obsolete. Exodus 34:28 tells us that the old covenant was composed of the Ten Commandments. However, if all Ten Commandments are still in force in the same way, how can it be said that the old package is obsolete? We should expect a difference — a difference between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinaitic covenant, a difference between the Sinaitic covenant and the Christian covenant. Most of the commandments are repeated in the New Testament, but the Sabbath is not. The New Testament doesn’t criticize anyone for breaking the Sabbath.

The old covenant, as a collection of laws, applied only until the Messiah came (Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 9:10). The laws were perfectly appropriate for Israel’s circumstances, but they are not all requirements for Christians today. In some cases, old covenant laws are good descriptions of moral

behavior and can be quoted in the New Testament. In other cases, they describe specific practices that are not required today.

The old covenant was a mixture of moral, civil and ceremonial laws. A moral law may be in the midst of ceremonial rules, and vice versa. Although we can categorize those laws according to function, Scripture does not. The only time that the Ten Commandments are given a special status or name, they are called the old covenant (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13).

The New Testament does not distinguish the Ten Commandments from any other group of laws. It does not give them any particular name or give them any special status. New Testament writers may quote some of the Ten and another law from elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Romans 13:9; Matthew 19:18-19; Mark 10:19; James 2:8-11), without any indication that the Ten are any more authoritative than other laws. In fact, the greatest commandments are not in the Ten (Matthew 22:36-40). If there is any consistent grouping in the New Testament, it is the last six commandments — the first four are not quoted with the others. We cannot assume that all 10 must remain together.

The Ten Commandments contain some temporary portions as well as some timeless truths. They were given in the context of physical salvation — they begin with “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). In Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath is commanded as a reminder of the Exodus. It was given in that historical context.

Also within the Ten Commandments, God says that he punishes “the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me” (verse 5). This applies to the physical blessings and curses of the old covenant, but it does not apply to the spiritual blessings of the new covenant. Today, God does not punish children for the sins of their parents.

These show that portions of the Ten Commandments are appropriate to

Israel and not everything in the Ten should be considered eternal truth. We cannot assume the continuing validity of the Sabbath law merely because it was given with other laws that have continuing validity — especially when that package, considered as a whole, is called obsolete in the New Testament. We cannot assume that all 10 must stay together.

Is the Sabbath Commandment a moral law or a ceremonial law?

Sabbatarians commonly assert that all the Ten Commandments are in the category of moral law, but there is no biblical proof for this assumption. The term “moral law” comes from theologians who attempt to categorize Old Testament laws according to their primary purpose.

In general, civil laws concern details of how humans interact as a society. Ceremonial laws concern specifics of worship (for example, specifying that the heifer must be red, or that the priest must touch the right big toe). Moral laws concern more fundamental aspects of our relationships with God and humans, the way we get along with each other. Many theologians say that Old Testament moral laws have continuing validity.

The Sabbath command touches on our relationship with God as well as our relationship with humans. It tells us that we should not require our servants to work seven days a week, so in that sense it is moral, concerning interpersonal relationships. The law ensured that servants had time to rest and worship. However, from a human standpoint, one day of the week would be just as good as any other for resting. The requirement that the day of rest specifically be the seventh day of the week is not an interpersonal matter. It was specified by God and was a worship detail.

Concerning worship, our relationship with God needs time. The Sabbath was made for human benefit, not because God’s holiness needed it. In the old covenant, a specific time was required for work, and a specific time required for rest.[10] But in the new covenant, the basis of our relationship with God

is faith, not a specific time. Time is still necessary, but the new agreement that God has given us specifies neither day nor frequency nor length of time.

The general worship value of the Sabbath command remains — humans need time to worship. But we should not assume that the specific details commanded (cessation of work specifically on the seventh day) are essential characteristics of a relationship with our Creator.[11] Day and night will eventually cease (Revelation 21:25), but our relationship with God will remain forever. The Sabbath is not an essential or permanent part of that relationship. God himself does not keep the Sabbath. It is not part of his character. Therefore, it does not play a direct role in our spiritual transformation to become conformed to his image. The Sabbath is not an end in itself — it was only a means to an end.

What we teach as commands cannot be based on assumptions about the Ten Commandments (that they are all moral, or that they must remain together as a package). Our doctrine about the Sabbath must be based on scriptural statements.

In ancient Israel, Sabbath-breakers were stoned to death (Exodus 31:14; 35:2; Numbers 15:32-36). Does this severe penalty show the importance of the Sabbath, that it is not just a ritual?

Exodus 31:14 shows that “cutting off” was the same severity of punishment as execution (see also Leviticus 20:2-3). People who violated the Sinaitic covenant could not be considered part of the covenant people — they had to be banished or executed. Numbers 15:30-31 says that any blatant, willful sin should be punished by cutting the person off from his people. This was immediately illustrated by the case of the man who was gathering sticks on a Sabbath. His rebellion was defiant, and that is why he had to be stoned. He was deliberately rejecting the covenant.

Severe punishments were also prescribed for violations of worship rituals

such as using a sacred recipe for incense (Exodus 30:33), an unclean person eating some of the fellowship offering (Leviticus 7:20-21), sacrificing an animal in the wrong place (Leviticus 17:4), going too near the tabernacle at certain times (Numbers 1:51) and prophets who claimed divine authority but whose predictions failed (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). All such were to be cut off or killed. The severity of the punishment is not proof that those particular laws continue to be in force in the new covenant.

The Sabbath is a perpetual covenant showing that the Creator is the One who makes his people holy (Exodus 31:13-17). Should Christians today keep this perpetual covenant as a sign that they are the Creator's people?

The Sabbath was given for several purposes. Exodus 31 describes one of them: The Sabbath was designated as a sign between the Israelites and God so the Israelites would know that God made them holy. It reminded the Israelites that God had set them apart for his purpose. However, their holiness depended on their obedience to the old covenant (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 28:9). Thus the Sabbath covenant sign was dependent on the old covenant.

However, Exodus 31 does not say that God sanctifies only Israelites, or only those who keep the Sabbath. It leaves open the possibility that God might make other people holy or give them some other indicator of being sanctified. God is free to work with whomever he wants, in whatever way he wants.

God worked with Israel as a physical nation, and he told them to observe the Sabbath as a sign between them and him forever (verses 16-17). However, circumcision was given as a similar sign, required for Abraham and his descendants, a reminder of the perpetual covenant between God and the people (Genesis 17:10-14). But the sign is not required for the church —

the New Testament gives a different sign.

Circumcision, like the Sabbath, was designated as a perpetual covenant in itself (Genesis 17:13b; Exodus 31:16b). The weekly showbread was also a perpetual covenant (Leviticus 24:8). But all these have been rendered obsolete by the establishment of the new covenant.

In the old covenant community, circumcision was the rite that marked the entrance of a person into the covenant, and the Sabbath was a regular reminder of participation in the covenant. In the new covenant, entry is marked by faith and baptism, and our acceptance of the new covenant is repeated regularly when we partake of the bread and wine in commemoration of our Savior. Those are the New Testament covenantal rites.

Baptism symbolizes being united with Jesus in his death and rising to a new life in him (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12). This is our re-creation, the beginning of our new life. The Lord's Supper symbolizes our participation with Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). He is the living bread, the sustenance of our new life. Thus we look to Christ, not to Abraham and the Exodus. In the new covenant, Christ is our point of reference.

The New Testament shows that God works with everyone on the basis of faith, not external conformity to a perpetual covenant (Romans 4:9-10). Even the circumcision covenant, given to Abraham himself, cannot annul the promise given to him because of his faith. Laws added after that promise (including the covenant of circumcision, the old covenant, the Sabbath covenant and the showbread covenant) cannot annul God's promise (Galatians 3:17). If there are other reasons to require Sabbath-keeping, then Christians should, of course, be willing to keep the Sabbath. But the Exodus 31 covenant is not binding on Christ's new covenant people.[12]

The Sabbath covenant between God and Israel showed that God had separated his people from other nations. This indicates that the Sabbath was

not given to the Gentiles. But today, God does not physically separate his people from others, and he does not have laws separating Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-18). The distinguishing characteristics emphasized in the New Testament are spiritual — faith and love — rather than physical, geographic or temporal.

We can't assume that perpetual covenants for Israelites automatically apply to the church today. Exodus 31 is interesting historically, but we cannot base our Sabbath doctrine on it. If we are to claim that Sabbath-keeping is required for salvation, we need more substantial evidence.

Didn't God give Israel his laws so they would teach the Gentiles to obey those same laws (Deuteronomy 5:5-7; Acts 7:38)?

God gave Israel numerous laws that Gentiles are not required to obey today — sacrifices, purification rituals, dedicating firstborn children, etc. Although those rituals were a good example to Israel's neighbors, they are not required now. We must look elsewhere in the Bible to see which laws have continuing validity and which do not. We cannot assume that "old covenant laws are still valid unless specifically rescinded in the new" — the new covenant has made the old covenant obsolete, and the old laws have been set aside. Moreover, as we shall see, the New Testament presents a dramatically different approach to the Sabbath than the old covenant did.

Endnotes

[1] In creation week, the seventh day (unlike the other six days) has no stated ending. The physical creation continued to be complete (Hebrews 4:3b). However, God is now working (John 5:17). One of his ongoing works is that of re-creation, or redemption.

[2] God fellowshiped with them on the sixth day, and presumably he did on the seventh day, too, and every day thereafter. In Genesis, for humans, all

days were alike.

[3] “Holy” does not mean “rest.” The entire jubilee year was holy (Leviticus 25:12), and it involved agricultural rest, but it did not require the cessation of all labor. “Holy” simply means that something is set apart for a special use. If God sanctified the seventh day of every week, he designated it for special use. But we are not told *how* it was to be used. Humans could have used the day for worship activities — but that is speculative, since we are told nothing about seventh-day observance before Moses.

[4] Abraham kept God’s requirements, commands, decrees and laws (Genesis 26:5), but we cannot assume from what Israel was told to do later that Abraham sacrificed all his firstborn male animals, or that he kept the annual festivals, or that he did anything different on the seventh day of each week. The verse tells us that Abraham was obedient, but it simply doesn’t tell us which statutes and decrees were in effect in his day. If we claim that Abraham kept all the requirements of the old covenant, we imply that the Abrahamic covenant was the same as the Sinaitic. The Abrahamic covenant was based on faith, but the Sinaitic covenant was based on the Ten Commandments.

[5] The “law of Moses” includes after-childbirth purification rituals (Luke 2:22), circumcision (John 7:22-23), prophecies of the Messiah (Luke 24:44; Acts 28:23), the law about muzzling oxen (1 Corinthians 9:9) and laws punishable by death (Hebrews 10:28). Thus it includes ceremonial laws, civil laws, prophecies and general principles. Apparently everything that Moses wrote was considered to be part of the “law of Moses.”

[6] It has been claimed that Galatians 3:19 refers to sacrificial laws only and that sacrifices were added to God’s law only after the people sinned. This is erroneous.

- First, the old covenant itself made provision for sacrifices (Exodus

20:24; 23:18); they were not a secondary provision.

- Second, Paul, who was trained as a rabbi, could have easily specified which aspect of the law he meant if he meant only a portion. Instead, he meant “the whole law” (Galatians 5:2) — the law that contained both patriarchal stories (Galatians 4:21-22) and civil penalties (Galatians 3:10). It was the Torah — everything Moses wrote about.
- Third, it is unlikely that Judaizers would claim that Christians in Galatia had to perform sacrifices.

[7] Verse 28 says, “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?” After Moses told them about the Sabbath, some of the Israelites refused to obey on one Sabbath. God was not referring to persistent Sabbath-breaking, but to a persistent disobedience to all the commands he had given.

[8] In both Testaments, God is holy, and holiness comes from him, but the way his holiness affects people is different. The New Testament emphasis on holiness concerns people and their behavior, not special things and places and times.

[9] It is sometimes claimed that only God can make things holy, but this is not true. Leviticus 27 describes how people may devote or consecrate things to the Lord, and those things thereby become holy. Similarly, people can devote a day to the Lord (in a fast, for example), and the day thereby becomes holy for them, designated for divine use.

[10] The way the command reads, work on six days is just as important as rest on the seventh. The command is given in physical terms, not in spiritual. In the Old Testament, rest was a much more prominent part of the Sabbath than worship was. There was a “sacred assembly” on the Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3), but there is no requirement that the people had to be at that assembly.

Most Israelites would have been unable to assemble at the tabernacle each week; they simply would have rested at home – stayed in their “tents.”

[11] The Sabbath command may be divided into specific details (which day of the week, and what to do), the practical (we need rest), and the spiritual (we need to have a relationship with God). The last aspect is the spirit of the law. That’s the part that is eternally valid. And the practical is still practical — love for neighbor means that an employer gives employees a day of rest. But the new covenant does not specify which day this ought to be, nor does it say that every culture ought to worship on the same day. And the new covenant does not imply that we must look to the old covenants to see which day is proper.

[12] Is the Sabbath required for Israelite Christians but not for Gentile Christians? This may be addressed in three ways:

- God saves Jews in the same way that he saves Gentiles (Acts 15:9, 11). All are saved by faith; the new covenant applies to all. God does not require one group to keep different laws than the others. Peter was allowed to live like a Gentile (Galatians 2:14). With God, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female. The terms and conditions of our relationship with God are the same. If the Sabbath is optional for one, it is optional for all.
- As the book of Hebrews explains, the old covenant is obsolete, and that means it is obsolete for Jews, the likely recipients of this epistle.
- The Jews’ relationship with God was like a marriage, and a death has broken the obligations of that marriage. Paul used that analogy, saying that Jews and Israelites have “died to the law through the body of Christ” so that they might belong to the resurrected Christ (Romans 7:1-4). Figuratively speaking, both Israelites and Gentiles

are betrothed to Christ, and the obligations of previous covenants do not apply to anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who has died to the law through Christ. Christianity is a new marriage, a new covenant. “We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (verse 6).

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## **Part 2: The Writings and the Prophets**

**The Israelites were punished for breaking the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:17-18; Jeremiah 17:27). They were promised blessings for keeping the Sabbath (verses 21-26). Doesn't this show the importance of the Sabbath?**

It shows the importance of the Sabbath in the old covenant system. As a sign, and as part of the tablets of the covenant, it showed covenant allegiance. The Israelites broke all aspects of the covenant, and they were punished with the curses that were attached to the covenant (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28).

Their disobedience regarding the Sabbath, as well as their disobedience in worship rituals, was an external sign of their unbelief. The blessings were physical, and the curses were physical, characteristic of the old covenant but not of the new.

The Jews were conquered again in A.D. 70, but Sabbath-breaking was not the reason. Their primary sin in the first century was the rejection of the Messiah, who was far more important than the Sabbath. They had rejected the new covenant. Jesus was the "test commandment" of the first century. Christ is the basis of our salvation.

In brief, God punished the Israelites for Sabbath-breaking because the Sabbath was a requirement for the time they lived in, for the covenant they lived under. But that cannot prove that the physical details of the Sabbath are still required in a new age.

**The Sabbath was a blessing for both Jews and Gentiles (Isaiah 56:2-8). Doesn't that show that both Jews and Gentiles should keep it today?**

Isaiah predicted that God, through the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, would establish a new covenant with his people (42:6-7; 49:8-10; 54:9-10; 55:1-3). However, in describing this new relationship, Isaiah also described old covenant customs that in some cases apply only figuratively to the new covenant. In Isaiah 56:7, for example, he said that Gentiles will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices at God's house.

Isaiah's main point is that God not only cares for Israelites, but also for Gentiles. God's house will become a place for all nationalities, and he will gather Gentiles as well as Israelites (verse 8). Eunuchs, who were excluded from the temple in the old covenant (Deuteronomy 23:1), would also be accepted. The terms of relationship between God and humans would be changed, and a new covenant would be made.

God's house would "be called a house of prayer for all nations." Jesus quoted this scripture in Mark 11:17, but the real fulfillment of the prophecy is not in the physical temple, but in flesh in which the Spirit lives. Both Jews and Gentiles are invited into God's household, the church. The physical details of Isaiah's prophecy — physical offerings and a physical temple — are not required for Christians today. If we interpret these physical details according to spiritual counterparts, may we not interpret Sabbath-keeping in a spiritual way, too?

Is the Sabbath a physical detail, like offerings, or is it a permanent and intrinsic part of a proper relationship with God? Neither view should be assumed, and this passage does not give us enough information to decide. We must turn to the new covenant to understand how the Sabbath applies to Christians.

**The Sabbath is a delight and honorable (Isaiah 58:13). Wouldn't it be wrong to call it burdensome and give up its benefits?**

Isaiah 58 is a call to repentance. Isaiah is declaring to the house of Jacob

their sins and rebellion (verse 1). Although the Israelites had an external appearance of worship (e.g., fasting), they did it for selfish reasons (verses 2-5). Although they claimed to worship God, they did not obey his more important ethical laws: justice, liberty and charity (verses 6-7).[13]

If the Israelites did the weightier matters of the law, then God would be responsive to them (verses 8-11). He would give physical blessings to the nation (verses 11-12). The same is true of the Sabbath. If the people were obedient to the covenant they were under, if they kept it without complaint, if they used God's day the way God wanted them to, then God would bless them.

Isaiah 58 is appropriate to old covenant conditions, and it does not necessarily tell us anything about new covenant requirements. We cannot assume that the requirements are the same. All the old covenant laws were good, but their value was temporary. They were designed to lead us to Christ, and they applied until he came. The laws had benefits, but it is permissible for us to give them up after we are led to something better, and we cannot teach as requirement something that is actually optional.

Peter was inspired to say that the law of Moses was "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Peter did not specify which aspects of the law were the most burdensome, but it is clear that the old covenant package was stricter, in external regulations, than the new covenant is. We must look to the new covenant to see whether 1) it tells us to look to the old covenant for worship days or 2) whether it gives new instructions regarding worship days and customs.

**Prophecies describe a worship of God that includes the Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 44:24). Does this show that the Sabbath is a permanent aspect of God's law?**

The prophets described an ideal time in which all peoples worshipped

God. To effectively convey this concept to an old covenant nation, the prophets described old covenant forms of worship, including new moon observances (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3) and sacrifices in the temple (Zechariah 14:20-21; Ezekiel 20:40; 45:17; 46:4). They also describe discrimination against uncircumcised peoples (Ezekiel 44:9; Isaiah 52:1-2) and avoidance of ritual uncleanness (Ezekiel 44:25-27). But neither circumcision nor sacrifices are religious requirements in this age. Moreover, another prophecy indicates that the day-night cycle will cease (Revelation 21:25), implying that there will be no more Sabbaths.

Prophecies (whether New Testament or Old Testament, whether about Sabbaths or sacrifices or circumcision) are not a reliable source of proof regarding Christian practice. Our doctrines must be based on scriptures that are applicable to the age we live in.

## **Endnote**

[13] The people complained about new moons in the same way that they complained about Sabbath restrictions (Amos 8:5). Although the Pentateuch does not forbid commerce on new moons, apparently that is the way they were observed in Amos's day. The people kept the days, but reluctantly. God criticized them most for social injustice. Hosea 2:11 similarly includes new moons among the "appointed feasts" being kept in Israel. Because injustice permeated the nation, God threatened to stop all the hypocritical worship.

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Part 3: Jesus and the Sabbath

Jesus kept the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). Was he teaching us how to observe the Sabbath properly so we could follow his example (1 John 2:6)?

Jesus lived sinlessly under the old covenant requirements (Hebrews 4:15). He was born under the law, while the old covenant was still in force (Galatians 4:4). He observed old covenant customs such as participating in the sacrifice of Passover lambs, tithing to the Levites, telling cleansed people to make offerings as prescribed by Moses, and he observed cultural customs such as Hanukkah.

Because of Jesus' historical context, Christians should be careful about using his example in different circumstances. For example, we do not follow his custom of going to synagogues.

Jesus never told anyone to keep the Sabbath. Although we are told various things that he did on the Sabbath, we are never told that he rested. According to the Gospels, what he did and taught on the Sabbath was consistently liberal. Let us examine the Gospels to see what the writers were inspired to preserve about Jesus' teachings regarding the Sabbath.

Matthew 12:1-12: "Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.'" "

Jesus did not sin. He did not break the Sabbath, and presumably he did not permit his disciples to break the Sabbath. We must conclude that the accusation was wrong. However, Exodus 16:29 told people to stay in the camp on the Sabbath and not to pick up food off the ground. Exodus 34:21 says that the Sabbath applied to harvest season.

The Pharisees could claim good scriptural support for prohibiting grain-picking on the Sabbath. But their strictness was excessive — the old covenant rules were not meant to be blanket prohibitions of all activity. But Jesus did not try to argue that his disciples were abiding by the biblical law and violating only the pharisaic tradition. Rather, Jesus went to the Bible to show that the biblical law itself can sometimes be set aside.

The Pharisees were not interpreting the Scriptures in the right way. Jesus pointed out this out by mentioning the example of David: “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread — which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests” (verses 3-4).

The law said that showbread was holy and was to be eaten, without exception, by priests. And yet David did it and was presumed innocent. It was not lawful according to the letter of the law,[14] and yet it was permitted in the purpose of God’s spiritual law. Jesus’ point here is that the letter of the law is not a reliable guide to holiness. People should be judged on the heart, not on superficial actions.

Jesus gave another example in verses 5-6: “Haven’t you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here.” Jesus says that the priests “desecrate” the Sabbath day. They are, according to the letter of the Sabbath law, doing something that is not lawful. But yet their work was permitted because it was temple work. Something was more important than the Sabbath, and that something was the temple. The temple and its sacrificial rites were more important than the Sabbath and superseded it.

Jesus, however, is more important than the temple and its sacrifices. The logical conclusion is that he is also more important than the Sabbath. Even before his death and resurrection, he was more important than the Sabbath.

[15]

The Pharisees, instead of worrying about a little activity on a holy day, ought to have been concerned with how they were treating the Holy One of Israel, who was standing before them. They should have worshipped him instead of looking to old covenant holy places and instead of using old covenant holy times to judge the Giver of those times. The Sabbath was holy only because God had designated it so, and here was God himself. They should have accepted without question whatever he did, and they should have followed his example!

Jesus then summarized his argument about the Sabbath and about his own identity: “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (verses 7-8).

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that love for humans is more important than sticking to worship rituals. Holy bread can be given to ordinary people when they are hungry. Holy time can be used in an ordinary way when people are hungry. If the Pharisees had understood the intent of the law, they would not have been criticizing the disciples. They would have been merciful, not judgmental.

Jesus ends the discussion with his claim to be Lord of the Sabbath — someone who had more authority than the God-given Sabbath did. It is not just that Jesus claimed to have a more accurate understanding of how the day should be kept — he claimed to be more important than the day itself. It was a stupendous claim, and it is no surprise that some Pharisees thought he blasphemed and deserved to die (verse 14).

Jesus’ next activity gives a practical demonstration not only of his authority over the Sabbath, but also the proper use for the Sabbath in the old covenant. “Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a

man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’” (verses 9-10). The Pharisees seem to be baiting Jesus, confronting him with a situation to test him. Healing was one of the types of work they said was unlawful.

But Jesus again pointed out the hypocrisy in their approach. They would rescue a sheep on the Sabbath (verse 11) — thus even a sheep was more important than resting on the Sabbath — and yet they were so strict that they didn’t allow human needs, whether hunger or healing, to be taken care of on the Sabbath. Their rules were a terrible distortion of what the Sabbath should have been. “How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (verse 12). This is what Jesus taught about the Sabbath. Don’t worry about prohibiting work — be more concerned about doing good.

So Jesus healed the man, and the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus. They thought the holy day was more important than the One who had made it holy.

Mark 1:21-22 — “They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.”

This verse doesn’t tell us much about the Sabbath, merely that Jesus happened to teach on this day. Presumably he taught on other days of the week, in other locations, but this is the day on which he could teach in a synagogue. The passage says that Jesus taught with authority. He also cast out demons with authority (verses 23-26), and the people were amazed at his authority (verse 27). Luke 4:31-37 is a parallel account.

Mark 2:23-3:6 is parallel to Matthew 12:1-12. Mark does not include the comments about sheep and mercy, but he makes a similar point by saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Several unsubstantiated claims have been made about verse 27. Let's note what it says and what it does not say.

First, it says that the Sabbath was made for humans. It was given to serve their needs and to benefit them. Actually, all of God's laws, even the laws of sacrifice, were given for human good. All the old covenant laws were designed to lead people to Christ. They were made to benefit humans. But their value has been eclipsed in Christ. God has given us something better.

Jesus did not say when the Sabbath came into existence. Nothing in the context indicates that Jesus was alluding to creation week.[16] We cannot assume that something made for humans necessarily had to be made immediately after humans were. For example, we could also say that the festivals were made for human benefit, and the rite of circumcision was instituted for humans. Christ was crucified for us. All these show that the word "for" is not precise enough to conclude, from this verse, when the Sabbath originated.

Also, Jesus did not say that the Sabbath was made for both Gentiles and Jews — this is not in the context. When Jesus used the word "man" in Mark 2:27, he was using it in a general sense, without any reference to Jews specifically or to Gentiles specifically. Most first-century Jews did not believe that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath,[17] and Jesus was not addressing this question. We should not ask questions that are beyond the context of the passage.[18]

The verse simply says that the Sabbath was made to benefit humans. We cannot assume that it was made at creation, nor that it hasn't been superseded by a better blessing in the new covenant. Since the Sabbath was made for human benefit, the Son of Man has authority over it (verse 28). He is more important than the Sabbath. Our relationship with God is based on faith in him, not in old covenant institutions.

In the Sabbath healing that follows, Mark again is slightly different than Matthew. Particularly striking is the emotion of Jesus: “He looked around at them in anger...deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts” (Mark 3:5). Jesus was angry at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who were so much more concerned about the holiness of a day than about the well-being of humans. They were really more concerned with self than with God, for they were failing to do what God himself would do.

Luke 4:15-30 — “He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.” Jesus taught in the synagogues on the Sabbaths. Considering the historical context, there is nothing unusual about that.

What is more significant is what Jesus taught: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (verses 18-19).

Jesus used the Sabbath, in his preaching and in his miracles, to deliver poor people from bondage. His ministry was like a jubilee year. He preached the good news that the Lord’s favor was on the people. He gave physical sight to a few, but spiritual sight to many. He did not release anyone from physical prisons, but freed many from spiritual captivity (through casting out demons and through forgiving sins). Although many people appreciated his ministry, many others did not.

In Nazareth, people were offended at who Jesus was. They recognized that he had wisdom, and that he could do miracles, but they also thought of him as an ordinary villager (Mark 6:2-3). How could a carpenter, the son of a carpenter, have such authority?

They could not believe that Jesus was more than an ordinary human, and Jesus said that it was a typical situation: “No prophet is accepted in his hometown” (Luke 4:24). And after Jesus reminded the people that God often sent his prophets to non-Israelites, the people were furious and tried to kill him (verses 25-29).

Although these incidents occurred on a Sabbath, there is little here about the Sabbath itself. There is more about who Jesus is and what he preached. He preached liberty and salvation.

Jesus has authority over the day. This is demonstrated by the healing that follows in all three Synoptic accounts. The miracle demonstrated not only Jesus’ ministry of liberation, but also his authority over the Sabbath, since he could perform such miracles on the Sabbath.

Luke 13:10-17 — Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke includes two more stories of Sabbath healings, and these provide further information to us regarding Jesus’ attitude toward the Sabbath. “On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, ‘Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.’ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God” (verses 10-13).

By using the words “set free” or “loose,” Jesus was emphasizing liberation rather than healing. This also provided the context for the comparison Jesus soon made.

The synagogue ruler complained, saying that healing was a work that could be done on the other six days and was not appropriate for the Sabbath (verse 14). “The Lord answered him, ‘You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has

kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (verses 15-16).

Since humans are more valuable than animals, and animals can be loosed on the Sabbath — an ordinary, daily, mundane task — then humans can be loosed on the Sabbath, too. The petty rules about the Sabbath were not designed to benefit humans.

Instead, the rules served the self-righteous attitudes of the teachers. They would prefer to see the woman labor with her infirmity rather than see the labor of healing. They were binding unnecessary obligations on the people, and Jesus said that the people should be “set free” or “loosed” on the Sabbath day. Luke’s readers may have extended this principle even further than would have been possible in a Judean setting.

A similar point is made in the next chapter. Luke 14:1-6 — “One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?’” (verses 1-3). As in previous situations, the Pharisees had probably set the situation up to test Jesus. Jesus knew their thoughts and handled the situation so expertly that he left them speechless.

Jesus healed the man, then asked, “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” (verse 5). Of course, these Jews would rescue a child or animal on the Sabbath. Rescue was permitted, so healing ought to be permitted, too.[19]

Consistently, whether alleviating minor hunger or healing major pain, Jesus pointed out that humanitarian needs took precedence over the Sabbath. The day was supposed to benefit humans, not cause burdens for them.[20]

John 5:1-18 — The Gospel of John has some additional stories about Jesus’ Sabbath activities, and they reinforce the emphases we have already

seen. On the Sabbath, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. And he told the man, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” (verse 8). The Jews accused the man of breaking the Sabbath because he was carrying his mat.

Why did Jesus tell the man to carry his mat? There was no emergency, and the man was certainly capable of coming back after the Sabbath to get his mat. Jesus could have easily said, “You can carry your mat today if you want, but to avoid offense, leave it here for now.” But Jesus was not that conservative. He wanted to emphasize human freedom — not only the man’s freedom from his infirmity, but also his freedom to do something on the Sabbath.

The Jews criticized Jesus for what he was doing on the Sabbath, but Jesus provoked them even further by boldly saying that he was indeed working on the Sabbath and that he did so because he was like the Father! (verse 17). “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (verse 18). Jesus continued to equate himself with the Father (verses 19-27).

Jesus did not try to defend his work, and the man’s work, as within the intent of the law. Instead, he boldly described his activity on the Sabbath as “work.” However, we know from Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus kept the Sabbath perfectly, even within the parameters of old covenant law. Just as the priests could do God’s work on the Sabbath, Jesus could, too.

We today are not under the old covenant restrictions. Just what that means for the Sabbath is not addressed in this passage. If we imitate our Savior, we might conclude that we are allowed to work on the Sabbath. At least John does nothing to prevent such a conclusion.

Jesus alluded to this Sabbath healing, and the controversy it caused, in

John 7:22-23. He pointed out the irony that the Jews did not allow healing on the Sabbath, but they did allow circumcision. “If a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?”

Work could be done on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses would not be broken, showing that the law of Moses commanding circumcision was considered more important than the Sabbath restriction. The circumcision law was more important than the strictness of the Sabbath law, just as the laws of temple ritual were – and yet circumcision and rituals are obsolete.

The Jews probably had no answer for Jesus. They could not refute what he said, and that is one reason they tried to kill him. But the readers of John’s Gospel would understand that circumcision, temple rituals and “the law of Moses” were not required for Gentile Christians. If important laws could be swept aside, what does that imply for the lesser requirements of the Sabbath law?

In **John 9:1-7**, Jesus made mud to heal a blind man. “Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath” (verse 14). This had a spiritual meaning, of course: Jesus is the light of the world, enabling spiritually blind people to see the truth.

On this Sabbath day, Jesus said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (verse 4). Work must be done on the Sabbath, Jesus said.

The Jews, of course, objected to Jesus’ work — and they objected to it being done on the Sabbath. Making mud was against their law, and so was healing. They judged Jesus according to their law, and they judged unrighteously. They claimed to have the correct standard, but they were spiritually blind, neglecting love, justice, mercy and faith (verse 41). They were looking at the law instead of the Lawgiver as the standard of judgment.

Throughout these Sabbath incidents, Jesus liberalized the standards. He repeatedly did things that could have waited until sundown. He boldly claimed to have authority to work on the Sabbath. That is one reason why many Christians conclude that the Sabbath is no longer required. Other Christians, who are also committed to God, conclude that they should keep the Sabbath, although not as strictly as the Pharisees did. They are all welcome to their opinions provided they do not judge others on this topic.

Every Christian should be fully convinced, living every day to the Lord, seeking to be led by the Holy Spirit. If people think that the day is required, then to them it is required. If people think that they have freedom in this matter, then Christ expects them to act responsibly with that freedom.

Numerous scriptures admonish us to follow the example of our Savior. In following his example, however, we must distinguish between his activities that were based on the historical situation he lived in (going to synagogues, for example), and those activities that were based on timeless laws of interpersonal conduct and worship in spirit and truth. We see some of these more important principles when we notice the context in which the scriptures admonish us to do as he did:

We are to serve one another, as he served his disciples (John 13:14-15). We are to love as he loved us (John 13:34; 1 John 2:5-7; 2 John 5). We are to accept one another, just as he accepted us (Romans 15:7). We are to be humble, as he was (Philippians 2:5-7). We are to suffer without retaliation, as he did (1 Peter 2:19-23). We should make sacrifices for one another, just as he did for us (1 John 3:16).

Jesus risked his life by what he did on the Sabbath. Didn't he do this for the purpose of showing his disciples how to keep the Sabbath properly?

Jesus criticized the Pharisees' approach to various laws and rituals,

including ritual handwashing (Matthew 15:2), phylacteries (Matthew 23:5) and Corban rules (Mark 7:11-13). In all these things, he antagonized the Pharisees and risked his life. But these criticisms were not attempts to tell his disciples how to continue these customs in a better way. In fact, Jesus' criticisms helped the early church realize that these customs were obsolete. Therefore, we cannot assume, when the Gospels record Jesus criticizing the way something was done, that he wanted the practice continued by the church in a better way.

Jesus sometimes criticized the way the Pharisees approached customs that were good, including almsgiving, prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16). On these topics, Jesus clearly taught his disciples to continue the practice (verses 3, 6, 17). But Jesus never taught his disciples to keep the Sabbath. We are told about work that Jesus did on the Sabbath, but we are never told that he rested on the Sabbath. He repeatedly noted that restrictive rules were violations of the intent of the Sabbath — he taught that a focus on external details was ineffective and incorrect. Those restrictions did not transform the heart.

Jesus never broke the Sabbath, nor did he teach others to break the Sabbath. But neither did he teach against circumcision and sacrifices. He could not while the old covenant was still in force. He could point out administrative problems, and present himself as the Lord, but it was not yet time to publicly reject any particular law (see John 16:12-13). But the implications are there. When John describes Jesus as working on the Sabbath, he does not feel compelled to explain that Christians cannot. When Luke says that people are freed on the Sabbath, he does not feel compelled to qualify what he said. Jesus' example regarding the Sabbath is liberty, not rules.

Endnotes

[14] Jesus clearly said that David did something that was not lawful.

[15] Christianity rejects both the temple and its sacrifices, although some Jewish Christians continued participating in both while the temple still stood. Jesus is more important than those rituals, and they are now obsolete. Jesus is more important than the Sabbath, too, which implies that he has superseded it, just as he superseded the rituals. In defending his Sabbath activities, Jesus put the Sabbath in the same legal category as showbread, sacrifices, and the physical temple, all of which are now obsolete.

[16] In Mark 2:27 Jesus did not use the word for create — he used *egeneto*, which is usually translated “became.” This word does not allude to the creation account (the Septuagint does not use *egeneto* in Genesis 2:2-3), nor can any stress be put on the English word “made,” since it is not in the Greek.

[17] The rabbis taught that Gentiles should observe laws that go back to Noah, and the Sabbath was not part of the “Noachian” requirements (see the *Jewish Encyclopedia* or the *Encyclopedia Judaica*). Although the number of Noachian laws and the prohibitions varied, the lists did not include the Sabbath. The rabbis looked on the Sabbath, like circumcision, as something that marked the Jewish people as different from other nations. The second-century B.C. book of *Jubilees* gave the view that seems to have been common: “The Creator of all blessed it, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel. He granted to them alone that they might eat and drink and keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth” (Jubilees 2:31, quoted from James Charlesworth, editor, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [Doubleday, 1985], vol. 2, p. 58.). Although the Sabbath was patterned after the creation week, Deuteronomy 5:15 says that the Sabbath was given to the Israelites because God had brought them out of Egypt. That implies that it was not given to other nations. Gentiles did not have a covenant relationship with God.

[18] For example, some might ask: Was the Sabbath made to exalt God, or was it for human benefit? If we use verse 27 to try to answer the question, we are using it out of context and trying to read something into the text. In the same way, we twist the context if we use it to answer questions such as, Was the Sabbath made at creation? — or, Was the Sabbath made for all humans or just for Israelites? These questions are inappropriate for this verse. Jesus was saying that the Sabbath was made for humanitarian benefit; he was not addressing other questions.

[19] Today, we might call various emergencies “an ox in the ditch.” Jesus, however, was not basing his argument on the urgency of the situation. The healing was a humanitarian need, but not an emergency need. Jesus could justify his healing activities equally well by referring to an ox in the ditch or to the ordinary need of leading an animal to water. His point was not urgency, but simple need.

[20] If Sabbath work actually dishonored God, then the Sabbath would have priority over humans in need and oxen in pits, since God is more important than human lives and oxen. If absolute rest were essential to worship, then Sabbath-keepers should let houses burn down, since that would only be a monetary loss, and God’s honor is far more important than our material goods. This indicates that the command to rest on a specific day is a ceremonial matter rather than a moral one. God’s spiritual law does not have any exceptions.

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## **Part 4: Paul and the Sabbath**

**Paul's custom was to keep the Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). Shouldn't we follow his example in this (1 Corinthians 11:1)?**

Paul, like Jesus, customarily went to the synagogue. But why should we insist on imitating one phrase of the sentence and ignore another part? Why should we cite the example of "Sabbath" but not of "synagogue"? The fact that this was a synagogue should alert us to the historical situation and should caution us regarding specific customs. Paul went to the synagogue on the Sabbath because that is when and where people were assembled to hear discussions of Scripture. That is when and where he had an audience. He went to Jews first, and then to Gentiles, and the best way to preach to Jews would be to go to the synagogues on the day Jews were there.[21]

Paul sometimes kept other Jewish customs, too, such as circumcision, making vows and participating in temple rituals. His example isn't automatically authoritative. If we imitate all the ways in which he lived like Jesus, we would have to be celibate traveling preachers. We need to discern which details of their lives were based on the culture they lived in, and which were based on timeless principles.

Paul considered himself under the law of Christ, not under the law of the old covenant (1 Corinthians 9:19-21). He was free to observe old covenant customs when with Jews, and he was free to ignore them in other situations. Peter was free to "live like a Gentile," and Paul was, too (Galatians 2:14). Today, we are to obey the commands of Jesus (Matthew 28:20), and neither Jesus nor Paul ever commanded anyone to rest on the Sabbath.

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul gave a controversial message in the synagogue: "Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified

from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39). The Jews and proselytes asked Paul to speak to them the next Sabbath (verse 42), and that is what Paul did. Paul did not try to change their Sabbath-keeping custom. Large portions of the audience would have had to work the next six days and would not have been able to assemble on Sunday. Also, it would be good for them to think about and discuss Paul’s message for a week. Because Paul waited a week, the entire city was able to hear about the controversy and therefore came to hear him speak (verse 44).

In the Gentile cities of Lystra and Derbe, nothing is said about the Sabbath. Even in Athens, where some Jews lived, nothing is said about the Sabbath. Instead, Paul reasoned “in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (Acts 17:17). Daily preaching is a valid custom, too, if we wish to follow the example set by Paul and Jesus.

Moses was preached in the synagogues every Sabbath, James noted (Acts 15:21). But James was not encouraging Gentiles to attend synagogues! The converts needed to hear about Christ, not about Moses. The Jerusalem conference rejected the view of those who thought the Gentiles had to keep the entire “law of Moses” (verse 5).

“We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (verse 19). Instead of requiring Gentile Christians to keep the law of Moses, the conference told them to abstain from blood, strangled things, idolatry and fornication (verse 20). The council gave a lenient decree because stringent requirements were being preached in the synagogues (verse 21). The Sabbath was part of the law of Moses, just as much as circumcision was, but nothing was said to make the Sabbath an exception, either by the council or by Luke, who wrote many years later for Gentile readers.

In Corinth, Paul again started in the synagogue, and there he argued every Sabbath (Acts 18:4). But soon Paul left the synagogue and began teaching

next door (verse 7). After this, nothing is said about the Sabbath, and Paul could have taught every day of the week. Even as he made tents, he could discuss the Scriptures with any who had time to listen.

In Ephesus, Paul preached every day of the week for two years (Acts 19:9). This is a valid custom, too.

On his way back to Jerusalem, Paul stopped seven days in Troas (Acts 20:6). But we do not hear anything about the Sabbath. What we hear is that the church (“we”) waited until the first day of the week to come together and break bread, and Paul preached after the Sabbath was over (verse 7). Why wait till then? Apparently the first day of the week was the time that the believers could get together. Although Paul was in a hurry (verse 16), he had to wait until the first day of the week. This is a significant example, too.

In short, we are never told that Paul rested on the Sabbath, or that he taught anyone to rest on the Sabbath. What we are told is that he used the day as an evangelistic opportunity, and that he could use any day of the week to preach about the Savior. His example shows liberty, and nothing about requirements.

### **Paul taught regularly on the Sabbath (Acts 18:1-11). Was he teaching the Gentiles to keep the Sabbath?**

This passage says only that he taught in the synagogues for a few Sabbaths — after that, it does not say when he taught. Although it may have been on the Sabbath, it may have been on other days, too, as it was in Athens and Ephesus. And the passage says nothing about avoiding work on a particular day of the week.

The book of Acts tells us what Paul did on a few Sabbaths and a few other days. If we want to know what Paul himself taught about the Sabbath, we must turn to the only place the word “Sabbath” is used in his epistles: Colossians 2:16-17: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat

or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”

Paul begins his analysis of the Sabbath with a “therefore.” That word should alert us to back up and examine the context. It is because Christ has triumphed in the cross (verse 15) that Christians should not let people judge them regarding the Sabbath. Christ’s death on the cross had changed something about the Sabbath. In Colosse, the Sabbath had no connection with temple rituals. The only way it could be observed is by abstaining from work and assembling for worship. But Christ’s death had changed something about the Christians’ approach to the Sabbath. Christians were not to be judged by anyone regarding the Sabbath.

The Sabbath, festivals, new moons and the entire Jewish calendar were a “shadow” of things to come. They were foreshadows — predictive shadows symbolizing things to come. Grammatically, it is not clear as to whether those things have already taken place, or whether some are future. For Christian practice, it does not matter, since Paul’s conclusion is that we should not let others judge us with regard to the Sabbath.

Whether we keep it or whether we do not, we should not let others judge us over this issue. Whether we keep the Sabbath or not, we should not let others make us feel guilty regarding the Sabbath. We should not let others make us think that we will lose our salvation if we don’t comply with their ideas. The Sabbath is neither forbidden nor required. That is why we welcome Sabbath-keepers as well as non-Sabbath-keepers.

The contrast between “shadow” and “reality” is found also in Hebrews 10:1 — the sacrificial laws were a shadow of the good things that were coming (same Greek word and tense as in Colossians 2:17), not the reality. Just as the sacrifices were shadows that pointed to Christ and were



superseded by him, the old covenant worship days were also shadows that pointed to Christ.

Now that he has come, the days are no longer standards by which we are judged. The proper standard is Jesus Christ. At the last judgment, the determining factor will not be about days, but about faith in Jesus Christ. His coming has made an enormous difference in the way God's people should worship in spirit and in truth.

Paul did not teach Gentile Christians to keep the Sabbath. He actually told them that the Sabbath was not an area in which we should be judged. As he told the Roman church, which contained both Jews and Gentiles, "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5).  
[22]

Paul did not think it necessary to tell these people that one particular day is sacred or superior. He left it to individual conviction. How could Paul take such an indifferent attitude to the concept of special days? Apparently something significant had happened — the most significant event in history: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Because of that event, days are no longer a matter for judging behavior.

Paul's main point is that one Christian should not judge another regarding any supposedly better days: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (verse 4). "Each of us will give an account of himself to God," Paul writes in verse 12.

But does this mean that we should live in fear of the last judgment, keeping the Sabbath "just in case," observing new moons "just in case," and other restrictions "just in case"? If a person does these things "to the Lord," they could be acceptable habits. But they cannot be made requirements on

other Christians. Paul's conclusion is clear: "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (verse 13). We should not put obstacles in front of people.

It is good to be obedient, but we must not think that our obedience earns anything toward salvation. Paul warned the Galatian Christians strongly that faith in Christ was sufficient for salvation. Faith leads us to walk by the Spirit, and that means a life-style of love, joy and peace, etc. Faith does not mean a superstitious observance of circumcision or old covenant laws "just in case" they are also necessary.

We are called to faith — confident that the sacrifice of Christ cleanses us from all sin — not to fearful bondage to religious traditions and human rules. Such rules may appear to be religious and they may have the form of godliness, but they do not have the power to transform the heart, which is the focus of Christianity. In fact, rules can become more important to some people than having love for neighbor. The rules can deceive people into thinking that they are right with God merely by keeping the rules. At least that's what they have done with some people.

The Galatians had worshipped numerous gods before they were saved by faith in Christ. But false teachers were apparently saying that, although they had started with Christ, they needed to complete their salvation with circumcision and a commitment to the old covenant (Galatians 5:3). Such a teaching must be condemned! It makes Christ of no value (verse 2).

The old covenant law was slavery, Paul said (Galatians 4:24-25; 5:1; note also the "we" in 4:3), just as paganism was (Galatians 4:8). The Galatian Christians had gone from one childish slavery (paganism, with its many external rules) to another (the old covenant, with its external rules)!

When the Judaizers taught "days and months and seasons and years"

(verse 10), it is likely that they taught the Jewish calendar with its days, lunar months, festival seasons and sabbatical years. Such external requirements were “weak and miserable principles”[23] (verse 9), since they can never earn us salvation, nor are they required after we are given salvation. Christians may keep such days if they want (as many Jewish Christians did), but they should not teach that such days are required under the new covenant.

How could Paul be so indifferent to something that had been a commandment? Because something more significant than the old covenant has come — something more important than manna has given us life. The old covenant worship days were shadows or silhouettes, just as the sacrifices were, and now the Reality has come (Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 10:1-2). The law — the entire old covenant — was in force until Christ came (Galatians 3:25; Hebrews 9:10).

The old covenant was an administration appropriate to a carnal nation. The new covenant is administered in a different way. God’s law is the same, but it is administered in different ways at different times for different peoples and different purposes.

We must recognize the continuing validity of God’s law — but we must recognize that the New Testament gives us a more complete picture than the Old Testament does. We must interpret old laws from the perspective of the new situation Jesus Christ brought. The spiritual purpose of the Sabbath is still valid, but the spiritual purpose is not in the avoidance of work on a specific day. The spiritual purpose is to point us to Christ. Now that we have come to Christ, the pointer is of such diminished importance that (whether we understand its function or not) Paul can say that it is not a matter on which Christians should be judged.

The Sabbath pointed an unconverted nation to its Creator. It gave them frequent reminders of him, just as the temple and its sacrifices did. But now

that the Creator is living in us, we do not need pointers in the same way. Just as we abide by the spiritual purpose of circumcision through repentance and forgiveness — completely ignoring the physical details the old rite demanded — we abide by the spiritual purpose of the Sabbath when we have faith in Christ.

We can see that a little more clearly in Hebrews 4, which we will analyze below, but the conclusion is made necessary simply by Paul's indifferent attitude toward old covenant days. Something so significant has happened that the weekly Sabbath is no longer a matter on which God's people are to be judged.

However, the practical aspects of the Sabbath are still practical. We still need time to worship, and we need time devoted to God. If we work constantly, we will most likely drift away from God and starve ourselves spiritually.

We must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, not only for our own benefit but for the benefit of the entire community of faith. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25). We should come to worship services prepared to encourage others, to give words of praise and thanks to the Lord.

Christians should not use liberty for self-destruction. They should not take their liberty to excess. Most of us recognize that there is great value in setting aside times for worship, times in which we do not allow secular duties to intrude, times for building family cohesion and building the community of faith.

We need to set boundaries for ourselves. This is good for our spiritual growth, and we should not recklessly abandon such valuable customs. But we

realize that the New Testament does not specify when this ought to be done, nor exactly how much time it must involve. Therefore, we cannot demand that others must do precisely as we do. Christ gives liberty not for selfish pleasures, but for service to others (Galatians 5:13). We must be grateful for our freedom and use it to build others up, not to put stumbling blocks in their way. We must not allow our freedom to become offensive to others.

In summary, all the Sabbatarian arguments are faulty. We cannot prove that the Sabbath existed or was commanded before Moses. We cannot prove that it is valid simply because it is part of the Ten Commandments. We cannot prove that it is important for Christians simply because it was important for ancient Israel. We cannot prove that Jesus commanded it or that Paul commanded it. Instead, we see that Jesus consistently argued for more liberty, and Paul said that we should not judge others regarding worship days.

Of course, there is no New Testament verse that says the Sabbath is now obsolete. Instead, there are verses that say the entire old covenant law is obsolete. The law of Moses is not required. The Sabbath is repeatedly likened to things now obsolete: temple sacrifices, circumcision, showbread, a shadow. It is not a basis for judging one another, and it must not be taught as a necessary addition to Christ. Therefore, many Christians conclude that the Sabbath is not required.

If the Sabbath were a requirement, it would be astonishing that the New Testament never mentions such an important command. It has space for all sorts of other commands, including holy kisses, but no occasion to command the Sabbath. Sweeping statements are made regarding the old covenant law, but never does anyone say, “except the Sabbath.” If the Sabbath is essential, it is astonishing that no one is ever criticized for ignoring it.

Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, and he lists numerous sins that can keep people out of the kingdom of God, but he never

mentions the Sabbath. In describing sins of the Gentiles (Romans 1), he says nothing about the Sabbath. He says plenty about faith and love, magnifying the real purpose of God's law, but the Sabbath is simply not commanded. Nor is it credible to claim that the entire New Testament was purposely written in such a way that only a spiritual elite would understand the most important command.

Instead, the Sabbath is an indifferent matter. People are free to rest on that day if they do it to the Lord. People are free to use the day in other ways, too, if they are living to the Lord. Believers are free to meet on the seventh day of the week, or on any other day.

## **Endnotes**

[21] Gentile God-fearers would often attend synagogues on the Sabbath, but they did not necessarily observe the day by abstaining from all work. Apparently the rabbis did not expect noncircumcised people to observe the Sabbath.

[22] The vegetarianism that Paul addressed was a daily life-style, not a restriction placed only on certain days. When Paul wrote to the Roman church, which contained both Jews and Gentiles, and mentioned that some people think certain days are better than others, many readers would conclude that he is referring to Sabbaths in a gentle way.

[23] The Greek word for "principles" is *stoicheia*, which refers to elementary or basic things. Just as the law was a disciplinarian that took young children to school (Galatians 3:24), it contained rules appropriate for immature children. Paul says that "we [including himself as a Jew and his readers as Gentiles] were in slavery under the basic principles of the world" (Galatians 4:3). It was an external approach to religion, having rules about what can be touched or eaten (Colossians 2:20-21). Such regulations appear to be religious, but they do not transform the heart, where real worship ought

to be centered.

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## **Part 5: Does Hebrews 4:9 Command Christians to Keep the Sabbath?**

The epistle to the Hebrews may have been written to Jewish believers who were still participating in the customs of Judaism. The epistle explains that the old covenant is obsolete and its regulations have been set aside. When the word *sabbatismos* is used in 4:9, it is not trying to make an exception for one particular old covenant law.

Throughout the epistle, the readers are admonished that Jesus is much, much better than anything the old covenant had. Jesus Christ is the main focus of the epistle. Tithing is mentioned, for example, only because it shows the superiority of Christ over the Levitical priests. *Sabbatismos* is also mentioned, not as a point in itself, but because it illustrates something about the superiority of faith in Christ.

Jesus is better than angels, better than Moses, better than Aaron, better than all the rituals. He has superseded them all, fulfilling the spiritual truths that they pictured, rendering their physical performance unnecessary. Hebrews 4:9 does not command the continuation of an old covenant practice.

Let us begin our analysis in Hebrews 3: “Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.... Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses” (verses 1, 3). The epistle then quotes from Psalm 95, reminding the Hebrews that their ancestors had hardened their hearts and been faithless and disobedient under Moses’ leadership.

Don’t harden your hearts, the epistle exhorts, echoing the point that had been made in Hebrews 2:1-3. The Hebrew Christians were apparently being tempted to go back into Judaism, and the epistle exhorts them to be faithful to the superiority of Jesus Christ. Listen to what Jesus says (1:2; 2:1). Look to him, not to Moses, as our authority in faith and practice. Look to him as our



High Priest in heaven, not to the Levitical priests in the temple, which are only shadows and copies of spiritual truth (8:1-5; 10:1).

Do not turn away from the living God, the epistle exhorts (3:12). Hold your faith in Christ firmly to the end (3:14). Do not harden your hearts (3:15). We cannot please God if we do not have faith (3:19; 11:6).

The epistle draws an analogy between the Israelites entering the promised land and Christians entering the better promise of the new covenant. This analogy is again designed to show the superiority of Christ. When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they sent spies into Canaan to see the land that the Lord would be giving them. However, most of the Israelite spies were afraid of the Canaanites, and most of the Israelites believed the spies instead of God. God therefore declared that they, since they lacked faith and would not obey his order to invade Canaan, would not enter the promised land: “They shall never enter my rest” (Numbers 14:26-29; Psalm 95:11; Hebrews 3:11). In this psalm, “rest” was a metaphor for the old covenant promise, the land of Canaan.

The next generation of Israelites entered the promised land under Joshua’s leadership. Nevertheless, even after they entered the promised land, God continued to warn them, in the psalm, not to harden their hearts lest they fail to enter God’s rest. So the psalm was pointing toward a future rest (4:8). The promised land had been a physical type or foreshadow of a spiritual rest that the Israelites had not yet entered.

The epistle to the Hebrews picks up the message and continues it: Do not harden your hearts, and do not reject the teaching of Jesus. Do not become unbelieving and disobedient, but continue trusting in Jesus and obey him.

Christians have been given the new covenant, with its better, spiritual promises. They participate in this new covenant through faith in Jesus Christ. They enter God’s rest, his promise, by their faith in Jesus Christ. “Now we

who have believed enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:3) — and that is the “rest” that the psalmist was talking about (verse 3b). Now, because we have entered God’s rest, we must be “careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (verse 1).

The spiritual rest that the psalmist spoke of, the rest that God wants us to enter, has arrived in Jesus Christ. And the way people might fall short is by abandoning their faith in Jesus Christ. We must be careful that we do not lose faith and lose the rest that we have already entered.

In Christ, we have rest. He has freed us from the old covenant, which was a yoke too difficult to bear (Acts 15:10), and has given us a new covenant, which is a yoke that is so much easier to bear that it is called a “rest” (Matthew 11:28-30). When we are in Christ, we are in spiritual rest. We have begun to experience the better promises of God.

God exhorts people to enter his rest — and the place that Scripture talks about God resting is on the seventh day of creation (Hebrews 4:4). We are invited to enter God’s end-of-creation rest by believing in the Son of God. By faith, we have joined with God in his rest. By faith, we have become new creations, created anew. We have been brought into the kingdom of God.

Our re-creation is not yet complete, but we have entered his rest. We have been reconciled and have fellowship with God through our High Priest, just as Adam and Eve had fellowship with God before they sinned. By faith in Christ, we enter God’s rest, as predicted by the psalmist.

We have entered into God’s *katapausin* rest, the same type of rest that he had on the very first seventh day.[24] “Anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his” (4:10). This is far more significant than resting one day a week, because the epistle has already noted that God’s “work has been finished since the creation of the world” (4:3). God’s rest is an enduring rest, and the believer’s rest is, too.

As long as we have faith in Christ, no matter what day of the week it is, we have entered God's rest and we are resting from our own work. Our own work cannot save us, but we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. We enter God's rest permanently through faith in Christ.

“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest [*sabbatismos*] for the people of God” (4:9). The writer is using a different word, but he is not referring to a different rest. Both words are used as metaphors for salvation. As can be seen by the word “then” or “therefore,” it is the same rest that is mentioned in verse 8 — the “rest” of salvation.[25]

The writer of Hebrews is using the words for rest as synonyms, one alluding to the creation rest and the other alluding to its weekly commemoration, but both referring to the same rest that Christians are to try to enter. It is the salvation rest that remains for Christians to enter and to be careful not to fall short of through unbelief. We are exhorted to enter this rest through faith (verses 11, 3).

Let us paraphrase the passage: God promised a rest, but the first Israelites did not enter it because of unbelief and disobedience. Joshua brought them into the land, but the Israelites were still being exhorted to enter the promised rest. It was still future. Therefore, since there is still a promise of rest, we must be careful that we do not fall short of it. We who have faith in Christ enter the promised rest, which is called God's rest.

God rested at the end of creation, so this is the divine rest, the supernatural rest, the spiritual promise that believers enter. Although some people fell short of the promise, it still remains that some will enter it. That's why the psalmist was still exhorting people to hear God's voice and obey him.

If Joshua had fulfilled the promise, God would not have inspired the psalmist to continue exhorting people about the promised rest. Joshua's entry

into the promised land was an antetype of a spiritual entry into a spiritual promise, a spiritual rest. The psalmist was speaking about another day, a day in which people could enter the promise. Therefore, there continues to be a spiritual rest for the people of God, because anyone who enters God's spiritual rest is able to cease from work, just as God ceased from his creative works. Therefore, we should strive to enter this spiritual promise, and not fall away through disobedience.

Why does the writer use the word *sabbatismos*? It refers to the weekly Sabbath, but it is being used figuratively. The author is telling us that this spiritual rest is what the weekly Sabbath had pictured all along. The Sabbath was not only a reminder of the end-of-creation rest and the Exodus, it also looked forward, prefiguring something, as a predictive shadow of a coming reality, our spiritual rest. We enter God's rest by faith in Christ (verse 3), and by doing so, we enter the rest that God entered when he completed his creation (verse 3b-4).

Our salvation rest is a Sabbath-rest, a fulfillment of the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath. If the author wanted to talk about the Sabbath day, he could have used the word for Sabbath. If he wanted to talk about keeping a law, he could have said that, too. But he did not use those words because he is not talking about the Sabbath day itself.

He is not saying whether it is necessary or unnecessary — he is not dealing with that issue. Rather, he is saying that the spiritual promise is a Sabbath-rest. Salvation is pictured by the Sabbath. Whether the Sabbath should continue to be kept as a weekly picture is not being discussed. The author is referring to salvation, the spiritual promised rest. He speaks of only one predicted Sabbath-rest, not a weekly picture of it. He is speaking figuratively of the kingdom of God. We enter our spiritual rest by faith in Christ.

The writer is describing an analogy, and we today often find analogies unconvincing. Even if there are parallels, we might say, that doesn't prove anything, and doesn't prove that the Sabbath is no longer required in its old covenant details. That's true. Hebrews tells us what the Sabbath pictures, but it does not address Christian behavior regarding the Sabbath. For that, we must turn elsewhere, such as the statements of Paul we have already examined.

In summary, Hebrews 4 is not exhorting us to keep a weekly Sabbath, but to enter the rest of God by having faith in Christ. We come to Christ, and he gives us rest.

**We should pray that we don't have to flee on a Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Does this show that Jesus' disciples would be keeping the Sabbath?**

This warning was given "to those who are in Judea" (verse 16). It is preserved only in Matthew's Gospel, probably written to Jewish Christians. Jesus' warning tells us more about practices in Judea than it does about Christianity.

It is permissible to flee for one's life on the Sabbath. The reason it might be difficult to flee on the Sabbath, however, is that non-Christians in Judea are keeping the Sabbath, not that the fleeing Christians are. Perhaps the fleeing people keep the Sabbath or perhaps they do not, but either way it might be difficult to flee when the people of Judea have closed their shops, closed the city gates, etc. This verse does not prove that the disciples would be keeping the Sabbath — only that it might be difficult to flee on a Sabbath.

**The resurrection stories show that the Sabbath still existed after Jesus' crucifixion. The women "rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). Does this show**

## **that the Sabbath is still commanded for Christians?**

The Sabbath still exists. Hanukkah does, too, but its existence does not prove that it has to be observed. When the Gospels tell us that the resurrection was discovered “after the Sabbath, on the first day of the week,” they are not telling us to keep the Sabbath any more than they are telling us to keep the first day of the week. They are simply telling us when this event occurred, using the term that was widely known at the time.

The women rested on the Sabbath, but their example does not tell us whether that commandment is still in effect. Today, many Sabbatarians would consider it permissible to prepare a body for burial, especially if the person had been dead for more than a day and there is no refrigeration. Luke’s readers, whether they kept the Sabbath or not, might have wondered why the women rested even though they were faced with this particular need. Luke was inspired to tell his readers that the women rested because of the commandment.

Luke used the word “commandment,” but that does not prove that the commandment was required for Luke’s readers. Paul used the word “commandments” to describe the rules that divided Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15), but the word does not imply that those commandments still had validity for his readers.

Luke is simply using commonly understood terms to explain why the women rested. He is not giving a command for his readers to follow that example.

In a similar way, the phrase “a Sabbath day’s walk” (Acts 1:12) does not imply anything regarding the distance we may travel today on the Sabbath. The phrase was simply a measurement of distance, just as “Sabbath” was the name of one day of the week. The name does not imply continuing obligation for Christians.

**The Sabbath is a reminder of creation and it points to salvation. God is re-creating us. However, our creation is not yet complete. Should we therefore continue to keep the weekly Sabbath as a celebration of salvation in Christ?**

The Sabbath was indeed a memorial of creation. And it foreshadowed and pointed to our salvation in Christ. And our salvation is not yet complete. Nevertheless, Paul says that we are new creations. John says that we have already been given eternal life, and that eternal life is in Jesus Christ. We have been given the promised Holy Spirit, guaranteeing the future promises. We do not yet have the fullness of salvation, but we have enough. Paul can say that we should not let anyone judge us regarding the Sabbath. The reality is Christ, and we have the reality, even if it's not yet in its fullness.

The sacrifices pictured our cleansing from sin, and yet we see that we are not yet sinless. But that doesn't mean that we still need sacrifices. Although the last judgment has not yet been done, the verdict has been declared for all who have faith. Circumcision pictured a cleansed heart, and we are not yet perfect in our hearts, but the physical symbol is not required. Likewise, although our re-creation is not yet complete, even the beginning is sufficient to make old covenant practices unnecessary and not a basis for judging others. Of course, we still have a practical need for physical rest and worship times, but we cannot use the old covenant to demand that everyone rest and worship at the same time that we do.

The Sabbath pointed to our renewal in Christ, and in that spiritual meaning, the Sabbath is still required — just as the spiritual meaning of circumcision is required, and the spiritual meaning of the sacrifices is still valid. But the physical details of such laws are in a different category.

That is why Paul could treat the question of special days in such a take-it-or-leave-it way (Romans 14:5). If the people had faith in Christ, if their entire

lives were devoted to the Lord, then they were already abiding by the purpose of sacred days. They were already experiencing the holiness, righteousness, peace and joy that come with the kingdom of God, in which God had placed them based on their faith in Christ. God's own presence is in the saints on a full-time basis.

**The Sabbath points to the re-creative, redemptive work of Christ, which is the most important event of all history. Shouldn't we commemorate this weekly?**

The Bible tells us to commemorate Christ's redemption by means of bread and wine, not by a day of rest. Jesus made it clear, in his controversies with the Pharisees, that it is wrong to add requirements to God's law and make things more difficult. We cannot teach as a requirement something that the Bible does not. It is good to commemorate Christ's salvation in weekly worship services, but we cannot insist that everybody worship on the same day and time we do.

**The early church kept the Sabbath. Wasn't it the influence of paganism that motivated some people to abandon it?**

The earliest church was entirely Jewish, and it continued the practice of circumcision and other old covenant customs, too. It was only through time, discussion and the intervention of the Holy Spirit that the church came to understand that Jewish customs should not be imposed on others. Although Gentiles were being grafted into Israel, figuratively speaking, making them spiritual Israelites, they did not have to live like Jews (Galatians 2:14). They did not have to obey all the rules that separated Jews from Gentiles.

However, it was not paganism that prompted Paul to say that he was not under the old covenant law (1 Corinthians 9:19-21), or that Christians did not have to keep "the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5, 28). And it was not paganism



that motivated Paul to say that days were not something to judge each other about (Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16).

Many early Christian martyrs met for worship on Sunday. That doesn't prove that this was the only acceptable day of worship, but their willingness to die for their faith in Jesus is evidence that they were not compromisers. They were not likely to give up essentials merely for convenience or to make Christianity more attractive to pagans. In their lives and in their deaths, the central issue was allegiance to Christ, not whether they abstained from work on any particular day.

Although some early Christians kept the Sabbath, many others did not, and allegations of paganism are designed more to frighten people than to examine history objectively. Our doctrine must be based on Scripture, not on ancient or modern history.

**Many Christians have lost their jobs because they kept the Sabbath, and God miraculously provided better jobs. Doesn't his blessing show the correctness of their behavior and God's approval of Sabbath-keeping?**

God looks on the heart, on the attitude, and he blesses his people even if their behavior is based on a misunderstanding. He honors sincerity. If we do something with the conviction that God wants us to do it, he is pleased with our willingness, and he may reward such sacrifices, but his rewards do not necessarily endorse our particular understanding.

**Many spiritual leaders kept the Sabbath, and we respect them. Wasn't God inspiring them, and shouldn't we follow their example?**

Many godly men and women have kept the Sabbath and inspired others to follow their example. But other faithful Christians, such as Peter Waldo, John

Calvin and William Miller, observed Sunday, and many Christians followed the example they set. Such examples can be emotionally powerful to those who knew the people personally or knew them through their writings, but the examples do not carry as much weight with the general public.

When we preach to the public, we cannot ask them to follow a human — we must point them directly to Christ. The example of highly respected leaders, like any tradition, must be evaluated according to the biblical testimony. It is Christ we must preach, as he is revealed in the Old and New Testaments.

**The Sabbath gives us rest from our physical labors, giving us more time for worship, fellowship and good works. It is a spiritually valuable time. Wouldn't it be wrong to neglect it?**

The old covenant specified exactly when and how much time should be separated for the Lord. It specified when and how and where to make sacrifices. These physical requirements helped keep the people aware of God, reminding them of their need for reconciliation and fellowship with him.

In the new covenant, however, we have been given the fellowship with God that the old covenant customs pictured. The Holy Spirit lives within us, helping us be aware of our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit transforms our hearts, leading us to love the Lord and to desire to spend time with him. It is good for us to spend time with the Lord and with his people. Those who neglect worship time stunt their spiritual growth.

However, we have no biblical authority to mandate that everybody set aside the same time that we do. We encourage people to set aside time for prayer, Bible study, fellowship and good works, but we should not judge anyone regarding the days they keep. It is physically helpful to rest from our labors. It is spiritually helpful to devote time each week to the Lord, and we encourage people to do this, but we do not condemn those who do not set

aside a 24-hour block of time. Rather than relying on an external discipline of rules, each Christian needs self-discipline to devote time to the Lord for spiritual growth.

Devoting time to the Lord includes prayer, study and worship services, of course. It can also include volunteer work in humanitarian service, such as by helping out at a hospital. Since service is one way to express true Christianity, service projects can rightly express the spiritual purpose of a day of worship.

As a practical need, of course, we appoint a day and time for worship meetings. We encourage all who can to meet with us and worship the Creator and Savior with us, but we do not condemn those who worship on another day.

### **Shouldn't we uphold the law?**

We should use the law in a lawful way — and the new covenant, the law that Christians are now under, does not permit us to dictate when and how much time other Christians should give to the Lord. It does not permit us to bind heavy burdens on people and threaten them with the lake of fire if they don't comply with our understanding. The real law we must be concerned about is the spiritual law, not the precise way the old covenant was to be administered.

We want to uphold the law in the way that is appropriate to the age we live in, after the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The New Testament gives hundreds of commands. It gives a high standard of conduct for God's people. It quotes various laws and amplifies them to the intents of the heart.

But it never commands Sabbath-keeping, and it commands the church not to lay unauthorized restrictions on God's people. We should never let traditions annul the Word of God, and that includes traditions about old covenant customs that were once authorized, but now are not authorized.

People who are led by God's Spirit want to obey our Creator and Savior. We also want to emphasize that salvation is by grace through faith, and we accept as Christian everyone who has faith in Christ.

Some Christians may continue to believe that their Savior wants them to keep the Sabbath. We do not criticize them for acting in accordance with their beliefs. We do not require people to change what they do on the weekly Sabbath. We are saying that we should not judge one another regarding this day.

We are saved by grace, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't matter how we live. Paul clearly expects believers to adhere to certain standards of conduct. But he treated the Sabbath as a matter of individual conscience, not for enforced conformity. He could approach the Sabbath in the same way as he dealt with circumcision: He could take it or leave it. Why could he take such liberty with the Sabbath? It was not a requirement because faith in Christ superseded it.

All who have faith in Jesus Christ are already abiding by the intent of the Sabbath law. If we walk by the Spirit, we are fulfilling the requirements of the law (Romans 8:5). We have come to Christ and he has given us rest. All who believe have entered God's rest. Although a future rest yet remains, we have already entered into rest, and a specific day of rest is no longer required.

Our relationship with God depends on faith in Christ, not on a specific block of time. Of course, this does not do away with our practical need to give time to the Lord to pray, study, and imitate Jesus' life-style of good works to the needy and preaching the gospel.

Christ exhorts his church to meet regularly to encourage one another in faith and good works and to worship. Since God does not give a complete spectrum of his gifts to any one person, we need to work together to help one another grow in maturity. Christians should make reasonable efforts to meet

weekly with the fellowship God has placed them in.

In summary, we enter God's rest, the true Sabbath, by having faith in Christ. Simultaneously, it is also through Christ that we are justified, regenerated, re-created, and adopted into the family of God. These are all metaphors for salvation. The Christian Sabbath is the regenerated life of faith in Jesus Christ, in whom every believer finds true rest. The weekly seventh-day Sabbath, which was commanded for Israel in the Ten Commandments, was a shadow that prefigured the true Reality to whom it pointed — our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.[27]

## Endnotes

[24] The Septuagint version uses the verb form of *katapausin* in Genesis 2:2.

[25] Joshua, entering the promised land, did not give the people the spiritual rest (*katapausin*) of God. That's why the psalmist, centuries later, spoke about another day. Therefore, verse 9 says, for that reason, because the psalmist spoke of a future rest (*katapausin*), it logically follows that there still remains a Sabbath-rest (*sabbatismos*) for the people of God, and, verse 11, we should make every effort to enter that rest (*katapausin*). However, if the *sabbatismos* rest were different than the *katapausin* rest, then it would not logically follow that the *sabbatismos* remains simply because the psalmist talked about a *katapausin*. Verse 10, which begins with "for," also presents a logical connection between *sabbatismos* and *katapausin*. A *sabbatismos* exists for Christians because they enter God's *katapausin*. The logical connection would not exist if these were two different rests. The equivalence of *katapausin* and *sabbatismos* can be further seen in the parallel way they are used. In verse 1, he says that the promise of *katapausin* rest still stands. In verse 6, he says that it still remains (*apoleipetai*) that some will enter the *katapausin* rest. And in verse 9, he says that there remains (*apoleipetai*) a

*sabbatismos* rest for us.

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# **Summary: Is the Sabbath Required for Christians Today?**

## **Can the fourth commandment be obsolete?**

The Bible says, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8). God’s people were told to rest on the seventh day of every week. Nevertheless, most Christians today do not observe the seventh-day Sabbath—they say it is obsolete. This article explains why.

We will examine the major questions, and give brief answers. We have longer explanations available for each question, but this article will give a concise overview.

### **1. Was the Sabbath commanded at creation, even before humanity sinned?**

There is no evidence in the Bible that God commanded the Sabbath before the days of Moses. Genesis says that God rested, but nowhere does it say that the first humans were commanded to follow his example. Before humans sinned, they lived in a blessed and holy time, in which they were in a state of peace with God, trustful and obedient. They did not need to labor in the way they later did. They did not need to set aside a day for communion with God, for they had it continually. The first human did not need to rest on the second day of his life.

God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, but that does not mean that he required people to rest on it. As the Jubilee year shows (Leviticus 25:8-12), time can be holy without requiring a rest. In the days of Moses, the creation week was used as a pattern for commanding the seventh-day Sabbath, but that *pattern* does not prove that the Sabbath existed ever since creation.

If God commands the Sabbath, then we should keep it, of course, even if we have to adjust our schedules, suffer financially, and alienate our families. But if God does not require the Sabbath, then it would be wrong to put this unnecessary burden on anyone. When the effect on our lives is so great, we need to make sure that we have a clear command from God, not a questionable inference. Genesis does not command the Sabbath, never mentions the word, and never pictures anyone as keeping it.

Abraham kept all of God's commands (Genesis 26:5), but this does not mean that he kept all the annual festivals, sacrificed his firstborn animals, or did any of the other laws that Moses gave. This verse tells us that Abraham was obedient to all the laws that applied to *him*, but it doesn't tell us *which laws applied*. The Jewish Talmud says that Abraham did *not* keep the Sabbath; the Jews believed that the Sabbath was given, as the Bible describes, through Moses to the Israelite people.

## **2. The Sabbath was called holy time. Doesn't it remain holy forever?**

Not necessarily. In ancient Israel's worship system, many things and places were holy. Firstborn animals and children were holy (Exodus 13:1-2), but they are not holy in the same way today. The Jubilee Year was holy, but it is not so today. The laws of holiness told the Jews how to worship God, and although we might think that worship laws telling us how to show love to God are the most important, the fact is that *many* of ancient Israel's worship laws are now obsolete. God does not expect us to worship him in exactly the same way that the Israelites did.

## **3. The Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. Shouldn't Christians keep the Ten Commandments?**

Christians generally agree that nine of the Ten Commandments still apply



today. The last six commandments are quoted several times in the New Testament—but it is a mistake to *assume* that the Sabbath command is also commanded today. We are asking *whether* all Ten of the Commandments are still required—we cannot assume in advance that all Ten *must* stay together. We need to see what the Bible says about it.

The Bible refers to the Ten Commandments *as a group* in only three places. They are called the covenant that God made with his people through Moses (Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 4:13)—and this covenant is now obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). Christians are not required to keep “the law of Moses” (Acts 15). The law-code of Moses, although containing some eternally-valid laws, also contains some temporary laws that became obsolete when Jesus Christ came. All Christians agree that *some* of these God-given laws became obsolete; the question now is whether the list of obsolete laws happens to include the Sabbath. We cannot judge the law by its neighbors—we cannot *assume* that it is valid, nor can we *assume* it is obsolete.

To answer our question, we must turn to the New Testament. Although some of the commandments are quoted at various places in the New Testament, the only place in the New Testament where the Ten Commandments are mentioned *as a group* is in 2 Corinthians 3. There, Paul talks about tablets of stone when Moses’ face was shining in glory (vs. 3, 7). Clearly, Paul is talking about the Ten Commandments. Notice what he says: They are the letter that kills, a ministry of death and condemnation, which came in glory but its glory is now fading away (vs. 6-11). The new covenant, in contrast, is a ministry that brings life, is much more glorious, and is a ministry that does not fade away.

Paul did not praise the Ten Commandments as part of the Christian way of life. Rather, he pointed out ways in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is *different* from the Ten Commandments. They were part of a ministry that was

fading away. Since Paul says that the ministry of the letter is fading, it should be no surprise if we find that one of the Ten was a temporary command. *Something* about those stone tablets is fading away; we cannot assume that all Ten Commandments are eternal.

#### **4. Didn't Exodus 31:16 declare the Sabbath to be a perpetual covenant between God and his people?**

Yes, but so was circumcision (Genesis 17:13) and the weekly showbread (Leviticus 24:8). The same Hebrew word is used to say that the Day of Atonement is a lasting ordinance, and the Levitical priesthood will continue (Leviticus 16:29; Exodus 29:9; 40:15). Obviously, the Hebrew word does not mean eternal. The covenant that God made with the Israelites is now obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

God gave the Sabbath to the Israelites as a sign between God and the Israelites (Exodus 31:17). The Sabbath made the Israelites different from other nations—but Paul says that the laws that separated Jews and Gentiles have been done away by the cross of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-18).

#### **5. Didn't Isaiah say that Gentiles would be blessed for keeping the Sabbath?**

Yes, he did. He also said that Gentiles will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices (Isaiah 56:7). The prophets predicted that people will observe new moons (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3), discriminate against uncircumcised people (Isaiah 52:1-2; Ezekiel 44:9), sacrifice in the temple (Ezekiel 20:40; Zechariah 14:20-21) and observe other laws that Christians do not need to. The prophets lived under the old covenant, and they described devotion to God in terms of the old covenant. We cannot assume that those specifics apply to Christians in this age.

#### **6. Jesus kept the Sabbath. Shouldn't we follow his example?**

Yes, Jesus kept the Sabbath. He kept all the Jewish laws, because he was born under the law and kept it perfectly (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 4:15). He killed Passover lambs, tithed to the Levites, told cleansed people to make offerings commanded by Moses (Matthew 8:4), and he observed Hanukkah (John 10:22). He would have worn blue threads on his garments (Numbers 15:38) and done a lot of other things that Christians aren't required to imitate. When we look at the example he set, we must remember the historical context.

What kind of example did Jesus set on the Sabbath? The Bible never says that he rested—we are told only of his *activity*. He never commands anyone to keep the Sabbath, nor praises anyone for it. Rather, he constantly criticized people who had rules about what could or could not be done on the Sabbath. He always taught more freedom, never any restrictions. Although he told people to be very strict about some laws (Matthew 5:21, 28, etc.), he was always liberal about the Sabbath.

Jesus always compared the Sabbath to ceremonial laws, not to moral laws. When his disciples were picking grain, he used the example of the showbread, and the work of the priests in the temple (Matthew 12:3-6). Those rituals were just as important as the Sabbath. He said that circumcision could be done on the Sabbath (John 7:22), which indicates that circumcision is a more important law than the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a ritual law—it says that behavior that is perfectly good one day, is forbidden on another, simply because the earth has rotated. But true morality does not change from one day of the week to another. When ritual laws became obsolete when Jesus died, it should be no surprise that the ritual of the Sabbath also became obsolete.

Jesus said that daily chores could be done on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15). Even hard labor could be done in an emergency (Luke 14:5). He told a healed man to carry his sleeping mat, even though there was no hurry (John 5:8). He

even used the word “work” to describe his activity (v. 17). Many Christians follow *this* example. They remember that Jesus consistently criticized the Sabbath rules of the Pharisees, and that he treated it as a ritual law.

### **7. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for humans (Mark 2:27).**

Circumcision was made for humans, too. All of God’s laws, even the obsolete ones, were made for humans. The Sabbath law was made to benefit humans, to serve them, not become an unpleasant burden. Jesus said this to argue for liberty, not for making requirements. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath—he has authority over it, and he can set it aside if he wants to.

### **8. Luke 23:56 tells us that even after Jesus’ crucifixion, the women “rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment” (Luke 23:56). Does this show that the Sabbath is still commanded for Christians?**

The women rested on the Sabbath, but their example does not tell us whether that commandment is still in effect. They did not yet understand that God no longer required ritual laws. Luke’s readers might have wondered why the women rested even though they were faced with an urgent need, so Luke told them why—the women rested because of the commandment.

Luke used the word “commandment,” but that does not prove that the commandment was required for Luke’s readers. Paul used the same word to describe the rules that divided Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15), but Paul says that those commandments do not have any validity for his readers. The word “commandment” does not imply any validity or permanence. Luke is simply using ordinary words to explain why the women rested. He is not commanding his readers to follow that example.

### **9. Jesus said that his disciples should pray not to flee on the Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Doesn’t this mean that we should be**

## keeping it?

No. It is permissible to flee for your life on the Sabbath. But Jesus said that people *in Judea* (v. 16) could find it difficult, just as they would find it difficult but not sinful to flee in winter (v. 20). This verse does not say whether the disciples would be keeping the Sabbath or not—it just recognizes that other people in Judea would be, so it would be difficult for the disciples to flee when city gates were closed, shops were closed, etc. This verse does not command the Sabbath—it only shows that it would be difficult for people in Judea to flee on the Sabbath.

## **10. Hebrews 4:9 says that a Sabbath-rest still remains for believers today.**

Hebrews 4 is talking about a future rest. People did not have this rest in Joshua's day, nor when Psalm 95 was written (v. 8), so this chapter is not talking about the weekly Sabbath. This rest is entered by faith in Christ (v. 2). By using the word "Sabbath-rest," Hebrews is saying that the weekly Sabbath symbolized the real rest that God wants his people to enter. Just as the Levitical sacrifices symbolized the work of Christ, the weekly Sabbath pictured our final salvation. This symbolism says nothing about whether Christians should continue observing the symbols.

In one way, symbols are obsolete, but in another way, they are still required. Circumcision is a great example. Christians do not have to be physically circumcised (Romans 2:29)—but we should be circumcised in the heart. We are to keep this ritual law, but we do so in the spirit, not the letter. In one sense, Christ has made the law obsolete; in another way, he has transformed it and still requires it in its transformed way. The same is true of the Levitical rituals: although we do not offer animal sacrifices, we are obedient to those laws when we have faith that Jesus Christ fulfilled those

sacrifices. The requirement has been transformed.

In a similar way, since the Sabbath points toward our final salvation, and this salvation is in Christ, we are abiding by the *purpose* of the Sabbath command when we put our faith in Christ. It is in him that we find the rest that we need (Matthew 11:28-30). The requirement for rest has been transformed to focus on Christ rather than a day of the week. If we have faith in him, we are entering God's rest and we are therefore keeping the spiritual intent of the Sabbath.

### **11. Revelation says that the end-time people of God will be keeping God's commandments (Revelation 12:17).**

This verse does not say *which* commandments are still valid. It is wrong to *assume* that it means the Ten, when God has actually given many more commandments than that.

### **12. Didn't Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, keep the Sabbath?**

When Paul was preaching the gospel in a new city, his custom was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). But this does not mean that he *kept* the Sabbath. Paul wanted to preach to Jews first, and the best place to do this was in a synagogue, and the best day to do it was the Sabbath, when the Jews were there. It was simply a good evangelistic strategy to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. However, Paul never taught anyone to keep the Sabbath.

Paul sometimes kept Jewish laws such as circumcision, making vows, and participating in temple rituals (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:26). When he was with Jews, he lived like they did—but he did not consider himself to be under the old covenant law (1 Corinthians 9:20). When with Gentiles, he could live like a Gentile, just as Peter could (v. 21; Galatians 2:14). In the first century, neither Jews nor Gentiles believed that Gentiles should keep the Sabbath. If

Paul had a different view, we should expect to see some evidence, but there is none.

In the Gentile cities of Lystra, Derbe and Athens, nothing is said about the Sabbath. In some places, Paul preached every day (Acts 17:17; 19:9). When he was in Troas, we do not hear anything about the Sabbath. Rather, the church waited until the first day of the week to come together and break bread (Acts 20:7). The example of Paul, like that of Jesus, is always liberty, and makes no restrictions or commandments about the Sabbath.

Before we see what Paul taught about the Sabbath, let us summarize our observations.

- The first place we see a *command* for the Sabbath is in the law of Moses.
- The law of Moses contains many commands that Christians do not have to keep.
- Even laws that came before Moses, such as circumcision, can be obsolete.
- To see which laws are obsolete, we need to study the New Testament.
- The New Testament never commands the Sabbath.

Jesus always criticizes Sabbath rules, and never tells anyone to be careful about what they do on the Sabbath.

- Jesus always groups the Sabbath with ceremonial and ritual laws.
- Peter and Paul could live like Gentiles if they wanted to.
- Paul said that *something* about the Ten Commandments was fading away.

Should Christians keep the seventh-day Sabbath? Is the command clear enough to require people to lose their jobs and alienate their families? No—the only place that the Sabbath is commanded is in a covenant that the New

Testament calls obsolete. True, the New Testament does not explicitly say that the Sabbath is obsolete. Instead, it says much more—that the entire old covenant is obsolete. It says that Christians do not have to keep the law of Moses. It says a large category of law is no longer required, and it never tells Christians to keep the Sabbath. *None* of the Sabbatarian arguments proves that the Sabbath is still commanded.

If the Sabbath were required, it is surprising that the New Testament never repeats the command. It has space for all sorts of other commands, from holy kisses to avoiding idolatry, but it never commands the Sabbath. It never criticizes anyone for breaking it. Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, but he never tells slaves or others how to keep the Sabbath. He lists numerous sins that can keep a person out of the kingdom of God, but he never mentions the Sabbath. If the Sabbath is important, the silence of the New Testament is astounding.

But the evidence against the Sabbath goes even further than what we have covered. The New Testament not only *fails to command* the Sabbath—it says that it is *wrong to require it*.

### **13. Christians should not judge one another regarding the Sabbath.**

The only time that Paul mentions the Sabbath by name is in Colossians 2:16-17. He says, “Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” Here, Paul groups the weekly Sabbath with the annual festivals, the monthly rituals, and eating and drinking restrictions of Judaism.

There is no translation problem here—Paul is talking about the weekly Sabbath and saying that it, like the other rituals of Judaism, is not a basis for



judging. The Christians at Colossae should not let other people judge them by what they do on the Sabbath day—and in the same way, they should not judge other Christians by what *they* do on the Sabbath. In other words, they are not to say it is wrong for other Christians to be working on the Sabbath. Christians should not let anyone make them feel guilty for what they do on the Sabbath.

The reason for this, Paul says, is because Christ is the reality that these rituals symbolized. Since Christ has canceled our debts (v. 14), we should *therefore* not let anyone criticize us for what we do on the Sabbath. Because of the cross, the regulations about the Sabbath (as well as the new moons and annual festivals) are obsolete.

Paul told the Galatians that the promises of salvation were given to Abraham (Galatians 3:16). Then a law was added 430 years later—meaning all the laws added through Moses (v. 17). This law was temporary, in effect only until “the Seed” (Christ) had come (v. 19). This law was put into effect until Christ, but now that he has come, we are not under the supervision of that law (vs. 24-25). The New Testament message is consistent: the old covenant, the law of Moses, is obsolete. If a command (such as the Sabbath) can be found *only* within the temporary law, then it is not likely to still be required.

#### **14. In Christianity, every day may be treated alike.**

In Romans 14, Paul writes that some Christians consider “one day more sacred than another,” whereas other Christians consider “every day alike.” In the Roman church, partly composed of Jews and partly composed of Gentiles, it is obvious what kind of days might be considered sacred.

But Paul says, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” In other words, he is saying that it is permissible for a Christian to think that every day is alike! He did not feel any need to explain that one day of the

week should be considered different. He was quite content for Christians to consider them all the same. His concern here, as it was in Colossians, was that Christians should not judge one another about their different customs (v. 4).

Paul was indifferent about the question of days—and the only reason that he could be indifferent about it, was that he considered the Sabbath command to be obsolete. If Christians work on the Sabbath, we are not to judge them or call them wrong, because they are not wrong. The Sabbath command does not apply.

First-century Jews did not think that the Sabbath applied to Gentiles, anyway. Paul would have had an uphill battle if he had wanted to teach otherwise. The reason that Paul could be so indifferent about days, that he could tell people not to judge one another about them, is that they were not commanded.

## **15. God accepts us on the basis of Christ, not on whether we keep a certain day of the week.**

The Sabbath (or any other distinctive practice) can deceive a person and subtly reduce the importance of Jesus Christ. The tendency is to think, “I please God because I keep the Sabbath. I am counted as one of his people because I keep the Sabbath.” But God knows us as his people through Christ, not through a day of the week. The Bible says that the *only* reason that we please God is because of Jesus Christ:

“He saved us, *not because of righteous things we had done*, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7).

No matter how many laws we keep, we are sinners, and the only reason

that we can be saved is because Jesus died for our sins. But a focus on laws, especially laws that make us different from other people, tends to put the focus back onto ourselves—and what we do. For some people, the badge of betterness is a certain style of worship. For others, it is a certain belief, or the avoidance of alcohol, or a style of dress. For Sabbatarians, it is the Sabbath. Not everyone falls into this trap, of course, but the more distinctive the doctrines, the more likely that people will value them too highly.

Suppose we come to the Day of Judgment and we are asked, “Why should we let *you* into the kingdom of God?” How will we answer? Will we talk about what laws we kept? Or will we trust in Christ alone? Will we try to claim *part* of the credit? The Bible says that our only basis of salvation is faith in Christ, and that no one has *anything* to boast about (Ephesians 2:8-9). Our works don’t count for anything; our only hope is Jesus Christ, and any doctrine or practice that obscures this fact is an enemy of faith. Anything that tempts us to look at what *we* do, tempts us to take away some of the trust that we should be giving to Christ.

Christians try to obey God, but our obedience does not count anything for our salvation. There are many reasons to obey God (faith in his wisdom, gratitude for his mercy, personal love for him, desire to spread the gospel, etc.), but salvation is not one of them. Salvation is a gift; obedience is a response—and that is for laws that are still valid in the New Testament era. If obeying a valid law counts for nothing, what good does it do to keep an obsolete one?

Christians may refrain from work one day a week if they wish. Spiritual disciplines like that *can* be helpful to a person’s spiritual growth, but they can also become obstacles, if people begin to think that these particular practices make them better than others. And these practices can become spiritually dangerous, if people think that everyone else ought to measure up to the way

they worship God. Christians should not place themselves “under the law” (Galatians 3:25) as if the laws of Moses still had authority over them.

Jesus criticized people who taught requirements that God did not have: “You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46). When we teach requirements, we need to be very careful.

The Sabbath has nothing to do with salvation, and nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was never part of the message of the New Testament church. The message is always one of liberty, never one of restrictions on a particular day of the week. God accepts us because of Jesus Christ, not because of anything that we do. It is by grace, not works. We are to trust in Christ for our salvation.

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Michael Morrison received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006. He is Dean of Faculty and Professor of New Testament for [Grace Communion Seminary](#). He is the author of:

Print:

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Trinitarian theology: a survey of theology with the merits of a Trinitarian perspective. We begin with the question, "Who is God?" Then, "Who are we in relationship to God?" In this context, "How then do we serve?"

Part-time study: designed to help people who are already serving in local congregations. There is no need to leave your current ministry.

Full-time students are also welcome.

Flexibility: your choice of master's level continuing education courses or pursuit of a degree: Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Theological Studies.

Affordable, accredited study: Everything can be done online.

For more information, go to www.gcs.edu. Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, www.deac.org. The Accrediting Commission is listed by the U.S.

Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency.

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Ambassador College of Christian Ministry

Want to better understand God's Word? Want to know the Triune God more deeply? Want to share more joyously in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit? Want to be better equipped to serve others?

Among the many resources that Grace Communion International offers are the training and learning opportunities provided by ACCM. This quality, well-structured Christian Ministry curriculum has the advantage of being very practical and flexible. Students may study at their own pace, without having to leave home to undertake full-time study.

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