

THE LAW OF THE SABBATH An Issue of Debate for Christians Today

Should Christians observe the Sabbath on Saturday and not on Sunday? Some proponents of Saturday Sabbath-keeping suggest this may be an issue of faithfulness. Is this strict view valid? An examination of the Scriptures clarifies this subject, and, more importantly, reveals what the real focus should be—the prophetic antitypical significance of the Sabbath Day.

THE SABBATH LAW UPON THE JEWS

In six epoch days, God accomplished His work of creation. On the seventh day God rested—“*ceased from His own works.*” (Heb. 4:10) This was the first Sabbath Day mentioned in the Scriptures, and is a beautiful example of the primary purpose of the Sabbath—rest from labor.

There is no other mention in the Scriptures of the Sabbath during the entire period from that account until Israel’s exodus from Egypt. At that time, it was ordained for the nation of Israel as a memorial of their deliverance from bondage. “*Remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and an outstretched arm: therefore, the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the Sabbath Day.*” (Deut. 5:15) The Law Covenant is continually referred to as dating from that time “*...when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.*” (Heb. 8:8; Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 20:5, 6) Not until Mt. Sinai, when the Law was formally inaugurated and given to Israel on two tablets of stone, was the day Sabbath made obligatory on anyone. From the entire account it is evident that keeping the Sabbath was something *new* to the Israelites.

The import of the Fourth Commandment of the Jewish Law is indisputable. It distinctly commanded that the *seventh day* of the week should be to the Jews a rest day, in which no work of any kind should be done, either by parent or child, employer or servant, male or female, ox or ass or any creature owned by a Jew. (Ex. 20:8-11) The strictness of this Law upon the Jews is fully attested to by the fact that upon one occasion, by Divine command, a man was stoned to death for merely picking up sticks on the Sabbath Day. The Law given to Israel on this

subject meant what it said to the very *letter*. To the Jews these things were realities, fixed upon them and bound to them by Divine decrees.

OTHER SABBATH ORDINANCES

We are reminded that Israel had two systems of Sabbaths—one of Sabbath Days and the other of Sabbath Years. The Sabbath Days began to count in the spring. The seventh day, the seventh month, and the seventh year were, in fact, all prominent under the Law unto the Jews. The seventh *day* was observed as a period to cease from toil, a period of physical rest. In the seventh *month*, atonement for sin was

provided that Israel might have rest from sin. (Lev. 16:29-31) In the seventh *year*, one might be released from the bondage of servitude. Deut. 15:12

Additionally, the grandest of all Sabbaths was the *Jubilee* year which occurred when the Sabbath (seventh) year was multiplied by seven (forty-nine years) and was climaxed by the added fiftieth year. Then all mortgages, liens and judgments against persons and lands were canceled—actual real estate was returned to every family. It was a year of rest, peace, and joy to those who were toiling under any sort of bondage or obligation. Lev. 25:8-17

These ordinances of days, months and years, were but a part of the entire Law given by God to the children of promise in order that they might be preserved as a people to bring forth the *promised seed*: “*Wherefore then [serveth] the Law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was*

made; [and it was] ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.” (Gal. 3:18-19) Therefore, it was given to the Jewish people to preserve the promise once given to Abraham that in his *seed*, all the families of the earth would be blessed. Indeed, the Law brought forth the *seed of promise*—Christ Jesus.

LORD OF THE SABBATH

Born a Jew, “*born under the Law,*” Jesus was as much obligated to keep that Law in its very letter as was any other Jew—and that included keeping Sabbath. Jesus fully understood, “*till heaven and*



earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the Law till all is fulfilled.” (Matt. 5:18) Jesus went beyond keeping the Law—he fulfilled it. “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets, I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” (Matt. 5:17) His death marked the beginning of the fulfillment of everything the Law pointed toward. Thus, Jesus has the right to the title “Lord of the Sabbath.”

St. Paul brought forth greater meaning to the Law than the Jews had ever supposed—length and breadth, height and depth. The Apostle declared that our Lord Jesus made that Law honorable. The Jews, having tried to keep the Divine Law for more than sixteen centuries, had reason to doubt if anyone could keep it in a way satisfactory to God. But the fact that Jesus did keep the Law perfectly, proved that it was not an unreasonable requirement—not beyond the ability of a perfect man.

THE SPIRIT VERSUS THE LETTER

Jesus not only fulfilled the *letter*, but he also fulfilled the *spirit* of the Law. The Scribes and Pharisees had strayed away from the real spirit of the Law in many particulars and were constantly trying to infer that Jesus was breaking the Law. According to the traditions of their Elders, it was breaking the Sabbath, if one were hungry, to rub the kernels of wheat in their hands and blow away the chaff and eat the grain, as the disciples did one Sabbath Day in passing through the wheat field. The Pharisees called attention to this and wanted Jesus to reprove the disciples, because, according to their thought, this simple process was labor—reaping and thrashing and winnowing. Jesus resisted this absurd misinterpretation of the Law, and by his arguments proved to anyone willing to be taught, that they had mistaken the Divine intention of the Sabbath Law.

Additionally, on several occasions Jesus healed the sick on the Sabbath Day. Indeed, the majority of His healings were done on that day, greatly to the disgust of the Pharisees. We cannot suppose that Jesus performed these miracles to aggravate the Pharisees, but rather to draw attention to a broader lesson. God did not make man merely to keep a Sabbath, but He had made the Sabbath for, in the interest of, mankind. Hence everything necessary for man’s assistance would be lawful on the Sabbath Day, however laborious it might be.

Jesus carried the thought still further when he said, if any of you should have one sheep fall into the pit on a Sabbath Day, would you leave him to die and thus suffer loss, as well as allow the animal to be in pain? Assuredly they would be justified in helping any creature out of trouble on that day. Then said Jesus, “If so much might be done for a dumb creature, might not a good work of mercy and help for mankind be properly enough done on the Sabbath Day?” (Matt. 12:11) Therefore, the critical entrapments of the Scribes and Pharisees were no match for Jesus’ superior wisdom in interpreting the true intention of God’s Law.

HOW THE SABBATH RELATES TO THE CHRISTIAN

Jesus was offering more than a day of rest from physical toil for his followers, he was proposing a rest of faith to those burdened with the weight of the Law and of the sin inherited from Adam: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

(Matt. 11:28) Each Christian, in proportion to his or her *knowledge* and *faith*, will have rest. “We which believe do enter into rest.” The perfect Sabbath rest comes when we submit our *all* to the Lord, accepting joyfully his promised guidance through a “narrow way” to the Kingdom. There we *rest from our own works*, from all effort to justify ourselves. There, we confess ourselves to be imperfect and unworthy of Divine grace, and unable to make ourselves worthy. There we gratefully accept Divine mercy extended toward us in the redemption which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But this rest we have entered into is not our ultimate rest. A permanent rest awaits us: “There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.... Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.” (Heb. 4:9-11) Christians will enter into that rest when they experience their resurrection change, when they will enter into the joys of their Lord.

“LOVE IS THE FULFILLING OF THE LAW”—Romans 13:10

Since Christ came and fulfilled the Law, the Church has been under a new law—the *law of love*. “Master, which [is] the great commandment in the Law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second [is] like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:36-40) These two commandments went beyond just loving God and one’s neighbor, but went to the essence of the Mosaic Law. “The righteousness [right-meaning] of the Law is fulfilled in us who are walking, not after [or according to] the flesh, but after [according to] the spirit.” (Rom. 8:4)

Paul’s meaning is clear, that even though the Jewish Law was never given to the Christian, it is quite appropriate that Christians should look back to those Ten Commandments and note the spirit of their teachings and strive to conform their lives thereto in every particular.

Jesus taught the *spirit* or deeper meaning of the Commandments. For instance, he indicated that the command, “Thou shalt do no murder,” would be violated by anyone who became angry and manifested, in any degree, an injurious or murderous spirit. (See also I John 3:15) The commandment respecting adultery, our Lord declares, could be violated by the mind without any overt act. The simple desire to commit adultery if an opportunity presented itself would be a violation of the spirit of that command. (Matt. 5:27-28) It is this magnified concept of the Divine Law which is fulfilled in the footsteps of followers of Jesus who are walking through life, not according to the flesh and its desires and promptings, but according to the spirit of love and purity. Thus, Christians would, out of love for God and their neighbors, not steal, commit adultery or take any action contrary to God’s Law.

Considering specifically the Sabbath Commandment upon the Jews, what is its deeper spiritual significance? Again, the word Sabbath signifies rest, and, therefore, its deeper significance was to lead the Jew to Christ and have the burden of the Law lifted. No Jew was able to gain life under the Law Covenant, but by becoming *dead to the Law*, he was privileged to come into membership in



Christ—become a sharer in the covenant of sacrifice. (Rom. 7:4-6 and Psalms 50:5) So doing, he was promised rest from the Law and its condemnation, because *“There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.”* (Rom. 8:1) Indeed, the merit of Christ covers the shortcomings of all those who are striving to walk in his steps, and the Scriptures give them the assurance of Divine favor, ushering them into peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

A STRUGGLE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The conflict between faith in this *rest* versus works under the Law has been so since the debate of Paul on behalf of the Gentile converts. Some in the early Christian Church, predominantly those of Jewish background, experienced difficulty letting go of the regulations of the Law of Moses. Issues such as circumcision, eating of certain meats, keeping Sabbath days, etc., challenged the teachings of the Apostles who needed to emphatically advise that such observances were no longer acceptable to the Lord. Jesus *“blotted out the handwriting of ordinances which was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross...”* therefore, henceforth, no man should judge us in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Wherefore, if we are dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?” Col. 2:14, 16, 17, 20

The Apostle tells us that anyone keeping the seventh day, or any other day, as under *“Moses’ Law,”* in the hope that by keeping that Law they will gain its promised blessings, is *fallen from grace*, and Christ is *profiting them nothing*. Just so, the Jew has tried to keep the Law and has failed. (Gal. 5:2-4) Indeed, those who trust in the Law Covenant or who blend its requirements with those of the *dispensation of grace*, cannot fully enjoy the true Sabbath rest. (Eph. 3:2) If we keep the Sabbath as did the Jew, *as if it were a law upon us*, then we are also obligated to keep every requirement of the Law without exception. If in bondage to one aspect of the Law, we are obligated to every jot and tittle and condemned if we do not obey it, for *“whosoever shall keep the whole Law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”* James 2:10

It is not astonishing that we find that even the Apostles needed some time to grasp thoroughly the meaning of the change from the Law dispensation to the dispensation of grace. Years after the conference of the Apostles, in which Peter and Paul testified of the grace of God bestowed upon the Gentiles, we find Peter still hesitating, and yielding to the prejudices of the Jewish believers, to the extent that he withdrew from Gentile converts, still treating them as unclean. He thus brought upon himself a rebuke from the Apostle Paul, who evidently grasped the whole situation of the new dispensation with a much clearer vision than the other Apostles. Gal. 2:11-19

Although the Sabbath observance is still obligatory upon the Jew, who, not recognizing Christ, is still under the Law, it is a mistake for Christians to endeavor to live under the Law as a requirement for salvation. The Law Covenant was not made with the followers

of Christ. Note Paul’s words to the Christians of Galatia, who were not by nature Jews but Gentiles: *“Ye that desire to be under the Law, do ye not hear the Law?”* *“Oh, foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?”* (Gal. 4:21 and 3:1,2) He proceeds to show that if the Jew cannot gain life by imperfectly keeping the Law, it would be foolish for Gentiles to think that they could secure everlasting life by trying to keep that Law. Again he declares, *“By the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified in God’s sight.”* (Rom. 3:20) The only way for Jew or Gentile to obtain justification in God’s sight is by the acceptance of Christ and by a full consecration to be his disciple and to join with Him in His Covenant of sacrifice—*“I beseech you, brethren, present your bodies living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, your reasonable service.”* Rom. 12:1

HOW SATURDAY OBSERVANCE BECAME SUNDAY

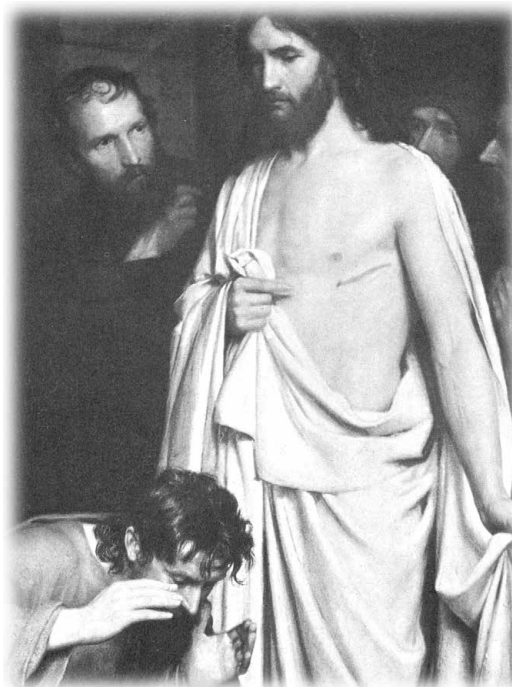
After the death of Jesus, the disciples chose to meet together on the *“first day”* of the week to remember the resurrection of their Lord.

Recall that it was the first day of the week that Jesus made his appearances to his disciples during the forty days after his resurrection. It was on the first day of the week in which the two disciples met with him on their way to Emmaus. It is not surprising, therefore, that without any command from the Lord or from any of the Apostles, the early Church fell into the custom of meeting together on the first day of the week, as a commemoration of the joys begotten in them by our Lord’s resurrection. It was also a reminder of how their hearts thrilled at the things they learned from their resurrected Master: *“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us by the way and opened unto us the Scriptures?”* (Luke 24:32) The first day of the week was a day to be celebrated amongst his followers as marking the revival of their hopes.

Pentecost came on the first day of the week as well. (Acts 2:1) Here is an excellent example of how the Law was a picture of *“good things to come.”* In the ordinances to the Jew, Pentecost was a multiple of seven.

Seven times seven days (forty-nine days) brought them to the *Jubilee* day, the fiftieth day—Pentecost. Pentecost never had its true meaning until the Lord, as *“the First-fruits of them that slept,”* arose from the dead. Then, fifty days from our Lord’s resurrection, the holy Spirit was shed abroad upon all those *“Israelites indeed”* who, already consecrated, were waiting in the upper room for the antitypical High Priest to make satisfaction for their sins. Immediately they had peace and rest with God.

Thus, Sunday, the first day, was not a new, obligatory law upon Christians, but it was merely a commonly cherished practice. They continued to the practice of the *“breaking of the bread”* (eating a meal) together on this day—not as the Passover Supper, or Lord’s Supper, but as a reminder of how they were blessed (note that the *“cup”* is never mentioned in connection with these references to the *“breaking of bread”*). These gatherings of the first day on the week were occasions of joy—rejoicing that the new order of things had been introduced by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The spirit of the true Sabbath is that we should be in this heart attitude of joy, rest, and peace in the Lord and in His finished work *every day*.



Jesus’ resurrection appearance on the first day.

PRIVILEGE VERSUS BONDAGE

Both the first day and the seventh day of the week were observed by early Christians for quite a time, but neither was understood to be obligatory—a bondage. Both days were privileges. However, more than two centuries after the Apostles fell asleep, formalism crept into the Church, and Christianity became the state religion under Constantine. False teachers gradually sought to bring the followers of the Lord into bondage, and the observance of Sunday as a day of rest was instituted as a *legal duty*. Thus, the spirit of liberty was lost, and the beauty of this cherished practice of honoring the Lord's resurrection on the first day of the week became a chain of bondage.

The Apostle Paul states that “...one man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike: Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” (Rom. 14:4-5) If any one presumes to judge another in these matters, he is violating a direct command of the Lord as expressed by one of his inspired Apostles—the *Law of Love*. By this Law, Christians recognize the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and there can be no bondage to the observance of any day. Again, the Scriptures are clear on this subject: “...therefore, henceforth, no man should judge us in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come.” Col. 2:16-17



ALL THE WORLD WILL ENTER INTO SABBATH REST

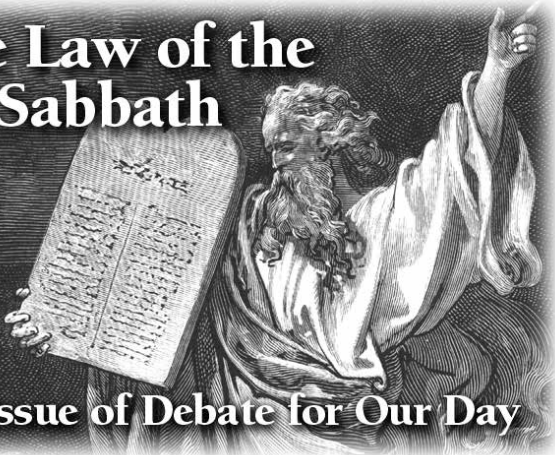
We have already seen that God rested from His creative work and has since *permitted* man to choose his own course—either obedience (rest in God's provisions) or sin (labor under the curse of death). Since Adam chose sin, all have inherited the fruitage of this painful choice.

God is resting—leaving the work of *redemption* and recovery of the world to his beloved Son who has purchased it with his blood. And much has been accomplished toward this Divine goal. The Law was a *schoolmaster* which led to Christ. (Gal. 3:24) His death and resurrection bring rest to those who accept him now—those answering the call to become his Church; and soon, Christ and his completed Church will together bring *rest* to all who have lived and suffered and died. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1Cor. 15:22)

Restitution for the world of mankind is the promise, and life everlasting will be the result for all who accept Divine mercy through Christ and his Church.

The grandest Sabbath of all is the seventh thousand-year period from Adam's disobedience, and, we are even now on the threshold of that great Sabbath Day. Messiah's reign of a thousand years will be the world's blessed Sabbath—the healing of all earth's sorrows. The entire Law arrangement was designed to be a picture of the long awaited rest of God's Kingdom—what a glorious prospect!

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