

May 30, 2003

## **THE SABBATH AND ITS LORD**

Moses wrote that God finished the work of creation in six days and that He rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2). Moses also wrote that God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:3).

The fact that Moses wrote these things about the seventh day does not imply that men and women have kept the Sabbath from the beginning or that people should keep it today.

As a matter of fact, there is no evidence that Adam and Eve ever kept the Sabbath. Nor is there any evidence that Enoch ever kept the Sabbath, or Noah, or Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob, or Joseph. Not until one comes to the time of Moses does one find evidence in the Bible that anyone kept the Sabbath.

The practice of keeping the Sabbath was first introduced to the children of Israel in connection with gathering of the food called “manna,” which God provided for them while they were en route from Egypt to Canaan. Moses told them to gather extra food on the day prior to the Sabbath so they would not need to gather any on the Sabbath (Exodus 16:21-30).

### **GOD MADE A COVENANT WITH THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL AT SINAI**

When the children of Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai, God informed them of the terms of a covenant He wished to make with them. The essence of the covenant was that they should obey all the laws that God was about to give them. If they obeyed the laws, God would consider them His “treasured possession” and “a holy nation.” He said to them,

“Now if you obey me fully  
and keep my covenant,  
then out of all nations

you will be my treasured possession.  
Although the whole earth is mine,  
you will be for me a kingdom of priests  
and a holy nation.”

Exodus 19:5-6a NIV

When Moses came down from Mt Sinai, he recited for the people all the words that God had spoken to him; and the people responded by saying,

“We will do everything  
the LORD has said.”

Exodus 19:8 NIV

Moses then went back up the mountain and brought the people’s answer to God, whereupon God wrote the famous Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone.

The fourth of these commandments says,

“Remember the Sabbath day  
by keeping it holy.”

Exodus 20:8 NIV

Moses explained in what way the children of Israel should keep the Sabbath day holy. He said,

“Six days you shall labor  
and do all your work,  
but the seventh day is a  
Sabbath to the LORD your God.  
On it you shall not do any work,  
neither you, nor your son or daughter,  
nor your manservant or maidservant,  
nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.”

Exodus 20:9-10 NIV

Moses also explained why it was that God had chosen the seventh day, and not some other day, as the day of rest. He said,

“For in six days the LORD made  
the heavens and the earth, the sea,  
and all that is in them,  
but he rested on the seventh day.  
Therefore the LORD blessed  
the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

Exodus 20:11 NIV

The Sabbath law was not a universal law. It was uniquely connected with the children of Israel. Its purpose was to enable them to remember their former days in Egypt. It should remind them that had God brought them out of Egypt “with a mighty hand.” Moses said to the people,

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt  
And that the LORD your God  
brought you out of there with a mighty hand  
and an outstretched arm.  
Therefore the LORD your God  
has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”

Deuteronomy 5:15 NIV

We see, therefore, that keeping the Sabbath was a part of God’s covenant with the children of Israel. They had to keep it if they wanted to be God’s chosen people.

### THE SABBATH WAS A SIGN

God also informed the children of Israel that the Sabbath was to be a “sign” between Him and them. He instructed Moses to say to the children of Israel,

“Say to the Israelites,  
‘You must observe my Sabbaths.  
This will be a sign between me and you  
for the generations to come,  
so you may know that I am the LORD,  
who makes you holy.’”

Exodus 31:13 NIV

God showed how important it was for the children of Israel to keep the Sabbath by saying,

“Observe the Sabbath,  
because it is holy to you.  
Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death;  
whoever does any work on that day  
must be cut off from his people.”

Exodus 31:14 NIV

It is a humane idea, of course, for people to have a day off from work, but the Sabbath law, as such, was not given to everyone. It was given to a specific people.

### JESUS' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE SABBATH

On one occasion, when Jesus and His disciples were passing through grain fields on the Sabbath, Jesus' disciples got hungry and began to pluck grain and eat it (Matthew 12:1-2). Some of the Pharisees saw them do this, and they said to Jesus, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath” (Mark 2:24)? Jesus replied,

“The Sabbath was made for man,  
not man for the Sabbath.  
So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Mark 2:27-28 NIV

Some of Jesus' contemporaries felt that it was against the Law for Jesus to heal people on the Sabbath.

Jesus, on the other hand, felt that if priests were permitted on the Sabbath to offer sacrifices to God in the temple, as the Law commands, then He (Jesus), who is greater than the temple, could show mercy upon the sick on the Sabbath. Jesus said,

“I tell you that one  
greater than the temple is here.  
If you had known  
what these words mean,  
'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'  
you would not have condemned  
the innocent.”

Matthew 12:6-7 NIV

Shortly after He said this, Jesus was in a synagogue on a Sabbath day and a man was present who had a shriveled hand. Jesus' detractors were searching for an excuse to accuse him, and they asked Jesus, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” (Matthew 12:10). Jesus responded by saying,

“If any of you has a sheep  
and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath,  
will you not take hold of it and lift it out?  
How much more valuable is a man  
than a sheep!  
Therefore it is lawful to do good  
on the Sabbath.”

Matthew 12:11-12 NIV

Having said this, Jesus restored the man's shriveled hand.

Jesus felt that it was just as permissible for Him to heal on the Sabbath as it was for people to circumcise their sons on the eighth day when it falls on the Sabbath. Jesus said,

“Now 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?”

John 7:23 NIV

Jesus obviously felt that healing was just as much an obedient service to God as was the practice of circumcision. He said,

“Stop judging by mere appearances,  
and make a right judgment.”

John 7:24 NIV

From these passages, one can draw the conclusion that Jesus did not place as much emphasis on resting on the Sabbath day as His contemporaries did. Indeed, Jesus never told His disciples that they should refrain from working on the Sabbath, as far as we know.

## DID JESUS' IMMEDIATE FOLLOWERS KEEP THE SABBATH?

Since Jesus died and was resurrected from the grave, the Law of Moses (which bound the Sabbath observance upon the children of Israel) has no longer been in force over those who have died with Jesus by being baptized into His death (Romans 6:3). The apostle Paul said,

“But now,  
by dying to what once bound us,

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.”

Romans 7:6 NIV

See also Romans 8:2.

There is no record in the Bible that the followers of Jesus observed the Sabbath after Jesus arose from the dead. It is true that the apostle Paul and other followers of Jesus sometimes went into synagogues on the Sabbath days, but they went to the Synagogues in order to speak to the children of Israel that were gathered there.

So, whereas the children of Israel were taught to look upon the Sabbath as a day of rest, the followers of Jesus are not obligated to rest on that day. They may rest on that day if they choose, but it is not binding upon them.

### THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

No one should think that the first day of the week is a replacement for the Sabbath. It is not. The seventh day of the week remains “the Sabbath.” The first day of the week has not become the “Christian Sabbath.” The thing that distinguishes the first day of the week from other days of the week is that Jesus arose from the dead on that day (Mark 16:9).

On the evening of the day that Jesus arose from the grave, he appeared to his disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem (John 20:19). Ever since that day Jesus’ followers have continued to meet on the first day of the week. It is safe to say that there has never been a first day of the week since Jesus’ resurrection, on which followers of Jesus have not met somewhere in the world to remember Him.

## THE LORD'S SUPPER

It was the continuing practice of the early followers of Jesus to come together on the first day of the week in order to share the Lord's supper in remembrance (1 Corinthians 11:24-25) of Jesus. This can be seen from the New Testament.

When the apostle Paul was returning to Jerusalem after a mission trip to Greece, he stopped over at the city of Troas, on the coast of Asia minor, and spent seven days there. Acts of Apostles says,

“On the first day of the week  
we came together to break bread.  
Paul spoke to the people and,  
because he intended to leave the next day,  
kept on talking until midnight.”

Acts 20:7 NIV

Notice, the brethren in Troas came together on the first day of the week for the expressed purpose of breaking bread. The expression to “break bread” can refer to a common meal. Here, however, it refers most likely to the Lord's Supper; for if the gathering in Troas had been merely to eat food, it could have taken place on any day of the week. Yet the apostle Paul and his travelling companions waited until the first day of the week. He obviously wanted to meet with the brethren, even though he was in a hurry to be on his way. This suggests that Paul was aware that the brethren in Troas would be meeting on the first day of the week to partake of the Lord's Supper. He had himself instructed churches to collect money for the poor on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2), since they would be meeting on that day anyway.

That the purpose of the meeting on the first day of the week was to partake of the Lord's Supper can also be seen from the letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. In his letter, Paul criticized the Corinthian brethren because they were not



meeting with a view to partaking of the Lord's supper, as they should have been doing, but they were coming together to eat a regular meal (1 Corinthians 11:20).

## LET NO ONE JUDGE YOU CONCERNING THE SABBATHS

Some of the children of Israel in the first century were upset with the believers in Jesus because they did not observe the regulations of the Law of Moses. The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian brethren that such things as the food regulations, the festivals, the new moons and the Sabbaths were only a shadow of the things that were to come. After Christ had come, those regulations and festivals were no longer binding. Paul said,

“So let no one judge you  
in food or in drink,  
or regarding a festival  
or a new moon or sabbaths,  
which are a shadow of things to come,  
but the substance is of Christ.”

Colossians 2:16-17 NKJV

Some people contend today that these verses (Colossians 2:16-17) do not speak against Sabbath-keeping. They say that the word “Sabbaths” (plural) in these verses does not refer to the seventh-day Sabbath but to other holy days. This contention, however, will not hold up, for Exodus 31:12-17 shows (as do other passages) that the seventh day is also one of the “Sabbaths” (plural).

So when the apostle Paul urged the followers of Jesus not to allow anyone to burden their consciences with “sabbaths,” his admonition included the seventh-day Sabbath.

As Colossians 2:16-17 shows, the Sabbath was only a “shadow” of good things that were to come. It is not a part of the “substance” (body) of the good things that were to come. The

“substance” (body) to which the apostle Paul referred is Jesus. He casts a “shadow” back into the Old Testament.

It would not be prudent for anyone to leave Jesus Christ and go back to the shadow.

## THE SABBATH REST

The Sabbath law was given to remind the children of Israel of their delivery from Egyptian slavery. The followers of Jesus look to a different delivery. The delivery to which they look is their delivery from sin, corruption, and death. The book of Hebrews says,

“There remains, then,  
a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;”

Hebrews 4:9 NIV

The most important rest is the one that comes after this life is over. That rest is most important because it is everlasting. The book of Hebrews continues by saying,

“for anyone who enters God’s rest  
also rests from his own work,  
just as God did from his.”

Hebrews 4:10 NIV

So there is a Sabbath rest for the believers in Christ. It lies in the future.

The apostle John reported in the book of Revelation that he heard a voice from heaven, which said,

“Write:  
Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord  
from now on.”

Revelation 14:13a NIV

Then John heard the Spirit add,

“Yes, they will rest from their labor,  
for their deeds will follow them.”

Revelation 14:13b NIV

## CONCLUSION

Summing up, then, the Sabbath, as presented in the Old Testament, reminded the children of Israel of their delivery from Egyptian slavery.

Sabbath rest of the New Testament, by way of contrast, is oriented toward the future. It looks forward to the time when God's people will enter into His eternal rest.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you suppose God gave the Sabbath law only to the children of Israel and not to the Gentiles as well?
2. Why do you suppose it is that the holidays that are mentioned in the Old Testament (Passover, Pentecost, Day of Atonement) were not brought forward into the New Testament as binding?
3. How many hours a week do you think people should work--60 hours, 40 hours, 38 hours?
4. Do you think it is important for believers in Jesus to meet on the first day of the week to remember Jesus by partaking of the Lord's Supper? Why do you think it is important, if you do?
5. How often do you think the followers of Jesus should meet together to remember Him, once a week, once a month, once a year? Please explain.

6. Is it a good habit or a bad habit when partaking of the Lord's Supper becomes a regular habit? What do you think?
7. How can people learn to look forward to their heavenly rest with joyful anticipation?