

God's Sabbath for Mankind

Introduction

In our busy world, stress is looming larger and larger as a major factor in so many aspects of our lives. More and more we are learning that to maintain good physical, mental, and emotional health, we must have periodic reprieve from the pressures of modern living. We must have rest from our labors, be they physical or mental.

Millennia ago, our all-wise Creator and Designer built into His plan for mankind a day of rest and rejuvenation, a day of ceasing from work, a day of freedom from the burdens of physical life. That day is the Sabbath — a foretaste of the peace and joy of eternal life, available through Jesus, the Messiah.

Our prayer is that you will read this book with a mind that is open to the truth of God's Word, and with a heart that desires to taste the blessings that flow to those who embrace the truth of the Sabbath.

— Richard A Wiedenheft and Daniel W. Porter, January, 1988

All Bible quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

CHAPTER ONE

Sabbath or Sunday: Does It Matter?

Truth is often stranger than fiction! And this is certainly true when it comes to the question of which day is the Sabbath for Christians. Consider the following *commonly accepted ideas* on the subject:

1. The early New Testament Christians began worshiping on the first day of the week instead of the Sabbath.

2. The Sabbath was a Jewish institution which originated with Moses.

3. The Sabbath of the Old Testament was a day of legalistic restrictions, a burden and yoke for the Israelites.

4. Roman Catholic theologians rely primarily on the Bible for justification for observing Sunday as a holy day.

If you are inclined to agree with any of these concepts, you are in for some surprises. As you read this booklet, you may discover that the truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

Origin of the Sabbath

The origin of the Sabbath rest goes back 2,500 years or more before Moses and the children of Israel. It goes back to the very creation of the world and of mankind.

“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done” **Genesis 2:1-2**.

How significant!

The very God of the universe chose to cease from His labor not because He was tired. For God is not a being of flesh, **Isaiah 40:28**. Yet He chose to cease, to rest, to step back and delight in what He had created. And what's more, He blessed, sanctified, and made holy the seventh day!

The fact is that the Sabbath was created by God Himself when man was created — well over two millennia before Moses. And resting and fellowshiping with God on that first Sabbath day was Adam, who had been created on the day before!

Other passages of Scripture also indicate that the Sabbath was given at Creation. For example, in the giving of the Fourth Commandment, Israel was reminded of the origin of the Sabbath.

“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**.

When was the Sabbath blessed and made holy? At creation!

Jesus also corroborates the early origin of the Sabbath. In upbraiding the Pharisees for their legalistic approach to the Sabbath, He reminded them that the “*Sabbath was made for man*” **Mark 2:27**. Of course, His primary point had to do with whether man was created to serve the day or whether the day was created as a blessing for the benefit of man. But in making that point, Jesus showed the Sabbath was made — not just for Israel *it was made for man!* And when was it made for man? *At Creation!* Over 2,500 years before Moses!

CHAPTER TWO

Was the Sabbath Kept Before Moses?

Some have argued that what God hallowed at Creation was only the very first seventh day — not a weekly Sabbath. Hence, they believe, the Sabbath was unknown and unobserved during the 2,500 years from Adam to Moses.

It must be granted that there is no direct reference to Noah, Abraham, Joseph, or other patriarchs keeping the Sabbath. But we do know that they were men of God. And we know that God said of Abraham that he, “...obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws” **Genesis 26:5**. What were those commands, decrees, and laws? Could they have included the Sabbath?

It can be demonstrated quite easily that before the time of Moses, the spiritual precepts of the Ten Commandments were in effect (though probably not codified as Ten Commandments). For example, it was sin for Cain to murder Abel (**Genesis 4**); King Abimelech knew adultery was wrong, as did Joseph (**Genesis 20** and **39**); Jacob knew stealing was wrong (**Genesis 31**).

Can we suppose that nine of the Ten Commandments were codifications of existing spiritual laws, but that the Fourth Commandment introduced a brand new law? Why should we expect that one to be any different from the others?

References to the Weekly Cycle

References to periods of seven days occur frequently in Genesis. A number of seven-day time sequences are mentioned in connection with the Flood (**Genesis 7:4, 10, 8:10-12**). Jacob served Laban for two seven-year periods for his wives; and he was told by Laban regarding Leah, “*Fulfill her week...*” (**Genesis 29:27-28**, KJV). Apparently the week was a routine part of their measurement of time.

Secular sources also indicate that the seven-day week was recognized in Near Eastern cultures from earliest times — unlike other cultures, which used 3, 4, 5, 6, or 8 day weeks (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., articles “Week” and “Calendar”). If a seven-day week was used during these patriarchal times, it seems likely that the Sabbath would have been part of that cycle.

Introduction of Sabbath to Israel

There are two possibilities relative to the introduction of the Sabbath to Israel:

1. The Sabbath was a completely new institution and law; it was unfamiliar to them since it had never been kept during the 2,500 years from Creation to Exodus; or,

2. The Sabbath was familiar to Israel. And although they may not have kept it as slaves in Egypt, they simply had to be reminded of what they already knew.

The weight of evidence rests solidly with the second of these possibilities.

The very first place the Sabbath is mentioned in connection with Israel is in **Exodus 16**. This introduction is quite incidental to the main point of the chapter, which is instruction about manna. According to *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, “...in short, the Sabbath is mentioned incidentally in considering the miraculous supply of manna and not the slightest hint is given of its being instituted for the first time on that occasion” (See on **Exodus 16:23**). God told Israel that they should gather and prepare twice as much on the sixth day so their food would be ready for them on the seventh. Moses told the people simply:

“This is what the Lord commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.’” **Exodus 16:23**.

God wanted them to be free from mundane physical responsibilities on the Sabbath. He wanted them to be free to rest and to worship Him.

Of course, some of the people couldn’t believe that their efforts of six days could suffice for seven, so they went out looking for manna on the Sabbath. God upbraided them sternly for not believing Him. Many Christians today have the same problem. They don’t think they can survive economically on what they earn in six days — they feel they have to moonlight, working on all seven days, dedicating only a few hours (if any) to worship and fellowship.

The way in which the Sabbath is introduced in **Exodus 16** stands in stark contrast with the way the Passover is introduced in **Exodus 12 and 13**. Israel knew nothing about the Passover. It was completely new, so God had to give them detailed regulations and instructions about how and why they should

observe it. The fact that major portions of two chapters are devoted to the introduction of the Passover points up the incidental nature of the discussion of the Sabbath in **chapter 16**.

Conclusion: the Sabbath was familiar to Israel; the Passover was not.

Wording of the Fourth Commandment

Another indication that Israel was familiar with the Sabbath is found in the very wording of the Fourth Commandment. “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” (**Exodus 20:8** KJV).

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary says of this, “... Remember implies that it was well-known and recognized” (See on **Exodus 20:8-11**). And this opinion is very much in harmony with the fact that the other Commandments were not new to Israel. It seems very improbable that nine of the Commandments would be codifications of precepts already familiar to Israel, but that one (the Fourth) should introduce a completely new law.

All the evidence points to the conclusion that the Sabbath was a day of rest and worship from Creation to Exodus. Indeed, when God thundered the Decalogue from Mt. Sinai, He referred back to the seventh day of Creation:

“Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” **Exodus 20:11**.

Note that it was not just the first seventh day God made holy. It was the Sabbath — as a weekly day of freedom and rejuvenation. It was His wonderful gift and blessing to all His creation, to all mankind—long before He began dealing with Israel.

CHAPTER THREE

The Sabbath of the Old Testament

No one disagrees with the fact that the Israelites were commanded to keep the Sabbath. However, there are many misconceptions about *how* they were to keep it.

One typical perception is that the Old Testament Sabbath was a burdensome yoke designed by God to be so rigorous that there was no way Israel could have kept it. To quote one publication:

“The Sabbath of Adam, Noah and Abraham had been a simple example of resting, refreshment and recuperation. But at the Exodus, the Sabbath became a stringent command which did not allow the Israelites to

do work of any kind. He could not cook an egg, pick a handful of food to eat on the Sabbath, gather a few sticks of wood for kindling, light a fire, carry any item out of the home, and he could not have any personal pleasure whatever all under the penalty of death if he did so.... Truly the Sabbath was very difficult to keep. It became a bondage — a heavy burden ... a day to be dreaded and feared” (*The Sabbath and The Christian*, Foundation for Biblical Research, p. 7, 1974).

This is an absolutely false concept of the Old Testament Sabbath! Yet it has been accepted by most Christians throughout the history of the Church. In fact, it was adopted by some of the early Church fathers, who were affected by very strong anti-Jewish prejudices extant in the Roman Empire. In an effort to discredit Judaism and draw a wide distinction between Christians and Jews, they reinterpreted the Old Testament. For example, Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-160) taught that the Sabbath had been imposed on the Jews as “a mark to single them out for punishment they so well deserve for their infidelities” (*From Sabbath to Sunday*, Bacchiocchi, p. 186, 1977).

The Word of God reveals exactly the opposite of these false concepts!

Sabbath — Day of Freedom

The Sabbath of the Old Testament was intended to be a day of joy, of rest, of freedom — a day of delight for all mankind — and especially for the nation of Israel whom God singled out for a special covenant with Him.

Isaiah wrote of the Sabbath,

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight ... if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please ... then you will find joy in the Lord ...” **ch. 58:13-14**.

Isaiah’s picture is one of joy and delight—hardly one of burden and oppression.

Psalm 92 is a psalm for the Sabbath and it characterizes God’s intent for this day:

“It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night ... You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox; ... The righteous will flourish like a palm tree ... they will flourish in the courts of our God” (**verses 1, 10, 12, 13**).

The Sabbath was intended to be a day of rejoicing, of delight, of freedom from the responsibilities of the first six days of every week. It was to be a humanitarian lifting of the grinding burdens the Israelites had known as slaves in Egypt — a special blessing for God’s people — a sign of their relationship with Him.

The freedom of the Sabbath is also indicated by the Sabbatical year God gave to Israel. Every seventh year the land was to be rested; servants were to be released; debts were to be cancelled. The year was to be one of freedom, rejoicing, and rejuvenation for the nation (**Deuteronomy 15:1-18; Leviticus 25:1-6**).

Unfortunately, the Israelites didn’t grasp the positive intent and blessing of the Sabbath day (and the Sabbatical year). If they had, God’s simple command “*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy...*” (**Exodus 20:8**) would have sufficed. But it was not in their hearts to obey God! Just like many people today, their primary concern was physical security and financial gain. They viewed the Sabbath as an intrusion in their lives, as an obstacle to their pursuit of physical, occupational goals. They flagrantly ignored the Sabbath or looked for loopholes; they insisted on working every day and farming the land every year — all because they did not trust God as their Sustainer and Provider.

Are you willing to trust God as your sustainer by resting on the day He made holy?

God’s Law Given to Israel

In considering the Sabbath in the Old Testament, we must understand the role of God’s law in general. When God began dealing with the nation of Israel, He codified for them His moral and spiritual laws. These are embodied in the Ten Commandments and the Two Great Commandments, which served as sort of a national constitution. But because Israel was a physical nation, these broad, general precepts had to be spelled out in much greater detail — as is done in modern nations like the United States.

The Seventh Commandment, forbidding adultery, was expanded in a legal way to prohibit various illicit sexual acts; appropriate punishment for each was prescribed (**Exodus 22:16, 19; Leviticus 18:2-23; Deuteronomy 22:13**). Various types of stealing and the penalty for each were spelled out in detail

(**Exodus 22:1-15; Deuteronomy 19:14-1 25:13-16**). Various degrees of murder and manslaughter were defined just as they are in our modern legal systems (**Exodus 21:12-32; Deuteronomy 19:4-7, 11-13, 21:1-9**).

Almost all of the Ten Commandments, including the Fourth, were expanded in the letter, in a legal way. Israel was given additional restrictions regarding the commanded day of rest. However, these were different in significant ways:

They were relatively few in number compared to those given for some of the other commandments;

Almost all were given in response to specific incidents of Sabbath breaking — not as general prohibitions; and,

They in no way made the Sabbath a grievous burden as some people falsely assume.

Restrictions Do Not Make Burden of Sabbath

Consider, in context, the Sabbath prohibitions given to Israel.

Staying at Home

When the Israelites insisted on going out to gather manna on the Sabbath (after Moses had just instructed them not to do so), God said, “*Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out*” (**Exodus 16:29**). In the context of looking for manna, this can hardly be taken as a general prohibition against leaving one’s abode on the Sabbath. Indeed, the Israelites were commanded to attend holy convocations on the Sabbath, **Leviticus 23:1-3**.

Lighting Fires

Exodus 35:3 prohibits the lighting of fires on the Sabbath. While some people consider this a cruel restriction, many Bible commentators believe it refers to industrial-type fires, which would be used in construction of the tabernacle (**Exodus 35:4-29**; see *the Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Bible Commentary* on these verses). Fires for domestic heating and cooking would already be lighted before the beginning of the Sabbath on Friday; and this single prohibition (even if it did include all fires) hardly proves that God wanted the Israelites to be cold and hungry every Sabbath day. In fact, they had been told to prepare for the Sabbath by cooking ahead of time, **Exodus 16:23**.

God’s whole intent was to allow them to be free to rejoice and *rest on the Sabbath*. He

did not want them burdened by routine physical responsibilities, which could have included the building of fires (quite a project in the wilderness).

Picking Up Sticks

Those who want to portray the Old Testament Sabbath as very oppressive cite **Numbers 15:32**. A man was caught gathering wood on the Sabbath. Moses, unsure of how to deal with him, kept him in custody until God revealed that he should be put to death.

Was God being arbitrary and harsh on a man who simply picked up a few twigs on the Sabbath?

Well, first of all, in a camp of several million people, gathering wood could be a lot of work. Secondly, Moses was not administering a repressive law. *It was God who decided the man's fate.* And God looked on the heart and read the motives which apparently were very much at odds with His will. Indeed, if the man had wanted to keep the Sabbath as God intended, he certainly wouldn't have been out gathering wood. It wasn't just a matter of a short stroll through the camp and picking up a few sticks. He was defying the law of God.

Don't Bear Burdens

Jeremiah forbade the people to bear burdens on the Sabbath; but this was clearly in the context of commercial loads. It certainly didn't mean that a man could not pick up his bedroll on the Sabbath (compare **Jeremiah 17:19-27** with **John 5:8-10**).

Even after the Babylonian captivity, the people couldn't resist the temptation to work on the Sabbath. Nehemiah observed them treading wine presses, harvesting, loading produce, and buying wares from the men of Tyre, **Nehemiah 13:15-22**. He rebuked them sharply for desecrating the Sabbath and finally ordered the gates of Jerusalem closed Friday evening. He was forced to legislate obedience to people who simply had no heart to obey God.

Overall there are very few specific Sabbath prohibitions given in the Old Testament. Those which were given were intended to make the people free for rest and worship. And if they had loved God and wanted to obey Him, the Sabbath would have been a fantastic delight, *as it can be for us — if we want to obey God!*

God's Law in the New Covenant

Under the New Covenant, God is dealing

with individuals, not a nation. His spiritual laws are not expanded in a legal way, as they were for Israel; rather, they are written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, **Hebrews 8:10**. God doesn't give us a list of do's and don'ts regarding sexual sins; rather He gets to the heart of the matter: *"anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart"* **Matthew 5:28**. He doesn't define various types of murder; He goes much further and says, *"Love your enemies"* **Matthew 5:44**.

In the New Covenant, God's basic spiritual laws, which were given to Israel in the Ten Commandments and in the Two Great Commandments, are the same as they've always been. But now they are to be written in our hearts and approached from a positive point of view.

We no longer ask, *"What do I have to do?"* Rather, we ask, *"What does God want me to do?"* We internalize God's laws — we make them part of our very being — because they express the will of our Father who has saved us by grace and put us into His family.

The Sabbath is very much apart of the overall will of God — a day of rest and freedom commanded by him for our physical and spiritual good.

Importance of Sabbath to God

The importance God places on the Sabbath is indicated by the prominence it occupies in His dealings with His people.

First, He chose to include it as part of the Ten Commandments, which were spoken by His own voice, written by His finger.

Second, He called the Sabbath a sign between Him and His chosen people (**Exodus 31:14-17; Ezekiel 20:12**).

And third, Israel's desecration of the Sabbath was cited as one of the primary reasons they went into captivity. Time and time again God upbraided them for their stiff-necked attitudes for Sabbath breaking and idolatry in particular. They couldn't seem to trust God enough to rest their land in the seventh year. Finally God gave them into the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Many years later, in reflecting on the reasons Israel went into captivity, Nehemiah wrote, *"What is this wicked thing you are doing — desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up*

more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath” Nehemiah 13:17-18.

The Sabbath was an integral part of God’s will for mankind as well as for Israel. He placed a great deal of importance on it. But even the national captivity and the preaching of all the prophets did not change the people’s basic self-centeredness. Indeed, following the days of Nehemiah they went to the opposite extreme. They made a complete ritual out of the Sabbath — still missing its whole meaning and purpose.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jesus Upholds Sabbath, Rejects Tradition

Sometime after their return from the Babylonian Captivity, the Jewish religious leaders began to add their own traditions to the Law of Moses in general — and to the Sabbath in particular. It was as if by adding all kinds of regulations they could prevent the people from breaking the Sabbath — and thus avert God’s punishment for disobedience. But in adding their own man-made rules, they completely missed the point of the Sabbath.

Sabbath Regulations Given in Talmud

Two entire treatises of the Talmud deal with how the Sabbath was to be kept. Thirty-nine types of work were not to be done on the Sabbath. For example, writing more than one letter was prohibited. Tying certain types of knots was prohibited, but others were permitted. A Levite in the Temple could retie a broken string on a musical instrument, but he could not put on a new one. Practicing medicine was not allowed — unless life was endangered. Hence, a man with a toothache could rinse his mouth with vinegar on the Sabbath — as long as he swallowed it (that was eating); but he could not rinse his mouth and then spit out the vinegar (that was practicing medicine).

Travel on the Sabbath was limited to a specific distance from one’s domicile. However, if one wanted to go further on the Sabbath, he could legally extend his domicile by placing some of his belongings at a distant point; then he could begin counting his Sabbath’s journey from that distant point (*A Dictionary of Bible*, James Hastings, Scribner’s, 1903, article “Sabbath”).

No wonder Jesus called the Pharisees and Scribes a bunch of self-righteous hypocrites! No wonder He said of them,

“You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! Thus you nullify the word of God by your traditions that you have handed down” **Mark 7:9, 13.**

By putting all their emphasis on legalistic do’s and don’ts, the Pharisees had indeed made a burden of the Sabbath; they had turned a day of joy and rest and rejoicing into an oppressive yoke. They completely obliterated God’s positive intent for the Sabbath!

Jesus Upholds the Sabbath

While Jesus took great exception to man-made traditions, never once did He hint that the Sabbath was to be set aside or changed to another day. Rather, He upheld the law, focusing on the positive spiritual intent of the day. He proclaimed Himself Lord of the Sabbath, the day which had been set aside by God’s example at Creation.

When the Pharisees accused Jesus disciples of breaking the Sabbath by shelling out a few kernels of grain (they called it harvesting), He denounced their traditions — but He upheld the Sabbath.

“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.**

When the Pharisees wanted to accuse Him for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus asked, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath; to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” **Mark 3:4.** He showed the positive intent of the Sabbath — as a day of release; but never did He suggest that the Sabbath would be abandoned.

On one occasion, the ruler of a synagogue was upset that Jesus healed a crippled woman on the Sabbath and told the people they should be healed on one of the six working days. Jesus responded,

“You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and ... give it water? Then should not this woman ... be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” **Luke 13:15-16.**

Jesus was showing that freedom was an essential theme for this day of release.

After Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath the Pharisees asked Him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” **Matthew 12:10.** He responded,

“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**.

Again, Jesus objected to the burdensome, arbitrary, inhumane traditions of men. But He upheld the spiritual intent and application, the freedom guaranteed by the Sabbath command, just as He did for the other Commandments. (See **Matthew 5:21-30**; **Isaiah 42:21**; **Jeremiah 31:33**).

Sabbath Upheld in Olivet Prophecy

Near the end of His ministry, Jesus indicated that His followers would continue keeping the Sabbath after His death and resurrection. The occasion was the “Olivet Prophecy” recorded in **Matthew 24**. His disciples had come to Him asking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs of His coming at the end of the age. In **verse 16**, He spoke about the people of Judea fleeing into the mountains. In **verse 20**, He exhorted the disciples, “*Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.*”

Now, if the Sabbath was to cease following Jesus’ death, this exhortation would be totally uncalled for. But such is not the case. The Sabbath would continue to be a day of rest, worship and rejuvenation for God’s people. Hence, an emergency flight, while not strictly prohibited, would not be in keeping with God’s purpose for the Sabbath.

The Gospel record, from beginning to end, is clear: our Lord kept the Sabbath and affirmed that it was made at Creation for all mankind. And while He abhorred the rituals and restrictions devised by men, He strongly upheld the spiritual intent of the Fourth Commandment.

Christians who consider Him their Leader, Teacher, and King should follow in His footsteps!

CHAPTER FIVE

Apostles and Early Church Observe Sabbath

Following His death and resurrection, Jesus gave not so much as a hint that the Fourth Commandment was no longer necessary, or that the day of rest was changed to Sunday. In fact, it is obvious from the New Testament record that the Apostles and early Christians continued to keep the seventh day of the week according to the Fourth Commandment. There is no evidence they

abandoned the Sabbath for Sunday!

Women Rest on the Sabbath

Luke 23:56 describes what the women did after Jesus died, after the veil in the temple was rent in two, after anything that was “nailed to the cross” was nailed there:

“Then they [the women] went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.”

While it would not be surprising that the women observed the Sabbath after Jesus’ crucifixion, the way Luke records this fact is quite significant. Luke was undoubtedly a Gentile writing to another Gentile long after the Resurrection. Yet in no way did he qualify his reference to the commandment as having been “old” or “Jewish” or “done away.” It was still “the commandment,” part of God’s spiritual law and will for mankind (see also **Romans 3:20, 31, 7:7-14, 22**; **I John 5:3**; **James 2:8**).

There is much more evidence that both Jewish and Gentile Christians kept the Sabbath during the New Testament period. The key to understanding this evidence is the Apostles and early Christians’ *attitude toward God’s relationship with Israel*.

Early Disciples See Gospel for Israel Only

At the time of Christ, the Jews believed that God was concerned with only one nation on earth — Israel. The *promises* were for Israel; *God’s blessings* were for Israel; the *Messiah* would come to save Israel. All other people, they believed, were simply heathen Gentiles — they were dogs whom God would begin dealing with only if they were circumcised and became Jewish proselytes.

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 2**), the Apostles began to realize the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God; but they still saw Jesus as the Savior of God’s people, Israel. They understood their commission basically in terms of preaching salvation to Israel. Those who repented and accepted Jesus had no thoughts of abandoning the Law of Moses. They continued to meet in the synagogues and worship in the Temple. In fact, when Paul went to Damascus to look for Christians to persecute, he went to the synagogues (**Acts 9:2**). Even the Romans, at first, considered the Christians a sect of the Jews, like the Pharisees or Sadducees.

The early Church viewed salvation strictly within the context of God's dealings with Israel.

Gospel Preached to Gentiles

It was only after God sent a special revelation that one of the Apostles first conceived of the idea that the Gospel might be for the Gentiles too (**Acts 10**). Through a vision, Peter was instructed by God to preach to Cornelius, a Roman centurion.

Peter was shocked by God's revelation — but he went and preached to Cornelius' household. The opening words of his discourse reveal both his attitude about associating with Gentiles and the message he received from God:

“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” (**Acts 10:28**).

Peter's acceptance of the Gentiles was the first major break with the “Israel only” concept—and it came about only as a result of a supernatural vision. Up until that time, and even long afterwards, the prevailing Jewish attitude was that salvation was for Jews only. In fact, when Peter returned to Jerusalem after preaching to Cornelius, he was severely criticized for having gone into a Gentile home, **Acts 11:3**.

How does all this relate to the Sabbath?

Simply this! In view of the strong attachment of the Apostles and first Christians to Judaism, can we possibly believe that they had already abandoned the Sabbath for Sunday? Unthinkable!

Controversy Arises

As the years went by, Paul and others began to preach to more and more Gentiles, hundreds of whom believed. However, many, if not most, of the Jewish Christians just assumed that these Gentiles would be circumcised and become proselytes. They could not conceive of anyone coming into a relationship with God without becoming an Israelite. They continued to discriminate against Gentiles — even against Gentile Christians.

On one occasion, at Antioch, Peter was eating with Gentiles — until certain men from Jerusalem showed up. He was intimidated by their presence and withdrew from the

Gentiles, as did Barnabas and others, **Galatians 2:11-13**. Paul was incensed and corrected Peter publicly — but the incident showed how great their attachment to the Law of Moses was. Can we possibly assume that they had already abandoned the Sabbath almost fifteen years prior to these events? Hardly! It was not just a man-made custom or Pharisaical tradition. It was the commandment of God!

Paul continued to insist that the Gentiles did not need to be circumcised and come under the national (Old) Covenant with Israel. However, he did uphold very strongly the spiritual laws of God, **Romans 3:20, 31, 7:7-14, 22**.

The controversy over whether or not the Gentiles had to become Israelite proselytes grew to such proportions that a major conference was held at Jerusalem around 49 A.D. to settle the question, **Acts 15**.

The conclusion reached at this meeting was that Paul was correct; circumcision was unnecessary for the Gentiles. However, the leaders did write letters instructing the Gentile Christians to abstain from fornication, from blood, from things strangled, and from foods polluted by idols; these were laws from the Old Testament that were apparently considered of particular importance to the Gentiles, **Acts 15:20**.

Remember, the whole conference had to do with Gentiles. At that time there was no thought of the Jews forsaking the Law of Moses. And in that context, it is obvious that they were not keeping Sunday instead of the Sabbath. It should also be noted that the decision of this conference in no way excused the Gentiles from the moral and spiritual laws of God, including the Sabbath. The issue was whether or not Gentiles had to become proselytes, symbolized by circumcision.

Paul Participates in a Temple Ceremony

As Paul and others continued to preach to Gentiles, more and more turned to God without becoming Jews. At the same time, however, thousands of Jews continued to be “zealous for the law,” **Acts 21:20-21**; and many of them kept on harassing the Gentiles about being circumcised.

Rumors began to spread at Jerusalem that Paul was even beginning to teach the scattered Jews to abandon Moses, **Acts 21:21**. So when Paul returned to Jerusalem, the Apostles there asked him to cooperate with

them in proving that these rumors were false. He was to go into the temple and join in a purification ceremony. *“Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law”* **Acts 21:24**.

Of course, the plan “backfired” and Paul ended up in prison. But the incident demonstrates clearly that the Apostles — and even Paul — were still very much in tune with their Jewish heritage. There is simply no way they were keeping Sunday instead of the Sabbath!

But what about the Gentiles? Were they taught to worship on Sunday?

Paul Worships with Jews and Gentiles on Sabbath

Throughout the book of Acts, Paul consistently used the Sabbath for teaching both Jews and Gentiles “as his custom was” (**Acts 17:2**; also **18:4**). In Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas went into the synagogue on the Sabbath where they were asked to speak, **Acts 13:14-15**. When they had finished, some of the listeners asked them to return *the next Sabbath* at which time *“...almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord”* **verses 42-44**.

Notice that Paul waited a whole week for another meeting. If Christians had been observing Sunday, there would have been no reason to wait; they could have met the very next day. This passage shows clearly the orientation of both Jews and Gentiles, yes, even “the whole city,” to the Sabbath.

Acts 18:4 describes Paul’s stay in Corinth, where he worked as a tentmaker during the week. And when did he rest from his physical labor to teach Jews and Greeks? *On the Sabbath, not on Sunday*.

Another indication of Sabbath observance by both Jews and Gentiles is the fact that the churches in many cities were mixtures of both groups. They met regularly, often in private homes, often in Jewish homes (**Romans 16:3-5**; **I Corinthians 16:19**). Now, given the conclusive evidence that the Jewish Christians continued to rest on the Sabbath according to the commandments, it is also quite obvious that Gentile Christians did so too. For the Apostles and early Christians — Jews and Gentiles alike — the Sabbath was part of God’s will for mankind. They continued to observe the seventh day of the week — not just because it was a Jewish tradition — but

because it was made at Creation for all men. It was one of God’s commandments. It was observed and taught by their Savior. And while the Gentiles, and even the Jews eventually, did not abide by all the civil and ceremonial laws and traditions handed down from the time of Moses, they did continue to live by the spiritual and moral laws, including the Sabbath.

Sabbath Observed into Second Century

Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and the death or scattering of many of the Apostles, the churches of Judea continued to be administered by Jewish Christians. Post Biblical church writers Eusebius (260-340 A.D.) and Epiphanius (315-403 A.D.) record that the church at Jerusalem was led by fifteen bishops “of the circumcision” until 135 A.D., when Emperor Hadrian besieged the city. Strong Jewish leadership and influence continued at least until then, and in that context, there is simply no way that Sunday keeping could have arisen among Christians there during the First Century.

Of course, Sunday keeping did arise in the church — but not because of apostolic teaching. Rather it began in post Biblical times. It began because of severe anti-Jewish attitudes in the Roman world, because of strong pagan influences, and because of political pressures under the godless emperors. Those pressures caused the early post apostolic church leaders to move as far away as possible from anything that could be considered Jewish — to move toward the customs and traditions of the pagan Roman world. In the process, the teachings of the Word of God, of Jesus and the Apostles, were severely compromised.

CHAPTER SIX

The Sabbath is Changed to Sunday

It took many decades, even centuries, for the post apostolic church to change the Sabbath to Sunday. The substitution did not come about because of the Apostles teaching. Rather it was the result of religious, political, and social forces that existed in the Roman Empire during the first three centuries after Christ. Church leaders of that period compromised the teachings of the Word of God because of pressures from the pagan Roman world.

In brief summary, this is what happened: At certain times the leaders in the Roman world were very anti-Jewish. As a result, Christians found it expedient to adopt an anti-Jewish attitude. Church leaders, particularly at Rome (the seat of the Empire), moved as far away as possible from anything that was considered Jewish — especially the Sabbath. They substituted Sunday, a day that was much more acceptable in the pagan Roman world at that time.

Roman Attitudes

The anti-Jewish attitude of the Romans during the first and second centuries A.D. is quite evident in their writings. Listed below are the names of five Roman writers and passages that indicate the attitude of each toward the Jews. The quotations are taken from the outstanding work, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, by Samuele Bacchiocchi (The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, Rome, 1977); page numbers are given in parentheses.

Seneca (ca. 4 B.C. to 65 A.D.)

“This fervent stoic railed against the customs of this accursed race [the Jews] ... and especially their Sabbath-keeping: ‘By introducing one day of rest in every seven, they lose in idleness almost a seventh of their life...’” (p. 173).

Persius (ca. 34 to 62 A.D.)

“... presents the Jewish customs as the first example of superstitious beliefs. The Jewish Sabbath, particularly, is adduced as his first proof that superstition enslaves man” (p. 174).

Martial (ca. 40-104 A.D.)

“... the circumcised Jews and their Sabbath are a synonym of degradation” (p. 175).

Plutarch (ca. 46-119 A.D.)

“... labeled the Jews as a superstitious nation and singled out their Sabbath-keeping (which he regarded as a time of drunkenness) as one of the many barbarian customs adopted by the Greeks” (p. 175).

Tacitus (ca. 55-120 A.D.)

“... surpassed all his predecessors in bitterness. The Jews, according to this historian, descend from lepers expelled from Egypt ... Their indolence on the Sabbath commemorates the day they left Egypt. ‘All their customs,’ Tacitus writes, ‘are perverse and disgusting...’” (p. 176).

In view of these attitudes among the Romans, it is no wonder that Josephus, the

Jewish historian of the First Century, wrote so extensively in defense of his people even though he sympathized with the Romans.

Political Repression of Jews

Given their anti-Jewish attitudes, it is not surprising that the Romans should take repressive political and economic measures against the Jews from time to time.

Emperor Claudius, about 54 A.D., expelled the Jews from Rome, including Jewish Christians Priscilla and Aquila, **Acts 18:2**. At that time, Christian Jews were not differentiated from Jews in general. They suffered equally under Claudius.

During the 60s A.D., anti-Jewish sentiment culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D. Emperor Vespasian abolished the high priesthood and the Sanhedrin and prohibited worship at the Temple site.

Around 135 A.D., Emperor Hadrian made it a crime to practice the Jewish religion. It became illegal to rest on the Sabbath!

What would you do if the practice of your faith became illegal? Obey God rather than men? Or compromise for the sake of expedience?

Many Christians, especially Jewish Christians, continued to observe the Sabbath as they had been taught by the Apostles. However, as the political pressures increased, other Christians began to compromise. They did what was practical, adopting a position of *accommodation with the Roman Empire and differentiation from the Jews*. They yielded to the forces of the world around them instead of being faithful to the will of God.

Anti-Jewish Attitude Adopted by Christians

The Apostles were Jews; and even though they criticized Jewish leaders for their failure to accept the Gospel, they continued to hold the Old Testament as the inspired Word of God; they continued to regard the Jewish people with love and compassion. However, Gentile church leaders in post apostolic Rome were of a different mind. They adopted the same anti-Jewish attitudes of their Roman contemporaries. The quotations given below are taken from Bacchiocchi's book. Page numbers are given in parentheses.

Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 A.D.; church teacher at Rome)

“He [God] imposed it [Sabbath] on the Jews as a ‘mark to single them out for punishment they so well deserved for their infidelities’,” (p. 186).

Marcion (ca. 144 A.D.)

“... ordered his followers ‘to fast on Saturday justifying it in this way: Because it is the rest of the God of the Jews ... we fast in that day in order not to accomplish on that day what was ordained by the God of the Jews’,” (p. 187).

Victorinus (ca. 304 A.D.; Bishop of Pettau)

“[Christians were] to avoid ‘appearing to observe the Sabbath with the Jews, of which the Lord of the Sabbath Himself, the Christ, says by His prophets that His soul hateth’,” (p. 196).

It is quite evident that the church fathers adopted the anti-Jewish bias of the Romans. They actually reinterpreted the Old Testament to justify their position — trying to put as much distance as possible between themselves and anything that appeared Jewish, particularly the Sabbath.

Political Church Emerges

As the Sabbath was gradually denigrated, Sunday was promoted as a practical substitute. This day was venerated by many pagans, particularly at Rome. It was a logical choice and would make the Christians seem distinct from the Jews and more like the Romans.

Of course, Church leaders needed a rationale to justify their adoption of Sunday; but there was little in the Bible that could be construed to support the first day of the week. The best reasons they could come up with were that light was created on the first day of the week and that Jesus was alive from the dead on the first day. Not very strong arguments! However, the real reasons were purely and simply political and social!

The various bishops at Rome, because they were at the seat of the Empire and more in tune with the attitudes of the Roman world, gained in power and prominence in the church. They put pressure on other bishops to accept Sunday; in time they succeeded.

The evidence is that for several centuries, Christians in Asia continued to keep the Sabbath, or to keep both Saturday and Sunday. A few even in Rome continued to do so for some time. But the die was cast. The power of the bishops at Rome was growing

rapidly. Christians there were gaining the approval of the Emperors. And once this new religion gained official recognition and sanction under Constantine, it was all over for those who sought to remain faithful to the teachings of the Word of God. A politicized church had emerged with the power of the state behind it.

Confessions by Modern Church Leaders

Modern Roman Catholic leaders have been quite frank in admitting that there is no Biblical authority, but only church authority, for Sunday. Notice just two quotations:

“But you may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday, a day which we never sanctify” (James Cardinal Gibbons, *The Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 89).

“Some of the truths that have been handed down to us by tradition and are not recorded in the Sacred Scriptures, are the following: that ... Sunday should be kept holy instead of the Sabbath; that infants should be baptized ...” (*Butler’s Holy Family Series of Catholic Catechisms*, John Murphy Co., Boston).

Many other quotations from Roman Catholic sources are available in the leaflet “Roman Catholic Confessions About Sunday,” The Bible Sabbath Association, Fairview, OK 73737.

Protestants have traditionally rejected the authority of the Catholic church, relying instead on the Bible. Many have cried, “The Bible and the Bible only.” Hence they have been forced to comb the Scriptures thoroughly to find support for their first-day Sabbath. Their search is quite fruitless. And some have written frankly about the lack of Biblical authority for Sunday.

“Because it was requisite to appoint a certain day ... it appears that the Church did for that purpose appoint the Lord’s day” (Augsburg Confession, part 2, art. 7).

“The festival of Sunday ... was always only a human ordinance and it was far from the intentions of the Apostles to establish a divine command in this respect; far from them, and from the early apostolic church, to transfer the laws of the Sabbath to Sunday” (*The History of the Christian Religion and Church*, Dr. Augustus Neander).

Many similar quotations are available from The Bible Sabbath Association.

The substance of these and many other frank admissions is that there is only traditional authority — not Biblical authority for the adoption of Sunday as a day of rest and worship. And the fact is that down through the centuries, many Christians, albeit a small percentage of all those who claim to be Christians, have continued to observe the day set aside by God at Creation. There have been and are now Christians who rest from their work on the Sabbath according to the will of God — who enjoy the freedom provided by the day sanctified by God, who celebrate His creation, His rest, and His redemption by resting on the day He set aside at Creation.

The Choice is Yours!

You have a choice. You can follow the traditions of the church, reasoning, perhaps that it doesn't really matter or that others are responsible. You can ignore the Fourth Commandment and miss out on the blessings that flow to those who experience the regular rejuvenation of the Sabbath rest.

Or you can study the Word of God and determine to follow it as your guide for living. You can follow the example of Jesus and the Apostles in embracing this day of rest, of freedom, and of fellowship with God.

The choice is yours. May God guide you in seeking to follow His will.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Answers to Objections About the Sabbath

One of the arguments given frequently to support Sunday as a day of rest and worship is that the early Christians worshipped on the first day of the week. Hence it is important for us to take a look at these claims and examine the New Testament passages that mention the first day of the week. For surely, if Jesus or the Apostles did indeed abandon the seventh-day Sabbath for Sunday, there must be some evidence of this in connection with the mention of "the first day of the week"!

A Look at the Numbers

The word "Sabbath" is used at least sixty times in the New Testament in connection with more than twenty separate Sabbath situations. In none of these is there any hint that the Sabbath rest was to cease. In fact, the opposite is true, as we have already seen in

previous chapters.

In contrast, the phrase "the first day of the week" (the word "Sunday" is never used) occurs only eight times; and six of these have to do with one particular first day of the week — the one associated with the resurrection of Jesus.

(1) to (4) **Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; and John 20:1** all refer to the visit of the women to the tomb of Jesus. He was not there, for He had already been resurrected. There is no hint in any of these verses of Sunday replacing the Sabbath. They are simple time references.

(5) **Mark 16:9** is another time reference to the Sunday after the resurrection; Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene on that day.

(6) **John 20:19** refers to the evening of the same day, when Jesus met with His disciples. Some claim this was the first Sunday service. But the facts are quite to the contrary: the disciples didn't even believe Jesus was resurrected; they were gathered for fear of the Jews; and, technically, the event took place on the second day of the week, which began, according to Jewish reckoning, at sunset.

Also, on this same day, although the phrase, "the first day of the week" isn't mentioned, Jesus met with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, **Luke 24:13**. Some have grasped at this account of their evening meal as evidence of a celebration of the Lord's Supper. On the contrary, the two disciples were simply being hospitable, offering food and lodging to a stranger. The event is certainly no precedent for Sunday-morning communion, nor for abandoning the Sabbath.

(7) **Acts 20:7** recounts Paul's meeting with brethren at Troas, "on the first day of the week." This verse is popularly used to support Sunday as a Christian day of rest and worship. There is considerable controversy about whether the event took place on Saturday night or Sunday night; however, this is beside the point. The meeting was anything but typical. The disciples were gathered on a special occasion to hear the Apostle Paul. The book, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, even though very much against the Sabbath, admits: "*We must resist any temptation to use Luke's account as though it were a paradigm of 'first day' observance. Too many of the features of his account depend on the extraordinary nature of this occasion as Paul's last night with a this particular church*" (Zondervan, 1982, p. 133).

(8) The last mention of “the first day of the week” is found in **I Corinthians 16:2**, which verse is frequently used as precedent for Sunday collections at church. In fact, it indicates quite the contrary. Paul’s use of the phrase “lay by him in store” indicates that whatever was to be done, it was to be done at home — not at a meeting. The phrase also implies work on the first day of the week — not rest and worship. Apparently Paul wanted them to use the first working day of each week to take inventory, so to speak, to set aside something for the poor saints at Jerusalem — so they didn’t need to do so when he arrived.

That’s it! Eight references to “the first day of the week.” And not one of them indicates anything special or holy about the day. The fact is that it wasn’t until decades after the death of the Apostles that Christians began to abandon the Sabbath for Sunday — in response to political and religious pressures extant in the Roman World.

There are three passages in Paul’s writings that are frequently used to prove that Christians should observe no special day as different from any other day. These passages are **Romans 14:1-5**, **Galatians 4:10**, and **Colossians 2:16**.

Before examining these, it is important that we understand something about Paul’s teachings and attitude about the observance of periodic festivals in general.

Paul Observed the Sabbath

First of all, Paul himself observed the Sabbath, and, at least on some occasions, other festivals. He kept the Sabbath with Jews and Gentiles (**Acts 13:14, 42, 44, 14:1, 16:13, 17:2, 18:4**). He, himself, lived in obedience to the laws of the Old Covenant (**Acts 21:24, 23:6-1, 25:8, 26:5**). He spoke and taught positively about the Ten Commandments, which included the Sabbath command (**Romans 2:13, 26, 7:7, 12, 14, 22**). Even the anti-Sabbath book *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* concedes this point: “*On the other hand, we have evidence from both Paul himself and the book of Acts that Paul continued his own Sabbath keeping*” (*ibid.*, p. 182).

In this context, it is inconceivable that Paul would have taught Christians to abandon the Sabbath in favor of no day of rest and worship.

Another factor is that many, if not most, of the Gentiles Paul wrote to had been

adherents to the Jewish religion. When Paul first preached to them, they were in the synagogues worshipping with Jews (**Acts 13:16, 26**). When James spoke before the Jerusalem Council, he did so with the understanding that Gentile Christians were still meeting in the synagogues on the Sabbath:

“For Moses has been preached in every city... and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” **Acts 15:21**.

Paul had not, apparently, taught the Gentiles to abandon the Sabbath in favor of Sunday. With this background, we can examine each of the three passages in question.

Romans 14:1-5

The overall subject of this passage is that Christians should not be judging one another about disputable matters. Specifically, Paul deals with the subject of those who were vegetarians as opposed to those who ate flesh food. He could very easily have straightened out the dispute by saying “It’s okay to eat flesh.” But he didn’t. Rather, he said, “Don’t judge.”

It is in this context that Paul mentions, almost in passing, the matter of observing special days. “*One man considers one day more sacred than another, another man considers every day alike*” (**verse 5**). His counsel: “*Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.*”

We don’t know enough about the problems in the Roman church to be absolutely certain what Paul is referring to. He could have meant special days for fasting, or for feasting, or for abstaining from meat (the primary question at hand). However, it is highly unlikely that he could have been referring to the Sabbath — because, as demonstrated above, he himself observed it and spoke very positively about the Ten Commandments, which included the Sabbath (**Acts 13:14, 42, 44, 16:13, 17, 2, 18:4, 21:24-23:6, 25:8, 26:5; Romans 7:12, 14, 22**).

The message of **Romans 14** is “Don’t judge!” It certainly is no proof that the Sabbath of Creation, the Sabbath that Jesus and the Apostles kept, was done away with!

Galatians 4:10

In this passage, Paul upbraids the

Galatians for “...*observing days, months, seasons, and years!*” At first glance this might seem to condemn the observance of any periodic festivals — whether a day (Sabbath) a season (annual festival in its season) or a year (Sabbatical or Jubilee year). But an understanding of the context shows quite the opposite.

The primary problem in Galatia was that certain Jews were insisting that if Gentiles wanted to be first class Christians, they must also be circumcised and come under the Old Covenant, which God had made with Israel (through Moses). Paul was furious! These people were already God’s children through faith in Jesus Christ — they didn’t need to accept the Old Covenant in order to enhance their standing. However, does this mean that Paul was condemning all festival observance?

Hardly! Given his own practices and the fact that many, if not most or all, of these Gentiles had been adherents to the Jewish religion, it is inconceivable that he was condemning festival observance *per se*.

The answer seems to be in the word “observe.” This word can imply *meticulous observance*. In other words, the problem at Galatia was that the Gentiles were being led by Judaizers to get all involved in the fine details of festival observance — in the context of embracing the Old Covenant. They were more concerned about the form than the substance. This is hardly a condemnation of the Sabbath.

Colossians 2:16

This verse has been used to prove almost every point of view regarding the observance or nonobservance of festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. The main point of the verse is “Don’t judge.” And, by itself, it doesn’t really prove much more than that.

Those doing the judging were probably people of the ascetic philosophy, who objected to eating and drinking, particularly as associated with festivals of any kind. The book, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, although written specifically to promote Sunday, says on this verse, “*The most natural way of taking the rest of the passage is not that he [Paul] also imposes a ritual of feast days, but rather that he objects to certain elements of such observation*” (*ibid.*, p. 182).

I would add, what Paul objects to is the *judging!* And beyond that, there is simply not enough evidence for us to say it proves

anything one way or the other. It certainly doesn’t prove that Christians should observe no day at all.

These three passages are simply Paul’s attempt to deal with specific problems in specific churches of his day. Because we don’t have all the facts surrounding these problems, we don’t know precisely what Paul is driving at. But there are plenty of other passages that plainly and clearly show that Paul kept the Sabbath, and that the Fourth Commandment is part of God’s will for His children now as it has been since Creation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

How to Observe the Sabbath

Observing the Sabbath is one of the greatest blessings and privileges of being a Christian. It is a day of commanded reprieve from the mundane cares of life, a day of freedom — freedom from labor, freedom to fellowship with God, freedom to fellowship with family, friends, and brethren, freedom to join in worship with others, who are also free on that day; it is freedom to rest, to be rejuvenated, physically, spiritually, and mentally.

But how should a Christian go about keeping this day of freedom?

Basic Command is to Rest

The Fourth Commandment is the starting point for learning how to keep the Sabbath.

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 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. 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 20:8-11.**

Unlike any of the other commandments, the Fourth was instituted at creation by God Himself. He chose to cease from His work of creation as an example for us, even though He doesn’t get tired and He doesn’t need to rest (**Isaiah 40:28; Exodus 31:17**). His example and the commandment itself show that the Sabbath is fundamentally a day of ceasing from the labor of the six working days. It is a day of rest, a different kind of day!

Of course, many questions could be asked about the Fourth Commandment: What is work? What is rest? How do we keep the day holy today? The Bible provides answers to these and many other questions. But there is something else that is far more important!

God's Law Must Be Written In Our Hearts

There is little point in discussing how we should observe the Sabbath until we recognize that God wants obedience from the heart! We must *want* to keep the Sabbath, we must *want* to cease from our labor on this day made holy by God. Once we have this desire to obey, we can study the Bible to learn how God wants us to observe the Sabbath. And what we find is not a laundry list of do's and don'ts (that's what the Pharisees of Jesus' day were all concerned about). Rather we find examples and general principles, which can teach us how God wants us to keep His day of rest.

A Day of Delight

Contrary to what many people think about the Sabbath, it was intended by God to be a day of freedom, a day of delight, the highlight of the week. Notice **Isaiah 58:13-14**, "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land..."

The Sabbath is not a day for seeking our own selfish, carnal pleasures; rather it is for seeking God's pleasure. We should consider it a delight, a special day at the end of each week — 24 hours of freedom from the pressures of this physical life. Anyone who thinks of the Sabbath as a day of *can'ts and don'ts* is either misguided as to how the Sabbath should be kept or does not yet delight in obedience to God. People of Amos' day had this problem; they couldn't wait for the Sabbath to end so they could get back to "getting things done":

"When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat? skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales..." **Amos 8:5**.

To them, the Sabbath was a burdensome

interruption in their commercial quest for physical wealth and pleasure. It was certainly not written in their hearts. Anyone who finds himself anxious for the sun to go down on Saturday, so he can get on to other things, is missing the point. It is to be a day of rejoicing, a day for celebrating God, His creating, His redemptions true delight, physically and spiritually.

A Day For Worship

While the Fourth Commandment itself does not mention worship on the Sabbath, examples from both Old and New Testament show that the Sabbath was used regularly for that purpose. According to **Leviticus 23:3**, the Sabbath was a day of sacred assembly for the Israelites. It was Jesus' custom to worship in the synagogues on the Sabbath, **Luke 4:14-16**. The apostles also worshipped on the Sabbath, both in synagogues and at other places (**Acts 13:14, 42, 44, 14:1, 15:21, 16:13, 17:2, 18:4**).

The writer of the book of Hebrews exhorted Christians to assemble with one another.

"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 10:28**.

Certainly Christians can assemble and worship on any day; but during the week so many activities and responsibilities interfere with congregational and group worship and Bible study. However, on the Sabbath, God's children are free from physical duties and obligations. Indeed, they are commanded by God to be free on that day. Hence, while every day is suitable for group worship, on the Sabbath day it is especially appropriate. Throughout Bible history, God's people have used it for that purpose.

Jesus' Example of Sabbath-keeping

Our Messiah was continually running afoul of the religious leaders of His day regarding the Sabbath. Many times they accused Him of doing things on the Sabbath which, according to their traditions, were unlawful. In His responses to them, we can learn a great deal about how the Sabbath should be kept.

Lawful to Do Good.

On one occasion, the Pharisees, looking

for a reason to accuse Jesus, asked Him if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath (it wasn't according to their traditions). He responded very pointedly,

"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**.

We can and should do good every day, but on the Sabbath we are especially free to reach out to, others, to visit the widow, the sick, the orphan (**James 1:26-27**) and to do good in many other ways. Of course, one could spend his entire Sabbath doing good for people and completely neglect to rest, to worship, or to fellowship; this is not what Jesus intended. Note that He did *not* say that doing good was the primary purpose of the Sabbath; rather He simply stated that it was *lawful*. He did not spend His entire Sabbath looking for people to heal. But when they came to Him, He did not turn them away.

But suppose one makes his living doing good — caring for the sick, for example. Can he go right on making his living on the Sabbath? Hardly! The intent and purpose of the Fourth Commandment is to provide the seventh day as a day of ceasing that is refreshing and rejuvenating physically, mentally, and spiritually. That is hardly accomplished by doing the same thing on that day that one does the six working days, even if it is doing good. Of course, sick people have to be cared for seven days a week, but if we truly have the Sabbath commandment written in our hearts, we will do our best to find a way to accomplish both — to have a seventh day of rest, and to have the sick cared for — perhaps by those who will be working that day regardless (non Sabbath-keepers) or by volunteers.

Taking Care of Emergencies.

Jesus made it very plain that it is right to handle emergencies — even those that involve labor — on the Sabbath. He gave the example of pulling an ox out of the ditch (**Luke 14:5**) and of caring for animals. Modern examples might be fixing a flat tire, jump-starting a stalled car, putting out a fire, repairing a broken water pipe.

In **Matthew 24:20**, Jesus spoke of fleeing on the Sabbath. "*Pray ye that your flight be not in winter, neither on the Sabbath Day.*" Fleeing would certainly be an emergency — something one would not want to do any day, but especially not on the Sabbath. Yet, though

not desirable, it was permissible. Some emergencies (like fleeing) might involve many hours of labor on the Sabbath, but they would be very rare.

Jesus Was Out with People.

Jesus did not cloister Himself away fasting, praying, and studying all day on the Sabbath. Rather, He was out with people, at least much of the time. He was teaching, preaching, healing, talking, walking. This does not mean it is wrong to pray, fast, and study, or to spend time alone on the Sabbath. Indeed, on that day, we are free to pray and study and we should definitely take advantage of that opportunity. But Jesus' example, and that of the apostles, was not one of seclusion on the Sabbath.

Learning Not to Judge

Sabbath-keepers are a very diverse group of Christians living in a world that virtually ignores the Fourth Commandment. We are students, office workers, factory workers, laborers, homemakers. And because we spend our six working days so differently, our needs for rest and rejuvenation on the seventh day will vary to some extent. A student, who spends six days grinding away at the books, will hardly be much refreshed by a Sabbath of mostly studying. Yet a busy salesman may relish the opportunity to spend long hours reading the Bible on the Sabbath. A man who does heavy construction all week, will look forward to the Sabbath differently than a woman who has been cooped up at home with small children all week. What is a thoroughly rejuvenating and spiritually uplifting experience for one person, may not be for another.

The Bible gives principles regarding how the Sabbath should be kept; they will be applied in different ways by different people. Just as other people may honor their parents differently than we do, others may keep the Sabbath a little differently than we do. Perhaps we can learn from them, and perhaps they can learn from us, **Galatians 6:1**. We should be careful not to judge one another, **Romans 14:4, 10**. Yet we should all approach the Sabbath with positive anticipation and learn to delight in what God wants on that day, rather than what we want.

Day of Preparation Important

We live at a very fast pace. There are so many things to do work, school, shopping,

appointments to keep, meetings to go to. There's never enough time. It is so easy to let all these activities and pressures spill over to the Sabbath. This should not be. When the sun sets on Friday, a different kind of time should begin. A time of calm, of refreshment, of ceasing. Some things will just have to wait until the next week — or be left undone. Some opportunities will just have to be sacrificed in order to obey God.

One of the keys to a restful, rejuvenating Sabbath is preparation. In **Exodus 16**, when God gave the Israelites manna, He specifically instructed them to prepare their food the day before. **Mark 15:42** also mentions the day of preparation before the Sabbath. Doing things beforehand is a very important key to enjoying the Sabbath to the full. So many routine things, such as feeding animals, taking out garbage, putting gas in the car, showering and cooking can be done ahead of time. The more effective one is in preparing, the more free he will be on the Sabbath — free to worship, to rest, to do good, to study, to fellowship.

Children's Special Needs

One of the most important considerations for those who have children is to recognize that their needs on the Sabbath are different from those of adults. To be sure, they need a day of ceasing, a day of rest and rejuvenation. But their idea of getting it may be entirely different than an adult's idea. Sitting long hours in church getting "spiritual food" may be a worse burden to them than doing chores around the house during the week.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not suggesting they stay home from church to do the chores on the Sabbath. I am saying, look at it from their perspective. If you give them a long list of don'ts (no TV, no ball playing, no bike riding, no computer games, no friends over,) and a short list of do's (pray, study Bible, go to church, sit quietly), you may make the Sabbath a real burden for them. Do everything you can to make the Sabbath a day they look forward to. Use your freedom from weekday responsibilities to spend time with your children — doing things that will make the Sabbath a joy and a delight for them!

Day to Enhance Relationship with God

There are so many things that could be said about keeping the Sabbath; it would be

so easy to give a set of rules. We would all feel so secure and comfortable with everyone keeping the Sabbath according to the same set of rules. But this is not God's way. He is not interested in cookbook obedience to a set of regulations; rather He wants an intimate, personal relationship. He wants children who are learning and growing and developing, not automatons who can follow a code of rules.

Of course, any individual or group can develop a set of guidelines based on their understanding of the Bible. And we can all learn from discussion with one another about keeping the Sabbath. But we should learn a giant lesson from the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They had a stringent code of conduct regarding the Sabbath. But one rule always begat another one — to the point that they completely forgot the original purpose of the Sabbath. Jesus denounced their approach: "*The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath*" **Mark 2:27-28**.

The important thing is that the law is written in each individual heart — in your heart and my heart. You, personally, must want to search the Scriptures for yourself. You must learn and apply the principles and lessons you find there in your own life so you can grow in your relationship with your heavenly Father.

The Sabbath is a special day that should be fundamentally different from the six working days of your week, a day of physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional rest, a day to enhance your relationship with God. Sabbath was made for man; it was made for you as God's gift. It is a day of commanded freedom. Use it to the full as a blessing for you and a glory to God!

Do You Have Questions or Comments?

If you have questions or comments about any of the material covered in this booklet, please feel free to contact the person who gave it to you or write to one of the addresses listed inside the back cover. We'll be happy to communicate with you on a personal basis.

Other literature regarding the Sabbath, including the book *From Sabbath to Sunday*, by Samuele Bacchiocchi, is available from The Bible Sabbath Association, RD 1 Box 222, Fairview, OK 73737; write for more information.