

## **Study Guide #18: The Case for the Sabbath**

### **Introduction**

Everyone acknowledges that what we call Saturday was the original Sabbath, which devout Jews still observe. While a few Christians continue this practice, the large majority of Christians observe Sunday, either as the Christian Sabbath or as a worship and family day. What does the Bible say about a weekly day of rest and worship? We explore the Biblical evidence regarding the Sabbath in this Study Guide.

### **Question #1: When did the Sabbath originate?**

**Answer:** The Sabbath was instituted by God on the very first seventh day of the Creation Week, according to Genesis 2:1-3. This passage states that God did 3 things on that day: (1) He *rested* from His creation; (2) He *blessed* the day; and (3) He *sanctified* (or made holy) the day. God certainly didn't need to rest, so His resting must have been an example for humans to rest in order to enjoy His creation. The fact that He blessed the day would mean He did so for mankind, for God is the Source for all blessings and doesn't need a blessing for Himself. Finally, His "setting apart" (meaning of "sanctified") the day for a holy use must have been for mankind because God doesn't need to set apart a day for Himself; He *is* holiness itself. The meaning is clear: that God set apart each 7<sup>th</sup> day for mankind so they could enjoy His creation and receive a spiritual blessing especially on that day. Since Adam and Eve weren't Jews, the Sabbath (which means "rest") was given to all mankind. [NOTE: Also note that the Sabbath Commandment in Exodus 20:8-11 specifies that the Sabbath was based on what God did at Creation week, which means that any attempt to say that the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Creation week was not a 24-hour day is false since the Sabbath Commandment obviously refers to a 24-hour day.]

### **Question #2: Why wasn't there a specific command in Genesis for people to keep the Sabbath?**

**Answer:** Many have objected that there's no specific command in Genesis for people to keep the Sabbath. They argue that since the first command came at Mt. Sinai, the Sabbath wasn't kept until the Israelites began to keep it in Moses' day. But note that Genesis is a book of *origins* or "beginnings," as the name of the book suggests, and isn't a law book per se. At the same time, Genesis 26:5 commends Abraham for having **"obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and my laws"** (NKJV). Excluding the word "voice," this verse quotes God using 4 different words for laws, which clearly speaks of a specific code of laws rather than merely a simple command by God. This means that Abraham knew about a code of laws that God must have given to mankind orally. Furthermore, the things God Himself did on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Creation week



Abraham

must have been for mankind, and it makes no sense to do something for mankind and then not expect them to take advantage of those things for more than 2,500 years. [NOTES: (1) From Creation to the Mt. Sinai story was approximately 2,500 years, according to a conservative rendering of Biblical chronology; and (2) See Explorer II, Study Guide #16, Question #3 for the evidence that the Ten Commandments were individually known in the time of Genesis.]

Some have further argued that Deuteronomy 5:15 cites Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery as the reason to keep the Sabbath, "proving" that it was given only to the Israelites. But an *additional* reason for *Israel* to keep the Sabbath doesn't mean that the original reason for all mankind ceased to exist.

### Question #3: Did Gentile converts to Judaism have to keep the Sabbath in the Old Testament?

**Answer:** Yes. Isaiah 56:1-8 states 3 times that Gentile converts should keep the Sabbath. This implies that the Sabbath was never intended only for the Hebrew or Jewish people. Moreover, Isaiah 66:22-23 tells us that in God's literal kingdom on the New Earth, that **"from one New Moon to another, And from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me"** (NKJV). Clearly the words **"All flesh"** includes all people on the earth. So if Gentile converts need to keep the Sabbath now, and everyone will keep it in the New Earth, then it's difficult to understand why God's people shouldn't keep it now.

### Question #4: Did Christians keep the Sabbath after the death of Jesus?

**Answer:** Luke's gospel tells us that the women didn't finish the burial preparation for Jesus' body on Friday (Luke 23:56), but they returned on Sunday morning to complete the process (Luke 24:1). The reason



Jesus rested in the tomb on Sabbath

Luke gives for this delay is that **"they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment"** (Luke 23:56, NKJV). This statement is remarkable for 2 reasons. *First*, Luke was a Gentile (a Greek). *Second*, he wrote his gospel around A.D. 60. It's remarkable that a Gentile Christian writing about 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus spoke of the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath as being **"according to the commandment."** If the Sabbath had been changed or abolished, surely he would have described it as the *Jewish* Sabbath or the Jewish commandment or in terms of it as being according to

the custom of the *old* Sabbath. But he simply says that it was **"the Sabbath according to the commandment."** This is strong evidence that the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Church believed that the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath was the Christian Sabbath.

### Question #5: Didn't Paul keep the Sabbath only because he was trying to reach fellow Jews with the Jesus message?

**Answer:** It might be except for the fact that the book of Acts, which describes the 1<sup>st</sup> 30 years or so of Church history, tells us that Paul preached to both Jews *and* Gentiles on the Sabbath (Acts 13:42, 44; 17:1-4; 18:4). If the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath had been changed or abolished, we would expect that Paul would have met

with the Gentiles on Sunday instead. But the fact that he met with both Jews *and* Gentiles on the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath strongly suggests that he and the early Church believed it was the Christian Sabbath.

### **Question #6: Is there a New Testament text that explicitly teaches that the 7<sup>th</sup> day is the Sabbath for Christians?**

**Answer:** Yes. Hebrews 4:9 states that **“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God”** (NKJV), with the Greek word for **“rest”** actually being a compound word meaning **“Sabbath-rest.”** In previous verses, the author used Israel’s eventual entrance into Canaan as a symbol of spiritual resting in the gospel (Hebrews 3:18-4:2). He then compares this spiritual rest to God resting on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Creation week, quoting from Genesis 2:2 and Exodus 20:11 (in Hebrews 4:4). Therefore, his statement about a **“Sabbath-rest”** remaining for Christians means that the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath is a symbol of the spiritual rest in the gospel.



Sabbath-Rest in the Cross

Verse 10 makes it quite clear that this Sabbath-rest is a literal keeping of the Sabbath because he states that **“he who had entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His”** (NKJV). Any attempt to assert that the believer’s ceasing from his work means to cease trying to earn his salvation violates the immediate context. The verse says we are to cease from *our* works **“as God did from His.”** It makes *no* sense to say that God ceased from trying to save Himself by His good works.

This statement is even more significant because even a cursory reading of the book of Hebrews informs us that it was written to Jewish (Hebrew) Christians to move them away from the Jerusalem Temple, earthly priesthood, and animal sacrifices and toward the heavenly Jerusalem, the priesthood of Jesus, and His once-for-all sacrifice for sins. To use the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath as a symbol of the spiritual rest in the gospel in such a book would be very odd *if* the Sabbath had been changed to Sunday or abolished. Therefore, Hebrews 4:9 is a validation of the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath for Christians.

### **Question #7: Is the Sabbath a sacrament?**

**Answer:** The historical meaning of the word for “sacrament” is that it’s God’s *means* by or through which He gives His grace (gifts) to believers. Therefore, the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath is indeed a sacrament of the Church in that Hebrews 4:9 teaches that by keeping it, the believer *more fully* enters into the spiritual rest of the gospel. What an irony that the very commandment that most of the Christian world views as representing legalism (salvation by works) is the only commandment that actually symbolizes, and is the means of more fully entering into, the spiritual experience of depending upon the *imputed* righteousness of Jesus for our salvation! [NOTE: We don’t deny that many Sunday-keeping Christians also enjoy the spiritual rest in the gospel truth. But Hebrews 4:9 teaches that 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath-keeping is God’s own chosen method for *more fully* entering into that rest.]

## Question #8: Why doesn't the New Testament say more about the Sabbath?

**Answer:** There aren't volumes written about the Sabbath truth in the New Testament because it was never an issue in the early Church. In this case, the absence of controversy is good evidence for the continued observance of the 7<sup>th</sup>-day Sabbath at that time. If the Church had to call a special council at Jerusalem in order to deal with the controversy over whether circumcision should be required for Gentile converts (Acts 15), then surely *if* the Sabbath was no longer being kept and/or if Sunday had replaced the Sabbath, the New Testament would have had *much* to say about it. [NOTE: See Explorer II, Study Guide #17, Question #1 for a discussion of the Jerusalem Council.]

## Question #9: How do we know that our Saturday is the same seventh day that the Bible calls the Sabbath? Hasn't the calendar been changed since then?

**Answer:** The calendar in Jesus' day was the Julian Calendar, which wasn't as precise as later knowledge became. Specifically, a year is about 11 minutes less than the Julian Calendar's reckoning, which over



OCTOBER 1582						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1	2	3	4	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

many centuries led to a partial shift in the seasons in connection with the calendar. In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII instituted what is called the Gregorian Calendar to correct this shift in the seasons. But the weekly cycle wasn't affected, because Thursday, October 4, 1582, was followed by Friday, October 15, 1582. Most European countries followed the Gregorian Calendar immediately, but the entire British Empire didn't follow suit until 1752. Since Christians believe that Jesus would never be mistaken

about the day for the Sabbath, and the Gregorian Calendar didn't affect the weekly cycle, we can be certain that our Saturday is the same day as the Sabbath in Jesus' day.

## Question #10: When exactly does the Sabbath begin and when does it end?

**Answer:** In Genesis 1, each day is marked by the expression “**the evening and the morning**” (Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31, NKJV), indicating that the night portion is the 1<sup>st</sup> part of a 24-hour day. Mark 1:32 defines “**evening**” as when the sun sets. Therefore, the Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. As in the Bible, Sabbath-keepers refer to Friday as their Preparation Day to do the little things that can be realistically done to prepare for the Sabbath, such as polishing one's shoes, taking baths, filling the vehicle with fuel, and doing what food preparation can be done to minimize labor on Sabbath. [NOTES: (1) The midnight-to-midnight reckoning of today was begun by the ancient Romans; and (2) In the far northern regions of earth, in the Land of the Midnight Sun, the sun never sets in midsummer and it never rises in midwinter. In those regions, most Sabbath-keepers begin the Sabbath when the sun is at its lowest point on the horizon; and during midwinter, most observe it from Friday noon to Saturday noon since that's the time the last visible sunset occurred at the beginning of the period and the time that the first visible sunset occurs at the end of the period.]

## Question #11: What are the major principles of how to keep the Sabbath holy?

**Answer:** The first thing to note is that the Sabbath is not *merely* a day to go to church, but an entire 24 hours of holy time. It's part of one's lifestyle, not just a couple of hours of church time. The Creation week origin of the Sabbath outlines the basic principles for proper Sabbath-keeping. Review Question #1 as you read the answer to this Question #11. *First*, people should physically rest from their regular labors in order to experience the blessing and holiness of the 7<sup>th</sup> day. Exodus 20:8-11 confirms that this is a physical rest from our labors by telling us that **"no work"** (v. 10, NKJV) should be performed on the Sabbath. *Second*, the word **"sanctified"** (Genesis 2:3, NKJV) means "to set apart for holy use," or "to dedicate." That means that our resting on the Sabbath is so that it can be dedicated (reserved) for a holy use. This holy use would be to focus our thoughts, words, and deeds on God in an exclusive way that we can't do so on the other 6 days, when we are engaged in our work habits. Therefore, except when we're sleeping, we should dedicate the entire 24-hour period as holy time to focus on Jesus. Of course, public worship is one way to dedicate the day to God and is required by Leviticus 23:3, where the term **"holy convocation"** (NKJV) literally means a "holy meeting."



Isaiah 58:13-14 summarizes what it means to keep the Sabbath holy when it commands that we should not do our **"own pleasure or our own ways or speak our own words"** on the Sabbath (v. 13, NKJV). Instead, we are to **"call the Sabbath a delight"** (v. 13, NKJV). This implies 3 basic things. *First*, we should refrain from the everyday topics in our conversations and from entertainment, recreation, and other secular activities. *Second*, we should speak of spiritual things in our conversations and engage in activities that enhance our relationship with the Lord. *Finally*, we should be joyful in our demeanor because the Lord is our delight.

## Question #12: Are there any specific activities the Scriptures tell us to avoid on the Sabbath?

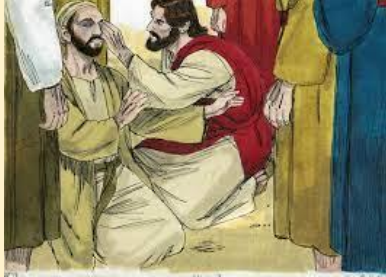
**Answer:** Yes. Nehemiah 13:15-21 says that God's people should refrain from all business transactions on the Sabbath. In other words, we should avoid shopping, banking, and engaging in discussing business or finalizing business deals *unless* there's a medical or humanitarian *emergency* (Matthew 12:11; Luke 13:15; 14:5). This would include eating out in a restaurant or buying or selling anything on the Sabbath. [NOTE: In some instances, excessive travel on the Sabbath can't be avoided, and purchasing food might be necessary under those circumstances. But careful planning should enable one to avoid most of those situations.]

Some have thought that no meal preparation like cooking should be done on the Sabbath. It's true that cooking on the Sabbath was prohibited in the Old Testament (Exodus 35:3). However, kindling a fire was definite work in those days. In our modern society, cooking is a simple matter of turning on the stove. Nevertheless, we ought to avoid heavy cooking and the baking of things like bread, cakes, pies, and the like, and anything that can be done on Friday should be prepared on that day.



### Question #13: Are there any positive activities that the Christian ought to do on the Sabbath other than attending a public worship service?

**Answer:** Absolutely! If the Sabbath is a “**delight**” (Isaiah 58:13, NKJV), it must *not only* be a day when certain things are *not* done. Besides public worship, Jesus frequently healed on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-



Jesus healing on the Sabbath

14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-15). From this we deduce that visiting the sick and those in nursing homes is an acceptable Sabbath activity, as is actively helping them as a doctor or nurse. A caution should be given that a medical professional not allow himself to use his profession as an excuse to regularly work on the Sabbath and miss worship services.

Since the Sabbath is a memorial of Creation, a nature walk when the weather permits is certainly an appropriate activity. Also, the playing of Bible games or watching nature or Bible videos are also interesting ways to spend the Sabbath. Perhaps a special Sabbath meal with the family’s favorite foods could be particularly planned, as long as any *meticulous* preparation work is done on Friday. These things are especially important for families with children in order to avoid the Sabbath becoming a day remembered only for what *cannot* be done. We should also remember that Jesus ignored the extra manmade rules the Pharisees had invented for keeping the Sabbath. So Sabbath-keeping should never be a matter of rules about what not to do, but a matter of applying Biblical principles. The bottom line is that whatever enhances one’s relationship with Jesus is an appropriate Sabbath activity.