

The Truth about The Sabbath

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It would be helpful for all readers to be familiar with information brought to the forty lessons course, supplied by the Christadelphian Bible Mission, Box CBM, 404, Shalfleet Lane, Birmingham B28 8SZ, UK.



A few points about this leaflet:

- 1) Many Bible passages are given. It is worth looking them up for yourself.
- 2) Some extra ideas are put as notes at the end.
- 3) Quotations are taken from the New King James Version of the Bible.

Some people think that the Sabbath should be kept as a day of rest; others disagree. We shall look at what the Bible says.

It shows us that

- the Sabbath was on Saturday.
- early Christians probably kept Sunday as a holy day.
- the Law given to Moses was not needed after the death of Jesus.

The seventh day

The following Scriptures show clearly that the Sabbath of the Bible is the seventh day:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

“Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.” (Exodus 31:14, 15)

We call the seventh day of the week Saturday, so Saturday is the Sabbath.

The Sabbath actually starts at sunset on Friday evening and finishes when the sun sets on Saturday evening. For an explanation of this see note 1 at the end.

We read in Genesis 2:3:

“Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made.”

After 6 days of creative work there was a day in which God did not work. He said that day was blessed and that it was holy. The word “Sabbath” means “rest” in the Hebrew original. It is not used in this passage in Genesis. The first time it is used in the Bible is much later, when the people of Israel had come out of Egypt. They were told not to collect manna on the Sabbath day (Manna was the bread God provided for them).

“Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, there will be none.” (Exodus 16:26)

Not long after this, God gave to the children of Israel a set of laws, which is usually called the Law of Moses. One important part of this law was the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment was to remember to keep the Sabbath day holy.

From the time of Adam to Moses there was no law about keeping the seventh day holy.

A day of rest

The Sabbath gave the children of Israel a day on which they could rest. It also made sure the lowest servants also had a day's rest every week; even animals benefited from the Sabbath rest, as Deuteronomy 5:14 shows:

“but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall not do any work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you.”

The next verse tells them that they should remember how hard they had to work in Egypt where they were slaves. They were not allowed regular rest then. God had helped them by delivering them from the Egyptian taskmasters who made them work so hard. If they remembered how difficult life had been for them at that time then they would be kind to their servants and not make them work seven days a week.

But the Sabbath was to be more than just a day of rest, it was to be a special day for blessing and honouring the Lord. God would bless them if they did this as Isaiah 58:13-14 shows:

“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honourable, and shall honour him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the Lord; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Notice that they were not to do anything on the Sabbath for their own benefit or gain. Verse 13 says they should honour God “not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure ...”.

They were to keep the Sabbath holy. “Holy” means “separate for God”. The Sabbath was to be God’s day.

If a person broke the rule and worked on the Sabbath he was to be put to death (Exodus 31:14, 15). The man who was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath day was stoned to death as God instructed (see Numbers 15:32-36).

Often the Jews broke the rule about the Sabbath. They hated having to keep it holy to the Lord and preferred to work and trade. They said:

“... ‘When will the New Moon be past, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may trade our wheat? Making the ephah small and the shekel large, falsifying the balances by deceit, that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals - even sell the bad wheat?’” (Amos 8:5-6)

God was not pleased with His people!

The Sabbath in New Testament times

It looked as if a great change had come over the nation of Israel by the time the Lord Jesus appeared. The people knew that their fathers had sinned in breaking the Sabbath law and so the leaders of the Jews now made up their minds that they were not going to fail in the same way. They did not fail in the same way: they failed in another way.

In some ways these religious leaders kept the Sabbath very strictly and also made everybody else do the same. They acted like over-enthusiastic policemen, and made the Sabbath law more severe than God had meant it to be. They criticised the Lord Jesus for doing miracles of healing on the Sabbath. They condemned a sick man, whom Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, because he was carrying a rolled-up mat and said it was wrong for Jesus to heal a poor woman because she came on the Sabbath day.

These men were not honouring God by their strict attitude to the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a day for relieving people of their burdens (or loads) and problems, but these men were using the Sabbath to make life harder. They condemned the Lord Jesus Christ who understood the true purpose of the Sabbath and fulfilled it by giving glory to God on that day. They overlooked the fact that the priests worked on the Sabbath day (see Matthew 12:5).

Jesus was obviously busy on the Sabbath day. He healed a man with a withered hand (Matthew 12:10-13), a woman with a bent spine (back) (Luke 13:10-14), a man who was paralysed for 38 years (John 5:1-9), and many others.

Was this right or wrong?

Obviously it was right. The Lord Jesus is the Son of God, who always does the will of his Father. The fact that he was able to perform these wonderful works was proof that God was with him. Yet these strict Jews said that Jesus was breaking God's laws, and they condemned him for performing miracles on the Sabbath.

First, let us be clear on the fact that Jesus was not breaking the Sabbath. The miracles of healing that he did were not against God's law. Jesus was fulfilling the spirit of the law. Remember Isaiah's words: "not doing your own ways." The things that Jesus did were not for his personal gain. He was doing God's work; he was helping people. For slaves, the Sabbath was a day of release, a day of freedom - and Jesus gave freedom to poor people who were suffering and in pain. Look at what he said in Matthew 12:11-12:

"Then he said to them, 'What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath'."

Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27). This day was intended by God to provide benefits for people weighed down with problems. The Lord Jesus was providing even greater benefits than the ordinary weekly Sabbath could provide. He was relieving burdens that people would otherwise have to carry for seven days every week; and even more important, he brought relief to people who were carrying the much heavier burden of sin. He said:

"Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

No wonder the Lord Jesus claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath! (Mark 2:28). For the deeper meaning behind the Sabbath see note 2 at the end.

- The Sabbath was to be kept separate for God.
- The Lord Jesus helped others on the Sabbath; he never pleased himself.
- Jesus Christ can give us rest by removing our sins.
- The end of the Law of Moses

Is it necessary for Christians to keep the Sabbath?

Because the Sabbath law was a part of the Law of Moses, the question we ought to ask is: Do Christians have to keep the Law of Moses? And the answer the Scriptures give us is: No.

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul explains that although the Law of Moses was given by God, it was not intended to last for ever. God's intention was that it should lead people to Christ. So when Christ came, the Law of Moses was no longer needed. Paul puts it very clearly when he says:

“Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.”
(Galatians 3:24-25) (A tutor is a teacher).

The Sabbath law, which was a part of the Law of Moses, also came to an end with the coming of Christ. For more on this, see Note 3 at the end.

Christians and the Sabbath

Because the coming of Christ marked the end of the Law of Moses, Christians do not have to keep the Sabbath. But there are other reasons for believing that the law of the Sabbath no longer applies:

1. It says twice in Exodus 31:13-17 that the Sabbath was a sign between God and Israel. The Sabbath is never described as a sign between God and Christians.
2. There is not a single passage in the whole of the New Testament that says that Christians must keep the Sabbath, though there are New Testament Scriptures that say that the other nine commandments (of the Ten Commandments) should still be kept.
3. There is not a single example in the New Testament of a Christian being condemned by God, or by His faithful servants, for breaking the Sabbath. In the New Testament it was only wicked and ignorant men who condemned others for Sabbath-breaking.

4. An important meeting of apostles and others in Jerusalem, called to discuss whether non-Jewish Christians ought to keep the Law of Moses, decided it was not necessary. It was agreed that Christians ought to observe certain “necessary things”, but the Sabbath is not included amongst them.
5. When Paul rebuked the Galatians for allowing themselves to be brought under the Law of Moses, from which men had been freed by Christ, he said sadly:

“You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have laboured for you in vain.” (Galatians 4:10-11)

To make people keep special religious days was, and still is, a backward step.

6. Paul knew that some, who had been brought up to think of the Sabbath law as important, would find it hard to change their thinking. He did not want to upset the conscience of these people. He even let them keep their Sabbaths and their other special days if they felt they must. But, and - this is important - he did not allow these Sabbath-observers to make others keep the Sabbath. His words to the Romans made this clear:

“One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” (Romans 14:5)

If Christians were commanded to keep the Sabbath, how could Paul write these words?

7. Paul’s words to the Colossians show clearly that we do not need to keep the Sabbath:

“Therefore 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)

See how Paul here gives the Colossians the same instructions as the Romans.

People could please themselves whether they kept the Sabbath or not. And the two groups - those who kept the Sabbath, and those who did not - were not to condemn each other. It is difficult to see how anyone who claims to follow the teaching of Scripture could insist that all Christians should keep the Sabbath.

Saturday or Sunday?

Religious Jews still keep the seventh-day Sabbath, and their reason for doing so is obvious. They do not think of Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah, and therefore they do not think that the Law of Moses has been brought to an end.

Those Christians who set apart Sunday for worshipping God cannot be called keepers of the Sabbath. Many people think that by making Sunday a day of rest they are keeping the Sabbath: but they are wrong. The Sabbath is the seventh day, and Sunday is the first day.

However, if worship is sincere, then the idea of setting apart one day for God is a good one. Indeed, in countries where Sunday is not a working day it is sensible to take advantage of this fact, and to set aside this day for worship. But God does not command us to do this.

In Acts 20:7 we read that the disciples met on the first day of the week (Sunday) to break bread:

“Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.”

Similarly the believers in Corinth must have also met on a Sunday (see 1 Corinthians 16:2). So it looks as if the special day for worship in the early church was a Sunday but they could break bread to remember the death of Jesus on any day as Acts 2:46 shows.

Seventh Day Adventists

Some religious groups like the Seventh Day Adventists say that we should keep the seventh-day Sabbath. The “Adventists” take their religion very seriously, and in many ways they are loyal to the Scriptures. They say that men from Adam’s time were meant to keep the Sabbath. It is true that God did not work on the seventh day but there is nothing in the Bible to say that Adam and Eve kept the Sabbath at any time. We do not read of Noah or Abraham or other great men who lived before the Law of Moses keeping the Sabbath. The children of Israel could not keep a weekly day of rest when they were slaves in Egypt. Do the Adventists kill people who don’t keep the Sabbath, because if they keep the Sabbath law they should keep all of it?

There was no law about keeping the Sabbath holy until the time of Moses.

The Seventh Day Adventists teach wrong ideas, views that do not agree with the Bible.

Here are some examples:-

1. They believe people go to heaven when they die. The Bible shows clearly that the dead have no existence until the Lord Jesus returns to this earth and raises the dead from their graves. For more on this see lesson 22 of the 40 lesson postal course.
2. They have wrong ideas about Satan. The Bible shows us that our own wicked human thoughts are what cause us to do evil. Lessons 29 and 30 of the postal course have more information on this.

Your time belongs to God

All our time belongs to God. This does not mean that God wants us to cut ourselves off from everyday life and live a lonely life. Jesus mixed with people so he could show them how God wanted them to live. But God should always be in our minds.

When we are at work, we will remember God and do only those things that please Him. When we are not at work we will realise that our spare time is a gift from God and should be used wisely in reading the Word of God, in prayer and in good works. We will also set aside time to join other believers in worship. Note 4 contains information about the Sabbath that is still to come.

Summary

1. The Sabbath was the 7th day, or our Saturday.
2. God commanded people to keep the Sabbath in the time of Moses. There was no law about it before this.
3. Jesus worked to help other people on the Sabbath.
4. The Law of Moses was not needed after the Lord Jesus.
5. Members of the early church did not keep the Sabbath.
6. We should think about God every day.
7. Baptised believers should remember the death of Jesus regularly.

Questions

1. Which day is the Sabbath?
2. What does the word “holy” mean?
3. Why did the Law of Moses command people to keep the Sabbath?
4. Write out Galatians 3:24. In your own words, say what it means.
5. How often should we read the Bible and pray to God?
6. When should a baptised believer break bread to remember the death of Jesus?

Optional extra work

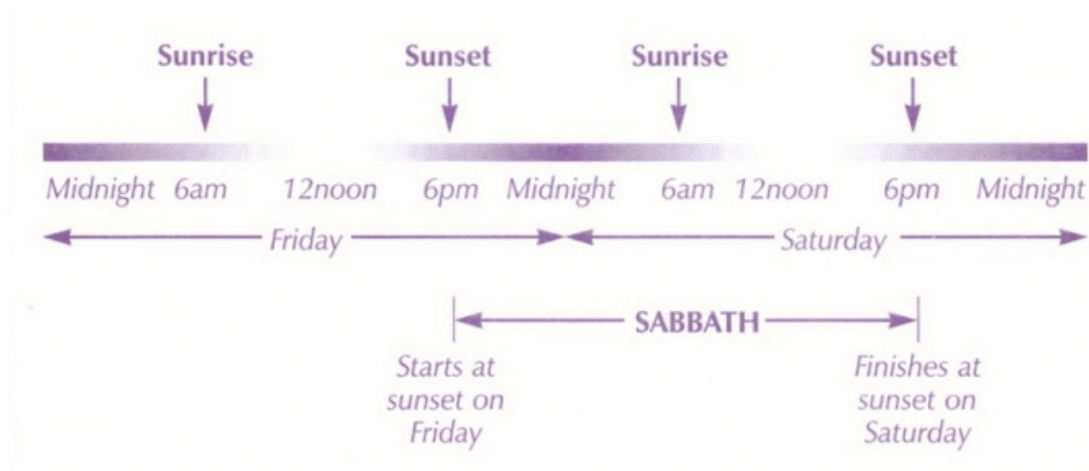
7. Explain in your own words what Romans 14:5-8 is telling us.

Note 1:

When is the Sabbath?

The Sabbath does not start in the early hours of Saturday morning. It starts when the sun goes down on Friday evening, so there is darkness at the beginning of the Sabbath. This follows the pattern set in Genesis chapter 1, where we read that the evening came first:

“... so the evening and the morning were the first day.” (Genesis 1:5)



Note 2:

The deeper meaning behind the Sabbath

Colossians 2:16-17 says:

“Therefore 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”.

It says that the Sabbath is a shadow. A shadow is not solid and lasting. It is roughly the same shape as the substance, but it has none of the details of the substance. The shadow itself is not important. What matters is the body - the substance.

The Sabbath is a shadow of Christ and his kingdom. It provides an outline, an incomplete picture of Christ. How foolish of Sabbath-observers to concentrate on the shadow when the real thing - Christ, and life in Him - is set before us.

The Sabbath was a day of rest - just one day in seven. It came and it went, it came and it went. Six days' work, one day's rest; six days' work, one day's rest. The fact that it did not continue showed that the real rest had not yet come.

The great rest came in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who said:

“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you ...” (Matthew 11:28-29)

He alone is able to provide mankind with a lasting rest - not just a rest from the bondage of a hard task-master, but from the universal bondage to the most cruel of all oppressors - sin. Sin makes servants of all men, and pays its wages - death.

Note 3:

The Law of Moses was not needed after the time of Jesus

Galatians 3:19 says:

“What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made ...”

Note it says that the law was ADDED. The law was not given until the time of Moses.

Why was it added? “Because of transgressions” (or sins). If there are clear rules then you know you are doing wrong when you break them.

For how long was it added? “TILL the Seed should come to whom the promise was made”. Jesus was this Seed (see lessons 12 and 15 of the 40 lesson postal course).

Note that the law was until the Lord Jesus Christ; it had an end!

Galatians 3:24 (which we have already looked at) says that the law was a teacher to bring us to Christ and verse 25 shows that we no longer need that tutor, or teacher.

The apostles were very worried about those who insisted that the Christians should keep the Law of Moses. An important meeting took place in Jerusalem to deal with the problem:

“But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them (the Gentile Christians), and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.’ So the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.” (Acts 15:5-6)

After much discussion, those God had chosen to lead the Christian church said this:

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.” (verses 28-29)

The burden of the Law was now removed. In a meeting that was called to discuss whether Christians should keep the Law of Moses, they were told plainly to stop doing certain things, but they were not told to keep the Sabbath.

Note 4:

The Sabbath that is still to come

Psalm 95:9-11 says that because Israel disobeyed God when they were in the wilderness, then they would not enter into God’s rest.

Hebrews 3, after quoting from this Psalm, says that the Christians should be careful so that they do not show unbelief. Hebrews 4:1-10 makes it clear that there is a future

rest for the people of God. Note 3 showed us that the true rest is provided by the Lord Jesus. When he returns to the earth, those who are true baptised believers of his will be welcomed into God's kingdom and released from their sinful human nature. They will be made immortal so they never have to struggle against sin again. This is the true Sabbath rest.

“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from his.”
(Hebrews 4:9-10)

Ruth Moore