

WHICH DAY SHOULD WE OBSERVE SABBATH?

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[Unless otherwise stated all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.]

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

In Genesis chapter 2 we read: *“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”* (vv. 13)

The Hebrew word “shabbat” simply means “rest.” However, in this article when I capitalize it—Shabbat—it refers to this seventh day, which God *hallowed* because on it he *rested from all the work that he had done in creation*. It is worth noting that while the formula: *“And there was evening and there was morning, the first day [etc.]”* concludes the account of each of the six days of creation, it is not there after the description of the seventh day as the day of rest for God.

In the Mosaic Laws the LORD commanded his people Israel to observe the seventh day of each week as a sabbath, a holy-day of rest. [In this article, when I capitalize this word—Sabbath—it will mean this weekly Holy-Day.] Two different reasons for such a command are given in the two versions of the Decalogue—the Ten Commandments.

In Exodus 20 (vv.8-11) God says: *“Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. . . . For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”* But in Deuteronomy 5 (vv. 12-15), Moses says to the people: *“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy as the LORD your God commanded you. . . . Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”*

The weekly Sabbath, therefore, is to be observed by the People of Israel on the seventh day, first in remembrance of God’s Shabbat, but in addition, as a reminder that their God had delivered them from slavery. Their observance of Sabbath distinguished them from all the other peoples of the earth as the peculiar people of Yahweh. Along with the rite of Circumcision it marked them as the People of the Covenant. The Jewish philosopher, Achad Ha-am has said: *“Even more than the Jews have kept Sabbath, has the Sabbath kept the Jews.”*

But God’s people have not always faithfully kept the Sabbath—see for example Nehemiah 13:15-18. The prophets also promised that if the people truly “delighted” in the Sabbath, then the LORD would bless them abundantly (see Isaiah 58:13&14). Indeed, the rabbis say that if the entire Jewish People would keep the Sabbath just once, then Messiah would come!

So, after the Exile, when a greater emphasis began being put on keeping the minutia of the Law, Pharisaic Judaism built a “Fence around the Law” to prevent even getting close to breaking any of the original commands. In the treatise of the Talmud entitled “Sabbath,” the rabbis established 39 categories of activities that were not permitted on the Sabbath, called *“Aboth”*—*“Fathers.”* They subdivided each of the *Aboth* into 39 sub-categories, which they called *“Toledoth”*—*“Offspring”* or *“Children.”* Thus making 1,521 separate Sabbath Rules (39x39)! In addition, there were a huge number of rules for the preparation of food for the Sabbath.

Some of this became simply foolish. For example: does a handkerchief constitute a burden that may not be carried on the Sabbath? Answer: if carried in one's pocket, then yes. But if tied around the neck (the origin of the "neckerchief" perhaps?), then no, since it is part of one's apparel! It is this rigid legalism that Jesus criticized severely, not the keeping of the Sabbath itself. Indeed it was this that prompted his famous statement: "*The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:27)

Certainly, the coming aside weekly from the bustle of everyday life to rest, to spend time with family and to spend time with God is not only obeying one of God's Ten Commandments, but is very beneficial for everyone. The playwright and novelist Herman Wouk admits in his autobiography, *This is My God*, that some of his colleagues in Hollywood have told him that they do not envy him his Judaism, but they do envy him his Sabbath!

FROM THE SABBATH TO THE LORD'S DAY

In Mark 2, Yeshua—Jesus' name in Hebrew—went on to declare: "... *so the Son of Man [i.e., he himself] is lord even of the Sabbath.*" (v.28) So the proper observance of the Sabbath became a major topic of contention between Yeshua and the religious leaders, and one of the ways Yeshua asserted his claim to be God, the One who had commanded the keeping of the Sabbath.

When Yeshua rose from the tomb, he chose to do so on the Feast of the First Fruits. But that was also the First Day of the week (or, if you wish, the Eighth Day—signifying a whole new order)! He appeared again to the disciples a week after his resurrection when Thomas, who had doubted the truth of the stories the others were telling about "seeing the Lord," was with them. That too, then, was on the First Day of the week.

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Apostles, that was on the Feast of Pentecost—or the Fiftieth day after the Feast of Firstfruits. If the Feast of Firstfruits, when Yeshua rose from the dead was on the First Day of the week, then the day the Holy Spirit was given was on the First Day of the week too! Luke, in his account of that Day of Pentecost, tells us that the followers of Yeshua "...*were all together in one place.*" (Acts 2:1) It seems that the First Day of the week had become an important day of gathering together for prayer and worship for the first believers, as they celebrated their Lord's resurrection. But these were all Jews, or at least converts to Judaism.

The importance of the First Day of the week to the early Christian community is also clear from the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters—see Acts 20:7ff, 1 Corinthians 16:2, etc. By the time the book of Revelation was written—towards the end of the first Century—the First Day had acquired the name, "The Lord's Day" (see Revelation 1:10).

If one remembers that in the Jewish calendar a day begins at sunset and runs through to the next sunset, we can discern what seems to have become the practice of the early Jewish believers from the Acts of the Apostles.

In Acts chapter 20, verse 7, we read: "*On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight.*" The Sabbath had begun at sunset on the sixth day and ended at sunset on the seventh day, probably with the service of *Havdalah*. It is also probable that the believers had spent the Sabbath together. Now the First Day had begun. After "breaking bread," which may have been just an evening meal or may have included what we now call Holy Communion, Paul and the believers continued with their fellowship, and Paul preached until midnight. Paul

departed the next morning, but that was still on the First Day. Clearly that First Day was observed as a special day—the Lord’s Day, but not as the Sabbath.

THE SEPARATION OF THE CHURCH AND THE SYNAGOGUE

Hostility from the Jewish Community towards Jews who believed in the deity of Yeshua increased during that first century of the Church (later to be called AD—Anno Domini—“the Year of Our Lord,” and today often called CE—the Common Era). This climaxed after the Jewish believers withdrew from the Bar Cochba revolt against the Romans in AD 135 when Bar Cochba was hailed as the Messiah. The Jewish believers were thrown out of the Synagogue, and the *Birkat HaMinim*—“blessing,” but effectively a curse on apostates, which specifically mentioned the “Nazarenes,” was added to the Synagogue Liturgy.

On the other side, Rome became more hostile towards the Jewish people, and the Church, now increasingly Gentile, began distancing itself from its Jewish roots. In AD 190, the Council of Caesarea declared that the Christian Sabbath was Sunday, the day “Our Lord rose from the dead, thus winning victory over those devilish Jews who had killed him.” And after the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 under the Emperor Constantine, it became illegal to light candles on Friday evening in celebration of Sabbath. During the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions in the 14th and 15th centuries, if you had a grudge against anyone, you could get them arrested—and maybe even killed—simply by accusing them of secretly lighting Sabbath Lights on a Friday night!

Thus it became a sacred obligation for Christians to observe the Lord’s Day as their Sabbath, and to regard the keeping of the seventh day Sabbath as anti-Christian. For Jews, on the other hand, the keeping of the Sabbath was not only an obedience to the Torah of God, it was a way of distinguishing themselves from their pagan neighbors and honoring those who had died rather than desecrate the Sabbath. If a Jew became a believer in Jesus Christ, therefore, they had to give up the Sabbath and observe Sunday. They would thus be called converts by the Church and traitors by the Jewish Community.

WHICH DAY SHOULD BELIEVERS KEEP SABBATH IN THE MODERN WORLD?

Given this historical perspective, which day of the week should we keep as the Sabbath in our modern world?

It is important to note that God’s Shabbat is ongoing, yet He continues His “work” of renewing and sustaining His creation. In the Gospel of John chapter 5 we read of Yeshua healing a crippled man on the Sabbath. As a result, the “Jews” (i.e., the Religious Leaders) started persecuting him for “working” on the Sabbath. In response, we read that Yeshua said: “*My Father is still working, and I also am working.*” John continues, “*For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.*” (See John 5:1-18.)

So for me, without for the moment asserting which day of the week the Sabbath should be or belittling that question, the more important question is: **How should we observe the Sabbath?** Surely we should be using it to remember, to rejoice in and to give thanks for God’s creation, and the deliverance of His people from slavery. . . . **AND** surely for believers in Yeshua, that **MUST** include celebrating the deliverance from sin and death won for us by Yeshua’s death and by his resurrection, which he chose to accomplish on the First Day of the week. This is so, I venture to suggest, whether or not we are able to actually avoid “work” on the day we keep as our sabbath day. I would add that the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem were given a

dispensation from the command to do no work on the Sabbath, because they had to offer the sacrifices in order to *keep* the Law! Yeshua made it clear that he—and remember, he is God incarnate—wants us to do good on the Sabbath, and not harm, to save life and not to kill (see Mark 3:4, etc.).

Let me give an example of what I mean from my own experience: One Easter Sunday, soon after I began working for CMJ in Britain, I was faced with a big question. I had been out of town for about two weeks, speaking on behalf of the Society and conducting Passover Seders. I had returned the day before, pretty exhausted spiritually, physically and emotionally, but my back yard was absolutely overgrown with the grass over a foot high. After I had attended the celebration of the Resurrection with my fellow believers at Church, I thought I ought to do work in that yard. Its overgrown state was not a good witness in the community! But I truly struggled with that because I had been well brought up to do no manner of work on the Lord's Day—the Sabbath. I prayed about it, and distinctly heard the Lord tell me that clearing the yard would indeed be glorifying to Him, and would be a remembrance of His creation and the deliverance from slavery. It would, on this occasion, do my body and soul good to get the exercise! That did not mean, however, that this should be my usual way of keeping the Sabbath Day holy!

In his letter to the Romans, chapter 14, Paul says this: *“Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.”* (vv. 5&6) In his letter to the believers in Colossae, Paul is combating the teaching of the “Judaizers,” who were saying that all followers of Yeshua, whether they were Jewish or Gentile, had to be circumcised and to keep the whole Mosaic Law. In chapter 2 he says: *“Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”* (vv. 16&17)

I take Paul's meaning in these two references to be that what is of paramount importance is to honor our Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, in all that we do, including in our observation of a weekly Sabbath—on whatever day we keep it. I also believe that we are not to judge other believers in how or when they keep the Sabbath. God is their Judge, not you and I.

I believe that Biblically there is precedent and good reason for observing both the seventh day and the first day as a Holy-Day and as the Sabbath. When I was a parish priest I generally had to work—and work hard (!)—on both Saturdays and Sundays. They were Holy-Days—in that sense Sabbaths (especially Sundays). But my rest day—my sabbath—was on another day of the week (most often Friday).

I also believe that there is good reason to start the observance of the Sabbath at sunset, besides the reference in Genesis 1 to “the evening and the morning” as the first day, etc. It is my experience that how I spend the evening and when I go to bed has a great impact on what I am able to accomplish during the next period of daylight!

CONCLUSION

Paul admitted to the believers in Corinth that: *“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. . . . To those outside the law I became as one outside the law . . . so that I might win those outside the law. . . . I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”* (1 Corinthians 9:20-22) It seems to me that it should still be true today that we should practice

our religious observances, whether we are Jewish or Gentile believers, in such a way that it is a witness to our neighbors and helps lead them to Messiah.

Therefore, if you live in a Jewish neighborhood or are called to be a witness primarily to Jewish people, observing Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset will both glorify God and cause your Jewish friends to take notice, thus giving you opportunities to speak to your friends about Yeshua and perhaps leading them to enter into his Shabbat rest. On the other hand, if you are in a predominantly Gentile society, I do not think keeping a Friday-Saturday Sabbath will particularly attract your neighbors. But keeping a joyous, non-judgmental Lord's Day that includes corporate worship, as well as care for others and time for rest on Sundays (or perhaps on Saturday evenings through Sunday evenings), may well be counter-cultural and a strong witness to the surrounding community, as well as bringing glory to our Lord.

May you and yours experience true "Shabbat shalom!"