

The Doctrine of Sabbath Keeping

Lane Casteix

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Introduction

Acts 20:1 After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia.

² When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. ³ There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. ⁴ Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus. ⁵ These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas, ⁶ but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.

⁷ On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

The context begins back in Acts 19:21, when Paul, traveling through Ephesus, causes a stir by teaching that “gods made with hands are not gods.” The local “idolsmith union” became very upset, and a near riot ensued. The “uproar” was this unruly Ephesian mob taking two of Paul’s friends prisoner and threatening them. This situation was defused by a city official. There is a system for handling civil problems, and mob rule isn’t it. Besides, Rome might notice and impose sanctions, which they definitely wanted to avoid.

Paul departs and heads to Macedonia, encouraging the churches along the way. From there through verse 6, the passage mainly serves as an itinerary for this part of Paul’s journey. However, note that in verse 5, there is a shift from describing Paul as “he” and “him” to using “we.” This change occurs because Luke, the author of Acts, has joined the group somewhere in Macedonia and travels with Paul to Troas, which leads us to our focus in verse 7.

Acts 20:7 On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

In verse 6, Luke states that they stayed there for seven days. On the first day of the week, they gathered together to break bread (v. 7). By cultural understanding at that time, the “first day of the week” referred to Sunday. Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath and the seventh day of the week. On the first day, they assembled to break bread, which refers to the Lord’s Table, not just a meal.

Verse 7 states, “Paul talked with them.” “Talked” is the Greek word *dialogomai*, which can mean to discuss, but it is also translated as “preach,” which I believe is the more accurate translation here. Note that they observed the Lord’s table—“we were gathered together to break bread.” Paul was preaching the Word all day and into the night. They are celebrating the Lord’s Table and preaching or teaching on Sunday, the day we traditionally consider our “Sabbath” in this Church Age. This is the first instance in Scripture where we see a reference to Sunday, the first day of the week, as a day of worship.

The Doctrine of the Sabbath

With that introduction, we are beginning a detailed study of a highly controversial subject, perhaps even more contentious than baptism. I am referring to the doctrine of the Sabbath. The question is whether we should observe the seventh day of the week as our Sabbath, as commanded of the Jews under the Law, or the first day of the week. This issue clearly separates Law from grace, but will grace prevail, or will it be commingled with the Law?

Few Christians truly understand grace, and many denominations try to turn Christianity into a system of human works and character building, expecting to gain merit from it. That is nothing more than the Law disguised as Christianity. It certainly is not grace. Romans 6 tells us that we are not under the Law, but rather under grace. Yet, very few grasp this.

These two days, Saturday and Sunday, as Sabbath days, represent two opposing principles and two major dispensations—the Church Age and

the Age of Israel. Of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, the only commandment not carried into the Age of Grace is the one concerning the Sabbath. Every other commandment is reiterated in the New Testament, with some even expanded on, but not this one.

The Sabbath issue is a classic example of the heresy that results when someone fails to understand the distinction between Israel and the Church, and the Law and grace. Most denominations make the mistake of confusing Israel and the Church. They are not the same, and contrary to what some say, the Church has not replaced Israel in God's plan. This point can be clearly shown with Scripture and has been discussed in these classes in the past (see my series on Dispensations). For some, Sabbath keeping is a key part of their cult.

The Jewish Sabbath

There are two "theories" concerning Sabbath observance. The first claim is that the Sabbath was given to humanity in Eden, while others argue that it was given only to Israel.

The first theory suggests that the Sabbath has been observed by all people since the time of the Garden, even before the Law was given, and it continues beyond the end of the Law of Moses. This isn't just a Seventh Day Adventist belief but is also promoted by writers and religious leaders of other denominations who attempt to transfer biblical authority from the Jewish Sabbath to what we call the "Lord's Day." These "Judaizing Christians" are obscuring the truth concerning grace. Scripture doesn't support this view.

Genesis 2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ²And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.

It is assumed, by the Sabbath observers, that this passage teaches that Sabbath observance was commanded for man at Eden. However, this is a stretch at best. The passage neither implies nor suggests this. In the Scriptures, you will find evidence of other religious activities like prayer, circumcision, and sacrifices from the period between the Garden and Moses, but there is no mention of Sabbath observance. It is hard to

believe that such an “important commandment” as Sabbath observance, if it had been instituted, would not be mentioned somewhere during this period.

Job lived over 500 years before Moses and exemplifies someone seeking to understand God's will and obey it. Job and his friends discuss creation, the flood, and various aspects of human obligation to God, but they never mention the Sabbath. It is impossible that this significant institution could have existed without being referenced anywhere in the Book of Job.

There is one passage that should settle the question beyond any doubt.

Nehemiah 9:13 You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, ¹⁴ and **you made known to them your holy Sabbath** and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. (Emphasis mine.)

God could not “make known” the requirement to observe the Sabbath if Moses was already observing it. “Made known” is *yada* in Hebrew and means to instruct, to advise, or to make aware. The Hebrew implies that Moses did not have prior knowledge of Sabbath observance before receiving the Law on Mt. Sinai. God had to tell him to do it.

Exodus 31:12 And the LORD said to Moses, ¹³ “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. ¹⁴ You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. ¹⁵ Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶ Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. ¹⁷ It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’ ”

The Sabbath was given to Israel as a “sign” between God and them. It was meant to set Israel apart from the rest of the world and was never

given to the Gentiles. There is no record in Scripture of the Gentiles observing the Sabbath either between Adam and Moses or between Moses and Christ. The Law did not come into effect until Moses received it on Mt. Sinai.

Punishment for not observing the Sabbath was death! Sabbath keepers today teach that such a failure results in the loss of salvation. The context does not support this, as the entire passage discusses the merit system of the Law and has nothing to do with salvation. The Law never promised salvation and was completely unable to deliver righteousness.

Romans 8:3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

Galatians 2:16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Ezekiel shows that Sabbath observance was definitely part of the Law and wasn't required until the Law was given to Moses.

Ezekiel 20:10 So I led them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. ¹¹ I gave them my statutes and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live.

¹² Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them.

Brought who out of the land of Egypt? Israel. In the original Hebrew, “sabbaths” is singular, *shabbat*. They were given as a sign to set Israel apart—“sanctify” means to set apart, in this case, to identify the special relationship God would establish with Israel. The Law was designed to make Israel stand out among the nations.

First Mention of a Sabbath

In Exodus 16, starting at verse 1, we see Israel on the move after leaving Egypt. They arrive in “the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and

Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they departed from Egypt” (v.1). Israel “grumbles” against Moses and Aaron about the food in verses 2-4.

Then God says in verse 5 that He will give them **six days** of manna, which they are to collect daily, **but on the seventh day, they will not go out to gather manna**. Instead, they will gather a double portion on the sixth day. Verse 22 states they collected a double portion on that day. Seven days earlier, they were traveling and not observing any Sabbath (verse 1).

Note what Moses says in verse 25 about the seventh day: “Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field.” This is the first recorded observance of a Sabbath by Israel. Were they in violation of God’s “commandment” to observe a Sabbath all the way back in Eden? No, because there was no Sabbath observance before this.

The Sabbath was instituted in principle at creation, as seen in Genesis 2:1, when God rested from His work. It is *assumed* that Adam and the woman kept the Sabbath while in the Garden. However, there is no indication that the Sabbath was observed at any time between the Garden and Moses.

The Sabbath was given to Israel as part of the Law (Exodus 31:12-17; Ezekiel 20:10). It was established for Israel even before the Law was given, as part of the blessing of Manna (Exodus 6). It is seen as a “shadow” or a “type” that foreshadows something more important that will happen in the future. Israel was given manna for six days. They were to gather only enough for one day, because it would spoil overnight. But on the sixth day, they were to gather enough for two days and gather nothing on the seventh. This time, it would not spoil as it did before, but last through the second day.

This taught Israel the importance of trust and obedience, emphasizing trust in God’s provisions and obedience to His commandments. They began observing the Sabbath, starting from the time of their deliverance from Egypt. When they were slaves in Egypt, they had to work every day. Israel neither did nor could observe the Sabbath while in slavery. Remember that their slavery in Egypt is a “type” for man’s slavery to sin. Israel was freed from slavery (symbolizing sin) by grace. They did nothing to earn or deserve this deliverance except cry out to God for help. For Israel, the Sabbath is directly connected to their deliverance. Through the

Sabbath, Israel honored God for rescuing them from slavery by resting from all work. Keep this idea in mind, as we'll revisit it when we discuss the Church in this study.

Sabbath Observance Between the Time of Moses and Christ

Beginning with the Decalogue in Exodus 12 and continuing through to chapter 31, we see the giving of the Law.

Exodus 23:12 “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.

Then again, in Exodus 31, we see it expanded on.

Exodus 31:12 And the LORD said to Moses, ¹³ “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. ¹⁴ You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. ¹⁵ Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶ Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. ¹⁷ It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’ ”

There is no other way to put this but to say it was given to Israel. However, the Sabbath Keepers claim that Europeans are descendants of the Twelve Lost Tribes of Israel. First of all, there is no such thing as the “Twelve Lost Tribes of Israel.” It is true that many Israelites who went into the Assyrian captivity did not return, and undoubtedly some ended up in Europe. But it is unreasonable to argue that all Europeans come from Jewish stock. Based on this theory of the twelve lost tribes, Sabbath Keepers claim we are all descendants of Israel, and this group will be the recipients of the four unconditional covenants. What about Africans, Asians, and people of

the Americas? They even have an explanation for the Americas. It appears that some of these Jews of the Diaspora who were banished ended up in America and were incorporated into American Indian tribes. That's unlikely, and it leaves out a few billion other people.

The Sabbath serves as a sign for Israel, which refers to the physical descendants of Abraham as defined by the nation of Israel established by God. God will gather this nation—the physical descendants of Abraham (believers)—and restore them to the land during the Kingdom. Church Age Gentile believers are coheirs with Israel because of our position in and identification with Christ as literal sons of God through regeneration. However, the Church has not replaced Israel in God's divine plan for mankind. The Tribulation marks a return to the final seven years of the Age of Israel, known as Daniel's Seventieth Week. The true Church will not be present on Earth at that time, but the apostate church will be.

The Sabbath is part of Israel's Law. It restates an institution established in the Garden, but was left unobserved between the Garden and Moses. It is a covenant between Israel and God.

Exodus 31:16 Therefore, the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. 17 It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel ...

A sign between God and the Gentiles? No! It is between God and Israel and part of the Law. And it was the possession of that Law that set Israel apart from the rest of the world. Moreover, it associated Israel with God, much like circumcision. That is the idea behind it being a "sign." The Sabbath, as part of the Law, was meant to sanctify Israel—set it apart from other nations—and make Israel and what God was doing there visible to the Gentiles.

As the word "Sabbath" indicates, a day of special rest, it is a day to **rest and be refreshed**. It was binding on the entire nation—not just believers. The whole nation was under the Law—believer and unbeliever alike. At that time, Israel was a theocracy—a nation governed by God. Failing to observe this day of rest would result in death. Verse 14: "Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death."

No Work!

Deuteronomy 5:12 Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ You shall 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.

Israel was to observe the Sabbath to sanctify them—to set them apart as belonging to the Lord. It allowed six days for labor, but on the seventh, no work was to be done “by you, your wife, son, daughter, servants, animals, or any visitors within your gates.” Travel was also restricted; a “Sabbath day’s journey” was less than 1 mile.

Additionally, rabbinical teachings imposed numerous rules and details regarding Sabbath observance. They added all sorts of petty minutiae. Jesus chose to ignore these man-made rules whenever He was challenged on this subject by the Pharisees. They accused Jesus and His disciples of breaking the Sabbath because they ate corn gleaned from a field. That was “harvesting and threshing.”

Luke 6:1 On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. ² But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” ³ And Jesus answered them, “**Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?**” ⁵ And he said to them, “**The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.**”

They accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath because he healed the sick on that day.

Matthew 12:10 And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him. 11 He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? 12 Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” 13 Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. 14 But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

Sabbath for the Land

Leviticus 25:1 The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, 2 “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the LORD. 3 For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, 4 but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the LORD. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. 5 You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land. 6 The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for your hired worker and the sojourner who lives with you, 7 and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land: all its yield shall be for food.

Even the land was to have its Sabbaths. Every seventh year, Israel was to let the land rest and lie fallow. This was meant to teach trust in God and obedience by Israel. It was also good horticultural practice long before it was adopted by mankind in general. The land needs to rest and lie fallow periodically. Israel failed to keep the Sabbath years, just as they failed to observe most of the Law. As a result, God removed them from the land, took them into captivity, and allowed the land to rest for 70 years—the exact number of Sabbath years Israel owed to God.

2 Chronicles 36:21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

This idea of rest and refreshment is directly connected to the fundamental concept behind the Law as a system based on works. Under the Law, Israel was required to work six days to earn one day of rest. Merit was earned through work. This is the core premise of the merit system, as outlined in the Law. Look at Deuteronomy 28—God says works are followed by reward. The Law was a covenant based on human effort. The Sabbath was a day of rest after work. It was intended to be observed with minimal activity, no travel, and no work, allowing for rest and strength recovery. It was not primarily a day of worship but a day to rest from work and allow your livestock to rest as well.

Modern Sabbath observers often fail to adhere to true Sabbath observance. Modern Sabbath practices focus on religious activities, public meetings, Christian service, and worship, many of which involve travel beyond the permitted distance. The argument is that the laws regulating Sabbath observance have been repealed, but the requirement to observe the Sabbath remains. That is disingenuous! You cannot separate one part of the Law from another. If you are going to keep one part, you must keep all of it.

James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

The entire legal system is interconnected. You can't pick and choose what fits your beliefs.

Much confusion about the Law and the Sabbath in relation to Christ comes from a misunderstanding of the unique period of Christ's time on earth. Many tend to view this period as a Christian era, but nothing could be further from the truth. During Christ's time, we are still in the Age of Israel. The Church Age did not begin until 50 days after His resurrection. A key principle of biblical interpretation is to always consider who is speaking, who the audience is, and the context of the message. A common mistake among expositors is to look at what Christ did and said during His earthly ministry and directly apply it to the Church.

You can take anything out of context and make it say what you want, but that would not be honest. Context, context, context! You must interpret Scripture within its context. Before the Cross, nearly everything Christ said was directed to Israel, not the Church. Indeed, what He says may have

application by way of principle to us, but the audience was Israel, and the message was directly for them.

The time of Christ was a deeply Jewish period, as Christ offered Israel one last chance to repent and receive the Kingdom. To receive the Kingdom, they must receive the King. To receive the King, they must abandon their apostasy and turn to the truth.

During His ministry, Jesus recognized, kept, and observed the Sabbaths as an essential part of the Mosaic Covenant. He was a Jew bound by the Law, but He insisted that the Mosaic System be freed from the Rabbinical traditions added on top of the original Law. The Jews considered these man-made additions to be just as binding as the Law itself, but Christ focused solely on the Word of God. Because of this, He is often seen as a liberal on the issue of the Sabbath.

He also claimed to be “Lord of the Sabbath,” and He was by virtue of His position. He had the authority to change the Sabbath if He chose—or abolish it forever. Instead, He chose to restore its true function.

Mark 2:27 And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

The day was created for man's blessing, a day to rest from work.

It has been argued that, through this statement, Christ extended the Sabbath to all mankind. So, what exactly is the meaning of the word “man”? Did Christ use this term to refer to all mankind? Two facts determine the answer:

1. The Sabbath was never referenced in later Scripture as being for the Gentiles.
2. The word “man” is used in the OT at least 336 times when referring to Israel alone.
3. And many times in the NT when referring to Christians only.

In all these Scriptures, the word “man” has a limited meaning. Context!!! Who was Jesus speaking to in that passage? Answer: The Pharisees—ISRAEL! There is no indication that Christ was referring to anyone but Israel when He made that statement. Nothing in the context indicates it referred to all mankind. The issue was Sabbath observance by Him and

His followers, as mandated by the Law (and the Rabbinical teachings that supplemented the Law). Sadly, many have misinterpreted this passage to mean all of mankind and have imposed the Law on the Church.

That is as far as we will go in this session. Stand by for more next time...