

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

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Chapter 40 – The Sabbath & The Lord's Day

The word “Sabbath” means “cessation” or “perfect rest” from activity. Among Christians there is a lot of confusion regarding the Sabbath. Many Christians are still unsure even what day the Sabbath was. Was it Saturday. Sunday, neither? In the movie Chariots of Fire we find the devout Christian “Eric Liddell” refusing to run in the Olympics on a Sunday because he considered it the “Christian Sabbath”. However, this is a misnomer. When the Sabbath is rightly understood the problem that Liddell created between honoring God or King goes away. But because there is such a large number of Christians who try to enforce a “Christian Sabbath” today we need to have a proper understanding of the Sabbath from Scripture. I remember my father-in-law telling me this story about “swimming on Sundays”. He went to his pastor and asked him if “swimming on Sundays” was wrong. The pastor looked at him and said, “what do you think Jesus would think about that?” Well, for a 12 year old boy I guess Jesus wouldn’t like it too much. So, there is still a lot of confusion about the Sabbath and we don’t want to put any legalistic demands on Christians so we better understand it so we can be free.

I. **God’s Sabbath Rest**

Beginning with creation God has chosen to sanctify or set apart one-seventh as rest. God created everything in the span of 6 ~24 hour days and on the seventh day it says God rested.

Genesis 2:1-3 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. ² By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. 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.

Seven times God uses a word that implies rest. It is not as though God got tired. God never gets tired, He's omnipotent. What these words mean is that God rested from His creative activity.

I think there is something very important about God resting on the seventh day. There is no doubt that the work week was established at creation. In all countries and all languages the work week is seven days. At one time Russia attempted to change the work week to ten days in order to increase the number of work days/yr and thus production.ⁱ However, what they found was that production actually decreased even though the workers worked more days and hours/yr. Since God created this world He necessarily built into it certain things. There are things built into creation that permeate everything. Since we are a part of creation this work week permeates us. So, there is something about rest, it is very important for the Christian to have a proper doctrine of rest. You can work and work and work to the point that the product is poor or productivity decreases. And that's not what we want. We want to follow God's pattern and be able to say that what we did at work "is good". So, a good doctrine of rest builds in one day out of seven in which we rest from labor and enjoy what we have made. I think God built the universe this way so that we would recognize that we are limited, finite creatures. When we realize this God's attribute of omnipotence just drips with application. When we are tired God wants us to remember that He never gets tired, that He is absolute energy! And when we need energy and call upon Him He is ready to supply what we need to make it through the day. So, we need to remember that God set the work week at creation and His doing so permeates our world even today.

However, God did not establish a specific day on which men should rest for the first 2,600 years of history. There is no record that any peoples rested on the 7th day. Even Israel, a week before the 7th day was set apart as the day of rest, was busy at work on what would become the Sabbath.

II. Israel's Sabbath Rests

Israel had three Sabbath rests, all of which were instituted by God; 1) the seventh day of the week, 2) every seventh year, and 3) every fiftieth year.

A. Seventh Day of the Week

At Mt Sinai God gave Moses and the people of Israel His Law. The fourth commandment in the Decalogue is the first institution of a specific day of Sabbath.

Exodus 20:8-11 "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. ¹¹ "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

No man or animal among Israel was to do any work on the Sabbath day. It was to be set apart or holy. The reason is because the God created everything in six days and rested on the seventh day. When was this Sabbath? Here it is called the "seventh day". But when was the seventh day? The "seventh day" began at 6pm Friday evening and ended at 6pm Saturday evening. The Hebrews did not begin the day at midnight but at 6pm. This corresponds to creation week when God said at the close of each day, "and there was evening and morning, the Xth day." Since God's days began in the evening so Israel followed God's word. It was not an arbitrary day God chose but one which stood as a memorial to God's rest on the seventh day of creation week.

B. Every Seventh Year

Every seventh year was to be a Sabbath for the land of Israel.

Leviticus 25:2-5 "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'When you come into the land which I shall give you, then the land shall have a sabbath to the LORD. ³ 'Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its crop, ⁴ but during the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath rest, a sabbath to

the LORD; you shall not sow your field nor prune your vineyard. ⁵
'Your harvest's aftergrowth you shall not reap, and your grapes of untrimmed vines you shall not gather; the land shall have a sabbatical year.

The people were to give the land a rest. Again, I think there is a principle in here that has been followed by many farmers. Some farmers plant on 6/7's of their land leaving 1/7th fallow and then shifting their crops every year. It is a fact built into creation that the soil can be depleted of nutrients and that leaving the soil fallow for one year out of every seven helps the soil replenish and produce better crops the following year. Nevertheless, God instituted this Sabbath year to separate Israel from the other nations and to stimulate them to live by faith, trusting in God's provision.

C. Every 50th Year

In this same passage the Lord instituted the year of Jubilee, a year of Sabbath which was celebrated every 50th year.

Leviticus 25:8-13 'You are also to count off seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years, so that you have the time of the seven sabbaths of years, *namely*, forty-nine years. ⁹ 'You shall then sound a ram's horn abroad on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall sound a horn all through your land. ¹⁰ 'You shall thus consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family. ¹¹ 'You shall have the fiftieth year as a jubilee; you shall not sow, nor reap its aftergrowth, nor gather in *from* its untrimmed vines. ¹² 'For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you. You shall eat its crops out of the field. ¹³ 'On this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his own property.

This was a national holi-day for the nation of Israel. Those who had sold land had it returned to them. Each was to return to his family to have a family reunion.

The period through which these three Sabbath's were in force began with Moses at Mt Sinai and ended with Christ on the Cross. This was a period of about 1,475 years. It was never imposed upon the nations but only upon the one nation of Israel. These Sabbaths served as a sign between YHWH and Israel who enjoyed a distinct covenant relationship (Exod 31:13, 17). It should be noted that during the OT Israel did not keep the Seven year land Sabbath for 490 years. As a result God made sure the nation gave the Land rest. To do this He sent Israel into Exile for 490 years. We know these years as the 70 weeks of Daniel. 69 weeks have passed (483 years) and 1 week remains (7 years). This last week is called the 70th week of Daniel or the Tribulation and is still future. When the 70th week of Daniel is complete Israel will be restored to her land and the Sabbaths will once more be instituted (Hos 2:11-16).

As I mentioned before, the OT Law with its Sabbaths did not end until the cross of Christ. Thus, Christ lived under the Law. Jesus is seen teaching the Law, keeping the Law, and applying the Law. The scribes and Pharisees of Israel had distorted the Sabbath, seeing it as a prohibition. Jesus corrected this notion in Mark 2:27 showing that it was for the benefit of man (to get his rest). Christ lived by the Law perfectly, never failing at a single point, and by following it He generated space-time righteousness which He imputes to all who believe. As such,

Rom 10:4 Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to all who believe.

The Sabbath's have no application to those who are a part of the Church. Consistent with Christian grace one may observe the Sabbath. We cannot condemn those who do choose to observe it. But at the same time we may never impose a Sabbath day on anyone. All our days are to be fully devoted to God.

Romans 14:5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

On one hand, if we condemn a Christian for observing a day we are being legalistic. On the other hand, if we force a Christian to observe a day we are

being legalistic. The rule of thumb is that “each person must be fully convinced in his own mind”. I think we ought to always teach that observing certain days, months, and times, and years” to gain merit with God is absolutely wrong. One can gain no merit with God by observing such things.

Galatians 4:9-10 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years.

It is a delicate balance that must be maintained.

Colossians 2:16-17 Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- ¹⁷ things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

The thing to keep in mind is that under grace we are free in Christ. Some Christians want to celebrate Christmas and Easter and some do not. As a result those few are judged as “weird” or something. Such judgments are legalism. Those Christians who do not wish to celebrate Christmas have every right under grace to not regard that day above any other. It is not they who have fallen from grace but those who denounce them or mock them behind their backs. As the text says, “Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5). To my own mind I am convinced that every day is the Lords Day and every day and hour and minute and second is to be devoted to His purposes and His glory. But I would not enforce this view upon you. You are free to do as you are convinced in your own mind. The command for each of us is to operate in grace and love toward one another and not be led astray by such minor things as days, food, celebrations, etc...

In closing on the Sabbath, let me remind you that it will be a vital part of the future Tribulation (Matt 24:20) and the kingdom age to follow (Ezek 46:1)

III. The Resurrection and the First Day of the Week

To set apart the first day of the week (Sunday) as a day appointed for Christians to observe is to contradict all that has been stated. It is placing

one day higher than the other days. It is true that Christ's tomb was empty on the first day of the week. This the Bible teaches.

Matthew 28:1 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the *first day* of the *week*, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.

Mark 16:2 Very early on the *first day* of the *week*, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen.

It is also true that Jesus appeared to his disciples on the first day of the week.

John 20:19 So when it was evening on that *day*, the *first day* of the *week*, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace *be* with you."

Further, it is true that the practice of the early church was to meet on the first day of the week. But we are not required to make practices...principles. If practice is made to contradict doctrinal principles then it is the doctrinal principles not the practices or traditions that must be followed. And the doctrinal principle is that no one is to judge another. Leaning on such traditions can lead to legalism. The whole substance belongs to Christ. That is the doctrine and that is what must be followed regardless of historical facts and practices.

In the NT, what day was the first day of the week anyway? It is highly possible that the first day of the week began after the Sabbath on Saturday at 6pm and ended Sunday at 6pm. For example, it is quite possible that in the following passage Paul began speaking Saturday evening and talked with them until Sunday morning.

Acts 20:7-11 On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.⁸ There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together.⁹ And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was

overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for his life is in him." ¹¹ When he had gone *back* up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left.

Whether this was Saturday night or Sunday night has no bearing on what day or time we must gather to break bread. The main point is that we should not make any one day a special day that they "must" observe. Whether one places any day above another day or not does not make one more spiritual than another, it does not gain merit with God. This is why I advocate the principle that every day is the Lords Day and every day and hour and minute and second is to be devoted to His purposes and His glory.

Historically, the early church met on Sunday. Justin Martyr, who was born at the beginning of the 2nd century said that the Christians of his time, "both in the cities and the country, were accustomed to assemble for worship on the day called Sunday."ⁱⁱ There is no reason not to meet on Sunday unless one's culture has designated Sunday as a day of work. There is no reason that our attention ought not be brought to remember that Christ rose from the dead on this day and that it is this day that begins our week. There is no reason why we should not begin each week with joy and worship of God on Sunday. There is no reason why we ought to not rest from our labors on Sunday. Since this is the day that we have chosen to worship in commemoration of Christ's resurrection and since we are commanded to continue assembling we should do so.

Hebrews 10:23-25 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; ²⁴ and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Some get into the habit of not assembling. But we cannot "confess" our hope if we forsake assembling together. We cannot stimulate one another to love and good deeds if we forsake assembling together, We cannot encourage one another if we forsake assembling together. Therefore, since we have chosen to assemble together on Sunday mornings, we ought to put all other things

aside on Sunday mornings and gather together. And what we ought to do here in our time of fellowship is to confess our hope to one another, stimulate one another to love and good deeds and encourage one another.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have learned that God created every thing in the span of 6 ~24 hour days and rested on the seventh day. He rested from His creative labors and as such God designed the work week to consist of six days of work and one day of rest. We ought to recognize God's original design and structure our lives accordingly. A doctrine of rest is important to excellent and efficient labor.

Israel had three Sabbath rests; 1) the seventh day of the week, 2) every seventh year, and 3) every fiftieth year or the year of Jubilee. These Sabbaths were to be followed from the giving of the Law at Mt Sinai until Jesus the Messiah fulfilled the Law at the cross. Therefore, none of the Sabbaths are obligatory for those who are a part of the Church. Christ is the end of the law for all who believe. Nor is there such a day as the Christian Sabbath.

During the present age every day is the Lord's Day. We are not to judge others for placing any one day above another. Each is to be fully convinced in his own mind. All the substance belongs to Christ. Grace is the theme of the age and any placing of obligations on other Christians to observe one day over another is a legalistic denial of grace.

The contrast between Israel's obligatory Sabbaths and the Church's freedom is another example of the distinction between Israel and the Church that must ever be kept in mind. In God's one plan He has distinct purposes for Israel and the Church. In the future tribulation the Sabbath will play a role and in the future Kingdom it will once more be instituted as an obligatory day. But we must never fall into the trap of confusing the dispensations. Our obligations are primarily found in the NT epistles and not once are we commanded to observe the Sabbath. However, because it is the chosen day on which we meet and Christians are not to forsake assembling together, we should gather each Sunday to worship the Lord, encourage one another, and stimulate one another to good deeds and love.

ⁱ On the Gregorian calendar of 365.25 days/yr a 5 day work week would be 260 days/yr. A 6 day work week would be 312 days/yr. If the week was changed to 10 days (as the Russians tried) and 9 of those days were work days then that would be 328.5 days/yr.

ⁱⁱ Horatio Hackett, *Commentary On Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1992), 233.

[Back To The Top](#)

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