

Sunday and the Sabbath

Bible teaching about God's day of rest

WE live at a time of decreasing religious belief and in an increasingly secular society. One way in which we see this change is in a remorseless pressure to treat every day of the week equally; shops, bars, places of entertainment are open, and sporting and other events are held now on any day from Sunday to Saturday. These moves are welcomed by some people, who see them as the final sweeping away of hide-bound traditions. But others see the trend as a great threat and an indication of serious moral and religious decline. When there are such strongly held and conflicting views on the subject, how can we determine what response to make? Where can we turn for answers to the problems that are raised?

The Bible – the only authority

This is a religious subject, and we need to turn to a source of religious authority to tell us what the truth is. The only real and reliable authority is in the Bible – the word of God for Israel in pre-Christian times, and, with the New Testament, for believers in God and Christ throughout the past 2,000 years. Let's list the questions we need to ask.

- Does the Bible have anything to say about a "Lord's day"?
- Has God commanded us to keep it by worshipping Him?
- Is the first, or seventh day the special day of the week?
- Do the Jewish sabbath day laws have any meaning for today's society?
- Should they be kept by followers of Christ?

This short booklet sets out to show what Bible teaching is on this subject, and to discuss the issues that it raises.

A weekly cycle

Quite apart from religious belief, most people accept that the pattern of five or six days of work, followed by a shorter period of relaxation or rest, is a healthy one. They would soon complain strongly if their employer suddenly decided to require them to work with no weekly break at all! It is not the pattern of work and rest that creates the difficulty. The question focuses on what men and women can or should do on their day of rest, and on which day of the week that should be.

We should note at this stage that there is a divine basis for the weekly working cycle. In its early chapters, the Bible records the creative work of God, and that He "rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made". Significantly, the record continues, "God blessed the seventh day and hallowed (or sanctified) it" (Genesis 2:2,3). Much of the argument about the significance of this special day is based on what this verse means. Is it God's instruction to the first man and woman, or just a comment on what happened? Was God declaring every seventh day a "holy" day, or only the one when He rested? Can we on the one hand accept the work / rest cycle for our own benefit, but reject the view that the rest day belongs primarily to God?

So far, all we have achieved is a list of questions, and this list could be extended even further. Let us approach the subject in an ordered fashion. As we started in Genesis we shall continue to look at the Old Testament background to discover the origins of the seventh day. This will be followed by a consideration of the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ; by how men tried to put this into practice; and, finally, what message the Bible has for people living today.

Old Testament teaching

We do not know whether at first the earth's population organised themselves by means of a seven-day week. There is just one clue in the Bible (Genesis 29:27,28) that this may have been the case by the time of Abraham's family. Whereas other periods of time (the day, month and year) are based upon observable movements of stars and planets, the seven-day week has no such basis – that can be found only in the explanation in Genesis 2.

This introduces an interesting aspect to the subject. By living according to a weekly cycle, man witnesses to the Genesis account of creation, irrespective of whether he believes it.

The daily provision of manna

Even if, in the times before Moses, people organised themselves around weeks of seven days, God did not say they would be punished for not resting on the seventh day. They appear to have had total freedom of choice about this. In fact, God gave no instructions about how the seventh day should be spent until after the nation of Israel had been brought out of Egypt and led miraculously through the Red Sea into the wilderness of Sinai. Being a large community, they needed a regular supply of good food and water, but in desert conditions these were very scarce. The people soon complained, and wished they were back in Egypt. A further miracle brought them their food. Each morning around their camp there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as the hoarfrost on the ground (Exodus 16:14). The food was called 'manna', and could be collected for six days each week.

On the first five days each week any manna not eaten that day, but kept overnight bred worms, and became foul. On the sixth day, if a double amount was collected, it kept fresh for use on the seventh day when no manna was available. In this way the pattern of work and rest was enforced for the nation of Israel:

‘Today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.’ (Exodus 16:25,26)

Six days of gathering and one day of rest: God's activity in creation became the example for His nation. For the first time in the Bible, the word 'sabbath' is used. It means simply 'to cease' and is used to describe the day when the Israelites rested from their labours, as God had from His. It also explains what is meant by God 'resting'. Almighty God does not need to restore His energy like men and women after a long period of hard work. His creative work took six days, and afterwards He ceased.

The Ten Commandments

Shortly after the manna was first provided, God gave laws through Moses to direct the life of the nation. The framework for these laws, known as the Ten Commandments, was written by God on two tables of stone. The fourth commandment was:

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work: but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God: in it you shall not do any work for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

The pattern of six days of work and one day of rest first seen in the collection of the manna is now extended to all Israel's activities. The use of the word “labour” is important. When God put Adam in the Garden of Eden he was commanded to tend and keep it; he had work to do. However, after he sinned God sentenced him and his descendants to hard toil in order to produce their necessary food. When the Psalmist refers to this, he speaks of man, who “goes forth to his work and to his *labour* until the evening” (104:23). Man's daily work, therefore, is a constant reminder of his mortality; the certainty that he is “dust, and to dust (he) shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

We can now see the significance of the introduction of the sabbath commands being associated with the provision of manna. The nation's experiences in the wilderness, when they had to go out daily toiling to collect food, reminded them of the punishment brought upon the world as a result of Adam's disobedience. When they rested on the seventh day, they identified themselves with their God for on the day after His creative acts ended, He rested. Yet the cycle then started all over again! Each week they worked and then rested and it would be brought home to them that they could never, by their own labours find everlasting rest: only God could provide this.

The sabbath enforced

The Jewish day commenced at sunset, so the regulations governing the sabbath operated from 6 p.m. on Friday to 6 p.m. on Saturday. This national law was to be strictly enforced. The penalty for breaking it was severe: any transgressors were to be put to death because they would have “profaned” or defiled the sabbath (see Exodus 31:14). On one occasion, while the children of Israel were still in the wilderness, there was the case of a man found gathering sticks on a sabbath day. Presumably he wanted them to make a fire for cooking. Although the sabbath law and the punishment for breaking it had been given, the people were not certain whether the man's activity had broken it, so they placed the problem before the Lord. The answer was categorical: “The man shall be put to death” (Numbers 15:32-36).

The punishment was very severe for what seems to us a minor offence. It suggests that the man set out deliberately to flout God's law, but it also confirms the importance of the sabbath day provision in God's purpose. God is not revealed in the Bible as an uncaring despot, so the enforcement of this law by a strong penalty suggests that there were significant benefits to be obtained from keeping it.

The sabbath blessing

When the details of the law were repeated for the generation born in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, the following information was added by way of explanation:

“Your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

There was thus a clear social benefit for everybody in the nation, but also an important underlying reason for the law. By keeping the sabbath there would be a weekly reminder of the nation's redemption from Egypt. They were to be merciful to their servants, because God had showed great mercy to them when He freed them from slavery to Pharaoh. To reinforce this point, even animals were to benefit from the sabbath law! As well as allowing servants to rest, the ox and ass could rest too (see verse 14). When the Apostle Paul commented upon another aspect of the law where animals were mentioned, he said: 'Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake?' (1 Corinthians 9:9). Whilst not denying that God is interested in all His creatures, the main benefit of the sabbath was for men and women, not animals. They were involved purely to emphasise the importance of the command.

Servants would obviously be pleased with the law, but what about their masters? Unscrupulous masters, like unscrupulous employers today, would surely try to find a way round it. But there were great benefits for them too. God told them that the sabbath was 'a sign between me and them, that they might know that I the Lord sanctify them' (Exodus 31:17; Ezekiel 20:12). If they wished to continue to receive blessings from God when they were in the land, as they had received them in the wilderness, they needed to keep His sabbaths.

The objective

All these provisions should have had one result: the formation of a people who were God-centred, not self-centred. If they were prepared to organise themselves according to His laws, they would be blessed above all other nations and peoples. Instead of being a burden to be endured, the provision of the sabbath could revolutionise their lives:

'If you turn back your foot from the sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; *then you shall take delight in the Lord*, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.' (Isaiah 58:13,14)

The great tragedy is that Israel, having been promised all these things by God, were not prepared to live in accordance with His commands. Instead of honouring the sabbath, they continually defiled it. They did not treat it as 'holy', but made it profane. As God's promises to them were conditional on their obedience, eventually He punished them as He said He would if they were disobedient:

'I swore in that I would scatter them among the nations, and disperse them through the countries, because they had rejected my statutes and profaned my sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their fathers' idols.' (Ezekiel 20:23,24)

Before seeing what the New Testament says about the sabbath, let us summarise the Old Testament teaching:

1. The seven-day week comes from the creation record, and is a witness to God's creative work.
2. The sabbath law was given to the nation of Israel, firstly through the commandments about the manna and then expanded in the Law given through Moses at Sinai. We do not really know how or even if the sabbath was kept before this time.

3. God wanted the sabbath to be a ðholy dayö.
4. The sabbath (meaning cessation, or rest) was to be observed by the Israelites refraining from everyday tasks in order to enjoy and remember God's blessings.
5. The six-day working week was a constant reminder that all men die and are sinners in need of redemption. Observance of the sabbath showed a man's trust that God had promised a share in His everlasting rest at some time in the future.
6. God's response was to shower great benefits on the nation, so long as they continued to obey Him in keeping the sabbath as He wished.
7. Under the Jewish law, the penalty for defiling the sabbath was death.
8. The sabbath was designed by God to teach Israel:
 1. about their special national relationship to Him,
 2. of His great mercy in freeing them from Egyptian slavery.
9. It was to be a *weekly* remembrance of the nation's redemption.

Petty regulations

When we turn to the Gospel records in the New Testament, we soon learn how the Jews applied the law of the sabbath 1,500 years after it was given.

They knew the terrible history of Israel, how their forefathers had so disobeyed God that He sent them into captivity. The land of Israel was ruined and thousands of Jews killed. Those who returned to the land after a period of exile attempted to ensure that this would not happen to them. The religious leaders at the time of Christ regulated the law according to a complicated set of rules built up over the years. This was not perversity on their part, but grew out of a strong desire not to displease God. Accepting that no work was possible on the sabbath, they legislated about what could be done to prepare meals, to look after the sick, or to care for animals. Unfortunately, despite these good original motives, the joy there should have been in the sabbath could not exist alongside the attitude forged by concentrating on relatively unimportant details. Soon they could no longer see the wood for the trees! The purpose and benefit of the sabbath was wholly lost in a myriad of petty rules and regulations.

New Testament teaching

Against this background, the Lord Jesus Christ commenced his ministry, ðpreaching the gospel of the kingdom of Godö (Mark 1:14). He soon met problems with the legalistic attitude of the Jewish leaders. If he healed on a sabbath day, they complained that he had defiled a ðholyö day. So antagonistic were they, that they sought ways and opportunity to destroy him. This raises two important questions: Why did Jesus heal without hesitation on the sabbath day, especially when he knew how the Jewish leaders would be incensed? and, Why do the Gospel records attach particular importance to his sabbath day miracles?

Seven specific sabbath miracles are noted in the Gospels and one of these was preceded by an incident which placed Jesus' view of the sabbath in direct opposition to that held by the Jewish leaders (Matthew 12:1-8). Some of the Pharisees had complained about Jesus' disciples who were plucking and eating grain as they walked through a cornfield on a sabbath day. The Jewish law allowed passers-by this privilege, but did not specify whether it was prohibited on the sabbath (see Deuteronomy 23:25). However, the tradition of the Jewish elders forbade it. They saw the action as no different from harvesting: an activity certainly forbidden on the sabbath.

Old Testament precedents

In his reply to the Pharisees' charge, Jesus mentioned two incidents from the Jewish scriptures. He reminded them of the great king David who, when he was in a desperate position ate of the showbread, food specifically devoted to the priests' use (1 Samuel 21:1-6). Speaking of the priests, Jesus also pointed out that they broke the sabbath every time it was their turn to perform the temple services on the seventh day. Yet David was blameless before God, and so were the priests. There were clearly other considerations that applied in these circumstances and took precedence over the sabbath laws. If they could be understood, then we may better appreciate Jesus' own attitude to the sabbath.

There are some important similarities between the two Old Testament precedents Jesus quoted and his own position. David was being pursued by Saul, the Jewish king, when he came to Ahimelech the priest at Nob, and asked for food for himself and his young men. Jesus was with *his* young men or the disciples or and the Jewish leaders of his day were keen to pursue him. If the Pharisees had pondered the comparison they would also have learned that Jesus, like David, was the Lord's anointed, and they, like Saul, had had their day.

So also with the other incident, the priests did not profane the sabbath if the work they did was in the temple, God's house. Obviously this work for Him took precedence over the sabbath. But Jesus had said to Mary and Joseph when he was only twelve years old, after they had searched for him for three days, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be *in my Father's house?*" (Luke 2:49). In a sense he was telling them that his whole life would be spent working for God or just as if he was in the temple all the time. Unlike anyone else who has ever lived, Jesus lived his whole life in total harmony with God's will.

Lord of the sabbath

We wonder whether the Pharisees understood the real impact of these two examples Jesus quoted. It was an outright claim to his close relationship with God, and his part in God's plan of redemption as the future King who will rule over an earth at peace and who will bring in the everlasting rest foreseen in the sabbath law. His short summary of the sabbath provision is important:

"He said to them, 'The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: so the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath' (Mark 2:27,28)

Jesus declared what we discovered from looking at the Old Testament: God provided the sabbath in order to confer benefits on anyone who was oppressed or it was made *for man*. How could the Pharisees have witnessed Jesus' great works or healing the sick and bringing relief to the poor and hungry or and not appreciate that the real essence of the sabbath could be seen in his devotion to His Father's will, and in his concern for his fellow men?

"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you *rest*." (Matthew 11:29)

Truly he was Lord of the sabbath!

Salvation from sin

Just as God had brought the nation of Israel out of Egypt and released them from slavery, the Bible describes how Jesus, by destroying in himself the power of sinful desires, has opened up a way for men and women to have their sins forgiven, and ultimately to be released from the grip of mortality. Many aspects of the Law given through Moses looked forward to this work of Christ: the tabernacle, the sacrifices, and the priests, for example. But so did the sabbath. It should have taught the Jewish nation of God's concern for His people, and of the blessings He wished to shower upon them. The Apostle Paul described it like this: "The law was our schoolmaster *to bring us unto Christ* í but after that faith is come we are no longer under a schoolmaster" (Galatians 3:24,25).

The Law taught a lesson about God's purpose through Christ. If the lesson has been understood and adopted, the work of the Law is complete. The sabbath was a weekly reminder of the release from Egypt. Followers of Christ are now commanded always to remember the release he has achieved on their behalf. Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus ate a meal with his disciples and imparted a fuller meaning to the bread and wine they shared. The bread, he said, represented his body, wholly given to God to bring salvation to his friends; the wine was like his blood, shed for them for the forgiveness of sins. "This do, he told them, in remembrance of me." Commenting on this, the Apostle Paul explained that, "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:26).

No wonder Paul was so upset that some of those he had taught the good news about Christ were insisting that the sabbath (and all the other parts of the Jewish religious calendar) had to be observed: "Now that you have come to know God í how can you turn back again? í You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid I have laboured over you in vain" (Galatians 4:9,10). Insisting that all Christian believers should follow these aspects of the Law was wrong and ignored what Jesus himself had taught. In an important and crucial passage, Paul explained that what had earlier been imposed on the Jewish nation, since Christ had come was a matter for the individual conscience:

"One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord í None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself í whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living." (Romans 14:5-9)

The Lord of life

After Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension, the early believers soon adopted a pattern of worship. As the hope of life and immortality was made sure by his resurrection, they remembered his sacrifice on *the first day* of the week, the day he came out of the tomb. We read for example of an occasion when Paul was visiting Troas, "and on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached to them" (Acts 20:7; see also 1 Corinthians 16:2). The information is introduced so naturally into the account that it must have been the practice adopted generally by the various groups of believers in different places.

The implication is that the sabbath was studiously avoided as the day when the memorial of Jesus's sacrifice was held, and his followers chose instead the day when he rose from the dead. Yet although worship on the first day of the week became part of the pattern of the early

Christian congregations, the restrictions of the sabbath were not simply transferred from Saturday to Sunday. There are no instructions in the New Testament commanding believers to rest from their daily work. The individual has to order his own life as he sees fit: "Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:16,17).

This New Testament teaching can be briefly summarised as follows:

1. The Jews had forgotten the real purpose of the sabbath: it was lost in a welter of petty rules and regulations which they had devised.
2. Jesus, in his teaching and by his miracles, declared the real purpose of the sabbath. It should show that God's purpose involves freeing men and women from slavery to sin and death so that they can serve Him. There was no better day for him to do God's work than on the sabbath.
3. The sabbath was a *weekly* reminder of these things, but Jesus lived this way *every day*, throughout his life.
4. After Jesus' ascension, his disciples met on the first day of the week to remember his sacrifice, but did not make the choice of day a matter of command: it was for their individual conscience.

Modern attitudes

Religious Jews today who do not recognise the work of the Lord Jesus Christ still keep the sabbath traditionally on the seventh day. They sincerely believe that the Law is still awaiting its fulfilment.

Some Christians think that by worshipping on a Sunday they are keeping some sort of New Testament sabbath. We have seen that there is no support for this view in the Bible. But this does not mean it is wrong to worship on a Sunday, or to refrain from the work that fills other days of the week. Where Sunday is not a normal working day, it is surely sensible to arrange meetings for worship on that day. Yet it must always be remembered that God does not command it. While Christian believers should meet regularly to remember Christ's sacrifice, there are no commands about exactly *when* they should do so. The important statement about this is that *as often* as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death. It is more crucial to remember regularly what Christ achieved, than to make an issue about what day the memorial should be kept.

Seventh Day Adventists

Members of this church claim that Christians should keep the seventh-day sabbath. They are right in saying that the sabbath was instituted on the seventh day, and not the first; but their insistence that true believers in Christ should still keep it ignores New Testament evidence. If the apostles, who wrote under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, specifically stated that keeping the sabbath was turning back to the weak and beggarly elements from which Christ's sacrifice had freed them (Galatians 4:9), how can true Christians insist upon it? Adventists claim that the sabbath was instituted and kept in Eden, though, as we have seen, there is no Biblical evidence of a sabbath command before the manna was given to Israel.

New Testament teaching is absolutely clear about the Law of Moses no longer being operative for Christian believers. However, Adventists believe that the Law must be viewed in two parts: a "moral" law (the Ten Commandments), and a "ceremonial" law (all the other commandments). They see the "moral" law as God's eternal commands, and thus still in force for believers today. They accept that the "ceremonial" law came to an end when the Lord Jesus was crucified. But the Bible never refers to the Law in this way; the phrases "moral law" and "ceremonial law" do not occur in scripture, and nor do the ideas the phrases are meant to express.

The early church

Misconceptions about Sunday and the sabbath arose within a few hundred years following the death of Christ, and soon became a fixed tradition. The spread of Christianity in those early times was rapid and far-reaching. It has been likened to a spreading flame, setting alight all in its path. The effect upon the Roman Empire, which controlled a large area of the inhabited world in those days, was very great. Some emperors, seeing the threat it posed, attempted to stamp it out by persecution. But, like pruning a tree, this only made the movement stronger and more determined. In the fourth century A.D. the emperor Constantine saw the political advantages of having the Christian subjects in his empire working with him rather than against him. So he merged some of the aspects of the old pagan religions with features of Christianity. Some pagan festivals were renamed to make them acceptable to both Christians and non-Christians. Recognising that Christians met to remember their Lord on the first day of the week, Constantine issued an edict to the effect that: "All judges, city people and craftsmen shall rest on the venerable day of the Sun." He therefore cleverly merged the old Sun-worship with the "new" religion of Christianity.

It was like the Law of Moses reimposed in a pseudo-Christian way. All the restrictions the Law had applied to the seventh day, by Constantine's edict now transferred to the first day. He removed the freedom introduced through Christ, and made observance a matter of law rather than free will. Just as the Jews had built up their traditions about how the sabbath should be kept, over a period of time misguided Christians began to view the first day of the week in strict sabbatarian terms. We have only to read some Victorian novels to understand how dull and depressing, how much calculated to remove any joy in worship, these traditions became.

Seven whole days

What can we learn from the subject, so that we can put into practice today only those things that are pleasing to God? There are some lines in George Herbert's famous hymn, "King of Glory, King of Peace", that can help us:

"Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise thee í
E'en eternity's too short
to extol thee."

Our time belongs, not to us, but to God. If we wish truly to please Him, we shall not grudgingly give Him just one day a week, and keep all the rest to spend only as we see fit. We shall try to keep His commands as guides for every aspect of our lives, and thus honour and glorify Him. There is no doubt that there are great blessings to be obtained from a regular

weekly release from ordinary, but necessary work. If these blessings are properly used what better than to devote them to worship and remembrance, as a response to a gracious provision, not because some law makes demands on mankind. This is how Paul spoke about the subject a little later in his letter to the Galatians:

“Stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery í for you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants one of another.” (Galatians 5:1,13)

“There remains a sabbath rest”

There is one final aspect. When writing to Jews who had left the Law of Moses behind and become believers in Christ, the Apostle wrote about the sabbath provision in a fascinating way that draws together all the different things we have discovered in our brief survey of Bible teaching (see Hebrews 3:7-4:10). Meditating upon a verse from Psalm 95, where God declared that those who turned away from Him would never enter into His rest, the Apostle deduced that there was an implicit promise of some who would enter it. Who would they be? It could not be the Israelites who, through disobedience, lost the promised blessings. So it must refer to others, who are still waiting for the rest to begin: “There remains a sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labours as God did from his” (4:9,10).

The real rest of God is therefore yet to come. It will be a time when His will is done perfectly “on earth, as it is in heaven”, as Jesus taught us to pray. Elsewhere, the Bible calls this rest the kingdom of God. Every day of the week there is an opportunity to show by the way we live our lives that we believe in the promise of the coming kingdom.

The King will soon return to call dead and living saints to his Father’s eternal rest. Will you be one who has waited for him?

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Scripture quotations are generally taken from the Revised Standard Version

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