

Hartford Bible Students Newsletter

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DO CHRISTIANS NEED TO KEEP THE SABBATH?

Should Christians observe the Sabbath on Saturday and not on Sunday? Some proponents of Saturday Sabbath-keeping suggest this may be an issue of faithfulness. Is this strict view valid? An examination of the Scriptures clarifies this subject and, more importantly, reveals what the real focus should be, which is what the Sabbath means for Christians today.

THE SABBATH LAW UPON THE JEWS

In six epoch days, God accomplished His work of creation. On the seventh day God rested—"ceased from His own works." (Heb. 4:10) This was the first Sabbath Day mentioned in the Scriptures and is a beautiful example of the primary purpose of the Sabbath—rest from labor.

There is no other mention in the Scriptures of the Sabbath during the entire period from that account until Israel's exodus from Egypt. At that time, it was ordained for the nation of Israel as a memorial of their deliverance from bondage. "Remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and an outstretched arm: therefore, the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the Sabbath Day." (Deut. 5:15)

The Law Covenant is continually referred to as dating from that time "...when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt." (Heb. 8:8; Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 20:5, 6) Not until Mt. Sinai, when the Law was formally inaugurated and given to Israel on two tablets of stone, was the Sabbath day made obligatory on anyone. From the entire account it is evident that keeping the Sabbath was something new to the Israelites.

The import of the Fourth Commandment of the Jewish Law is indisputable. It distinctly commanded that the seventh day of the week should be to the Jews a rest day in which no work of any kind should be done, either by parent or child, employer or servant, male or female, ox or ass or any creature owned by a Jew. (Ex. 20:8-11)

To the Jews these things were realities, fixed upon them and bound to them by Divine decrees.

"LOVE IS THE FULFILLING OF THE LAW"

Since Christ came and fulfilled the Law, the Church has been under a new law—the law of love. "Master, which [is] the great commandment in the Law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second [is] like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:36-40) These two commandments went beyond just loving God and one's neighbor, but went to the essence of the Mosaic Law.

"The righteousness [right-meaning] of the Law is fulfilled in us who are walking, not after [or according

to] the flesh, but after [or according to] the spirit." (Rom. 8:4) Paul's meaning is clear, that even though the Jewish Law was never given to the Christian, it is quite appropriate that Christians should look back to those Ten Commandments and note the spirit of their teachings and strive to conform their lives thereto in every particular.

Jesus taught the spirit or deeper meaning of the Commandments. For instance, he indicated that the command, "Thou shalt do no murder," would be violated by anyone who became angry and manifested, in any degree, an injurious or murderous spirit. (See also I John 3:15) The commandment respecting adultery, our Lord declares, could be violated by the mind without any overt act. The simple desire to commit adultery, if an opportunity presented itself, would be a violation of the spirit of that command. (Matt. 5:27-28) It is this magnified concept of the Divine Law which is fulfilled in the footsteps of Jesus who are walking through life, not according to the flesh and its desires and promptings, but according to the spirit of love and purity. So Christians would, out of love for God and their neighbors, not steal, commit adultery, or take any action contrary to God's Law.

Considering specifically the Sabbath Commandment upon the Jews, what is its deeper spiritual significance? Again, the word Sabbath signifies rest, and, therefore, its deeper significance was to lead the Jew to Christ and have the burden of the Law lifted. No Jew was able to gain life under the Law Covenant, but by becoming dead to the Law, he becomes a sharer in the covenant of sacrifice. (Rom. 7:4-6 and Psa. 50:5) In so doing, he was promised rest from the Law and its condemnation, because "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1) The merit of Christ covers the shortcomings of all those who are striving to walk in his steps, and the Scriptures give them the assurance of Divine favor, ushering them into peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

A STRUGGLE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The conflict between faith in this rest versus works under the Law has been so since the debate of Paul on behalf of the Gentile converts. Some in the early Christian Church, predominantly those of Jewish background, experienced difficulty letting go of the regulations of the Law of Moses. Issues such as circumcision, eating of certain meats, keeping Sabbath days, etc., challenged the teachings of the Apostles who needed to emphatically advise that such observances were no longer acceptable to the Lord. Jesus "blotted out the handwriting of ordinances which was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross..." therefore, henceforth, no man should judge us in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Wherefore, if we are dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?" Col. 2:14, 16, 17, 20

The Apostle tells us that anyone keeping the seventh day, or any other day, as under "Moses' Law," in the hope that by keeping that Law they will gain its promised blessings, is mistaken. Just so, the Jew has tried to keep the Law and has failed. (Gal. 5:2-4) Indeed, those who trust in the Law Covenant or who blend its requirements with those of the dispensation of grace, cannot fully enjoy the true Sabbath rest. (Eph. 3:2)

If we keep the Sabbath as did the Jew, as if it were a law upon us, then we are also obligated to keep every requirement of the Law without exception. If in bondage to one aspect of the Law, we are obligated to every jot and tittle and condemned if we do not obey it, for "whosoever shall keep the whole Law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." James 2:10

It is not astonishing that we find that even the Apostles needed some time to grasp thoroughly the meaning of the change from the Law dispensation to the dispensation of grace. Years after the conference of the Apostles, in which Peter and Paul testified of the grace of God bestowed upon the Gentiles, we find

Peter still hesitating and yielding to the prejudices of the Jewish believers, to the extent that he withdrew from Gentile converts, still treating them as unclean. He brought upon himself a rebuke from the Apostle Paul, who evidently grasped the whole situation with a much clearer vision than the other Apostles. Gal. 2:11-19

Although the Sabbath observance is still obligatory upon the Jew, who, not recognizing Christ, is still under the Law, it is a mistake for Christians to endeavor to live under the Law as a requirement for salvation. The Law Covenant was not made with the followers of Christ. Note Paul's words to the Christians of Galatia, who were not by nature Jews but Gentiles: "Ye that desire to be under the Law, do ye not hear the Law?" "Oh, foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?" (Gal. 4:21; 3:1,2) He proceeds to show that if the Jew cannot gain life by imperfectly keeping the Law, it would be foolish for Gentiles to think that they could secure everlasting life by trying to keep that Law. Again he declares, "By the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified in God's sight." (Rom. 3:20) The only way for Jew or Gentile to obtain justification in God's sight is by the acceptance of Christ and by a full consecration to be his disciple and to join with Him in His Covenant of sacrifice.

PRIVILEGE VERSUS BONDAGE

Both the first day and the seventh day of the week were observed by early Christians for quite a time, but neither was understood to be obligatory—a bondage. Both days were privileges. However, more than two centuries after the Apostles fell asleep, formalism crept into the Church, and Christianity became the state religion under Constantine. False teachers gradually sought to bring the followers of Christ into bondage, and the observance of Sunday as a day of rest was instituted as a *legal duty*. The spirit of liberty was lost, and the beauty of this cherished practice of honoring the Lord's resurrection on the first day of the week became a chain of bondage.

The Apostle Paul states that "*...one man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike: Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.*" (Rom. 14:4-5) If any one presumes to judge another in these matters, he is violating a direct command of the Lord as expressed by one of his inspired Apostles—the *Law of Love*. By this Law, Christians recognize the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and there can be no bondage to the observance of any day.

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