



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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### *The Sabbath or Sunday?*

#### Exodus 20:8–11

**W**HAT WAS INSTITUTED AS THE **SABBATH** IN the Mosaic Law continues to be a misunderstood concept in our day. Some sincere, well-meaning Christians, in fact, insist on worshipping on the **Sabbath** (Saturday) instead of the Lord's Day (Sunday). To address this issue, let us examine four emphases.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Old Testament Sabbath*

The root of the Hebrew *shabbāt* (**Sabbath**) is the verb *shābat*, which means to cease or rest. It first occurs in Genesis 2:2, where God “rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.” That, of course, set the precedent that God desires His people to cease work (implying rest), but how they do so is not the same in all ages.

Based on *shābat* in Genesis, therefore, some teachers conclude that the Sabbath *day* (*shabbāt*) is perpetual and the same in every age, but Scripture simply does not say that. Yes, while *shābat* occurs in Genesis in reference to *God*, *shabbāt* occurs not a single time in Genesis to indicate a prescribed Sabbath day for *man*. There is, in fact, neither a *command* nor even an *implication* that man was required to observe (or ever did observe) the Sabbath day until the Mosaic Law was given after Israel came out of Egypt (Ex. 16:23–29; **20:8–11**). Not one of the patriarchs of Genesis, for example, is said to have observed the Sabbath.

Job is another crucial example. Several factors date the events of Job as occurring sometime after Babel but before, or perhaps contemporaneously, with Abraham. In other words, Job lived before the Mosaic Law was

given. It is, therefore, significant, as theologian Louis Sperry Chafer puts it, that while “Job discloses the religious life and experiences of the patriarchs, and though their various responsibilities to God are therein discussed, there is never a reference to a Sabbath-day obligation.”<sup>2</sup> In dramatic contrast, it is distinctly stated that the Sabbath was given to *racial* Israel through Moses (Ex. 16:29; **20:8–10**; Neh. 9:13–14; Ezek. 20:11–13). The remainder of the OT is permeated with references to the **Sabbath**, the word appearing some seventy-seven times (all the other books of the Pentateuch, 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chron., Neh., Ps., Isa., Jer., Ezek, and Amos). So complete was such cessation from any labor to be (Ex. 20:10), for example, that the people couldn't gather sticks for a fire (Num. 15:32–36) or even light a fire in their homes (Ex. 35:3).

#### *The Place of the Mosaic Law*

When the above point arises, another immediately follows, namely, the place of the OT Law, which also is greatly misunderstood today. Some teachers (as did the Judaizers of old: Acts 15:5; Gal. 2:11–13; 3:1, 3; 5:1) insist that Christians must keep the Mosaic Law. It is *essential* to a proper understanding of Scripture, however, to recognize that the recipients of the law were those whom God “brought . . . out of the land of Egypt” (Ex. 20:2), that is, Israel *alone*. It was *never* meant for the Church or Gentiles in general. It was a covenant made *with* Moses *for* racial Israel.

The purpose of the Law was basically four-fold and is summarized in Galatians 3:19–25. First, it was to

make sin known (v. 19, “added because of transgression”), “for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). Second, it demonstrates that “all [men are] under sin” (v. 22; cf. Rom. 3:23) and sin’s horribleness (Rom. 7:7–13). Third, it actually imprisons men and inhibits sin: “Before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed” (v. 23; cf. 1 Tim. 1:9). “Kept” is *phroureō*, which means to keep inward under lock and key. The law was a jailer who held in custody those who were subjected to sin, and who kept them that way until Christ came to free them.

Fourth, and most significantly, because God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16), the law was a schoolmaster that pointed men to Christ and His righteousness (vs. 24–25). The end of the Law came when Christ was crucified. One of the most basic principles of understanding the Bible is that the Mosaic Law ended in Christ. If that is not recognized, the result will be enormous confusion and serious error. Paul, therefore, makes the matter absolutely clear with the word “schoolmaster.” The Greek is *paidagogos*, which was a person (usually a slave) who was assigned as a tutor and guardian for young boys. By its very definition, it was both a *temporary* and *lowly* position. When the son came of age into full sonship at about eighteen, the schoolmaster’s responsibilities ended. Paul’s imagery, then, is unmistakable. The Mosaic Law was a temporary schoolmaster that was designed to lead Israel to maturity, that is, *Christ*. Once Christ arrived, He became the controlling force in the believer’s life.

The Mosaic Law, therefore, including the **Sabbath**, was *never* intended to be the rule in the Christian’s life. The Christian is under a “new law.” One school of Bible teaching is fond of saying, “We are no longer under law but under grace,” which while true when we are speaking of the Mosaic system, is not true if we conclude that there is *no law at all*. In other words, just as grace existed in the OT, law still exists today, but just as grace was manifested differently under the Old Covenant, law is manifested differently in the New Covenant.

So basic is the truth that the Mosaic Law is passed that our Lord Himself declared, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Matt. 5:17). “Fulfil” is *plēroō*, a verb that speaks of filling a container to capacity and means to influence fully, control, or satisfy. The entire Mosaic Law pointed to Christ, so when He came, He “filled it up,” He satisfied it, so it passed away.

Even more significant, our Lord later even summarized the *entire* law (all 613 commands of it!) into two: love God and your neighbor, on which “hang *all* the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:36–40; emphasis added). What is the key word here? What law is now in force that replaces and supercedes the old? *The law of love*. As Paul wrote, “He that loveth another hath fulfilled the

law. . . . Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:8, 10).

Oh, how far superior this law is to the old! Jesus declared, “except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20), and then went on to illustrate how superior. While the old law said not to murder, the new says not to have rash anger (vs. 21–26; cf. Ex. 20:13). While the old said not to commit adultery, the new says to not even look with lust (vs. 27–28; cf. Ex. 20:14). While the old said not to swear falsely, the new says, “Swear not at all,” that is, carelessly or profanely (vs. 33–34; cf. Lev. 19:12). While the old said “an eye for an eye,” the new says “turn the other cheek” (vs. 38–39; cf. Ex. 21:24). Let us glorify our Lord by keeping *His* law, not the one He fulfilled.

For a little more study, what did Paul tell the Galatians about how the law is fulfilled (Gal. 5:14)? What does he call that law, in fact (6:2)?

### *New Testament Rest*

Coming back to the **Sabbath**, if we may we reemphasize, the Mosaic Law, including the **Sabbath**, was given to *racial* Israel (Ex. 20:2). *None* of the Mosaic system was meant for the church or Gentiles in general. This includes the **Sabbath**, which was not commanded until the Mosaic system, and is never repeated in the NT, as are the other nine commandments that are written on men’s hearts (Rom. 2:15).<sup>3</sup>

So what about the NT? While it is quite true that there are sixty occurrences of the word **Sabbath** in the NT (*sabbaton*), all but one are in the Gospels and Acts, where it is simply used as historical reference (e.g., as in “such-and-such a thing happening on the Sabbath”). The *only* occurrence in the Epistles is Colossians 2:16: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days.” It is beyond any doubt whatsoever that the Sabbath is not in force in the NT.

That being said, however, since God’s resting in Genesis established the precedent that He wanted His people to enjoy rest, is the Lord’s Day the Christian “day of rest” in this age, or as some word it, “the Christian Sabbath”? No, as Hebrews 4:1–11 wonderfully demonstrates. There we read of the perfect rest provided by the finished work of Christ. “The rest under Christ,” writes one theologian, “is not for one day in the week, nor is it that Sabbath rest which was due after a six-day strain. . . . It is rather the abiding rest of faith in Another. . . . It is rather the rest of Christ’s imparted, resurrection life, and that life is ceaselessly active.”<sup>4</sup>

Thanks be to God that because of grace through Christ, no longer do we need a prescribed *day* of rest because our Lord fulfilled the Mosaic System, including

the **Sabbath**. Whenever we need rest, therefore, we take it. We live not by *legalism* but by *liberty* (Gal. 2:4; 5:1, 13).

Again for further study, read Hebrews 7:18–19, 22 and 8:6–13, noting how the writer declares that the Mosaic Law (the old covenant) had passed its usefulness because of its own weakness and that “a better testament” of “Jesus” (the New Covenant) replaced the Mosaic System.

### *The Centrality of the Lord’s Day*

This brings us to a final emphasis, that of the place of the Lord’s Day (Sunday). While not “the day of rest,” the first day of the week, the day of our Lord’s resurrection, became the day for public worship of the church. While some teachers adamantly argue, this is the clear precedent (Jn. 20:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10).

While modern “Sabbath keepers” insist that Sunday did not become the day of worship until Constantine in the fourth century, that is historically false. Writing in the middle of the second century, apologist Justin Martyr described a typical worship service of his day:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen.<sup>5</sup>

We should also interject here that while lost in most churches today, Martyr demonstrates that preaching was central to the early church (note the primacy of “doctrine” in Acts 2:42) and its immediate descendents. Mark it down—unlike today’s seeker-sensitive, entertainment driven, music saturated church growth philosophy, the reading and exposition of the Word of God was the absolute center of the worship service.

If Justin Martyr is not enough, the even earlier writings of Barnabas and Ignatius prove Sunday worship beyond the slightest doubt. *The Epistle of Barnabas* 15:8–9 (100 AD) states:

Finally, [the Lord] says to them: “I cannot bear your new moons and Sabbaths” [Isa. 1:13]. . . . This is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both rose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven.<sup>6</sup>

Further, *The Letters of Ignatius: To Magnesians* 8:1–9:1 (AD 107) declares:

Do not be deceived by strange doctrines or antiquated myths, since they are worthless. For if we continue to live in accordance with Judaism, we admit that we have not received grace. . . . If, then, those who had lived in antiquated practices came to newness of hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath but living in accordance to the Lord’s Day, on which our life also arose through him and his death.<sup>7</sup>

Following is one of the most devastating statements I have ever read on this issue. It comes from the late David Baron (1857–1926), who at one time was one of the most eminent and learned Jewish converts to the Christian faith and who founded, along with C.A. Schönberger, the *Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel* missionary organization in London:

How can a Hebrew Christian be shown that he must not keep the Seventh-day Sabbath seeing it is written: “Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant” (Ex. 31:16)?

There is no necessity to “show” or teach the Jewish believers that they “must” not “keep the Sabbath.” . . . When more fully instructed, and as he grows in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, he will be brought to see for himself that the Jewish Sabbath has not significance in this dispensation and in relation to those whose calling is a heavenly one, and whose destinies are bound up not with time but with eternity. . . .

The Sabbath is thus essentially connected with the old marred creation, with the imperfect Mosaic dispensation, and with the typical redemption from Egypt. But Christians are children of the new creation, and are in the dispensation not of Law but of the Spirit. “With Christ’s resurrection,” says one writer, “the Seventh-day Sabbath expired, transmitting its sanctity and its privileges . . . to the first day of the week.”<sup>8</sup>

Again, that is from a saved Jew. If a *Jewish* believer can so easily recognize that “the old marred” system is past, why can’t *Gentile* believers see it and stop their insistence on the Sabbath?

The simple fact is that the first day of the week is so obvious in the NT, so clearly the precedent set for *all* believers, both Jew and Gentile, and then so unmistakably observed by the church from the resurrection, through the church fathers, and to the present, that to argue against it is the height of folly and an insult to our Lord.

Finally, to further support the straw man of “Sabbath keeping,” some teachers are so desperate that they even challenge the fact that Jesus rose on the first day of the week. There are two incontrovertible passages, however, that state this without doubt.

*First*, Mark 16:9: “Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.” While this is clear, rationalistic textual criticism challenges this passage (vs. 9–20), saying that it’s not in the so-called “best manuscripts.” (Some “Sabbath-keepers,” in fact, rely on such criticism to get around this verse.) Sadly, this is only one of many passages that have been damaged because of such criticism. I have been studying and writing on the textual criticism issue for some twenty years, so I could go into some detail, but I will just submit here the very brief facts concerning this passage.

1) The vast majority of Greek manuscripts (about 1800) include this passage. 2) It appears in many ancient versions of the Bible (e.g., the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Peshitta Syriac). 3) *Nineteen* of the early church fathers (100–500) supported it; Justin Martyr (151), for example, quotes verse 20 in his first *Apology*, proving that this passage was familiar to believers within 50 years of the last of the evangelists. 4) All the approximately 2,000 surviving Lectionaries (portions of the Greek NT that were read in the churches on special days) include it. 5) It has stood through the centuries as being unquestionably genuine only until modern textual criticism.

This verse, then, is clear, authentic evidence of Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week. To reject it is pure folly. *But*, if people insist on rejecting it, we can still turn to another irrefutable proof.

*Second*, please turn to Luke 24 (for the sake of space, we will not quote the entire passage). What is essential to note here is that *all the events from verses 1–21 occurred on the same day*. Verse 1 sets the stage:

*Now upon the first day of the week*, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. (Emphasis added here and in the following verses.)

While *this* verse does not actually *state* that Jesus rose on the first day of the week, when we read on, we discover that the other events that happened *on that same day* make the issue inarguably clear. Please read verses 2–6 and then note verse 7:

The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and *the third day* rise again.

This obviously establishes that Jesus would rise on the third day, which no one questions. When we continue reading, however, *we find out what day that was*. Read verses 8–12 and then note verse 13, where the scene in this drama changes to when Jesus appears to two men who are on their way to Emmaus on this same day:

And, behold, two of them went *that same day* to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs [about 7-1/2 miles].

Again, on the *same day* that the women went to the tomb, Jesus appeared to these men. So what day is this? The *first day*, our “Sunday.” Finally, read verses 14–20, and then note the clincher, verse 21:

But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, *to day is the third day* since these things were done.

Let us put it all together: Since verse 1 says the ladies went to the tomb on the *first day* of the week, since verse 7 says He would rise on the *third day*, since verse 13 says this is the *same day*, and since verse 21 says this is the third day, what day is this?—*the first day of the week*. It is just that simple.

Oh, that we would rejoice in the true rest we have in Christ and revere each Lord’s Day as we worship together (cf. Heb. 10:25).

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Most of this article was adapted from the Feb. 14–16 and Mar. 20–21 devotionals in Pastor Watson’s new book, *A Hebrew Word for the Day*, due out in the first quarter of 2009 (AMG Publishers).

<sup>2</sup> Louis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–1948), Vol. IV, p. 254.

<sup>3</sup> The Moral Law was written in the hearts of men everywhere (Rom. 2:15), demonstrating that men know in their heart (i.e., by their conscience) not to lie, steal, murder, and violate the other moral commands. Such moral law is found in legal codes of nations throughout history prior to the Mosaic Law. These moral laws (except for keeping the Sabbath) are also found restated several times in the NT: having no other gods (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7; Acts 5:29); making no idols or images” (Ex. 20:4–6; Deut. 5:8–10; Acts 17:29–31; I Cor. 8:4–6; 10:14; Col. 3:5; I Jn. 5:21); not profaning God’s name (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11; Jas. 5:12); honoring one’s father and mother (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Eph. 6:1–3; Col. 3:20); not murdering (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17; Rom. 13:9–10; Jas. 2:11); not committing adultery (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:19; Rom. 13:9–10; I Cor. 6:9; Heb. 13:4; Jas. 2:11); not stealing (Ex. 20:15; Deut. 5:19; Rom. 13:9–10; Eph. 4:28); not lying (Ex. 20:16; Deut. 5:20; Eph. 4:25,31; Col. 3:9; Tit. 3:2); not coveting (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21; Rom. 7:7; 13:9; Eph. 5:3–5; Heb. 13:5 Jas. 4:1–3).

<sup>4</sup> Chafer, Vol. IV, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1; Ages Digital Library, “The First Apology Of Justin,” Chapter 67.

<sup>6</sup> J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer (translators), *The Apostolic Fathers*, Second Edition (Baker Books, 1989), p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> From *The Witness* (Scotland). Cited in William C. Irving, *Heresies Exposed*, Third Edition (Loizeaux Brothers, 1921), p. 167.

