

The Sabbath and its Meaning

“Must a Christian keep all the Ten Commandments?” or “What about the fourth commandment, the Sabbath?” Such questions are frequently asked by people who study the Bible.

In the following text we want to explain what attitude we as Christians should have toward the Sabbath. We will also briefly go into the meaning of this Old Testament commandment in more general terms and how it was fulfilled in the New Testament.

1 To Whom and When Was the Sabbath Given?

In the Ten Commandments it says:

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, 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. 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. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

The main purpose of the Sabbath commandment was that God’s people should dedicate (at least this^[1]) one day of the seven-day week entirely to God.

In addition, we can see from this passage that the Sabbath was a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites were to grant their slaves a day of rest and remember that they too had been slaves. They should therefore be fair with their slaves. Compare 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.

In the light of these thoughts we should also consider the following verses:

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. 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. 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. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. 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.' (Exodus 31:13-17)

Here it is clearly stated that the Sabbath was given as a sign of the covenant between God and the people of Israel.

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

From this passage we can see that the Sabbath was not something known from the time of creation, but God made it known to the people of Israel when he gave them the law. We can also see from the other books of the Bible that the Sabbath was not observed before the time of Moses.

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

... and keep my Sabbaths holy that they may be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God. (Ezekiel 20:10-12 + 20)

Here it is clearly stated twice that the Sabbath is the covenant sign between God and his people, whom he led out of the land of Egypt.

From all these passages we can see that God gave the Sabbath to the people of Israel when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, so that it might be a sign of the covenant made with them. This was a law that was given exclusively to Israel, as a sign that was to distinguish them from all the other nations, and that is not found among any other nations either.

2 How Shall We Understand the Expression That God Rested on the Sabbath Day?

Some argue with Genesis 2:2-3 that God gave the Sabbath commandment as early as the creation, and since God himself rested, we too must observe the day of rest, because this is a "law of creation".

And 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. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

If we want to understand God's nature, we must also examine the verses that speak clearly about the fact that God never stops working.

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. (Psalm 121:2-4)

But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." (John 5:17)

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17)

God's nature is eternal and unchanging, so that he **"does not faint or grow weary"** (Isaiah 40:28). In light of these statements, the correct understanding of Genesis 2:2-3 can be found. Instead of understanding these verses literally, it is important that we see them in accordance with other statements in the Bible.

When it is stated here that God rested on the seventh day, blessed and sanctified it, this tells us that rest and peace are as much a part of God's nature as his work and activity. This state of rest expresses

- God completed his creative work and saw that everything was very good, it was perfect, did not need any improvement, correction, mending. God rejoiced in his work, celebrated it because he created it because of his love (Psalm 104:31).
- The passage also expresses that the goal of creation is rest — not passive rest, but communion with God when we glorify Him and He has time for us. We can experience this even in this life, but it will be complete only in eternity. This is why the New Testament interprets rest on the seventh day as the eternal fellowship in heaven (Hebrews 4:10-11: "to enter God's rest").
- He created man in his own image. Thus, for man, too, the goal of life is not restless work and toil, but a relationship with his Creator. Man should not lose himself in his activities, but have the higher goal in mind. God is always active and yet always at rest.
- God found rest in his perfect work. This also teaches us that we can find rest when we do His will.

People can learn a lot from Genesis 2:3 and from the stories of creation in general. They teach us spiritually important things, but we should not conclude from them that God is subject to time and refrained from working for 24 hours. The Old Testament was originally written for the Israelites, which is why the way of expression is Jewish. So here the act of God's creation is described in the framework of a seven-day week that ends with the Sabbath rest. The Israelites were thereby encouraged to keep the Sabbath, which was often neglected in their history, an expression of their unfaithfulness to God.

3 How Did Jesus Deal With the Sabbath?

Even though Jesus kept the Jewish laws, he did not differentiate between days in his devotion to serve the people. As the situation in which his disciples were picking the ears of corn on the Sabbath shows (Matthew 12:1-8), Jesus believed that God does not value formal observance of Sabbath prohibitions, but rather condemns or vindicates us according to our hearts' attitude.

To the indignation of his opponents, Jesus also healed several times on the Sabbath, for example by making some mud and putting it on the eyes of a blind man (John 9:6-7). In another situation, he asked a man who had been healed to carry his bed (John 5:8-10). John writes about this:

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (John 5:18)

Jesus also said:

For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:8)

With these statements Jesus wanted to expose the hypocritical religiosity of his critics. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) we see what attitude Jesus had towards the law. In verse 17 he said that he did not "come to abolish it, but to fulfil it." He then gives some examples in which he says: "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you...". For example, he extended the commandment "You shall not commit adultery" to refer to impure thoughts and looks, "You shall not murder" he referred to hatred and contempt; he also taught new things about swearing or love towards enemies. Jesus gave the Old Testament laws a deeper content, namely their original content—this also applies to the Sabbath. Even if it is not mentioned here, we see that he fulfilled the Sabbath commandment in his life in a perfect way through his daily devotion and love.

4 What Was the Attitude of the First Christians With Regard to the Sabbath?

The first thing we notice is that we cannot find a single passage in the New Testament^[2] where Christians are admonished for neglecting the Sabbath. But considering that the Sabbath had been given to the people of Israel, it was natural that both Jesus and the apostles kept the Sabbath commandment ^[3] . But this does not show that they did so because they regarded it as necessary for salvation, nor does it show that we too should keep the Sabbath today. For us the situation of the Christians who came from the Gentile nations is more relevant.

One important question is whether we find even a single hint in the New Testament that Christians who were not of Jewish origin should also keep the Sabbath. When the Apostles gathered together in Jerusalem to decide upon what Christians who had converted from paganism should observe, four points were mentioned which were considered necessary for maintaining fellowship with Jewish Christians, and for the purpose of reaching Jews with the Gospel. Keeping the Sabbath was not one of them. None of the apostles dared to put the yoke of the law on the Gentile Christians. They were only expected to abstain from idols^[4] , fornication ^[5] , the flesh of strangled animals, and the eating of blood (Acts 15:10-21).

Paul wrote to the Romans:

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. (Romans 14:5-6, NASB)

The fact that someone regards “one day above another” is a clear indication that the Sabbath was still being observed by some Jewish Christians. There was no other day that some had “observed the Lord”. Paul did not want everyone to keep the Sabbath and the food laws. From the context (verses 2 and 14) we can even see that he considered those who kept the Law (here the Sabbath and the food laws) to be weak. The Jewish Christians, on the other hand, who had understood that they no longer needed to keep the Law, he calls strong. If he does not require these Jewish Christians to keep the Sabbath, how much less would he expect Gentile Christians to do so?

The New Testament also contains letters to churches where some Gentile Christians were in danger of turning to the Law. Paul admonished them very severely:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain. (Galatians 4:8-11)

Let us consider Paul’s argumentation: The Galatians were formerly Gentiles and had served idols. Their religious practices had no power to bring them close to God. Now they are returning to that same level. The fact that they now observe days and months (which refers to the Sabbath and other Jewish festivals) is regarded by Paul as turning back to the weak and poor elements — that is, to the same level as the pagan festivals and rituals by which they had been enslaved (verses 8 and 9).

In other places he writes to them:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel [...] (Galatians 1:6)

and:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (Galatians 3:1-5)

All these are very serious admonitions addressed to Christians. If they once come to believe in Jesus, but then turn to the Law (which includes observing days), they will not be saved.

There was a similar danger in Colossae:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17) [6]

The Christians there were also threatened by the danger of accepting human teachings and keeping the law. It follows that the Gentile Christians kept neither the Law nor the Sabbath.

The biblical passages quoted in this section are just a few examples that can be better understood by reading the entire context in each case.

5 Are We Supposed to Keep the Sabbath According to the Ten Commandments?

Some people assume that the Mosaic law consists of two kinds of laws: the moral law (the law of God), which is found in the Ten Commandments, and the ceremonial law (the law of Moses), which includes sacrificial ordinances, circumcision etc. They consider the moral law to be eternally valid—for all people at all times, including Christians today—whereas the ceremonial law is considered to have found its end with Jesus. In the Bible, however, we do not find any distinction in this respect, e.g. in Nehemiah 8,1+8 the Law of Moses and the Law of God are used interchangeably.

We can see several examples in which Jesus did not only refer to the Decalogue[7] when he spoke of commandments. For example, when the rich young man asked him which commandments he should keep in order to have eternal life, he answered him:

And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honour your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” The young man said to him, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19:17-22)

Jesus did not mention all the commandments of the Decalogue (not even the Sabbath). On the other hand, he speaks of a commandment that is not found in the Ten Commandments: You shall love your neighbour as yourself! (Leviticus 19:18). Loving one’s neighbour means much more than not taking what belongs to him (stealing) or not killing him. Jesus wants to make it clear what is most important: We are to be perfect by following him. He encouraged the rich young man not only to give a part (to keep some commandments), but to put all his heart into doing everything for God.

This is the attitude to which Jesus encouraged people in various ways. Also in the situation when Jesus was asked which was the most important commandment, he answered:

Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31)

Jesus gave a new commandment (John 13:34-35). He explained to his disciples in a much deeper way what they should do and what they should not do: It would be very bad to be content with not killing one’s brother, but to be angry with him (Matthew 5:22). Not only is committing adultery very evil, but also looking at a woman lustfully (Matthew 5:27). Jesus did not abolish the Law and the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5:17), but rather clarified the deeper meaning of the Law. God taught people very basic moral principles and laws through the Ten Commandments, which even those who seek justification in their deeds can agree with (Matthew 23:23). Only those who choose to love God and their neighbour with all their heart will also understand that following Jesus means giving everything and setting no limits to their devotion.

Paul explains in his letter to the Romans in chapter 7:4-7 that we have died to the Law and so can serve in the Spirit in a new way.

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” (Romans 7:1-7)

Paul compares dying to the Law through Christ to a married woman whose husband has died. The Law in verses 4-6 must also refer to the Ten Commandments, because he mentions a Decalogue commandment in verse 7 (you shall not covet).

As can be seen from the subsequent teachings of Paul (Romans 7 and 8), freedom from the law does not mean descending below the level of the Mosaic law, but the opposite: to be able to follow of Jesus in devoting our lives to God. It is in this way that the Sabbath commandment also finds its deeper fulfilment.

6 Conclusion: Sabbath, Sunday or Every Day?

Indeed, it is very important for our relationship with God that we dedicate our time to Him. The early Christians took time each day to pray together, encourage and help each other (Acts 2:37-47; 5:42, Hebrews 3:12-14). We believe that it is natural for every Christian to use all his free time to build God’s kingdom. We are happy that we do not have to work on Saturdays (Sabbaths) as well as on Sundays and that we can use the time on weekends completely to meet with brothers and sisters in faith and thus praise

God together and help other people to find the way to him.

The New Testament fulfilment of the Sabbath is not in observing a special day (neither Sabbath nor Sunday), but is found in the fact that Christians dedicated their lives to God every day. Nor does the New Testament provide any indication that the Sabbath should be replaced by Sunday. Can we really believe that the greatest spiritual battle in history, according to Jesus, is whether we should observe Saturday or Sunday as a day of rest? When someone argues about whether to keep the Sabbath or Sunday, it shows that he has not yet understood Jesus' message. (Other topics that can help clarify our thoughts are: "[The life of the first Christians](#)", "[The Church in the New Testament](#)").

God does not want us to follow certain forms, but rather that we give ourselves completely for Him, seeking His will. If we highlight a day in this way, even though the New Testament teaches us a higher standard of devotion, doesn't this show a lack of willingness to give the rest of the days completely for God?

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

We are aware that this is a very broad subject. Not all questions can be answered in this short article. You are welcome to contact us with any questions you may have.

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Footnotes

1. God's main commandment has always been: You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength! (Deuteronomy 6:5). The believers who want to give their whole life to God serve God every day with all their heart, praising and glorifying Him. Already at the time of the Old Testament this was natural: Psalm 35:28; 61:9; 71:8, 15, 24; 72:15; 145:2, 1 Chronicles 16:37. Those who trust God call on Him every day: Psalm 86:3; 88:10. That is why they were expecting the Messiah, so that "we will serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days" (Luke 1:74-75). What better way to sanctify a day?
2. In contrast to the Old Testament: e.g. Nehemiah 13:15-22; Isaiah 58:13-14; Jeremiah 17:19-27
3. This can be assumed for the early days of the community. But after the Gospel had reached the Gentiles, there are legitimate reasons to assume that Peter (Galatians 2:14) and Paul (1 Corinthians 9:19-22), for example, renounced keeping the Sabbath.
4. i.e. meat sacrificed to idols
5. i.e. intermarriage of relatives
6. Here the festivals are arranged according to their annual frequency: annual, monthly and weekly Jewish festivals.
7. The Ten Commandments

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