

## Sabbath

### THE HISTORICAL SABBATH

- God instituted the seventh-day Sabbath. It was on the seventh day that God rested from His work of Creation [Gen.2:2]. This same seventh day was set apart for God's use [Gen.2:3].
- For the next few thousand years no mention is made of the Sabbath. It isn't until the exodus and wilderness experiences of the Israelites that God mentions the Sabbath. After providing manna for the Jewish nation for six days God explains that there won't be any manna on the ground on the seventh day because it is to be a day of rest. He expected the people to rest from trying to gather it or prepare it [Ex.16:14-30].
- The keeping of the Sabbath was repeated from Mt. Sinai (still as a day of rest)[Ex.20:8-11; Ne.9:13-14]. God was very serious about its being kept by the Israelites [Nu.15:32- 36].
- God also reveals that there is a great deal more to the Sabbath than a day of rest. As their day of rest it was to be a sign from God to remind the Israelites of His plan of labor-rest [Ex.31:12-17; 35:2-3].
- The following points are important to note:
  1. All commands to observe the Sabbath are given to the Jews and not the Gentiles.
  2. The observance of the Sabbath by the Jews was to be forever.
  3. Although sacrifices occurred on the Sabbath when feast days or offerings occurred simultaneously [Ex.12:1-28; Le.23; Nu.28], the Sabbath itself was never designated as a day of sacrifice on its own merit. Neither was it designated as a day of worship, but only as a day of rest [Mk.2:27].

### JEWISH SABBATH IN CHRIST'S TIME

- By Christ's time the observance of the Sabbath was hardly recognizable. A tremendous amount of tradition and religious trappings had been superimposed on the scriptural requirements [Ma.12:2]. This made the original intent of the Sabbath as a sign of labor versus rest very difficult to recognize.
- Friday was known as the day of preparation. No labor was allowed on the Sabbath day (Saturday). This meant that all work had to be completed by Friday sundown. Meals were pre-prepared, clothes washed, cleaning done, lamps filled, business completed, etc.
- Every Friday evening as the Sabbath began, the 'hazzan' (a synagogue official) called people to prayer with three short blasts on a ram's horn (not unlike the traditional role of the church bell). This would signal the faithful Jews to assemble at their synagogue.
- Upon arriving at the temple the family could enter only after it had undergone a ritual bath (mikveh). They would enter first into a large area called the Court of the Gentiles (a tourist area and place where Gentile proselytes would bring their offerings). A low, stone wall separated the Gentile area from the inner courts. This wall had inscriptions in Latin and Greek warning non-Jews from entering (upon pain of death). The Romans honored this sentence and allowed even Roman citizens to be killed for transgressing this Jewish law. To preclude accidents the Romans had guards placed at the wall to stop unsuspecting Gentiles. To catch offenders the Temple guard was also stationed here.

- Having passed this wall the family would climb a few steps and entered through one of three gates to the Court of Women (as far as the women could go). This area served as a 'fellowship hall' during the Sabbath gatherings. During the week this was where the religious teachers would meet to teach, discuss and debate issues of a religious nature while others would gather around to listen.
- The 'Court of Women' also had dedicated space in each of the corners. One corner allowed patient inspection of alter wood for worms before the wood could be used. Another corner was where lepers who believed themselves to be cured would wait for inspection by the priests in accordance with the Law. One corner was used to store oil and wine for use during services. The last corner was the gathering place of those who had taken the Nazarite vow.
- The Temple treasure was gathered here in 13 chests (each shaped like a ram's horn trumpet). These stood ready to receive various offerings (such as the widow's mite). When full the contents were transferred to various vaults further within the temple.
- Each vault was used for a special purpose. For example: the Shekel Chamber held the proceeds from the half shekel per year tax imposed on all adult male Jews. The Chamber of Utensils was used to store the valuable bowls, etc. used during services. There was also a vault used to collect benevolence funds. It was called the Chamber of Secrets (the distribution of funds were tracked, but not open to the public). Even private funds were kept in these vaults (like a bank) because of the security and sanctity of the grounds.
- Only men were allowed to proceed up the steps that led from the Court of Women to the Court of the Israelites (a long, narrow walkway). This would lead to the Court of Priests. Here would be a crowd of men—some praying, many talking, some waiting to sacrifice the animals they had brought. The Court would also smell of burnt animal fat, blood and incense.
- Having completed their sacrificial business they would return to the Court of Women. Here the service was held. It began with a time of prayer led by a priest. He would begin with prayer. As he ended his prayer the people would say "Amen!" then in unison the worshipers would repeat the statement, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." The hazzan brought forward a box containing a Torah scroll. The scripture reading began with a prayer of thanks for the word of God by the priest. He then selected individuals from the assembly to read portions of scripture. In larger synagogues (and in the Temple) this would be reserved for those who were qualified priests (as Jesus was—see BIRTH OF CHRIST), but in the smaller synagogues throughout Israel no special qualifications were required. After each three verses of the ancient text was read, the reader would pause while a translation into common vernacular was given. After the readings came the sermon. Again, in smaller synagogues throughout the region there was no prerequisite for expounding on the scriptures, but as the size of the synagogue grew the privilege became more reserved (not unlike churches today). The service ended with a single reading from the Prophets, and a benediction.
- This would be followed by a relaxed, holiday like meal at home. The meal was the best of the week, perhaps even with a little salted fish if you could afford it (most meat was expensive enough that it was usually eaten only on feast days). A prayer was said over the wine (Kiddush) and the meal began.
- Saturday morning began with another visit to the synagogue for more worship, prayer and scripture readings. The Sabbath ended with another signal from the hazzan's ram's horn.

## THE DISPENSATION OF GRACE

- Finally, with the Age of Grace (or Church Age, see Eph.3:2 and DISPENSATIONS) the Age of the Law (Age of Israel) is temporarily set aside (with 7 years remaining - see DISPENSATIONS). The Church Age was a mystery to the Old Testament prophets. When God said that the Sabbath was forever it must be remembered that the statement is taken in the context of the age in which it was given - the Age of the Law. Under the Law it is a true statement. During the Tribulation the last 7 years of the Age of the Law will be played out [Dan.9:24-27; Num.14:34; Ez.4:6; Ne.2:1-8]. During this period the Sabbath will be reinstated [Rev.11:1].
- Following the Tribulation is the Millennial Reign. During these thousand years the Sabbath will also be observed [Ez.44:24].
- The Sabbath is also observed throughout eternity in the New Heaven and New Earth [Isa.66:22-23]. So from the aspect of revealed truth in the Old Testament the Sabbath *does* go on forever. If it had been revealed at that time that there would be a pause in that plan, then the Church would not have been a mystery (as scripture plainly states) [Eph.3:1-11].
- As stated earlier the Sabbath was a sign. It was a type (symbol) of the plan of salvation. The week represented our striving to make ourselves acceptable to God. This is religion. It is expressed by our works. Unfortunately, no amount of works will be sufficient to pay off our sin debt. Christ paid for the debt by dying on the cross. He now offers everlasting life in Heaven as a gift to those who would believe that He paid the debt. When we come to understand and believe this we enter into the rest of God. This rest is the reality that is illustrated by the Sabbath.
- Heb.4:1-13 describes the Sabbath as an illustration of salvation by grace through belief in the Gospel.
- Col.2:14-17 describes the role of the Jewish Sabbath to the believer living during the Church Age. Most of the Mosaic Law was taken out of the way for believers today. Christ fulfilled the Law, but nailed to the cross only those portions of the Law that were incompatible with Grace. The significant deletions for Paul's purposes (and ours) are listed in vs.16. Rules about what we could (or could not) eat or drink were superseded by Grace [Ma.15:10-20; Mk.7:14-23]. So were the rules about which days were holy days and Sabbath days [see earlier references] and also new moons [1Chr. 23:31]. All of those rules were but a shadow of life in the Kingdom Ages (see DISPENSATIONS). The reality for this age is the Grace of God through Christ.

## IF GOD DIDN'T SPECIFY A PARTICULAR DAY FOR WORSHIP DURING THE CHURCH AGE, THEN WHY DO NEARLY ALL PROFESSING CHRISTIANS WORSHIP ON SUNDAY?

- The early Church recognized the importance of coming together to worship. They also realized that they were not required to do so on Saturday. In fact, it's very probable that they preferred *not* to worship on Saturday because they might inadvertently lend credibility to the Judaizers of the day that were trying to mix Grace with works by requiring components of the Mosaic Law as conditions to be met before salvation [Gal.], or they may be confused with one of the quasi-Judaic religious organizations that abounded in the near east.
- Instead, they chose to worship on Sunday. This perpetuated the principle of rest once a week, but honored the resurrection of Christ rather than honoring the symbol of something they had already experienced in reality.
- There is no requirement to worship on Sunday, or even to limit worship to once a week. It is purely a question between the believer and his God.

**WHY DO SOME ORGANIZATIONS STILL PROMOTE SATURDAY SABBATHS AS A REQUIREMENT RATHER THAN AS A LIBERTY?**

- Despite clear teaching from scripture some religious organizations still promote Saturday Sabbath as the only rule of faith. It must be understood that scriptural things are Spiritually discerned [Jn.8:47; 1Cor.2:14]. It is possible (but not always true) that the proponent of Saturday Sabbath has never really understood the Gospel, is not born again, and has no Holy Spirit with which to discern. He (or she) may deny salvation by God's grace alone and substitute a legalistic code of conduct requiring self-reformation as a prerequisite to salvation.
- There is only one effective way of dealing with people who insist on the Saturday Sabbath. First, determine where they stand on the plan of salvation. If their gospel includes works, then ignore the issue of Sabbaths and stick to the Gospel. If the Gospel is okay, then appeal to Rom.14 until such time as that person can produce documentation for your study. Study it and go from there.