

The Doctrine of the Sabbath

DOCTRINAL SERIES



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TRUE JESUS CHURCH

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Preface

After six days of creation, God rested from His work. He blessed the seventh day and sanctified it. Later, when Jesus came to the world and preached the gospel of the kingdom, He explained those divine actions, saying, “The Sabbath was made for man” (Mk 2:27).

After Adam sinned the land became cursed: it brought forth thorns and thistles, and man was destined to eat the fruit of his labours with the sweat upon his brow until he returned to dust. It meant that his life would be without respite; the longer he lived, the heavier the curse. For Adam and those early ancestors who were to live for hundreds of years, this would have been endless torment. Fortunately, God had prepared His mercy beforehand—the Sabbath, a mercy that would remain forever. It was evidence of His all-knowing and all-powerful nature, proving that His kindness always goes before man’s failure and that God does not need to follow behind, picking up the pieces that result from his rebellion.

God gave the Sabbath day as a sign to those who belonged to Him (Ex 31:12-17). It was also a “perpetual covenant”, meaning they could enjoy this weekly rest throughout the generations until they finally entered into another “rest”—an eternal Sabbath (Heb 4:9). It is unfortunate, then, that man had to experience failures before they realized God’s grace and mercy:

Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation

shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” So, as the Lord commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died.

Numbers 15:32-36

Was it actually the case that “it had not been explained what should be done”? In truth, even before God gave the two tablets of commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, He stipulated that whoever did any work on the Sabbath would be cut off from the people and be put to death (Ex 31:12–17). This fact indicates man’s weakness: he often fails to trust in God’s words or to realize how serious He is about what He says. The outcome is that he will take a chance or test how far he can push the boundaries.

Furthermore, man often makes the mistake of viewing God’s ways through human compassion, leading him to look for a temporary tolerance instead of embracing God’s long-lasting love and mercy. It was God’s firm and unmovable intention for man to receive the blessing of rest. Therefore, God refused to tolerate a careless act that would spoil the whole purpose of His love; He could not bear to see His loved ones looking lightly upon the Sabbath and ultimately abandoning it.

Today, many people fail to grasp the importance of the Sabbath, never mind the divine will behind the act of stoning. They cannot comprehend the fact that God is serious about imparting His grace. Hence, when Jesus came to the world, He had to explain God’s intention: the Sabbath is not meant to bind man—to make him lose his freedom to work—rather, it releases him from toil and labour. Therefore, it is not a restriction but an enjoyment, for it is on this day that man can truly receive physical and spiritual rest (Mk 2:23-28). Importantly, by resting in this way, he looks forward to the time when life’s labour is over and he can enter into the eternal rest (Heb 4:1-11).

On one occasion, when Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees about His disciples’ alleged trespassing of the Sabbath, He responded by saying, “Have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?” (Mt 12:5). Also, when tested with the question “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” He answered, “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Mt 12:12). The Lord’s words highlight that serving in the

sanctuary and performing good works on the Sabbath are permissible. Importantly, He mentioned no other exceptions with regards to working. Indeed, Jesus Himself set a good example by attending Sabbath worship (Lk 4:16, 31, 44) and doing good deeds (Lk 6:6–11; 14:1–6), as did the believers in the early church (Acts 13:14–15, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2).

Some people argue that the Bible offers no evidence of Gentile Christians attending Sabbath worship, and that the latter is not required on account of the grace that was ushered in through the blood of Jesus Christ. However, it is worth noting that when an issue was raised at the Council in Jerusalem concerning whether Gentile believers should be circumcised, James, the brother of Jesus, made this conclusion before the apostles and elders:

“Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

Acts 15:19-21

The four things mentioned by James were not meant to be an exhaustive list of requirements for a godly life; rather, they were those matters that the Gentile believers had to take extra care to avoid on account of the adverse social environment. To be pleasing to the Lord, a believer would still need to learn from Moses and the prophets and to put their teachings into practice. James was confident to make that judgment because he knew that the Gentile Christians would do just that in the synagogues on the Sabbath.

Today, there are important questions that need to be answered for the benefit of those wishing to understand the truth of the Sabbath. They include: how did the status and meaning of the day come to change over the course of human history? And how should Christians uphold this commandment from God in this era of grace? These answers can be found in *The Doctrine of the Sabbath*, the latest addition to the IA DLM’s Doctrinal Series. It has been adapted from an original book by Deacon James Chiang, *The Holy Sabbath*, published in Chinese in November 2004. The latter was the result of careful

research, compilation and analysis from both a historical and biblical perspective.

The Doctrine of the Sabbath is the combined result of God's guidance and tremendous teamwork. Those who helped to make its publication possible include: Sister Christina Chan from New Zealand, who translated the text into English; Sister Janet Yaw from Canada, who proofread the initial draft; Brother Will Yang and Sister Margaret Ho, who did the graphic design work; members of the IA DLM team in the UK, including an editor, translator and proofreaders; the IA Review Board members; brethren from around the globe who contributed their personal testimonies or interviewed other members on behalf of the DLM team. May God remember their contribution and bless their service.

We pray that the readers of this book may understand the intention of God to bless man, and that they will treasure the Sabbath day. We also pray that God remembers the dedication and labour of Deacon Chiang whose work underpins this project.

KC Tsai

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Chapter 1

THE ORIGIN OF THE SABBATH

1.1 God establishes the Sabbath at creation

To trace the origin of the Sabbath is not a complicated matter. All we need to do is to look in the Bible—the inspired word of God—with faith. It is there, within the opening pages, that we learn of God’s creation work, culminating in His establishment of this special day.

God created the heavens and the earth in six days by the power of His command. The Bible notes, “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day” (Gen 1:31). However, there was one more element in the divine plan—something that would render it perfect and complete. On the seventh day, God rested; He blessed the day and made it holy.

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

Genesis 2:1–3

The Sabbath marked the end of His glorious creation work and, indeed, was the pinnacle of the entire process. It had all the sense of a celebration—a time when God took delight in all that He had accomplished. Moreover, in His company was a throng of heavenly hosts who praised His work with a joyful chorus (Job 38:4–7).

1.2 Its significance

The Sabbath was special on account of the fact that God set it apart from the other days of the week through His actions of resting, sanctification and blessing.

On the surface, God's resting is perhaps the most intriguing, for it is seemingly incongruous with His omnipotent nature (Isa 40:28). However, when we piece together the biblical picture, we realize that this action was never intended to be for His own benefit; it was for man's. God's inauguration of a seventh day rest was ultimately meant to be a gift to man, a gracious invitation to enter into a rest that He first enjoyed. Hence, when Jesus later came to the world, He reinforced this point by teaching that the Sabbath was made for man (Mk 2:27–28).

God's next action was to bless the Sabbath day. It is perhaps easier for us to comprehend His blessing of the creatures He had created, including man (Gen 1:22, 28), but what did His blessing of the seventh day mean? The answer is revealed in the Book of Isaiah, which speaks of special blessings for the people who honour this day (Isa 56:2–5; 58:13–14). This leads us to understand that when God blessed the Sabbath, He intended for that blessing to come upon those who enter into it. Pertinently, He chose only to bless this particular day of the week, indicating there is no equivalent blessing for those who choose to uphold another.

Finally, God sanctified the Sabbath day and, in doing so, showed that it belonged to Him (Ex 31:13; Lev 23:3; Deut 5:14; Isa 56:4). It proved to be the start of an on-going lesson on the concepts of holy and profane: things set apart for Him versus the mundane. Later, God developed the lesson further when He told the Israelites, "Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you" (Ex 31:13). From that point, the Sabbath became an important sign, reminding God's people that they were a holy nation, chosen by Him and set apart for His glory.

1.3 The term Sabbath

1.3.1 Its occurrence in the Old and New Testaments

Despite recounting the origin of the day, the Book of Genesis makes no specific mention of the term “Sabbath”. The latter first appears in Exodus 16, which records God’s instructions through Moses for the Israelites to observe the day at the start of their wilderness journey: “Then he said to them, “This is what the Lord has said: “Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning” ’ ” (Ex 16:23).

Later, God addresses the matter of the Sabbath again when He delivers the Fourth Commandment on Mount Sinai:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
Six days you shall labor and do all your work,
but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it
you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor
your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your
stranger who is within your gates.
For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea,
and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the
Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

Exodus 20:8–11

In both these passages, the Hebrew word *Shabbath*¹ is used. It derives from the root *shabath*², meaning “to cease” or “to rest”, first seen in Genesis 2:3: “Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He *rested* from all His work which God had created and made.”

In the New Testament, the writers use the Greek words *sabbaton*³ (singular) e.g. Lk 4:16, Mt 12:8, and *sabbata*⁴ (plural) e.g. Acts 17:2. In the Book of Hebrews, we also come across the word *sabbatismos*⁵

1 Strong’s reference no. H7676.

2 Strong’s reference no. H7673.

3 Strong’s reference no. G4521

4 *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*: “The doubled b has an intensive force, implying a complete cessation or a making to cease...”

5 Strong’s reference no. G4520

which refers specifically to the future heavenly rest (Heb 4:9).

1.3.2 Its meaning

The Bible is clear that the Sabbath entails a cessation of work. As mentioned previously, the Book of Genesis shows that God set the precedent: after creating the universe, He “ended His work which He had done, and rested on the seventh day” (Gen 2:2). Moreover, because He did this, He would require man to follow His example: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work...” (Ex 20:9–10). From the exodus period onwards, God helpfully defined the nature of that “work” for the Israelites through various regulations.

1.3.3 The naming of the days of the week

In the Greek language of the New Testament, the days of the week are given in reference to the Sabbath. Hence, Sunday is literally “the first of the Sabbath”, i.e. “the first day after the Sabbath” e.g. Mk 16:9 (cf. Mt 28:1; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1; Acts 20:7). Friday, aside from being the “Day of Preparation” e.g. Mt 27:62; Mk 15:42; Lk 23:54, is also called “the day before the Sabbath” (Greek, *prosabbaton*⁶) e.g. Mk 15:42.

In the Christian writings of the time, the names for the days of the week would have been as follows:

- *Mia ton sabbaton* (“First of the Sabbath/week”)—the first day of the week (Sunday).
- *Deutera* (“Second”)—the second day of the week (Monday).
- *Trite* (“Third”)—the third day of the week (Tuesday).
- *Tetarte* (“Fourth”)—the fourth day of the week (Wednesday).
- *Pempte* (“Fifth”)—the fifth day of the week (Thursday).
- *Paraskeue* (“Preparation”)—the sixth day of the week (Friday).

6 Strong's reference no. G4315

- *Sabbaton* (“Sabbath”)—the seventh day of the week (Saturday).

However, from the latter half of the first century AD, writers began referring to the first day of the week as *Kyriake Hemera* (“Lord’s Day”), which was later rendered simply, *Kyriake* (“Lord’s”).

Eviator Zerubavel, a sociologist, notes:

The rest of the days of the week were originally also named by the Church in accordance with their temporal distance from the preceding Sabbath, following the Hebrew practice. Monday was thus designated as the “second day after the Sabbath” (*Secunda Sabbati*, in Latin), Tuesday as “the third day after the Sabbath” (*Tertia Sabbati*), and so on. (This archaic nomenclature is still preserved, at least in part, in Armenian, Greek, Portuguese, and Icelandic).

Eviator Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Circle*

Significantly, in tandem with the spread of the gospel, Christians in many countries began adopting the word “Sabbath” for the seventh day, such that it became ingrained in their languages. Examples include:

- Spanish—*Sábado*
- Italian—*Sabato*
- Portuguese—*Sabado*
- Polish, Czech, Slovak, Slovene—*Sobota*
- Serbo-Croatian—*Subota*
- Hungarian—*Szombat*
- Armenian—*Shapat’*
- Russian—*Subbota*
- Romanian—*Sâmbăta*

1.4 The Sabbath existed before the Mosaic Law

An important point highlighted by the Book of Genesis is that God ordained the Sabbath at the end of the creation week—two thousand years before He chose Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, and two and a half thousand years before He delivered the Law at Sinai. Also, we note that Moses led the people to observe the Sabbath not long after their departure from Egypt, before their arrival at Mount Sinai (see Ex 16:23–30). Together, these facts reveal that the Sabbath predates both the emergence of the Jewish race and the era of the Mosaic Law.

Nevertheless, because the Bible does not record specifically that God's people observed the Sabbath prior to the exodus, some biblical commentators have concluded that Sabbath-keeping was neither known nor practised before then. However, one can argue that there is, in fact, evidence within the Bible, albeit indirect, indicating that Sabbath-keeping was a possibility, at the very least.

One interesting piece of evidence is the existence of the seven-day cycle. In Genesis, it is clear that God established it at the time of creation. Indeed, there is no other plausible explanation: it tallies neither with the lunar cycle nor any other natural cycle; and, outside of Scripture, has all the appearance of a completely arbitrary marker of time. After creation week, the seven-day cycle became the established way of reckoning time, as the Bible repeatedly documents its use by the people of God, including Noah (Gen 7:4, 10; 8:10, 12); Job and his friends (Job 2:13); Jacob and Laban (Gen 29:27–28; 31:23); Joseph (Gen 50:10); Moses (Ex 7:25; 12:15, 18, 19; 13:6, 7; 22:30; 23:15; 29:30, 35, 37; 34:18). This evidence is particularly compelling, for a seven-day cycle presupposes the existence of a significant day—the Sabbath day—to provide demarcation.

A second piece of evidence is the direct and indirect biblical references to God's commandments prior to the era of the Mosaic Law. Sometimes, we overlook the fact that God issued commandments to His people before that historical juncture, but the Bible reminds us otherwise. In Genesis 26:5, for example, God says, "Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." The charge, commandments and statutes that He gave to Abraham would have defined what worshipping the

one true God entailed, including the requirement for offerings—a matter that was known even in the time of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3–4). They must therefore have been the basis for the Bible’s assessment of those who were able to walk successfully with God during their lives (Gen 5:22; 6:9) and whose characters warranted a description of “just,” “perfect,” “blameless” and “upright” (see Gen 6:9; Job 1:1). If we follow this line of thinking, we are naturally led to infer that God, who ordained the Sabbath at creation, must surely have spoken to those whom He loved about this monumental event and possibly even given instructions for its observance. This would be a more logical position than assuming that He waited 2000 years to do so.

Certainly, the afore-mentioned points do not constitute definitive proof that the people of God observed the Sabbath prior to the exodus. Nevertheless, they do indicate that it was more of a possibility than an impossibility.

1.5 Conclusion

From the Bible, we can trace the institution of the Sabbath to the time of creation. It records that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh. He blessed this day and sanctified it. The Sabbath was part of the divine plan from the beginning of time; it predates both God’s calling of the Jewish nation and His institution of the Law at Sinai. Thousands of years later, and in tandem with the spread of the gospel, Sabbath-keeping became a way of life for God’s people around the world, such that the very term “Sabbath” became ingrained in many languages and cultures.

CHAPTER 2

THE EXODUS PERIOD

2.1 The wilderness journey

The Book of Exodus is the epic account of the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt, their subsequent delivery by God under the leadership of Moses, and the forging of a new relationship between God and His people. As we read about the start of the wilderness journey, we discover that the people had little or no notion of Sabbath-keeping. Whether the practice was lost during their time in Egypt or earlier is unclear, as the Bible does not elaborate. What is evident, however, is that God had to teach His people the basic principles. Chapter 16 records that He began this process in tandem with the miraculous bestowal of manna:

So they gathered it every morning, every man according to his need. And when the sun became hot, it melted.

And so it was, on the sixth day, that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. Then he said to them, "This is what the Lord has said: 'Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.' " So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. Then Moses said, "Eat that today, for 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 the Sabbath, there will be none." Now it happened that some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none. And the Lord said to Moses, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! For the Lord has given you the

Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day.

Exodus 16:21–30

In short, God told Moses to instruct the Israelites to gather manna for six days and to collect a double portion on the sixth day, for none would fall on the seventh; the latter would be a day of rest.

At this juncture, God had yet to enshrine the Sabbath in law, so there were no penalties for transgression. However, the people were exhibiting the beginnings of rebellious tendencies, for some chose to venture out on this day, against God’s explicit instructions (see Ex 16:27). This situation provoked Him to exasperation (Ex 16:28–29) and most likely influenced the manner and detail in which He later instructed the Israelites to keep this day.

2.2 The Sabbath included in the Ten Commandments

Exodus 19 records the Israelites’ arrival at Mount Sinai, marking a watershed in the history of the nation. It was here that God established a covenant with His people, pledging to make them His “special treasure” and a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5–6). The only condition was that they resolved to obey Him by keeping His divine law. The latter comprised the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1–17) and a set of ordinances that would guide their religious and community life (e.g. Ex 21–23:19).

Significantly, God took care to emphasize the special nature of the Ten Commandments. He did this by writing them with His own finger onto tablets of stone (Ex 31:18) and instructing Moses to place them inside the ark of the covenant (Deut 10:2). The Book of the Law that was scribed by Moses (Ex 24:4, 7), on the other hand, was placed beside the ark (Ex 24:4; Deut 31:26). It is unclear whether the Book of the Law contained both the Ten Commandments and the religious, civil and criminal laws (as is traditionally assumed), or merely the latter¹. Either way, God’s symbolic action reinforced the unique status

¹ See the discussion in *The New Century Bible Commentary: Exodus* by J.P. Hyatt (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1983), pp 207 and 217.

of the Ten Commandments and their unalterable nature. Indeed, God's intention was that they would serve as a perpetual moral code for His people from that time onwards. The first three commandments set out man's obligations towards God, while the latter six set out his obligations to his fellow man.

The Fourth Commandment concerned the Sabbath:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

Exodus 20:8–11

“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall not do any work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

Deuteronomy 5:12–15

“Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you...Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.’ ”

Exodus 31:13, 16–17

The length and detail of this particular commandment served to highlight the importance of the day and God's wish for the people to be clear about why they had to observe it, and how they were to do so.

Firstly, God instructed the people to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy (Ex 20:8; Deut 5:12). This day belonged to Him: it was the "Sabbath of the Lord [their] God" (Ex 20:10). Secondly, He stipulated the way to sanctify it, which was to stop work and to ensure that their children, servants, animals and the foreigners in their midst did likewise (Ex 20:10; Deut 5:14). Thirdly, He explained that the Sabbath would remind them of a number of important matters: His creation, His own resting, His blessing and sanctification of that day (Ex 20:11; 31:17), and His act of deliverance (Deut 5:15). Finally, the Sabbath would serve as a perpetual sign, affirming the people's status as God's holy nation (Ex 31:13).

2.3 A holy and joyful convocation

God referred to the Sabbath as a holy convocation²—a time for the people to rest and to assemble for worship: "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings" (Lev 23:3). He also spoke of it as a joyful feast (Lev 23:1–3), an occasion for the Israelites to recall and celebrate His gracious acts of creation and deliverance (Ex 20:11; Deut 5:15).

2.4 Festival sabbaths

Aside from the seventh day of the week, God also termed a number of other days as "sabbaths":

- The Feast of Trumpets: the first day of the seventh month (Lev 23:24).
- The Day of Atonement: the tenth day of the seventh month (Lev 23:32).

2 Strong's reference no. H4744. Hebrew, *miqra*, meaning "holy assembly".

- The beginning and the end of the Feast of Tabernacles: the fifteenth and the twenty-second days of the seventh month (Lev 23:35–36, 39).

God gave the following instructions to Moses concerning these sabbaths:

“Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord.’”

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the Lord. And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God. For any person who is not afflicted of soul on that same day, he shall be cut off from his people. And any person who does any work on that same day, that person I will destroy from among his people. You shall do no manner of work; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. It shall be to you a sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict your souls; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening, you shall celebrate your sabbath.”

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days to the Lord. On the first day there shall be a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it. For seven days you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation, and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord. It is a sacred assembly, and you shall do no customary work on it. These are the feasts of the Lord which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire to the Lord, a burnt offering and a grain offering, a sacrifice and drink offerings, everything on its day—besides the Sabbaths of the Lord, besides your gifts, besides all your vows, and besides all your freewill offerings which you give to the Lord.’”

‘Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the Lord for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest.’”

Leviticus 23:24–39

The festival sabbaths were distinct from the weekly Sabbaths, but were likewise holy convocations on which the Israelites could rest from their mundane routines and worship God wholeheartedly.

2.5 Conclusion

The exodus journey was a time when God began forging a new covenantal relationship with the Israelites—one that included an obligation on the part of the latter to uphold the holy Sabbath. He guided them to fulfil this requirement by giving them a six-day cycle of manna followed by a seventh day of compulsory rest. Later, God set out the Fourth Commandment which made clear the nature of the Sabbath, the reasons for observing it and how the people were to do so.

CHAPTER 3

THE INTRODUCTION OF SABBATH REGULATIONS

3.1 The purpose of the regulations

Starting from the time of the exodus, God gave the Israelites a number of regulations that stipulated the practicalities of Sabbath-keeping. These were additional to the Fourth Commandment and served to promote the sanctity of the day and to reinforce the requirement to rest. God delivered some of the regulations at Sinai as part of the Mosaic Law and gave others prior to, as well as after, this event.

As we learn about these regulations, a picture emerges of a heavenly Father patiently teaching His young children the basic principles. In hindsight, we realize that His intention was to prepare them for a time of maturity and grace through faith in Jesus Christ. His will was that they would, by that time, grasp the true spirit of the Sabbath without the need for the detail of the written Law (Gal 3:23).

3.2 The Old Testament regulations

3.2.1 No cooking

Not long after leaving Egypt, God gave Moses the first Sabbath regulation, which related to the preparation and cooking of food. The Book of Exodus records, “Then [Moses] said to them, ‘This is what the Lord has said: “Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil;

and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning” ’ ” (Ex 16:23). In other words, Friday was to be a day of readiness—a time for the people to prepare their meals ahead of the Sabbath. In this way, the people could enjoy the holy day in a carefree manner.

3.2.2 Remaining at home

During the wilderness journey, God arranged for the people to gather manna for six days and to rest on the seventh. On the sixth day, He instructed them to collect a double portion, for no manna would fall on the following day. Nevertheless, some people persisted in venturing out on the Sabbath, thereby provoking God to anger: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! For the Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day’ ” (Ex 16:28–29). God’s requirement was simple: the people could attend to their daily needs over the course of six days, but they were to rest in their tents on the seventh. However, it was evident that some people had difficulty obeying even this basic rule.

3.2.3 No kindling of fire

Another stipulation during the exodus period related to the making of fires: “You shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations on the Sabbath day” (Ex 35:3). There are two possible reasons why it equated to work. Firstly, it involved the gathering of firewood, a task that would have been time-consuming and arduous in the harsh environment of the wilderness. Secondly, a primary purpose of kindling fire was to cook meals, an equally labour-intensive chore. It was God’s good wish for the people to rest completely on the seventh day, unfettered by their usual work routines.

3.2.4 Setting out the showbread

Along with giving instructions for the building of the tabernacle, God told Moses to make a table of acacia wood, overlaid with gold, to place inside the holy place (Ex 25:23–30; 40:22–23). This was for the showbread:

“And you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it. Two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. You shall set them in two rows, six in a row, on the pure table before the Lord. And you shall put pure frankincense on each row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, an offering made by fire to the Lord. Every Sabbath [Aaron] shall set it in order before the Lord continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant.”

Leviticus 24:5–8

Another name for the showbread was the “bread of the Presence” (Ex 25:30, RSV)—literally, bread set out in the presence of God. It was to be made with the finest flour offered up by the people. On each Sabbath day, fresh showbread was to be set out on the table, while the previous batch was to be eaten by Aaron and his sons in a holy place (Lev 24:9). In this way, the showbread would be an offering pleasing to God and an important symbol of communion between God and man, and between man and man.

3.2.5 Burnt and drink offerings

God instructed the priests to make a special burnt offering and drink offering on the Sabbath, in addition to the daily sacrifices (see Num 28:3–8): “And on the Sabbath day two lambs in their first year, without blemish, and two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour as a grain offering, mixed with oil, with its drink offering—this is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, besides the regular burnt offering with its drink offering” (Num 28:9–10). This doubling of offerings emphasized the special nature of the day.

3.2.6 No ploughing or harvesting

Prior to their entry into Canaan, God commanded the people, “Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest” (Ex 34:21). Life for the Israelites would change upon their arrival in the promised land: they would finally be able to settle down and farm the land. Nevertheless, God made it clear that, even during the two most crucial and busy times in the agricultural calendar—the seasons of ploughing and harvesting—the people were not to neglect the holy Sabbath.

3.2.7 No burden-bearing and trading

Later on, during the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah (circa 627–580 BC), God stipulated a prohibition relating to the carrying of burdens. “Thus says the Lord: ‘Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers’ ” (Jer 17:21–22).

This prohibition was linked to trading, for we learn that the Jews had been doing business with the merchants coming into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. It led to God issuing this severe warning through Jeremiah: “But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched” (Jer 17:27).

It was unfortunate that the people chose not to heed God’s words, for the judgment was realized in 586 BC, whereby the city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the Babylonians. Later on, a new generation of Jews began making the same mistake when they returned from exile. Nehemiah responded swiftly by reinstating the Sabbath rest in order to prevent further judgment coming upon the nation (Neh 10:31; 13:15–21).

3.3 Penalty for breaking the Sabbath

God's requirement was for His people to stop all routine work and to rest on the Sabbath. He set out this principle clearly in the Fourth Commandment (Ex 20:10; Deut 5:14). However, because of the wayward nature of some, He had to stipulate a severe judgment—the death penalty—to deter wilful transgression:

“You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.”

Exodus 31:14–17

In the Book of Numbers, we learn of an unfortunate occasion where this judgment had to be enacted. It records how, during the course of the wilderness journey, a man was caught collecting sticks one Sabbath day and was brought before Moses.

Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” So, as the Lord commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died.

Numbers 15:32–36

From this incident, we gain some important insights. Firstly, we see that God required the seventh day rest to be observed in an absolutely faithful manner, and His nature was such that He could not overlook a deliberate act of sin. Secondly, the severity of the punishment was

undoubtedly meant to deter the spread of insubordination. Thirdly, we come to understand God's capacity to dispense kindness and severity in equal measure, bringing to mind the sober warning of the apostle Paul: "Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off" (Rom 11:22).

3.4 Conclusion

Starting from the time of the exodus, God gave the Israelites a number of Sabbath regulations to promote the sanctity of the day and to reinforce the requirement to rest. However, it is debatable whether He meant all of them to be implemented for the duration of the Old Testament period. This is because some of the regulations appeared to be circumstance and time-specific. There were those, for example, that seemed to be targeted at the nomadic period, and others, to the settlement period. However, there were some regulations that were obviously of a more enduring nature, such as those to do with the showbread and the offerings. These would have been implemented for as long as there was a physical temple in which the people could worship. Nevertheless, once Jesus Christ died, resurrected and established His spiritual temple—the church (Eph 2:19–22; Heb 8:2, 5)—even these ceremonial practices became unnecessary. This was because, by that time, the shadow had passed, to be replaced by the true substance (Heb 10:1).

CHAPTER 4

SABBATH OBSERVANCE IN CANAAN

4.1 The manna ceases to fall

Taking their cue from the six-day cycle of manna, the Israelites learnt to observe the Sabbath dutifully for the duration of their wilderness journey. The manna continued to fall until they entered the land of Canaan: “Now the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten the produce of the land; and the children of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate the food of the land of Canaan that year” (Josh 5:12).

The Bible indicates that during this new era there appeared to be relatively few regulations in force, and the people engaged in a number of activities that did not constitute the breaking of the Sabbath.

4.2 Activities permitted on the Sabbath

4.2.1 Warfare

One of the activities permitted by God upon the people’s arrival into Canaan was warfare. We see evidence of this in the siege of Jericho. In the Book of Joshua, we learn that God commanded them to march around the city for seven days: “You shall march around the city, all you men of war; you shall go all around the city once. This you shall do six days. And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark. But the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets” (Josh 6:3–4).

Other examples are in 1 Samuel 13:5–8 and 1 Kings 20:26–29.

4.2.2 Marriage feasts

A custom in the time of the patriarchs was the holding of week-long marriage feasts (see Gen 29:27–28). This was also the case in the era of the judges, for we learn that this was the duration of Samson's celebrations (Judg 14:10–17). A logical assumption is that the prohibitions against the kindling of fire and cooking on the Sabbath no longer applied by this time.

4.2.3 Travel

1 Samuel 21:1–10 records David and his band of men fleeing from Saul on a Sabbath day. His journey from Nob to Gath would have been about twenty-five miles. In another biblical account, we learn of a Shunammite woman who appears to have had a habit of travelling to Mount Carmel on the Sabbath (see 2 Kgs 4:22–23), some twenty miles away from her home. These examples reveal that there were no travel restrictions in those times. History indicates that they came about later, during the inter-testamental period, on account of the Jewish scribes and rabbis who interpreted and expanded on the written Law.

4.2.4 Fasting and mourning

1 Samuel 31:13 records the people of Jabesh fasting for seven days after the death of Saul and his sons. Also, 2 Samuel 12:18 records David fasting and praying for his sick son for the same length of time. These accounts indicate that these acts were not prohibited during the time of the early kingdom.

4.2.5 Priestly duties

It was the duty of the priests to minister before the Lord at all times. On the Sabbath, they sang hymns, offered sacrifices, set out the showbread and performed circumcision (Num 28:9–10; Lev 24:5–8; Jn 7:22–23).

During the time of Samuel and David, the Levites were appointed as gatekeepers of the tabernacle, caretakers of the holy things and assistants to the priests (1 Chr 23:30–32). Some worked to a seven-day rota:

All those chosen as gatekeepers were two hundred and twelve. They were recorded by the genealogy, in their villages. David and Samuel the seer had appointed them to their trusted office. So they and their children were in charge of the gates of the house of the Lord, the house of the tabernacle, by assignment. The gatekeepers were assigned to the four directions: the east, west, north, and south. And their brethren in their villages had to come with them from time to time for seven days. For in this trusted office were four chief gatekeepers; they were Levites. And they had charge over the chambers and treasuries of the house of God. And they lodged all around the house of God because they had the responsibility, and they were in charge of opening it every morning.

1 Chronicles 9:22–27

The Levites were also singers and musicians (1 Chr 15:16–24), later playing a key role at the dedication of the temple (2 Chr 5:1, 12). Among their repertoire was “A Song for the Sabbath Day” (Ps 92).

4.3 A holy convocation

God included the Sabbath among the holy convocations (Lev 23:1–3), and it was therefore a day for the Israelites to rest and assemble for worship. After God delivered the Law to Moses at Sinai, the tabernacle served as the focal point for weekly Sabbath observance, for it was here that the priests performed the required ceremonial rituals: namely the offering of sacrifices (Num 28:9–10) and the setting out of showbread (Lev 24:5–9). Later, in King Solomon’s time, the temple served as a far more magnificent and glorious venue for worship:

“Behold, I am building a temple for the name of the Lord my God, to dedicate it to Him, to burn before Him sweet incense, for the continual showbread, for the burnt offerings morning and evening, on the Sabbaths, on the New Moons, and on the set feasts of the Lord our God. This is an ordinance forever to Israel.”

2 Chronicles 2:4

Then Solomon offered burnt offerings to the Lord on the altar of the Lord which he had built before the vestibule, according to the daily rate, offering according to the commandment of Moses, for the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the three appointed yearly feasts—the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

2 Chronicles 8:12–13

During the period of the divided kingdom, Sabbath worship appears to have taken place in Israel’s holy sanctuaries. Evidence for this is found in 2 Kings which records the story of a Shunammite woman who, after her son died, made preparations to seek out the prophet Elisha on Mount Carmel. Her husband asked, “Why are you going to him today? It is neither the New Moon nor the Sabbath” (2 Kgs 4:23). His words indicate that Carmel was a centre of worship at that time—a place where people travelled to on Sabbath days and other holy feasts.

Later, during the period of the Babylonian exile, when worship in the temple was no longer possible, Sabbath observance took place in local synagogues¹. It was there that the people assembled for prayer and instruction in the Scriptures.

On the Sabbaths and holy days the loss of the Temple and the absence of the solemn sacrificial celebrations were keenly felt by the exiles...the synagogue...served as a substitute for the Temple. In the synagogue there was no altar, and prayer and the reading of the Torah took the place of the sacrifice. In addition the prayer house performed an important social function...it was a gathering point and a meeting place where the people could congregate whenever it was necessary to take counsel over important community affairs.

Menes, *The Jewish People*, vol 1, pp 78–152

1 Strong’s reference no. G4864. Greek *sunagoge*, meaning “a bringing together.”

When the Jews returned from exile, synagogues became firmly established as places of worship and learning. The Gospels show that Jesus Himself attended the synagogues at Nazareth (Mt 13:54; Lk 4:16) and Capernaum (Mk 1:21; Jn 6:59). Such were their importance that, by the first century AD, they could be found in those cities that the Jews migrated to, including Salamis in Cyprus (Acts 13:5), Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14), Iconium (Acts 14:1), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–2), Berea (Acts 17:10), and Corinth (Acts 18:1, 4). It was in the synagogues, and often on the Sabbath day, that the apostle Paul took the opportunity to preach to Jews and Greeks alike, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. As the Christian faith spread, believers also took their worship into private homes (see Rom 16:3, 5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phm 2) and, finally, into church buildings.

4.4 Conclusion

After the Israelites settled in Canaan, there appeared to be few Sabbath regulations. From the Bible, we note that the people were at liberty to engage in various activities that did not constitute the profaning of the day—activities such as warfare, travel, celebrating marriages, mourning and fasting.

Importantly, the Sabbath became established as a holy convocation, with worship centering initially on the tabernacle, and later, in the temple at Jerusalem and the holy sanctuaries in Israel. From the period of the Babylonian exile, local synagogues served as meeting places for the chosen people. In the time of the New Testament, and with the spread of Christianity, believers took their worship into private houses, and later into formal church buildings.

CHAPTER 5

THE MESSAGES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

5.1 The role of the prophets

It is an unfortunate fact of history that God-fearing kings in Judah and Israel were few and far between. The majority not only broke God's laws, but also led the people to do likewise. Therefore, God had to raise up prophets like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel to reprimand the two kingdoms, and to remind the people of their covenantal obligations, including their duty to keep the Sabbath day holy.

5.2 Prophetic messages for Israel

5.2.1 Amos

Amos ministered in the eighth century BC, during the reign of Jeroboam II. It was a time of peace and prosperity for the northern kingdom; yet, all was not well. The prophet was compelled to speak out against a troubling attitude in the people:

“When will the New Moon be past,
That we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
That we may trade our wheat?
Making the ephah small and the shekel large,
Falsifying the scales by deceit,
That we may buy the poor for silver,
And the needy for a pair of sandals—
Even sell the bad wheat?”

Amos 8:5–6

Outwardly, they worshipped God and observed the Sabbath and the New Moons, but it was mere lip service. The condition of their lives did not match their religiosity: they failed to act righteously, exploited the poor and were dishonest. To make matters worse, they adopted the idolatrous practices of the surrounding nations to create a syncretic brand of religion; the damning evidence was in the high places at Bethel and Gilgal (Amos 4:4–5; 5:4–5). This dire situation prompted God to issue a severe warning through Amos:

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
“Surely I will never forget any of their works.
Shall the land not tremble for this,
And everyone mourn who dwells in it?
All of it shall swell like the River,
Heave and subside
Like the River of Egypt.”

“And it shall come to pass in that day,” says the Lord God,
“That I will make the sun go down at noon,
And I will darken the earth in broad daylight;
I will turn your feasts into mourning,
And all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on every waist,
And baldness on every head;
I will make it like mourning for an only son,
And its end like a bitter day.”

Amos 8:7–10

The prophet made it clear that God would not overlook the sins of the people, but would surely judge them. He therefore spoke of a day when Israel would have cause to put on sackcloth and mourn.

5.2.2 Hosea

During the latter part of Jeroboam’s reign, another person emerged to speak out against the northern kingdom—the prophet Hosea. Continuing the message of Amos, he highlighted the social and moral sins of the people, focusing particularly on the matter of idolatry. He pointed out that, in God’s eyes, they were like an unfaithful wife: “Do

not rejoice, O Israel, with joy like other peoples, for you have played the harlot against your God” (Hos 9:1). Hosea added that God had no choice but to pronounce judgment:

“For she did not know
That I gave her grain, new wine, and oil,
And multiplied her silver and gold—
Which they prepared for Baal.”

“Therefore I will return and take away
My grain in its time
And My new wine in its season,
And will take back My wool and My linen,
Given to cover her nakedness.
Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers,
And no one shall deliver her from My hand.
I will also cause all her mirth to cease,
Her feast days,
Her New Moons,
Her Sabbaths—
All her appointed feasts.”

“And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees,
Of which she has said,
‘These are my wages that my lovers have given me.’
So I will make them a forest,
And the beasts of the field shall eat them.
I will punish her
For the days of the Baals to which she burned incense.
She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry,
And went after her lovers.
Then she forgot Me,” says the Lord.

Hosea 2:8–13

The prophecies of both Amos and Hosea were duly fulfilled in 722 BC. The Assyrians, led by Tiglath-Pileser III, invaded Israel, exiled the people and brought in foreign subjects to occupy the land. From that time, the northern kingdom ceased to exist.

5.3 Prophetic messages for Judah

5.3.1 Isaiah

Isaiah was a prophet of the southern kingdom and a contemporary of Amos. Addressing the inhabitants of Judah as the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah, he pointed out that God took no delight in their sacrifices, New Moons, sacred assemblies and Sabbaths.

Hear the word of the Lord,
You rulers of Sodom;
Give ear to the law of our God,
You people of Gomorrah:
“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?”
Says the Lord.

“I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
And the fat of fed cattle.
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
Or of lambs or goats.”

“When you come to appear before Me,
Who has required this from your hand,
To trample My courts?
Bring no more futile sacrifices;
Incense is an abomination to Me.
The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—
I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting.
Your New Moons and your appointed feasts
My soul hates;
They are a trouble to Me,
I am weary of bearing them.
When you spread out your hands,
I will hide My eyes from you;
Even though you make many prayers,
I will not hear.
Your hands are full of blood.”

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.
Cease to do evil,
Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the oppressor;
Defend the fatherless,
Plead for the widow.”

Isaiah 1:10–17

The reason for God’s acute displeasure was the people’s religious hypocrisy. Like the nation of Israel, they honoured Him outwardly, but their lives told a different story: they failed to implement justice and righteousness, and instead committed evil. They also profaned the Sabbath—not surprising, given their overall backsliding. The prophet therefore urged them to mend their ways, before God was forced to execute judgment:

Thus says the Lord:
“Keep justice, and do righteousness,
For My salvation is about to come,
And My righteousness to be revealed.
Blessed is the man who does this,
And the son of man who lays hold on it;
Who keeps from defiling the Sabbath,
And keeps his hand from doing any evil.”

Isaiah 56:1–2

After proclaiming messages of warning and judgment, Isaiah gave words of comfort to assure the people of restoration. One key message was God’s promise to bless those who honoured the Sabbath day:

“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,
From doing your pleasure on My holy day,
And call the Sabbath a delight,
The holy day of the Lord honorable,
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,
Nor finding your own pleasure,
Nor speaking your own words,
Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord;
And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,

And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.
The mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Isaiah 58:13–14

God would grant them three blessings. One blessing was that they would delight in Him—that is, they would find spiritual joy through their relationship with Him. The second blessing was that He would make them “ride on the high hills of the earth”—words reminiscent of the Song of Moses:

“He made him ride in the heights of the earth,
That he might eat the produce of the fields,
He made him to draw honey from the rock,
And oil from the flinty rock;
Curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock,
With fat of lambs;
And rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats,
With the choicest wheat;
And you drank wine, the blood of the grapes.”

Deuteronomy 32:13–14

They revealed a blessing of a physical nature: God would bestow His providential care upon the people, as well as the bounty of the earth. The third blessing was the “heritage of Jacob”, which, in one sense, signified the right to dwell securely in the promised land (Gen 28:3–4, 12–14; cf. Ex 6:8; Ps 135:12). However, in a more profound sense, it referred to the right to inherit a far better heavenly country (Heb 11:13–16). This latter meaning was reinforced in another of Isaiah’s messages:

For thus says the Lord:
“To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths,
And choose what pleases Me,
And hold fast My covenant,
Even to them I will give in My house
And within My walls a place and a name
Better than that of sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
That shall not be cut off.”

Isaiah 56:4–5

Herein was God's assurance that even the eunuchs would receive a lasting legacy for their part in honouring the Sabbath: He would grant them an everlasting name and a place in His house. In other words, God would record their names in the Book of Life—a privilege signifying their right to eternal life in His kingdom (Rev 20:11–15).

Finally, Isaiah prophesied of a new era when God's people would return to Him:

“For as the new heavens and the new earth
Which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the Lord,
“So shall your descendants and your name remain.
And it shall come to pass
That from one New Moon to another,
And from one Sabbath to another,
All flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the Lord.
Isaiah 66:22–23

In that time, salvation would extend to “all flesh”, and both Jews and Gentiles would gather before Him on the Sabbath.

5.3.2 Jeremiah

Jeremiah was a prophet of the southern kingdom, ministering from 627 to 580 BC. Despite the earlier reforms of King Josiah (2 Kgs 22, 23), the religious situation of Judah did not improve for the longer term. In fact, the nation was backsliding once more, for we learn of the following indictments against the people: they were ignorant of the way of the Lord (Jer 5:4); they continued in idolatrous practices (Jer 5:7; 7:9, 18); they carried out abominable pagan acts (Jer 7:31); their religion was false and their lives, immoral (Jer 7:1–11).

A sign of the nation's godlessness was their neglect of the Sabbath. It was for this reason that God instructed Jeremiah to stand by the gates of Jerusalem to proclaim this warning:

Thus says the Lord: “Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded you

fathers. But they did not obey nor incline their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear nor receive instruction.”

“And it shall be, if you diligently heed Me,” says the Lord, “to bring no burden through the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but hallow the Sabbath day, to do no work in it, then shall enter the gates of this city kings and princes sitting on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their princes, accompanied by the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall remain forever. And they shall come from the cities of Judah and from the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin and from the lowland, from the mountains and from the South, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and incense, bringing sacrifices of praise to the house of the Lord. But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.”

Jeremiah 17:21–27

The message was clear: unless they took care to sanctify the Sabbath day, God would destroy the city with a consuming fire.

Sadly, the people refused to listen, and Jeremiah had the misfortune to witness the literal fulfilment of God’s words. In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem and destroyed both the city and its temple with fire. Not long after, the prophet could only lament over the fact that the chosen people would now be destined to forget the Sabbath:

He has done violence to His tabernacle,
As if it were a garden;
He has destroyed His place of assembly;
The Lord has caused
The appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion.
In His burning indignation He has spurned the king and the priest.

Lamentations 2:6

5.3.3 Ezekiel

History indicates that Ezekiel was most likely exiled to Babylon in 597 BC, along with Jehoiachin, king of Judah. It was in that land, by the River Chebar, that God called him to be His prophet (Ezek 1:3)—to not only make known the sins of the nation and to pronounce judgment, but also to give hope of future restoration.

Ezekiel pointed out that the people were guilty of idolatry (Ezek 6; 8:15–18) and of failing to obey God’s statutes and judgments (Ezek 5:6). A symptom of their fallen state was the profaning of the Sabbath. In effect, they were repeating the mistakes of their rebellious forefathers (Ezek 20:1–32)—those who forgot that the Sabbath was a sign of their sanctification (Ezek 20:12).

In God’s eyes, the defilement of the Sabbath was a particularly grave sin. Hence, Ezekiel spoke of it alongside the nation’s other great evils: the neglect of one’s parents, the oppression of the weak, sexual immorality, child sacrifice and idolatry.

“Look, the princes of Israel: each one has used his power to shed blood in you. In you they have made light of father and mother; in your midst they have oppressed the stranger; in you they have mistreated the fatherless and the widow. You have despised My holy things and profaned My Sabbaths. In you are men who slander to cause bloodshed; in you are those who eat on the mountains; in your midst they commit lewdness. In you men uncover their fathers’ nakedness; in you they violate women who are set apart during their impurity. One commits abomination with his neighbor’s wife; another lewdly defiles his daughter-in-law; and another in you violates his sister, his father’s daughter.”

Ezekiel 22:6–11

The Lord also said to me: “Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then declare to them their abominations. For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands. They have committed adultery with their idols, and even sacrificed their sons whom they bore to Me, passing them through the fire, to devour them. Moreover they have done this to Me: They have defiled My sanctuary on the same day and profaned My Sabbaths. For after

they had slain their children for their idols, on the same day they came into My sanctuary to profane it; and indeed thus they have done in the midst of My house.”

Ezekiel 23:36–39

Ezekiel continued his message by saying that the religious leaders had also committed great sins:

“The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured people; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst. Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.”

Ezekiel 22:25–26

They broke God’s laws, acted corruptly, failed to distinguish the holy things and neglected the Sabbath.

In 586 BC, while the prophet was still speaking, God’s judgment came upon the southern kingdom: the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the city and its temple, and exiled the inhabitants. In the aftermath, God gave the prophet a vision of a new city and a new temple. He also set out His expectations concerning how the priests were to minister in the new era: “In controversy they shall stand as judges, and judge it according to My judgments. They shall keep My laws and My statutes in all My appointed meetings, and they shall hallow My Sabbaths” (Ezek 44:24). The priests would act as faithful judges and keep His Sabbaths holy once more.

In chapter 45, God outlined the duty of one called the “prince”:¹

“Then it shall be the prince’s part to give burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings, at the feasts, the New Moons, the Sabbaths, and at all the appointed seasons of the house of Israel. He

1 Strong’s reference no. H5387. Hebrew, *nasi*. The identity of the prince is unclear, but from the Book of Ezekiel, we understand that he will: eat bread before the Lord (44:3); be given a portion of land in the temple area (45:7–8; 48:21–22); make offerings at the feasts, New Moons and Sabbaths (45:17); make a sin offering for himself and the people during the Passover (45:22); enter the gateway of the inner court facing east (46:1); be in the midst of the people during the feasts (46:10); have the right to pass on his inheritance to his sons (46:16).

shall prepare the sin offering, the grain offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offerings to make atonement for the house of Israel.”

Ezekiel 45:17

Thus says the Lord God: “The gateway of the inner court that faces toward the east shall be shut the six working days; but on the Sabbath it shall be opened, and on the day of the New Moon it shall be opened. The prince shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gateway from the outside, and stand by the gatepost. The priests shall prepare his burnt offering and his peace offerings. He shall worship at the threshold of the gate. Then he shall go out, but the gate shall not be shut until evening. Likewise the people of the land shall worship at the entrance to this gateway before the Lord on the Sabbaths and the New Moons. The burnt offering that the prince offers to the Lord on the Sabbath day shall be six lambs without blemish, and a ram without blemish.”

Ezekiel 46:1–4

This spiritual leader would do God’s will, to make offerings on the Sabbath and guide the people to hallow this day.

5.4 Conclusion

Through their various messages, the prophets warned the people of Israel and Judah about their departure from God and their failure to sanctify the Sabbath. They highlighted a number of important truths, including the point that Sabbath-keeping was as important as a life of morality; that obedience would be rewarded with physical and spiritual blessings; and that judgment awaited those who persisted in profaning this day.

Unfortunately, the chosen people chose to ignore the warnings, thereby provoking God to anger and righteous judgment (Jer 17:22–27; Amos 8:5–10; cf. Hos 2:11–12). In the case of the northern kingdom, the outcome was its invasion and destruction by the Assyrians in 722 BC. In the case of the southern kingdom, the outcome was the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BC.

CHAPTER 6

THE POST-EXILIC PERIOD

6.1 The return of the Jews to Jerusalem

After the fall of the southern kingdom, the Jews found themselves exiled to foreign lands. Fortunately, the godly among them realized the need to repent and to ask God for a safe return to the holy land (Neh 1:4–11). God heard their prayers and, in 538 BC, moved the King of Persia to allow the first batch of exiles to return home. The Bible records:

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,

Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah.

Who is there among you of all His people? May his God be with him! Now let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem.

And whoever remains in any place where he sojourns, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:1–4

On account of the king's decree, three key figures—Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah—were able to lead the people back in groups to rebuild the temple and the city walls. Moreover, Ezra the priest, made it his priority to re-educate the people in God's Law:

So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the congregation, of men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.

Nehemiah 8:2–3

6.2 Profaning of the Sabbath

Despite hearing the word of God, the people failed to implement it consistently. Around 445 BC, when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he found them profaning the Sabbath on account of their business activities:

In those days I saw in Judah some people treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

Nehemiah 13:15–18

Nehemiah rebuked the people and reminded them that God had brought disasters upon their forefathers for the same sin. He then warned them that if they did not mend their ways, God's wrath would come upon them also.

6.3 Nehemiah reinstates Sabbath observance

Nehemiah's next step was to initiate a religious reform. Firstly, he led the people to make a solemn oath before God: "If the peoples of the land bring wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and that we would forego the seventh year's produce and the exaction of every debt" (Neh 10:31).

He then proceeded to implement a number of practical measures:

So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day. Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. So I warned them, and said to them, "Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!" From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day.

Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!

Nehemiah 13:19–22

Nehemiah's strategy was to physically prevent the people from breaking the Sabbath: he shut the city gates at sunset and arranged for them to be guarded, and warned off traders who attempted to come into the city. In this way, he ensured that the Jews kept the Sabbath rest.

6.4 Stricter observance after Nehemiah

Not long after Nehemiah, the Jewish scribes began developing increasingly legalistic rules for Sabbath-keeping. While they were well-meaning, wanting to prevent the people from transgressing the Fourth Commandment ever again, they ended up creating a complicated and burdensome culture.

Aside from the Jews, there were other groups who kept the Sabbath zealously. They included the Samaritans and the Essene community at Qumran who were both, in many ways, even stricter observers of the Sabbath. The Samaritans, for example, interpreted Exodus 16:29 literally, such that they avoided leaving their homes at all on the seventh day. In addition, both groups refrained from lighting any fires on the Sabbath, and so would pass Friday night in total darkness.¹

6.5 Conclusion

After the Jews returned to Jerusalem, they had much to learn in terms of keeping God's laws. Indeed, when Nehemiah returned to the city, he found that the people were breaking the Sabbath commandment. The situation prompted him to take action: he led them to make a solemn oath before God and established stringent measures to promote the Sabbath rest. This period marked a turning point for the nation; thereafter, the religious leaders developed increasingly strict measures to prevent the Jews from transgressing God's laws.

¹ Johnston, Robert M., "The Rabbinic Sabbath", *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982).

CHAPTER 7

THE INTER-TESTAMENTAL PERIOD

7.1 Introduction

The inter-testamental period was a time of assiduous activity for the Jewish teachers, for it was then that they developed a plethora of oral traditions relating to the Mosaic Law. In this chapter, we shall look at some of the traditions, their content, purpose, and their impact on the lives of the Jewish people. Having this overview enables us to put into context those parts of the Gospels that detail Jesus' manner of Sabbath-keeping, His teachings and His encounters with the Jewish leaders.

7.2 The different oral traditions

7.2.1 Public readings of the Mosaic Law

Beginning in the fifth century BC, when the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem, the religious leaders strived to promote a renewed understanding of the Scriptures. Ezra, the priest and scribe, began the process by instituting public readings of the Mosaic Law, with help from the Levites (Neh 8:1–8). This period marked the beginning of the Sopherim¹ movement.

¹ The scribes.

7.2.2 Targumim

A major issue facing the returnees was a language barrier. After seventy years in exile, the new generation had difficulties understanding the Hebrew Scriptures and needed them to be interpreted into Aramaic (see Neh 8:3, 8). It was against this background that the scribes began the oral transmission of targumim, which were the interpretations, transliterations and paraphrases of Scripture.² In time, these were put into writing, resulting in two official Aramaic versions of the Hebrew Scriptures: *Targum Onkelos* on the Torah (the Law) and *Targum Jonathan ben Uzziel* on the Nevi'im (the Prophets).

7.2.3 Midrash and Halakah

The scribes also developed a method of scriptural interpretation called midrash³ which provided the people with a verse by verse commentary on the Scriptures. The method used to interpret the Mosaic Law specifically was called midrash halakah,⁴ while the method used to interpret the moral teachings and theological concepts was midrash aggadah.⁵ These were the scribes' attempts at making the content of the Scriptures more comprehensible and relevant to the new generation of Jews. Following on was the development of a body of oral laws and traditions called the Halakah that were based on the literal or implied meanings of the Mosaic Law. Over time, they became as important and as binding as the written Law.

The intention of the religious leaders was to ensure the people's absolute understanding and compliance with the Mosaic Law. However, the outcome was an ever-expanding body of judgments, opinions and rules. To complicate matters, there was often more than one school of thought.

2 "Talmud", *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, eds. Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos and John Rea (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983).

3 The term *Midrash* ("exposition" or "investigation"; plural, *Midrashim*) is used in two senses. On the one hand, it refers to a mode of biblical interpretation prominent in the Talmudic literature; on the other, it refers to a separate body of commentaries on Scripture using this interpretative mode. Source: "Talmud and Midrash", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved September 01, 2009, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/581644/Talmud>>

4 Hebrew, *halak*, meaning "to walk".

5 Hebrew, *agada*, meaning "narration".

7.2.4 The mishna method of interpretation

In the first century AD, another group of teachers, the Zugot, developed a method of teaching and study that no longer involved direct reference to the Scriptures. This method was called mishna. Due to their volume, it was now easier to study and teach the oral laws by topic, rather than to follow the order of the Scriptures. Committing the laws to memory was achieved through a process of continuous repetition, hence the name *mishna*, which is derived from the word *shana*, meaning “to repeat”.

7.2.5 Haggadah

From the fifth century BC, the scribes also began developing parables, homilies, stories, prayers and letter symbolism whose purpose was to amplify the Scriptures. These were known as the Haggadah.⁶ Some of the material was later incorporated into the Talmud, the Jewish canon.

7.3 The redaction of the Jewish oral laws

7.3.1 The Mishna, Gemara and Talmud

In AD 200, Judah haNasi collated and wrote down many of the oral laws from both midrashic and mishnaic sources. The result was the Mishna.⁷ After that, the Amoraim spent another 300 years analyzing, discussing and commenting on the text. Their written commentary became the Gemara, which, together with the Mishna, formed the Talmud (“Oral Law”). Two versions of the latter were produced: the Palestinian (Jerusalem) Talmud, written in Western Aramaic in AD 425, and the Babylonian Talmud, written in Eastern Aramaic in AD 500.

⁶ Also spelt *Aggadah*.

⁷ Hebrew, meaning “repeated study”. Also transliterated as *Mishnah*. Plural, *Mishnayot*.

7.3.2 Structure and content of the Mishna

Within the Mishna, there are six orders (*sedarim*) containing a total of sixty-three books or “tractates” (*massekhtot*), which are further divided into chapters (*peraqim*). The six orders are:

- *Zera'im* (“Seeds”)—laws pertaining to agriculture.
- *Mo'ed* (Festival)—laws on ceremonies and rituals, and prohibitions relating to the Sabbath, festivals and fast days.
- *Nashim* (“Women”)—laws on betrothal, marriage and divorce.
- *Neziqin* (“Damages”)—civil and criminal laws.
- *Qodashim* (“Sacred Things”)—laws on temple sacrifice, offerings and donations.
- *Tohorot* (“Purifications”)—laws relating to the ritual purity of vessels, dwellings, foods and people.

7.3.3 Sabbath regulations in the Mishna

Most of the laws concerning the Sabbath come under the order of Mo'ed. Two entire tractates are devoted to them: Shabbat (“Sabbath”) and Erubin (“Mixtures”).

(a) Thirty-nine types of prohibited work

The main Sabbath regulations are found in Shabbat, which has twenty-four chapters. Shabbat 7:2 details thirty-nine types of prohibited work:

He who sews, ploughs, reaps, binds sheaves, threshes, winnows,
selects [fit from unfit produce or crops], grinds, sifts, kneads, bakes;
he who shears wool, washes it, beats it, dyes it;
spins, weaves,
makes two loops, weaves two threads, separates two threads;
ties, unties,
sews two stitches, tears in order to sew two stitches;
he who traps a deer, slaughters it, flays it, slats it, cures its hide,
scrapes it, and cuts it up;

he who writes two letters, erases two letters in order to write two letters;
he who builds, tears down;
he who puts out a fire, kindles a fire;
he who hits with a hammer; he who transports an object from one domain to another—
lo, these are the forty generative acts of labor less one.

Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation*, 1988

The list in its most basic form originated from the rabbis' exegetical analysis of Exodus 35—a chapter that records God's commandment to rest (Ex 35:2), the prohibition against the kindling of fire (Ex 35:3) and the instructions for the building of the tabernacle (Ex 35:4–35). The opinion of the rabbis was that the actions required to build the tabernacle constituted “work” of the sort that must be prohibited on the Sabbath.

(b) Other Sabbath laws

In addition to the thirty-nine prohibited types of work, the rabbis also developed laws about things to be avoided on the Sabbath, even though work is not directly involved. They included a prohibition relating to the consumption of eggs laid on this day (Betzah 1:1).

The rabbis also prohibited some activities they felt had the potential to detract from the Sabbath rest and the sanctity of the day. They included the climbing of trees, riding animals, swimming, clapping, slapping the thighs and stamping the feet. Other prohibitions related to the administration of justice, betrothal, levirate marriage and burials (Betzah 5:2; Shabbat 23:4, 5).

Other Sabbath regulations dealt with cooking (Betzah 2:1) and the seventh year of rest (Tractate Shebit; cf. Ex 23:10–11; Lev 25:1–7; Deut 15:1).

(c) Laws relating to the healing and saving of life

In the Mishna, there is a prohibition against healing on the Sabbath. This originated from a concern on the part of the rabbis that people would break the law relating to work in the course of preparing medicines, particularly when grinding herbs and other therapeutic substances. The outcome was that they forbade the treatment of any non-life threatening or chronic condition. The Mishna states, for example, that people are not permitted to:

- eat Greek hyssop, or use root oil as a remedy (Shabbat 14:3)
- gargle with vinegar for toothache, or treat a pain in the pelvic region with wine or vinegar (Shabbat 14:4)
- take an emetic, or pour cold water onto a dislocated hand or foot (Shabbat 22:6)

One of the few matters that overrides the Sabbath laws is the danger to life. If there is any possibility that a life is in danger, a person can, and is obliged to, act. The tractate Yoma contains the following teaching from Rabbi Mattiah ben Harash: “He who has a pain in his throat—they drop medicine into his mouth on the Sabbath because it is a matter of doubt as to danger to life. And any matter of doubt as to danger to life overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath” (Yoma 8:6). The same tractate states that if a building falls down and it is uncertain whether someone is alive or not, others can shift the debris to look for him. If he is found alive, he should be freed; if he is dead, his body should be left where it is until after the Sabbath (Yoma 8:7).

(d) Laws on travelling and carrying

Within the Mishna there are many laws to do with the carrying of items on the Sabbath: from a private to a public domain and vice versa, and within a public domain. These derive from Jeremiah 17:21: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem, nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers.’”

The rabbinical laws address matters such as the transfer of objects between domains (Shabbat 1:1; 11), the amount that may be carried (Shabbat 7:3–4; 8:1), and the manner in which they can be carried (Shabbat 10:2–4). Underpinning a number of these laws is the issue of motivation, as indicated by the descriptions of the quantities that are prohibited: “Honey enough to put on a sore; oil enough to anoint a small limb...” (Shabbat 8:1).

In the tractate *Erubin* (“Mixtures”), ten chapters concern travel and the carrying of items on the Sabbath. They also detail the circumstances under which the laws can be alleviated. It is here that we find a travel restriction of 2000 cubits (*Erubin* 4:3, 5, 7, 8)—a law that was evidently familiar to the people of the New Testament (see *Acts* 1:12). The law itself was derived from *Exodus* 16:29, while the specific figure of 2000 cubits was linked to *Numbers* 35:5.

(e) Laws on animal husbandry

The Mishna goes into some detail about the care and treatment of animals on the Sabbath day. In it, we find laws relating to the type of equipment that can be used (*Shabbat* 5); moving and handling (*Shabbat* 18:2); hygiene (*Shabbat* 20:4); feeding (*Shabbat* 24:2–4); assistance during birthing (*Shabbat* 18:3). In general, the laws allow people a fair amount of leeway to tend to the needs of their livestock.

The Talmud later articulated a principle which was familiar in the time of Jesus, which was that a person could go to the aid of an animal on the Sabbath if it was in danger (see *Lk* 14:5, cf. Talmud Tractate *Shabbat* 128b).

7.4 Jewish teachers responsible for the oral traditions

The teachers who taught and elaborated on the body of oral traditions included the following:

- The Sopherim (Scribes) who were active from 450–180 BC.
- The Hasidim (“Pious Ones”) in the period of the Maccabees.
- The Zugot (“Pairs”): five pairs of teachers who developed the

mishna method of teaching from about 200 BC–AD 30.

- The Tannaim (“One who studies or teaches”), whose work in the first and second centuries AD entailed teaching by the mishna method and consolidating the midrashic and mishnaic materials. The Tannaim included Judah haNasi who compiled the Mishna in AD 200.
- The Amoraim (“Interpreters”) who analyzed and commented on the Mishna in AD 200–500, giving rise to the development of a supporting commentary, the Gemara,⁸ which, together with the Mishna, formed the Talmud.
- The Savoraim (“Explainers”), whose work from AD 500–540 included the teaching and editing of the Talmud. The Geonim, heads of the Jewish academies in Sura and Pumbedita, Babylon from the sixth to the eleventh centuries AD. They produced a body of question and answer literature known as the Responsa.

7.5 Writings of the period

Evidence of the legalistic culture in the inter-testamental period can be found in the religious writings of that time.

7.5.1 The Book of Jubilees

The Book of Jubilees⁹ (part of the Pseudepigrapha¹⁰), written around 100 BC, reveals a very strict attitude to Sabbath-keeping. In chapter 50, the writer begins by citing the Fourth Commandment (Ex 20:9–10):

Six days shalt thou labour, but on the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it ye shall do no manner of work, ye and your

⁸ Aramaic, *gemara*, meaning “completion”.

⁹ Also known as “Little Genesis” because it is considered to be a reproduction of the canonical Genesis. It was probably written before or around 100 BC.

¹⁰ A work falsely attributed to a historical biblical figure.

sons, and your men-servants and your maid-servants, and all your cattle and the sojourner also who is with you.

Book of Jubilees 50:7

He then proceeds to detail a number of prohibitions that are punishable by death which are not found in the Mosaic Law:

And the man that does any work on it shall die: whoever desecrates that day, whoever lies with (his) wife, or whoever says he will do something on it, that he will set out on a journey thereon in regard to any buying or selling: and whoever draws water thereon which he had not prepared for himself on the sixth day, and whoever takes up any burden to carry it out of his tent or out of his house shall die.

Book of Jubilees 50:8

And every man who does any work thereon, or goes a journey, or tills (his) farm, whether in his house or any other place, and whoever lights a fire, or rides on any beast, or travels by ship on the sea, and whoever strikes or kills anything, or slaughters a beast or a bird, or whoever catches an animal or a bird or a fish, or whoever fasts or makes war on the Sabbaths: The man who does any of these things on the Sabbath shall die, so that the children of Israel shall observe the Sabbaths according to the commandments regarding the Sabbaths of the land, as it is written in the tablets, which He gave into my hands that I should write out for thee the laws of the seasons, and the seasons according to the division of their days.

Book of Jubilees 50:12–13

This is the first set of oral laws to appear in written form. Interestingly, they are even more stringent than those in the Talmud.¹¹ The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* notes:

In the compiling of the Halakoth [i.e. oral laws] the author of Jubilees was a forerunner of the Pharisees; the strictness of the regulations and the failure to mention exceptions also suggest, however, that the author was a spiritual ancestor of the conservative Jewish group that withdrew to Qumran. Fragments of Jubilees have been found at Qumran, and the Damascus Document apparently quotes Jubilees (CD 16:2–4). The Damsacus Document also calls for strict

¹¹ The Talmud contains the Mishna (oral law) and the Gemara (the commentary to the Mishna). There are two versions: the Jerusalem version which was completed in AD 425, and the Babylonian version which was completed in AD 500.

observance of the Sabbath. Like Jubilees, it prohibits food preparation (CD 10:22) and the carrying of objects into or out of one's house (11:7–9). It also provides several regulations not found in Jubilees and allows for the saving of human life in emergencies (11:16f). The penalty for profaning the Sabbath is not prescribed; rather, a seven-year period of probation is required (12:4–6).

“Sabbath”, *ISBE*, vol 4, p 250

7.5.2 1 and 2 Maccabees

In the fourth century BC, the Jews began experiencing great political upheaval once more. In 332 BC, Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) gained control of Judea, and when he died in 323 BC, Ptolemaic and Seleucid forces fought over the land. In time, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Greek king of the Seleucid empire, came into power.

When news of a Jewish uprising reached Antiochus in 168 BC, he responded by sacking Jerusalem and killing a large number of Jews, and then proceeded to stamp out the Jewish faith by outlawing Sabbath observance and circumcision, making pagan sacrifices mandatory, bringing in temple prostitution, and ordering copies of the Torah to be burnt. Some Jews complied with the king's tyrannical demands; others resisted to the point of death.

Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, and that each should give up his customs. All the Gentiles accepted the command of the king. Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath.

And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and feasts, to defile the sanctuary and the priests, to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals, and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, so that they should forget the law and change all the ordinances.

“And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die.” In such words he wrote to his whole kingdom. And he appointed

inspectors over all the people and commanded the cities of Judah to offer sacrifice, city by city. Many of the people, every one who forsook the law, joined them, and they did evil in the land; they drove Israel into hiding in every place of refuge they had.

1 Maccabees 1:42–53

Now on the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering... The books of the law which they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Where the book of the covenant was found in the possession of any one, or if any one adhered to the law, the decree of the king condemned him to death. They kept using violence against Israel, against those found month after month in the cities. And on the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the altar which was upon the altar of burnt offering.

1 Maccabees 1:54, 56–59

It was at this point that a priestly family, the Maccabees, came forward to lead a Jewish revolt. It was led by Mattathias and his five sons—the most famous being Judas Maccabees. 1 and 2 Maccabees, two books of the Apocrypha, record their fight for independence.

1 Maccabees, which details the start of the struggle in 168 BC, describes the extreme piety of some Jews. We learn that a thousand of their number were willing to be killed by enemy forces rather than take up arms on the Sabbath.

And Mattathias cried throughout the city with a loud voice, saying, Whosoever is zealous of the law, and maintaineth the covenant, let him follow me. So he and his sons fled into the mountains, and left all that ever they had in the city. Then many that sought after justice and judgment went down into the wilderness, to dwell there: Both they, and their children, and their wives; and their cattle; because afflictions increased sore upon them. Now when it was told the king's servants, and the host that was at Jerusalem, in the city of David, that certain men, who had broken the king's commandment, were gone down into the secret places in the wilderness, they pursued after them a great number, and having overtaken them, they camped against them, and made war against them on the sabbath day. And they said unto them, Let that which ye have done hitherto suffice; come forth, and do according to the commandment of the king, and ye shall live. But they said, We will

not come forth, neither will we do the king's commandment, to profane the sabbath day. So then they gave them the battle with all speed. Howbeit they answered them not, neither cast they a stone at them, nor stopped the places where they lay hid; But said, Let us die all in our innocency: heaven and earth will testify for us, that ye put us to death wrongfully. So they rose up against them in battle on the sabbath, and they slew them, with their wives and children and their cattle, to the number of a thousand people.

1 Maccabees 2:27-38

However, Mattathias soon realized that the continuation of such a stance would lead to annihilation and decreed self-defence to be lawful:

Now when Mattathias and his friends understood hereof, they mourned for them right sore. And one of them said to another, If we all do as our brethren have done, and fight not for our lives and laws against the heathen, they will now quickly root us out of the earth. At that time therefore they decreed, saying, Whosoever shall come to make battle with us on the sabbath day, we will fight against him; neither will we die all, as our brethren that were murdered in the secret places.

1 Maccabees 2:39-41

Nevertheless, 2 Maccabees indicates that fighting only took place on the Sabbath when it was deemed absolutely necessary. For example, when the Maccabean forces won a particular battle on the Day of Preparation (i.e. Friday), they did not pursue their enemies the next day:

And by the help of the Almighty they slew above nine thousand of their enemies, and wounded and maimed the most part of Nicanor's host, and so put all to flight; And took their money that came to buy them, and pursued them far: but lacking time they returned: For it was the day before the sabbath, and therefore they would no longer pursue them. So when they had gathered their armour together, and spoiled their enemies, they occupied themselves about the sabbath, yielding exceeding praise and thanks to the Lord, who had preserved them unto that day, which was the beginning of mercy

distilling upon them. And after the sabbath, when they had given part of the spoils to the maimed, and the widows, and orphans, the residue they divided among themselves and their servants.

2 Maccabees 8:24–28

After a long series of wars, the Maccabees finally regained control of Jerusalem. Their priority was to ritually cleanse the temple and to rededicate it—matters which duly took place in 164 BC. At last, the king rescinded the edict prohibiting Judaism, and the Jews were once again free to observe the Sabbath.

The Maccabees, however, were far from content with these minor victories and continued their fight for freedom. A long and protracted war ensued that resulted in definitive victory and the establishment of the independent Hasmonian kingdom. The latter lasted until 63 BC, at which point the Romans took control of Judea. The freedom of the Jews to practise their faith thereafter was dependent upon the goodwill of their rulers.

7.6 Conclusion

After the Jews returned from exile, there was a far greater challenge facing the religious leaders than just the physical rebuilding of the temple and city walls; they had to rebuild the faith of the nation. To this end, they developed various techniques to explain and teach the Scriptures. They also developed a body of oral laws whose purpose was to promote absolute compliance with the written Law. This led to an increasingly strict and legalistic stance towards Sabbath-keeping which is evident in the literature of the time.

CHAPTER 8

HOW JESUS OBSERVED THE SABBATH

8.1 Introduction

The early years of the first century AD, when Jesus came to the world to undertake His earthly ministry, was a time of relative religious freedom. Despite being subject to Roman rule, the Jews were able to practise their faith with little hindrance, and the religious leaders could develop and promote the oral traditions that were so important to them. The latter came to impact significantly on the Jewish way of life, but not necessarily in a positive manner. From the Gospels, we learn of the exacting nature of those laws, and of how the Jewish leaders used them to find fault with Jesus when He performed miracles of healing on the Sabbath. The outcome was that Jesus had to challenge their legalistic stance and make known the true spirit of the day.

8.2 Sabbaths in Nazareth

Bible passage: Luke 4:16–30

This is the first recorded account of Jesus observing the Sabbath. Luke writes that He went to Nazareth, His childhood home, to attend the synagogue “as His custom was” (Lk 4:16). On that day, Jesus stood up to read from the Book of Isaiah.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To preach deliverance to the captives

And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,
To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isaiah 61:1–2

After He finished, He closed the book, sat down and told the congregation, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21).

What exactly had Jesus fulfilled? The passage spoke of the “acceptable year of the Lord”—the Year of Jubilee, the fiftieth year in the Jewish calendar—a time when the poor were traditionally released from their debts and servitude. It prefigured the salvation work of the Messiah: the fact that He would come to the world to set mankind free. He would preach the message of salvation to the lowly, comfort the needy, deliver those bound by sin, restore the sight of the blind and liberate the oppressed. It was particularly significant that Jesus chose to announce the nature of His ministry on a Sabbath day, and it set the context for His compassionate and miraculous deeds on Sabbaths thereafter.

It was unfortunate that the people did not respond suitably to Jesus’ momentous declaration. While they marvelled at His eloquence, they could not conceal their underlying scepticism: was this man before them not the son of Joseph, the carpenter? (Lk 4:22). What they wanted was evidence of His prophetic credentials (Lk 4:23).

Jesus’ response was to point out that no prophet had ever been accepted by his own countrymen, and cited the examples of Elijah who was sent by God to a Sidonian widow, and Elisha who healed Namaan, a Syrian commander (Lk 4:22–27). Upon hearing these words, the Jews became infuriated and promptly marched Him out of the city, intending to throw Him off the cliff (Lk 4:28–29). Fortunately, Jesus managed to free Himself and went on His way.

The situation did not improve when Jesus later returned to Nazareth to teach once again in the synagogue (Mt 13:54–58; Mk 6:1–6). The people stubbornly refused to accept Him and were “offended at Him” (Mt 13:57; Mk 6:3). The writer Mark notes, “Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He marvelled because of their unbelief...” (Mk 6:5–6).

In summary, Jesus attempted to share the grace of God with the people of His own hometown on two separate Sabbaths. Unfortunately, their hardness of heart prevented them from receiving that grace, and therefore the wonderful blessings articulated by Isaiah bypassed them.

8.3 Sabbaths in Galilee

Bible passages: Mark 1:21–34; Lk 4:31–41

Here, it is recorded that Jesus went to Capernaum to teach in the synagogue. While there, He cast out an unclean spirit (Mk 1:23–28). Later, He went to the house of Simon and Andrew where He healed Peter’s mother-in-law who was ill with a fever (Mk 1:29–31). In the evening, many people who were sick and demon-possessed were brought to the door, and He extended His hand of mercy upon these also (Mk 1:32–34).

Jesus continued preaching in the synagogues in Galilee and casting out evil spirits (Mk 1:39). By performing many of these gracious acts on the Sabbath, He showed that it was a day of blessing and release.

8.4 Healing at the Pool of Bethesda

Bible passage: John 5:2–18

The event recorded in this passage occurs in Jerusalem during a Jewish feast. On the Sabbath, Jesus came across a man who had been infirm for thirty-eight years. He was lying beside the Pool of Bethesda, near the Sheep Gate. Here, a multitude of sick people—the blind, the lame and the paralyzed—were waiting for a miracle known as “the moving of the water”. They believed that an angel came down at a certain time to stir the water, and whoever was able to enter the pool first when it happened would be healed. Sadly, for the infirm man, no one would help him secure that coveted place.

Fortunately, Jesus took pity on him and said, “Rise, take your bed and walk” (Jn 5:8). Immediately, the man got up and was able to take up his bed and walk. Later, in the temple, Jesus cautioned him to “sin no more”

(Jn 5:14).

However, instead of rejoicing with the man, the Jews ungraciously pointed out, “It is not lawful for you to carry your bed” (Jn 5:10). They then proceeded to confront Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus’ reaction was to declare an important truth: “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.” In other words, both He and the Father were “working” continuously for the benefit of man—by giving and sustaining life, and guiding people to salvation. Their gracious deeds did not stop on the Sabbath day.

By performing this miracle, Jesus was found guilty on a number of counts: firstly, He broke the Jewish law by healing on the Sabbath and by instructing the man to carry a burden. Secondly, He dared to call God His Father, thereby making Himself equal to God. These matters provoked the fury of the Jews, and from that time onwards, they plotted diligently to kill Him.

8.5 The disciples pluck grain

Bible passages: Matthew 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5

While passing through some grain fields, Jesus’ disciples plucked at the heads of grain and rubbed off the chaff so that they could eat. The sharp-eyed Pharisees saw what they were doing and complained to Jesus, saying, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” (Mt 12:2; Mk 2:24; Lk 6:2). According to the Jewish laws, the actions of the disciples most likely broke two work prohibitions: reaping and threshing.

Jesus responded with two important points. Firstly, He reminded the Pharisees that God desired mercy above sacrifice (Mt 12:7; cf. Hos 6:6). He illustrated this point by telling the story of David and his men who were, under desperate circumstances, permitted to eat the showbread reserved for the priests (1 Sam 21:1–6). Secondly, Jesus stated that the priests were permitted to perform their sacred duties in the temple on the Sabbath; and now, someone far greater than the temple was in their midst—the “Son of Man [who] is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mt 12:8). Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah—God manifested in the flesh (1 Tim 3:16; Jn 1:1–3)—the one with ultimate

authority over the Sabbath. It was His teachings and personal example they should be following.

8.6 The healing of a man with a withered hand

Bible passages: Matthew 12:9–13; Mark 3:1–5; Luke 6:6–10

After arriving in Galilee, Jesus entered a synagogue where he saw a man whose hand was withered. The Pharisees, who were observing Jesus closely, asked, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus replied, “What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Mt 12:11–12).

On hearing Jesus’ words, the Pharisees kept quiet (Mk 3:4); they could offer no counter argument. Nevertheless, Jesus was grieved by their hardness of heart (Mk 3:5). They did not realize that their laws were rigid, harsh and flawed. Furthermore, they neglected a fundamental principle of the Sabbath, which was to do good to others.

Jesus told the disabled man to stretch out his hand; and as he did so, was healed. Sadly, the Pharisees viewed this miraculous deed as an affront to their authority and plotted to kill Jesus (Mt 12:14). Their intentions highlighted the added poignancy of His words: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” (Mk 3:4).

8.7 The healing of a blind man

Bible passage: John 9:1–14

One Sabbath, Jesus and His disciples came upon a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples were curious to know whose sin had brought about his condition: the man’s or his parents’. Jesus told them, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him” (Jn 9:3).

Jesus then spat on the earth to make some clay with which to

anoint the man's eyes, and told him to wash in the pool of Siloam. On his return, the man discovered he could see. His neighbours and those who knew him were astonished and brought him to the Pharisees. The latter proceeded to interrogate both him and his parents.

Once again, the Pharisees criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Some said, "This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath" (Jn 9:16).

Others were not so sure, however, and commented, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" (Jn 9:16).

The Pharisees pressured the man to denounce Jesus as a sinner, but he refused. As a result, they cast him out of the synagogue (Jn 9:34). Fortunately, his ordeal was ameliorated when Jesus went to find him and to reveal His identity as the Son of God. At that point, the man who once was blind declared, "Lord, I believe!" and bowed down in worship (Jn 9:38).

8.8 The healing of a crippled woman

Bible passage: Luke 13:10–17

Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, when He saw a crippled woman whose spine had been deformed for eighteen years. Jesus said to her, "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity" (Lk 13:12) and laid His hands on her, making her straight.

It was unfortunate that the ruler of the synagogue reacted with annoyance. Addressing the crowd, he declared, "There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore, come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day" (Lk 13:14).

The response of Jesus was swift and strong: "Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or his donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound—think of it—for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?" (Lk 13:15–16).

Again, Jesus had to highlight a fundamental problem with the oral traditions: they allowed a person to care for an animal, but did not permit the healing of a child of God. He was astonished at the extent of

the religious leaders' heartless legalism.

In the end, His opponents could only recoil in shame; the people, on the other hand, rejoiced at having witnessed the power of God. This miracle led to liberation in more ways than one.

8.9 The healing of a man with dropsy

Bible passage: Luke 14:1–6

Luke 14 records Jesus dining at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees. It was probably more than mere coincidence that there was a man with dropsy (oedema) there. The lawyers and Pharisees observed Jesus closely. Knowing their thoughts, Jesus posed the question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (Lk 14:3).

The religious leaders kept silent, and so Jesus healed the man and sent him on his way. He then turned to the dinner guests and said, "Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?" (Lk 14:5).

With these words, Jesus once again highlighted the mismatch of priorities in the oral traditions. Again, no one was able to counter His argument (Lk 14:6).

8.10 Conclusion

From the Gospels, we see that it was Jesus' custom to observe the Sabbath: He attended the synagogues, read the Scriptures, taught the word of God, healed the sick and cast out demons. As He did so, He challenged the Jewish teachers over the unhelpful nature of their oral laws. Jesus wanted them to understand that the Sabbath was a day of blessing and release, not one of burden. Hence, He consistently chose to manifest God's grace on this day.

CHAPTER 9

HOW THE APOSTLES AND EARLY CHRISTIANS OBSERVED THE SABBATH

9.1 Introduction

The New Testament Scriptures indicate that, after Jesus' ascension, the apostles continued observing the Sabbath day. They worshipped in synagogues and other meeting places, taking the opportunity to preach God's word to Jews and Gentiles alike. The new converts also followed this practice. In short, Sabbath-keeping was the norm for the early church.

9.2 Two Sabbaths in Pisidian Antioch

Bible passage: Acts 13:14–51

But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on."

As part of his first missionary journey (circa AD 46–48), Paul travelled with Barnabas to Antioch in Pisidia (present-day Turkey). On arrival, they entered a synagogue and sat down to listen to the reading of the Law and the Prophets. Afterwards, the rulers of the synagogue invited them to speak. Taking this opportunity, Paul stood up to preach Jesus Christ. The Book of Acts records the reaction of some of the people: "And when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath" (Acts

13:42). In addition, many of the Jews and proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:43).

On the next Sabbath, a great crowd gathered: “And the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 13:44–45).

The response of Paul and Barnabas was to declare that, even though the Jews had the privilege of hearing the gospel first, it would now be preached to the Gentiles. On hearing these words, the Gentiles were filled with joy, and many believed. In contrast, the Jews became angry and stirred up the eminent people of the city, with the outcome that Paul and Barnabas were expelled from the region. The latter “shook off the dust from their feet against them” and moved on to Iconium (Acts 13:51). Despite the hostile send-off, Paul and Barnabas later made a courageous return journey for the sake of the new converts (Acts 14:21–23).

From this episode, we note that Paul and Barnabas observed the Sabbath. Moreover, it was also the practice of the Gentile believers. We see no evidence, either from the Book of Acts or from Paul’s letter to the Galatians (which he wrote to the churches in this region), that the new converts replaced the Sabbath with Sunday worship.

9.3 A Sabbath in Philippi

Bible passage: Acts 16:12–15

In this passage, we see Paul and Silas embarking upon a second missionary journey, during the course of which they came to Philippi in Macedonia: “And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there” (Acts 16:13). It was here that the word of God touched the heart of Lydia, a seller of purple cloth from Thyatira. The outcome was that both she and her household received water baptism.

From this event, we learn that the Sabbath was being kept by faithful worshippers in a Gentile land, despite the absence of a

synagogue. Pertinently, Paul and Silas—two key workers of the church—upheld the custom, and we see no evidence that they instituted a new practice of Sunday observance.

9.4 Sabbaths in Thessalonica

Bible passage: Acts 17:1–4

This passage records Paul and Silas arriving in Thessalonica: “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:1–2).

Paul attended the synagogue for three Sabbaths in Thessalonica, taking the opportunity to preach the gospel. The result was that a number of people believed, including some devout Greeks and a few leading women.

9.5 Sabbaths in Corinth

Bible passage: Acts 18:1–4

In Corinth, Paul became acquainted with two Jews, Aquila and Priscilla, who were tentmakers. He stayed with them and spent every Sabbath in the synagogue, reasoning with both Jews and Greeks.

9.6 Sabbath observance was the norm in the apostolic church

Bible passage: Acts 15:1–29

For the apostolic church, Sabbath-keeping was normal practice. This fact is revealed in Acts 15 which records an interesting debate.

Not long after the first missionary journey, some Jewish Christians from Judea came to Antioch with an erroneous message for the Gentile converts. The Book of Acts records: “And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised

according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question” (Acts 15:1–2).

Even with the restrained language of the writer, it is evident that the debate concerning circumcision developed into a major issue. Moreover, it could not be resolved locally and had to be referred to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. It was there that Peter, Paul and Barnabas were called to present their case.

In the end, James made this conclusion:

“Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

Acts 15:19–21

The apostles and elders followed up with a letter detailing their decision, which was dispatched to the church in Antioch via Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas.

From this biblical account, we gain some important insights. Firstly, we note that the Jewish Christians from Judea had been arguing about circumcision specifically: they were convinced that this practice was still necessary for salvation and imposed their belief on the Gentile converts (Acts 15:1). However, it is pertinent to note that they had not raised another issue that would have been equally close to their hearts—the Sabbath. This leads us to understand that the Gentile converts were observing the Sabbath at that time; otherwise, its negligence would certainly have caught the attention of the Jewish brethren.

Secondly, James mentioned the age-old custom of reading from the Books of Moses on the Sabbath day (Acts 15:21), indicating that this was normal practice in the time of the early church. Hence, in the Book of Acts, there are many references to Jews, proselytes (Acts 13:16, 26, 43), Christians (Acts 2:46), workers of God (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4) and God-fearing Gentiles (Acts 17:1–4, 12, 17; 18:4) all

observing the Sabbath in this manner.

9.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the apostles were evidently Sabbath-keepers. They observed this day faithfully wherever they travelled to, whether it was a predominantly Jewish area or a Gentile land, and regardless of whether there was a synagogue or not. Importantly, they led the new Christians converts, including those from Gentile backgrounds, to do likewise.

CHAPTER 10

SABBATH-KEEPING AFTER THE APOSTLES (1) THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CLIMATE

10.1 Introduction

Even during the time of the apostles, false doctrines began infiltrating the church, and it was for this reason that the church leaders exhorted the believers to contend for the truth (1 Tim 6:3–5; Jude 3). However, the situation worsened considerably after the passing of the apostles, with the church going down a slippery slope of doctrinal decline. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that the post-apostolic church (or parts of it, at least) continued upholding the Sabbath until the end of the sixth century, and that a number of small faith communities continued the practice in isolation thereafter.

It appears that various complicated factors worked together to bring about changes to Sabbath observance. They included political and religious pressures, teachings from influential Christian writers and leaders, and the influence of sun worship. In this chapter, we shall first examine some of the key religious and political factors.

10.2 The religious and political climate under Roman rule

10.2.1 Life for the Jews

To understand the political and religious factors affecting the post-apostolic church, we need to begin by looking at the situation of the Jews under Roman rule. History indicates that Rome assumed control of Palestine around 63 BC, after Pompey was called to intervene

in a dispute between two Maccabean brothers, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus. He sided with the eldest, Hyrcanus II, and helped him to secure the High Priesthood. It was from that point that Pompey set about dismantling the kingdom built up by the Hasmonians. It led to a long period of turmoil for Judea, whereby different groups struggled for power. In the end, Herod the Great assumed the role of puppet king, reigning from 37–4 BC. It was during this period that Jesus Christ was born.

After Herod died, his kingdom was divided between his three sons. Philip became tetrarch of the largely non-Jewish regions northeast of Galilee (4 BC–AD 33/34); Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (4 BC–AD 39); Archelaus, of Samaria and Judea (4–6 BC). Thereafter, aside from the brief reign of Herod Agrippa I (AD 41–44), Samaria and Judea came under the control of Roman procurators.

During the ministry of Jesus, Galilee was ruled by Herod Antipas (see Mk 6:17–29; Lk 13:31–33; 23:6–12), while Judea-Samaria was governed by Pontius Pilate. The picture that emerges from the Gospels is one of relative peace and religious freedom. However, the existence of revolutionaries like the Zealots indicates that there were on-going tensions. The writings of the historian Josephus support this, for they mention riots and killings during the governorship of the unpopular Pontius Pilate.¹

After the reign of Herod Agrippa I, the situation for the Jews worsened considerably under the Roman procurators. Things came to a head when the last of them—Gessius Florus (AD 64–66)—came to power. In AD 66, Florus requisitioned a heavy tribute of gold from the temple treasury. When the Jews protested, he set his troops upon Jerusalem. The people reacted by declaring rebellion throughout the land. At the same time, civil war broke out in Jerusalem, whereby various groups grappled for control of the rebellion. Emperor Nero responded by dispatching an experienced general, Vespasian, to quell the uprisings. The latter successfully concentrated his efforts on Jewish strongholds outside Jerusalem. However, after becoming emperor, he left his son Titus to deal with the unfinished business in Jerusalem. In AD 70, Titus laid siege to the city. Although the different Jewish factions united against him, they were no match; thousands died, many

1 "The Antiquities of the Jews" 18.3.1 & "Wars of the Jews" 2.9.4, *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston, A.M. (USA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995).

from starvation and disease. Eventually, the Roman troops invaded the city, sacked it and destroyed the temple. Not long after, the Romans abolished the Sanhedrin and the High Priesthood.

After the fall of Jerusalem, the Romans took the Jewish strongholds of Herodium and Machaerus. Finally, Flavius Silva, the procurator of Judea, headed towards Masada to deal with the last vestiges of the rebellion. In the now infamous episode, around 1000 Jews, including women and children, chose suicide over surrender. In AD 73, seven years after the start of the rebellion, the war ended.

Despite the years of turmoil and devastating loss, the Jews held on tightly to their faith, even when they were scattered throughout the Mediterranean. However, the yearning for freedom from foreign domination persisted, as evidenced by further uprisings.

The next major Jewish rebellion occurred in AD 131 and was led by Simon Bar-Kokhba. This time, it was sparked off by news of Emperor Hadrian's plans to rebuild Jerusalem as a Roman colony, with a temple dedicated to Jupiter. The early part of the war went in the Jews' favour, but they were finally defeated in AD 135. Hadrian attempted to prevent further uprisings by killing or enslaving the remaining Jewish survivors and turning Jerusalem into a Romanized city with new Gentile settlers. Also, he built a temple to Jupiter on the very site of the Holy of Holies; inside was a statue of himself. Finally, he outlawed the Jewish faith. Hence, no one was allowed to observe the Sabbath—at least, not without the fear of death.

10.2.2 Anti-Jewish sentiment

Following the First and Second Jewish Revolts, there arose much anti-Jewish sentiment, which was shared by the Roman government and populace alike. Samuele Bacchiocchi, author of *From Sabbath to Sunday*,² notes, for example, that a number of Roman writers took the opportunity to express their contempt for the Jews. They included Seneca (circa 4 BC–AD 65), Persius (AD 34–62), Petronius (circa AD 66), Quintillian (circa AD 35–100), Juvenal (AD 125) and Tacitus (circa AD 55–120)—who all levelled criticisms at the Jews and derided

² Bacchiocchi, Samuele, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977).

Sabbath-keeping and circumcision as superstitions.

In addition, there were on-going tensions between Christians and Jews which fostered hostility from some parts of the Christian community. A whole body of *Adversus Judaeos* (“Against All Jews”) emerged around this time, vehemently denouncing the Jews and their traditions. An example is the *Epistle to Diognetus*, written sometime between the period of the apostles and that of Emperor Constantine.

But as to their [the Jews’] scrupulosity concerning meats, and their superstition as respects the Sabbaths, and their boasting about circumcision, and their fancies about fasting and the new moons, which are utterly ridiculous and unworthy of notice—I do not think that you require to learn anything from me. For, to accept some of those things which have been formed by God for the use of men as properly formed, and to reject others as useless and redundant—how can this be lawful? And to speak falsely of God, as if He forbade us to do what is good on the Sabbath-days—how is not this impious?

Epistle to Diognetus, chp 4

Aside from making their case against the Jews, these writers also shared a common purpose in drawing a distinction between the Jewish and Christian faiths and warning Christians against so-called judaizing.

10.2.3 Life for the Christians

The Romans were generally tolerant of the different religions within their empire, but not without condition: they did not permit those that threatened the stability of Rome or dishonoured the state religion. Hence, whenever the Jews created uprisings, the Romans responded variously by exiling them, persecuting them, or outlawing their faith.

In the first century, matters were somewhat complicated by the fact that the Romans were unable to distinguish between the Christian and the Jewish faiths, especially in areas like Jerusalem where most of the Christian converts were Jewish. This was not surprising given the fact that the two communities had much in common: the believers worshipped one invisible God, read the same Old Testament Scriptures, observed the Sabbath, and refused to bow

down to the state gods and the Emperor. The inevitable outcome was that any persecutions that were directed at the Jews came to affect the Christians also. In the Bible, we see, for example, that Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish Christians, were forced out of Rome at the command of Claudius (Acts 18:2), an event which happened in AD 49. The inability of the Romans to tell the two groups apart also explains the emergence of writings by Christians around this time that made a point of highlighting the differences.

However, as the Romans learned more about Christianity, it created a new set of problems. Both the authorities and the populace became wary of this new and fast expanding religion where the followers claimed sole allegiance to a man called Jesus Christ, held private gatherings, performed unusual religious rites, behaved in a non-conforming way, and refused to participate in state religious activities. It led to suspicions about whether the religion was, in fact, a cover for illicit, immoral or even conspiratorial activities.

State policy, however, was far from being the only inciting cause to persecution. With the great mass of the people, blind prejudice, jealousy, superstitious fears, or material interests were the leading motives. They estimated the subject merely from a surface view. That the Christians were a peculiar class, holding themselves aloof from the common amusements and vices, was enough to arouse their ill-will and suspicion. Priests and artisans who had a pecuniary interest in heathenism sought to magnify this prejudice. So the most abominable slanders were circulated against the Christians. Their isolation was attributed to misanthropy. They were stigmatized as haters of mankind. *Odium humani generis* was a standing charge against them. As they had no temples or images, they were reprobated as atheists. The seclusion they naturally sought for their love-feasts and celebrations of the Lord's Supper was declared to be a covering for the most hideous crimes.

Henry C. Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church*,
vol 1, pp 136–137

With regards to the reactions of the emperors, these varied, depending on their individual agendas and dispositions. Nero (AD 54–68) was the first to carry out a full-scale persecution of the Christians. In AD 64, when a fire broke out in Rome, and rumours spread that he was responsible, the emperor responded by turning the unpopular

Christians into scapegoats; he rounded them up, tortured them and executed them.³

And in their deaths they were made the subjects of sport, being covered with the hides of wild beast and worried to death by dogs, or affixed to crosses, or set on fire and made to serve as nocturnal lights when the day had departed.

Henry C. Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church*, vol 1, p 140

The fact that Nero targeted the Christians specifically indicates that, by this time, the Romans had learnt to distinguish between the two religions; or, at least, this was the case within the imperial city.

The next emperor to persecute the Christians with equal ferocity was Domitian (AD 81–96). It is believed that he even summoned the grandchildren of Judas, the brother of Jesus, suspecting them of wanting to make claims to the throne.

A number of other emperors held the view that Christians were undesirable and subversive, but did not perceive them as imminent threats to the nation. The emperor Trajan (AD 99–117), for example, ordered that any Christians who were caught should be punished, unless they renounced their faith. However, he refrained from actively seeking them out. His successor, Hadrian (AD 117–138), had much the same policy, but was also careful to implement proper judicial procedures. Later, Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180) actively rooted out Christians and tortured them in order to force them to renounce their faith. After a period of respite, Diocletian and Caesar Galerius went on to carry out the Great Persecution of AD 303, purging a sect they felt had become too powerful and dangerous. Those Christians who suffered the most were those in Rome, Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor (Turkey). Those in the west, who were further removed from the grasp of the persecutors, suffered less.

It was under these difficult circumstances that the Christian apologists emerged, and the time from AD 130–180 is known as the period of the apologists. Their mission was to defend the Christian faith against the many charges levied against them. The most famous among them was probably Justin Martyr, a Christian philosopher

3 Lunn-Rockliffe, S., *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, BBC website. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire_article_01.shtml>

who wrote from Rome around AD 153. His writings made a number of points: punishing people simply for being Christians was an injustice; Christians were not atheists, for they worshipped the true God; Christians were not a threat to Rome, because the kingdom they pursued belonged to God; Christians were decent and moral citizens.

The turning point for Christianity came when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in AD 312. The following year, he and his co-emperor, Licinius, issued a royal edict to legalize all religions. In this way, the state-sanctioned persecution of Christians within the Roman empire finally came to an end.

10.3 Conclusion

Under Roman rule, the Jews experienced sporadic and often intense persecution. Moreover, due to the inability of the Romans to distinguish between Judaism and the emerging Christian religion, their actions came to impact on the Christians also. It was against this background that writers in the post-apostolic period rallied to the defence of the Christian faith and attempted to differentiate it from the Jewish one. Nevertheless, once the Romans learnt to tell the two religions apart, they began persecuting Christians in their own right. It was not until the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, that peace finally ensued.

CHAPTER 11

SABBATH-KEEPING AFTER THE APOSTLES (2) THE TEACHINGS OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS AND OTHER INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE

11.1 Introduction

From as early as the first century AD, step changes to the Sabbath were being introduced by a number of influential Christians. Their primary justifications were the need for Christians to depart from Jewish practices and a duty to honour the Lord's Day (Sunday) in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection.

11.2 The term "Lord's Day"

The term "Lord's Day"¹ appeared in Christian writings from the first century AD onwards. Many attribute its origin to Revelation 1:10, a verse that records the following words of elder John: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet". Others trace the term to the Gospel of Peter, although there is some debate concerning the date of its writing, which varies from AD 70–180. In this apocryphal book, it appears in an account about the resurrection:

And in the night in which the Lord's day was drawing on, as the soldiers kept guard two by two in a watch, there was a great voice in the heaven; and they saw the heavens opened, and two men descend with a great light and approach the tomb. And the stone that was put at the door rolled of itself and made way in part; and the tomb was opened, and both the young men entered in.

The Gospel According to Peter, v 9

¹ Greek, *kyriake hemera*, later rendered simply *kyriake*.

And at dawn on the Lord's day Mary Magdalene, a disciple of the Lord, fearing because of the Jews who were burning with wrath, had not done at the Lord's sepulchre the things which women are accustomed to do for those that die and for those that are beloved by them—she took her friends with her and came to the sepulchre where he was laid.

The Gospel According to Peter, v 12

The term is also found in the *Didache*, a short Christian treatise from the latter part of the first century (or possibly later). The anonymous writer uses it in the course of teaching Christians how to conduct the Holy Communion:

Gather together on the Lord's day, break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. But do not let anyone who has a quarrel with a companion join with you until they have been reconciled, so that your sacrifice may not be polluted; for this was spoken by the Lord: "In every place and time offer me a pure sacrifice, for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the Gentiles."

The Didache, chp 14, vv 1–3

Regardless of when the term first came into use outside of the biblical canon, by the middle of the second century, it was well documented and widely understood to mean Sunday.

However, it is important to point out that the Lord Jesus, His disciples, and the New Testament writers never used the term "Lord's Day" to refer to Sunday. They invariably called the latter the "first day of the week" (Mt 28:1; Mk 16:2; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Among the writers was John who wrote the Fourth Gospel, and it does not seem plausible that he would have created a new term—the "Lord's Day"—to denote Sunday in the course of writing his other book, Revelation. Therefore, we understand that John must have used the term to mean something else altogether (see chapter 15 for a discussion).

11.3 The first century

11.3.1 Ignatius

In the first century, after the passing of the apostles, Christians continued keeping the Sabbath. This fact is evidenced by the literature of that period, including the *Letter to the Magnesians*, written by Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (circa AD 30–107). In it, he acknowledges the practice of Sabbath-keeping, but admonishes his readers not to rest on this day “after the Jewish manner”. Furthermore, he teaches them to celebrate the Lord’s Day after the Sabbath to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus:

Let us therefore no longer keep the Sabbath after the Jewish manner, and rejoice in days of idleness; for “he that does not work, let him not eat” (2 Thess 3:10). For say the [holy] oracles, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread” (Gen 3:19). But let every one of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body, admiring the workmanship of God, and not eating things prepared the day before, nor using lukewarm drinks, and walking within a prescribed space, nor finding delight in dancing and plaudits which have no sense in them. And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord’s Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week].

Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, chp 9

11.3.2 The Epistle of Barnabas

The *Epistle of Barnabas*, written by an unknown author (possibly an Alexandrian Jewish Christian) sometime between AD 70–131,² goes one step further by teaching Christians not to keep the Sabbath at all. His rationale is that, in this present age, believers are in an unholy state and do not have the capacity to sanctify the Sabbath. He argues that

2 Ladeuze, P., “Epistle of Barnabas”*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907). Retrieved December 2008. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02299a.htm>>

they will only be able to do so when Jesus comes again. The writer goes on to make the point that literal Sabbath-keeping is an erroneous Jewish practice and quotes Isaiah 1:13 in an attempt to prove that God does not accept it. He says that Christians need to observe Sunday instead, to commemorate the Lord's resurrection.

He speaks of the Sabbath at the beginning of the creation: "And God made the works of his hands in six days, and finished on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it"... Furthermore, he says: "You shall sanctify it with clean hands and a clean heart." If, therefore, anyone now is able, by being clean of heart, to sanctify the day which God sanctified, we have been deceived in every respect. But if that is not the case, accordingly then we will truly rest and sanctify it only when we ourselves will be able to do so, after being justified and receiving the promise; when lawlessness no longer exists, and all things have been made new by the Lord, then we will be able to sanctify it, because we ourselves will have been sanctified first. Finally, he says to them: "I cannot bear your new moons and sabbaths." You see what he means: it is not the present Sabbaths that are acceptable to me, but the one that I have made; on that Sabbath, after I have set everything at rest, I will create the beginning of an eighth day, which is the beginning of another world. This is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both arose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven.

Epistle of Barnabas, chp 15

Here, the writer's view is that the creation week serves as a prophecy of the world week: six millennia followed by the eschatological Sabbath. He argues that the latter is the seventh day that God has sanctified and on which He will finally rest. It is when God will bring the present world to an end and establish the new one. Somewhat confusingly, he also refers to this new age as the "eighth day", using the term interchangeably with the Sabbath: "Therefore (i.e., because the Sabbath acceptable to God is the eschatological eighth day, the new world), we pass with rejoicing the eighth day on which Jesus rose from the dead, appeared, and ascended to heaven" (Barnabas 15:9).

11.4 The second century

11.4.1 Justin Martyr

Around AD 150–155, Justin Martyr, a Christian philosopher and writer, wrote an apology³ from Rome, addressing it to Emperor Antoninus Pius. His aim was to defend the Christian faith at a time of persecution. Part of that apology dealt with the matter of worship:

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 to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chp 67

From this excerpt, we see Justin Martyr attempting to explain the nature of Christian worship (including the Holy Communion in the manner that it was conducted at that time) and to portray Christians as good and moral citizens. He addressed the matter of Sunday worship,

³ Greek, *apologia*, meaning “a speech for the defence.” The period from AD 130–180 is commonly known as the era of the apologists.

saying that Christians honour this day because God created the world on the first day of the week, and it was the day on which Jesus Christ resurrected.

John Nevins Andrews, a Christian writer, argues that Justin Martyr's motivation in mentioning Sunday observance was to demonstrate a similarity between Christians and their fellow Roman citizens who honoured the sun:

This statement of reasons for Sunday observance is particularly worthy of attention. He tells the emperor that they assembled upon the day called Sunday. This was equivalent to saying to him, We observe the day on which our fellow-citizens offer their adoration to the sun. Here both "patriotism" and "expediency" discover themselves in the words of Justin, which were addressed to a persecuting emperor in behalf of the Christians.

J.N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week*,
chp 16

Whether Andrews is right in his assertion or not, what we do know from Justin Martyr's *Apology* is that, by the middle of the second century, Sunday observance was already established, at least in Rome. What we do not know is how widespread the practice was.

11.4.2 Tertullian

At the end of the second century and the beginning of the third century, there were calls to honour Sunday specifically as a day of rest. They came from people such as the Latin Father, Tertullian, a prolific writer of apologetic works. Like Justin Martyr, his stance was that the Sabbath was a temporary institution and that Christians should now rest on the Lord's Day:

As regards kneeling also, prayer finds a variety of practice in the action of a certain very few who refrain from kneeling on the Saturday. At the very moment when this difference of opinion is pleading its cause in the churches, the Lord will give His grace that they may either yield or, without proving a stumbling-block to others, follow their own opinion. But we, according to the tradition we have received, on the day

of the Lord's resurrection, and on it alone, ought to refrain carefully not only from this, but from every attitude and duty that cause perplexity, putting off even our daily business, "lest we give any place to the devil."

Tertullian, *De Oratione*, chp 23

11.5 The third century

11.5.1 Didascalia Apostolorum

The *Didascalia Apostolorum*⁴ is a work that purports to originate with the Apostles, but, in reality, was most likely written in the third century. It uses language that is reminiscent of Ignatius to warn believers against "Sabbath idlings":

If then the Lord, by the gift of His grace, has set you loose and given you rest, and brought you out into refreshment [Ps 66.12 (65.12 LXX)], that you should no more be bound with sacrifices and oblations, and with sin offerings, and purifications, and vows, and gifts, and holocausts, and burnt offerings, and [Sabbath] idlings, and shewbread, and the observing of purifications; nor yet with tithes and firstfruits, and part-offerings, and gifts and oblations, -- for it was laid upon them to give all these things as of necessity, but you are not bound by these things, -- it behoves you to know the word of the Lord, who said: *Except your righteousness abound more than that of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven* [Mt 5.20].

Didascalia Apostolorum, chp 9

Here, the writer equates resting on the Sabbath with bondage to Jewish tradition. Like Ignatius, he exhorts believers to observe the Lord's Day as a matter of priority:

Since therefore you are the members of Christ, do not scatter yourselves from the Church by not assembling... And make not your worldly affairs of more account than the word of God; but on

⁴ A treatise purportedly written by the Apostles at the time of the Council of Jerusalem (see Acts 15), but is more likely to have been a composition of the third century.

the Lord's day leave every thing and run eagerly to your Church; for she is your glory. Otherwise, what excuse have they before God who do not assemble on the Lord's day to hear the word of life and be nourished with the divine food which abides for ever?

Didascalia Apostolorum, chp 13

11.6 The fourth century

11.6.1 Pope Sylvester I

Pope Sylvester I (AD 314–335) was among those who taught Christians to keep the Lord's Day:

Pope Sylvester instructed the clergy to keep the *feriae*.⁵ And, indeed, from an old custom he called the first day [of the week] the "Lord's [day]", on which light was made in the beginning and also the resurrection of Christ is celebrated.

Rabanus Maurus, *Liber Computo*, chp 27

By this time, Sunday worship was already an established custom. However, it appears that the pope went one step further: Rabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mainz, Germany (AD 776–856) claims that he decreed the transfer of the Sabbath rest to this day:

Moreover, the same pope decreed that the rest of the Sabbath should be transferred rather to the Lord's day, in order that on that day we should rest from worldly works for the praise of God.

Rabanus Maurus, *De Clericorum Institutione*, bk 2, chp 46

11.6.2 Constantine's Sunday decree

One of the most significant developments that promoted Sunday worship occurred in AD 321. Emperor Constantine, who had earlier converted to Christianity, legislated the turning of Sunday into a civil

⁵ "Day of celebration".

day of rest within the Roman empire and outlawed all work except farming:

On the venerable day of the sun let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed. In the country, however, persons engaged in agriculture may freely and lawfully continue their pursuits; because it often happens that another day is not so suitable for grain-sowing or for vine-planting; lest by neglecting the proper moment for such operations the bounty of heaven should be lost.

Codex Justinianus, bk 3, tit 12, 3

One may well question whether Constantine was motivated purely by a desire to promote the Christian faith. This is because we note his reference to Sunday as the “venerable day of the sun”—a hint, perhaps, of a past faith not quite relinquished. In light of this, it is possible that the decree of AD 321 was more of a political move—one aimed at uniting pagans and Christians in the empire.

While Constantine did not actually establish the custom of Sunday observance, as it was already in place by his time, he gave it the force of law. Later, in AD 386, Emperor Theodosius I and Emperor Gratian Valentinian built on Constantine’s decree and stipulated other Sunday prohibitions, including the hearing of court cases and the payment of debts.

11.6.3 The Council of Laodicea

The next landmark event was the Council of Laodicea (in Phrygia Pacatiana) in AD 364. This was a meeting of around thirty clerics from Asia Minor. Out of it came a number of resolutions, including one that stipulated as follows:

Christians must not judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honouring the Lord’s Day; and, if they can, resting then as Christians. But if any shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ.

Council of Laodicea, Canon 29

It is worth noting that the council acknowledged both the Sabbath and the Lord's Day—evidence that Christians were still observing the Sabbath at that time. However, the position of the clerics was that Christians should not be resting on this day. They issued a severe warning that if anyone was found “judaizing”—that is, resting on the Sabbath in the manner of the Jews—they would be “anathema from Christ”. The latter presumably meant that they would be excommunicated from the church.

11.6.4 The Apostolic Constitutions

Around the close of the fourth century saw the appearance of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a collection of eight books compiled in Syria (or elsewhere in the east), whose teachings were purportedly those of the twelve apostles. They exhorted Christians to worship morning and evening on the Sabbath, and also to keep the Lord's Day in remembrance of Jesus' resurrection:

[B]ut assemble yourselves together every day, morning and evening, singing psalms and praying in the Lord's house: in the morning saying the sixty-second Psalm, and in the evening the hundred and fortieth, but principally on the Sabbath-day. And on the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's day, meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent Him to us, and condescended to let Him suffer, and raised Him from the dead. Otherwise what apology will he make to God who does not assemble on that day to hear the saving word concerning the resurrection, on which we pray thrice standing in memory of Him who arose in three days, in which is performed the reading of the prophets, the preaching of the Gospel, the oblation of the sacrifice, the gift of the holy food?

The Apostolic Constitutions, 7.59

11.7 The fifth century

In the fifth century, the Greek historian Socrates noted that all Christians kept the Holy Communion on the Sabbath, except in Rome and Alexandria where they had their own local custom.⁶ John Cassian (circa AD 360–435), a theologian and writer, wrote that the monks in Egypt worshipped on both the Sabbath and on Sundays, but they also had a custom of holding the Holy Communion at 9 am on the latter:

Wherefore, except Vespers and Nocturns, there are no public services among them in the day except on Saturday and Sunday, when they meet together at the third hour for the purpose of Holy Communion.

John Cassian, *Institutes* 3.2

11.8 The sixth century up until before the Reformation

From the sixth century onwards, there was an increasing drive on the part of the Catholic Church to enforce Sunday as a sacred day of rest—in effect, turning it into a Christian Sabbath. The Third Council of Orleans (AD 538), for example, stipulated the following in its twenty-ninth canon:

The opinion is spreading amongst the people, that it is wrong to ride, or drive, or cook food, or do anything to the house, or the person on the Sunday. But since such opinions are more Jewish than Christian, that shall be lawful in future, which has been so to the present time. On the other hand agricultural labor ought to be laid aside, in order that the people may not be prevented from attending church.

Third Council of Orleans, 29th Canon

It was the opinion of the council that Christians should stop doing all farm work on Sundays to make time for worship; but it did not go as far as to prohibit other types of work, to avoid emulating Jewish practices. However, not long after, in AD 585, when the bishops

⁶ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, bk 5, chp 22.

convened in Burgundy, they finally decided to prohibit all works on the Lord's Day:

Notice is taken that Christian people, very much neglect and slight the Lord's day, giving themselves as on other days to common work, to redress which irreverence, for the future, we warn every Christian who bears not that name in vain, to give ear to our advice, knowing we have a concern on us for your good, and a power to hinder you to do evil. Keep then the Lord's day, the day of our new birth.

Second Council of Macon

Following this, in AD 586, the Council in Narbon decreed that all freemen were to be fined for working on the Lord's Day, while servants were to be punished with lashings.

At the end of the sixth century, Pope Gregory (AD 590–604) castigated those Christians who persisted in upholding the Sabbath day. He argued that literal Sabbath-keeping was no longer necessary since Christians observe it in a spiritual sense through faith in Jesus Christ:

It has come to my ears that certain men of perverse spirit have sown among you some things that are wrong and opposed to the holy faith, so as to forbid any work being done on the Sabbath day. What else can I call these but preachers of Antichrist, who, when he comes, will cause the Sabbath day as well as the Lord's day to be kept free from all work. For, because he pretends to die and rise again, he wishes the Lord's day to be had in reverence; and, because he compels the people to judaize that he may bring back the outward rite of the law, and subject the perfidy of the Jews to himself, he wishes the Sabbath to be observed... On the Lord's day, however, there should be a cessation of earthly labour, and attention given in every way to prayers, so that if anything is done negligently during the six days, it may be expiated by supplications on the day of the Lord's resurrection.

Epistle of St. Gregory the Great, bk 13, epist 1

Pope Gregory called those who advocated resting on the Sabbath day "preachers of Antichrist" and urged Christians to rest solely on the Lord's Day in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection.

Despite their best efforts, it took a long time for the church leaders

to enforce the Lord's Day as a day of rest. This is evidenced by the fact that further decrees ensued over the centuries:

- * In AD 791, Charles the Great summoned the bishops to Friuli in Italy where they decreed that all Christians should honour the Lord's Day.
- * In AD 826, at a synod in Rome, Pope Eugenius, instructed parish priests to warn those who failed to go to church on Sundays about the prospect of calamities.
- * In AD 928, King Athelston of England banned all trade and civil hearings on Sundays.
- * In AD 1244, at the Council of Lyon in France, church leaders warned the people to cease their work on the Lord's Day at pain of "ecclesiastical censures".
- * In AD 1322, at the Synod in Valladolid in Castile, Spain, church leaders told people to refrain from husbandry and any mechanical employment on the Lord's Day.
- * In AD 1533, the Council of Tours decreed that Christians failing to observe the Lord's Day and other holy days would face excommunication.

11.9 The Reformation

During the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther had the prime opportunity to tackle the Roman Catholic Church's deviation from the biblical Sabbath, alongside the other doctrinal issues, if he had been so inclined. However, he did not do so. In August 1520, when Luther published his treatise, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, which set out a programme of reform, it was clear that he did not see Sunday observance as a matter for debate. In Article 18, Luther stated, "All saints days and festivals should be abolished, keeping only Sunday".

In 1529, Luther published *The Large Catechism*, a manual for clergymen, whose contents comprised the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism and the Sacrament

of the Altar (i.e. the Holy Communion). It revealed that Luther was of the opinion that the Sabbath was no longer relevant to Christians, and that all days were the same. Moreover, while he acknowledged that Sunday observance was a man-made custom, he did not see the need for change.

Now, in the Old Testament, God separated the seventh day, and appointed it for rest, and commanded that it should be regarded as holy above all others. As regards this external observance, this commandment was given to the Jews alone, that they should abstain from toilsome work, and rest, so that both man and beast might recuperate, and not be weakened by unremitting labor... However, this, I say, is not so restricted to any time, as with the Jews, that it must be just on this or that day; for in itself no one day is better than another; but this should indeed be done daily; however, since the masses cannot give such attendance, there must be at least one day in the week set apart. But since from of old Sunday [the Lord's Day] has been appointed for this purpose, we also should continue the same, in order that everything be done in harmonious order, and no one create disorder by unnecessary innovation.

Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 1529

These views were reiterated in the famous *Augsburg Confession*, a document written by Philipp Melanchthon in response to Emperor Charles V's demand for an explanation of the religious convictions of the German rulers and free territories. It was informed by the *Torgau Articles*, a summary of faith drawn up earlier by Luther, Jonas Bugenhagen and Melanchthon. The *Augsburg Confession* was read out before the emperor at the Diet of Augsburg in June 1530. Part of its content addressed the issues of the Lord's Day and the Sabbath.

Of this kind is the observance of the Lord's Day, Easter, Pentecost, and like holy-days and rites. For those who judge that by the authority of the Church the observance of the Lord's Day instead of the Sabbath-day was ordained as a thing necessary, do greatly err. Scripture has abrogated the Sabbath-day; for it teaches that, since the Gospel has been revealed, all the ceremonies of Moses can be omitted. And yet, because it was necessary to appoint a certain day,

that the people might know when they ought to come together, it appears that the Church designated the Lord's Day for this purpose; and this day seems to have been chosen all the more for this additional reason, that men might have an example of Christian liberty, and might know that the keeping neither of the Sabbath nor of any other day is necessary.

Augsburg Confession, Article 28, 57–60

Similar views were later expressed by the English reformer, William Tyndale, and the French reformer, John Calvin. The latter, for example, wrote:

It is true that we are not limited to the seventh day, nor do we, in fact, keep the same day that was appointed for the Jews, since that was Saturday. But, to show the liberty of Christians, the day was changed because the resurrection of Jesus Christ set us free from the bondage to the Law and canceled the obligation to it. That is why the day was changed. Yet, we must observe the same regulation of having a specified day of the week. Whether it be one day or two is left to the free choice of Christians.

John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1555

Andreas Carlstadt,⁷ a contemporary of Luther, was in a minority for arguing the need for a seventh day of rest. However, even he stopped short of committing to a specific day:

If servants have worked six days, they shall be free of service on the Sabbath. God says, without distinction, "Remember that thou keep holy the seventh day." He does not say that we ought to take Sunday or Saturday for the seventh day. Concerning Sunday, one feels uneasy, because men have established it. Concerning Saturday, it is a disputed question. But so much is clear, that thou shalt keep holy the seventh day, and give the servants rest when they have worked six days.

Andreas Carlstadt, [About the Sabbath and Commanded Holidays], 1524

7 Also spelt "Karlstadt".

11.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, Sunday observance was the result of step changes in church doctrine. After the passing of the apostles, influential Christian leaders and writers began teaching believers to observe Sunday in addition to the Sabbath, then as a day of rest, and finally, as the complete substitute for the Sabbath. By the time of the Reformation, people such as Martin Luther, Tyndale and Calvin taught that the Sabbath was a redundant tradition, and that Christians were no longer bound by the requirement to observe any particular day. Such views have left a lasting legacy, for we find many Christians today using the same arguments to counter those who uphold the seventh day Sabbath.

CHAPTER 12

SABBATH-KEEPING AFTER THE APOSTLES (3) EASTER SUNDAY AND SABBATH FASTING

12.1 Introduction

In addition to the developments outlined in the previous chapters, there were two other measures instigated by the church in Rome which came to have a significant impact on Sabbath-keeping. One measure was the transfer of the annual Pascha (Easter) from the Sabbath to Sunday. The other was the turning of the Sabbath into a day of fasting.

12.2 Changing the annual Pascha (Easter) to Sunday

History indicates that the post-apostolic church instituted an annual Pascha¹ (later called “Easter”) in the second century.² The Greek church historian, Socrates of Constantinople (born AD 380), wrote that it most likely evolved from local practice and acknowledged that neither Jesus nor the apostles instructed believers to observe this feast.³ The churches in Asia Minor observed the annual Pascha on the fourteenth day of the first month (the date of the Jewish Passover), regardless of which day of the week it fell on, while the church in Rome observed it on the following Sunday.

In AD 196, Victor, Bishop of Rome attempted to impose the custom in Rome on all the churches. However, the churches in Asia Minor refused to comply, and it led him to issue letters of excommunication and to urge the other bishops to sever links. During the course of the

1 “Passover.”

2 Pamphilus, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, bk 4, chp 14, trans. C.F. Cruse (Baker Book House, 1994).

3 Socrates and Sozomenus: *Ecclesiastical Histories*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886).

struggle, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons attempted to mediate by reminding Victor about his predecessor, Sixtus (circa AD 116–126), who observed the annual Pascha on Sunday while tolerating those who did not. This reveals that the origin of Easter Sunday can be traced back at least to the time of Sixtus and to Rome. Victor's strategy failed to change the practice of the eastern churches, and it was not until AD 325 that a more uniform approach was agreed, at least in principle.

In AD 325, Emperor Constantine convened the First Council of Nicaea in Bithynia. It was attended by two to three hundred bishops from different parts of the Roman empire. The council agreed for all the churches to observe Easter on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox (21 March). The church historian, Eusebius Pamphilus, documents these words of Constantine in his letter to the churches following the meeting:

When the question arose concerning the most holy day of Easter, it was decreed by common consent to be expedient, that this festival should be celebrated on the same day by all, in every place...And truly, in the first place, it seemed to every one a most unworthy thing that we should follow the custom of the Jews in the celebration of this most holy solemnity, who, polluted wretches! having stained their hands with a nefarious crime, are justly blinded in their minds...Let us then have nothing in common with the most hostile rabble of the Jews. We have received another method from the Saviour.

The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus

Constantine presented the case for Easter Sunday in two ways. Firstly, he argued the need for a uniform approach, and secondly, he said that Christians should avoid emulating the Jews. In making the latter point, he was echoing the popular view of many Christians before (and after) him.

12.3 Fasting on the Sabbath

By the end of the second century, the church in Rome had established a practice of fasting on Fridays and Sabbath days. By the time of the

Spanish Council of Elvira (circa AD 300), the Sabbath fast had become a custom in the west. In contrast, Sunday was a feast day on which the church celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In fact, the Sabbath fast was yet another practice that went against the teaching of God:

And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'The feasts of the Lord, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings.'"

Leviticus 23:1–3

The Sabbath was meant to be a feast, a day of joyful celebration, but the post-apostolic church turned it into a gloomy fast day and justified this move by arguing the need to mourn the death of Jesus. Pope Innocent I (AD 401–417), for example, said, "The Sabbath should be observed as a fast day, because on the Sabbath the Lord was laid in the tomb and the disciples fasted."⁴ Pope Sylvester (AD 314–335) had earlier gone as far as to say that fasting on the Sabbath demonstrated contempt for the Jews and their feasting: "If every Sunday is to be observed joyfully by the Christians on account of the resurrection, then every Sabbath on account of the burial is to be regarded in execration of the Jews."⁵

12.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the church in Rome introduced and promoted two practices to elevate the status of the Lord's Day. One was the celebration of the annual Pascha (Easter) on Sunday; the other was the Sabbath fast. Both were part of the church's on-going strategy to steer Christians away from the allegedly Jewish Sabbath, and to establish Sunday as the official Christian holiday.

⁴ *Liber Pontificalis* [The Book of the Popes], Innocent I, chp 87.

⁵ Humbert, S.R.E, *Adversus Graecorum Calumnias* 6, PL 143, 937. Source: Bacchiocchi, S., *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977).

CHAPTER 13

SABBATH-KEEPING AFTER THE APOSTLES (4) THE INFLUENCE OF SUN WORSHIP

13.1 Introduction

A key rationale put forward by the post-apostolic church for Sunday observance was the need to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. However, one may question why they did not choose another day for weekly observance—such as Friday, for example, to commemorate Jesus' death. This has led to a view that there was another factor influencing the adoption of Sunday specifically—namely, sun worship.

13.2 The veneration of the sun

In many ancient civilizations, including Persia, India, Syria, Assyria, Egypt, Greece and Rome, the sun was an object of veneration and worship. For the Romans, the solar deity was known variously as Sol, Sol Indiges (the “Native Sun” or the “Invoked Sun”) and later, Sol Invictus (“Unconquered Sun”). Interestingly, when Constantine established the seven-day week in AD 321, he designated Sunday as the first day.¹

The original Sol, or Sol Indiges, had a shrine on the Quirinal and an annual sacrifice dedicated to him on 9 August, and another shrine in the Circus Maximus. Although the cult appears to have been native, the Roman poets equated him with the Greek sun god Helios.

1 “Week,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved September 16, 2009, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/638786/week>>

The worship of Sol assumed an entirely different character with the later importation of various sun cults from Syria. The Roman emperor Elagabalus (reigned AD 218–222) built a temple to him as Sol Invictus on the Palatine and attempted to make his worship the principal religion at Rome. The emperor Aurelian (reigned 270–275) later re-established the worship and erected a magnificent temple to Sol in the Campus Agrippae. The worship of Sol as special protector of the emperors and of the empire remained the chief imperial cult until it was replaced by Christianity.

“Sol”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, 2009

At the end of the first century BC, the Roman legions that returned from the east brought back the cult of Mithras.

[T]he worship of Mithra, the Iranian god of the sun, justice, contract, and war in pre-Zoroastrian Iran. Known as Mithras in the Roman Empire during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, this deity was honoured as the patron of loyalty to the emperor.

“Mithraism”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, 2009

As Mithras was also a sun god, the cult became assimilated into that of Sol Invictus, such that the two became indistinguishable.

13.3 The adoption of Sunday by the post-apostolic church

The writer, Samuele Bacchiocchi, puts forward the following theory on how the Sabbath came to be replaced by Sunday worship:

The valorization of the day of the Sun over that of Saturn, as a result of the diffusion of the Sun-cults, possibly oriented Christians (who desired to differentiate themselves from the Sabbath of the Jews) toward such a day. This choice however, it must be stated again, was not motivated by their desire to venerate the Sun-god on his day, but rather by the fact that its symbology could fittingly commemorate two important events of the history of salvation—creation and resurrection... Moreover, the day of the Sun enabled Christians to explain also the Biblical mysteries to the pagan world by means of an effective symbology that was very familiar to them.

Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 1977

In short, he argues that Christians in the post-apostolic era were motivated by a number of factors: the wish to distance themselves from Jewish practices; a desire to commemorate God's act of creation and the Lord's resurrection; and the need to explain the Christian faith through the convenient symbolism of the sun.

Significantly, from the second century, the early church fathers began linking the symbolism of the sun to God and to Jesus Christ through their writings:

Theophilus of Antioch (second century):

For the sun is a type of God, and the moon of man. And as the sun far surpasses the moon in power and glory, so far does God surpass man. And as the sun remains ever full, never becoming less, so does God always abide perfect, being full of all power, and understanding, and wisdom, and immortality, and all good.

Theophilus to Autolytus, bk 2, chp 15

Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215):

Awake, He says, you that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light (Eph 5:14)—Christ, the Sun of the Resurrection, He who was born before the morning star, and with His beams bestows life.

Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, chp 9

Cyprian of Carthage (circa AD 200–258):

For since Christ is the true sun and the true day, as the worldly sun and worldly day depart, when we pray and ask that light may return to us again, we pray for the advent of Christ, which shall give us the grace of everlasting light.

Treatise of Cyprian, 4, chp 35

Jerome of Stridonium (circa AD 347–420):

If it is called the day of the sun by the pagans, we most willingly acknowledge it as such, since it is on this day that the light of the world appeared and on this day the Sun of Justice has risen.

Jerome, *In die dominica Paschae homilia*,
Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 78, 550, 1, 52.

Furthermore, from the evidence of Tertullian (circa AD 160–220), we learn that the church even developed a practice of praying towards the east:

Others, with greater regard to good manners, it must be confessed, suppose that the sun is the god of the Christians, because it is a well-known fact that we pray towards the east, or because we make Sunday a day of festivity.

Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, bk 1, chp 13

13.4 The origin of Christmas

Around the fourth century, 25 December came to be associated with the birth of Christ. A popular theory is that it was the result of the Christianizing of the *dies solis invicti nati* (“day of the birth of the unconquered sun”), a Roman festival celebrating the end of winter and the resurgence of the sun.² Once the date was widely accepted, Christian writers began linking the birth of the sun with the birth of the Son of God.³

One argument is that the establishment of Christmas was a deliberate strategy on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to draw pagans into the Christian faith by allowing converts to keep their winter celebration, on condition that they accepted its new significance.

Although the Gospels describe Jesus’ birth in detail, they never mention the date, so historians do not know on what date he was born. The Roman Catholic Church chose December 25 as the day for the Feast of the Nativity in order to give Christian meaning to existing pagan rituals. For example, the Church replaced festivities honoring the birth of Mithra, the [Persian] god of light, with festivities to commemorate the birth of Jesus, whom the Bible calls the light of the world. The Catholic Church hoped to draw pagans into its religion by allowing them to continue their revelry while simultaneously honoring the birthday of Jesus.

“Christmas”, *MSN Encarta*

2 “Christmas”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved September 04, 2009, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/115686/Christmas>>

3 *Ibid.*

13.5 Conclusion

In summary, it appears that one key reason why the post-apostolic church adopted Sunday as its main day of worship was to differentiate the Christian faith from the Jewish one. By linking the symbolism of the day to Jesus Christ, it was able to rationalize and justify the new practice. Sunday observance also had the benefit of establishing common ground between Christians and pagans within the Roman empire. In light of the growing hostility facing the Christians, one could conclude that this was a matter of simple expediency.

CHAPTER 14

SABBATH-KEEPING AFTER THE APOSTLES (5) THE SABBATH-KEEPERS

14.1 Introduction

Beginning in the first century, influential Christian writers started teaching changes to the Sabbath and urging believers to honour the Lord's Day. Nevertheless, there is evidence that a significant number of Christians were still observing the Sabbath up until the end of the sixth century, albeit in tandem with the Lord's Day. We know this to be the case because of Pope Gregory's (AD 590–604) condemnation of those who advocated resting on the Sabbath. However, from that time onwards, it appears that there was a concerted drive on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to ensure that Sunday became the official day of rest and worship. Despite this, not all Christians abandoned Sabbath-keeping: a number of faith communities outside of the Catholic Church courageously went against the prevalent trend to uphold the Fourth Commandment.

14.2 The Celtic Church

One Christian community that kept the Sabbath day was the early Celtic Church which emerged from Ireland in the sixth century. It had a zeal for evangelism and focused its efforts on the heathen areas of Scotland and Europe. One group, led by Columban,¹ settled on the west coast of Scotland and the islands of Hy and Iona.

Due to its detachment from Rome, it professed different

¹ Latin, *Columbanus*.

doctrines and practised a simpler faith. One key difference was Sabbath-keeping. Writing about this point, Professor Andrew Lang, a church historian, notes, "They worked on Sunday, but kept Saturday in a sabbatical manner."² Another writer, James Moffat, says, "It seems to have been customary in the Celtic churches of early times, in Ireland as well as Scotland, to keep Saturday the Jewish Sabbath, as a day of rest from labor. They obeyed the fourth commandment literally upon the seventh day of the week."³ Similarly, Alexander Clarence Flick, says, "The Celts used a Latin Bible unlike the Vulgate and kept Saturday as a day of rest, with special religious services on Sunday."⁴

The Celtic Church went on to evangelize in Europe under the leadership of Columban from AD 612. By the time the Roman Catholic Church dispatched its emissary, Boniface, to central Europe in AD 718, it felt compelled to redress what it saw as heretical teachings and to deal with those responsible.

In Britain, the fate of the Celtic Church was sealed when Pope Gregory I sent Augustine⁵ to England in AD 597, accompanied by a group of forty monks. Their mission was to convert the Anglo-Saxons and to bring the Celtic Church under the control of Rome. When they failed to secure compliance, they expelled the monks at Iona. The Celtic Church thereafter suffered centuries of oppression and, by AD 1322, disappeared altogether.

14.3 Other Sabbath-keepers

Apart from the early Celtic Church, there were other Sabbath-keepers from the sixth century onwards. They included the following:

- Christians in Rome who were castigated by Pope Gregory I (sixth and seventh centuries)⁶
- Christians in Italy (eighth century)⁷

2 Lang, A., *A History of Scotland From the Roman Occupation*, vol 1, p 96 (NewYork: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1900).

3 Moffat, J. C., *The Church In Scotland*, p140 (Philadelphia: 1882).

4 Flick, A. C., *The Rise of Mediaeval Church*, p 237 (Burt Franklin Publishers, 1964).

5 Augustine, first Archbishop of Canterbury, AD 598.

6 *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol XIII, p 13, epist 1.

7 Council of Friaul (791 AD), Canon 13, in Mansi, 13, 851.

- Christians in Bulgaria (ninth century)⁸
- The Nestorians (tenth century onwards)⁹
- Christians in Constantinople (eleventh century)¹⁰
- The Pasagians (Passagini) in Europe (twelfth and thirteenth centuries)¹¹
- Christians in Bohemia (fourteenth century)¹²
- Christians in Norway (fifteenth century)¹³
- Those termed “conscientious and independent thinkers” in England (sixteenth century)¹⁴
- British immigrants in America, including Seventh Day Baptists (seventeenth century)¹⁵
- Abyssinians (eighteenth century)¹⁶
- Christians in Russia (Subotniki, i.e. “Sabbatarians”),¹⁷ China,¹⁸ and Seventh Day Adventists in the USA (nineteenth century).¹⁹

From the twentieth century to the present time, the number of Sabbath-keeping Christians has continued to grow. According to one conservative estimate, the number of known faith groups upholding this holy day stands at 500.²⁰

8 *Responsa Nicolai Papae I ad Consulta Bulgarorum, Responsum 10* [Answer of Pope Nicholas I to the Prince of Bulgaria, Response 10], in Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol 15; and in Hefele, *Conciliengeschichte*, 4, sec 478.

9 Schaff, Philip, “Nestorians”, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1954).

10 *Migne Patrologia Latina*, vol 145, p 506; Hergenroether, Photius, vol 3, p 746.

11 Schaff, Philip, “Pasagians”, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1954).

12 Armitage, T., *A History of the Baptists* (Baptist Standard Bearer, 2001).

13 Catholic Provincial Council at Bergin AD 1435.

14 “Sabbath”, *Chambers’ Encyclopaedia*, vol 8, p 402 (London: W & R Chambers, 1868). Source: Internet Archive. <<http://www.archive.org/stream/chambersencyclo08lond#page/402/mode/1up>>

15 Bailey, J., *History of the Seventh-day Baptist General Conference: From its Origin September, 1802 to its Fifty-Third Session, September, 1865* (Toledo, Ohio: S. Bailey & Co. Publishers, 1866).

16 Abudacnus, J., *Historia Jacobitarum*, pp 118-119 (18th Century).

17 Sternberg, *Geschichte der Juden in Polen*, p 124.

18 Lin-Le [Lindley, Augustus F.], *Ti Ping Tien Kwoh: The History of the Ti-Ping Revolution*, vol 1, pp 36-48, 84 (London: Day & Son Ltd., 1866).

19 Schaff, Philip, “Adventists”, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1954).

20 Source: “The Ten Commandments” website. <<http://www.the-ten-commandments.org/sabbathkeepingchurches.html>>

14.4 Religious persecution

A distinguishing feature of those who upheld the Sabbath in the post-apostolic era was their non-conformity to the Catholic Church. This led to unfortunate consequences. Members of the Celtic Church and the Pasagians, for example, were oppressed and killed for their beliefs, and the latter became a primary target during the Medieval Inquisitions. Those arrested were subject to torture and, if deemed unrepentant, sentenced to death by burning at the stake. Those who relinquished their faith had to endure life-long imprisonment and the confiscation of property.

1478 marked the start of the Spanish Inquisition, which lasted until 1834. It was instigated, not by the Roman papacy, but by the Spanish monarchy, which was motivated by a desire to maintain Catholic orthodoxy within their kingdoms. The Jews suffered the most: they were persecuted and forced to convert to Christianity, but were often suspected of reverting to their original faith. Hence, any Christians thought to be “judaizing” would have been prime targets for the inquisitors.

14.5 Conclusion

From the sixth century onwards, the practice of Sabbath-keeping continued among some Christians, notably those without links to the Roman Catholic Church. However, the latter did not tolerate differences of doctrine and practice and therefore attempted either to enforce compliance or to purge the dissenters. Nevertheless, Sabbath-keeping as a custom survived over the centuries, albeit among some of the smaller faith communities. Today, there are growing numbers of enlightened Christians who uphold this holy day.

CHAPTER 15

ANSWERING SOME KEY ARGUMENTS AND QUESTIONS

15.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, we learnt that influential Christians in the post-apostolic era decried the Sabbath as a redundant Jewish tradition and promoted Sunday—the Lord’s Day—as the new Christian feast day. Other erroneous teachings included the claim that Jesus abolished the Ten Commandments, thereby rendering literal Sabbath-keeping unnecessary. Today, the legacy remains, for the majority of Christians keep Sunday as their day of rest. However, there are also those who hark back to the Lutheran argument that all days are alike and that any day can be observed in honour of God.

In this chapter, we shall use the Bible to address some of the key arguments and a number of common questions.

15.2 Argument 1: The Sabbath is a redundant Jewish tradition

God established the Sabbath at creation (Gen 2:1–3), two thousand years before the emergence of the Jewish nation, and two and a half thousand years before His delivery of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Even after He chose a holy nation for Himself—a people who would enter into a covenantal relationship with Him (Ex 19:5–6)—He continued to extend the Sabbath blessing to those Gentiles who knew Him through their interactions with His people. This point is evidenced in the detail of the Fourth Commandment: “But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor

your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates (Ex 20:10).

However, God's ultimate will was for all of mankind to return to Him and to keep His Sabbaths. Therefore, the Book of Isaiah prophesies of a time when salvation would extend to the Gentiles:

“Also the sons of the foreigner
Who join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him,
And to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants—
Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath,
And holds fast My covenant—
Even them I will bring to My holy mountain,
And make them joyful in My house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
Will be accepted on My altar;
For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.”
Isaiah 56:6–7

“For as the new heavens and the new earth
Which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the Lord,
“So shall your descendants and your name remain.
And it shall come to pass
That from one New Moon to another,
And from one Sabbath to another,
All flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the Lord.
Isaiah 66:22–23

The apostle Paul describes this aspect of God's plan as a mystery—one that was finally revealed to the early church, and which continues to be fulfilled to this day (Col 1:26–27). Therefore, far from being a redundant Jewish tradition, the Sabbath has become a blessing to “all flesh”, where people of different backgrounds come before God “from one Sabbath to another”.

15.3 Argument 2: Christians should observe the Lord's Day

15.3.1 Origin of the term

From as early as the first century, many Christians have been interpreting the term “the Lord’s Day” to mean Sunday, attributing its origin to Revelation 1:10 which records the following words of John: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet”. However, there are at least two problems with such a view.

One problem is that nowhere in the Book of Revelation does John equate the Lord’s Day with the first day of the week—the day of Jesus resurrection. Moreover, in his other book, the Gospel of John, he refers to Sunday as simply “the first day of the week” (Jn 20:1, 19).

Another problem relates to the setting of Revelation. The book states that John was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10; cf. 4:2). In other words, the Holy Spirit transported him into the spiritual realm, to witness “the things which are, and the things which will take place” (Rev 1:19). These included the Lord’s pronouncement upon the seven churches (chapters 1–3) and visions of an eschatological nature (chapters 6–22). In light of this, it would be more appropriate to interpret the Lord’s Day as the day of divine judgment. This would tally with the concept of a fearsome “Day of the Lord” that is already well documented in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament prophetic books (e.g. Isa 2:12; 13:9; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; Amos 5:18; Obad 1:15; Zeph 1:14; see also 2 Pet 3:10).

15.3.2 Did Jesus’ disciples commemorate the resurrection?

One argument relating to the need to observe Sunday in commemoration of Jesus’ resurrection is that this is allegedly what the disciples did (cf. Lk 24:33–51; Jn 20:19–23). Proponents point to an account in Luke where two followers returned to Jerusalem to proclaim news of the risen Lord to a gathering of the eleven disciples: “So they rose that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together” (Lk 24:33).

The question is, had the eleven disciples actually gathered in worship that Sunday? The Book of John indicates not: “Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews...” (Jn 20:19). The reason they were together was because they were frightened. Furthermore, we note that many of the disciples remained sceptical about Jesus’ resurrection, despite having heard the news from others (Lk 24:11). It is hardly plausible, then, that they were holding a service to commemorate, or even to celebrate, the event. It was only later, when Jesus appeared to all of them, that they truly believed and rejoiced (Lk 24:36–43; Jn 20:19–29; 21:1–14).

15.3.3 Did Paul and the believers in Troas observe the Lord’s Day?

Another biblical passage that is commonly cited in support of the Lord’s Day is Acts 20:7–12. However, it is important that we look carefully at the context of the event. The passage records that Paul had been in Troas for a week as part of his third missionary journey and was preparing to leave. On the day before his departure, which was the first day of the week, the disciples gathered to break bread, and Paul took the opportunity to encourage them (Acts 20:7).

The first point to note is that the account depicts a farewell fellowship, not a routine service. This is evidenced by the fact that Paul was “ready to depart the next day” (Acts 20:7). As it transpired, the fellowship lasted until daybreak on Monday (Acts 20:11)—longer than could be expected for a regular service.

A second point is that the breaking of bread took place after midnight (Acts 20:7, 11). As Troas was a Gentile region, this would have been reckoned as Monday morning. Therefore, assuming that the breaking of bread in this context was the Holy Communion sacrament (as opposed to a simple fellowship meal), it did not actually take place on Sunday at all.

Thirdly, we can be confident that if the believers were partaking of the holy sacrament, Paul would have taught them to do so in commemoration of Jesus’ death, not His resurrection (1 Cor 11:24–26).

In light of the above, there is nothing to suggest that the disciples

at Troas were commemorating Jesus' resurrection through a newly established holy day, namely the Lord's Day. Rather, the evidence points to the nature of the occasion as being one of a farewell fellowship in honour of Paul.

15.3.4 Did Paul instruct the church in Corinth to keep the Lord's Day?

1 Corinthians 16:1–2 simply records Paul instructing the Corinthian believers to set aside a portion of their earnings on the first day of the week so that there would be a fund ready for dispatch to needy believers in Jerusalem by the time of his next visit (see Rom 15:26). There is no mention that he asked them to do this during a service.

15.3.5 Is the Lord's Day a biblical teaching?

In the Bible, we can find no teaching, either from Jesus or from the apostles, concerning the need to keep the Lord's Day in commemoration of His resurrection. Moreover, there is no basis for the elevation of Sunday above the Sabbath, despite the seemingly authoritative arguments that emerged in the post-apostolic era.

One argument is that Sunday took on a new significance when Jesus resurrected and appeared to His disciples. However, the counter-argument is that the Bible was merely documenting the fulfilment of prophecy and nothing else—the fact that Jesus would die and rise again after three days (Mt 12:38–40; Lk 18:33; Jn 2:19–22; 1 Cor 15:4). In any case, after His first appearance on the Sunday, Jesus continued to show Himself to His disciples on other occasions: eight days later, on a Tuesday (Jn 20:26); on an unspecified day (Jn 21:1, 14); over a period of “forty days” (Acts 1:3).

Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21). To be saved, we must do God's will. It entails that we keep His commandments faithfully and not follow the traditions of man.

Take which you will, either the fathers or the moderns, and we shall find no Lord's day instituted by any apostolical mandate; no Sabbath set on foot by them upon the first day of the week.

Peter Heylyn, *History of the Sabbath*, 1636

Not any ecclesiastical writer of the first three centuries attributed the origin of Sunday observance either to Christ or to his apostles.

William Domville, *The Sabbath; An Examination of the Six Texts*, 1849

15.4 Argument 3: Jesus abolished the Law to usher in an era of grace

To address this argument, we need to consider three related matters: the Bible's teachings concerning grace, the Law, and the Ten Commandments.

15.4.1 The Bible's teaching concerning grace

The word for "grace" in the New Testament Bible is the Greek word *charis*¹—a word that signifies "unearned and unmerited favour".² This is a particularly fitting description for that aspect of God's work which underpins the whole Christian faith: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph 2:8–9); "...who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began (2 Tim 1:9).

The Bible is clear that we have been saved on account of God's grace. Salvation is His free and merciful gift; we did nothing to earn it. God bestowed it when He sent His beloved Son to die for us and to shed His blood. The outcome is that we are now justified through faith in Jesus Christ.

1 Strong's reference no. G5485.

2 Zodhiates, S., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (USA: AMG Publishers, 1993).

[B]eing justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.

Romans 3:24–27

However, the Bible is equally clear that grace through faith in no way relinquishes our practical obligations towards God. On the contrary, faith entails action. This is well illustrated by the fact that when God invites us to accept salvation through the gospel, we are required to respond in the appropriate manner: to repent, receive water baptism and to ask for the infilling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; Lk 11:13). In short, grace only becomes ours when we manifest our faith.

Furthermore, after entering into God's salvation, we have a duty to press onward and upwards by keeping God's commandments and living a fruitful and holy life (Mt 19:17; Jn 15:8; 1 Pet 1:15–16). His commandments include the Ten Commandments in their entirety. When we live proactively in this way, we reveal our Christian faith: "But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (Jas 2:18).

15.4.2 The Bible's teaching concerning the Law

Concerning the issue of whether Jesus abolished the Law, there is no clearer answer than His own words, which are recorded in the Book of Matthew:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one

of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:17–19

From Jesus' words, we note two points: He came not to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it. The word for "fulfil" in Greek is *pleroo* and has various nuances of meaning, including to "make full", "complete", and "make perfect".³ Knowing this helps us to understand a couple of key points.

Firstly, Jesus fulfilled the Law by making it complete. He did this by realizing those aspects that had been a "copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Heb 8:5; cf. 10:1). These were the rules governing the religious life of the Israelites and concerned matters such as the tabernacle (Ex 25–31), offerings (Lev 1–7), clean and unclean animals (Lev 11), purification (Lev 12–15), the priesthood (Lev 21–22) and festivals (Lev 23). They also included the ceremonial laws of the Sabbath—the offerings (Num 28:9–10) and the setting out of showbread (Lev 24:5–8). All these pointed to the work of salvation that would be accomplished by Jesus, including His establishment of the church (Heb 8:2; 9:11). Hence, the writer of Hebrews explains that some parts of the Law were "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation" (Heb 9:10)—the time of reformation being the coming of Christ. Likewise, Paul describes these as "a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Col 2:17).

Secondly, Jesus fulfilled the Law by making it full and perfect. He did this by making clear its spirit—specifically those aspects to do with our moral obligations towards God and man. Hence, during His ministry, He expounded on God's commandments—including the Ten Commandments (Mt 19:17–19)—to reveal their meaning at a more profound level and to highlight the fact that God now requires us to keep them from within our hearts (e.g. Mt 5–7). In terms of the Fourth Commandment, Jesus showed us through His personal example and teachings a number of important truths: the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27); it is a day for doing good to others (Mt 12:12); God desires mercy over sacrifice

3 Strong's reference no. G4137.

(Mt 12:7); He is Lord of the Sabbath (Mt 12:8).

In summary, far from abolishing the Law, Jesus fulfilled it through His work of salvation and by making clear the spirit of God's commandments. The Bible reveals that, under the new covenant, God has placed His laws inside our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and no longer in writing as in times past (Heb 8:10; Ezek 36:27). His will is that we submit to the Spirit, so "that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4).

15.4.3 The Bible's teaching concerning the Ten Commandments

It is important to reiterate that Jesus did not abolish the Ten Commandments. From the Bible, we understand that they constitute a special element of God's Law. Indeed, their unique status was first indicated through His writing of them with His own finger onto tablets of stone (Ex 31:18) and His instructions to Moses to place them within the ark of the covenant (Deut 10:2). It is particularly significant that, thousands of years later, the Holy Spirit enabled the apostle John to glimpse the ark in a vision of the heavenly temple—God's true church (Rev 11:19). These truths reveal that the Ten Commandments remain binding on God's people until the end of time. Importantly, for our purpose, they are simple to keep and do not carry the curse associated with the old covenantal Law. For this reason, elder James refers to them as the "law of liberty" and exhorts believers to live by them (Jas 2:12).

In conclusion, the Fourth Commandment—the Sabbath commandment—still applies today. What do not apply are the regulations and the penalty of death for transgression. Jesus Christ has ushered us into a period of grace and spiritual maturity, whereby we no longer need the letter of the Mosaic Law to teach us in detail how to keep the Sabbath (Gal 3:24–25). What God now requires of us is to keep this holy day from our heart, in sincerity and faith.

15.5 Argument 4: Jesus has fulfilled the Sabbath rest

A compelling and often heard argument is that Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath rest and rendered literal Sabbath-keeping unnecessary. Here, the fulfilment is interpreted as the complete realization of the Old Testament shadow. Those who hold this view are apt to cite those famous words of Jesus: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28–29).

While no one would argue against the biblical teaching that Jesus has given believers spiritual rest—rest not only from the need to strive for our own righteousness through the keeping of the Mosaic Law (Rom 3:20–22; Gal 2:16), but also from the bondage of sin and death (Rom 8:2)—we cannot conclude that this equates to the realization of the Sabbath, nor its obsolescence. This is because the Bible is clear that there is a Sabbath that remains to be fulfilled. The writer of Hebrews says:

There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience.

Hebrews 4:9–11

Here, the original Greek word for “rest” is *sabbatismos*⁴, which refers to the heavenly rest that awaits victorious Christians—the time when they can lay down their earthly labours once and for all. The writer therefore exhorts his Christian readers—those who have already accepted Christ as their Saviour—to be “diligent to enter that rest” through obedience to God (Heb 4:11). The fact of the matter is, by keeping the Sabbath rest here on earth, we are reminded that there will be a future *sabbatismos* in heaven, and that we need to prepare for it through spiritual cultivation (2 Pet 3:13–14).

Christians who argue that Jesus has already fulfilled the Sabbath also point to Colossians 2:16–17: “Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,

⁴ Strong's reference no. G4520.

which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.” They infer from this passage that Jesus, being the substance, has done away with the shadow, which is the Sabbath itself. For this reason, they say that believers can no longer be judged for non-observance. However, such a view sits neither well with Paul’s own custom of Sabbath-keeping (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4), nor with the Bible’s teaching concerning a future heavenly rest (Heb 4:9).

It is therefore important that we clarify the context of Paul’s words. The point is, he was writing to address an issue of heresy at Colosse which involved the “commandments and doctrines of men” (Col 2:22) and which had “an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body” (Col 2:23). It appears that some Christians were promoting a brand of religion that combined Mosaic traditions (Col 2:11–14) with ascetic principles (Col 2:21) and were criticizing others for not adhering to it. It was therefore incumbent upon Paul to point out that the written Law was merely a shadow of Jesus. It was a shadow in one sense because it pointed to His salvation work (see Heb 7–10:22) and the era of justification by faith (Gal 3:23–25). However, the Law was a shadow in another sense because Jesus revealed the deeper meaning of the moral element—including the Sabbath commandment—to help us be clearer about what God requires of us in this time of grace.

In short, Paul was not speaking against the need for the Sabbath itself. Rather, he was pointing out that we no longer need to keep the regulations of the Mosaic Law.

15.6 Argument 5: All days are alike

Some Christians cite Romans 14:5–6 to make the point that all days are alike and that they are free to dedicate to God whichever day they choose. However, they fail to grasp that this biblical passage does not address the matter of the Sabbath at all, but rather an issue relating to food and drink.

A problem in the church at Rome was that some believers regarded all food as fit and proper to eat, while others—whom Paul described as “weak in the faith”—abstained from foods they considered to be unclean (Rom 14:1–2, 14, 20–21). In Romans 14, Paul admonished

the stronger believers to accept the weaker ones (Rom 14:1) and to avoid doing anything that would make them stumble (Rom 14:13–15, 20–21). He also urged both parties to stop judging the other (Rom 14:3–4, 10, 13) because, differences aside, everyone was motivated by the same desire to please God (Rom 14:6).

In Romans 14:6, Paul spoke particularly about observing “the day” alongside the matters of eating and not eating. This leads us to understand that the day (or days) was either a fast day or a feast day, although we cannot be sure of its exact nature.⁵ In other words, some believers appeared to have had a custom of fasting or feasting on certain days, while others did not. This explains Paul’s words: “One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike” (Rom 14:5).

What was Paul’s conclusion? He said that, while personal convictions about food, abstention and other related matters were all very well, they should never cause offence to others (Rom 14:21). Importantly, believers have a duty to pursue peace: “[F]or the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).

15.7 Argument 6: We do not need to keep days, months, seasons and years

The letter to the Galatians was for a Gentile church, for Paul says they were uncircumcised (Gal 5:2; 6:12–13) and used to worship false gods (Gal 4:8). His purpose in writing was to reprimand them for turning away from Jesus to a “different gospel” (Gal 1:6) that was being taught by false teachers who wanted to “pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal 1:7). The latter advocated works of the Law (Gal 3; 5:4), including circumcision (Gal 5:2; 6:12–13), as requirements for salvation.

In Galatians 4:10, Paul addressed an outcome of the false teachings which was the believers’ observance of “days and months and seasons and years”. These were the Jewish festivals which were integral to the Mosaic Law and included the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Day of Atonement, the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee

5 Black, Matthew, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Romans*. Second edition (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1973).

and so forth. By adhering to this Jewish calendar, the Galatian converts were giving up their liberty which came from believing in Christ in exchange for enslavement to the Mosaic ordinances, hence Paul's rebuke: "But now after you have known God...how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?" (Gal 4:9). The ordinances were deemed "weak and beggarly elements" because of their inability to bring about man's justification before God (Gal 2:16).

It is important to point out that Paul was not talking about the weekly Sabbath, which is part of the Ten Commandments—God's enduring and timeless laws for all believers. Jesus says we need to keep these in order to "enter into life" (Mt 19:17).

CHAPTER 16

THE PRINCIPLES OF SABBATH-KEEPING

16.1 Introduction

In this time of grace, Sabbath-keeping should be a simple matter as there are no longer any Mosaic regulations to keep, or judgments to invoke trepidation. Our duty is merely one of upholding the Fourth Commandment—to keep the day holy, to rest, and to commemorate God’s gracious acts of creation and salvation. In addition, the Lord Jesus has taught and shown us through personal example to share God’s grace through good deeds. These basic principles, however, are not reasons for us to be casual about Sabbath-keeping. If anything, we need to fulfil God’s requirement to worship Him in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24). Therefore, whatever we do on this day should emanate from the heart.

16.2 Which day?

It should be clear that the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week—Saturday. Sunday observance, as we have learnt, was a development of the post-apostolic period, instigated by a church in doctrinal decline.

Our current way of timekeeping harks back to Roman times and entails that we reckon the day from midnight to midnight. However, the Bible shows that the original one-day cycle was from sunset to sunset. The Book of Genesis records: “God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day” (Gen 1:5; cf. 1:8, 13, 19, 23, 31). The Jews understood this and so kept the Sabbath from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday (Neh 13:19; Mk 15:42)—a practice that remains to this day.

As Christians, we should note that the Sabbath is a complete twenty-four hour cycle. It means that we should sanctify the whole day, not just a single hour or the part of the day that we spend in church.

16.3 The principles of Sabbath-keeping

16.3.1 Keeping the day holy

The Sabbath is special. It has been sanctified by God (Gen 2:3), meaning that it has been separated out to belong to Him. Therefore, in the Bible, it is called “a holy Sabbath to the Lord” (Ex 16:23), “the Sabbath of the Lord your God” (Ex 20:10; cf. Lev 23:3), “a Sabbath of rest to the Lord” (Ex 35:2), “My Sabbaths” (Lev 26:2; Isa 56:4; Ezek 20:12). For this reason, we must respect this day and not profane it by treating it like any other day of the week (Ex 20:8; Deut 5:12).

The Book of Isaiah teaches us to keep the Sabbath holy by setting aside our own personal matters and wishes in favour of God’s:

“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,
From doing your pleasure on My holy day,
And call the Sabbath a delight,
The holy day of the Lord honorable,
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,
Nor finding your own pleasure,
Nor speaking your own words,
Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord;
And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,
And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.
The mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Isaiah 58:13–14

While it would not be helpful or desirable to have a prescriptive approach—for that would lead us back to the era of the Law—we will do well to reflect at a personal level on the way we keep the Sabbath. Do we have a tendency to engage in non-essential activities that distract us from the sanctity of the day, and do we allow them to take up time that rightfully belongs to God? If we do, then maybe we can do better.

Central to Sabbath-keeping is church attendance. This is because the Bible calls the day a holy convocation¹ (Lev 23:3). It is when the community of faith comes together to worship, to share His word and give thanks for His wonderful acts of creation and salvation (Ex 20:11; Deut 5:15). In doing this, the believers reaffirm their faith in God and build up the bond of unity within His household. Therefore, even if we live far away, we should endeavour to set aside time to worship God—on our own, if we have no choice; as a family unit; or with other brethren living nearby. Keeping the Sabbath is a basic Christian duty, and we should maintain this habit wherever we are.

By keeping the Sabbath holy, we are reminded that God has chosen us out of the world and sanctified us (Ex 31:13; Ezek 20:12). It is on account of His grace that we are “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people” (1 Pet 2:9). Having this constant awareness prompts us to lead lives that are worthy of our noble calling and to act as beacons of light in this dark world.

16.3.2 Resting

Underpinning the Fourth Commandment is the requirement to rest. Our almighty God Himself rested on the seventh day after completing His creation work. In doing so, He set a pattern for man’s earthly existence: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God...” (Ex 20:9–10).

Today, we live in a world where the pace of life never slows and the demands upon our time are unrelenting. Those of us fortunate enough to enter into God’s weekly rest are in a position to truly appreciate this special blessing. It is a precious respite—a day when we can lay aside our hectic routines to rest physically and mentally, and allow ourselves to be spiritually refreshed through God’s word and through fellowship with other believers.

However, there is an even more profound reason for us to rest on the Sabbath: it reminds us of a future *sabbatismos* (Heb 4:9), or heavenly rest. Hence, the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to strive to enter into it through obedience to God:

¹ Hebrew, *miqra* (H4744), meaning “something called out, i.e. a public meeting...assembly, calling, convocation, reading”. Source: *The Complete Word Study: Old Testament*, ed. S. Zodhiates (Tennessee: AMG International, 1994).

There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.

Hebrews 4:9–11

The question is, how exactly should we rest? Very simply, the Fourth Commandment stipulates that we should stop our work (Ex 20:10). In the original Hebrew, the word for “work” is *melakah*², where the principal meaning is employment or business. This leads us to understand that work is primarily the activity of making a living.

In a world where time equates to money, God’s call to stop work goes against the grain. However, for the person who truly fears Him, it is both appropriate and necessary. The Sabbath offers a regular pause in our busy lives to regain perspective: to remember our status, God’s love, and our true purpose. In truth, God’s requirement for us to stop work is also completely reasonable, given the fact that He has given us six days in which to earn a living and, moreover, has graciously assured us of His providential care (Isa 58:13–14). All we need is a heart of obedience, a measure of faith, and the right conditions in our lives to enable us to comply with God’s will.

At a fundamental level, having the right conditions in our lives means doing a job that allows us to rest on the Sabbath day. For many of us, particularly those working in the west, this is not likely to be an issue, as many organizations close at weekends. However, this will not be the case for everyone: in some countries and in certain sectors, employees have contractual obligations to work at weekends. In such situations, and where we genuinely have no option, we can only appeal to the mercy of God. Nevertheless, this should never be a reason for us to be complacent: we must remember that we still have an over-riding duty to honour the Sabbath commandment. Where practicable, that duty might entail re-negotiating our work contract, looking for a new post, or even considering a career change. Where there is a will, God will surely provide the way.

For those of us in the fortunate position of being self-employed, Sabbath-keeping should hopefully be an altogether more

² Strong’s reference no. H4399. “The principal meaning is deputyship, i.e. ministry, service, employment, work, labor, performance, business, trade, errand.” Source: *The Complete Word Study: Old Testament* (USA: AMG Publishers, 1994).

straightforward matter. This is because closing our business on the seventh day should be a matter of course. When we do this, we not only enable ourselves to honour the Sabbath rest, we allow those in our employment to do likewise (Ex 20:10).

Broadening the scope, we will also do well to apply the spirit of the Sabbath rest to two other areas of our lives: our personal or home life, and our church life. In terms of our personal life, we should consider deferring any non-essential tasks that have the potential to tire us or to raise our stress levels. The benefit is that we will have more time and energy for more meaningful matters, such as being with our family, and with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In terms of our church life, it is likewise important to promote the principle of rest. If we have responsibility for the Sabbath schedules of our local church, we should try to strike a balance in terms of the volume of activities we arrange. Services and other church work are certainly central to this holy day, but we also need to ensure that members are able to experience and enjoy the Sabbath rest. The latter might be compromised if there are too things planned, or if the same few members are enlisted to facilitate them week after week. Both the congregation and the workers need to come away from the weekly Sabbath feeling physically and spiritually refreshed.

16.3.3 Commemorating God's grace

The Sabbath is a day for us to commemorate two important aspects of God's grace. One aspect is God's creation: the fact that He made the heavens and the earth and all things in it, including man (Ex 20:11). This truth provides us with much needed perspective. It reminds us that, however much material success we may acquire in this world, we are but God's creatures. He is the master of the universe—the one who created everything by the power of His command, and the one who gives us life, our daily needs and everything we have.

The second aspect of God's grace is His salvation. We remember that, just as He delivered the Israelites out of their bondage from Egypt (Deut 5:15), so He delivered us from our bondage to sin (Rom 6:17–18). Having this awareness constantly in our mind should give rise to a heart of thankfulness. Furthermore, it should act as a motivational

force, compelling us to live for God and to share the good news of salvation with others.

Each one of us should make a habit of remembering these aspects of God's grace. In addition, the church should share these messages with the congregation, for in this way, we avoid losing sight of why we ought to keep the Fourth Commandment.

16.3.4 Doing good works

The Sabbath reminds us of another important truth: as believers, we have an obligation to both God and man (Mt 22:37–39). Therefore, while attending services to worship God is important, it is only half the picture; we also need to take care of the people around us, especially those in the household of faith (Gal 6:10). It is with good reason, then, that Jesus taught us to do good works on this day (Mt 12:12). He Himself taught in the synagogues, visited people, healed the sick and cast out demons.

For us today, performing good deeds could entail doing something as simple as visiting the sick and the isolated, giving someone a ride to church, offering a sympathetic ear, preparing a fellowship meal, or sharing the gospel. All these things and much more are possible when we have a heart of love and eyes that are constantly open to the needs of others. In truth, when we allow God to use us to minister to others, we enable them to experience His love and the warmth and joy of being one family in Christ: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34–35).

16.4 Conclusion

God, in His wisdom, gave us a Sabbath that remains as significant and as relevant now as when it was first established. It is a day of respite, an opportunity to enter into His blessings, a time for reflection upon His grace and our future hope, and a time to manifest His love. By keeping the Sabbath here on earth, we look forward to keeping it for an eternity in heaven.

“Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them’ ” (Rev 14:13).

CHAPTER 17

SABBATH-KEEPING IN THE TRUE JESUS CHURCH

In this final chapter, members of the True Jesus Church from around the world share what the Sabbath means to them and how they observe it. Despite the differences in environments, personal circumstances and lifestyles, we find a striking commonality, which includes a deep sense of thankfulness to God and the desire to honour Him through rest and sanctification.

For me, the Sabbath is a joyful day. I study at a very competitive business school and sometimes I fear that my ambitions could lead me to abandon the grace of God, or even to sin. Therefore, I'm very thankful for the Sabbath. It's a day for reflection and for enjoying the grace of God. It's also a day for studying His word and having fellowship with other brethren. I can stop thinking about my studies and escape from the pressures of school. It's a complete day of rest for me, a time to enjoy and appreciate what God has given.

As there are no churches or prayer houses in the Netherlands, I usually travel to the Rhineland Prayer House for services. It's located near the border between Germany and the Netherlands. Normally, if I don't have anything to do on Friday evening, I go to a sister's house for Bible study. On Saturday morning, we go to the Prayer House (which is a member's house) for the Sabbath service.

After the service, we share news and prayer requests, and we pray together. Then, we have a hymnal session where we sing our favourite hymns. It's a peaceful day and so much fun! The congregation isn't big, but we're very close. Most of the members are foreign students and workers from Taiwan. We're all grateful to be able to observe the Sabbath together in Germany.

Melita Purnomo, student, Netherlands

The Sabbath is the teaching of the Bible and God's promise of blessings. It's also the day on which I can lay aside all my worries and burdens.

At Zhongli Church, we start the Sabbath with a morning prayer, followed by formal services in the morning and afternoon. We have a meal together in between the two services. There are religious education classes for the youngsters in the morning and afternoon, and classes for teenagers after the two main services. College youths have their classes after dinner in the evening. Generally, the Sabbath is full of services and holy work.

Serena Hsu, sales coordinator, Taiwan

Before 1977, we didn't really know how important the Sabbath was. There were no Sabbath services back then, but we did gather at a member's house as the children had a day off school. When we did start holding services at the takeaway shop (the old prayer house), we had one Sabbath service, followed by lunch. In 1985, when we bought the current church building, we still only had one service on the Sabbath. However, shortly after, we had two services—one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Nowadays, on a typical Sabbath day, we'll rest at home in the morning and go to church around 10.30 am. The first service starts at 11.30 am. The Sabbath is very good. We keep it because it's what Christians should do—it's part of our duty. If we're not in Elgin or near a church, we keep the Sabbath in our hearts.

We didn't understand the reason for the Sabbath in the past, but now, we look highly upon it. We put aside our work and concentrate on the day, just as the Bible teaches.

Jackie Shek and Mary Tang, retired couple, Scotland, UK

The Sabbath is an institution for me. I was introduced to it from a very young age and have been keeping it ever since. I start the Sabbath by going home from university on Friday and attending evening Bible study. Basically, on Saturday, I wake up, leave home for church, stay until evening, come home and go to sleep. I try to keep the Sabbath holy and to rest by being at church."

Nathanael Ko, student, Germany.

Since Saturday is the Sabbath, I try not to make any appointments. If I have to (and this is rare), I make sure they're after church so that I don't need to rush. When I was working, I refused to work on Saturdays. Now I'm looking for a job that doesn't require me to work on this day. In order to keep the Sabbath, I go to church every week and attend all the services and fellowships. I also help wherever I can and do what I'm assigned to do—cooking, cleaning and watching the children.

Sau Ying Ho, housewife, France

I'm an employee of the church and work on weekdays. Sometimes, on the Sabbath, there are still many things to do, but I know I need to rest and hand over my work to the Lord Almighty and not rely on my own ability. To me, the Sabbath means God's love and blessing. It's a time for us to return to Him and to witness His beauty and glory by worshipping in His temple, listening to His truth and loving one another. I really treasure this day and am very thankful for having this wonderful command from our God in heaven.

I like to draw close to God by singing hymns. It helps me to keep the Sabbath day holy and to be joyful no matter where I am or what I'm doing. I know that He'll take care of everything and I can relax and enjoy His true rest.

One Friday night, after service, a sister who had been absent from church for a while due to illness invited me to join her for a walk the next day. In the morning, as we walked in the park, I was filled with the joy of the Sabbath and began singing a hymn. At the sister's request, I sang it louder so she could hear the words: 'Lord, on Thee our souls depend; In compassion now descend; Fill our hearts with Thy rich grace, Tune our lips to sing Thy praise, Tune our lips to sing Thy praise.'

Afterwards, I went to church and continued the remainder of the joyful Sabbath there. The events of that day made me think of Jesus' words: 'What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?' (Mt 12:11).

Sarah Pai, secretary, USA

I live in Japan where there are not many [True Jesus] churches. The nearest one to where I live is Yokohama Prayer House, one and a half to two hours' drive away. I don't have the luxury of being able to attend services on any other days of the week, so I especially treasure the Sabbath. On this day, I look forward to going to church, listening to God's words and being with other brethren.

On Friday night, I often stay up late to prepare for any church work I need to do the next day. On Saturday morning, our family leaves for church around 8.30 am. The morning prayer session is at 10.30 am and is followed by a morning service, lunch, hymnal, afternoon service, youth service, sisters fellowship and youth choir. We leave church at 4 pm. On our journey home, we usually discuss the day's sermons or the things that happened in church.

Jenny Saito, housewife and part-time English teacher, Japan

The Sabbath is a day that reminds me of the fundamental questions of life:

- *Who I am:* The establishment of the Sabbath at creation by God reminds me that I'm His child, and that He's so loving that, even though He doesn't need to "rest", He considered our frailties and created a day of rest for us.
- *What I'm doing here:* The command to keep the Sabbath holy reminds me not to consume the twenty-four hours of each of the seven days for myself. It's also a welcome prod, reminding me to check whether I've kept myself holy throughout the week and whether I've done enough to honour Him.
- *What I should aspire towards:* For five days of the week, I'm immersed in a society that urges one to go faster, higher and further for things in the world. The Sabbath is a reminder that, one day, all things will cease to matter, and I should really focus on the things that matter.

While I was growing up, I thought that one could pick and choose which Sabbath service to attend, but now, I realize that God has given us a Sabbath day, not a Sabbath hour. Also, when I first started working, I had to work a five-and-a-half day week, including Saturday mornings. However, this was eventually changed to five days. This has indeed been God's grace.

I'm mindful that there are still others who have to work at weekends. Therefore, I try to attend all the services in my home church—on Friday evening, Saturday morning and Saturday

afternoon. On those occasions when I'm tempted to skip a session to "do my own thing", the verses in Isaiah 58:13-14 reverberate through my mind!

Sharon Chang, civil servant, Singapore

To me, the Sabbath is a day of rest. I can stop work and rest from my physical labours. It's also a time to receive spiritual edification through sermons, Bible study and praying together in church. The Sabbath is important to me because I can devote myself to God and keep holy. On this day, I spend time to worship my Creator and Saviour, sing praises and give glory to Him for all His blessings and grace. It's also an opportunity to participate in divine work, as serving in the church is an important part of my devotion to the Lord.

I try to keep the Sabbath holy by not working on this day, if at all possible. Since I'm a support engineer, I'm on call at weekends. Fortunately, I now work in a department where the frequency of callouts is very low. There's still a small chance I may be called out, but thanks to the grace of God, this hasn't happened yet.

I also try to keep the Sabbath holy by avoiding social or work functions on this day. Usually, my friends and work colleagues understand; they know I'm a Christian and that I always attend church.

Daniel Vun, engineer, Australia

The Sabbath is a holy day set aside for us by God. It's when we can put down our worldly matters and any problems we're facing, and focus on worshipping God. It's wonderful how He's given us this day to rest, because we really need it.

In London Church (Central), the youths normally cook dinner together on Friday evening. This is followed by a service from 8 pm to 9.15 pm. On Saturdays, we have a whole day of worship, both in Central London and South London. It consists of services, activities and fellowships from 11 am until the evening. It's really jam-packed, but it's also joyful. It's really to do with our mindset and our heart: what you put in is what you get out. If we have the heart of praising God and the mentality of grasping opportunities to have meaningful and edifying conversations with the brother and sisters, we'll benefit a lot.

We particularly love the fellowship sessions in the afternoon. In Central London, on the first Sabbath of the month, we have a Brothers' Fellowship and a Sisters' Fellowship. On the second and

third Sabbaths of the month, we have a London Fellowship. The younger members also have Junior Youth Fellowship twice a month. On the last Sabbath of the month, we go out to do leafleting, street preaching and door-to-door evangelism. The fellowships are essential because we can discuss challenges, struggles and faith issues. By sharing, we're able to understand one another more and grow together in faith.

After the fellowships, we have choir. It's always really nice to come together to sing praises to God for the blessings we've received throughout the week and for the Sabbath rest.

The youths normally pray together at 9 pm, after dinner and chores. It really adds to our Sabbath, as we share prayer requests and pray for one another. This really brings us joy on the Sabbath day!

Nissi Chin, paralegal and Sophia Chin, graphic designer, England, UK

The Sabbath has a significant and important place in my heart. I look forward to it every week, not least because I don't have to wake up early for work. I truly see it as a blessed day of rest—a day that God has specially designated for us.

When I first moved to Hong Kong, my husband and I used to live in the western district, so it was easy to go to Fortress Hill for the Sabbath service at 11 am. In the afternoon, we'd go back to Tsuan Wan for services. However, since moving to Tai Po, we're too far away to go to Fortress Hill for services in the morning, so we try our best to enjoy this part of the day at home, and to prepare our hearts, either by listening to online sermons, reading the Bible or preparing RE lessons for that day.

Sabbath services at Tai Po begin at 1.30 pm. Afterwards, we have RE lessons and a youth fellowship, which ends at 5 pm. I cherish the time at church. If I'm unable to attend a session due to school commitments, I always feel as if I'm missing something.

I realize the importance of, and cherish, Sabbath services, which is why I try to make the most of them and to enjoy fellowship with the brethren.

Elaine Shek Hoo, teacher, Hong Kong.

The Sabbath is an important day for me. I look forward to it after six days of work and am grateful to gather with the brethren to worship God. It means I can draw near to Him and rest in Him. I'm usually busy working for the sake of my daily needs and without this day, it would be difficult for me to sit down and rest spiritually.

On the Sabbath, I go to church to listen to the word of God in quietness. At home, I talk with my family about faith matters. We often reflect over the events of the past week—what we’ve done and said—to see if we’ve done what God has required of us and to consider how we can improve. By doing these things, we try to live out our faith in Jesus.

Tin Jun Zhou, businessman, Moscow

I first realized the significance of the Sabbath when I went to the UK to further my studies. The peace and fellowship in church was both physically and spiritually refreshing.

Nowadays, I’m busy working in the city in Malaysia. Observing the Sabbath reminds me constantly of the immense grace of God. Our family keeps the Sabbath by attending church services, which remind us of God’s daily providential care and help us to refocus on godly things. Apart from services, we also have fellowship meals with the church members. Finally, I find that teaching children’s RE classes is spiritually refreshing.

Thiam Huat Low, bank manager, Malaysia

When I was young, keeping the Sabbath seemed merely like a command we should follow. However, as I grew up, I learnt that it’s a special day that God has blessed and sanctified, and on which we should turn away from our worldly activities. It’s always very joyful because we put aside our hectic schedules and have spiritual communion with other brethren.

It’s only in these past few years that I’ve been keeping the full Sabbath day—from Friday evening to Saturday evening—after learning from the church brothers and sisters while I was studying overseas. It was quite hard at first because I’d got used to keeping only a Sabbath hour and spending the rest of the time on my own pleasures and activities.

Nowadays, I attend most of the church services and activities at Sunter Church. The attendance is around 150 members, and everyone knows each other, so it’s like keeping the Sabbath with your own family. The church has services on Friday evenings at 7 pm and Saturdays at 10 am. The morning Sabbath service is followed by a Bible study, lunch, afternoon service and, finally, a youth service which finishes at 6.30 pm.

Winly Jurnawan, graduate, Indonesia

Thank God, the Sabbath is a day to rest from my own works; to show my fear of God; to focus wholly on Him and on godliness; a day to do His works; to experience and maintain unity between the sons of God; to rejoice in, and deeply recognize, Jesus the Almighty God.

I prioritize and plan my work for the week every Saturday evening. I examine my spirituality, intercede for the members and commit the Sabbath services into the hands of God. I also examine my relationship with the brethren, visit weak members and conduct door-to-door evangelism, if time permits. May all glory be unto Jesus' Name!"

Titus Adede, farmer and church worker, Kenya

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