

What does the Bible say about Sunday and the Sabbath?

By Clark Blanchard

- *Is the Sabbath the same as Sunday?*
- *What does God expect on these days?*
- *Is it a sin to not observe Sunday?*

These and many other questions regarding Sunday and the Sabbath are common and have been a source of confusion throughout the history of the Christian church. This brochure will concisely present the biblical teaching and the historical background of this issue. We will explore the subject chronologically, beginning with the establishment of a Sabbath day between God and Israel.

(1) The Sabbath (the keeping of Saturday as a rest day) was a sign exclusively between God and the nation of Israel. There is no evidence that Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph kept a Sabbath day. Certainly they had no command to do so. It had nothing to do with the Gentiles or the New Testament church. It had nothing to do with a day of worship or church attendance. The Sabbath was a day of complete rest in the sense of inactivity.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, You shall surely observe My Sabbath; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you ... So the sons of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to celebrate the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed (Exodus 31:12-17, emphasis mine). See also Exodus 16:21-30; 20:8-11; and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. For Christ's application of Sabbath-keeping, see Matthew 12:1-13 and Mark 2:27.

(2) The early church, as recorded in the books of Acts and the Epistles, regularly met on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, often in synagogues. There is no record of them regularly meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week. *And as Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God. And the next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God (Acts 13:42-44, emphasis mine). See also Acts 13:13-15; 15:19-21; 16:11-13; and 18:1-4.*

Furthermore, there is only one Bible reference to a gathering in Troas on the first day of the week to eat and hear Paul preach (Acts 20:7). But they also gathered *day by day* in the temple and breaking bread from *house to house* in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46) and *from house to house* in Ephesus (Acts 20:20).

There is only one Bible reference by Paul instructing individual Christians in Corinth to set aside money on the first day of the week, but this is a reference to personal savings for giving, not a church gathering (1 Corinthians 16:1-3).

There is only one Bible reference to the *Lord's day*, when John received the Revelation from God (Revelation 1:9-11). But this is most likely either Saturday or possibly the prophetic future judgment *day of the Lord*.

(3) In the first few centuries after the apostles, the meeting days were mixed. Some churches met on the Sabbath, some on Sunday, and many on both days. Here are some of the earliest accounts in church history:

“Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which the Lord rose again from the dead” (Epistle of Barnabas 15:9).

“... keep the Sabbath, and the Lord's day festival; because the former is a memorial of the creation, and the latter of the resurrection. Let the slaves work five days; but on the Sabbath-day and the Lord's day let them have leisure to go to church for instruction in piety” (The Apostolic Constitutions, compiled in the A.D. 300s).

Gregory of Nyssa in the late 300s referred to the Sabbath and Sunday as “sisters” (“Patrologia Graeca,” Vol. 46, Col. 309).

(4) A movement began in Rome and Alexandria to abolish the Sabbath observance in favor of Sunday only. “For although almost all churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the Sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this” (“Socrates Scholasticus,” 400s).

“The people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assemble together on the Sabbath, as well as the first day of the week, which custom is never observed at Rome or at Alexandria” (Sozomen, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series, Vol. 12, pp. 7-8).

The reason for the deletion of Sabbath-keeping in Rome and Alexandria is not perfectly clear. The most likely reason is due to the rising anti-Jewish climate in the Roman empire due to numerous Jewish revolts. Sabbath-keeping may have been deleted in Alexandria because of the large Jewish population there and the desire of the Christians to distance themselves from the Jews politically. In Rome it may have been deleted for the same reasons plus the influence of Augustinian theology, which said Old Testament Israel was to be understood allegorically and applied by the church.

(5) In the A.D. 300s, laws were introduced by both the formal church and the government of Rome, mandating observance of Sunday only, thereby abolishing Sabbath observance for the formal church. One of the most important events regarding this Sunday observance was the Sunday Law, established by the Roman Emperor Constantine on March 7, A.D. 321.

“On the venerable Day of the Sun [i.e., “Sunday,” named after his Sun god], 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-growing or for vine planting; lest by neglecting the proper moment for such operations the bounty of heaven should be lost.”

This mandate was strengthened in A.D. 364 as shown in Canon 29 of the Council of Laodicea:

“Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on Saturdays but shall work on that day; but the Lord's day they shall especially honor, and as being Christians, shall, if possible, do no work on that day. If however, they are found Judaizing, they shall be shut out from Christ.”

By the a.d. 700s, the confusion over Sunday “Sabbath-keeping” was nearly complete as indicated when Charlemagne at Aquisgranum in A.D. 788 decreed that:

“... all ordinary labor on the Lord's day be forbidden, since it was against the Fourth Commandment, especially labor in the field or vineyard, which Constantine had exempted.”

We can see that nearly 2,000 years of church history provide a lot more heat than light on this issue. A meaningful answer regarding the Sabbath or Sunday is not to be found in church history.

For our answer, we must turn to the Word of God, where we find Paul's teaching on the subject to be amazingly plain and simple:

One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, ... So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. ... The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves (Romans 14:5, 6, 12, 22).

Further he writes, *But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain (Galatians 4:9-11).*

Questions and Answers

Q: *Is the Sabbath the same as Sunday?*

A: No. In the Bible the Sabbath is Saturday, a rest day prescribed for Israel. Sunday is the traditional Christian worship day which developed historically.

Q: *What does God expect on these days?*

A: You are free to observe spiritually a special day or to treat them all the same. You should be convinced in your own mind. Your devotion to God is the important issue, not observing or abstaining from a special day.

Q: *Is it a sin to not observe Sunday?*

A: No. But causing your brother to stumble is a sin. You should not use your freedom in a way that causes another Christian to stumble (Romans 14:21; 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 31-32).