

# Are Christians Obligated to Keep the Sabbath?

By Raymond C. Faircloth

## Adam Was Not Given a Sabbath Keeping Ordinance

- ❖ “By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and **He rested** on the **seventh day** from all his work. So God blessed the **seventh** day and *made it holy*” (*Gen. 2:2, 3*).

This example set by God meant that Adam, and therefore mankind, was not to experience time as an indefinite and undefined progression of days, but as a succession of weeks with a change of activity at the end of each. However, this was not like the detailed ordinance later given to Israel; but rather was in imitation of God’s change of activity (John 5:17).

### THE ORDINANCE WAS ADDED LATER

- ❖ “Why then **the law**? It was **added** *because of transgressions*, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place **through angels** by an intermediary” (*Gal. 3:19*).

As shown later in this study there is no separate ceremonial law and moral law. So Galatians 3:19 implies that no Sabbath law was given to Adam, but rather it was given through angels to Israel at a much later date.

## Didn’t Jesus Say Sabbath Keeping Applied to All Mankind?

- ❖ “The Sabbath was made for **man**, not man for the Sabbath” (*Mark 2:27*).

Jesus is not speaking in the context of all mankind but in the context of the Israelites to whom he was sent. Ezekiel 20:21 refers to Israel as rebelling against God in failing to keep His laws including the Sabbath. It says “...if a man [*an Israelite*] observes them he will live...”

## The Sabbath Ordinance Was Given to Israel and Not the Gentiles

- ❖ “See, because Yahweh has given to you [*Israel*] the Sabbath...” (*Ex. 16:29 LEB*).
- ❖ “*It was* not with our ancestors *that* Yahweh made this covenant [*including the Sabbath*], *but with these of us who are here alive today*” (*Deut. 5:3 LEB*).
- ❖ “So You made known **to them** [*Israel*] Your holy Sabbath, and laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, through Your servant **Moses**” (*Neh. 9:13, 14*).

*The rabbinic view is:*

the Sabbath is a perpetual covenant between Me and the children of Israel, but not between Me and the nations of the world (Melkita, Shabbata,1).

## The Basis for the Sabbath

- ❖ “...because *in* six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that *is* in them, and on the seventh day he rested. Therefore (*that is why*” *NAB, NJB*) Yahweh blessed the seventh day and consecrated it” (*Ex. 20:11 LEB*).

In Genesis “the seventh day” is not called a Sabbath. So Exodus 20 is not stating that the Sabbath-keeping ordinance was instituted at the beginning of mankind’s history but rather that God’s pattern of rest on the seventh day was being used as the basis for the Sabbath-keeping ordinance now, in Moses’ time, when it is being instituted for Israel. That is why the Hebrew word translated “therefore” can mean “**consequently now**” because in this verse **God is blessing the Sabbath that Israel is to keep**.

## The Sabbath is a Commemoration of the Exodus

- ❖ “...and Yahweh your God brought you out [*of Egypt*]; with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm; therefore, Yahweh your God commanded **you** [*Israel*] to keep *the Sabbath*” (*Deut. 5:15 LEB*).

## Israel Was Given a System of Sabbatical Observances

- ❖ “[*The people*] are taking on...an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through **Moses**, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments ... As for the people of the land who bring wares or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or a **holy day**; and we will forego the crops on the **seventh year** ... We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly ... for the continual burnt offering, the **Sabbaths**, the **new moon**, for the *appointed times*...and all the work of the house of our God” (*Neh. 10:29, 31,-33*).
- ❖ ““And this shall happen: From *new moon to new moon* and from *Sabbath to Sabbath* all flesh shall come to bow in worship before me,’ says Yahweh” (*Isa. 66:23 LEB*).

*This shows that the new moon was a day of worship as was the Sabbath. So the term Sabbath applied to weekly, monthly and annual events.*

## The 10 Commandments Were an Integral Part of the Whole Law

Some attempt to separate the Law into the Decalogue—the *10 commandments* as the **moral** law and the rest of the Law into **ceremonial** (feasts etc) law and **civil** law. This is done so that the keeping of the Sabbath (the 4<sup>th</sup> of the 10 commandments) is included in the ‘moral law’ and therefore is a universal commandment. This assumption is made because, at the time of the giving of the 10 commandments (including the Sabbath law) there was an interruption and so showing that *the 10 words* were separate commandments to the rest. However, this understanding is incorrect because the interruption that occurred was because of the fear of the people. (Ex. 20:18, 19). This attempt to create a separate group of moral laws is incorrect because God’s moral standards, based on His character, underpin all that He requires of humans i.e. all laws. So the 10 commandments were an integral part of the entire law and all 600+ laws were underpinned by God’s character and therefore **moral law is the backbone of all biblical law** i.e. there is no separate moral law. That there was no division of the Law is seen in the following examples:

- ❖ “The contribution of the king [*Hezekiah*] from his own possessions was for the burnt offerings: the burnt offerings of morning and evening, and the **burnt offerings for the Sabbaths** [*from the 10 commandments*], the **new moons, and the appointed feasts**, as it is written in the Law of the LORD” (*2 Chron. 36:3*).

This point is further proved by the fact that in **the Gospel accounts** the laws are quoted by Jesus or the writers without distinction from the Decalogue or from outside of it (Matt. 5:21-44, Matt. 19:18, 19, Mark 10:19). Also Paul does not separate the Weekly Sabbath from other Sabbaths:

- ❖ “No one is to act as your judge in respect to food or...**a festival** or a **new moon** or a **Sabbath** day” (*Col. 2:16*).

This trio covers times of worship that were annual, monthly and weekly and form a complete package—a single shadow. The trio is found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures: 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4, 8:13, 31:3 ; Ezra 3:5; Nehemiah 10:33; Isaiah 1:13,14; Ezekiel 45:17, 46:3; Hosea 2:11. So feasts [*supposedly ceremonial*] cannot be divided off from Sabbath [*supposedly moral because it is in the Decalogue*].

### HOW THEN DOES THE CHRISTIAN APPLY THE 10 COMMANDMENTS?

This concerns the concept of *general equity* so that laws apply in more cases than the particular one addressed in the particular circumstances of the biblical passage. This means that each law has a *general or moral principle* behind it. Having identified the particular principle one moves to **the contemporary situation** and applies the principle to it. This was what Jesus did in his day as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount etc. For example, Jesus reapplied Hosea 6:6, “I [*Yahweh*] desire mercy, not sacrifice,” (Matt. 9:10-13) to show that it was fine to eat with sinners and to pluck the grain on a Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-7). The literal keeping of the Sabbath was for the circumstances only of Israel and which ended with the coming of Messiah, from which time a Christians application of it concerns his entire life (Heb. 4:4-11). Furthermore, higher principles must over-ride laws that were made for particular circumstances.

## Preservation of Life Takes Precedence over Sabbath Keeping

- ❖ “And he said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to **save life** or to kill?”” (*Mark 3:4, 5*).

*Jesus was here invoking the rabbinic principle of **pikuach nefesh**: that the obligation to save life supersedes Jewish law:*

- ❖ “But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is **not lawful to do on the Sabbath?**” And Jesus answered them, “Have you not read what David did when he was **hungry**, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and took and ate the **bread of the Presence**, *which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat*, and also gave it to those with him?”” (Luke 6:2-4).

This example used by Jesus is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. The account does not mention the “**hunger**” that is noted by Jesus. He evidently knew of this detail because of what was recorded in the *Jewish Commentary* which states:

...because he found only the bread of the presence there [in the house of God], David said to him, ‘Give me some to eat, so **that we will not die of hunger**. The preservation of life takes precedence over the Sabbath.’

Additionally the **loaves of presentation** were freshly baked and set on the table **on the Sabbath** (Lev. 24:5, 8). Hence the event of 1 Samuel 21:1-6 occurred on the Sabbath. This fact would have been known by the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking and was the very point Jesus was making. The two factors were:

- The hunger being life-threatening because David and his men were being pursued by Saul’s men, so that they needed food to give them the needed strength to escape, and;
- The event having occurred on the Sabbath.

These two points were used by Jesus as an example to answer the accusation about breaking the Sabbath. This same example also shows that the preservation of life takes precedence over the Sabbath. This fits in with the general Jewish tradition that *all commandments of the Scriptures (except idolatry, incest and murder) must be suspended to save a human life*. This is why in Mark’s account of this confrontation with these Pharisees Jesus says:

- ❖ “The Sabbath came into existence **for the sake of man**, and not man for the sake of the Sabbath; hence the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27, 28).

Clearly, from the above, Jesus also makes the preservation of human life take precedence over the Sabbath and other commandments.

## Circumcision Takes Precedence over Sabbath Keeping

In John 7:22 Jesus shows that it had been understood that the prohibition against the work of *cutting* on the Sabbath was to be suspended when the **8<sup>th</sup> day circumcision rule** happens to fall on a Sabbath. This precedence was not stated in the Law but was interpreted in the Oral Torah for the purpose of avoiding confusion. Therefore, those who believe that Christians are obligated to keep the Sabbath must also get circumcised because circumcision is the more important command!

## The Priesthood Legitimately Profanes the Sabbath

- ❖ *On every Sabbath* he shall arrange it [*the twelve loaves*] in rows *before* Yahweh continually; *they are* from the *Israelites* as an everlasting covenant. And it shall be for Aaron and for his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, because it *is a most holy thing* for him from Yahweh’s offerings made by fire—a *lasting rule*” (Lev. 24:8-9).

Also Numbers 28:9, 10 shows that the work of the priests was doubled on the Sabbath:

- ❖ “Or have you not read in the Law how **on the Sabbath** the *priests in the temple profane the Sabbath* and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here” (Matt. 12:5, 6).

The implication is that all believers as a “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9) are also exempt from keeping the weekly Sabbath.

## Sabbath Law Was Only until Christ Came

- ❖ “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary” (*Gal. 3:19*).

## The Apostles’ Conflict with the Judaizers

The Judaizers required that Christians keep the Mosaic Law. The assembly of apostles and elders at Jerusalem dealt with this matter as stated by Peter:

- ❖ “...why do you put God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples *a yoke* which neither our forefathers nor we have been able to bear?” (*Acts 15:10*).

And then James stated that:

- ❖ “...it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us to lay no greater burden (*on the gentiles*) than these essentials...” (*Acts 15:28, 29*).

The essentials were in deference to Jewish converts and not permanent; otherwise it would have been a laying on them of the same unbearable ‘yoke.’ However, there is no mention of Sabbath keeping as one of these essentials.

## Paul Worked on the Sabbath

- ❖ “And Paul went in [*the synagogue*], as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures...” (*Acts 17:2*).

## Christians Are Not to Be Judged for Ceasing to Keep the Sabbath as an Ordinance

- ❖ “One person *esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike*. Each one should be fully *convinced in his own mind*. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God” (*Rom. 14:5, 6*).

Evidently Paul, here, is encouraging the mature Christians to be patient with their brothers until all gain a unity of the spirit on this issue based on the fact that the ordinances of the Law were “set aside” by Christ’s death. This resulted in God’s:

- ❖ “...cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its **legal demands**. This he **set aside**, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Therefore **let no one pass judgment on you** in questions of food and drink, or with regard to *a festival* or *a new moon* or **a Sabbath**. These are a **shadow** of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (*Col. 2:14-17*).

*Because the whole Law was a single shadow* (Heb. 8:4, 5; 10:1) *and the Sabbath was part of that shadow it, therefore, was “set aside” along with the rest of the law.*

## The Sabbath Moves from Shadow as an Ordinance to Substance In Jesus and so Continues “Forever”

- ❖ “Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the *Sabbath*, observing the Sabbath **throughout their generations**, as a covenant **forever** (Heb. *olam*). It is a sign forever between me and *the people of Israel*...” (*Ex. 31:16, 17*).

*The Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* demonstrates a variety of definitions of the Hebrew term *olam* in Genesis 9:12, 16:

(a) The Heb. word *olam*, a long time or duration.

(c) The main component of *olam*’s meaning is according to common consent “most distant time,” with reference both to the past and the future, and occasionally to both...the allotted time span extends throughout the whole life of the persons concerned, but it is also limited to it.

(d) The meaning of a life span is also applicable on generations and even on the existence of a nation as a whole.

(e) God's promises, which are established forever, remained bound to their point of reference in himself, and are, therefore, not automatically timeless and irrevocably valid.

In this dictionary examples are given of:

- The slave "forever" (Ex 21:6; Deut 15:17), but lasting logically up to the end of his life or that of his master.
- Eli and his household enjoying ministry "forever," but only during the time they are faithful.

Similarly there is the burning forever of the tabernacle light (*shekinah*) as "a statute forever in your generations" (Lev.24:2, 3) which later became **spiritualized in Jesus** as "the light of the world" (John 8:12) and therefore a light which continues to burn. Also, from Colossians 2:14-17 and Hebrews 8:4, 5 and 10:1 we learn that the Sabbath moves from its shadow as an ordinance to its substance in Christ and therefore continues "forever" in the sense of "rest" as now being found only in Jesus, but no longer as a weekly, monthly or annual ordinance.

#### *PRIESTS EXEMPT FROM THE SABBATH*

Just as the Aaronic priests working in the temple were not bound by the Sabbath law (Matt. 12:5), so too Christians are the **spiritual priesthood** representing the spiritual temple and therefore are exempt from Sabbath-keeping.

#### *THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH IS FOUND IN A PERSON—JESUS*

- ❖ "Come to me, all 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

## Entering God's Rest – Sabbatism

- ❖ "For He has said somewhere concerning the seventh day: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all His works;' and again in this passage, 'They shall not enter into my rest,' Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience, He again fixes a certain day, 'Today' saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, 'Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.' For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. So there **remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God**. For the one **who has entered** His rest has himself also **rested from his works**, as God did from His" (Heb. 4:4-9).

*One enters God's rest by doing not one's own work but the work of the Father. Furthermore, the Sabbath also served as a type of the coming Millennial rest.*

## Repercussions of Following the Sabbath as Ordinance

If anyone promotes the keeping of the Mosaic Law and specifically the Sabbath-keeping law then, as a law-keeper, he should also get circumcised as Paul said: "*I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that **he is obligated to keep the whole law***" Gal. 5:3). So, in keeping with the law, such a person must then invoke the death penalty for other Sabbath-keepers who fail to keep the weekly Sabbath. He must also be subject to that penalty for any failure of his own to keep the Sabbath. (Ex. 31:15). Yet, in reality all such Mosaic Law-keeping is meaningless since Christ offered himself in sacrifice. Therefore, much time is wasted that could be better spent on the Christian activities that Christ has commanded, and rather than looking partly toward Moses, we should be: "*fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith...*" (Heb. 12:2).

## Misunderstood Text

### 1 Corinthians 7:19:

"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the **keeping of the commandments** of God."

This is not, however, a reference to the Mosaic Law, but to the divine commands that are “*the law of Christ*” as stated by Jesus: “*If you love me you will keep my commandments*” (John 14:15).

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## APPENDIX

### Jesus Was in the Tomb for Less Than 72 Hours

#### The Sabbath-Keeper’s Understanding

For the purpose of proposing a Wednesday execution and a Saturday resurrection of Jesus Sabbath-keepers look to the following NT texts for support for a 72 hour internment of Jesus:

- ❖ “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be *three days and three nights* in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40).

*Does this text really mean three absolutely full days and nights and so making 72 hours for Jesus’ being in the tomb as the following Scriptures seem to suggest?*

- ❖ “And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and **after three days rise again**” (Mark 8:31).
- ❖ “The next day, that is, *after the day of Preparation*, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘**After three days I will rise.**’ Therefore order the tomb to be made **secure until the third day**” (Matt. 27:62-64).

But does ‘After three days’ really mean ‘after three full days’?

#### “On the Third Day” Means Less Than 72 Hours

The weight of evidence comes from the **eleven times** the NT states that Jesus’ resurrection was “*on the third day*” (Matt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46; Acts 10:40; 1 Cor. 15:4).

##### EXAMPLES OF USAGE

- ❖ “...the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them **today** and **tomorrow**, and let them wash their garments and be ready for **the third day**. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (Ex. 19: 10, 11).
- ❖ “And he [*Jesus*] said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox, “Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures **today** and **tomorrow**, and **the third day** I finish my course”’” (Luke 13:32).

**The only day in these events that was a full 24 hours is “tomorrow.”** The day before “tomorrow” and the day after “tomorrow” are only parts of days and so less than full days. So the eleven times the NT states that Jesus’ resurrection was “*on the third day*” give solid weight to the fact that he was in the tomb for less than 72 hours. Also Strack and Billerbeck’s *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Midrash* states with reference to Matthew 12:40 (translated from the German by Anthony Buzzard): “In regard to the reckoning of the three days, we must note that...part of a day was considered as the whole day. R Yishmael (ca 135 A.D.) treated part of an ‘onah’ (in this case 12 hours) as a whole ‘onah’ (i.e. as a full 12 hours)...Pesahin 4a: ‘A part of a day counts as a whole day...’” So the concept of a 72 hour internment would make the Bible contradict itself because “*on the third day*” cannot mean 72 hours.

#### “After Three Days I Will Rise” Matthew 27:63

Mark quotes, in 8:31, Jesus as having said these words which the religious leaders later quoted. Yet these leaders showed that they understood this phrase as meaning that it would not be a 72 hour period when they also said: “*Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day*” (Matt. 27:64). However, if the resurrection of Jesus had occurred **after the third day it would be on the fourth day**. Therefore, we have to conclude that the phrase “**and after three days rise again**” must have the same meaning as “*on the third day*” which we saw as referring to a day and parts of two days. So the phrase “after three days” does not mean after three full days.

## Jesus Was Executed on Friday and Was Resurrected on Sunday

### *JESUS WAS ENTOMBED LATE ON FRIDAY*

- ❖ “Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and *laid him in a tomb* cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was **the day of Preparation**, and *the Sabbath was beginning*. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then *they returned and prepared* spices and ointments. **1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn**, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did **not find the body** of the Lord Jesus” (*Luke 23:50-24:3*).

Because the bodies were not to be left unburied overnight Joseph’s action was during the late afternoon on “the day of preparation” with the **Sabbath beginning i.e. late on Friday**. The women evidently prepared the spices during the very late Friday afternoon before the Sabbath actually began and then returned “*on the first day of the week (Sunday), at early dawn*” only to find that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. So Jesus was only in the tomb for the late afternoon of Friday, all of Friday night, all day and all night Saturday i.e. for 24 hours, and Sunday morning. This amounts to parts of 2 days, 1 full day, and 2 full nights in line with the above information concerning “on the third day.”

### *“THE THIRD DAY” WAS SUNDAY*

- ❖ “But **on the first day of the week**, at early dawn, they [*the women in 23:55, 56*] went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. <sup>2</sup>And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup>but when they went in they **did not find the body** of the Lord Jesus. ... <sup>13</sup>**That very day** two of them were going to a village named Emmaus ... <sup>15</sup> Jesus himself drew near and went with them. <sup>16</sup>But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" ... And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth ... <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and **crucified him**. <sup>21</sup>...Yes, and besides all this, **it is now the third day** since these things happened” (*Luke 24:1-3, 13, 15-17, 20-21*).

“**The first day of the week**” is Sunday. So, these two disciples were travelling on the Sunday i.e. “**that very day**” and they said that “**it is now the third day** since these things happened” i.e. the crucifixion. Soon after this event, these two disciples returned to Jerusalem and met with the apostles and the rest of the disciples. Then Jesus appeared to them and:

- ❖ “...he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and **on the third day rise from the dead**... You are witnesses of these things”  
(*Luke 24:45, 46, 48*).

So, calculating back from Sunday, the amount of time of Jesus’ internment in the tomb included “early dawn” on Sunday, all day and all night Saturday, and the late afternoon of Friday. Again this amounts to parts of 2 days, 1 full day, and 2 full nights so that Jesus rose “**on the third day**” and not after it. This corresponds with the events concerning the women’s actions in Luke 23:50-24:1 on the day before the Sabbath and the day after the Sabbath. These are the only days involved i.e. Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

## John’s Gospel Harmonizes with the Synoptic Gospels

It is “preparation of the Passover” and not ‘preparation for the Passover.’ This occurred on the Friday. The term Passover was applied to the week of celebration not just to the first day because Jesus spoke of “the first great day of Passover” i.e. the 15<sup>th</sup> Nisan of the Passover week.

## Summary

Professor Emeritus of New Testament history and archaeology Jack Finegan states:

All four gospels indicate that the day of the crucifixion of Jesus was a Friday (in our terminology), because they describe the following day as the Sabbath (Mark 15:42; Matt 28:1; Luke 23:56; John 19:31),

our Saturday, and because they state that the visit of the women to the tomb on the next day was on the first day of the week (Mark 16:2; Matt 28:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), our Sunday.

*Handbook of Biblical Chronology* p. 354.

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