Sunset to Sunset
God's
Sabbath Rest

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Introduction

Society has undergone astonishing changes in recent decades. Everyone, it seems, lives at a breakneck pace, constantly rushing here and there to get everything done. Technological advances that once promised more leisure time now seem only to push us further behind, making it ever more difficult to catch up.

So we frantically scramble. We feel out of touch—out of touch with our spouse, out of touch with our families, out of touch with the world around us and, perhaps most of all, out of touch with God.

This very Being who created the universe, including every one of us, did not leave us to grope in the dark to understand His intent for our lives. Rather, through inspiration, He caused His instruction and truth to be written down for us (2 Timothy 3:15-17; John 17:17). His revelation, the Holy Bible, tells us what we need to know about life's purpose, why we are here and where we are headed. Most important, it tells us how to live.

It tells us that thousands of years ago God gave a people a set of laws, promising the recipients that they would be blessed if they obeyed them. "You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you," He told them (Deuteronomy 5:33, emphasis added throughout).

The law God revealed is summed up in the Ten Commandments. They are our basic guide for living, showing us how to have a proper relationship with our Creator and fellow man.

Among those commandments, the one most universally misunderstood and misapplied is God's instruction to "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). Many people view the Sabbath as a quaint relic of history, perhaps a nice idea at some time in the past but altogether impractical in today's busy world. Some think the Sabbath is Sunday and that spending an hour or two at church on Sunday morning fulfills the intent of the Sabbath commandment.

Others think Jesus Christ did away with any specific day of rest, or the need to worship on a particular day, and that whatever time we choose to dedicate to God is holy.

The questions and opinions about this commandment, it seems, are endless. Did Jesus keep the Sabbath because He was Jewish, or did He actually break the Sabbath command to demonstrate our freedom from Old Testament law, leading the religious leaders of His day to want to kill Him? Did the apostle Paul, in writing more books of the New Testament than any other writer, show that the Sabbath is no longer necessary for Christians, or did he uphold it?

Was the Sabbath condemned and changed in the early New Testament Church, or was it confirmed? Did God sanctify the Sabbath at the time He created Adam and Eve, or did He first set it apart as holy time at the Exodus more than 2,000 years later? Was the Sabbath changed from the seventh day of the week to another day, and if so, when did this happen?

Why did God command a day of rest to begin with? Did He have a purpose for it, and if so, what is that purpose? Is the Sabbath at all relevant for humankind today? Does it make sense in

today's world? The questions go on and on.

Why should there be such confusion about one of the 10 basic guiding principles and laws God gave mankind? Why is there such controversy and confusion over this one commandment when most people, including religious leaders and their churches, have little quarrel with the other nine?

You don't have to look far to discover the answers to these questions. They can be found in the pages of the Bible and history. And we address these basic questions in this booklet. Join us now for a journey through the Bible to discover God's Sabbath Rest.

The Sabbath: In the Beginning

"And on the seventh day God ended His work . . . 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 2:2-3).

When we think of the Sabbath, we often think of the Ten Commandments, which God revealed when the ancient Israelites left Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The events of that period of Israel's history—the Exodus—were extraordinary. The plagues on Egypt, the death of all Egypt's firstborn, the parting of the Red Sea, manna coming from heaven for food in the desert and God giving Moses the Ten Commandments on stone tablets were all miraculous occurrences.

These events were dramatic testimony to the birth of a new nation. And in the midst of these incredible beginnings, God told His new nation to remember something. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," He commanded His people (Exodus 20:8).

He pointed them back to His role as Creator, reminding them that "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" (verse 11).

The Sabbath commandment had an important spiritual purpose. It pointed God's people to Him as the supreme Maker of all things. It was a required weekly remembrance that a higher power and authority is at work in our lives and the lives of all humanity. God intended that the Sabbath be observed as a reminder of that fact.

God revealed the Sabbath day by miracles

The significance of the Sabbath was evident before God gave the Ten Commandments to the nation of Israel. For example, a few weeks earlier, after the crossing of the Red Sea, when the Israelites witnessed the destruction of Pharaoh's armies, Israel entered the vast desert wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. Within a few days the Israelites' food supplies, brought with them from Egypt, were exhausted. "You have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger," they cried to Moses (Exodus 16:3).

However, God was already a step ahead of them. He promised to send manna, a miraculous substance to nourish and sustain them for as long as they were in the wilderness (verses 4, 15-18).

But God imposed a condition. He would provide the manna only six days out of every seven. On the sixth day there would be twice as much as usual, but none on the seventh day (verses 5, 22). Moses explained to the people what God had told him: "Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord . . . Lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning . . . Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, there will be none" (verses 23, 26). But some didn't listen and "went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none" (verse 27).

What was God's reaction? He said: "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" (verses 28-29).

Here, several weeks before He spoke the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, God said the Israelites were refusing to keep His commandments and laws! He also said, "The Lord has given you the Sabbath." He didn't say "is giving" or "will give"; He had already given them the Sabbath, to be observed every seventh day!

When God commanded Israel, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8), and told the Israelites they were refusing to keep His commandments and laws by violating the Sabbath before they arrived at Mount Sinai (Exodus 16:28), He pointed them back to the original creation week.

God set apart the Sabbath day

In the book of Genesis we read of God creating the earth, then filling it with plants and animals and forming it into a dazzlingly beautiful home for the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. Here we read of the real origin of the Sabbath: "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 2:2-3).

This day was different from the other days of creation week. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it. The word sanctify means to set apart as holy. God specifically set apart the seventh day, making it holy. We read three times in these two verses that God did not work on this day. The emphasis is that this was His day of rest. It was God's Sabbath rest.

Some people dispute this interpretation, saying this was not the origin of the commanded day of rest, noting that the word Sabbath isn't mentioned here. However, the Hebrew word translated "rested" is a form of shabath, the root word for "Sabbath." Shabath means to cease, or rest, and it is from this that the Sabbath gets its meaning as "a day of rest." To paraphrase the account in Genesis 2, "God sabbathed on the seventh day from all His work." The Hebrew language is clear and unambiguous in its intent.

God made the Sabbath for humankind

Remarkably, some will still argue that this doesn't prove the Sabbath existed from creation week, maintaining that it wasn't instituted until given to Israel at Mount Sinai and that it was meant for the physical nation of Israel alone—and for only a limited time.

However, Jesus Christ Himself dispelled this notion. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," He explained to some who completely misunderstood its intent and purpose (Mark 2:27).

He clarified the great underlying principle of the Sabbath day that so many have missed through the centuries: The Sabbath, far from enforcing a tiresome bondage or sanctioning a list of forbidden activities, is something God made for man! It was sanctified—made holy—when mankind was made, with God creating Adam and Eve on the sixth day of creation week and then creating the Sabbath on the following day by setting that day apart (Genesis 1:26-31; 2:1-3).

To Jesus Christ the Sabbath was positive and beneficial, not the oppressive burden some religious leaders had made of it in His day. Notice His choice of words. The Sabbath wasn't something just for the nation of Israel; He said it was made for man—for all humanity—and observing it wasn't a meaningless practice forced on people to bring only hardship and difficulty.

The seventh day was made for man, created expressly for mankind's benefit and well-being! Several other translations bear this out: "The Sabbath was made for the good of human beings," says the Good News Bible. "The Sabbath was made for the sake of man," reads the

New English Bible. The Williams New Testament says, "The sabbath was made to serve man." And the New Living Translation reads, "The Sabbath was made to benefit people."

Jesus understood the purpose of God's law, including the Sabbath—that God intended it to be a blessing and benefit to mankind. God, speaking through Moses, had earlier told Israel to "love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments."

Why? "That you may live and multiply; and the Lord your Godwill bless you in the land which you go to possess" (Deuteronomy 30:16).

Moses, after leading Israel for 40 years through the wilderness, summed up the Israelites' experiences just before they entered the Promised Land. He understood how wonderful the law was that they had received from God and how it was unique. "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me . . . ," he told them. "Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people' . . . What great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?" (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

A blessing for all who choose to obey

God clearly intended the Sabbath to be a blessing to those who would use it as He intended. The actual instructions God gave regarding the day were brief but give valuable insight into its intent. Let's look at some of these instructions.

"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 male servant, nor your female servant, 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).

On the Sabbath, we see that all members of a household were to rest from labor—even servants, guests and animals. All were to rest every seventh day from their normal, routine work. All family and household members were specifically listed, including parents, sons, daughters, servants and guests. If none did normal work on the Sabbath, presumably everyone would spend much of the day with other family members as a family or household.

The command to observe the Sabbath in all households is reinforced in Leviticus 23, where God lists the required religious observances He instituted—His feasts or festivals. He also makes it clear that the Sabbath is His holy time, not that of Moses or Israel: "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"'" (verses 1-3).

The Sabbath was not just a religious ritual for the tabernacle; it was an observance for every individual home throughout the nation.

A reminder of deliverance from slavery

We can find more details of God's intent where the Ten Commandments are reiterated in Deuteronomy 5:12-15: "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 do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and 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."

In this listing of the Commandments, another aspect of observing the Sabbath is added for God's people—remembering that they had been slaves in Egypt and that "the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand."

The Sabbath was a weekly reminder of Israel's humble origins as slaves in Egypt and that God, by mighty miracles, had delivered His people into freedom and established them as a nation. Now that He had given them rest from their slavery, everyone throughout the nation was to rest and be refreshed on the Sabbath, and servants were specifically included in that command. As God had given the Israelites rest, they, too, were commanded to allow their servants to rest, an additional reminder of the blessing the Sabbath was to provide for everyone.

The Israelites were specifically told to remember those events in connection with the Sabbath. God, through Moses, frequently reminded the Israelites how far they had come and how He had miraculously intervened for them on many occasions.

In like manner, the Sabbath is an important reminder for Christians today of our deliverance and liberation. Through God's mercy and Jesus Christ's sacrifice, Christians are delivered from spiritual slavery to sin and death, set free now to serve God (Romans 6:16-23; 2 Peter 2:19).

God repeatedly warned His people to never forget what He did for them: "Only take heed to yourself . . . lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren" (Deuteronomy 4:9). "Beware, lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (Deuteronomy 6:12). "[Beware] when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (Deuteronomy 8:14).

A time for religious instruction, teaching and joy

Notice that God also told the Israelites to teach their children His laws and ways. Immediately after repeating the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5, God instructed the Israelites: "These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

The Sabbath, then, was intended to be a time for religious instruction, for teaching and learning of God's wondrous acts and laws. Work was prohibited and God's great miracles were to be remembered on this day. As Smith's Bible Dictionary summarizes, "Thus the spirit of the Sabbath was joy, refreshment and mercy, arising from remembrance of God's goodness as Creator and as the Deliverer from bondage . . . On this day the people were accustomed to . . . give to their children that instruction in the truths recalled to memory by the day which is so repeatedly enjoined as the duty of parents; it was 'the Sabbath of Jehovah' not only in the sanctuary, but 'in all their dwellings'" (1884, "Sabbath").

Observed this way, the Sabbath truly would be the blessing and delight God intended, a day of rest and refreshment with one's Creator—learning, contemplating and practicing His laws and ways.

When Is the Sabbath Day to Be Kept?

Our convention of starting a new day at midnight is an arbitrary, humanly devised practice. God, who created the heavenly bodies and set them in motion to mark the passage of time (Genesis 1:14), counts time differently—from evening to evening.

We see this indicated in the creation account in Genesis 1. After dividing day from night, God tells us that "the evening and the morning were the first day" (verse 5). "Evening" is mentioned first, followed by "morning." God describes each day's creation in similar terms (verses 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).

In the Bible, evening began when the sun went down (Joshua 8:29; 2 Chronicles 18:34; Nehemiah 13:19; Mark 1:32), and at that time a new day began. Regarding His Sabbaths, God commands that they be observed "from evening to evening" (Leviticus 23:32). This was the usual way at that time of calculating the beginning and ending of days (Exodus 12:18).

In New Testament times, days were calculated the same way. Mark 1:32 records that, after the sun had set, marking the end of one Sabbath, crowds brought many ailing people to Jesus to be healed, having waited until after the Sabbath to come to Him. The Gospel accounts also record that Joseph of Arimathea entombed Jesus' body before evening to keep from working on an approaching annual high-day Sabbath (Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-54; compare John 19:31).

God, Creator of the Sabbath, determines when the day begins and ends, and it was observed from sunset to sunset throughout the Bible. His Sabbath begins Friday evening at sunset and ends Saturday evening at sunset.

Which Day Is the Sabbath?

Which day is the Sabbath? Since most churches observe Sunday as their day of rest and worship, many people assume that Sunday is the Sabbath.

The Fourth Commandment states: "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 . . ." (Exodus 20:8-10, emphasis added throughout).

God commanded that the seventh day be observed as the Sabbath. A glance at almost any dictionary, encyclopedia or calendar will show you that Saturday is the seventh day of the week, while Sunday is the first day of the week. According to God's calendar, the seventh day is—and always has been—the Sabbath day. Although man has modified calendars through the centuries, the seven-day weekly cycle has remained intact throughout history. The days of the week have always remained in their proper order, with Sunday as the first day of the week and Saturday as the seventh.

Time has not been lost in this regard, as some assert. "The oracles of God"—His divine words and instructions—were entrusted to the Jewish people (Romans 3:1-2), and they have preserved the knowledge of the seventh-day Sabbath faithfully since well before Christ's time to this day. Jesus repeatedly confirmed that the day the Jews observed as the Sabbath in His day was indeed the Sabbath. And since then the Jewish people, even scattered in many nations and in different sects, have all preserved the same day.

Moreover, the mainstream Christian churches, though rejecting the Sabbath, indirectly confirm when it is by maintaining their early tradition of worshipping on Sunday, which they acknowledge to be the first day of the week. Obviously that makes the previous day the seventh —the biblical Sabbath. (See also "Names for Saturday in Many Languages Prove Which Day Is the True Sabbath".)

No biblical authorization for changing the Sabbath

So how did Sunday become the primary day of rest and worship for these churches? Although the concept of rest has largely disappeared today, most denominations continue to hold their worship services on Sunday. You can search throughout the Bible, but you will find no authority to alter the day of worship.

James Cardinal Gibbons, Catholic educator and archbishop of Baltimore at the turn of the 20th century, was blunt about the change: "You may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday, a day which we never sanctify. The Catholic Church correctly teaches that our Lord and His Apostles inculcated certain important duties of religion which are not recorded by the inspired writers . . . We must, therefore, conclude that the Scriptures alone cannot be a sufficient guide and rule of faith"(The Faith of Our Fathers, 1917, p. 89).

Did you grasp what he said? He admitted that Sunday observance is nowhere authorized in the

Bible and that the seventh day is the only day sanctified by the Scriptures. His justification for changing the day of rest and worship assumes that authority exists apart from the Bible to define the necessary truths and practices for salvation—in other words, he says, human beings can change the commandments of God!

Change to Sunday was made after the New Testament was written

The change from Sabbath to Sunday is not found anywhere in the Bible. It was made long after the writing of the New Testament. So how and when was the change made?

Initially Christianity was viewed as simply a sect of Judaism. However, after Jewish revolts in Judea in A.D. 67-70 and 132-135, Jewish religious practices—many of which continued in the early Church—came to be viewed with hostility throughout the Roman Empire. Many among the Church began to abandon these practices, including observance of the biblical Sabbath and festivals.

No clear references to Sunday as a day of Christian worship are found until the writings of Barnabas and Justin, around A.D. 135 and 150, respectively. Observance of Sunday as the primary day of worship appears to have begun to solidify during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-135), who harshly persecuted Jews throughout the Roman Empire. Hadrian specifically prohibited practices of Judaism, including observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.

These oppressive measures apparently influenced many early Christians in Rome to abandon the seventh day and turn to Sunday, the day for honoring the sun god among the Romans and other peoples of the ancient world. When Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the process accelerated.

Constantine's anti-Jewish prejudice

The Roman Emperor Constantine, although a worshipper of the sun, was the first emperor to profess belief in Christianity. But the "Christianity" Constantine endorsed was already considerably different from that practiced by Jesus and the apostles. The emperor accelerated the change by his own hatred of Jews and religious practices he considered Jewish.

For example, at the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), church authorities essentially banned the biblical Passover observance. Endorsing this change, Constantine announced: "It appeared an unworthy thing that . . . we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul . . . Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd" (Eusebius, Life of Constantine 3, chapter 18, quoted in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1979, Vol. 1, pp. 524-525).

In a bid to unify his empire, he established the first laws making Sunday the official day of rest. His A.D. 321 law, for example, stated: "On the venerable Day of the Sun [Sunday] let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed."

Several decades later, the Council of Laodicea decreed: "Christians must not judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honoring the Lord's Day [Sunday]; . . . But if any shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ."

Within a few centuries observance of the biblical Sabbath was driven underground within the confines of the empire, and most who professed Christianity embraced Sunday.

Although the Protestant Reformation brought some changes, observance of Sunday continued from the Roman Catholic Church into subsequent Protestant denominations. But whereas the Catholic Church claimed authority to establish its own times of worship, Protestant churches generally justified Sunday observance on the grounds that the seventh-day Sabbath was replaced in the New Testament by worship on Sunday in honor of Christ's resurrection (see "Was Sunday the New Testament Day of Worship?").

However, as confirmed by Cardinal Gibbons above, there is no biblical authority for changing the day of rest and worship from the seventh day to Sunday. As shown throughout this booklet, Jesus Christ, the apostles, and Jewish and gentile members of the early Church alike continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath —the only day authorized in the Bible.

Names for Saturday in Many Languages Prove Which Day Is the True Sabbath

Which day of the week is the biblical Sabbath? Many are confused over the issue, but such confusion is unnecessary. Not only is the answer plain from history and the Bible, it is also clear from the names for the seventh day of the week, Saturday, in many languages.

For example, the Spanish word for the seventh day of the week, Saturday, is sabado—the same word for "Sabbath." In fact, in more than 100 ancient and modern languages the seventh day of the week was named "Sabbath" or its equivalent. Following is a list of names for the seventh day of the week, Saturday, in 24 languages in which the root word Sabbath is still easily recognizable.

Such widespread use of forms of the word Sabbath for the seventh day of the week, Saturday, is clear evidence that speakers of these languages understood which day is the Sabbath.

Likewise, the fact that in no language do we see "Sabbath" similarly linked with Sunday, the first day of the week, is an obvious confirmation that this day never was considered the biblical Sabbath until later religious leaders tried to substitute Sunday for the true Sabbath day.

Arabic: Sabet

Armenian: Shabat

Bosnian: Subota

Bulgarian: Sabota

Corsican: Sàbatu

Croatian: Subota

Czech: Sobota

Georgian: Sabati

Greek: Savvato

Indonesian: Sabtu

Italian: Sabato

Latin: Sabbatum

Maltese: is-Sibt

Polish: Sobota

Portuguese: Sábado

Romanian: Sambata

Russian: Subbota

Serbian: Subota

Slovak: Sobota

Slovene: Sobota

Somali: Sabti

Spanish: Sabado

Sudanese: Saptu

Ukranian: Subota

Jesus Christ and the Sabbath

"And He said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath'" (Mark 2:27-28).

How did Jesus Christ view the Sabbath? Many people see only what they want to see regarding His approach to the seventh day. Some believe, based on misunderstandings, that Jesus came to do away with the law and thus ignored or deliberately broke the Sabbath commandment.

Actually, the Sabbath is mentioned almost 50 times in the four Gospels (more than in the entire first five books of the Bible!), so we have ample historical record of His attitude toward the Sabbath. To understand the Gospel accounts, however, we must consider how Sabbath observance had changed—or, more properly, had been changed—since its inception and later inclusion in the Ten Commandments.

The Sabbath in history

Sabbath observance underwent a dramatic transformation in the centuries leading up to the time of Christ.

Earlier in this booklet we reviewed how God warned Israel not to forget His mighty works and laws. The ancient Israelites' sad record shows they didn't listen. Eventually Israel did forget God and disintegrated as a nation, dividing into the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah before being taken away into captivity by Assyrian and Babylonian invaders in the eighth and sixth centuries B.C., respectively.

One of the Israelites' most flagrant sins leading up to their national captivity was the violation of God's Sabbath. Even as the kingdom of Judah was self-destructing from its citizens' sinful behavior, God continued to warn them through the prophet Jeremiah to "bear no burden on the Sabbath day . . . nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers . . . But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day . . . then I will kindle a fire . . . , and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched" (Jeremiah 17:21-22, 27).

Through the prophet Ezekiel, in Babylon after he and much of the kingdom of Judah had been taken into captivity, God said of the Israelites: "I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. Yet . . . they greatly defiled My Sabbaths . . . They despised My judgments and did not walk in My statutes, but profaned My Sabbaths" (Ezekiel 20:12-13, 16).

God also said of His people, "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 22:26).

Later, many of the Jewish captives returned from Babylon and were restored to their former lands several centuries before Christ's time. They knew from the messages of Jeremiah and

Ezekiel that their nation had been destroyed for breaking God's law, and violating the Sabbath was one of their chief sins.

Once restored as a nation, they determined never to make the same mistake again. Consequently, over several centuries Jewish religious authorities crafted meticulous regulations detailing exactly what they considered permissible and impermissible on the Sabbath. They veered from one ditch to the other—from ignoring and abusing the Sabbath to imposing an oppressive, legalistic observance of the day.

Religious authorities added burdensome Sabbath regulations

The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary describes how extreme these measures had become by Christ's day. The religious code regarding the Sabbath listed "39 principal classes of prohibited actions: sowing, plowing, reaping, gathering into sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking . . . Each of these chief enactments was further discussed and elaborated, so that actually there were several hundred things a conscientious, law-abiding Jew could not do on the sabbath.

"For example, the prohibition about tying a knot was much too general, and so it became necessary to state what kinds of knots were prohibited and what kind not. It was accordingly laid down that allowable knots were those that could be untied with one hand . . .

"The prohibition regarding writing on the sabbath was further defined as follows: 'He who writes two letters with his right or his left hand, whether of one kind [of letter] or of two kinds, . . . is guilty. He even who should from forgetfulness write two letters is guilty . . . Also he who writes on two walls which form an angle, or on the two tablets of his account-book, so that they can be read together, is guilty" (1967, "Sabbath," p. 736).

Authorities defined "work" in extreme ways

The religious authorities' definition of "work" that could violate the Sabbath command was vastly different from any ordinary definition of work. For example, plowing was a prohibited-work category, and few would dispute that plowing is difficult work. However, according to first-century rabbinic opinion, the prohibition against plowing could be violated by simply spitting on the ground. The spit could disturb the soil, which in the rabbis' view was a type of plowing! Women were forbidden to look into a mirror on the Sabbath, because they might see a gray hair and pull it out, and that would constitute work.

Wearing nailed shoes on the Sabbath was prohibited, because in the authorities' view the addition of the nails meant they were carrying an unnecessary burden. Even walking through grass was not allowed, because some of the grass might be bent and broken, which constituted threshing, one of the forbidden categories of work.

The religious leaders taught that if a house caught on fire on the Sabbath, its inhabitants couldn't carry their clothes out of the house to spare them from the flames because that would

be bearing a burden. However, they were allowed to put on all the layers of clothing they could wear and thus remove the clothes by wearing them, which was acceptable.

This was the kind of charged, hypercritical religious atmosphere Jesus Christ entered with His teaching and preaching. Today, without this historical context of how religious authorities had twisted and distorted God's Sabbath commandment, many people draw wrong conclusions about how Jesus viewed the Sabbath.

The writers of the Gospel accounts record numerous confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders of His day concerning the Sabbath. His healings on the Sabbath and His teachings about Sabbath observance stirred frequent controversy. A brief view of the biblical record of His actions and teachings will help us understand how Christ viewed the Sabbath.

As we review these accounts of His life, keep in mind their chronology. Bible scholars generally agree that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were written in the first century, from the 50s through the 70s, some 20 to 40 years after the events recorded in them occurred (John, they believe, wrote his Gospel near the end of the first century). If Jesus intended to change, abolish or annul the Sabbath, that intent should be apparent in the Gospel writers' historical records of His life. But as we will see, there is simply no evidence to support that view.

Jesus proclaims He is the Messiah on the Sabbath

The first mention of the Sabbath in the life of Christ is Luke 4:16: "So He [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read."

In this, the Gospels' first mention of the Sabbath, at the very beginning of Christ's ministry, we find that Jesus' custom—His normal activity—was to go "into the synagogue on the Sabbath day." This was not an isolated incident; He would later continue to teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath as well (Mark 6:2; Luke 13:10).

Continuing in Luke's account: "He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: '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 proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.' Then He closed the book . . . And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:17-21).

Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1-2, which those in the synagogue recognized as a prophecy of the messianic age. By saying, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus claimed to be fulfilling this prophecy—and thereby proclaimed Himself the expected Messiah! Jesus went on to compare His ministry to that of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. His listeners, clearly understanding His meaning, promptly tried to kill Jesus for this claim, but He escaped from them (verses 23-30).

This is the first mention of the Sabbath during His ministry. On that day Jesus Christ first proclaimed that He was the prophesied Messiah—introducing His mission as Savior and Lord of all humanity. This was a significant event. Nazareth was where He grew up. Now, on that

Sabbath, the people of Nazareth were the first to hear, directly from Him, that He was the Messiah. He pointed them to the hope of His future reign—the gospel, or good news, in both its present and future fulfillment.

Jesus heals and casts out demons on the Sabbath

Immediately, Jesus began to use the Sabbath to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God and to manifest His miraculous power as the Messiah. "Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths. And they were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority" (Luke 4:31-32).

Next, Jesus ordered a demon out of a man, and those in the synagogue "were all amazed and spoke among themselves, saying, 'What a word this is! For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out'" (verses 33-36).

Jesus then went to Peter's house, where He healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. Finally, as the Sabbath day drew to a close, "all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying out and saying, 'You are the Christ, the Son of God!' And He, rebuking them, did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ" (verses 38-41).

As the Savior, Jesus understood the purpose of the Sabbath, that it was a perfectly appropriate time to bring His message of healing, hope and redemption to humanity and to live that message through His actions. Even the demons recognized that He was the prophesied Messiah (which is the meaning of "Christ," John 1:41), the promised King and Deliverer. Jesus used the Sabbath to point people to Him as the Healer and Savior of mankind.

Pharisees confront Jesus over His disciples' actions on the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1-8, Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5 are passages misconstrued to imply that Jesus broke the Sabbath commandment. But let's see what really happened. Mark's account states: "He went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. And the Pharisees said to Him, 'Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'" (Mark 2:23-24).

The Pharisees were an excessively strict branch of Judaism holding considerable religious authority during Christ's time. As we saw earlier, they were extreme in their interpretation of what was allowed on the Sabbath. Their question would make it appear the disciples were hard at work gathering grain on the Sabbath and were confronted by the Pharisees for violating it. Luke's account clarifies the disciples' actions: As they "went through the grainfields," they "plucked the heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands" (Luke 6:1). They did this because they were hungry (Matthew 12:1), not because they were harvesting the field.

Christ's disciples didn't violate the Sabbath commandment

Their actions were perfectly acceptable according to the laws God had given the nation of Israel. As a matter of fact, God made specific allowance for picking handfuls of grain from another person's field as the disciples were doing here (Deuteronomy 23:25). God even told His people to leave portions of their fields unharvested so the poor and travelers would be able to eat what was left (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22).

The disciples were walking through the field, and as they walked they picked heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands to remove the chaff, then ate the kernels. Requiring almost no effort, this could hardly be construed as work. Yet the Pharisees, who were among the most strict in their rules concerning the Sabbath, viewed the disciples' actions as "reaping" and "threshing," which were among the 39 categories of work forbidden on that day. Although these actions did not violate God's Sabbath commandment, they did violate the Pharisees' man-made regulations. The Pharisees viewed the disciples' conduct as "not lawful on the Sabbath" and criticized them for it.

God's law allowed for mercy on the Sabbath

Jesus pointed out that King David and his hungry followers, when they were fleeing King Saul's armies, were given bread that was normally to be eaten only by priests, yet they were guiltless in God's sight (Mark 2:25-26). He also pointed out that even the priests serving in the temple of God labored on the Sabbath by conducting worship services and performing sacrifices, but God held them blameless (Matthew 12:5).

In both examples, the spirit and intent of the law were not broken, and both instances were specifically allowed by God for the greater good, Christ said. He emphasized that God's law allowed for mercy, and the Pharisees were completely wrong in elevating their harsh, humanly devised regulations above everything else, including mercy.

He said that, because of the Pharisees' distorted view, they had actually turned matters upside down. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," He countered. Because of their narrow, legalistic view of the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week had become a hardship, weighted down with hundreds of rules and regulations.

Jesus, however, pointed out the true purpose of the day intended from its inception: God created the day to be a blessing, a time for genuine rest from normal labors rather than an unmanageable, overly restrictive burden. It was a time to be enjoyed, not endured. Further, He said the Sabbath was created for all mankind, not just for the nation of Israel.

Jesus' teaching in these verses is summarized in The Anchor Bible Dictionary: "At times Jesus is interpreted to have abrogated or suspended the sabbath commandment on the basis of the controversies brought about by sabbath healings and other acts. Careful analysis of the respective passages does not seem to give credence to this interpretation.

"The action of plucking ears of grain on the sabbath by the disciples is particularly important in

this matter. Jesus makes a foundational pronouncement . . . : 'The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath' (Mark 2:27). The disciples' act of plucking grain infringed against the rabbinic halakhah [way to walk, denoting law from tradition] of minute casuistry [case-based reasoning] in which it was forbidden to reap, thresh, winnow, and grind on the Sabbath . . .

"Jesus reforms the sabbath and restores it to its rightful place as designed in creation, where the sabbath is made for all mankind and not specifically for Israel, as claimed by normative Judaism . . . It was God's will at creation that the sabbath have the purpose of serving mankind for rest and [to] bring blessing" (1992, Vol. 5, "Sabbath," p. 855).

In this example, we see that Jesus Christ understood and explained the Sabbath's true intent—that it was created to be a day of rest from normal labors, a blessing and benefit to all humanity.

Another Sabbath healing

Immediately after the dispute with the Pharisees over the disciples' plucking grain on the Sabbath, the Gospel accounts record that Jesus found Himself in another confrontation over what could and could not be lawfully done on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11). The Pharisees' intolerant regulations went so far as to forbid giving aid to someone who was ill on the Sabbath unless the person's life was in jeopardy!

In the synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus met a man with a withered, shriveled hand—a severe handicap, but not life-threatening. "Stand up in front of everyone," Jesus told the man (Mark 3:3, New International Version). Angered and grieved that their callous, hardened minds were incapable of grasping the most fundamental intent of God's law, Jesus asked those watching, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"

Unable or unwilling to answer, they remained silent. In front of the entire synagogue, Jesus healed the man's hand, making it "completely restored." Far from rejoicing at the blessing given the man, the Pharisees "went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus" (verses 4-6, NIV).

Rather than learning a vital spiritual lesson about the intent and purpose of both the Sabbath and Jesus Christ's ministry, the Pharisees were infuriated that Jesus ignored their strict directives. Rather than considering a message of mercy and compassion in applying God's law, they conspired to kill the Messenger.

Far from annulling the Sabbath, Jesus demonstrated that the Sabbath is an appropriate time to give aid and comfort to those in need. The Sabbath command didn't instruct people on what they were to do on that day, just what they were not to do. Jesus clarified what was acceptable to God. "It is lawful [within God's law] to do good on the Sabbath," He declared (Matthew 12:12).

The Pharisees' legalism had gone far beyond God's stated commandment to not work and created a myriad of rules restricting even the very basics of human activity—something God never intended. Yet even the Pharisees' regulations gave way to emergencies like getting a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath (verse 11). Jesus declared that the Sabbath was a day on which good could and should be done.

Some who oppose Sabbath observance view Christ's statement that "it is lawful to do good on

the Sabbath" as ending any distinction of days for rest or other religious purposes. However, to conclude that Jesus annulled the Sabbath's unique nature by teaching that it is lawful to do good on it, one must assume that it was originally unlawful to do good on that day. That is clearly not the case. As He frequently chided those who criticized Him, doing good was specifically allowed on the Sabbath, as it always had been (Matthew 12:12; Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9). The Sabbath is a day given by God for rest and religious observance, but this does not preclude doing good.

Jesus' healing acts on the Sabbath also foreshadowed something much larger—the miraculous healings still to come in the messianic age when He will reign over the world. Isaiah prophesied of this time: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy" (Isaiah 35:5-6, NIV).

The Savior's actions on the Sabbath are a reminder of that coming time of peace, restoration and healing for all mankind.

Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath

Luke 13:10-17 records another incident of Jesus' healing of a chronically ill person on the Sabbath in the synagogue, in this case "a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up" (verse 11). Calling her to Him, He laid His hands on her, "and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God" (verses 12-13).

The crowd, knowing that Jesus had just violated the narrow, restrictive prohibition against giving aid to an ill person unless the situation were life-threatening, waited to see what would happen next. The people didn't have to wait long. "The ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, 'There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day'" (verse 14).

Jesus would have none of this attitude. "Hypocrite!" He responded. "Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or 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?" His answer sank in on the crowd. "And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him" (verses 15-17).

Jesus stressed here that the Sabbath represents a time of liberation, of loosing from bondage, as we saw in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, and so helps us further understand God's intent for Sabbath observance. Even the Pharisees' strict regulations allowed for the feeding and watering of animals on the Sabbath. If caring for the basic life needs of animals doesn't break the Fourth Commandment, then how much more is "loosing" by healing appropriate on the Sabbath!

Jesus' example reminds us that the Sabbath is an appropriate time to visit the sick and elderly, helping them celebrate the day as a time of freedom. As He proclaimed earlier, He came to "proclaim liberty to the captives [and] to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18)—referring to the glorious freedom and liberty from spiritual bondage that will be a hallmark of His

coming rule as Messiah.

Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath

The next mention of the Sabbath during Christ's ministry follows in Luke 14:1-6. Rather than in the synagogue, this incident took place in the home of a prominent Pharisee where Jesus had gone to share a meal on the Sabbath.

A man with a chronic health problem came before Him. Jesus pointedly asked the Jewish legal experts and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" None answered. Jesus healed the man, who promptly left the uneasy atmosphere of the gathering (verses 2-4).

"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?" Jesus asked. Again, they had nothing to say (verses 5-6). Questions such as these had been debated among the Jewish religious teachers for years, and even they recognized that the command to rest didn't include ignoring emergency situations in which life and limb were at stake.

Jesus' approach was that when an opportunity to relieve suffering presents itself, the opportunity should be taken. God's Sabbath command was never intended to prohibit doing good on that day. Jesus well knew the heart and core of God's law: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Both James and Paul understood that love was the intent and fulfillment of God's law (James 2:8; Galatians 5:14).

Jesus' example showed that every day is to be lived in the spirit and purpose of God's law, which is love.

Jesus heals an invalid on the Sabbath

John 5:1-18 records a Sabbath healing not mentioned in the other Gospels, thereby adding another dimension to Christ's activities on the Sabbath. In this instance, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk," Jesus told him (verse 8, NIV).

The man was instantly healed, took up the mat on which he had lain and walked away, only to be confronted by other Jews for carrying his mat. "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat," they warned him (verse 10, NIV). "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk,'" he replied.

After determining that it was Jesus who had performed the healing and told the man to carry his mat, they "persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath" (verse 16). Their view of the Sabbath was so distorted that they focused more on their own petty rules about what could not be carried on the Sabbath than on the wonderful healing of a man's 38-year affliction!

Jesus' response to their accusation of breaking the Sabbath angered His accusers even more. "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working," He said. "Therefore the Jews

sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God" (verses 17-18).

Of course, what He broke was not God's Sabbath command, but the Pharisees' restrictive regulations regarding what they thought was allowable on the Sabbath. Jesus would not have broken the Sabbath, because He had earlier pronounced a curse on anyone who "breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so" (Matthew 5:19).

But what did Christ mean when He said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working"? The Life Application Bible, commenting on this verse, says: "If God stopped every kind of work on the Sabbath, nature would fall into chaos, and sin would overrun the world. Genesis 2:2 says that God rested on the seventh day, but this can't mean that he stopped doing good. Jesus wanted to teach that when the opportunity to do good presents itself, it should not be ignored, even on the Sabbath."

God made the Sabbath as a day of rest for mankind, not for Himself. He rested from His work of forming the world on the seventh day to show us that we should also rest from our normal work. But God continues some work without ceasing. Night and day, seven days a week, He works to bring people into His Kingdom. He works to help them grow spiritually on the Sabbath. He works constantly to build a close, personal relationship with His people.

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus healed more people on the Sabbath than on any other day. He taught and preached on the Sabbath. Was He sinning? No. His activities were part of God's work of helping people understand and ultimately enter the Kingdom of God and were therefore perfectly acceptable to God.

Circumcision and the Sabbath

In John 7:24 Jesus summed up what should have been obvious to those who criticized Him for healing on the Sabbath: "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." The Pharisees' narrow, intolerant view focused more on outward appearance than anything else. Jesus upbraided them for their emphasis on physical things while neglecting more important matters such as justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23).

To illustrate the extremes to which the Pharisees took their views, Jesus in the preceding verses used the example of circumcision. He pointed out that circumcision, a sign of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel, could be performed on the Sabbath without breaking it. And if this alteration of one of the 248 parts (by Jewish calculation) of the body could be done on the Sabbath, He argued, "Why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?" (John 7:22-23, NIV).

The inconsistency of allowing the ritual of circumcision while outlawing mercy to those who needed healing was to callously disregard the intent of God's law. It was in this context that Jesus warned His detractors in verse 24, which the NIV renders as: "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

Rather than upholding God's law by their added rules and regulations, their distorted view of God's commands led them to actually break the law, according to Jesus (Matthew 23:3, 28; Mark 7:6-9). "Not one of you keeps the law," He told them (John 7:19, NIV), reproving them for

their twisted interpretation of God's law. They were not keeping the law correctly, and Jesus restored its proper understanding and practice.

Jesus heals a blind man on the Sabbath

Jesus used the incident of healing a blind man on the Sabbath in John 9:1-34 to twice proclaim His messiahship. Speaking to His disciples, He said, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day . . . As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (verses 4-5). He then healed the man of his blindness.

The Pharisees caught up with the recently healed man, then interrogated and intimidated him. "This Man [Jesus] is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath," they argued (verse 16). The man countered, "This is a marvelous thing . . . He has opened My eyes! . . . If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing" (verses 30, 33).

Angered at having their authority questioned and their opinions challenged, "they cast him out," excommunicating the man from the synagogue (verse 34). He was condemned as a heretic, cut off from family and friends.

Jesus sought out the man He had healed. "Do you believe in the Son of God?" Jesus asked.

"Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" the man replied.

"You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you," Christ answered. The man then accepted Jesus as the Son of God. At this, Christ said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind" (verses 35-39).

Jesus Christ again made it clear that He was the Messiah, the very Son of God. In this incident He continued to teach, as He did so many times on the Sabbath, of His redemptive work for mankind.

Did Jesus change the law?

These accounts summarize the specific activities of Christ on the Sabbath recorded in the four Gospels. As stated earlier, some see only what they want to see in these verses—supposed proof that Jesus broke the Fourth Commandment. However, as the Scriptures actually show, He did no such thing. He did ignore the misguided, restrictive regulations the religious leaders attached to the Sabbath, often showing where they were wrong. But He never broke God's commandments. Had He done so, He would have sinned (1 John 3:4), yet Jesus never sinned. He lived a sinless life so He could be our perfect sacrifice, the Savior of all mankind (1 Peter 2:22; Ephesians 5:2; 1 John 4:14).

It would have been unthinkable for Jesus to disobey God's commandments. He said of Himself, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He [God the Father] does, the Son also does in like manner" (John 5:19).

What did Jesus do? In His own words, He did exactly what the Father did. Yet some mistakenly think He came to overturn God's holy law and remove it as a standard of guidance and behavior for mankind.

"I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me," He said (John 5:30). Christ's motivation was to please the Father. What the Father wanted was most important to Him.

"My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work," He told the disciples (John 4:34). That was His motivation, His reason for living—to do the will of God the Father. Through Christ's teaching on the Sabbaths during His earthly ministry, He revealed God's will and determined to carry out God's work in spite of the opposition and persecution that came with it, ultimately bringing about His cruel torture and death.

Jesus Christ's clear statement

Jesus Himself clearly denied that He intended to change or abolish the Sabbath or any part of God's law. "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets," He said. "I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

The Greek word pleroo, translated "fulfill" here, means "to make full, to fill, to fill up . . . to fill to the full" or "to render full" (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 2005, "Fulfill"). In other words, Jesus said He came to fill the law to the full—to complete it and make it perfect. How? By showing the spiritual intent and application of God's law. His meaning is clear from the remainder of the chapter, where He showed the full spiritual intent of specific commandments.

Some distort the meaning of "fulfill" to have Jesus saying, "I did not come to destroy the law, but to end it by fulfilling it." This is entirely inconsistent with His own words. Through the remainder of the chapter, He showed that the spiritual application of the law made it an even higher standard of behavior and thought, not that it was annulled or no longer necessary.

Jesus made it clear that He wasn't abolishing any of God's law: "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" (verse 18). Here a different Greek word is used for "fulfilled"—ginomai, meaning "to become, i.e. to come into existence" or "to come to pass" (Thayer's). Only after everything necessary would come to pass would any of God's law pass from existence, said Christ.

To prevent any possible misunderstanding, He warned those who would try to abolish God's law: "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least [by those] in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great [by those] in the kingdom of heaven" (verse 19).

Jesus, by explaining, expanding and exemplifying God's law, fulfilled a prophecy of the Messiah found in Isaiah 42:21: "The Lord is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will magnify the law, and make it honourable" (King James Version). The Hebrew word gadal, translated "magnify," literally means "to be or become great" (William Wilson, Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies, "Magnify"). Jesus Christ did exactly that, showing the true purpose and scope of God's Sabbath rest.

We are to follow Jesus' example

When asked, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered: "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment" (Mark 12:28-30).

Here Christ restated the greatest commandment of the Old Testament (see Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Those who observe the biblical Sabbath strive to obey that commandment, putting God first in their lives and keeping His command to observe the Sabbath. They will also follow Jesus' instruction: "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me" (John 14:21).

Jesus Christ is our Lord and Master (Philippians 2:9-11). He also proclaimed that He is "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28), so we should follow His example in observing the Sabbath—and all God's commandments—in the way He taught and lived (1 John 2:6).

Just What is Legalism?

Throughout this chapter, references are made to the legalistic approach of religious authorities who accused Jesus Christ of breaking the Sabbath. But what does the term "legalism" mean? A dictionary definition of legalism is "a strict, literal or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code."

A popular meaning attached to the word today is that any form of biblical law-keeping is legalism and therefore to be avoided. The word is used pejoratively, especially against such practices as keeping the Sabbath or adhering to other laws given in the Old Testament.

However, this use of the word is incorrect. It is not legalistic to obey God's laws correctly. To be legalistic is to misuse God's laws in a way never intended.

The Pharisees' interpretations undermined God's law

The Pharisees, an excessively strict branch of Judaism whose religious interpretations dominated popular thinking at the time of Christ, were examples of this. They added many of their own humanly devised rules and regulations to God's laws, which had the effect of misrepresenting and misapplying them.

Their added interpretations of God's laws so distorted the original purpose that they rendered them ineffective (Matthew 15:6), nullifying them. By following the Pharisees' interpretations and edicts, the people were no longer following God's law (John 7:19).

This mistaken view of God's law led many to reject Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah, even though that very law had prophesied of Him (John 5:39-40; Luke 24:44).

This was why Christ so strongly condemned the lack of understanding and hypocrisy of the religious leaders of His time. He taught a return to the correct teaching and practice of God's laws according to their original intent and purpose, and also that He was the promised Messiah.

Paul condemned the perverting of the law

The apostle Paul also wrote extensively against those who would pervert the proper use of God's law. This is particularly apparent in the book of Galatians. What Paul addressed was not the correct keeping of God's law, which he himself elsewhere upheld (Romans 3:31; 7:12, 14, 22, 25), but a claim that justification (the forgiveness and restoration of a sinner to a state of righteousness) could be achieved by circumcision and strict observance of the law.

Some false teachers (Galatians 2:4; 5:10, 12; 6:12-13) subverted the Galatian churches by wrongly insisting that circumcision and the keeping of the law were sufficient requirements for justification and salvation, apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul condemned this erroneous teaching, noting that obedience to the law had never made

eternal life possible (Galatians 3:21). He made it clear that justification—being made righteous in God's eyes and thus gaining access to eternal life—is only available through Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16; 3:1-3, 10-11, 22; 5:1-4).

Paul made it clear that forgiveness of sin requires a sacrifice, and even the strictest observance of the law cannot remove the need for that sacrifice.

However, the law of God remains the righteous standard by which all mankind will be judged (James 2:8, 12). The law is not annulled or abolished by faith in Christ (Romans 3:31), as many falsely believe. Instead, said Paul, the law's proper use is established by faith.

When Solomon concluded that the whole duty of man is to "fear God and keep His commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13), he expressed the enduring purpose of God for all mankind. The apostle John agreed when he concluded that if we love God we will keep His commandments (1 John 5:3).

Jesus told the woman caught in adultery to "sin no more" (John 8:11)—in other words, to uphold God's law! He told the rich young man, who came to Him asking what he could do to have eternal life, "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17).

Biblical examples of legalism

So, then, what does the Bible tell us about legalism?

To substitute any humanly devised laws for God's laws, as the Pharisees did, is legalism.

To rely on keeping any law in the belief that it will make one righteous in God's eyes, instead of faith in Christ, is legalism.

If all one focuses on is obedience to law apart from the motivation of pleasing God, loving God and loving neighbor, this distorts the purpose of the law (Matthew 22:36-40; Romans 13:10) and is legalism.

If we believe that any keeping of God's law can earn our salvation as our deserved reward, we are guilty of legalism.

Technical obedience, or strict obedience to the exact letter of the law while searching for ways to get around the underlying purpose and intent of the law, is legalism.

Proper obedience to God's law is not legalism

But Jesus Christ and the remainder of the Bible make one thing perfectly clear: Proper obedience to the law of God is not legalism.

After conversion, a Christian is given a much fuller understanding of the purpose and intent of God's law. He understands the importance of faith in the person and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He is given a more complete understanding of why he is to be obedient. But it remains for him to obey, with God's help. That is not legalism.

To obey in a proper attitude God's biblical commands, such as His command to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, is not legalism. Don't allow anyone to deceive you with such a false notion, which is itself a contradiction of Jesus Christ's own command (Matthew 5:19).

Was the Sabbath Changed in the New Testament?

"Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12).

We have seen that Jesus Christ did not change God's Sabbath day. On the contrary, throughout His ministry He showed the true purpose and intent of the Sabbath. Jesus often showed that the Sabbath, and particularly His teachings and actions on that day, prefigured the coming messianic age—the time of the Kingdom of God—as one of healing, freedom and restoration for all humanity.

Jesus was a Sabbath-keeper. At the time of His death, His closest followers clearly observed the Sabbath, waiting until it was past to prepare His body for burial (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1-2; Luke 23:56; 24:1). Fifty days from Christ's resurrection, many gathered for the Day of Pentecost, one of God's seven annual Sabbaths or feasts observed in addition to the weekly Sabbath (Leviticus 23), and it was on that day that the New Testament Church was founded by the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).

The Bible shows no evidence of any change at Christ's death and resurrection concerning God's Sabbaths. We see only a continuation of Christ's followers observing them just as He had done—despite the assertions of some to the contrary.

Did Paul abolish the Sabbath?

If the Sabbath, or any part of God's law, was abolished or changed in the early New Testament Church, we should find clear evidence of such a dramatic shift in the New Testament writings. After all, the books of the New Testament were written in the first century over a period of decades ending in the 90s, more than 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Many who argue that the Sabbath was abolished in the New Testament point to the apostle Paul's writings to justify their view. But is this opinion correct? They commonly cite three passages to support that claim—Romans 14:5-6, Colossians 2:16-17 and Galatians 4:9-10.

To properly understand these passages we must look at each in context, both in the immediate context of what is being discussed and in the larger social and historical context influencing the author and his audience at the time. We must also be careful not to read our preconceived notions into the text. With that in mind, let's examine these passages and see if Paul indeed annulled or abolished Sabbath observance in his writings.

First, let's consider Paul's own statements about God's law. More than 25 years after the death of Jesus Christ, he wrote in Romans 7:12, "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good." In Romans 2:13 he stated, "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified." In Romans 7:22 he said, "For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man."

Many assume that once we have faith in Jesus Christ, we have no more need to keep the law. Paul himself addressed this concept in Romans 3:31: "Do we then make void [Greek katargeo, meaning 'destroy' or 'abolish'] the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish [Greek histemi, meaning 'erect' or 'make to stand'] the law." Faith does not abolish the law, said Paul; it establishes and upholds it.

In Acts 24 he defended himself before the Roman governor Felix against charges of dissension and sedition brought by Jewish religious leaders. Replying to the accusations against him, he said, "I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets" (verse 14).

Two years later he again defended himself against such accusations, this time before another Roman governor, Festus. "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all," he responded to the charges against him (Acts 25:8).

Here, some 25 to 30 years after Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, Paul plainly said he believed "all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets" (terms used for the books of the Old Testament) and had done nothing against the law!

In light of these clear statements, we should expect to find equally clear instructions regarding abolition of the Sabbath, if that had been Paul's understanding and intent. But do we?

Romans 14:5-6: Are all days of worship alike?

In Romans 14:5-6, Paul wrote: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks."

From this statement, it could appear to some that Paul is saying that whatever day one chooses to rest and worship is irrelevant so long as one is "fully convinced in his own mind" and "observes it to the Lord." Does this mean that the Sabbath is no different from any other day or that we are free to choose whatever day we wish to observe?

To come to that conclusion, one must read it into the verse, because the Sabbath is nowhere mentioned here. In fact, the word Sabbath or references to Sabbath-keeping are not found anywhere in the book of Romans. The reference here is simply to "days," not the Sabbath or any other days of rest and worship commanded by God.

Keep in mind that Paul, earlier in this same epistle, had written that "the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good," that "the doers of the law will be justified," and that he found "delight in the law of God" (Romans 7:12; 2:13; 7:22). If he were saying in Romans 14 that Sabbath observance is irrelevant, such an assertion would be completely inconsistent with his other clear statements in this same letter.

What are the "days" Paul was talking about?

What are the days Paul mentions here? We must look at the context to find out.

The passage in question about days in Romans 14:5-6 is immediately between references to eating meat and vegetarianism in verses 2, 3 and 6. There is no biblical connection between Sabbath observance and vegetarianism, so these verses must be taken out of context to assume Paul was referring to the Sabbath.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains that "the close contextual association with eating suggests that Paul has in mind a special day set apart for observance as a time for feasting or as a time for fasting" (Everett Harrison, 1976, Vol. 10, p. 146). It is apparent that Paul wasn't discussing the Sabbath but, rather, other days during which feasting, fasting or abstaining from certain foods was practiced.

Paul was writing to a congregation composed of both Jewish and gentile believers in Rome (Romans 1:13; 2:17). Eating and fasting practices that were not clearly addressed in the Scriptures had become a point of contention.

The Talmud records that many Jews of that time fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. They also had other traditional fast days (compare Zechariah 7:3-5). Since some of the Jewish Christians in Rome self-righteously criticized others (Romans 2:17-24), perhaps they had become like the Pharisee who boasted, "I fast twice a week" (Luke 18:12), and set themselves up as more righteous than others who were not fasting at these times.

Possibly members of the church at Rome were trying to enforce fasting on particular days on other Christians there, prompting Paul's pointed question, "Who are you to judge another's servant?" (verse 4). Paul appears to be setting the record straight by emphasizing that fasting is a voluntary exercise of worship not limited to particular days. Therefore, one person's fasting on a particular day when another is eating does not make him more righteous.

Why were some avoiding meat?

In Romans 14:2-3 Paul discussed vegetarianism ("he who is weak eats only vegetables") and continued this theme in verse 6 ("he who eats . . . and he who does not eat").

The context shows us that some members of the congregation there were eating meat, and others were abstaining from eating meat. The vegetarians were likely members who "feared lest they should (without knowing it) eat meat which had been offered to idols or was otherwise ceremonially unclean (which might easily happen in such a place as Rome), that they abstained from meat altogether" (W.J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson, The Life and Epistles of St. Paul, 1974, p. 530).

In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, Paul addressed the issue of eating meat that may have been sacrificed to idols and consequently could have been viewed by some members as improper to eat. Paul's point in that chapter was that unknown association of food with idolatrous activity did not make that food unsuitable for eating.

Paul was evidently addressing the same issue with both the Romans and the Corinthians, namely whether members should avoid meats that may have been associated with idolatrous worship. This is indicated by Paul's reference to "unclean" meat in Romans 14:14. Rather than

using the Greek word used to describe those meats listed in the Old Testament as unclean, he used a word meaning "common" or "defiled," which would be appropriate in describing meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 8 was the same as his conclusion in Romans 14:15: Be especially careful not to offend a fellow Christian, causing him to stumble or lose faith over the issue of meats.

In no way was this related to Sabbath observance, as the Sabbath is nowhere associated in Scripture with abstaining from eating meat or any food. The Sabbath is nowhere mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans; it simply wasn't the issue.

Those who look to Paul's letter to the Romans for justification for their view that he abrogates keeping Old Testament laws face the added burden of explaining why, if his purpose is to argue that those laws are done away, Paul quotes from that same Old Testament more than 80 times in this same epistle as authority for his teaching. This simple fact alone confirms Paul's view that "the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12).

Galatians 4:9-10: Is the Sabbath bondage?

Galatians 4:9-10 is another passage from Paul's epistles that some see as condemning Sabbath observance. In these verses Paul wrote: "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years."

Those who argue against Sabbath observance typically see Paul's reference to "days and months and seasons and years" as pointing to the Sabbath, festivals and sabbatical and jubilee years given in the Old Testament (Leviticus 23, 25). They see these God-given observances as the "weak and miserable principles" (NIV) to which the Galatians were "turn[ing] again" and becoming "in bondage" (verse 9).

Is this Paul's meaning? There is an obvious problem with viewing these verses as critical of the Sabbath. As with Romans 14, the Sabbath is not even mentioned here. The term "Sabbath," "Sabbaths" and any related words do not appear anywhere in this epistle to the Galatians.

Again, to argue against keeping the Sabbath, some assume that the "years" referred to in Galatians 4:10 are the sabbatical and jubilee years described in Leviticus 25. However, the jubilee year was not being observed anywhere in Paul's day, and the sabbatical year was not being observed in areas outside the land of Israel (Encyclopaedia Judaica, Vol. 14, p. 582, and Jewish Encyclopedia, "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee," p. 666). The fact that Galatia was in Asia Minor, far outside the land of Israel, makes it illogical to conclude that Paul could have been referring here to the sabbatical and jubilee years.

The Greek words Paul used for "days and months and seasons and years" are used throughout the New Testament in describing normal, civil periods of time. They are totally different from the precise terms Paul used in Colossians 2:16 specifying the Sabbaths, festivals and new-moon observances given in the Bible. He used exact terminology for biblical observances in Colossians, but used very different Greek words in Galatians—a clear indication that he was discussing altogether different subjects.

To understand what Paul meant, we must be sure to carefully examine both the historic and immediate contexts of these verses.

The Galatians couldn't turn back to what they had never observed

It is true that there was a Judaizing faction trying to introduce to the Galatians the need to be circumcised and take up the entire ritual system of the Mosaic law—which Paul strongly opposed. But this was new to the people here. For the Galatian churches were composed mostly of members from a gentile, rather than Jewish, background. Paul made it clear that they were physically uncircumcised (Galatians 5:2; 6:12-13), so they could not have been Jewish.

This background is important in understanding this controversial passage. In Galatians 4:9-10, Paul said that the Galatians were "turn[ing] again to the weak and beggarly elements," which included "days and months and seasons and years." Since Paul's readers were from a gentile background, it is difficult to see how the "days and months and seasons and years" they were turning back to could be the Sabbath and other biblical festivals, since they could not turn back to something they had not previously observed.

This is made even clearer by the immediate context. In verse 8, Paul said, "When you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods." By this Paul referred "clearly to the idols of paganism, which, in typical Jewish idiom, Paul termed 'not gods'" (James Boice, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, 1976, Vol. 10, p. 475).

Paul wasn't referring to biblical practices

Is it possible that these "weak and beggarly elements" they were returning to (verse 9) could be God's laws, Sabbaths and festivals? The word translated "elements" here is the Greek word stoicheia, the same word translated "elements" earlier in verse 3. There Paul described his readers as having been "in bondage under the elements of the world." For this to refer to God's law in verse 9, it would also have to refer to His law in verse 3, since the same word is used.

To say that verse 3 refers to biblical law is insupportable, because these Galatians were gentiles, not Jews, and thus had no history of keeping the biblical laws. Also, "it does not explain why or how Paul could add the phrase 'of the world' to the term stoicheia. All Jewish thought would emphasize the other-worldly character of the law resulting from its divine origin" (ibid., p. 472).

Far more reasonable is to understand "elements of the world" as designating either fundamental principles of false human religion or the specific pagan concept of elemental spirits controlling natural forces. The Expositor's Bible Commentary continues: "It would seem that in Paul's time this exceedingly early and primitive view had been expanded to the point at which the stoicheia also referred to the sun, moon, stars, and planets—all of them associated with gods or goddesses and, because they regulated the progression of the calendar, also associated with the great pagan festivals honoring the gods. In Paul's view these gods were demons. Hence, he would be thinking of a demonic bondage in which the Galatians had indeed been held prior to

the proclamation of the gospel . . .

"In the verses that follow, Paul goes on to speak of these three crucial subjects in quick succession: (1) 'those who by nature are not gods,' presumably false gods or demons; (2) 'those weak and miserable principles,' again stoicheia; and (3) 'days and months and seasons and years' (vv. 9, 10). No doubt Paul would think of these demons in ways entirely different from the former thinking of the Galatians . . . Thus, this whole issue takes on a cosmic and spiritual significance. The ultimate contrast to freedom in Christ is bondage to Satan and the evil spirits" (ibid.).

In any case, astrology was probably a major aspect of this. In Deuteronomy 18, God calls pagan fortune-tellers "observers of times" (verses 10, 14, KJV). While God gave the heavenly bodies "for signs and seasons, and for days and years" (Genesis 1:14), the pagan nations had succumbed to attributing power and influence to these objects and the times they marked. God warned, "Do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for
the Gentiles are dismayed at them" (Jeremiah 10:2).

The Galatians' superstitious observance of days and times

This is the context in which at least some of the Galatians had been observing "days and months and seasons and years." So let's now understand what Paul was really referring to in Galatians 4:10.

"In the Greco-Roman chronography [time-measurement system], the smallest unit larger than a single day is a group of nine or ten days. In the majority of systems, these are the ten days respectively of the waxing moon,full moon and waning moon. "These three groups of ten days comprise a month of thirty days. Three months make one of the four seasons, and four seasons make a year. The years are then grouped into Olympiads of four years or eras of varying lengths. When Paul refers to days, months, seasons and years in Gal[atians] 4:10, he is describing a pagan time-keeping scheme" (Troy Martin, By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique, 1996, pp. 129-130).

The Judaizing faction had evidently succeeded in getting many in Galatia to believe it was necessary to embrace the Jewish ritual system to be a Christian. This resulted in two extremist positions.

Some fully accepted it. But others, unwilling to embrace what they saw as unreasonable demands of Christianity, seem to have turned to the opposite extreme, some reverting to aspects of paganism. Paul is rebuking them over this. He tells them, "I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain" (Galatians 4:11). He was trying to prevent them from again becoming entangled in their former pagan practices.

From the context, we see that it's simply not logical to conclude that Paul was criticizing the observance of the biblical Sabbath and festivals, since they were not even mentioned. The context shows that he was talking about pagan practices, something entirely different.

Colossians 2:16-17: Is the Sabbath obsolete?

A third passage from Paul's writings, Colossians 2:16-17, is also used to support the claim that observance of the Sabbath is no longer necessary. Here Paul wrote, "Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come . . ."

Again, let's examine these verses' context and historic setting to see if they support that view.

Did Paul intend to say that Sabbath-keeping is abolished? If so, we encounter some immediate problems with this interpretation. To accept this position, it is difficult to explain how Paul could leave the issue so muddled by not stating that these practices were unnecessary, when these verses indicate that the Colossians were, in fact, observing them. After all, the Colossian church was primarily gentile (Colossians 1:27; 2:13), so Paul could have used this epistle to make it plain that these practices were not binding on gentile or Jewish Christians.

However, Paul nowhere said that. Regarding the practices of festivals, new moons and Sabbaths, he said to "let no one judge you," which is quite different from saying these practices are unnecessary or obsolete.

Paul wasn't discussing biblical practices

A more basic question to ask is whether Old Testament practices were even what Paul was addressing here. Was Paul even discussing whether Christians should keep the laws regarding clean and unclean meats, the biblical festivals, the weekly Sabbath or any other Old Testament laws?

Many people assume that the "handwriting of requirements . . . nailed . . . to the cross" (verse 14) was God's law and the requirements He gave in the Old Testament. But this is not what Paul meant. The Greek word translated "handwriting" in this verse is cheirographon. Occurring only here in the Bible, this word referred to a handwritten record of debt, or what we would today call an iou. In contemporary apocalyptic literature, the term was used to designate a "record book of sin," meaning a written account of our sins (since the payment of a penalty is owed for sin, as a debt).

Paul was not saying that God's law was nailed to the cross. What was nailed there, he said, was all record of our sins. Because God's law required the death penalty as payment for sin (Romans 6:23), this record is what "was against us, which was contrary to us" (Colossians 2:14), not the law itself.

The New Testament in Modern English, by J.B. Phillips, makes this plain, translating verses 13 and 14 as: "He has forgiven you all our sins: Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over His own head on the cross."

As this says, it is the evidence against us, not the law itself, that was nailed to the cross, enabling us to be forgiven.

This becomes clear when we read the rest of this chapter. It is apparent that other issues were involved that had nothing to do with God's laws given in the Old Testament. Among these were "principalities and powers" (verse 15), "false humility and worship of angels" (verse 18), forbidding to touch, taste and handle (verse 21) and "neglect of the body" (verse 23).

Further, Paul referred to the false teachings in Colosse as rooted in "persuasive words" (verse 4), "philosophy and empty deceit" and "the tradition of men" (verse 8). He also referred to submitting to "regulations" of this world (verse 20) and "the commandments and doctrines of men" (verse 22).

Could Paul, who in Romans 7:12 said the law is "holy and just and good," possibly be referring to the same law here, or is he addressing something entirely different?

The Colossians were being affected by infiltration from gnosticism

Taking into account the historical context, the answer becomes clear. As the Church spread from the Holy Land into pagan areas such as Asia Minor, Italy and Greece, it had to deal with pagan philosophies such as gnosticism. The influence of this thought and practice is particularly noticeable in the New Testament writings of Paul, Peter and John.

Gnosticism "was essentially a religio-philosophical attitude, not a well-defined system" (Curtis Vaughn, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, 1978, Vol. 11, p. 166). As such, it wasn't a competing religion, but rather an approach to one's existing beliefs. The central theme of gnosticism was that secret knowledge (gnosis is the Greek word for "knowledge," hence the term gnosticism)could enhance or improve one's religion.

"Its central teaching was that spirit is entirely good, and matter is entirely evil. From this unbiblical dualism flowed . . . important errors" (Zondervan NIV Study Bible, introduction to 1 John). Among these errors were beliefs that "man's body, which is matter, is therefore evil. It is to be contrasted with God, who is wholly spirit and therefore good . . . Salvation is the escape from the body, achieved not by faith in Christ but by special knowledge . . . [And] since the body was considered evil, it was to be treated harshly. This ascetic form of gnosticism is the background of part of the letter to the Colossians" (ibid.).

In addition to these beliefs, "gnosticism, in all its forms, was characterized by belief . . . in mediating beings." Furthermore, "the knowledge of which the gnostics spoke . . . was knowledge acquired through mystical experience, not by intellectual apprehension. It was an occult knowledge, pervaded by the superstitions of astrology and magic. Moreover it was an esoteric knowledge, open only to those who had been initiated into the mysteries of the gnostic system" (Expositor's, p. 167).

References to gnostic teachings in Paul's letter to the Colossians

All of these elements are seen to have been influencing the Colossian congregation. It is clear

that Paul was combating the supposedly special knowledge claimed by the gnostics by pointing out that he was making known to the Colossians the higher, saving knowledge of God the Father and Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:9, 25-29; 2:2-3).

Paul wrote to them, he explained, "lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words" (verse 4). He called this secret knowledge nothing more than "philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (verse 8). The more important knowledge, wrote Paul, was that of God and Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (verse 3).

Proponents of the gnostic heresies included people advocating obeisance to angels and other spiritual powers. Paul warned the Colossians of those who delight in "worship of angels" (verse 18). In the light of Christ's atoning sacrifice, these supposed spirit "principalities and powers" were useless as a means of access to God, he said (verses 10, 15).

Paul addresses the misguided strict ascetic approach

Based on their belief that spirit was good and flesh evil, these teachers taught strict asceticism, denying the self any physical pleasure. Through "neglect of the body" (verse 23), they hoped to attain increased spirituality. Paul described their rules as "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle" (verse 21). These regulations concerned only "things which perish with the using," he wrote, because they are based on "the commandments and doctrines of men" (verse 22) rather than teachings from God.

Given the mention of angels and spiritual hierarchies, this early gnostic asceticism probably integrated gentile concepts with elements of Judaism —perhaps also including circumcision (compare verse 11). "It is likely, therefore, that the Colossian heresy was a mixture of an extreme form of Judaism and an early stage of gnosticism" (Zondervan NIV Study Bible, introduction to Colossians).

From the specific teachings Paul addressed, it appears that one or more branches of Judaism were influenced by gnosticism and infiltrated the Colossian congregation, teaching an extreme form of ascetic Judaism blended with gnostic beliefs. The ascetic approach advocated by these false teachers led them to condemn those whose religious observances were not up to their ascetic spiritual standards. Thus Paul cautioned the Colossians to "not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink" (verse 16, NIV).

The Colossians were being judged for how—not whether —they observed the Sabbath

Note that where the New King James Version has "in food or in drink" in verse 16, the New International Version has "eat or drink," while the New Century Version has "about eating or drinking." This is connected to the festivals and Sabbaths mentioned next.

Indeed, the Colossians were not being judged by Jews for not observing festivals, new moons and Sabbaths, as so many now assume. Rather they were being judged by ascetic gnostics for

the fact that they were observing those occasions—and in particular for how they were observing them, apparently with joyous and festive eating and drinking.

The Colossians, knowing these days were God's festivals—festive, happy occasions—celebrated these days in a way that was entirely contrary to the ascetic approach of self-denial. They also understood that the Sabbaths and annual festivals are clearly commanded in the Old Testament. (New moons, it should be noted, were used as the biblical markers of time but never declared to be sacred Sabbaths, nor are they listed among the annual sacred festivals.)

Gnosticism was also concerned with the stars and planets, part of what Paul referred to as "the elements of the world" (verse 8, Green's Literal Translation), as in Galatians 4. This would likely have influenced the gnostics' observance of festivals, new moons and Sabbaths, since the calendar governing those days was determined by movements of the heavenly bodies.

By cautioning the Colossian members not to let others judge them for how they observed the festivals, new-moon celebrations and Sabbaths, Paul didn't address whether they should be kept. The obvious implication of these verses is that these gentile Christians were in fact observing these days, and in no way did Paul tell them to stop.

Instead, his point was that Christians should not be criticized for observing these days in a festive manner. Paul cautioned that members should not let others judge them by those misguided ascetic standards in what they ate or drank or how they observed the Sabbaths or festivals (verse 16).

The larger context of Colossians 2:16 is asceticism growing out of pagan philosophies, not a discussion of which laws are binding for Christians.

God's days of worship were "a shadow of things to come"

What about Paul's statement in Colossians 2:17 that, as translated in the New King James Version, the Sabbath and biblical festivals "are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ"? Did Paul mean that they were irrelevant and obsolete because Jesus Christ was the "substance" of what these days foreshadowed?

Actually, Paul said they "are a shadow of things to come," indicating they have a future fulfillment. The Greek word translated "to come" is mello, meaning "to be about to do or suffer something, to be at the point of, to be impending" (Spiros Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament, 1992, p. 956).

Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words similarly defines mello as meaning "to be about (to do something), often implying the necessity and therefore the certainty of what is to take place" (W.E. Vine, 1985, "Come, Came," p. 109).

Paul uses the same word construction in Ephesians 1:21, stating that Jesus Christ is "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (NIV). He contrasts the present age with one "to come," showing there is clearly a future fulfillment.

This future fulfillment is also made plain from the phrasing in Colossians 2:17 that these things "are a shadow." The Greek word esti, translated here as "are," is in the present-active tense and

means "to be" or "is" (Zodhiates, p. 660). For Paul to have meant that the Sabbath and festivals were fulfilled and became obsolete in Jesus Christ, it would have been necessary for him to say they "were a shadow" and to have used entirely different wording.

Paul's choice of wording makes it clear that the Sabbath and festivals "are a shadow" of things still to come and not "were a shadow" of things fulfilled and made obsolete in Jesus Christ.

God gave physical acts to teach us spiritual lessons

Some assume that certain physical acts relating to worship—because they are representations or symbols of greater spiritual truths—have been "fulfilled in Christ" in the New Testament and are therefore obsolete and unnecessary. These people put the Sabbath and other biblical festivals in this category based on Paul's comment that they "are a shadow of things to come."

But this reasoning is flawed. Just because something is a shadow, a representation or a symbol doesn't mean its importance is diminished. The Old and New Testaments alike are filled with symbols and symbolic acts commanded by God to teach us important spiritual lessons.

Baptism is a symbolic act representing a greater spiritual truth, the burial of the old self and living a new life (Romans 6:3-4), yet we are commanded to be baptized (Acts 2:38). The bread and wine of the Passover service are symbols of the vital spiritual relationship we have with Jesus Christ, yet we are clearly commanded to partake of them (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Laying on of hands (Hebrews 6:2), anointing with oil (James 5:14), foot-washing (John 13:14), partaking of unleavened bread (1 Corinthians 5:6-8) and other physical acts are commanded to be observed in the New Testament, not because they are greater than the things they symbolize, but to strengthen and enhance our spiritual understanding as we do them. After all, we are physical human beings who are in search of spiritual understanding. God gave us physical acts and symbols to help us better understand spiritual lessons.

These examples show that symbols and symbolic acts aren't strictly limited to physical worship in the Old Testament, but are clearly commanded in the New Testament as important elements of our worship. They are vital reminders of important spiritual truths, as Paul recognized (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The same is true of the Sabbath. Jesus Christ, through His actions and teachings on the Sabbath, showed that the Sabbath rest is a type—a foretaste—of the great coming messianic age of peace, rest, freedom and healing.

Paul's point in Colossians 2:16-17, in saying that the festivals and Sabbaths are shadows of things to come, was that Christians must not let anyone get them overly focused on minutiae of regulation and strictness in observing these days to the point that they lose the big picture of the wonderful meaning of these days—the plan of God they picture.

As to the specific phrase in verse 17 that the New King James Version renders "but the substance is of Christ," there is no word here for "is" in the original Greek text, and the word for "substance" here is soma, translated "body" in the King James Version, as the NKJV renders the same word two verses later. So the literal wording here is ". . . but the body of Christ." This ties in with verse 19, which criticizes the gnostics for "not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body . . . grows with the increase that is from God." The reference here is to Christ as "the head of the body, the church" (1:18).

Recall that Paul had begun his statement with, "Let no one judge you . . ." on how you celebrate festivals. He concludes the same thought with, ". . . but the body of Christ." In other words, don't let these others judge your manner of observing these days, but instead let the Church of God, of which Christ is the living Head, judge in this regard.

In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul isn't discussing the permanence or transience of the Sabbath. As a matter of fact, Paul nowhere quotes the Old Testament in Colossians. He uses the Greek word for "law," nomos, dozens of times in his other epistles, but not once in Colossians. Why? The continuing necessity of the Old Testament and God's law simply was not the issue.

Far from negating Sabbath observance, Paul's instructions to the Colossians, written about A.D. 62, actually affirm that gentile Christians were indeed observing the Sabbath more than 30 years after Christ's death and that the Sabbath is an important reminder of vital spiritual truths for us today.

What does the historical record in the book of Acts show?

Out of all of Paul's writings, the three passages discussed earlier in this chapter are the ones commonly used in attempting to prove he did away with Sabbath observance. However, as we have seen, two of those passages do not even mention the Sabbath, and the third confirms that gentile believers were actually keeping the Sabbath, since Paul told them not to let themselves be judged by outsiders for how they kept it.

But in addition to Paul's words, his actions showed that he never intended to abolish or change the Sabbath and that he observed it himself. The book of Acts, written by Paul's companion Luke, makes this clear.

Acts 13 records that, 10 to 15 years after Paul was miraculously converted, he and his companions traveled to Antioch in Asia Minor, where they "went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day" (verse 14). After being invited to speak to the congregation, Paul addressed both Jews and gentile proselytes (verse 16), describing how the coming of Jesus Christ had been foretold throughout the Old Testament scriptures.

His message was received so enthusiastically that "when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath" (verse 42). Notice that the gentiles in attendance wanted Paul to teach them more about Christ on the next Sabbath. Why? Because these gentiles were clearly already keeping the Sabbath with the Jews in the synagogue!

What was Paul's response to the gentiles' request? "On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God" (verse 44). Had Paul not believed in the Sabbath, he could easily have told them to come the next day or any other day and he would teach them. Instead, he waited until the following Sabbath, when "almost the whole city," Jew and gentile alike, came out to hear his message!

The gentiles of the city, hearing that Paul had been commissioned to preach the gospel to the gentiles, "were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (verses 45-48). The Sabbath, commanded by God, was still the day for rest, assembly and instruction in God's way of life.

About five years later, in what is today northern Greece, Paul "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, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ'" (Acts 17:1-3). Here, some 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul's custom was still to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath to discuss the Scriptures and teach about Jesus Christ!

He continued to teach both Jews and gentiles: "And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks [gentiles], and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas" (verse 4). So Paul, specifically commissioned to preach the gospel to the gentiles (Acts

9:15; 13:47), taught the gentiles in the synagogues on the Sabbath!

Several years later he went to the Greek city of Corinth, where "he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4). Later still he went to Ephesus in Asia Minor, where "he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8).

The book of Acts was completed around A.D. 63, shortly before Paul's execution in Rome, covering the history of more than 30 years of the New Testament Church. It shows that, over a period of many years, Paul repeatedly taught Jews and gentiles on the Sabbath. Even though he was the apostle to the gentiles, he never hinted to them in either his writings or his actions that the Sabbath was obsolete or unnecessary.

To argue that the apostle Paul advocated abolishing or annulling the Sabbath, one must not only twist Paul's words out of context to directly contradict his other statements, but one must also ignore or distort Luke's written eyewitness record of the Church from that time. The book of Acts contains no evidence that the Sabbath was abolished or changed during that time.

In legal proceedings against him, Paul assured all who heard him that he believed in and had done nothing against the law (Acts 24:14; 25:8). As earlier noted, he said that the law of God is not annulled or abolished by faith, but, "on the contrary, we establish the law" (Romans 3:31).

He concluded, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters" (1 Corinthians 7:19). That is his unequivocal statement: Obeying God's commandments matters. They are vitally important to our relationship with God.

Paul, in observing the Sabbath, was only doing what he told others to do: "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). He observed the Sabbath just as his Master had done.

Paul delighted in the law of God

As we've seen, Paul himself wrote, "I delight in the law of God" (Romans 7:22), not that it should be abolished. "The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good," he affirmed (Romans 7:12).

He did not see the New Testament as replacing the Old. After all, there were no New Testament scriptures as such during his lifetime—they were not fully assembled until several decades after his death. Paul quoted from what we call the Old Testament dozens of times in his writings, accepting and using it as an authority and guide for living (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:15).

The New Testament Church simply continued with Old Testament practices, including the Sabbath, but with greater insight and understanding of their spiritual significance in the lives of God's true followers.

Was Sunday the New Testament Day of Worship?

Three passages lead some to believe that Sunday was the day of rest and worship for the New Testament Church. Let's briefly examine each of them to see whether this is true.

The Lord's Day?

One scripture commonly cited to justify Sunday worship is Revelation 1:10, where John wrote, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day..." Some believe this means John was worshipping on Sunday and had the vision on that day. But nowhere does the Bible define "Lord's Day" as the first day of the week. As a matter of fact, this is the only place this term is used in the Bible, which would hardly be the case if the Church had been observing Sunday for years, as some contend.

If this were referring to a day of the week, we would have to conclude that John meant the seventh day, since God called the Sabbath "My holy day . . . the holy day of the Lord" (Isaiah 58:13) and Jesus Christ said He was the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28, not some other day of the week.

However, the context of John's vision shows that John wasn't referring to a day of the week at all. Instead, he meant that the vision transported him into the future time the Bible elsewhere calls the "day of the Lord," "day of the Lord Jesus Christ" or "day of Christ" (Jeremiah 46:10; Acts 2:20; 1 Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10).

These terms are not speaking of a specific single day. Instead, they refer to the end-time period when Jesus Christ will return to personally and directly intervene in human affairs. Thus, these terms indicate the end of the age of man's self-rule and the beginning of the age of God's rule over all nations through Christ. This is the theme of the book of Revelation and the "Lord's Day" John saw in vision.

Breaking bread on Sunday?

Another scripture some believe shows the New Testament Church observed Sunday is Acts 20:7: "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight."

Some think that "break[ing] bread" refers exclusively to the ceremony in which Christians partake of bread and wine in commemoration of Christ's death. So they conclude that the verse here concerns a religious service on the first day of the week. However, that commemoration is supposed to take place once a year at the festival of Passover (see our free booklet God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind.) Moreover, breaking bread is not limited to

religious observance, but refers to dividing flat loaves of bread for a typical meal.

"It means to partake of food and is used of eating as in a meal . . . The readers [of the original New Testament letters and manuscripts] could have had no other idea or meaning in their minds" (E.W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, 1991, pp. 839-840).

This is proven by the fact that after Paul finished speaking they again broke bread and ate (verse 11). Breaking bread to eat a meal is mentioned in Luke 24:30, 35 and Acts 27:35.

The timing of the events in Acts 20 helps us to understand more clearly. Verses 7-11 describe several events of one night. Since the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, counts days as beginning when the sun goes down (see "When Is the Sabbath Day to Be Kept?" on page 6), these events began with a meal on Saturday evening after the Sabbath, which would have been the only evening on "the first day of the week." Several translations, including the New English Bible, Revised English Bible, Good News Bible, The New Testament in Modern English and the Complete Jewish Bible, state unequivocally that this occurred on Saturday night.

Paul planned to leave the next day for another city, so he stayed and spoke long into the night. At midnight one young man in the congregation fell asleep, tumbled from the window where he sat and was killed in the fall. Paul rushed to the young man, who miraculously came back to life. After that, the group broke bread and ate again, talking almost until dawn. Paul departed at daybreak.

After speaking and talking all night, Paul the next morning walked almost 20 miles to Assos to meet the rest of the people in his group who had sailed there (verses 11, 13-14). So rather than describing a religious service on Sunday, this passage actually documents Paul walking almost 20 miles on foot on the first day of the week—hardly making it a day of rest and worship for him!

Collection during a Sunday service?

Some people assume that 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 refers to taking up a collection during a Sunday religious service. However, a closer look shows that this is not what Paul means. Although the Bible says the collection took place on the first day of the week, nowhere does it say that a church service was involved.

This was a special collection "for the saints," members of the church in Jerusalem (verses 1, 3). It was part of a wider relief effort involving other members in Galatia (verse 1), Macedonia and Achaia (Romans 15:25-26), as well as those in Corinth to whom Paul wrote. This outpouring of support may have been that described in Acts 11, when a famine prompted members to send "relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea . . . by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (verses 28-30).

Paul gives no indication that this collection was to be taken up at a religious service. On the contrary, he tells the Corinthians, "Let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:2). These contributions were to be "laid aside" and "stored up" by "each one of you" as an individual act, not brought to a church service and collected there. To say this is an account of a collection taken up during a Sunday worship service is to read into the Bible an unwarranted personal interpretation.

Scripture contains no other passages that mention anything remotely resembling weekly religious services on the first day of the week. The New Testament was written over a span of more than 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and nowhere does it even hint at the day of rest being changed to Sunday.

Was God's Law Abolished in the New Testament?

If the Sabbath had been abolished in the New Testament, shouldn't we find numerous passages throughout the New Testament making that clear? After all, the abolishing of one of God's Ten Commandments would certainly require nothing less!

Jesus Christ said that "one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law" until all is "fulfilled," or has completely filled its purpose (Matthew 5:18). Various passages, including entire chapters of the New Testament, make clear the spiritual purpose behind such practices as animal sacrifices and temple worship (Hebrews 7:11-19; 8:1-6; 9:1-15; 10:1-18).

But God's commandments remain. The last books written in the New Testament were, around A.D. 85-95, John's epistles and, about the year 95, the book of Revelation. Were the Ten Commandments abolished by that time? Notice the words of John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:7, 20): "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4).

John defined sin as the violation of God's laws. "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness," he wrote (1 John 3:4).

He knew that God's law was a law of love, defining both our love for others and our love for God: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:2-3).

The intent of God's law from the beginning was love, as Jesus taught: "This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it" (2 John 6).

The book of Revelation, divinely inspired by Jesus Christ Himself (Revelation 1:1), also upholds keeping God's commandments. In Revelation 12:17, describing events shortly before Jesus' return, Satan attempts to destroy members of God's Church, "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."

In Revelation 14:12, the saints are described as "those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." Faith and keeping God's commandments go hand in hand, as Paul stated earlier (Romans 3:31).

In the last chapter of the Bible, Jesus Christ gave a final message to the Church: "'Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work...' Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city" (Revelation 22:12, 14).

Clearly God's law is not abolished in the New Testament. (To learn more, read our free booklet

The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law?)

Why is the Sabbath Commandment Not Repeated in the New Testament?

Some people believe that, since the Sabbath commandment isn't explicitly repeated in the New Testament, it is no longer binding. But is this true?

The Sabbath commandment did not have to be repeated in the New Testament, simply because the people to whom Jesus Christ and the apostles preached would never have imagined that it needed to be repeated!

The Scriptures that would later be called the Old Testament were their Bible, their guide for living (Romans 15:4). Paul described them as being "given by inspiration of God, and . . . profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Holy Scriptures clearly commanded them to keep the Sabbath, and the common people accepted that as God's inspired instruction.

Jesus Christ and the apostles lived and taught in a Sabbath-keeping society. Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees were over how to observe the Sabbath, never over whether to observe it.

When the apostles took their message beyond the confines of Judea, Sabbath observance was well known in other parts of the Roman Empire. Notice, for example, what the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, writing during the New Testament period, said: "The multitude of mankind itself have had a great inclination for a long time to follow our religious observances; for there is not any city of the Grecians, nor any of the barbarians, nor any nation whatsoever, whither our custom of resting on the seventh day hath not come . . . As God himself pervades all the world, so hath our law passed through all the world also" (Against Apion, Book 2, chap. 40).

The examples of Jesus and the apostles confirm that they believed in and obeyed all of the Ten Commandments. Throughout the book of Acts—written by Luke, a gentile —the Sabbath and the annual Sabbaths described in Leviticus 23 are mentioned quite routinely (Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4, 21; 20:6, 16; 27:9). Whether to observe them simply wasn't a question.

To learn more, read our free booklet The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law?

Surprising Admissions About the Sabbath and Sunday

Leaders and authorities from many religious denominations candidly acknowledge that Saturday is the biblical Sabbath day and that there is no biblical basis for Sunday observance. Notice below some of their admissions that the change was made by the Roman Catholic Church and not on the basis of biblical instruction.

Roman Catholic admissions

"Nowhere in the Bible do we find that Christ or the Apostles ordered that the Sabbath be changed from Saturday to Sunday. We have the commandment of God given to Moses to keep holy the Sabbath day, that is the 7th day of the week, Saturday. Today most Christians keep Sunday because it has been revealed to us by the [Roman Catholic] church outside the Bible" ("To Tell You the Truth," The Catholic Virginian, Oct. 3, 1947, p. 9).

"But since Saturday, not Sunday, is specified in the Bible, isn't it curious that non-Catholics who profess to take their religion directly from the Bible, and not the Church, observe Sunday instead of Saturday? Yes of course, it is inconsistent; but this change was made about 15 centuries before Protestantism was born, and by that time the custom was universally observed. They have continued the custom, even though it rests upon the authority of the Catholic Church and not upon an explicit text in the Bible" (Dr. John O'Brien, Faith of Millions, pp. 543-544).

"You may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday, a day which we never sanctify" (James Cardinal Gibbons, Faith of our Fathers, 88th ed., p. 89).

"Q: Which is the Sabbath day?

"A: Saturday is the Sabbath day.

"Q: Why do we observe Sunday instead of Saturday?

"A: We observe Sunday instead of Saturday because the Catholic Church, in the Council of Laodicea, transferred the solemnity from Saturday to Sunday" (Peter Geiermann, The Convert's Catechism of Catholic Doctrine, 1957, p. 50).

Protestants follow Rome's lead

"The Sabbath was binding in Eden, and it has been in force ever since. This fourth commandment begins with the word 'remember,' showing that the Sabbath already existed when God wrote the law on the tables of stone at Sinai. How can men claim that this one

commandment has been done away with when they will admit that the other nine are still binding?" (Dwight L. Moody, Weighed and Wanting, pp. 47-48).

Anglican/Episcopal: "Where are we told in the Scriptures that we are to keep the first day at all? We are commanded to keep the seventh; but we are nowhere commanded to keep the first day . . . The reason why we keep the first day of the week holy instead of the seventh is for the same reason that we observe many other things, not because the Bible, but because the church has enjoined it" (Isaac Williams, Plain Sermons on the Catechism, 1882, Vol. 1, pp. 334, 336).

Baptist:"There was and is a commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day, but that Sabbath day was not Sunday. It will however be readily said, and with some show of triumph, that the Sabbath was transferred from the Seventh to the First day of the week . . . Where can the record of such a transaction be found? Not in the New Testament—absolutely not. There is no scriptural evidence of the change of the Sabbath institution from the Seventh to the First day of the week . . .

"To me it seems unaccountable that Jesus, during three years' discussion with His disciples, often conversing with them upon the Sabbath question . . . never alluded to any transference of the day; also, that during forty days of His resurrection life, no such thing was intimated . . .

"Of course I quite well know that Sunday did come into use in early Christian history . . . But what a pity that it comes branded with the mark of Paganism, and christened with the name of the sun-god, adopted and sanctioned by the Papal apostasy, and bequeathed as a sacred legacy to Protestantism" (Dr. Edward Hiscox, before a New York ministers' conference, Nov. 13, 1893, as reported in the New York Examiner, Nov. 16, 1893).

"There was never any formal or authoritative change from the Jewish seventh-day Sabbath to the Christian first-day observance" (William Owen Carver, The Lord's Day in Our Day, 1940, p. 49).

Congregationalist: "It is quite clear that however rigidly or devotedly we may spend Sunday, we are not keeping the Sabbath . . . The Sabbath was founded on a specific Divine command. We can plead no such command for the obligation to observe Sunday" (Dr. R.W. Dale, The Ten Commandments, 1884, p. 100).

Disciples of Christ: "The first day of the week is commonly called the Sabbath. This is a mistake. The Sabbath of the Bible was the day just preceding the first day of the week. The first day of the week is never called the Sabbath anywhere in the entire Scriptures. It is also an error to talk about the change of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. There is not in any place in the Bible any intimation of such a change" (Alexander Campbell, First Day Observance, pp. 17, 19).

Lutheran:"But they err in teaching that Sunday has taken the place of the Old Testament Sabbath and therefore must be kept as the seventh day had to be kept by the children of Israel . . . These churches err in their teaching, for Scripture has in no way ordained the first day of the week in place of the Sabbath. There is simply no law in the New Testament to that effect" (John Theodore Mueller, Sabbath or Sunday, pp. 15-16).

Methodist: "Take the matter of Sunday. There are indications in the New Testament as to how the church came to keep the first day of the week as its day of worship, but there is no passage

telling Christians to keep that day or to transfer the Jewish Sabbath to that day" (Harris Franklin Rall, Christian Advocate, July 2, 1942, p. 26).

Presbyterian:"The Sabbath is a part of the Decalogue—the Ten Commandments. This alone forever settles the question as to the perpetuity of the institution . . . Until, therefore, it can be shown that the whole moral law has been repealed, the Sabbath will stand . . . The teaching of Christ confirms the perpetuity of the Sabbath" (T.C. Blake, D.D., Theology Condensed, pp. 474-475).

Does it matter to God?

Jesus Christ condemned the practices of the religious leaders of His day, saying: "'In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition" (Mark 7:7-9).

According to Christ's own statements, it is possible to worship Him in a way that does no good—that is, it is in vain. God does not give us the choice of how to worship Him—only whether we will worship Him according to His instructions or not. What, then, must He think of those who ignore His commands regarding the Sabbath, substituting instead a different day?

"There Remains a Sabbath-Rest for the People of God"

The book of Hebrews uses creative comparisons to emphasize to its largely Jewish audience that the weekly Sabbath is a reminder of more than the fact that God was the Israelites' Creator and the One who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

The faithfulness of Moses and Jesus Christ is spoken of in the first six verses of the third chapter of Hebrews. Beginning in verse 7, Psalm 95 is quoted to document the failure of the first generation of Israel as a lesson to God's people today. Disobedience because of unbelief was the main cause of their failure to enter the rest promised to them (verses 18-19).

The fourth chapter begins with an admonition to faith and obedience as a prerequisite for receiving the rest that is still available to God's people. No one has yet entered that rest, and not because God hadn't prepared it—for in fact, it was finished from the foundation of the world (Hebrews 4:3). That God rested on the seventh day from all His works indicates as much (verse 4).

David (in Psalm 95) spoke of a promise of rest long after Joshua led the second generation of Israel to rest in the Promised Land. This demonstrates that the rest fulfilled at the time of Joshua was only a type of a greater rest to come (Hebrews 4:6-8).

Rest for the people of God

Now we come to a controversial statement: "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God" (verse 9).

The Greek word translated "rest" in every other verse throughout Hebrews 3 and 4 is katapausis. But the word translated "rest" in Hebrews 4:9 is sabbatismos. This is the only New Testament occurrence of this word, and its meaning is fundamental to understanding this pivotal verse, which is the conclusion of everything previously said about "rest" beginning in Hebrews 3:7.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary states regarding the meaning of sabbatismos: "The words 'sabbath rest' translate the [Greek] noun sabbatismos, a unique word in the NT. This term appears also in Plutarch . . . for sabbath observance, and in four post-canonical Christian writings . . . for seventh day 'sabbath celebration'" (p. 855, emphasis added).

The same resource continues with an explanation of the context: "The author of Hebrews affirms in Heb[rews] 4:3-11, through the joining of quotations from Gen[esis] 2:2 and Ps[alm] 95:7, that the promised 'sabbath rest' still anticipates a complete realization 'for the people of God' in the . . . end-time which had been inaugurated with the appearance of Jesus [Hebrews] 1:1-3 . . .

"The experience of 'sabbath rest' points to a present 'rest' (katapausis) reality in which those 'who have believed are entering' (4:3) and it points to a future 'rest' reality (4:11). Physical sabbath-keeping on the part of the new covenant believer as affirmed by 'sabbath rest' epitomizes cessation from 'works' (4:10) in commemoration of God's rest at creation (4:4 = Gen[esis] 2:2) and manifests faith in the salvation provided by Christ.

"Heb[rews] 4:3-11 affirms that physical 'sabbath rest' (sabbatismos) is the weekly outward manifestation of the inner experience of spiritual rest (katapausis) in which the final . . . rest is . . . experienced already 'today' (4:7). Thus 'sabbath rest' combines in itself creation-commemoration, salvation-experience, and eschaton [end-time]-anticipation as the community of faith moves forward toward the final consummation of total restoration and rest" (pp. 855-856).

In summary, The Anchor Bible Dictionary decisively and correctly concludes that sabbatismos means keeping the seventh-day Sabbath. Therefore, Hebrews 4:9 stresses the need to continue to keep the Sabbath in a New Covenant context, even though the day also embodies all it meant under the Old Covenant.

Added meaning for the Sabbath

The book of Hebrews is addressed to Jewish Christians to explain the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The Sabbath and circumcision have long been considered two of the cardinal tenets of Judaism, identifying the Jews as "the people of God." However, by the time of Christ, the meaning of the Sabbath had become buried under a mountain of dos and don'ts.

The Sabbath had become a heavy burden as Sabbath-keeping degenerated into the bondage of legalism, perpetuated by the narrow-minded scribes and Pharisees. Jesus Christ condemned these human traditions and set the example of how to keep the Sabbath as God's gift to mankind (Mark 2:27-28).

Elevation of the Sabbath

What could be more appropriate to the book of Hebrews than the elevation of the Sabbath to its full meaning and intent in the plan of God?

So the Sabbath retains its Old Covenant meanings that identify God's specially sanctified people ("the people of God") and point them back to God as Creator. Added to that is the New Covenant meaning of entering into another rest through Jesus Christ, fulfilled in type by the rest given to Israel during Joshua's time (Hebrews 4:8).

This spiritual rest begins now in this life and reaches its consummation in the resurrection to eternal life at the return of Christ (Revelation 20:6). His return also signals the beginning of the millennial rest prophesied in the Old Testament.

The book of Hebrews cleverly weaves together three themes of rest—the rest promised to Israel from enemies, the physical rest of the weekly Sabbath, and the spiritual rest through Christ. The

conclusion is that Sabbath-keeping is still necessary for the people of God, the New Testament Church.

As Hebrews 4:10 affirms, we must all labor to enter the spiritual rest and continue to keep the weekly Sabbath out of obedience to God and because of what it portrays in His great master plan.

A Sign of God's People

God reveals several important points about the Sabbath day in Exodus 31:13- 17: "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. You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it 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."

Note first the duration of the Sabbath as an identifying sign of God's people: "Therefore the children of Israel shall . . . observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign . . . forever."

How could God state that the Sabbath is to be kept forever if He planned to later abolish it? And how could He waive that requirement for the early Church—which, after all, was overwhelmingly Jewish? Obviously, either God is inconsistent or theologians' claims about Him are inconsistent. Scripture assures us the problem isn't with God (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17).

Notice also the purpose God gave for keeping the Sabbath: "that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you." God says keeping the Sabbath holy is a reminder to those He calls that He is the One who has sanctified them, setting them apart and establishing a special relationship with them as His people.

This passage also tells us that the Sabbath is a two-way sign. To those keeping the Sabbath, it identifies the true God—"the Lord [who] made the heavens and the earth"— as the One they worship. His people rest on that day, as He did, in acknowledgment that He is their Creator.

To God, His Sabbath distinguishes those who believe in keeping His commandments from those who rely on their own reasoning for determining how they should live and relate to Him. Those who keep holy His Sabbath day—the only day of the week God has ever set apart—proclaim, by their actions, their acceptance of Him as the supreme authority over how they should live, think and worship.

God's Sabbath in Today's World

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, . . . then you will find your joy in the Lord . . ." (Isaiah 58:13-14, NIV).

Is the Sabbath relevant? Is it really practical to keep the Sabbath in today's world? How should it be observed today? To answer these questions, let's consider what the Bible, God's inspired Word, reveals.

Jesus Christ said that He was "Lord of the Sabbath" and that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). He did not limit the Sabbath by teaching that it was made for any particular group of people at any specific time in history. Instead, it was made for all mankind for all time. It was enshrined in the Ten Commandments, the heart and core of God's divine law for mankind.

Part of a right relationship with God

The Sabbath was made for mankind, but for what purpose?

The book of Isaiah, chapters 58 and 59, describes mankind's separation from God because of our sins. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2). These verses point out the hypocrisy of those who claim to seek God, yet are still filled with sin and evil intentions (Isaiah 58:1-4; 59:4-15).

But God shows that we can be reconciled to Him: "'The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,' says the Lord" (Isaiah 59:20). Jesus Christ is that prophesied Redeemer, the One God sent to redeem, or buy back, mankind through the sacrifice of His life (John 3:16; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 1 John 2:2; 4:9-10).

God also describes how to begin building a proper relationship with Him. Doing so involves humility and fasting, that we might come to understand God and His ways. "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am' . . . Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail" (Isaiah 58:9-11).

God reveals a proper understanding of the Sabbath

This section of Scripture reveals another critical element to help us build that right relationship with God—a proper understanding and observance of the Sabbath.

"'If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance [physical blessings] of your father Jacob.' The mouth of the Lord has spoken" (verses 13-14, NIV).

Here we see God's true intent for the Sabbath: It is part of a proper, loving relationship with Him. It is a matter of honoring God. It is a matter of surrendering one of our most precious possessions—our time—to build a right relationship with our Creator.

Properly observing the Sabbath, according to God's instruction here, means turning away from "going your own way," "doing as you please" and "speaking idle words." These actions trample His holy time underfoot, says God.

But the Sabbath is not to be a time for doing nothing. It is to be a time for building a relationship with God. It is to be a delight, a time to "find your joy in the Lord," He tells us. Rather than spending this time on our own interests and pursuits, it is a time set aside to concentrate on the

things that are pleasing to God and to nourish our relationship with Him.

Keys to a proper relationship with God

How do we build this right relationship with God? We build it through contact and communication with Him. We talk to God through prayer. He talks to us through His inspired Word, the Bible. These are vital keys to a right relationship with God.

"Continue earnestly in prayer," wrote Paul (Colossians 4:2). "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," he added (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much," wrote James (James 5:16).

Jesus Christ expected His followers to pray, telling them, "When you pray . . ." (Matthew 6:5-7; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:2). He gave them specific instruction about prayer and encouraged them that they "always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

God's Sabbath day is an ideal time for additional prayer, study of God's Word and contact with Him. By refraining from our usual work and other activities on that day, we have additional time to spend with God to build and strengthen our relationship with Him.

The Sabbath is also an ideal time for God to speak with us. He instructs us through His Word, the Bible. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work," Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Not only does Sabbath observance help us understand God's ways; it helps us better understand our own thoughts and motivations, showing us where we can change to become more like Him. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that "the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

We should earnestly desire to study God's Word and learn more about it. "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby," we are told (1 Peter 2:2).

God commanded worship services on the Sabbath

God's Sabbath is a time for fellowship with others of like mind, a time for mutually encouraging one another. "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Believers are expected to come together to worship (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:23). As mentioned above, we should not forsake "the assembling of ourselves together." And the Sabbath is "a holy convocation," also translated "a sacred assembly" (Leviticus 23:3, NIV). God commands His people to gather to worship on that day.

God's ministers are expected to teach God's people about His way of life. Paul instructed the younger minister Timothy to "preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2, NIV).

As we read earlier, the regular practice of Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul was to attend a gathering in the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach and fellowship with those who wanted to learn God's ways. Jesus Christ constantly showed by His actions—by explaining God's Word and way of life and by performing works of mercy—the proper way to observe the day. Today God's Sabbath is the appropriate day to rest from our normal work and employment, a day to set aside time to meet with other believers to worship God, to be instructed in His way of life and to likewise perform good works that exemplify that way.

The Sabbath is to help us build a relationship with God

God tells us, "The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work ... " (Exodus 20:10). He made it clear that our ordinary, routine work was unacceptable on that day. The Sabbath was to be different. Under the national administration of God's laws in ancient Israel, the Sabbath was so important to God that He specified that those who violated this command were to be put to death (Exodus 31:14-16; 35:2).

When Israel came out of Egypt, God reinforced this commandment by providing a double portion of manna on the sixth day and none on the Sabbath every week for 40 years (Exodus 16:26, 35; Joshua 5:12)—a total of more than 2,000 miracles! The Sabbath command is clearly important to God, and He expects us to obey it. Observing the Sabbath is vital to maintaining a proper relationship with God.

The Life Application Bible, commenting on Exodus 20:8-11, explains why we as human beings need the Sabbath: "The Sabbath was a day set aside for rest and worship. God commanded a Sabbath because human beings need to spend unhurried time in worship and rest each week. A God who is concerned enough to provide a day each week for us to rest is indeed wonderful. To observe a regular time of rest and worship in our fast-paced world demonstrates how important God is to us, and it gives us the extra benefit of refreshing our spirits. Don't neglect God's provision."

Jesus Christ showed by His example the proper way to observe the Sabbath. It was never intended to be a rigid, joyless day constrained by endless restrictions detailing what could and could not be done. He used it as a time to delight in sharing with others the joy of God's Word and way of life, showing it to be a time for strengthening our relationship with God. He used it as a time for healing—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. It was meant to be a time for encouraging and helping those who are less fortunate.

Jesus Christ made it clear there was nothing wrong with doing good on the Sabbath, pointing out that God's Sabbath command had never forbidden it. He emphasized what the day is for, rather than listing all the things we can't do. His actions on the Sabbath pointed to the coming age He referred to as that of "the Kingdom of God," in which all humanity will share in God's promised healing, joy and freedom (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:16-19; 9:11; 10:9).

Christ's example showed that the Sabbath is to be a day of physical rest and spiritual rejuvenation. It is meant to be a welcome, refreshing break from our weekly labors, a time during which we must no longer be absorbed in our ordinary daily cares and concerns.

The purpose of God's commands—to bless and benefit us!

God's Word tells us that His commandments are never burdensome (1 John 5:3). They are not meaningless or arbitrary. They were given to humanity in love from a God of infinite wisdom and knowledge (Isaiah 55:8-9). They were given to be a benefit to mankind, bringing blessings when obeyed (Deuteronomy 4:40; 5:29, 33). These commandments include God's Sabbath. It is a day of rest and refreshing, a gift to mankind by the One who designed and created us. It is a time for physical, emotional and spiritual renewal.

God knew that we would need this time to nurture and strengthen a right relationship with Him. Part of the Sabbath command reads, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work . . ." God tells us to take care of our ordinary work and concerns on the other six days, leaving our time and our minds free to properly worship and obey Him by observing the Sabbath. When we are free to focus our minds and thoughts on God's way and purpose, the Sabbath truly becomes the blessing and delight God intends it to be (Isaiah 58:13-14).

On this seventh day of each week, we should cease from our own work and allow God to work in us, building and nourishing our relationship with our Creator. We will then discover and experience the blessings of God's Sabbath rest!

The Sabbath in the Age to Come

God created the Sabbath for mankind (Mark 2:27), and there will yet come a time when all people will keep God's Sabbath.

The Bible speaks of God's Kingdom as being established on earth when Jesus Christ returns to rule as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Revelation 11:15; 19:11-16). In addition to ruling over sons of God who will be changed to spirit beings and rule with Christ in the Kingdom of God at the time of His second coming, Jesus will rule as Head of a literal government over physical nations on earth (Psalm 22:27-28; 72:1-11; Daniel 2:34-35; Zechariah 14:8-9).

At that time, all nations will be ruled by God's laws (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Micah 4:2; Isaiah 2:2-3; Hebrews 8:7-13).

All of humanity will then learn and keep God's Sabbath: "'From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,' says the Lord" (Isaiah 66:23, New International Version).

The Sabbath will be kept by gentiles and those who were never a part of the physical nation of Israel. "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 . . .

"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.

"'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'" (Isaiah 56:1-2, 4-7).

Sabbath observance is specifically mentioned as a part of the covenant God will make with all peoples then, and their worship of Him. It will be an important part of Jesus Christ's coming reign on earth!

What is True Worship?

A theme in this booklet is the concept of worship. In most people's minds, worship involves some sort of public service with hymns of praise, prayers and a well-planned liturgy. Such services epitomize for many what is involved in worshipping God. Yet this provides only a partial picture.

A dictionary definition of worship is "reverence tendered to a divine being" and "an act expressing such reverence." The word "worship" comes from an Old English word meaning "worth-ship" and refers to worthiness, respect and reverence directed toward God.

Do we show our appreciation for God's worth?

Our worship of God would therefore literally mean showing our appreciation of God's worth. Certainly forms of outward religious practice, with their rituals, ceremonies and prayers, can show worship for God. But we must pay careful attention to what God tells us in His Word, the Bible.

God makes it clear that He seeks those who will worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). When Satan sought to tempt Jesus Christ to worship him, Jesus sharply rebuked him, saying, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve" (Matthew 4:10). The apostle Paul equated his worship of God with "believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14), referring to what we call the Old Testament.

God wants us to worship Him in truth. We do this by honoring Him, serving Him and giving heed to His instructions. God asks us to live "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). Our worship of God is shown in how we live our daily lives. Christianity is a way of life (Acts 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). It is a way of thinking, acting and living. It affects every aspect of one's life.

What does true worship involve?

True worship of God involves nothing short of the inward transformation of the human heart by faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice and having Christ live in us through the Holy Spirit to help us obey. External worship practices alone are inadequate. God is looking for those who will worship Him in spirit, from a converted and transformed heart. (Be sure to read our free booklets You Can Have Living Faith and Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.)

True worship, then, is much more than praise of God in a public worship service. This broader meaning is indicated by the fact that five Greek verbs are translated "worship" in the New Testament. "The worship of God is nowhere defined in Scripture . . . It is not confined to praise; broadly it may be regarded as the direct acknowledgement to God, of His nature, attributes, ways and claims, whether by the outgoing of the heart in praise and thanksgiving or by deed done in such acknowledgement" (Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, "Worship, Worshiping," p. 686).

Jesus Christ sharply rebuked the religious leaders of His day because they misrepresented God's commands and substituted their own humanly devised teachings (Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7). He said such worship was in vain. Christ reserved the harshest words of warning for those who would profess to worship God (who say "Lord, Lord," Matthew 7:21), but refuse to do God's will or obey His laws (verses 21-23). Such worship is empty and without merit, unacceptable to God and Jesus Christ.

We live at a time when many people are disillusioned with traditional worship services. They find them vacuous, without meaning and irrelevant to their lives. It is time to take a fresh look at what true worship is all about. When we come to understand its real significance, true worship becomes supremely relevant to our lives now and to our ultimate destiny.

The Sabbath is full of meaning today

Many people, professing Christians in particular, might be shocked to learn that the seventh-day Sabbath—God's commanded day of rest and communal worship—is not abrogated for the Christian today. It remains very much in force, as shown throughout this booklet. It is full of meaning and supremely relevant to the lives of all humanity. We are missing some of God's most wonderful blessings if we ignore the observance of His commanded day of rest.

True worship of God honors God's commands concerning the Sabbath. In contrast, Sunday observance does not rest on God's authority or that of His Word, but on the reasoning and tradition of man, including the adoption of pagan religious customs to honor Him, which He forbids (see Deuteronomy 12:19-32). The hard question must be asked whether God accepts such worship when His clear commands regarding these matters are ignored.

Our Appointment With God

In Leviticus 23:2-3 God reveals an important aspect of the weekly Sabbath day and His other annual festivals: "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'These are my appointed feasts, the appointed feasts of the Lord, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies . . . the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly'" (New International Version, emphasis added throughout).

God plainly says these are His feasts, His "sacred assemblies." The Hebrew word mo`ed, the plural form here translated "appointed feasts," means "appointed time" or "meeting" (Lawrence Richards, Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, 1985, "Feast/Festival"). "Sacred assemblies" and "sacred assembly" here are translated from miqra, which denotes a divinely summoned gathering.

In other words, God says His Sabbath is a divine appointment that He commands His people to keep through their gathering before Him with other believers (compare Hebrews 10:24-25).

Notice that God is the one who sets the appointment, not us. He is the one who determines the time—that time being His weekly seventh-day Sabbath and His annual festivals. Weekly Sunday worship does not fulfill God's command.

That raises an interesting question: If we don't come before Him at the time He commands, either by not coming at all or coming on a different day, are we really keeping an appointment with Him?

If you make arrangements to meet with someone next Wednesday but he decides to show up on Thursday instead, would you think he had kept the appointment? Of course not. So why should we think God would find it acceptable if we decide to assemble on a day different from the one He commands?

The Sabbath is God's day, not ours. It is a time He wants to meet with you, a time for reading His Word, for prayer, for fellowship with other believers, for your family—but, most of all, a time for His presence with you, especially as you are taught from His Word at His commanded assembly.

A Test for You?

By now perhaps you've realized that most of mankind has failed to obey God when it comes to His Sabbath day. Much of humanity ignores God altogether and couldn't care less about setting aside a day to honor and worship Him.

Maybe you're one of the many who have been told that the Sabbath command has been transferred from the seventh day of the week, Saturday, to Sunday, the first day of the week. Or maybe you've been told that it's no longer necessary to keep it at all.

Sadly, traditional Christianity has for the most part turned its back on the Fourth Commandment —considering the Sabbath obsolete, fulfilled by Jesus Christ, replaced by Sunday or somehow negated by the dozens of arguments that have been marshaled against it over the centuries. However, we shouldn't be surprised at this widespread disdain for the Sabbath day, since God's Word tells us that "the mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit itself to God's law" (Romans 8:7, Holman Christian Standard Bible).

What about you? What's your view of God's most ignored commandment in light of the clear instructions in His Word? The simple fact is that nowhere in the Scriptures will you find that the day God established at creation as the proper day of rest and worship has been changed or abolished. Most religious groups don't have a problem with the other nine commandments, but few are willing to submit to God's will on the Fourth.

It's instructive to note what God said when He revealed His Sabbath to the Israelites in Exodus 16 through the miracle of the manna to feed them in the wilderness. Unlike on other days, the people were not to go out to gather on the Sabbath, as there would be none. Rather, they were supposed to gather double the day before to prepare for the Sabbath.

Notice God's intent: "that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not" (verse 4). Indeed, the Sabbath was a test commandment—and remains so today. While the rest of the Ten Commandments are generally acknowledged as right and proper, keeping the Sabbath commandment often brings ridicule and even ostracism. So this command can reveal who is willing to go the distance in obedience to God. Will you?

Rarely will a church organization change its beliefs. But with God's help and guidance, you as an individual can change yours and begin patterning your life according to His instructions. You would do well to ask yourself: If God made the Sabbath holy at creation, if He made it a part of the Ten Commandments, if Jesus Christ, the apostles and the early Church kept it (as the New Testament and history shows they did), doesn't it make sense that He would want you to keep it?

Will you pass the test? Are you willing to surrender a portion of your time to build the kind of relationship God wants to enjoy with you?