

# WHO CHANGED THE SABBATH?

By Richard Jordan

In many church gatherings the fourth commandment of the Decalogue is publicly read each week. Generally those who observe this practice call Sunday “the Sabbath,” and yet when pressed as to why they “keep” the *first* day of the week rather than the *seventh*, Sunday instead of Saturday, confusion quickly sets in. While a few argue for Saturday, most seem to think that the Sabbath has been changed and that now Sunday is the so-called “Christian Sabbath.” But has the Sabbath day indeed been changed? And is Sunday really now the Sabbath? Let us see what God’s Word says on this subject.

Although many who seek to observe the Sabbath are not readily familiar with Exodus 31, this chapter contains one of the most descriptive and instructive passages in the Bible on the subject of Sabbath day observance.

“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,

“Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it *is* a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that *ye* may know that I *am* the LORD that doth sanctify you.

“Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it *is* holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth *any* work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

“Six days may work be done; but in the seventh *is* the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth *any* work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.

“Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, *for* a perpetual covenant.

“It *is* a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for *in* six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

“And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:12-18).

Here Moses clearly shows that Sabbath day observance was a “sign” between the Lord and the children of Israel (verses 13,17; cf. Ezekiel 20:20) to be kept throughout their generations, that Israel might know that “I am the Lord that doth sanctify you.”

The “sabbath of rest” was to be kept “holy unto the Lord” as a *ceremonial observance*,<sup>1</sup> given as a perpetual reminder of Israel’s covenant relationship with and separation to the Lord. Recall His words to them through Moses:

“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and *how* I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself.

“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth *is* mine:

“And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These *are* the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel” (Exodus 19:4-6).

Israel was to be His “peculiar treasure,” and as such He reminded them of their place, privilege and responsibility by this “sign” of Sabbath day observance. There is no one line of Scripture to indicate that God gave the observance of the Sabbath to anyone but Israel. In fact, the Scriptures seem to indicate that it was not given to anyone before Moses, for we read in Nehemiah 9:13,14:

“Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments:

“And madest known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandedst them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant.”

### AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE LAW

The observance of the Sabbath day, then, was a part of the law given through Moses, and this explains both the exacting instructions and the severe penalties which accompany it.

A *particular day* was to be kept, not merely “one in seven.” “The seventh is the sabbath of rest” (Exodus 31:15). And so demanding were the accompanying regulations that later Israel was told:

“Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day.”

This would make cooking the Sabbath day dinner a bit difficult—to say nothing of keeping warm in the winter! From passages like Exodus 16:22-26 it appears that they were to make all the necessary preparations for the “sabbath of rest” on the previous day so as not to be in violation of these exacting regulations.

And the penalty for breaking this “holy sabbath” was equally heavy.

“Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it *is* holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth *any* work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

“Six days may work be done; but in the seventh *is* the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth *any* work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 31:14,15).

In Numbers 15:32-36 we see this sentence swiftly carried out against a man “that gathered sticks upon the sabbath day”—possibly to “kindle a fire.”

One reason the Sabbath day was used as a “sign” of the Mosaic Covenant is intimated in the words:

“... for *in* six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:17).

Just as God had perfected His work of creation in six days and then “rested and was refreshed,” in like manner He had given Israel a work to do as His representative nation—His witness before the nations—and this work was to result in the promised “times of refreshing” (Acts 3:19). Israel’s Sabbath day was, of course, only a type of that coming day of kingdom blessing and rest, the future age when this groaning creation shall finally be “delivered from the bondage of corruption” and find true rest. Concerning that time we are told:

“Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field.

“And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.

“And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places” (Isaiah 32:16-18).

### ISRAEL’S FAILURE

Israel failed sadly in her responsibility. Thus when our Lord appeared on the scene He was forced to lament even over the temple itself.

“... Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves” (Mark 11:17).

Hence, in a touching invitation, we see Him offering *Himself* to those who so futilely labored under the “burden” of keeping the Law:

“Come unto me, all *ye* that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

“For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30).

Israel’s only hope of finding her true sabbath of rest lay in her Messiah, “the Lord of the sabbath.” Here it is interesting to note that the Scripture’s first mention of “rest” is found after the completion of creation (Genesis 2:1-3). But God’s rest was soon broken, for in the very next chapter we see Him *seeking* fallen man and *working* in his behalf, slaying an innocent animal to provide him a covering.

Thus our Lord came to Israel to “seek that which was lost,” and saying:

“... My Father worketh hitherto, and [now] I work” (John 5:17).

How touching to hear His words to the Father on the eve of His crucifixion: “I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4), and then as He hung upon the cross his cry:

“... It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost” (John 19:30).

Indeed, He had finished redemption’s work by His all-sufficient sacrifice for sin. Hence Hebrews 10:12 says:

“... after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.”

How blessed!! Our Lord “sat down”—for the work was completed, finished, with nothing left undone.

## OUR REST

“There remaineth therefore a rest<sup>ii</sup> to the people of God.

“For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God *did* from his” (Hebrews 4:9,10).

Just as God rested in His perfect work of creation; just as our Lord Jesus Christ ascended and sat down to rest in His perfect work of redemption; just so we are bidden to “enter into His rest.”

Today, Christ is the believer’s only Sabbath, our only resting place. We ceased from our labors, not on the sabbath day, but the very moment we enter by faith into “His rest,” the result of His finished work at Calvary, where He died “the Just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.”

And what about “sabbath day observance” today? Galatians 3: 19 tells us that the Law was added “till” something happened—and this something *has* happened. “We were kept under the law,” the Apostle says, “shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed” (Galatians 3:23). But now with the revelation of the mystery through Paul that faith *has come*, and thus Paul declares by divine inspiration:

“But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested ...”

“To declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Romans 3:21,26; cf. Galatians 3:23-25).

And it is Paul who goes on further to say:

“For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Romans 10:4).

“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*:

“Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ” (Colossians 2:16,17).

Who changed the Sabbath? Well, the sabbath *day* remains unchanged; it is still the *seventh* day, Saturday. However, God Himself *has* changed the sabbath—our resting place—from a day to a *Person*. Now we are to rest in Him who died for our sins and rose again as proof that the debt is fully paid.

This no doubt explains why the Scriptures show Paul and the disciples meeting on “the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7; cf. I Corinthians 16:2). Thus meeting on the day of His resurrection, they celebrated His finished work of redemption and their new-found “life in Christ Jesus.”

And so it is with us. Ah, but this is seldom a “day of rest” for us—far from it! Rather we will gladly toil right through Sunday that others may “find rest in Christ Jesus.”

#### A CLOSING WORD

Believers today are, of course, free to set aside any particular day for special worship and study. In the dispensation of grace, no day is set above any other. Hence Paul wrote to the Roman Christians:

“One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day *alike*. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

“He that regardeth the day, regardeth *it* unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it” (Romans 14:5,6).

Down through Church history, and even in some lands today, believers have found it very difficult to set aside a definite time for Christian fellowship, Bible study and worship services. How we should praise God for the privilege so freely given to us in the “land of the free” to have a regular day each week which we can devote more wholly to the worship and service of Christ. And how sad to see increasing multitudes of believers forsaking the assembling of the saints, and using even this opportunity for their own pleasure and enjoyment. Surely all excuses for such behavior become insignificant and meaningless when placed alongside the faithfulness of the One who gave His all for us.

Rather than using our liberty “for an occasion to the flesh,” may we “by love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13), taking to heart Paul’s exhortation:

“Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.

“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise,

“Redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5: 14-16).

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<sup>i</sup> Some would object to our calling the Sabbath day a ceremonial observance. They would point to a supposed three-fold division of the Law: *moral*, *ceremonial* and *civil*. But this argument breaks down when it is noted that the Ten Commandments contain all three of these elements.

<sup>ii</sup> The Greek is *sabbatismos* from the root *sabbata*, sabbath.