

## SABBATH FOR CHRISTIANS

The Sabbath is an integral part of the religion and history of the Bible. The notion of the Sabbath as the focus of the Creation in the first chapters of Genesis, and the commandment to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy is part of the Ten Commandments that God gave to His people Israel at Sinai. Ancient and modern Judaism is characterized by its observance of the Sabbath. In Christian tradition, the Sabbath has been debated, dropped, reformed and misapplied at different times and by various groups within Christendom. For the most part, Christians tend to view the Sabbath in one of three ways.

The first view considers the Sabbath, as understood and practiced by Judaism, to be part of the Mosaic Law system that was, according to this view, superseded by the Gospel. This rendered the Sabbath to be merely a shadow of the present system which replaces the Sabbath with the Lord's Day (Sunday). This view holds that the early church worshiped on the first day of the week as a memorial of the resurrection. The second view also considers the Sabbath to be no longer valid for observance. This view, however, holds that Sunday or the Lord's Day has become a day of worship, but need not be a day of rest or have any other relationship to the Sabbath. A third view claims that the Sabbath is binding upon Christians today as it was and is on Jews in Judaism. These Christians are often called seventh-day observers or Sabbatarians. This view tends to be accused of legalism by those holding the other views.

A fourth possibility exists and it is the purpose of this writing to suggest such an approach for Christians. This view holds that the Sabbath is a required part of Judaism and incumbent on Jews throughout their generations and also has value for Christians that makes its observance important, though not required in a legalistic sense. What follows is an overview of the Biblical basis for Christian observance of the Sabbath.

The Bible introduces the seventh day as distinctive and significant in the second chapter of Genesis:

*Thus were the heavens and the earth completed, and all their hosts, and by the seventh day God had completed his work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. The God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which He had done. (Gen. 2: 1-3)*

This seventh day is the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments. This is found in Exodus and Deuteronomy:

*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 you God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or*

*the sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that are in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:8-11)*

The Torah (five books of Moses) also gives some details regarding the observance of the Sabbath among the ancient Hebrews. For example, Exodus 16:22-30 explains how God had commanded the people through Moses to gathering would be necessary on the Sabbath. Some of the people, however, went out to gather but found no manna to make bread. Moses tells them to stay in their places. It appears that the original notion of the Sabbath was to remain home with family and cease from subsistence work while acknowledging the day as holy.

Sabbath observance also related to the making of fire (Ex. 35: 1-3). This appears to apply to the use of fire for work. Traditional Judaism has based much of its interpretation of working on the Sabbath to this commandment regarding kindling a fire. Whether this includes a prohibition on fire use for all purposes, only the starting of a fire rather than use of a fire, or some combination of the two is problematic. Traditional Judaism uses the Mishnah (Oral Law) to address the question. Christianity generally doesn't address it at all.

The Sabbath is also part of the system of Holy days observed by Israel as commanded by God. Leviticus chapter 23 explains all of the Holy days of the Lord. The first one mentioned is the weekly Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwellings. (Lev. 23:3)

The prophets of Israel complained about the violation of the Sabbath by the people of God. Israel was exiled from the Land because of its neglect of the Sabbath and other commandments. After the exile, Nehemiah addressed the problem of violating the Sabbath during the reestablishment of Jerusalem:

*In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the Sabbath and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food. (Neh. 13: 15ff).*

Nehemiah complained about commerce on the Sabbath and closed the gates of the city at sundown on Friday. Again the subsistence type of work is directly addressed by the Sabbath observance.

The Sabbath was not imposed on the non-Jew except in the case of one dwelling at the home or city (such as Jerusalem) of the Jews. There is, however, an invitation to the non-Jewish believer in the God of Abraham to observe the Sabbath:

*Also the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, everyone who keeps from profaning the Sabbath, and holds fast My*

*covenant: Even those I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples. The Lord God who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered. (Isaiah 56:6-8)*

This chapter from Isaiah is quoted by Jesus and the apostles as being fulfilled in the Salvation brought to pass by Jesus in the New Testament. It appears that the Sabbath is the sign of the covenant to the Jew, and also to the Greek (non-Jew).

In the New Testament writings, the Sabbath is a point of contention between Jesus and His critics. He is accused of breaking the Sabbath by gathering food and healing on the Sabbath (Mark 2 & 3). Jesus response is that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. He also claims Lordship over the Sabbath. While He violates the traditional view of observance, He does not set aside the Sabbath from being correctly observed. The New Testament writings collectively do not remove the Sabbath but correct its abuse. Even Paul's statement that is used to claim the removal of the Sabbath, doesn't remove it but declares it is symbolic rather than substantial. This continues the thought that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath:

*Therefore, let no man act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day -- things which are a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Col.2:16-17).*

These things are, not were a shadow. The observance of the Sabbath as a sign of identification with the God of creation is still part of being a Jew who believes, and is available, though not required, with the promise of blessing in the things to come (Isaiah 56) for the Christian (non-Jewish believer).

The result of this view of the Sabbath is that the Sabbath is not replaced by Sunday or the Lord's day. The Sabbath remains the sign of the covenant of the God of Israel. It is made for man, and Jesus is Lord, also of the Sabbath. It is symbolic and gives meaningful expression for those who join themselves to the Lord, to love him and to be His servants. As such, it may be observed by Christians who wish to identify with the God of creation and seek the blessing promised to the foreigner who keeps it.

## **QUESTIONS REGARDING THE SABBATH**

**Should the church gather to worship on the Sabbath?** Probably not. The practice of Sabbath worship in Judaism originated in the Babylonian captivity and was well in place by the time of Jesus. The New Testament documents seem to indicate that the early Christians did gather on the first day of the week.

This was probably Saturday evening at the close of our just following the Sabbath. By the second century this was institutionalized among gentile believers. There Sabbath was kept originally (that is, when originally given) in one's home. It is for man and for family. Christians may worship on any or every day. The DiscipleCenter recommends that our families observe the Sabbath in their homes with family and friends and then gather together as congregation for worship on Sunday. This does not mean that the church cannot use the Sabbath for worship services.

**Do Christian have to keep the Sabbath?** Absolutely not. No one is to judge each other with regard to Sabbath observance among gentile Christians. The person who requires Sabbath observance and the person who prohibits Sabbath observance becomes a judge and violates the teaching of Paul in Colossians.

**I like the idea of Sabbath observance with time for the family and rest, but what if Saturday can't be observed?** Part of the functional benefit of the Sabbath observance is the time for family and rest. An alternative approach to this is explained in the brochure on having a Family Home Night. This functional equivalent of the Sabbath allows for some of the benefit when the actual Sabbath cannot be observed.

**How does someone go about starting to observe the Sabbath?** There are many books from the perspective of Judaism that can give the Christian ideas about Sabbath observance There are also some Christian books that address the "how" part of the question. First it should be pointed out that the Scriptures give two general guidelines for observance. It is to be remembered, and made holy. Remembrance is accomplished by the ceremony that the family uses at the beginning of the Sabbath. This is usually associated with the Friday family dinner. Making it holy, that is different, is most directly related to separating it from the rest of the week. As much as possible, the observers should avoid work for family subsistence. If an employer requires you to work, the Christian should work. But often the employer will make a schedule change for family and religious reasons.

**What do we do to begin?** Just start. Below you will find an explanation for one family's attempt to struggle with the observance of the Sabbath. Use part of all of it to begin your own family tradition. Use the Biblical passages as your basic guide. Then add the ritual and expressions that are authentic to your family and consistent with your understanding. Then as you understand more, add, change or drop the parts that apply.

## **A GENTILE (Judeo-Christian) FAMILY SABBATH OBSERVANCE**

The Sabbath is kept at home by our household This is in keeping with the statement: Let no man go out of his place on the seventh day (Ex. 16:29). Also

the Scriptures require the observance by all servants and those who dwell with you (Ex. 20:10). The Sabbath is in this sense confined to our home and property. When we enter the home on Friday night, we enter into the Sabbath. We leave the Sabbath when we leave the property, unless we are traveling to another place where the Sabbath is being observed.

The Sabbath begins Biblically at sundown Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. For our purposes, the Sabbath observance begins at our Home at Sundown Friday (or 6:00PM whichever is later) and continues until Sundown Saturday. When we began we observed until at least 12:00 noon Saturday and as time went on, we grew to a full day observance. During times when we are unable to be home to begin at sundown, one family member lights a candle before sundown. This becomes a MEMORIAL to remember the Sabbath of creation. The candle is placed on a Menorah that sits on a table located at the entrance of our home. As we enter the home and see the candle, we are reminded of the Sabbath and begin to observe it.

The Scriptures require that the Sabbath be made holy. For that reason, we eliminate the normal use of the TV and phone during the Sabbath observance. In addition, all work related to family subsistence is stopped so that we may enter into rest (Ex. 20:8-10). We also greet one another with mention of the Sabbath to make it holy.

The Scriptures states "You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day." We are not yet sure of the meaning of this -- whether it prohibits all fires or the use of building a fire to work is a debatable point even in Judaism. To observe this, all candles or fires are lighted from the MEMORIAL CANDLE lighted prior to the beginning of the Sabbath. (Ex. 35:3).

To REMEMBER the Sabbath, to Make it HOLY, and to testify that we acknowledge the GOD of CREATION, we observe a special Sabbath dinner with a ritual that reminds us of many Biblical elements related to the Sabbath. The ritual follows the following Liturgy:

**TABLE CANDLES** - The Wife lights the Table Candles from the MEMORIAL CANDLE. As she lights the candles, they say, **Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, who has Given us the Light of you Word, and the Light of the World, Jesus.**

**BLESSING OF THE CUP** - The Father takes the wine and opens the carafe and says, **Blessed are you O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth the fruit of the vine.** Each person drinks of the wine as a testimony that we acknowledge the God of Creation Who rested from all his work on the Sabbath. We have joined ourselves to THAT GOD who created all things through His Son. We rejoice in the Lord with the wine of joy. The wine also reminds us of the first miracle of Jesus who created wine from water (Gen. 1 & John 2.)

**BLESSING OF THE BREAD** - The Father takes the two loaves of bread (Shepherd bread or Challah) and says, **Blessed are you O Lord our God, King**

**of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.** Each person eats the bread to remember the manna given by God, two loaves on Friday so that they would not have to work, and that God gives us each day our daily bread. We are also reminded of the shewbread eaten by the priests on each Sabbath. We are a holy priesthood to the Lord (Ex. 16:29, Luke 11:3, I Peter 2:9)

**PRAYER** - We then Pray that we (Jews and Christians) may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty (I Tim. 2:1,2) and for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6).

**DINNER** - We eat dinner and discuss the previous week in light of Biblical priorities. This is also a time to share the good things of the Lord and to show thankfulness for God's provision. The dinner usually ended by each of us going around the table and telling what we are thankful about.

**GRACE** - After dinner we conclude the dinner with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for His Blessings.

**FAMILY TIME** - The time after dinner is used to enjoy family time together by talking, playing games, having Biblical discussions or sharing with a family who is visiting. We have found this to be a special time to invite fellow believers and neighbors to our home.

**GROWING IN OBSERVANCE** – After establishing this basic pattern, families can adapt and introduce many other aspects of traditional Sabbath observance by studying options available from Jewish and Christian sources. Keeping the Sabbath a living and changing experience can make family members participate more fully in this home based worship experience. Blessing the wife and the children, adding songs and other parts of traditional ceremonies will assist the family in growing in the Grace and knowledge of the Lord.

The Sabbath is not a burden, but a blessing, and we have found it to be a time given to us and for us, rather than a duty to keep (Mark 2:27). One purpose of the Torah (Law) is to teach. As the Lord is, -- Lord also of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), we have sought to understand its meaning, as well as receive the blessing of the Lord promised to the non-Jew who keeps the Lord's Sabbath (Isaiah 56:6-8).

**SABBATH OBSERVANCE AND WORK ACTIVITIES** - The Bible specifically forbids work on the Sabbath and this appears to indicate normal work related to subsistence. Jewish tradition adds many related types of activities as forbidden on the Sabbath. It was with regard to these additions that Jesus was often at odds with the pharisees. He was accused of violating the Sabbath by healing (Mark 3: 1-6) and because he and his disciples picked grain and ate it on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-8). Jesus said that some of the traditions voided the Word of

God and that He was Lord of the Sabbath. He also indicated that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27) and that to do good on the Sabbath was lawful (Mark 3:4). It appears from these passages that visiting the sick, doing good, and activity of benefit to the family and the community of faith is acceptable activity for the Sabbath. We are attempting to include inviting others to our home for Sabbath and visiting others as part of the day for us. We have only deliberately avoided regular work which is the basis of our living. We avoid rather than refuse to work at places of employment. This means that unless required by our employer we do not go to work on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:9).

**HOLY DAYS AND THE SABBATH** - During Holy Days we adapt the Sabbath observance to include some of the meaning of the Holy Days of Leviticus 23. The Sabbath is included as one of the Holy Days of the Lord.

**PASSOVER** - During the Week of Unleavened Bread, we use matzo for the bread of blessing. We use three matzos on the plate to remind us of the two normal loaves and the third becomes the symbol of the Afikomen of the Passover Seder. If the Sabbath is the night of the Passover Seder, we replace our normal Sabbath dinner with a family Seder. Our congregation also observes a Seder each Passover.

**PENTECOST** - The Sabbaths from Firstfruits to Pentecost are to be counted (Lev. 23:15). To accomplish this we place the Memorial Candle for each Sabbath in the Menorah until we have completed the 7 Sabbath.

**HIGH HOLY DAYS** - If the Sabbath falls on the Day of Trumpets, we blow the shofar as part of the dinner ceremony. On Tabernacles, we eat the Sabbath dinner in our patio or in a temporary booth to remind ourselves of the Biblical command given to Israel in this regard during the Holy Days.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The Sabbath uniquely identifies the God of creation. No other god is represented with such a observance of time. When Jews or Christians observe the Sabbath, they identify with the God of Creation, and testify that He made the heavens and the earth. When Christians observe the Sabbath, they show an identification with Israel, who were given the Sabbath as an everlasting covenant. And when children grow up in a home that observes the Sabbath, they develop a sense of the presence of God who dwells with them in their home each week.

For more information on home and congregational Discipleship regarding the Sabbath or other Holy Days contact the DiscipleCenter at [www.disciplecenter.com](http://www.disciplecenter.com) or [Disciplecenter@aol.com](mailto:Disciplecenter@aol.com) or write us at The DiscipleCenter – 8018 E. Santa Ana Canyon Rd. Suite 100 PMB 186 Anaheim Hills, CA 92808.