

# Jot & Tittle

*A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God*

July 2008

## **Sabbath Rest**

by Dana L. Goodnough

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” is one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8). But what is the Sabbath, and how are Christians to honor the Sabbath today? The principle of the Sabbath implies the need for physical and spiritual rest. Everyone benefits from a break in their work routines, and Christians benefit greatly from a time of spiritual rest and refreshment.

### ***Sabbath Terms***

The Hebrew term for Sabbath, *shabbath*, is related to the verb *shabath*, meaning to “cease, cease working, rest.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the emphasis of Sabbath day is rest. Another Hebrew term that has bearing on the Sabbath day is the cardinal number “seven” (*sheba*) and the ordinal “seventh” (*shebi'iy*). The seventh day of the week was the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:10; Leviticus 23:3; Deuteronomy 5:14). The correlation between the Sabbath day and the seventh day is found in God’s ceasing from His work of creation on the seventh day in the creation week (Genesis 2:2-3). The Greek term for Sabbath, *sabbaton*, is a transliteration of the Hebrew term and carries the same meaning.

### ***Historical Development***

The concept of one day each week for rest was not unique to the Jews. Other ancient cultures honored the Sabbath day as well.

The Sabbath rest was a Babylonian as well as a Hebrew institution. Its origin went back to pre-Semitic days, and the name Sabbath was of Babylonian origin. In the cuneiform tablets the *Sabattu* is described as “a day of rest for the soul.”<sup>2</sup>

While the concept of Sabbath rest was shared by ancient cultures, the observance of a Sabbath day predates these cultures, finding its roots in the original creation week. According to Genesis 2:2-3, God “rested” or ceased His creative work on the seventh day. Thereby God *exemplified* the concept of Sabbath rest. Interestingly, the word “Sabbath” does not appear in the Bible until the time of Moses, and there is no reference to a Sabbath rest from the time of creation until the Exodus. Apparently the patriarchs followed God’s example and set aside a day for rest, but there is no direct mention of this practice in the Old Testament.

What was exemplified by God at creation became *codified* at the time of Moses. The word “Sabbath” first appears in the Bible in Exodus 16:23, at which time the Sabbath day seems to have become institutionalized. “It is in Exodus 16:23-29 that we find the first incontrovertible institution of the day, as one given to and to be kept by the children of Israel.”<sup>3</sup> Sabbath observance was commanded by God in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11), including a cessation from work (Exodus 23:12; 35:1-3) and participation in sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:3). Therefore, the Sabbath day provided physical rest and spiritual reflection. Even the land was to experience a period of Sabbath rest once every seven years (Leviticus 25:1-7). Rest and reflection were to characterize the Sabbath.

Over time the Jewish people refined the Sabbath day regulations to the point that these regulations became a burden instead of a blessing to the people of God. Therefore, Jesus *clarified* the Sabbath during His earthly ministry. The first mention of the Sabbath in the New Testament is found in Matthew 12:1, on which occasion Jesus defended His disciples for plucking grain to satisfy their hunger on that day. Jesus declared that He is the Lord of the

Sabbath (Matthew 12:8). He defended the performance of acts of mercy on the Sabbath day, and then healed a man who had a shriveled hand, (Matthew 12:9-14). Jesus did honor the original intent of the Sabbath day by attending synagogue services and teaching in the synagogue on that day (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:31). But Jesus clearly emphasized the fact that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Old Testament Law became obsolete and the new era of grace prevailed. Consequently, Christians are not obligated to observe the Sabbath according to the standards of Moses’ Law. Sabbath observance became *modified* through Jesus’ complete fulfillment of the Law. The term “Sabbath” is found frequently in the four Gospels. However, it is used in the book of Acts almost exclusively to identify the day of the week on which certain events took place, carrying no theological significance. The New Testament epistles use the term only twice. First Corinthians 16:2 uses the term “Sabbath” in its secondary usage, translated “week.” Colossians 2:16 encourages Christians not to let others judge them regarding the Sabbath. The fact that the Sabbath is barely mentioned in the New Testament epistles indicates that Sabbath observance changed significantly after Jesus’ resurrection. The post-Law observance of the Sabbath seems to mirror its pre-Law observance. Rather than being a regulated day of rest, the Sabbath is once again an unencumbered gift to God’s people as a day of rest and spiritual reflection.

### ***Christian Observance***

As a day for spiritual reflection, the Sabbath (the seventh day of the week, that is, Saturday) was replaced in the early church by the resurrection day (the first day of the week, that is, Sunday). Because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, Sunday took on a higher significance for Christians. For some, Sunday became the Christian Sabbath. But Colossians 2:16 teaches that Christians should not judge one another over Sabbath observance. Romans 14:5-6 states that, while some Christians may want to elevate one day of the week over the rest of the days, other Christians can freely

consider each day to be equal. Christians are not obligated to observe specific Sabbath regulations. There is freedom in Christ.

### ***Practical Application***

Sabbath observance was exemplified by God during the creation week. It is a gift to humankind so that there will not be endless labor. Everyone needs physical and mental rest from day to day activities. Such rest is helpful to our bodies and our minds. In addition, we clearly need time for spiritual refreshment. Setting aside one day each week to cease from normal labors and to focus on God is a wise practice that will reap great personal rewards. Taking time to worship God in the setting of the community of believers, that is, the church is also invaluable.

Although Sabbath observance is not mandated for the Christian, how we spend our time each and every day is a matter of spiritual devotion. Instead of observing a Sabbath rest every week because such rest is mandated, we should observe a Sabbath rest because we need it and it is prudent for our physical and spiritual wellbeing. In addition to a day of rest each week, we should also enjoy a time of rest and reflection each day with God, and even a season of rest after periods of intensive labor. Sabbath rest is a blessing from God. Why not take full advantage of this wonderful blessing!

---

<sup>1</sup> Koehler, Ludwig and Baumgartner, Walter. *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958, p. 946.

<sup>2</sup> Unger, Merrill F. *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 939.

<sup>3</sup> Unger, p. 940.