

THE SABBATH DAY

The fourth of the Ten Commandments concerns the Sabbath. Exodus 20:8 notes: *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”* The first part of verse 10 indicates the Sabbath is “the seventh day” and according to Hebrew tradition, the seventh day is Saturday. *Note, the term Sabbath predates the term Saturday (or it’s variations sæterdæg, sæternesdæg, Saterdi) by many centuries.* The fourth of the ten commandments is *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”* To keep the Sabbath means to break from normal activity, worship God, and meditate on spiritual things. God gave the commandment for man’s benefit—to guard against physical and mental exhaustion from overwork, and as a reminder to continually honor God and cultivate the relationship with Him. The commandment harkens back to God’s plan for creation. Incorporated into the giving of the Ten Commandments, we read: *“For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy”* (Exod. 20:11).

The meaning of the term Sabbath

The word *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word shavath (or Shabbot), meaning "to cease" or "to rest." The context of the commandment in Exodus 20 indicates the Sabbath *day of rest* was designed to help humans properly balance physical and spiritual responsibilities. *To rest* does not indicate sleep; it indicates a reset of mind, body, and spirit—to pause or “cease” from the regular routines and responsibilities and to remember to worship and honor God. The command to worship and honor God brings body and spirit rejuvenation. This is part of what Jesus pointed to when addressing the weary in Matthew 11. We read: *“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light”* (Matt. 11:28-30). Here we see that Jesus does not offer to free you from all worldly cares or responsibilities but does promise that when we draw close to Him, we will find “rest for [our] souls.”

The length of the Sabbath

Exodus 20:11 indicates the Sabbath should be *one day*—it has come to be known as the “day of rest.” Jewish tradition holds that the day ends at sunset. Therefore, a Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and

lasts until sundown on Saturday. The *day of rest* follows God's example of resting on the seventh day. Genesis 2:2b states that God "*rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.*" The day of rest signals the conclusion of a cycle (generally, a period of time). In Genesis 2, the *rest* followed God's work to bring about creation as we know it today. In Exodus, the *day of rest* brought the week to a close. Later, the concept of a Sabbath was extrapolated to include aspects of debt and farming. For example, Leviticus 26:34-35 states that every seventh year, the land should not be farmed but rather, receive a rest. The law in Leviticus states, "*The land will enjoy its sabbath years*" (NIV). Deuteronomy 15:1-2 addressed the issue of personal debt in language associated with the Sabbath.

The Law reads: "*At the end of every seven years, you shall grant a release of debts. And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the Lord's release.*" The Sabbath presents a regular opportunity to rest, reset, renew the spirit, reenergize the body, and reaffirm one's commitment to the Lord.

What should one do on the Sabbath?

Exodus 20:8 indicates we are *to keep the Sabbath holy*. The phrase, *keep the Sabbath holy* is one word in most English translations and means "consecrate" or "set apart." The Sabbath day was to be revered and considered different from the other days in the week. Priests in Old Testament times emphasized the solemnity of the day by presenting a double (daily) sacrifice (Numbers 28:9–10). And while the priests offered a double sacrifice on the Sabbath (indicating the special holiness of the day), the Hebrews honored the Lord by refraining from work, spending time with family, and meditating on the Lord. Keeping the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between Israel and the Lord: "*You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come*" (Exodus 31:13). As Israel set the Sabbath day apart from other days of the week, they were reminded that they too were also being set apart: "*So you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy*" (verse 13). Today, believers should pause regular activities, refrain from work, and prioritize worshipping, praying, serving, showing mercy, spending time with family, and meditating on spiritual things on the Sabbath.

What Old Testament Hebrews could not do on the Sabbath?

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for adding burdensome traditions and requirements to God's law. By the first century A.D., religious leaders had prohibited 39 categories of work and hundreds of subcategories of labor on the Sabbath. The list of forbidden work included working in a field (from Exod. 34:21), operating a winepress or loading animals (from Neh. 13:15-18), carrying an object or tying a sandal

with two hands (from Isa. 58:18), lighting a fire (from Exod. 35:2-3), and walking more than 1.5 miles (from Exod. 16:29-30). Other forbidden activities included cutting, writing, erasing, sewing, hunting, sifting, or baking. The religious leaders lost sight of the meaning of God's directive, which was not to prohibit activity, but to encourage rest and highlight the importance of honoring God.

Freedom in Christ

Paul wrote of the freedom we have in Christ in his Epistles to the Ephesians, Galatians and the Romans. While affirming to Timothy that "all Scripture" is inspired, ("All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness," 2 Timothy 3:16), he also noted that Jesus' perfect and final sacrifice ushered in a New Covenant of Grace, thus releasing us from the yoke of the Old Testament Law (which was based on a sacrificial system). Ephesians 2:13-15 notes: *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace."* Jesus, our "peace," "abolished in His flesh," that is, by dying on the cross, the yoke of "the law." We are free in Christ, and Jesus said, *"If the Son has set you free you shall be free indeed"* (John 8:36).

How to overcome the temptation to neglect to keep the Sabbath

Though Christians today are no longer bound by the Old Testament Law, we are to maintain a regular schedule of rest and give special attention to honoring the Lord. Christians in the early Church encouraged honoring the Sabbath commandment on Sunday rather than Saturday. In this way, they honored the day Jesus rose from the dead (Sunday), and the day the New Testament Church was birthed (on Pentecost, also a Sunday). We can honor the Sabbath today by keeping the following things in mind.

- The Lord's commands are for our benefit. When we are faithful, we will be blessed. For example, regarding the command to not plant on the Sabbath year, some naturally asked how they would eat if they did not plant their fields. Scripture reveals that God had a plan for this. When the people asked, *"What will we eat in the seventh year? We will not sow, and we will not gather in our produce!"* God replied: *"I will command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will yield produce for three years. And you will sow in the eighth year, while still eating from the old crops. Until the ninth year, until the arrival of its crop, you will eat the old crop!"* (Leviticus 25:20-22).

- Overwork is counterproductive and can harm our health, relationships, and daily walk with God. Honoring the Sabbath helps us remain healthy, productive, and close to our Lord and family.
- Keeping the Sabbath prompts the remembrance of God's powerful creative work and His many blessings and promises.
- Keeping the Sabbath prompts one to keep their focus on the proper things.
- Keeping the Sabbath is an act of faith and obedience. We will be blessed when we humble ourselves before God and pause regular activities to honor Him.

The consequences of not keeping the Sabbath

In the new covenant, we embrace the Spirit of the law through the freedom given to us, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. This includes honoring the Sabbath in our hearts, not as a burden of law but as an invitation to rest in God. This does not mean a total cessation of activity (such as not doing anything that requires the use of two hands as the religious leaders of Jesus' day required), but does mean that we regularly pause our schedule to worship God, reflect on His Word, spend time with family, and rest our bodies. One should consider the following when contemplating the consequences of not keeping the Sabbath,

- In Old Testament times, there were severe penalties for working on the Sabbath day. Exodus 31:14 notes: *"You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people."* Though no longer under the Law, we should be mindful of how important keeping the Sabbath is to God.
- To not keep the Sabbath is sin. Those who willfully persist in sin compromise their spiritual walk, hinder their witness and put themselves outside the direct line of receiving God's blessing. In grievous situations, unconfessed and willful sin evidences a lack of relationship with God. Jesus said it plainly in John 14:21, *"He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."*
- To not keep the Sabbath or engage in corporate worship is sin. Hebrews 10:25 commands: *"Do 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."*