

END-TIMES ISSUES



#83 Commandment #4 – When is the "Christian Sabbath"?

GOD DOESN'T TELL US TO KNOW ALL THE END-TIME DETAILS. HE TELLS US TO BE READY.

A N D B E Y O N D I

THE SABBATH

The question often asked...

❖ What day should Christians have as their "Sabbath"? ❖

- The greater emphasis of the word "Sabbath" is on "a time of rest and refocus" – a rest from our daily activities and a refocus on God, our creator and sustainer.
- Even in the Old Testament, the "sabbath" concept was *not* tied to a specific day. The "weekly Sabbath" was on Saturday; but there were other types of "Sabbaths" that did not always occur on a Saturday. Some were a year in length. There is also an "eternal sabbath."
- QUESTION:** Under the New Covenant, is there a specific day that this "rest" should occur? Even if we recognize "one day in seven" as a basic principle, is it the *same* day as under the Old Covenant?

We need the Sabbath concept.

Without it, we lose our connection to God.

- We become slaves to our own work and other activities.
- The Sabbath concept points to our *ongoing* need for God. Continued ignoring of this need (which would be demonstrated by our *actions*) leaves us in danger of great loss – perhaps *eternal* loss.

But as for the day that we celebrate the Sabbath concept ...

- This is where opinion and personal preference seem to rule. People tend to choose the day they want, and then try to "prove" it in Scripture – adding to or subtracting from Scripture, in whatever way they wish. Or taking a passage that "seems to suggest" something, and turning it into a command.
- We need to ask: "What does Scripture say?" and "What does it *not* say?" – and then leave it at that.
- Our goal: To examine these issues by asking some questions.** ➡

WHAT ARE THE OLD TESTAMENT REGULATIONS?

ISRAEL, IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

The Saturday Sabbath was an obligation for all people in the land.

- Everyone living in Israel** – whether native-born or foreigner – was *required* to observe the weekly Sabbath.
 - ✓ This was also true of certain *annual* Sabbaths (such as the Day of Atonement).

On [the Sabbath] **you shall not do any work**, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, **nor any foreigner residing in your towns ...**

Deuteronomy 5:14b (NIV)

- Throughout Israel's history**, the people (both native-born and foreigner) tended to ignore the Sabbath commands. Even after they returned from their exile in Babylon, they began repeating the same sins. Scripture calls this "evil."

- ✓ Buying and selling on the Sabbath – by Jews and non-Jews.

In those days I saw **people in Judah treading winepresses** on the **Sabbath** and **bringing in grain** and **loading it on donkeys**, along with wine, grapes, and figs. All kinds of goods were **being brought into Jerusalem** on the **Sabbath** day. So I warned them against **selling food** on that day.

Additionally, **men of Tyre** who lived there were **importing fish** and all kinds of **merchandise** and **selling** them on the **Sabbath** to the **people of Judah in Jerusalem**.

Nehemiah 13:15-16 (BSB)

- ✓ This is one of the reasons God brought disaster on them in the past.

Then I rebuked the nobles of Judah and asked, "What is this **evil** you are doing—**profaning the Sabbath day**? Did not your forefathers do the same things, so that **our God brought all this disaster on us** and on this city? And now **you are rekindling His wrath** against Israel by **profaning the Sabbath**!"

Nehemiah 13:17-18 (BSB)

- The absence of the Sabbath day celebration** would be a sign (or proof) of *God's judgment* on Israel. This was fulfilled when most of the people were either killed, or taken to exile in Babylon.
- ✓ A warning, *before* the judgment came:

I will stop all her celebrations:
her yearly festivals, her New Moons,
her **Sabbath days**—all her appointed festivals.
I will punish her ...

Hosea 2:11, 13a (NIV)

(They ignored this warning.)
- ✓ *After* the judgment came:

He has laid waste his dwelling like a garden;
he has destroyed his place of meeting.
The LORD has made Zion forget
her appointed festivals and her **Sabbaths**; ...

Lamentations 2:6a (NIV)

(Could this have been fulfilled a *second* time, when the temple was destroyed in AD 70?)

GENTILES, IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

Never required to observe the Sabbath, unless they were in Israel.

(As already stated, if they were living in Israel, they were required to observe the weekly Sabbath (as well as certain annual Sabbaths).)

- There is **no evidence** that Gentiles living outside of Israel were ever given the *command* to observe the Sabbath. Nor were they *condemned* for not doing so. (Some who chose to follow the God of Israel may have *voluntarily* observed the Sabbath.)
- Some possible reasons for this (no direct explanation is given):
 - ✓ As a command, it was a *national* obligation. Nations that served false gods would not require it. (Their *idols* didn't require it!)
 - ✓ The Sabbath was a *gift* for people who claimed to be loyal to the true God.

Even so, Gentile nations are *not excused* for their idolatry. It is *still* sin. There is a coming Judgment Day for *all* people; but the severity of the judgment will depend on what truth they knew (whether instinctively in their consciences, or by means of God's revelation in Scripture).

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WHAT ARE THE NEW TESTAMENT REGULATIONS?

ISRAEL (& saved Jews), IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:

Never told to stop worshipping on the Saturday Sabbath.

- Jews are **never told to stop** worshipping on Saturday.
 - ✓ By the New Testament era, most Jews *were* observing the Sabbath; but their observations were superficial and ritualistic – *not* an expression of love for God. Much of what they did was for show. They had replaced God's commands with human traditions.
 - ✓ Jesus had a lot to say about the Sabbath; but he *never* said anything about it coming to an end. Instead, he told them to do it the *right* way, with the right (God-honoring) attitude.
- **Saved Jews were never told to change their day of worship.** In fact, the apostles often went to the synagogues on the Sabbath... until they were kicked out by Jews who didn't accept what the Scriptures said about Jesus.

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SAVED GENTILES, IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: Never told to worship on the Saturday Sabbath.

- There is **no command anywhere in the New Testament** that tells Gentiles that they must worship on a *specific day*.
 - ✓ Gentiles were told they didn't have to follow Jewish rituals (such as circumcision), in order to be saved (Acts 15). *But the question did not involve the day of worship.*
 - ✓ There *are* a number of passages that describe *who* to worship, *how* to worship, etc., but none that tell us *when* to worship, or that give us a specific technique, liturgy, or format to use.
- There are **very few commands about worship** in the New Testament. But there are many statements of fact, showing us that God's people do worship God.

Why might this be? Probably because there isn't a *need* for such a command! God has already embedded his laws in the hearts and minds of his people, so it's their nature to *want* to worship God!

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WHAT ABOUT IN THE FUTURE?

A few passages that people disagree about.

- This is an issue where *speculation* and *pre-held opinions* seem to take over.
 - ✓ People tend to reach a "conclusion" about what they think the "end times" will be like... *then* they interpret the few passages that mention the Sabbath, based on those opinions.
 - ✓ Some look at such passages, and say it will happen *in the way that the passages say it will happen* ("literally"). Others look at the same passages, and claim they are figurative or symbolic, fulfilled by the church or by already-occurred events in Israel's history, etc.
- Ultimately, what God does will not be influenced by our opinions. If he wants to fulfill those passages "literally," nothing can stop him from doing so (even if we don't understand how it could be possible). Or if he wants to fulfill them "figuratively"... or *both* ways. *Our duty is to be ready for Jesus' return, regardless of how he does it!*

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Three situations that are connected to the word "Sabbath":

- Jesus describes "**terrible times**" that would come upon Israel (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). He tells them to pray that the time of destruction/distress/tribulation won't happen on the Sabbath.

... then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ... Pray that your flight will not occur in the winter or on the **Sabbath**.

For at that time there will be great tribulation, unmatched from the beginning of the world until now, and never to be seen again.

Matthew 24:16, 20-21 (BSB)

- Ezekiel describes a **future temple** in great detail, along with many of the things that will be done there. He often mentions the Sabbath:
 - ✓ First, it is to be kept holy (Ezekiel 44:24).
 Also, on the Sabbath:
 - ✓ Offerings will be provided by the prince (45:17; 46:4, 12).
 - ✓ The gate of the temple's inner court will be open (46:1).
 - ✓ The people will worship the LORD at the door of the gate (46:3).

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- Isaiah speaks of "**the new heavens and the new earth**," and says that *all nations* will bow before God on the Sabbath. He also mentions something that sounds like a "final judgment."

"For just as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, will endure before Me," declares the LORD,

"so your descendants and your name will endure.

From one New Moon to another and **from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come to worship before Me**," says the LORD.

"As they go forth, they will see the corpses of the men who have rebelled against Me; for their worm will never die, their fire will never be quenched, and they will be a horror to all mankind."

Isaiah 66:22-24 (BSB)

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WHAT DID THE EARLY CHRISTIANS DO?

- We can learn from various instructions and examples (since there are few commands).
 - ✓ We must be aware that *examples* do not have the same force as commands and instructions. Scripture contains both *good* and *bad* examples; and evaluating them will require us to consider what other Scripture passages say.
- We can also look at related issues – ones that Scripture often has a greater focus on.



Where did they meet?

- **Anywhere they could!** They met at the temple and in synagogues (before the unrepentant Jews expelled them), in public assembly places, in open spaces, and in homes.

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How often did they meet?

- The **earliest account** describes Christian Jews as meeting in the temple and in each other's homes on a *daily* basis.

With one accord **they continued to meet daily** in the **temple courts** and to break bread **from house to house**, sharing their meals with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

Acts 2:46-47 (BSB)

Most likely, this *doesn't* mean that 100% of the Christians met 100% of the time! But it certainly *does* mean that they didn't limit their coming together to *one* day a week.

- Is it **mandatory** that we meet on a daily basis? It's not *commanded*. And for many (such as slaves), it would have been quite unrealistic. In some situations, people would have to be satisfied with whatever opportunity they could find.

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One day a week... or seven?

- We have an **obligation** to serve God *EVERY* day of the week – whether we meet together (to worship him in a group setting) or not. We are to honor/glorify God in *all* that we do!

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, **do it all to the glory of God.**

1 Corinthians 10:31 (BSB)

- If we are honoring God *every* day, the issue of treating *one* day or *seven* days as special ceases to be an issue. Scripture tells us to meet together... but it doesn't tell us *how often* in a week.
- **Conclusion?** *It's OK for different people to have different preferences!*

One person regards **a certain day** above the others, while someone else considers **every day** alike. **Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.**

Romans 14:5 (BSB)

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DO WE NEED TO FOLLOW JEWISH PRACTICES?

For Jews: OK, but not always mandatory.

(This would not be for attaining salvation or *earning* God's favor. Even in the Old Testament, the temple practices weren't for that purpose!)

- The **views of the early church leaders** (including the apostles): They did not consider it *wrong* for a Jew to participate in such practices. In fact, Paul* himself occasionally did them. **EXAMPLES:**
 - ✓ Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3).
 - ✓ On his way to Jerusalem, Paul cut his hair, as part of a vow he had taken (Acts 18:18).
 - ✓ At Jerusalem, Paul participated in some purification vows, an act that was endorsed by the Jewish Christian leaders (Acts 21:20-26). He was ceremonially clean (Acts 24:17-18).
 - ✓ Paul claimed to have done nothing against the Jewish law or the temple (Acts 25:8).

* Though Paul was "the apostle to the Gentiles," he was Jewish (Philippians 3:5).

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- Paul did **not** tell Christian **Jews** to **STOP** following Jewish customs – although he was falsely accused of doing so. As the leaders of the church at Jerusalem said to Paul...

"You see, brother, how **many thousands of Jews have believed**, and **all of them are zealous for the law.**

But **they are under the impression** that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe our customs."

Acts 21:20b-21 (BSB)

- ✓ To dispel this rumor, Paul participated in some Jewish purification rites – to publicly *demonstrate* that he lived in obedience to the law. [Some false accusers lied about what Paul did, and used it to attack him (Acts 21:17+).]

"Then everyone will know that there is **no truth to these rumors** about you, but that **you also live in obedience to the law.**"

Acts 21:24b (BSB)

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Some Jewish practices are clearly shown to be unnecessary (i.e., optional) under the New Covenant. Here is a specific example:

- Regarding **ceremonially clean and unclean foods**: Jesus said that the important issue is: "What is in the *heart*?" – this includes one's *mind*. The issue is *not* "What is in the *stomach*?"

(In saying this, **Jesus declared all foods clean.**)

Mark 7:19b (NIV)

- ✓ When God gave Peter a vision of all kinds of animals, and told him to "kill and eat," this was to *teach* him that it was now permissible, under the New Covenant, for Jews to associate with Gentiles.

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Acts 10:14-15 (NIV)

CEREMONIAL PRACTICES WERE MEANT TO TEACH SPIRITUAL TRUTHS!

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- ✓ After this, Peter was willing to associate with Gentiles. When he backed-away from doing so (out of fear of receiving disapproval from certain Jews), it was a matter of *hypocrisy*. Paul had to rebuke him.

For before certain men came from James, [Peter] used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because **he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group**.

The other Jews joined him in his **hypocrisy**, so that by their **hypocrisy** even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas [= Peter] in front of them all, "**You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?**"

Galatians 2:12-14 (NIV)

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Some Jewish practices have been providentially *stopped* by God.

- Temple activities ended with the destruction of the temple (AD 70).
- Whether or not some of the practices will be revived with a *third* temple is a matter that people debate over. (God knows what he plans to do; and our opinions won't change it.)

Being under the New Covenant, there will necessarily be differences (even if it is perfectly acceptable for Jews to do Jewish practices).

- There are things that pointed to Christ... and Christ has *fulfilled* them.
- At least some aspects of the Old Covenant have been done away with, because of the change in covenants. (Example: Hebrews 10:9.)
- Remember that the very reason the New Covenant *exists* is because Israel *broke* the Old Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-32).
- (We are not debating whether or not all, or just some, Jewish practices have been made optional for Jews. This would require a more in-depth analysis of what Scripture *says*, and *doesn't say*, on the issue.)

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What about the Gentiles? Do *they* need to practice Jewish rituals?

- The only practices the Gentiles were told they *must* do were the four things mentioned in Acts 15. These were determined (after examining Old Testament Scripture) by the *same* leaders who *approved* of Paul's practice of Jewish customs!

"As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they must abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality."

Acts 21:25 (BSB); referring to Acts 15:19-20.

- ✓ It is *wrong* to claim that Gentiles *need* to do Jewish practices!

Therefore **let no one judge you** by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a feast, a New Moon, or a **Sabbath**.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the body that casts it belongs to Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17 (BSB)

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ARE THERE MORE IMPORTANT ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

Yes, there are issues that are *more* important than "On what day of the week should we worship?" [Below are two examples.]

- **Attitude is more important than location!** God introduced salvation to the world through *Israel*. Yet even though Israel and Jerusalem had great importance because of this, "location" would become a "non-issue" under the New Covenant. Even in the Old Testament, the condition of the *heart* was a *much more important* issue.

"You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the **true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth**, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

John 4:22-24 (NIV)

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- **Meeting with other Christians:** The New Testament is filled with examples of Christians meeting together. There are also instructions and commands that tell us what we need to do, if we want spiritual growth – and *many of these are done in a group setting*.
- **Scripture tells us that Christians *need* to meet together** for spiritual growth and encouragement – especially as the "end" approaches (i.e., the day when Jesus will return). We need *God*... and we also need *each other*... even during times when it's tempting to *not* meet together (such as in a time of persecution). But Scripture doesn't specify a time or day for doing this.

And let us consider how we may **spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together**, as some are in the habit of doing, but **encouraging one another**—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)

Since God *changes* a person's heart and mind, when he saves them, doing these things, when possible, will become one's desire.

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WHY DO MOST (NOT ALL) CHRISTIANS MEET ON SUNDAY?

- In the **early years**, saved Jews tended to meet on Saturday, and saved Gentiles tended to meet on Sunday. But this was not a "rule" that they had to follow. They could also meet on *both* days; or even *every* day of the week.
- As the **number of Gentiles increased**, the number of people meeting on Sunday increased. This would most likely influence one's choice.
- **Though Scripture does not define a specific day for group worship**, certain events in Scripture might influence a person's decision to choose *Sunday*. Here are some of them. → (Even so, we cannot condemn those who accept Scripture, yet choose to meet together on a *different* day.)

An issue that can complicate attempts to define specific days:

In Scripture, the Jewish day began at sundown. Others often had a different starting point (such as midnight or sunrise). One person's "Saturday evening" would have been another person's "Sunday!"

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Factors that influence some people's decision to worship on Sunday:

- Jesus' resurrection was on the first day of the week (Sunday).
- The *resurrected* Jesus met with his followers on the first day of the week (several times on the day he rose from the dead; at least one of his later appearances – John 20:19; most tell us what day they occurred).
- Pentecost – when the Holy Spirit came down and the church was formed – was on the first day of the week.
- Scripture refers to Christians who met (or would be meeting) on the first day of the week – Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2.
- In the book of Revelation, the apostle John saw Jesus on "The Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10). Most people interpret this as a term referring specifically to Sunday, the day for celebrating Jesus' resurrection. But as a "technical term," it didn't become popular in the church until *after* the apostolic era.
- People may point out other factors that could influence their choice of Sunday – which you may, or may not agree with. But in all cases, they are more like suggestions or "things to consider" – *not commands*.

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An early Christian document that uses the phrase "Lord's Day," referring to Sunday.

The "Didache" or "Teaching of the Twelve [Apostles]"

Chapter 14

- 1 But on **the Lord's day**, after that ye have assembled together, break bread and give thanks, having in addition confessed your sins, that your sacrifice may be pure.
- 2 But let not any one who hath a quarrel with his companion join with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be polluted,
- 3 for it is that which is spoken of by the Lord. In every place and time offer unto me a pure sacrifice, for I am a great King, saith the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the Gentiles.

[From "The Didache: The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles through the Twelve Apostles." (C. Hoole, trans.; Public Domain).]

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WHAT SHOULD WE CONCLUDE?

- **The main issue: *We need God!*** We need to do *whatever is necessary* to meet that need!
 - ✓ One of the God-designated ways to meet this need is worship and fellowship with other Christians – studying Scripture, prayer, praise, singing, etc. But *we must do this with the right attitude*.
- **The less-important issue (or perhaps even a "non-issue"):** The specific day (or days) when we do this!
 - ✓ *As long as we are doing it – that's what matters.* (Of course, we need to do it in a way that honors God.)
 - ✓ Perhaps there are isolated Christians, or those in areas of severe persecution, who may have a legitimate reason for *not* meeting with other Christians. But it's more by *force*, than by *choice*. (They *want* to have such worship times.)
- **Also, what we call it is not that important** – the "Christian Sabbath," the "Day of Worship," the "Lord's Day," or whatever else we choose.

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Don't make excuses for sin!

Statements like this use Scripture to *attack* Scripture! They *deny* both God's sovereignty *and* human responsibility!

I'M SAVED, SO I DON'T HAVE TO OBEY THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT PRINCIPLES!

- God has *guaranteed* that his people will have the desire in their hearts to do his will.
- Therefore, if the desire to do his will is *not* in your heart, and if this is your *ongoing attitude*, it's because *you aren't saved!*

"This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord.
**I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds.**"

Hebrews 10:16 (NIV)

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Your Mission:

Make it your *priority* to pursue the Fourth Commandment Principle!

- ✓ **Pursue God!** Doing so is an expression of the Fourth Commandment principles.
 - ✓ **Meet with other Christians!** Group worship, study of God's Word, singing, prayer, sharing, encouraging, etc. – God has chosen this to be a means of *accomplishing* the Fourth Commandment principles.
- AND -
- ✓ **Keep secondary issues secondary!** Focus on such issues (like "the day we choose to worship") *only to the extent that they enable you to fulfill your Fourth Commandment obligations!*

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Credits

SCRIPTURE

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