

Chapter 9 - What Happened to the Lords Day?

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I said to their children in the desert, “Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols. I am the Lord your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.” But the children rebelled against me: They did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws – although the man who obeys them will live by them – and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the desert.

– Ezekiel 20:18-21

Most Christians believe that Sunday is the Lord’s Day, the day appointed to worship God. However, since World War II, the observance of Sunday as a holy day in the United States has changed significantly. Yes, church bells still ring and people still go to church on Sunday morning, but Sunday afternoon has become a different story.

If Sunday is the Lord’s Day, why doesn’t the observance of the Lord’s Day last *all day*? For many people, Sunday has become a holiday instead of a holy day. Does God really care what we do on His holy day? Does He care if we work, go shopping, conduct business, wash the car, watch TV, mow the lawn, clean out the garage, attend ball games or go skiing?

The answer to these and other questions about the Lord’s Day are found in the Bible. So, let us take a look.

The First Lords Day

After six days of work, Jesus created something very special. He created the seventh day. His crowning act at Creation was a gift to man. (Mark 2:27,28) Jesus gave the Sabbath to man and He made it a sign of allegiance between man and God. (Exodus 31:16-17)

His action, of course, makes the Sabbath as old as the world itself. **“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on t he seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”** (Genesis 2:2-3)

Contrary to what many people say, God did not make all seven days of the week holy. According to the Bible , the Lord made one day of the week holy. Webster says the word *holy* means *to set apart* or to make unique. For example, when a couple gets married, their union becomes holy and they are “set apart” from the dating crowd. In like manner, at the time of creation, God “set apart” the seventh day of the week and made it unique from the other six days.

The Bible says that God rested on the seventh day from His work of creating, blessed the

seventh day and made it holy. If Jesus made the seventh day holy by resting from His labors on the seventh day, what do you think Adam and Eve did on the Sabbath? Consider this statement: There is a direct link between observing the Lord's Day and exalting the Lord. If the Lord's Day is not faithfully observed, subsequent generations will soon forget the authority of God.

Review the opening text for this chapter and you will understand this important point: *When the worship of God is compromised, the authority of God is lost*. This point is easily demonstrated throughout the Bible. Both the antediluvians and Israel refused to worship God according to His commandments and they ended up in total rebellion against their Maker. (See 2 Peter 2 and 3; Jeremiah 25 and Ezekiel 20.)

If history proves anything, it proves how quickly respect for God is lost. For example, there are ten generations between Adam's creation and the flood. Do you think the tenth generation antediluvians doubted Noah when he told them God was going to destroy the world with a flood?

Is the Lords Day Optional?

In the United States, Christians overlook the sacredness of the Lord's Day. This is a mystery since God elevated the significance of the seventh day to the same level as nine other commandments. Think about it. The Sabbath commandment is one of the Ten Commandments.

In God's sight, the Sabbath commandment is just as moral, just as binding and obligatory as the sixth commandment which says, "Thou shalt not kill." It is ironic that men will put a murderer to death, but think nothing of breaking the fourth commandment. This phenomenon occurs because God has given man the concept of government. (Romans 13:1-4)

Man governs man. Is murder a serious crime because it violates the right of another person to live or because it is a violation of the sixth commandment? The answer is "yes" to both questions. Then the next question to be asked is, what about the Sabbath? Is the fourth commandment optional?

Is the sixth commandment optional? Israel's history confirms the fact that when His chosen people forgot to observe the Lord's Day, it was only a matter of time until the nation was in complete rebellion regarding God's supreme authority! Jesus spoke the words found in Ezekiel 20 while the nation of Israel remained in rebellion and consequently, in Babylonian captivity.

The Sabbath Brought into Focus

About eight hundred years after the flood, God sent Moses back to Egypt to lead Abraham's descendants out of slavery. As a condition for deliverance from slavery, God required the slaves to rest from their weekly labor on the seventh day of the week. God's demand was bittersweet. Naturally, every slave welcomed a day of rest.

Even more, every Hebrew in Goshen wanted to be delivered from Egyptian bondage. But after Israel kept their first Sabbath, Pharaoh realized that he was losing control over the Hebrews. To regain the upper hand, Pharaoh required the slaves to produce the same quota of bricks in six days that they had been producing in seven.

On top of this, Pharaoh increased their workload and required them to gather all the necessary straw as well! This unreasonable demand pushed the Hebrews beyond their physical ability. Failure to meet the quota provided Pharaoh the “license” he wanted to beat the Hebrew slaves into submission.

The consequence for obeying God caused the Hebrews to suffer unmercifully since it was not possible to meet Pharaoh’s demand for bricks. This Sabbath “rest test” put the Hebrews in a very difficult position.

A Rest on the Seventh Day?

Some scholars have proposed that the work stoppage prompted by Moses and Aaron was to observe God’s seventh day Sabbath. Although the Bible does not specifically say that the slaves were required to observe the *seventh day* Sabbath, I believe this issue can be resolved by reviewing four texts:

1. From the Creation of the world to the time of the Exodus, the Bible identifies one day of rest, the seventh day of the week. (Genesis 2:2,3) By divine decree, the seventh day Sabbath enjoys preeminence above all other days of the week. Jesus did not complete creating the world until the seventh day Sabbath was established and “set apart.” The continued presence of the seventh day (causing a weekly cycle of seven days) confirms this point.

2. The language Pharaoh uses indicates that Moses and Aaron had called on Israel to *rest* from their labor. The words of Pharaoh in Exodus 5:5, “**You make them rest from their labor**” (KJV) or “**You are stopping them from working**” (NIV) reveals two points. First, Pharaoh blames Moses and Aaron for causing the slaves to “rest” from labor by emphasizing “*You . . .*” Second, the word Pharaoh used for rest is *shabath* (Strong’s #7673). This is the same word and idea expressed in Genesis 2:2 when God “rested” or ceased from His creative works on the seventh day.

To suggest that Moses and Aaron required the Hebrews to rest from their labor on any other day of the week other than God’s holy day would be inconsistent with God’s declaration about the seventh day at Creation and the Sabbath day “manna test” that transpired shortly after the Exodus. (Exodus 16)

3. The Bible indicates that God tested Israel with the observance of His seventh day rest *before* He spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai. (See Exodus 16.) This proves two interesting concepts: First, Israel knew about God’s seventh day rest *before* Jesus spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai; and second, by withholding manna on the Sabbath, Jesus confirmed which day of the week was the seventh – just in case there was any question.

The absence of manna on the Sabbath further confirmed the importance and holiness of the seventh day *before* Jesus spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai. Given God's consistent behavior, we can conclude that God's regard for the holiness of the seventh day did not change between Creation and the Exodus, a period of about 2,500 years.

4. When the Lord spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai, He expressly commanded a cessation from work on the seventh day of the week. The fourth commandment begins with, **"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy"** (Exodus 20:8)

If the observance of the seventh day Sabbath was a new concept codified in the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai as some scholars argue, why does the fourth commandment refer back to the original Sabbath day that took place at the creation of the world? The fourth commandment emphasizes the holiness placed upon the seventh day of the week at the time of Creation! Notice: **". . . 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."** (Exodus 20:11)

When these four texts are aligned, we can be safe in saying that Moses and Aaron caused the Hebrews to stop working on the seventh day. The Sabbath rest infuriated Pharaoh and he began persecuting the Hebrews. The actions of the Israelites and Pharaoh confirm the thorny presence of a Sabbath rest test before the Exodus. The holiness of the seventh day of the week did not begin at Mt. Sinai as many people claim. Instead, the holiness of God's seventh day began at Creation and the patriarchs and elders who *walked* and *talked* with God honored the Creator's holy day.

Evidently, Moses and Aaron told the Hebrew elders that deliverance from Egyptian bondage would only be possible if they put complete faith in God. Abraham's offspring were required to live by faith. They had to obey the higher laws of God in order to receive His deliverance.

Israel's faith was to be tested and the test centered on observing God's Sabbath. Would Israel recognize the higher authority of His law by disobeying the laws of Pharaoh? A person's faith in God is revealed when there is both an obedience and disobedience penalty. If the Hebrews obeyed God, they received the wrath of Pharaoh. If the Hebrews obeyed Pharaoh, they would receive the wrath of God. The elders of Israel were afraid of God's wrath and begged Pharaoh to let them go out into the desert and obtain reconciliation with God saying, **" . . . or He,' they said, 'may strike us with plagues or with the sword.' "** (Exodus 5:3)

Observing the Lords Day

If the Holy Spirit brings conviction to a person's heart about the seventh day Sabbath and that it should be honored, a common question arises, "How do I observe the Sabbath?" The answer to this question is determined by examining the fourth commandment and investigating *the intent* of the law. Fortunately, the Bible offers some very good insight on observing the Lord's Day.

Since sin began, the fourth commandment has stood in direct opposition to the ways of the world. For young and old people alike, observing God's Sabbath produces conflicts with family, friends, work, entertainment, recreation and shopping. However, the beauty of the fourth commandment can be observed through the act of obeying God, when man exalts the demands of God above the demands of this world. The world runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week without any rest.

This was not God's intention for His created beings. God created the Sabbath and He commanded rest on the seventh day each week for man's benefit! When we rest according to the commandment, we admit and submit to the authority of our Creator. When we choose to obey Jesus, we are making a statement.

We say to the world, "I love God's law more than anything the world has to offer." The commandment says: **"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 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."** (Exodus 20:8-11)

The fourth commandment makes four statements to be considered:

1. Do not regard the seventh day of the week like the other six, for it was set apart.
2. Do no work on the seventh day, it is holy.
3. Do not allow others under your dominion, whether man or animal, to work on the seventh day.
4. The seventh day is not a holiday. These hours belong to God; it is "the Lord's Day." He rested on the seventh day from His labors, blessed it and made it holy. He wants us to enjoy it as He enjoyed it!

The Sabbath was Set Apart

The first statement, "Do not regard the seventh day of the week like the other six, for it was set apart," eliminates several arguments. Most Christians are convinced that it does not matter which day of the week they worship on as long as God is worshiped. (Among Christians, this argument was first advanced in Rome around A.D. 150.) But God disagrees, because His commandment states that the seventh day of the week, Saturday, is His holy day.

Some people say, "I worship God seven days a week." While there is nothing wrong with worshipping God every day, the fourth commandment is not about daily devotion. It is about submission to God's will which is demonstrated by ceasing from work on the seventh day of the

week. The argument, “I worship God seven days a week,” was used to profane the Sabbath in Israel before King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem.

Notice what God says about Israel's apostate priests: **“Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.”** (Ezekiel 22:26)

Do No Work

The second statement, “Do no work on the seventh day, it is holy,” raises several questions. What is work? Work is defined as something we do for gain, something we do for survival, something that we *have* to do to sustain life. The fourth commandment does not mean that we have to stay in bed on the Lord's Day. It means that we should not do things on the Sabbath that we do during the week.

What about the dairy farmer? Should he forgo milking his cows on Sabbath? How does a nurse keep the Lord's Day when patients need care in the hospital? How does a policeman keep the Lord's Day when criminals are at work seven days a week? How can the mechanic or electrician, who services the generators that provide electricity to thousands of homes, take the Lord's Day off?

How can cooks in nursing homes observe the Lord's Day when the elderly need food seven days a week? When God gave the fourth commandment, did He anticipate the problems that we would face today? Yes, of course. Then, how are these needs reconciled with the fourth commandment?

Before answering these questions, we need to observe how Jesus interpreted the intent of the Lord's Day. The following text is the first of three important texts: **“At that time Jesus went through the grain-fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, ‘Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.’ He answered, ‘Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread – which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.’ ”** (Matthew 12:1-8)

Jesus makes four points within this text. First, gathering food to eat “on the way” through the field that day was not a violation of the Sabbath *as God interprets* the law. (See Exodus 16:23,24 for the basis of the Pharisee's complaint.) Second, Jesus pointed out that when it comes to survival, David and his men ate the holy bread that was in the tabernacle without incurring guilt.

The bread they ate was reserved for priests only. So, there are instances where the immediate preservation of life *momentarily* overrides the letter of the law. Third, Jesus pointed out that the temple priests worked on the Sabbath (desecrated the day) without incurring guilt. Even though the Sabbath was a heavy work day for them, they were not guilty of contempt for God's law. (Note: The priests rotated assignments so that no priest was continuously desecrating the Sabbath. See Luke 1:8.)

Last, the "Lord of the Sabbath," rebuked the Pharisees for abusing the purpose and intent of the Sabbath. As scholars and leaders of the people, they should have known better. When Jesus told them that He was the "Lord of the Sabbath," He applied a title to Himself that shows ownership and sovereign authority. For example, a person is called a "landlord" because he or she owns property and has control over the use of that property.

When Jesus declared Himself to be the "Lord of the Sabbath," He indicated that He – not the Pharisees – had the authority to interpret how the Sabbath should be observed. Jesus Himself made the Sabbath and He alone has the necessary authority to define proper Sabbath conduct.

The Pharisees did not understand the law or its intent and in their perverted, sanctimonious judgment, the Creator of the universe and His disciples continually broke the Sabbath. (John 5:18) How amazing that created beings would condemn their Creator!

The second text brings even more understanding to the subject of Sabbath observance: **"Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'** Then he said to the man, **'Stretch out your hand.'** So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was." (Matthew 12:9-16)

From Jesus' statement we glean two important points: First, Jesus went about doing good for others on the Sabbath. He did not sleep the Sabbath away. He did not pass the Lord's Day in a mindless state of exhaustion because He had overworked during the previous six days. Instead, He used the Sabbath day to minister to others. Second, Jesus affirmed again that there are certain acts that do not violate the *intent* of the Sabbath. If rescuing an animal is not a violation of the intent of the law, then rescuing a human being from sin or suffering does not violate the fourth commandment.

This last text reveals two key issues on observing the Lord's Day. Notice the setting. Jerusalem was being rebuilt under Nehemiah's leadership. He writes, **"In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of**

merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this wicked thing you are doing – desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.' When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over.

I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said, 'Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.' From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love." (Nehemiah 13:15-22)

It is obvious from these verses that conducting business on the Lord's Day is offensive to God – whether it is for food or merchandise is immaterial. Second, like the Levites of old, we should "guard" the gates of our house in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. Did you notice that Nehemiah associates God's wrath (the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.) with desecrating the Sabbath?

Like Nehemiah, I believe the basis for God's coming wrath upon the world is due in part to the fact that mankind does not have respect for God or His holy day. When the Great Tribulation rumbles across the face of the Earth, God's authority and His Sabbath will be put into proper perspective. The strength and authority of His law will be plainly seen. Until this occurs, this topic remains a matter of prophetic faith.

If we honor the Sabbath hours by resting from our work and labor, we honor God. If we honor God, He will bless us. The Lord told Isaiah, "**If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.**' The mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 58:13,14)

Sabbath Observance

What principles do we apply to the dairy farmer, the nurse, the cook, the policeman, etc.? Here is my personal view of the matter: The Lord's Day is the Lord's *Day* – all day long – from sunset to sunset. (Genesis 1; Leviticus 23:32) The Sabbath was made for man to be a rest, both physically and spiritually, or a day of renewal each week. God wants us to prepare all week for the Sabbath. Jesus wants us to enjoy the Lord's Day and call it a delight. The weekly Sabbath is not for God's benefit, but ours! When we honor the Sabbath commandment, we exalt the "Lord of the Sabbath!"

Preparation for the Lord's Day is important. In ancient times, the Jews did not have names for the days of the week. They used numbers such as the "the first of seven" for Sunday, or "the third day of the week" for Tuesday, etc. After the Babylonian captivity, the sixth day of the week became known as "The Preparation" or "the day of preparation." This title summarized the importance of being *prepared* for the Lord's Day. (Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54)

As I understand it, actions that bring the blessing of Sabbath rest to others are permissible on Sabbath. Whether you prepare a good meal for a patient or help victims from a tornado, the Sabbath was made for man. Yes, the dairy farmer has to milk his cows. Yes, the doctor may be called for an emergency.

Yes, the nurse may need to render care and the preacher may have to work harder on Sabbath than any other day. BUT, the first consideration that people need to address when trying to resolve this matter for themselves is this: How can I submit to the demands of the fourth commandment and still honor the Lord on His holy day with deeds of compassion?

Imposing Work on Others

The fourth commandment says that we are not to impose work upon others under our dominion, whether man or animal, on the Sabbath. This issue raises some interesting questions.

Would it be appropriate for God to create the Sabbath and then force humanity to work on the Lord's Day while He rests? No, of course not. God is fair and just and He wants us to follow His lead. If the Ruler of the Universe gives rest to His servants each week, then each of us, as God's servants, must give our dominion (those under our management) rest as well.

A Holy Day Not a Holiday

The Bible says the world and all that is in it belongs to God. (Psalm 24:1) This means that human beings are stewards of "God's property." (Matthew 25:14; Leviticus 25:23) Jesus is the Landlord of Earth. Jesus is also the owner or "the Lord of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27, 28)

Observing the seventh day reminds humankind each week that we are not the owners of time or possessions. Notice how this works: Observing the Lord's Day *always* puts a person at odds with the pace and activities of this world. (This is a world in rebellion against God's will and His ways.) From the beginning of time, antagonism between God's Sabbath and the world has existed.

God set apart a day for Himself and His children which not only offers physical rest, but also offers a time to spiritually reconnect with God each week. To the carnal mind, the Sabbath conflicts with our use of time or our pursuit of wealth and pleasure. To the spiritual mind, the Sabbath is a "time-out" from managing the assets God has given to us. (Matthew 6:33) The command to rest on the seventh day may sound easy to do, but in fact, "resting" according to God's commandment has financial and social consequences in a world that has no respect for God.

Keeping the Sabbath holy can mean the loss of income, job or even a career. Yet, we need to remember that we really do not own these things in the first place. For some people, keeping the Lord's Day holy means rejection and ridicule by family members and friends. The devil has done and will do everything possible to make sure that the world forgets or rejects God's Sabbath. But, we can be sure of one thing: If we are willing to honor the Creator by resting on His holy day, we will find a faith experience.

God sustains whatever we lay down so that when we resume our management of His assets after Sabbath, nothing will be lost or hurt. The devil is able to bring ruin and loss, but God owns everything and He will recover His losses if we are faithful. This may seem scary, but it is also the exciting part of living by faith. Observing God's Sabbath involves risk and the presence of risk proves the necessity for faith. If we are faith-full with all that God has given us to manage, we can be sure that Jesus will reward in full every faithful steward at the Second Coming. (Matthew 25:23)

The faith-full people who honor the Lord by keeping His Sabbath holy will come to know the "Lord of the Sabbath" more intimately. God will bless the people who look forward to entering into God's rest each week by giving them His eternal rest. (Hebrews 4) This is why God said: **"The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested."** (Exodus 31:16,17)

Summary

The blessing surrounding the fourth commandment is both timeless and universal. Unfortunately, the corporate race to make more money and capture market share has become a powerful economic force that has pushed God's command to rest out of the weekly cycle. Jesus said, **"You cannot serve both God and money."** (Matthew 6:24)

These entities are diametrically opposed. The pursuit of money never ends and opportunities to compromise God's Sabbath are limitless. Therefore, we have to be vigilant to "Remember the Sabbath day. . . ." If we plan to live in God's eternal kingdom, then the principles of God's kingdom need to be a priority in our lives.

Honoring God's Sabbath is a faith exercise that Jesus invites us to experience with Him each week. Obeying God when something important is at stake is the experiential meaning of living by faith.

I believe that if we forget the Sabbath, we will forget God.

"If I were called upon to identify the principal trait of the entire 20th century, I would be unable to find anything more precise than to reflect once again on how we have lost touch with our Creator . . . Men have forgotten God." (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Reader's Digest, September 1986).