

ARE BELIEVERS OBLIGATED TO KEEP THE LAW OF SABBATH?

Scripture: Colossians 2:16-17, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

- Paul speaks about the supremacy of Christ in Col. 1 and sufficiency in Christ in Col. 2. In chapter 2, he also addresses problematic issues in the Colossian church.
 - 2:8 on worldly philosophies
 - 2:16 on Jewish legalistic laws (special food and days)
 - 2:18 on mysticism (asceticism, worship of angels and sensual experiences)
 - “Therefore” (since Christ is supreme and our all-sufficient one), let no one judge you (judge your salvation or spiritual condition) based on your observance of food (food and drink) and days (festival or a new moon or a Sabbath).
 - Paul says these are a shadow (temporal value) but the reality is Christ (eternal treasure). Therefore, we are not obligated to follow them but Christ.
- Sabbath was a temporal rest, but Christ is our eternal rest.

What is Sabbath? It is a day of rest in which the Jews abstain from work, from Friday evening to Saturday evening. “Sabbath” literally means “to cease.”

- There are also the annual Sabbaths (Seven annual Holy Sabbaths (feasts) that occur once every year) and the Sabbatical years (Lev. 25:1-7; Deut. 15:1-11) about which we will not be focusing here.

Where is the commandment to keep the Sabbath day? Exodus 20:8-11, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep 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, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

- Observe, Sabbath should be observed by adults, children, slaves, and even animals.
- It is the only ceremonial law in 10 commandments; the rest are moral laws.
 - Moral laws are related to holy principles (No adultery, lying).

- Judicial laws are related to civil laws and the execution of justice upon law breakers (eye for eye, tooth for tooth)
- Ceremonial laws are related to laws pertaining to food, days, festivals.
- First day of the week is not the Sabbath day. Nowhere there is a shift. It is the seventh day which is the day of Sabbath.

What does the Sabbath day represent? In the Old Testament covenants have signs.

- What is the sign of Noahic covenant? Rainbow (Gen. 9:8-17)
- What is the sign of Abrahamic covenant? Circumcision (Gen. 17)
- What is the sign of Mosaic covenant (Sinai Covenant)? Sabbath (Exo. 31:12-17; Eze. 20:12-17)
 - [12] And the LORD said to Moses, [13] “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. [16] Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. [17] It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’”

Note: Mosaic covenant is a covenant between God and the Israelites that God will bless and prosper them if they obey His laws and punish them if they disobey His laws.

What is the reward for keeping the Sabbath? Blessings

- ❖ **Isa. 56:2**, “Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.” (cf. Isa. 56: 6-8; 58:13-14)

What is the consequence for violating the Sabbath? Death

- ❖ **Exo. 31:14-15**, “You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.” (cf. Exo. 35:2; Num. 15:32-26)

What did the Jews do on the Sabbath day?

- They abstained from usual work to rest. (Exo. 31:14)
- They offered special burnt offerings. (Num. 28:9-10)

- After the establishment of synagogues, the Jews gathered in synagogues on the day of Sabbath to worship and study.
 - **Luke 4:16**, “And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.”
 - **Acts 13:14-16**, “Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.” So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said.....”

By the time of the Lord Jesus’ walk on earth, numerous laws were established to keep the day of Sabbath:

- During the Maccabean Period (a century or so prior to the coming of Christ) a 1,000 Jews had been slaughtered because they were attacked on the Sabbath and would not break the Sabbath to defend themselves.
 - **Since there is no work on Sabbath, and lifting weight is work, so weight must be defined.**
- People were forbidden from traveling more than 3,000 feet from their homes on the Sabbath.
- A Jew could not carry an object that weighed more than a dried fig. But, an object that weighed half that amount could be carried twice.
- One could eat nothing larger than an olive.
- You could not throw an object into the air with one hand and catch it with the other.
- If the Sabbath came upon you as you were reaching out for some food, you would have to drop the food before you pulled your arm back, otherwise you would be guilty of carrying a burden on the Sabbath.
- Clothing could not be washed or dyed.
- A letter could not be sent.
- A fire could not be lit or extinguished. If you failed to light your lamps before the Sabbath, you had to sit in the dark until the next evening. [now the privilege of automatic lights]
- Jews could not take a bath on the Sabbath. If they did, some of the water might splash onto the floor and this would be considered “**washing it**”.

- A woman could not look into a looking glass because she might see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out.
- False teeth could not be worn because they exceeded the weight limits.
- A Jewish tailor could not carry a needle on the Sabbath lest he be tempted to mend a torn garment.
- If your child falls on a sabbath and skins his knee, you are allowed by the law to take a bandage and tie it over that knee but you are not allowed to take any medicine and put it on the wound and then tie the bandage because if you put the medicine the wound would start to get better which means the body is working and your body is not allowed to work on the sabbath, so tie a bandage to keep it from getting worse but do not put any medicine to help it get better.
 - Sabbath ultimately became a day of burden rather than a day of rest.

The Lord Jesus:

The Lord Jesus did not violate Sabbath, but corrected the wrong application of it.

- ❖ **Mark 2:23-24**, One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”
- ❖ **Luke 14:1-4**, One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” But they remained silent.
- ❖ **The healing at the Pool on the Sabbath: John 5:9-10**, Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.”
- ❖ The Lord Jesus claimed in **Mark 2:27-28**, And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Reasons why believers are not under the law of Sabbath:

1. Since Sabbath was a covenant sign for the Mosaic covenant, we are no more under Sabbath because we are not under Mosaic law.
2. Colossians 2:16-17 gives an evidence that we are not under the law of Sabbath, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

3. In Galatians 4:10-11, “You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain,” Paul rebukes the Galatians for observing special days (which includes the Sabbath).
4. Of the 10 commandments listed in Exodus 20:1-17, only nine of them were mentioned under the law of Christ. (Six in Matthew 19:18, murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, honor parents, and worshiping God; Romans 13:9, coveting. Worshiping God properly covers the first three commandments). The one that was not mentioned as a practice for believers was Sabbath.
5. When the issue of keeping the custom of Moses aroused, particularly ‘circumcision’, what the Jerusalem council, consisted of apostles and elders, decided is this: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” (Acts 15:28-29) There is no mention of keeping Sabbath.
6. According to Romans 14:5, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind,” v.10, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God,” one may keep the Sabbath (Saturday) as a special day, but they must not require it for salvation or make it a law for other believers to follow or judge others who do not follow (Col. 2:16). It can only be a personal conviction.
7. Hebrews speaks about the “Sabbath rest” which awaits God’s people and which is an eternal rest in Christ (Heb. 4:1-10). He doesn’t mention anything about the importance of keeping the seventh day, Sabbath. In fact, there is not a single command for the New Testament believers to observe the Sabbath.
8. It seems the early church generally gathered on the first day of the week for fellowship and breaking of the bread (Acts 20:7, “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread”). This practice seems to have its root in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, which was on the first day of the week (John 20:19).

Note: The Lord’s Day is not the Sabbath day but a day set apart for Christian fellowship.

- **John MacArthur**, Sunday has not replaced Saturday as the Sabbath. Rather the Lord's Day is a time when believers gather to commemorate His resurrection, which occurred on the first day of the week. Every day to the believer is one of Sabbath rest, since we have ceased from our spiritual labor and are resting in the salvation of the Lord (Hebrews 4:9-11).

9. Most of the early church fathers did not practice or defend literal Sabbath observance (cf. Diognetus 4:1). Instead, they spoke about Sunday as the Lord's Day and an occasion for church fellowship.

- a. **Justin Martyr (135 A.D)**, "Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior in the same day rose from the dead."
- b. **Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (110 AD)**, "If, then, those who walk in the ancient practices attain to newness of hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but fashioning their lives after the Lord's Day on which our life also arose through Him, that we may be found disciples of Jesus Christ, our only teacher."
- c. **Tertullian (200 AD)**, "But why is it, you ask, that we gather on the Lord's Day to celebrate our solemnities? Because that was the way the Apostles also did."
- d. **The Didache (70-75) instructs believers:** "On the Lord's own day, gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks."

Note: If Sunday is not possible, believers can gather any day which is convenient for all believers (ex. Friday in Middle Eastern Countries).

10. Many trustworthy Bible Scholars affirm that we are not under the law of Sabbath:

Thomas R. Schreiner, a New Testament scholar (Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), "Believers are not obligated to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant. The Mosaic covenant and the Sabbath as the covenant sign are no longer applicable now that the new covenant of Jesus Christ has come."

John MacArthur, "There's not one New Testament command to keep the sabbath. All the ten commandments are repeated in the New Testament except the one about the sabbath. It is never quoted in the New Testament. There are no prescriptions or sabbath rules anywhere in the new covenant. There is no instruction about behavior on the sabbath anywhere in the New Testament."

Douglas Moo, a New Testament Scholar, "Colossians 2:16 can validly be used to conclude that the observance of a Sabbath day is no longer a requirement of God's people in the new realm."

Two Questions:

I. Is not Sabbath a covenant forever?

- ❖ **Exodus 31:16-17**, “Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a *covenant forever*. It is a *sign forever* between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’

The Hebrew word “Olam” could mean either “eternity” or “long duration.”

Regarding circumcision in Genesis 17:13, “both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.”

But Paul says, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” (**Gal. 5:1-4**)

Regarding atonement: And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins.” And Aaron did as the Lord commanded Moses. (**Leviticus 16:34**)

But the new covenant through Christ’s priesthood made the old covenant obsolete: “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” (**Hebrews 8:13**) **Also**, “He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (**Hebrews 10:9-10**).

Examples of “forever” does not necessarily mean “eternity” but “long duration”:

- ❖ **Exodus 21:5-6**, “But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.”
- ❖ **Joshua 8:28**, “So Joshua burned Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day.”
 - **Neh. 7:32**, in the lists of returned exiles, “The men of Bethel and Ai, 123.”
- ❖ **I Samuel 1:22**, But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord and dwell there forever.”

- ❖ **1 Kings 1:31**, Then Bathsheba bowed with her face to the ground and paid homage to the king and said, “May my lord King David live forever!”
- ❖ **2 Chronicles 7:16**, “For now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time.”

2. Did not God Himself rest on the seventh day, which was a backup for the Sabbath day?

- ❖ **Exodus 31:17**, “It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.” (cf. Gen. 2:1-3)

Note: Sabbath, which was a sign between God and Israel, was a memorial, a testimony, to God’s creation in six days and his rest on the seventh day.

- i. Using the example of God, there is no evidence in the Bible of anyone keeping the Sabbath or a command to keep the Sabbath before the time of Moses.
- ii. There is no command to the New Testament believers to keep the Sabbath because of the creation account.
- iii. However, considering the creation account, we can keep in mind the principle of rest and practice it, but not to keep the law of Sabbath which is a Mosaic law.
 - **Bruce Waltke (Old Testament Scholar)**, “Though we are not under law—and the Bible does not command a Christian to keep a Sabbath—it is in our hearts to set apart a day, sanctifying it for worship and reflection. A person who feels inclined to work seven days a week should examine what god he or she worships.”

Note: Although we are not under Sabbath, believers are exhorted not to miss regular church fellowship (Heb. 10:24-25).

- ❖ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

▪ **CONCLUSION:**

1. The New Testament believers are not obligated to keep the law of Sabbath, because we are people of the New Covenant, not of the Old Covenant.
2. However, it is good to cease from our usual work once a week for physical rest and refreshment, and also for spiritual nourishment through church fellowship and encouragement.