

Christ *and the* Sabbath



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:1–3, Heb. 1:1–3, Acts 13:14, Mark 2:23–28, John 5:1–9, Isa. 65:17.*

Memory Text: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath” (*Mark 2:27, 28, NKJV*).

The vast majority of Christian denominations observe Sunday as the day of “rest” and worship (even though the vast majority of Sunday keepers don’t really rest on Sunday). Sunday “keeping” is so prevalent among modern Christians that many believe the day to be the “Christian Sabbath.”

This was not always the case. On the contrary, as a continuation of the Israelite faith, Christianity did not discard all of the symbols of its parent religion, including the seventh-day Sabbath. For a time, the only Bible that early Christians had to guide them was the Old Testament. No wonder, then, that the issue of an alternative day of worship was not introduced into Christianity until more than a century after Christ ascended to heaven. Furthermore, it was not until the fourth century, with the edict of Constantine, that Sunday observance became the policy of the dominant church. Unfortunately, even after the Protestant Reformation, almost all Christianity has adhered to keeping Sunday, despite the Bible teaching that the seventh day remains the true Sabbath.

This week’s lesson will cover Christ and the Sabbath.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 3.

The Jewish Sabbath? *(Exod. 20:8–11)*

Although many refer to the seventh day as the “Jewish Sabbath,” the Bible reveals that the Sabbath predates the Jews by many centuries. Its roots go back to the Creation itself.

Genesis 2:1–3 declares that after God had completed His acts of Creation in six days, He rested on the seventh day and then “blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (*NIV*). This clearly shows the high place of the Sabbath in God’s creation. In addition to the blessing, the Sabbath was also “made holy.” In other words, God applied some of His own qualities to this monument in time.

Compare the two Sabbath commandments in Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. In what ways do these relate to the theory that the Sabbath is not only for Jews?

The most notable difference between the two commandments is the rationale for Sabbath observance. Exodus makes a direct reference to Genesis 2:3 as it elevates the fact that God both “blessed” and “made holy” the Sabbath day. On the other hand, Deuteronomy 5:15 points to Israel’s divine deliverance from Egyptian bondage as being a rationale for Sabbath keeping. On the basis of the Deuteronomy text, many believe the Sabbath is only for the Jews. However, this argument totally ignores the fact that the Exodus text points to the Creation, when God established Sabbath for all humanity.

Furthermore, the Deuteronomy 5:15 reference to deliverance from Egypt is symbolic of the salvation we have in Christ. Hence, the Sabbath is a symbol not only of Creation but also of Redemption, two themes that are linked with each other in the Bible (*Heb. 1:1–3, Col. 1:13–20, John 1:1–14*). Only by the fact that Jesus is our Creator could He also be our Redeemer, and the seventh-day Sabbath is a symbol of His work as both.

Anyone can claim to be resting in Christ. In your own experience, how does keeping the seventh-day Sabbath help you to find that rest?

A Time for Rest and Worship (Luke 4:16)

According to Colossians 1:16 and Hebrews 1:2, the preincarnate Christ was directly involved in the creation process. These texts declare that all created things came into existence through Him. Paul further expresses that Christ had a part in creating “invisible” things (*Col. 1:16, 17*), which would, of course, include the Sabbath. Although Christ was central in the creative process, when He was transformed into human flesh, He subjected Himself to His Father’s commandments (*John 15:10*). As earlier lessons showed, Jesus was opposed to certain traditions and used every opportunity to correct religious behavior that was not grounded in the will of God. If Jesus had intended to abolish the Sabbath commandment, He had plenty of opportunities to do just that.

Most of the Sabbath texts in the Old Testament speak of the Sabbath as a day of rest. The understanding of “rest” in many modern languages may lead some to believe that the Sabbath should be spent sleeping and generally relaxing. While we can definitely enjoy these activities on the Sabbath, the true meaning of *rest* is “cessation,” “stop,” or “pause.” The Sabbath is a time when we can take a break from the routine labor of the first six days and spend special time with the Creator.

By the time of Christ, the Jews were holding a weekly divine worship service on the Sabbath (*see Luke 4:16*). Those who lived in Jerusalem would attend special prayer services in the temple, where the liturgy was different from what it was on the other days of the week. Jews who lived in other parts of the world developed the synagogue as a place of social gathering and worship. On Sabbaths, as long as a minimum of ten males was present (a *minyan*), a divine worship service could take place.

What do the following texts inform us about Sabbath keeping among the earliest Christians? What does this tell us about those who claim the Sabbath was changed to Sunday in honor of the resurrection? *Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4; Heb. 4:9.*

Given their Jewish roots, it was only natural for early Christians to worship on the day prescribed in the Old Testament. Yet, almost twenty years after the ascension of Jesus, it was still Paul’s “custom” to attend a synagogue on the Sabbath (*Acts 17:2*). Thus, no biblical evidence shows that the first Christians kept Sunday instead of Sabbath.

A Time for Enjoyment (Mark 2:27, 28)

Many who claim to keep the Sabbath do not always understand what Sabbath keeping entails. As did some of the Pharisees in Jesus' time, people even today have imprisoned the Sabbath behind rigid walls of rules and regulations (while others have almost made it a day no different than any other). The Sabbath is supposed to be a delight, not a burden, but it is still a day to be kept holy.

During the time when Jesus walked this earth, some of the religious leaders had surrounded the Sabbath with 39 other commandments. They reasoned that if people could keep the 39 laws, then the Sabbath would be perfectly kept. As a result of this well-intentioned law-making, the Sabbath—which was intended to be a joy—did, indeed, become a yoke to many.

Carefully read Mark 2:23–28. Why did the disciples pluck grain? Does the text indicate that Jesus participated with the disciples? What biblical laws were being violated, if any?

As Jesus and His hungry disciples walked through a field one Sabbath, the disciples decided to satisfy their hunger by plucking grain. Although it was not their field, their actions were permissible under the law of Moses (*see Deut. 23:25*), even if the Pharisees interpreted it as a violation of another Mosaic law that forbade plowing and harvesting on the Sabbath (*see Exod. 34:21*). Apparently, Jesus did not partake of the grain; nonetheless, He took the time to defend the disciples' actions. Jesus reminded the Pharisees that even David and his men had eaten the “forbidden” sanctuary bread when hungry.

In Mark 2:27, 28, Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for the benefit of humans, not vice versa. In other words, the Sabbath was not made *to be* worshiped, but rather to provide opportunities *for* worship. As God's gift to *all* humans, the Sabbath is not meant to oppress but to provide release and liberation. It is truly a way to experience our rest and freedom in Christ.

What are some things that you can do on the Sabbath that you can't so easily do other days of the week? Think through this question, and bring your answers to class on Sabbath.

A Time for Healing *(Luke 13:16)*

When God created the world, He pronounced that everything was “very good” (*Gen. 1:31*), no doubt perfect in every way. However, with the advent of sin, the creation has been corrupted with evil, an impact seen everywhere. Humans, though created in the image of God, became subject to sickness, deterioration, and death. We often say that death is part of life; death, though, is the negation of life, not part of it. Death was never meant to be something that we experience.

Given God’s original plan for humanity, it is no surprise that some of Jesus’ most dramatic healing miracles took place on the Sabbath.

Review the Sabbath-healing stories in **Mark 3:1–6, Luke 13:10–17, John 5:1–9, 9:1–14**. What lessons do these miracles teach about the true purpose of the Sabbath?

Each of the Sabbath-healing miracles is spectacular and serves to demonstrate the true meaning of Sabbath. Before Jesus healed the man with the withered hand (*Mark 3:1–6*), He asked the rhetorical question, “‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’” (*Mark 3:4, NKJV*). If a person has an opportunity to relieve suffering on the day of liberation, why shouldn’t he do it? In fact, the miracle with the woman who had a bent back powerfully demonstrates the liberating purpose of the Sabbath (*Luke 13:10–17*). When criticized for the healing, Jesus asked, “‘Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?’” (*Luke 13:16, NIV*).

The theme of liberation is also present in the accounts of the healing of the man by the pool of Bethesda, who had been sick for 38 years (*John 5:1–9*), and the healing of the man born blind (*John 9:1–14*). In response to the Pharisees’ charge that Jesus broke the Sabbath with His healing miracles, He reminded them, “‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working’” (*John 5:17, NIV*). If God did not allow the healing, it would not have happened. When it comes to relieving human misery, God does not rest.

What should we learn from the mistakes of these religious leaders about how preconceived notions can so blind us to even the most obvious of truths?

A New Creation

Sabbath not only reminds us of God’s creative ability, but it points to His restorative promises. Indeed, with every healing of a person on the Sabbath, the promise of eternal restoration was powerfully reinforced. In its own unique way, the Sabbath provides a view that reaches back to earth’s earliest history and stretches forward to humanity’s eventual destiny. Again, we can say that the Sabbath points both to Creation and to Redemption.

God created this world once already. Due to sin, however, His creation has been defiled, but this defiling will not last forever. A key element of the plan of salvation is restoration—not just of the earth but, even more important, of people, beings made in His image who will be restored to that image and who will live on the new earth. The same God who made the first earth, whose work we celebrate every seventh day, will create the earth again. (Think about how important remembering our creation must be that we are commanded to do it once a week in a special way.)

Read the following texts. What message does each one have that can be linked to the meaning of the Sabbath?

Isa. 65:17 _____

Isa. 66:22 _____

2 Pet. 3:9–13 _____

Rev. 21:1 _____

2 Cor. 5:17 _____

Gal. 6:15 _____

Rev. 21:5 _____

The Sabbath “declares that He who created all things in heaven and in earth, and by whom all things hold together, is the head of the church, and that by His power we are reconciled to God. . . . The Sabbath is a sign of Christ’s power to make us holy. And it is given to all whom Christ makes holy. As a sign of His sanctifying power, the Sabbath is given to all who through Christ become a part of the Israel of God.” —Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 288, 289.

What practical things can you do to allow the power of God to sanctify you? That is, what choices do you make on a daily basis that either help or hinder this creative process in you?

Further Study: “From the very beginning of the great controversy in heaven it has been Satan’s purpose to overthrow the law of God. It was to accomplish this that he entered upon his rebellion against the Creator, and though he was cast out of heaven he has continued the same warfare upon the earth. To deceive men, and thus lead them to transgress God’s law, is the object which he has steadfastly pursued. Whether this be accomplished by casting aside the law altogether, or by rejecting one of its precepts, the result will be ultimately the same. He that offends ‘in one point,’ manifests contempt for the whole law; his influence and example are on the side of transgression; he becomes ‘guilty of all.’ James 2:10.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 582.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at the Ellen G. White statement in Friday’s study, a fuller rendition of the reference used in the introduction to this quarter. How does the Sabbath and what has happened to the Sabbath in Christendom help us to understand Satan’s attack on the law of God?
- 2 In the following texts (*Mark 3:2, Luke 13:14, John 5:18, 9:16*) Jesus is charged with breaking the Sabbath. Review Exodus 20:8–11 and evaluate the merit of this charge. What do you say to those who claim that these passages provide evidence that Jesus broke the Sabbath?
- 3 In class go over your answer to the final question at the end of Tuesday’s study. That is, what are some things that the Sabbath frees you up to do that on other days of the week you might not be able to do because of worldly obligations?
- 4 Review your own Sabbath experience. Is the Sabbath for you a day of liberation, rest, and freedom or a day of foreboding, bondage, and stress? How can you learn to enjoy the Sabbath, to make it a delight, as we are told to do in this verse: “If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words” (*Isa. 58:13*)?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Mark 2:27*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that the Sabbath is still a symbol of Creation and is also the symbol of our Redemption.

Feel: Experience Sabbath as a time of release and liberation.

Do: Find delight in keeping the Sabbath.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: A Timeless Sign

- A** Why did Jesus' opponents charge Him with Sabbath breaking?
- B** How did Jesus defend His disciples' behavior on the Sabbath in Mark 2:23–28?
- C** Where did the Sabbath originate, and what does this tell us about who the Sabbath was meant for?

II. Feel: A Celebration of Freedom

- A** How can we come to see Sabbath as a day of delight?
- B** Why did Jesus take the opportunity to relieve suffering on Sabbath?
- C** How do you feel about sleeping in on Sabbath morning and missing church?

III. Do: The Crowning Event of the Week

- A** Jesus asked, “ ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?’ ” (*Mark 3:4, NASB*). Does this mean that we should spend our Sabbaths doing emergency relief work? Where is the place for worship or relaxation? How do we strike the right balance?
- B** What can you do to make the Sabbath a delight for those around you?
- C** How can you keep the Sabbath without resorting to a list of things that you cannot do on Sabbath?

► **Summary:** Jesus, as the Creator of the Sabbath during the Creation week, did not come to nullify Sabbath observance but rather to restore it as a symbol of Creation, as well as Redemption.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Mark 2:27*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *The Sabbath is a way to truly experience rest and freedom in Christ.*

Just for Teachers: *The case is often made that, even though there is no solid biblical evidence for Sunday keeping, Christians worship on Sunday to commemorate Jesus' great sacrifice on our behalf. The following story could be used as a basis for discussing this argument.*

Marcelle had no idea that she was about to make a shocking discovery as she walked into her mom's room. Mom had gotten out a large cardboard box and was rummaging through the papers in the box. "What are you looking for, Mom?" Marcelle asked. "A copy of your birth certificate," Mom replied. For a few moments, Marcelle and her mom searched the box together. "Ah, here it is, but Mom, something is wrong! This birth certificate says I was born on October 7. You know my birthday is March 16." "Honey, don't pay any attention to that little old piece of paper! That date was just for the folks at the hospital. Your dad and I changed your birthday to March 16 in honor of your uncle Max. That's the day he quit smoking. Now that's something worth celebrating, don't you think?" For a moment, Marcelle remained speechless and then she blurted out, "March 16 isn't my real birthday?" Mom tried to console Marcelle by explaining that it had now become a family tradition and the October date was really not a good time for a celebration as they always had so much yard work then. "Besides, does the day really matter?" Mom asked. (This story is based on the *Birthday Switcheroo* tract by Randy Fishell.)

Discuss: Would you feel loved and respected if you were Marcelle? Did her parents have any legal grounds for making the date change? How does this story relate to Sabbath versus Sunday keeping?

Opening Activity: Invite class members to share their favorite Sabbath activity. Highlight the importance of activities that build relationships with God and others, as well as help us find rest.

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Jesus and the Sabbath (*Review Jesus' visit to the synagogue of Nazareth in Luke 4 with your class.*)

We usually find Jesus in the synagogue or temple on Sabbaths. Luke is very explicit when he retells the story of the life and ministry of Jesus in relation to the Sabbath: “So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. *And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read*” (*Luke 4:16, NKJV; italics added*). As He is invited to read from the scroll assigned to this particular Sabbath’s reading, Jesus reads about the Messiah’s work as depicted in Isaiah 61:1, 2. The Spirit-guided Anointed One was to preach good news to the poor; He was to proclaim freedom for prisoners; He was to restore sight for the blind and release the oppressed. What an explosive message! As Jesus put down the scroll, Luke tells us that He added one sentence: “ ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (*Luke 4:21, NKJV*). The exchange that followed led to a furious mob trying to lynch the most famous Son of Nazareth.

Consider This: How would you feel if somebody were to stand up in your Sabbath School class and claim to be a prophet? How would you react, particularly if you knew that member? How should we react in moments when our worldviews and experiences are profoundly shaken?

II. Sabbath and Conflict (*Review the Sabbath miracle of John 5 with your class.*)

It seems that many conflicts with the leadership and religious specialists began on a Sabbath day. While not specifically seeking theological confrontation, Jesus often used His Sabbath sermons or healings to highlight important theological concepts that clashed with the traditional Jewish theology of the day.

One of the most significant passages dealing with Sabbath and conflict in the ministry of Jesus can be found in John 5. Initially, the reader is not made aware of when Jesus visits the pool of Bethesda, where a great number of sick people waited for healing. Jesus singles out an “invalid” who had been sick for 38 years—a lifetime (*ESV*). Jesus sees and knows and asks the man the obvious. “ ‘Do you want to get well?’ ” (*vs. 6, NIV*). The sick man’s answer suggests that he was unable to move by himself, perhaps suffering from some type of paralysis. He couldn’t make it in time to the pool after the water had moved. Note how Jesus heals in this instant: the Living Word speaks the man to health. Three imperatives (“get up, take up your bed, and walk,” *vs. 8, ESV*) mean the difference between languishing in suffering and healing. At once, the man was healed; he picked up the mat, a reminder of his past, and started walking.

By this point, the reader has been drawn into the narrative. We can see and smell and hear the countless sick. We listen in on the conversation that Jesus had with the nameless man, wondering about that first question and marveling at the power of His word. We rejoice with the man as

he gets up and walks, and then we are, as noted by Seventh-day Adventist scholar Sigve K. Tonstad, “caught completely off guard by the implications of the next sentence, charged as an unexpected negative: ‘Now that day was the Sabbath’ (5:9).”—*The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2009), p. 183.

The following section describes the dialogue between “the Jews” (usually Jewish leadership in John) and the healed man (*John 5:10–13*). It sounds more like an interrogation in a white-tiled, stuffy police station. The logical sequence goes like this: “Since it is Sabbath, you cannot carry your mat, because the law forbids you to do so. So, on whose authority have you picked up your mat?”

There is no joy shared here with the newly restored child of God. There is no oohing and aahing about the muscle tone and athletic gait of somebody whose body had been characterized by atrophy and the incapacity to move freely. In John 9:14, which describes another Sabbath miracle by Jesus, involving a blind man, John did not include this narrative to document more healings. This narrative and the previous one in John 5 were chosen because they focus upon Sabbath keeping and Jesus’ relation to the law. John provides a clue for this in his reference to the carrying of the mat and the making of the mud in John 9:6. In other words, Jesus purposefully chose the Sabbath to underscore the fact that He is One with God the Father (*compare with John 5:18*). His word is creative, and John emphasizes the Creation Word in his prologue (*John 1:1–18*). Since the rationale of Sabbath is based on Creation (*Exod. 20:8–11*), the Sabbath healings create an important link to the law and the Lawgiver.

Consider This: What basic difference regarding the purpose of Sabbath keeping can you see between Jesus’ and the Pharisees’ activities on Sabbath?

III. God’s Signature Statement (*Review Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15 with your class.*)

As noted by Tonstad, the Sabbath healings also speak about the character of God (and, by extension, Jesus): “Jesus’ insistence on healing on the Sabbath is best understood when we see the Sabbath not as the prized possession of the Jews but as God’s signature statement. In effect, Jesus is delivering on the original commitment invested in the seventh day at Creation.”—*The Lost Meaning of the Sabbath*, p. 197. Jesus not only re-creates, He is also partaking in fellowship with those who are downtrodden and marginalized, as God shared the first Sabbath with Adam and Eve. Jesus communicates that God cares about people and that the Sabbath is both a memorial to Creation and to Redemption (*Deut. 5:12–15*). His calculated conflict with Jewish leadership helps to crystallize His self-identity, His mission, and His theology. The Lawgiver unmistakably

explains His law more clearly by His actions.

Consider This: We often have an image of Jesus as a mild and gracious Redeemer—something we can see, undoubtedly, in many key moments of His ministry. Why, then, would He provoke the Jewish leadership so much with His numerous Sabbath healings involving physical activity?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- ❶ In an age of mass communication, why do we bother to still have churches and come to church? Wouldn't it be easier to stay home and watch top-quality sermons and music on Hope Channel or 3ABN?
- ❷ Sabbath is not meant to restrict and oppress but to provide rest, release, and joy. How can Sabbath keeping be a way of expressing our freedom and joy in Christ?
- ❸ What did Jesus mean by saying, “ ‘My father is always at his work . . . and I too am working,’ ” when charged by the Pharisees with Sabbath breaking (*John 5:17, NIV*)?
- ❹ Think for a moment of our name: Seventh-day Adventist. How does the seventh-day Sabbath point toward the Second Coming? (Hint: Think of the relation between Creation and re-creation.)

Application Questions:

- ❶ Why do you come to church on Sabbath? What is your favorite part of the worship service? How can you make the other parts more meaningful?
- ❷ What practical steps can we take as individuals or as a church family to make the Sabbath a delight and still a day to be kept holy?
- ❸ What activities are endorsed as acceptable Sabbath activities in your culture? Are these based on sound biblical principles or traditions?
- ❹ In what ways can we improve our Sabbath keeping experience? How can we keep from becoming so exhausted during the week that we have no energy left on Sabbath to enjoy it?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: Sally is a newly baptized Seventh-day Adventist with two young children. Her husband is not interested in religion. She accepts that the Sabbath is God's holy day and wants to keep it, but she isn't sure how she should go about keeping it. What practical advice would you, as a class, give her?