

The “Change” of the Law



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Rom. 8:1; 7:15–25; Rom. 7:1–14; John 20:19–23; Acts 20:6, 7; Dan. 7:23–25; Rev. 13:1–17.*

Memory Text: “He will speak against the Most High and oppress [H]is holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time” (*Daniel 7:25, NIV*).

Central to our understanding of last-day events is the question of the law of God. More specifically, it is the question of the fourth commandment, the seventh-day Sabbath. Although we understand that salvation is by faith alone and that keeping the law, including the Sabbath, can never bring salvation, we also understand that in the last days, obedience to God’s law, including the seventh-day Sabbath, will be an outward sign, a mark, of where our true allegiance lies.

This distinction will become especially obvious amid the climactic end-time events depicted in Revelation 13 and 14, when an all-powerful conglomeration of religious and political forces will unite to enforce a false form of worship upon the inhabitants of the world. All this is in contrast to Revelation 14:7, where God’s people are called to “worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (*NKJV*); that is, to worship only the Creator and no one else.

This week we will look at the law of God, especially the Sabbath, and we will touch on issues surrounding the attempted change of that law and what it means for us, upon whom the end is soon to come.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 12.

The Promise

One of the greatest promises in the Bible is found in Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (*NKJV*). These words come as a “capstone,” or a culmination of the train of thought that came right before. Only by studying what Paul talked about just preceding this verse can we better grasp the hope and promise found in it.

Read Romans 7:15–25. What is the essence of what Paul is saying in these verses that makes what he says in Romans 8:1 so assuring?

Although great debate has existed in Christendom over whether or not Paul was talking specifically about himself as a believer here, one thing is clear: Paul is, indeed, talking about the reality of sin. Everyone, even Christians, can relate in some way to the struggle that Paul refers to here. Who hasn’t felt the pull of the flesh and of the “sin that dwells in” (*Rom. 7:17, NKJV*) them, which causes them to do what they know they should not do, or not to do what they know they should? For Paul, the problem isn’t the law; the problem is our flesh.

Who hasn’t found himself or herself wanting to do what is right but doing what is wrong? Even if Paul is not talking about the inevitability of sin in the life of a born-again Christian here, he certainly is making a strong case for the ever-present struggle facing anyone who seeks to obey God.

So, he comes to the famous words: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (*Rom. 7:24, NKJV*). His answer is found in Jesus, and in the great promise of “no condemnation” for the believer in Jesus who, by grace, walks according to the spirit. Yes, believers struggle; yes, they face temptations; yes, sin is real. But by faith in Jesus, those who believe are no longer condemned by the law; indeed, they obey it. Thus, they learn to walk in the spirit and not “according to the flesh.”

Read again the texts for today. In what ways can you relate to what Paul is saying there? Why, then, is Romans 8:1 such a wonderful promise?

The Law and Sin

In yesterday's study we looked at verses (*Rom. 7:15–25*) that talked about the reality of sin for everyone, even Christians. However, in the verses before these, Paul points to the law, which shows just how prevalent sin is, and how deadly.

Read Romans 7:1–14. What is the relationship between the law and sin? What do these verses also tell us about the impossibility of being saved by the law?

Two crucial points come from what Paul teaches here. First, he shows that the law is not the problem. The law is “holy, and just, and good.” The problem is sin, which leads to death. The other point is that the law is powerless to save us from sin and death. The law points out the problem of sin and death; if anything, the law makes the problem of sin and death even more apparent, but it offers nothing by way of solving the problem.

Only a superficial reader could use these verses to argue that the law, the Ten Commandments, has been nullified. That's the opposite of Paul's point. Nothing Paul writes here makes sense if the law were nullified. His argument functions on the assumption that the law is still binding, because it's the law that points out the reality of sin and the resulting need of the gospel. “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet’ ” (*Rom. 7:7, NKJV*).

Read Romans 7:13 carefully. What is Paul saying not only about the law but about why it's still necessary?

The law does not produce death; sin does. The law is what shows just how deadly sin is. The law is good in that it points to sin. It just has no answer for it. Only the gospel does. Paul's point is that as Christians, as those who are saved in Christ, we need to serve in the “newness of the Spirit” (*Rom. 7:6, NKJV*); that is, we live in a faith relationship with Jesus, trusting in His merits and His righteousness for salvation (the theme of so much of what came before in Romans).

How has your own experience with keeping the law shown you your need of God's grace?

From Sabbath to Sunday?

As Seventh-day Adventists we often hear fellow Christian brothers and sisters in other denominations argue that the law has been done away with, or that we are not under law but under grace. What they are really saying, however, is that only the fourth commandment has been done away with. Many, though, are not saying even that. They are saying instead that the seventh-day Sabbath has been replaced by the first day, Sunday, in honor of the resurrection of Jesus.

And they believe they have the texts to prove it, too.

Below are some of the common texts in the New Testament that many Christians believe indicate the Sabbath was changed from the seventh day in the Old Testament to the first day in the New Testament. As we read them, we need to ask ourselves if they truly talk about a change of the day, or are they merely describing events that happened on the day, but without rising to the level of prescribing a change?

Read John 20:19–23. What reason does this text give for the disciples' being assembled in that room? What do these verses say about whether it was a worship service in honor of the resurrection of Jesus, as some claim?

Read Acts 20:6, 7. What, if anything, in these verses indicates that the Sabbath was changed to Sunday, the first day of the week? *See also Acts 2:46.*

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1–4. Outside of the fact that they were to store up offerings at home on the first day of the week, what does this text teach about any change of the Sabbath to Sunday?

Here is the essence of the textual “evidence” used to promote the doctrine that the first day of the week superseded the seventh-day Sabbath. Outside of describing a few times when, for various reasons, believers were gathered, not one text indicates that these gatherings were worship services held on the first day as a replacement for the seventh-day Sabbath. This argument is merely reading back into the texts the centuries-long Christian tradition of Sunday keeping. It is putting something into these verses that was never there to begin with.

The Seventh Day in the New Testament

As we saw yesterday, the texts commonly used to promote the idea that Sunday replaced the Sabbath say no such thing. In fact, every reference to the seventh-day Sabbath in the New Testament reveals that it was still being kept as one of God's Ten Commandments.

Read Luke 4:14–16; 23:55, 56. What do these passages tell us about the seventh-day Sabbath both before and after Christ's death?

Notice how the women, who had been with Christ, “rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment” (*Luke 23:56, NKJV*). Obviously, the commandment was the fourth commandment, written in stone at Sinai. There is no indication that they had learned in their time with Him anything other than the keeping of the commandments of God, which included the Sabbath commandment. In fact, Christ told His disciples, “ ‘If you love Me, keep My commandments’ ” (*John 14:15, NKJV*), which He Himself kept, and which included the seventh-day Sabbath. If Sunday were to be a replacement for the Sabbath, these women knew nothing about it.

Read Acts 13:14, 42–44 and Acts 16:12, 13. What evidence do these verses give for the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath? What evidence do they give for the keeping of the first day of the week?

We find in these texts no evidence of a change of the Sabbath day to Sunday. Instead they point clearly to the practice among early believers in Jesus of keeping the seventh-day Sabbath.

Acts 16:13 is especially interesting because it occurs outside of the context of the synagogue. The believers were meeting by the side of a river where some “customarily” (*NKJV*) went to pray. And they did so on the seventh-day Sabbath, many years after the death of Jesus, too. If a change to Sunday had occurred, nothing in these texts indicates it.

What are some gentle and noncondemnatory ways you can witness to Sunday keepers about the seventh-day Sabbath?

The Attempted Change of the Sabbath

God's law, the Ten Commandments, is still binding (see *James 2:10–12*), and that law includes the seventh-day Sabbath. Why, then, do so many Christians keep Sunday when there is no biblical justification for it?

Daniel 7 talks about the rise of four great empires: Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, and then Rome, the fourth and final earthly empire. In a latter stage of the Roman Empire, a little horn power is depicted as coming up out of this empire (*Dan. 7:8*). *It is still a part of the Roman Empire*, just a later phase of it. What else could this power be but the papacy, which arose directly out of Rome and, to this day, is still part of it? Wrote Thomas Hobbes in the 1600s: "If a man consider the original of this great ecclesiastical dominion, he will easily perceive, that the Papacy, is no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof."—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 463.

Read Daniel 7:23–25. What do these verses teach that can help us to understand the origins of Sunday keeping?

Aramaic, the original language, shows in verse 25 that the little horn power "intend[ed]" (*NKJV*) to change the law. What earthly power can, indeed, actually change God's law?

Although exact details are blurred in history, we do know that under papal Rome the seventh-day Sabbath was replaced by the tradition of Sunday keeping, a tradition so firmly entrenched that the Protestant Reformation kept that tradition alive, even into the twenty-first century. Today most Protestants still keep the first day of the week, rather than following the biblical command for the seventh day.

Read Revelation 13:1–17 and compare with Daniel 7:1–8, 21, 24, 25. What similar imagery is being used in these texts that help us to understand last-day events?

Using imagery directly from Daniel, which included imagery about the latter (papal) phase of Rome, the book of Revelation points to end-time persecution that will be unleashed on those who refuse to "worship" according to the dictates of the powers seen in the book of Revelation.

How does Revelation 14:6, 7—especially verse 7, which reflects language taken from the fourth commandment (*Exod. 20:11*)—help to show that the Sabbath will be crucial in this final end-time crisis over worship?

Further Thought: The same dragon, Satan, who made war against God in heaven (*Rev. 12:7*), is the one who makes war with God's people on earth, those who "keep the commandments of God" (*Rev. 12:17*; see also *13:2, 4*). In fact, Satan himself becomes an object of worship, too (*Rev. 13:4*). So, Satan started the war against God in heaven, and he seeks to continue it here on earth. And central to his attack on God is his attack on God's law.

"In the fourth commandment, God is revealed as the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and is thereby distinguished from all false gods. It was as a memorial of the work of creation that the seventh day was sanctified as a rest day for man. It was designed to keep the living God ever before the minds of men as the source of being and the object of reverence and worship. Satan strives to turn men from their allegiance to God, and from rendering obedience to His law; therefore he directs his efforts especially against that commandment which points to God as the Creator."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 53, 54.

We worship the Lord because He is the Creator of "the heavens and the earth," and the seventh-day Sabbath is the foundational sign of His creatorship, a sign that goes back to the Creation week itself (see *Gen. 2:1–3*). No wonder that in his attack on God's authority Satan goes after the premier, fundamental sign of that authority: the seventh-day Sabbath.

In the last days, God will have upon the earth people who will stay firm and steadfast in their allegiance to Him, an allegiance manifested in their obedience to His commandments—all of them, including the only one that specifically points to the Lord as the Creator, who alone is worthy of our worship.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What is the problem with those who talk about the reality of sin and yet argue that God's law has been done away with? What great inconsistency can you point out in that line of reasoning?
- 2 What has been your own experience with those who argue for Sunday instead of Sabbath? What arguments did you use, and how effective were they? How can you deal with the common argument that keeping the seventh-day Sabbath is an attempt at salvation by works?
- 3 As we talk to others about the Sabbath and as we prepare for end-time events, why is it important to make it clear that the challenges regarding the "mark of the beast" have not yet happened?

Full Circle

by BRITTANY FLETCHER

A young man came up to me as I was taking out the trash on New Year's Eve at my home in the U.S. state of Kentucky.

"I have a survey here that might help the community," he said. "Would you take it?"

The friendly stranger turned out to be a Generation of Youth for Christ (GYC) volunteer attending the Seventh-day Adventist youth organization's annual convention in Louisville. Little did I know that I would be going door-to-door at the next GYC convention a year later.

Outside my home, I looked at the survey that the GYC volunteer had handed me. I circled my interest in Bible studies and visitation. Then I heard nothing for five months.

In May, my mother told me that someone had come to the house for Bible studies. The man visited six times. I missed him every time because of my university classes. In June, the man, a Bible worker named Romone, came when I was at home, and we arranged to study the Bible at a local café every Friday.

I knew nothing about Adventism. I was active in another denomination, where I taught the children and went on mission trips. But I was not getting the connection with Jesus that I desired. I prayed constantly to grow closer to Him.

My prayers were answered with Romone.

Soon I texted Romone that I wanted to meet twice a week. I accepted everything that I learned. As my diet and lifestyle changed, my life began to improve. I love Romans 12:2, which says, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (NKJV).

This heavenly mind-set broadened my mind-set. Now when I study, I am not hoping for a good grade but I am learning for God. I want the knowledge to provide healing to people as a speech therapist one day.

At Romone's church, I learned about the GYC convention in Houston, Texas, in December 2016. I joined the Adventist Church shortly before the convention began.

Going door-to-door with GYC volunteers was exciting. Several people signed up for Bible studies. I saw the same passion that I had had a year earlier in one young man. I am praying that the story will come full circle with him, just as it did with me. I know the power of one survey.



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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Exodus 20:8–11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the importance of the law of God and examine the central role of the Sabbath in the law of God.

Feel: Experience God’s love in His law and learn to enjoy the law of God.

Do: Find ways to obey the law of God without falling into legalism.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Sabbath in the Law

- Ⓐ Why did God give the law?
- Ⓑ What is the place of the Sabbath in the Decalogue?
- Ⓒ How is the grace of God related to His law?

II. Feel: Law Is Love.

- Ⓐ Why should we enjoy God’s law?
- Ⓑ Why is to love God to obey His commandments?
- Ⓒ Why is the Sabbath the commandment that expresses the most of His love to humankind?

III. Do: The Practice of Grace

- Ⓐ Why does the Christian desire to obey God?
- Ⓑ Why should I begin the Sabbath on time?
- Ⓒ Why did many Jews and Christians die rather than disobey God?

► **Summary:** The law of God is the most visible and the most concrete element of biblical religion. And yet, it is the aspect most controversial and controverted. Thus, it is on the law, and more specifically, on the Sabbath, that religious fidelity has been, and will be, tested.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Daniel 7:25, Revelation 14:9*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The law of God is to our spiritual life what physical exercise is to our blood. The Sabbath is to the law what the blood is to the body. The law is the only way that God has found to make our religion real and alive.

Just for Teachers: Many Christians have rejected the law. They mistake keeping the law with legalism. And yet, in reality the law cannot be separated from the gospel. Why?

Opening Discussion: Many Christians think that the law of the Sabbath could apply to any day. They believe that God who is eternal does not care about a specific day; or they argue that, for them, Sabbath takes place every day, because we should worship God on every day of the week.

Questions for Discussion:

- ❶ Why would keeping the Sabbath on another day than the one prescribed by the law of God—the “seventh day”—affect the spiritual content of the Sabbath?
- ❷ What spiritual lessons of the Sabbath will be missed if we observe Sabbath on a day other than the “seventh day”?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Do we observe God’s commandments only because we think that they are wise and rational, or because we believe they will make us happier? Contrary to either of these motives, the only rationale for keeping the law that is given in the law itself is “‘I am the LORD your God’ ” (*Exod. 20:2, NKJV*). It is our personal and historical relationship with the God of grace, the God who saved us and loved us, and the God whom we love in return that explains why we should keep these commandments. It is because He is “your God.” To change the law would shift that reason from God to ourselves. The change of the law for another reason, our human reason, would signify that we have replaced God by our own fabrication. The Bible calls this maneuver “idolatry” (*Isa. 40:19*).

Bible Commentary

I. The Grace of the Law *(Review Genesis 2:16 and Psalm 119:29 with your class.)*

It is striking that God's first word to humankind (Adam and Eve) was a commandment: "The LORD God commanded the man" (*Gen. 2:16, NKJV*). This verb "commanded" concerns more than moral duties or ritual observances. For, as we see, God "commanded" the creation of the world (*Ps. 33:9, Isa. 45:12*). In the same way, God's law is not just made of requests, imperative orders, things we should do, or prohibitions: rather, it is a gift. God Himself refers to His law as His gift to humans (*Exod. 24:12, Neh. 9:13*) for their own happiness and wisdom (*Ps. 19:8; Deut. 4:5, 6*). Moreover, the law of God is understood in the Bible as the expression of His grace. As the psalmist sings, "Grant me the grace of your Law" (*Ps. 119:29, NJB*).

Grace, as is suggested by this psalm, is not incompatible with the law. Indeed, grace is identified with the law. God's first commandment is a good example. Significantly, His first command involves a gift of all the trees: of "every tree . . . you may freely eat" (*Gen. 2:16, NKJV*). But it also contains a prohibition, or law, which ensures life, for the eating of the fruit will provoke death. Thus, as is evinced by Scripture, God's laws are a gift from God to us, an expression of His grace and His love for humankind.

Consider This: The law is a gift from God, an expression of His love for us. Why, and how, should we, then, obey the law? In what ways is the Sabbath an expression of God's love for us? Why do the psalmist and Paul himself call the law of God a "delight" (*Ps. 119:92, Rom. 7:22, NKJV*)? Why is the law of the Sabbath called a "delight" (*Isa. 58:13, NKJV*)?

II. The Change of the Law *(Review Daniel 7:25 with your class.)*

The biblical text of Creation reports that God is the One who determined the times (*Gen. 1:14, 17*). This act was His prerogative alone as the Creator of the universe.

The prophet Daniel affirms this same truth of Creation when he emphasizes that it is God who "changes the times and the seasons" (*Dan. 2:21, NKJV*). Yet, Daniel sees in his prophetic vision of human history the coming of a power, represented by a "little horn" with human features, that "shall intend to change times and law" (*Dan. 7:25, NKJV*). The reference to "times," in association with the "law" of God,

points, in fact, to specific time: the Sabbath; for the Sabbath is the only law that concerns the domain of times. Thus, we can infer from the text that the little-horn power will intend to change the Sabbath. The human characteristic of this power, which symbolizes its religious-spiritual identity (*compare with Dan. 7:4, 13*) and its place in the sequence of the kingdoms (after pagan Rome), suggests that it is the Roman Catholic Church. The prophecy of Daniel has thus predicted the claim of the church to take God's place as the Creator.

The Roman Catholic Church did exactly as the prophecy predicted, replacing the sacredness of the Sabbath with Sunday worship. The main historical reason that motivated the Roman emperors, along with the Catholic authorities, in the direction of Sunday observance was that this change would facilitate the integration of most people in the Roman Empire. They were worshipping the sun and were thus keeping Sunday, the day of the sun. This "evangelistic" strategy and compromise greatly helped the political success of the Roman Catholic Church.

Yet, in order to justify, *a posteriori*, this change, the church fathers used the theological argument that Jesus was resurrected on Sunday. This theological defense was, in fact, expressing the old Greek dualistic philosophy that separated the low physical world of Creation from the high spiritual world.

Consider This: Why is the Sabbath the most vulnerable commandment and the easiest commandment to be changed? What are the misconceptions that are revealed through the historical and theological reasons for that change?

Activity: Discuss and dismantle the spurious reasoning behind the main proof texts used by many Christians to support the change from Saturday to Sunday observance.

III. A Sign of the Times (*Review Revelation 12:17; 14:9, 12 with your class.*)

The book of Revelation informs us that beyond the tentative change of the Sabbath by the "little horn," the Sabbath will serve at the end times as the test for faithfulness. Already in the Old Testament the Sabbath was given as a sign between God and His people, a visible sign that God is the One who sanctifies them (*Exod. 31:13, Ezek. 20:12*). The place of the Sabbath in the center of the Decalogue—which was the very place of the seal in ancient covenant treaties—testifies to that function of the Sabbath.

The book of Revelation uses the Old Testament symbol of faithfulness to the law of God, a sign on the forehead and on the hand (*Deut. 6:8*), to

describe the one who joins the camp of the enemy of God and “worships the Beast” (*Rev. 14:9, NKJV*). This symbol suggests that the person in question has submitted to a spurious law that has replaced the law of God. The fact that the worship of the beast is set in contrast to the worship of the Creator (*Rev. 14:7*) suggests that it is the Sabbath that is at stake here, for the Sabbath expresses faith in the Creator (*Exod. 20:11*). Indeed, the next verse explains that this comment applies to the “saints” who “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (*Rev. 14:12; compare with Rev. 12:17*).

Consider This: If you were to ask a Seventh-day Adventist what Sabbath means to him or her, he or she might answer, “It is not Sunday.” While this answer contains an important element of truth, it is not the whole truth. Why?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Discuss the reasons the church fathers did not want to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. Show the relationship between the genesis of anti-Semitism and the rejection of the Sabbath.

Application Questions:

- ❶ How should we keep the Sabbath to make this day truly the sign of God?
- ❷ Discuss this comparison by a rabbi: you Seventh-day Adventists *keep* Sabbath while we Jews *celebrate* Sabbath.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Show the members of the class the unique nature of the Sabbath commandment in comparison to the other commandments. Help your class to understand why it makes sense that the Sabbath (and not another commandment) will be the last test of faith.

Activities:

- ❶ Share with the members of your class stories of people who were persecuted because of their Sabbath observance.
- ❷ Consider the following paradoxical question: Why is it sometimes more difficult to keep the Sabbath in a free society than it is to do so in an oppressive one? Discuss.