

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

63 Why Do Christians Observe the Lord's Day?

Scripture: Psalm 118:22-24; Acts 4:11-12; Revelation 1:10

Christians observe the Lord's Day in order to celebrate a weekly remembrance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are some Christians who observe the seventh day of the week in their worship rather than the first or Lord's Day. Their feeling is that the origin of Sunday worship is essentially pagan having developed from an edict of Constantine in A.D. 321 which declared that the first day of the week was a holiday for Christians and unbelievers alike. They further object to the use of the name Sunday because of its association with pagan divinities. There is such an association and it is true of every day. We may speak of Moon's-day, Tiwe's-day, Woden's-day, Thor's-day, and Saturn's-day.

In answer to these objections it can be pointed out that Christians celebrated the Lord's Day generations before Constantine's famous law. The Apostle John wrote sixty years after the resurrection of Christ that he was in the spirit on the Lord's Day. (Revelation 1:10) We have the statements of several church fathers who affirm the recognition of the day by believers. One of the earliest, Barnabas, wrote, *"Wherefore also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, a day on which Jesus rose from the dead."* Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch wrote in the early 2nd century, "If, then, those who walk in the ancient practices attain unto 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."

Justin Martyr wrote about 135 A.D., "Sunday is the day upon which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. On the Lord's Day all Christians in the city or country meet together because that is the day of our Lord's resurrection; and then we read the apostle and prophets." Not many years later, Bardaisan, a Macedonian, wrote, "wherever we be, all of us are called by the one name of the Messiah, namely Christians, and upon one day, which is the first day of the week, we assemble ourselves together and on the appointed days we abstain from food." Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, wrote in 178 A.D., "The mystery of the

Lord's resurrection may not be celebrated on any other day than the Lord's Day." In 194 A.D. Clement of Alexandria wrote, "The old Sabbath day has become nothing more than a working day." Peter of Alexandria wrote in the year 300 A.D., "We keep the Lord's Day as a day of joy because of Him who rose thereon."

Lastly, the important church historian Eusebius wrote in 315 A.D., "The churches throughout the rest of the world observe the practice that has prevailed from apostolic tradition until the present time so that it would not be proper to terminate our fast on any other day but the resurrection day of our Lord, that the mystery of the Lord's resurrection should be celebrated on no other than the Lord's Day." Sabbatarians are mistaken when they charge that Sunday worship has its source in Constantine's edict.

People who insist that believers worship on Saturday instead of Sunday are in error because they make an Old Testament ceremony a New Testament principle. The sabbaths in Israel were a number of special days which did not always fall on the seventh day. The best known is the weekly sabbath as outlined in Exodus 20:8-11. This was the seventh day and it was to be a day of complete rest. No mention is made of worship or sacrifice. The day did commemorate God's work in creation. (Genesis 2:3; Exodus 20:11) It kept before the minds of the people the Creator Himself. It was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Exodus 31:13-17) It was necessary for man's physical wellbeing. (Mark 2:27) The Sabbath was also a commemoration as mentioned in Deuteronomy 5:15. It commemorated the wonderful deliverance from Egypt. The nation of Israel was obligated to keep all of its sabbaths, the weekly and festal sabbath days and the sabbatic years. The weekly sabbath cannot be separated by being looked upon as moral law which does not change while the other sabbaths were temporary in nature. They were all part of the same system.

When we come to the New Testament we find that the observance of special days is not fundamental to the Christian faith. This is the teaching in Romans 14 where believers had differing views about sabbath observance. There is no instruction in the New Testament to observe the sabbath day because God never intended that the observance of such a day go on indefinitely. Scholars often point to Psalm 118 in this regard. In verses 22-24 we are informed, *"The stone which the builders refused is become the head of the corner. This is the Lord's doings it is marvelous, in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it."*

I. THE STONE THE BUILDERS REFUSED:

The only explanation of this image comes from Jewish tradition. The stones for Solomon's temple were cut to shape in a distant quarry and then transported to the building site. In order for the stones to fit perfectly it was necessary for the quarrymen to follow the architect's plans very carefully. On one occasion a stone arrived at the temple site which did not fit anywhere. It was laid aside and somehow became mislaid and was forgotten about. As the construction progressed the time came for the fitting of a very special stone, a keystone, a cornerstone. Word was sent to the quarry with proper specifications. The stone cutters replied that this particular stone had been sent long ago. A search took place and in time the stone which had earlier been set aside was found. It fit perfectly. *"The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner."* In Psalm 118 this truth is quoted. It has a prophetic significance. Jesus is the stone which the leaders of Israel rejected. Yet he will become the cornerstone of God's dealings with men. The day which the Lord has made is the day of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It is a day to rejoice in as the Psalmist enjoins. This is a proper understanding of Psalm 118:22-24 because it is the interpretation Peter gives when he stood before the Sanhedrin and defended the faith. Peter said, *"This is the stone which was set at naught of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there any salvation in any other; for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."* (Acts 4:11, 12)

We have a new day to celebrate. The Sabbath was a part of the Law which was done away in Christ. The Lord's Day, Sunday, has no relationship with the Jewish sabbath. There is no Christian sabbath and we do not celebrate the Lord's Day because God once designated a seventh day recognition for Israel. Some people feel that Sunday is now the true sabbath. The decree of Constantine in A.D. 321 and that of the council of Laodicea in A.D. 364 made official what Christians had been doing for a long time, celebrating a Christian sabbath. I do not believe this to be true. The sabbath was an institution of the old covenant, which is done away. (II Corinthians 3) We are free from the law and even its sabbaths, for Christians the sabbath has been abolished. (Romans 6:14; Colossians 2:16) The sabbath was a day of enforced idleness. Our Lord's day is not a day of enforced anything. It is a day given to God voluntarily as Christians celebrate what God has done in bringing Jesus from the dead.

II. ELEVEN IMPORTANT EVENTS:

Lewis Sperry Chafer in his book, **Grace**, points out that from the time of the resurrection every important event recorded in the New Testament which had spiritual significance happened on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day. There are eleven of these events.

1. Jesus Arose from the Dead on the First Day of the Week.

This fact is mentioned by each of the gospel writers. For my own part I have always felt this to be one of the great proofs that the resurrection of Christ actually did take place. It is fascinating that most of the early or first believers were Jews and in spite of the fact that they had a heritage of worship on the Sabbath or Saturday, they immediately set themselves to the recognition of another day. They would never have done such a thing if it were not for some very important reason. They forsook the day of their ancestry, this would hardly have been done by whim or chance.

Chafer writes, "When Christ arose from the dead, Christianity was born, and the new creation was brought into existence. There is nothing in the old order for the believer. He stands on resurrection ground. He belongs to a new creation. God is faithful to all that He has wrought in Christ and He, according to His Word, will not suffer the child of the new creation to go back and celebrate the beginning of the old and fallen creation from which His child has been saved through infinite riches of grace. If the children of grace persist in relating themselves to the old creation by the observance of the sabbath, it is evidence of their limitations in the knowledge of the Word and will of God," (Chafer, **Grace**, pp. 273-4)

2. Jesus Ascended into Heaven on the First Day of the Week.

Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, "*Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father.*" (John 20:17) For the space of forty days after his resurrection Jesus appeared on earth to certain people and in the period between those appearances He ascended to the Father. To Mary He said, "*Touch me not.*" In a very short time He allowed other women to touch him and even invited the disciples to touch him. (Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:39) In between these two occurrences He ascended to the Father. This is a fulfillment of the Old Testament wavesheaf that was brought before the Lord. Jesus had to ascend to the Father and to present the value of His

atoning death to Him. (Leviticus 16) Resurrection had an important part to play in the completion of atonement.

3. Jesus Bestowed His Peace upon the Disciples on the First Day of the Week.

Fear gripped their hearts. They huddled behind closed doors. They had no awareness of God's presence. They were without joy. Jesus turned their fear into joy and changed their state of mind.

4. On the First Day of the Week Jesus Broke Bread with the Disciples.

This happened in the presence of those two disciples Jesus had overtaken on the road to Emmaus and again in the upper room with all the disciples at the end of the first Lord's Day. These were observances of the communion table.

5. On the First Day of the Week Jesus Helped the Disciples to Understand the Scriptures.

Here is the familiar story of the Emmaus disciples and the way in which Jesus opened the Scriptures to them. (Luke 24) We are very much in keeping with the Lord's example when we open the Scriptures on Sunday.

6. On the First Day of the Week Jesus Commissioned the Disciples.

In John 20:21 it is recorded, *"As my Father has sent me, even so send I you."* In Luke 24:48 we read, *"And ye are witnesses of these things."*

7. On the first day of the week Jesus imparted the Holy Spirit to them.

John 20:22 reads, *"And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit."* This was to sustain them until the power to be received at Pentecost. He had earlier promised to give them power.

8. On the First Day of the Week Jesus' Promise of Power Was Fulfilled.

Pentecost was experienced seven weeks after the resurrection. It is this same Holy Spirit who imparts spiritual gifts and upholds us in our walk with Christ. It happened on the first day of the week.

9. On the First Day of the Week God Directed Paul to Instruct Believers.

This story is told in Acts 20. Paul was in the city for seven days. This means he was present on a seventh and first day. He had a choice of the day to minister. He chose the first day of the week.

10. On the First Day of the Week Corinthian Christians Were Told to Lay by in Store as God Had Prospered Them. (I Corinthians 16:2)

It was on that day that offerings were to be taken and the ministry was to be maintained.

11. Lastly, on the First Day of the Week the Lord Jesus Appeared to John on the Island of Patmos

The Lord Jesus gave John that great revelation of Himself and the heavenly glory.

These events show the importance of the day of the resurrection for the church age in which we live. We can hardly overlook the fact that these things took place on the Lord's Day rather than the Sabbath day. It is very interesting to evaluate these happenings and to discover that everything we do today in the life of the church is based on these events. It is on the Lord's Day that we gather to read and interpret the Scriptures, give our offerings, observe the communion and reflect upon the Lord's death, place ourselves under the control of the Holy Spirit anew, and renew ourselves in dedication to the great commission. This is evidently the pattern God would have us assume. The day is for believers. The day is to remember the resurrection of Christ and the aforementioned events. The only person who can keep the day in a way which pleases God is the person who has been raised to newness of life by Christ's resurrection. The Lord's Day and its observance will never have real meaning or blessing until the risen Lord is known personally. Whoever will call upon Him can know Him in that way. (Romans 10:13)

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