

# **WHY KEEP SUNDAY SPECIAL?**

**4 BIBLE STUDIES**

Keep Sunday Special Campaign

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The Jubilee Centre is a Christian research and campaigning centre seeking to apply biblical principles to social and economic issues of relevance today. It acts as the secretariat for the Keep Sunday Special Campaign which is in turn supported by a broad spectrum of Church and retail concerns.

## INTRODUCTION

These Bible studies are designed with small group study particularly in mind. They can also, however, form the basis of personal study or as foundations for sermon preparation. With this in mind a brief background is provided with each study to point the way.

The background information is not, however, designed to provide either a full theology or a note on all possible interpretations of the passage under discussion, or of other relevant passages. If, however, the studies are used in group discussion, making each person aware of the material in the notes will aid the progress and understanding of the study. The studies are produced in a form which does not preclude the provision of one booklet for each group member.

For the student who wishes to delve deeper we would suggest a good set of commentaries. Additional resources are not however essential for you to grasp the basic points of the studies.

These four studies are designed to help Christians understand the biblical roots of the Sunday question. The first study discusses the meaning of the sabbath to Israel and applies the underlying principles to today. The second study investigates God's view of Israel's success or failure to uphold the sabbath. The third study takes two particular examples and contrasts the response of Nehemiah and Jesus to the question of sabbath observance. The final study looks at Paul's teaching on 'special days'.

It is not the intention of these studies to resolve finally what has always been a thorny theological debate with respect to the sabbath and its application today. The student will need to decide for himself precisely where he stands on this issue. However, the need for rhythm in life, regular times for rest and worship and the need to protect and safeguard the weak against exploitation, gives a firm basis for us to desire to keep Sunday special.

We trust that as Christians understand more of the roots of this issue from the Bible the better equipped they will be to serve God in society. We also hope that this understanding will spur them on to action and the support of the campaign to keep Sunday special.

## **Sabbath - A sign and a remembrance**

**Exodus 20:9-11**

**Deuteronomy 5:12-15**

### **BACKGROUND**

Though constantly throughout the Old Testament the Sabbath is referred to in relation to God's creation work, there is no actual use of the word until Exodus. However, the root from which it is taken does occur in Genesis 22-3 - cessation of work, or rest, is the fundamental concept.

Although no mention of the word is to be found in Genesis there are indications that the practice of keeping one day different, or at least the observation of a seven day cycle, was present before the giving of the Ten Commandments (e.g. Genesis 8:10,12; 29:27ff).

There is also clear evidence from Exodus 16:21-30 that one day in seven was special when it came to gathering the manna. Clearly in the Ten Commandments the Sabbath concept was further endorsed and given even greater significance by God.

The two passages for study relate to the parallel accounts of the Ten Commandments. The first passage emphasises the nature of the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant. The second passage emphasises Israel's release from slavery in Egypt.

## QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 What are the points of similarity between the two passages?
- 2 What do you think is the implication of the law being addressed to the head of a household?
- 3 Discuss the impact on the Israelites of using the two different reference points of (a) creation and (b) slavery in the immediate context of Israel's wanderings in the desert and entry into the promised land.
- 4 Exodus 31:12-18 expands on Exodus 20:8-11 and is God's final word to Moses on Mount Sinai. What do vv 16 -17 of chapter 31 suggest about the significance of the sabbath for a Jew and how does this help us to understand the severity of punishment for those who disobeyed it in Old Testament days?

## QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 1 In what ways can Christians use Sunday as a day set apart for God, i.e. to make or keep it holy?
- 2 If a primary sign of God's relation to Israel was that of sabbath observance, what signs in the New Testament are said to be signs of the new covenant for Christians?
- 3 When we seek to apply biblical principles to the way in which society is run today, what can we learn from the all inclusiveness of the sabbath law (i.e. that it extended to family, servants, employees and even livestock)?

## **Sabbath - Gods reward for observance and curse for disobedience**

**Amos 8:4-13**

**Isaiah 58:13-14**

### **BACKGROUND**

Amos was a farmer in Judah when Israel was divided into northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms. His prophecy was one of judgement. Perhaps rather strangely it was spoken primarily against the northern kingdom of Israel. Imagine an Englishman being asked to go and prophesy against the Scots!

The prophecy gives the impression of being a carefully constructed thesis against Israel. First it builds the audience up with the condemnation of their neighbours for sins of brutality in war and dealings in the slave trade. Then a charge of disobedience to the law of the Lord is made against Judah, which no doubt would have gained popular support from his audience in Israel.

Israel's position of privilege amongst the nations of the earth is then used to shame the people. Privilege means responsibility and breaking God's law in these circumstances calls for severe punishment. The itching feet of traders to have the sabbath over and done with so that they could continue trading was not an insignificant factor in bringing on judgement.

Isaiah 58 is penned after judgement had been meted out to Israel, now in captivity, and when Judah was being threatened with a similar fate from Assyria. The chapter is a challenge to God's people in Judah to put real meaning into their times of fasting. Just looking sad wasn't good enough. The sabbath, which involves some self-denial just like fasting, was to be understood as being about social justice as well as about Israel's special relationship to God.

## QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 How does the desire to sell one's produce at all possible times lead to an accusation of 'trampling the poor and doing away with the needy' in the Amos passage?
- 2 What is the main goal of the traders in the Amos passage?
- 3 There are six conditions in Isaiah 58:13 relating to Israelite attitudes to the sabbath. According to the first part of the chapter what **actions** will show that the people have the right **attitudes**?
- 4 In the context of fasting and possible imminent invasion how would each of the three promises in v 14 be understood?

## QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 1 Why is judgement meted out to a whole nation on the basis of the misuse of power (economic or political) of a minority and what does this tell us about the current Sunday trading dispute?
- 2 In what ways are those who want a total free-for-all on Sunday trading guilty of the same misdeeds as those outlined in Amos 8:6-7?
- 3 In what practical ways do you think that we should exercise an element of self-practical denial in the way we use our Sundays?

## **Sabbath - Enforcement and acts of mercy**

**Nehemiah 13:15-22**

**Mark 2:27-3:6**

### **BACKGROUND**

Although Nehemiah comes at the very end of Old Testament history, there is still a period of 400-500 years between his time and the coming of Jesus. Despite this gulf, and the split between Old and New Testaments there is much in these two passages that can be considered together. First, both deal with the live and current issue of the sabbath and second, that the issue was both live and current because the old covenant was only completely fulfilled at Christ's death and resurrection.

There are also great contrasts between both the historic circumstances and the roles of Nehemiah and Jesus. We must ask ourselves at this critical Old/New Testament juncture exactly what is being done away with and what is being retained. We must learn from the underlying principles that motivated both Nehemiah and Jesus and apply them today.

Nehemiah was a great reformer. The operation to rebuild Jerusalem was one in which he mobilised a whole nation. However after carrying out the bulk of his plans to rebuild the city and reinstate the law of God and the temple worship, he spent a short period away from the province (Nehemiah 13:6).

On Nehemiah's return three areas of national life had degenerated. First, the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them so that they had to neglect their service and return to their fields. Second, trading on the sabbath had become widespread particularly in Jerusalem. Third, the people were marrying foreign wives.

The observance of the sabbath in exile had become very important for the Jews as a mark of their distinctiveness. The same was true in Jesus' time. Although the Jews were back in their own land they were ruled by a foreign power and were continually under threat from the gradual infiltration of Greek culture. The important difference, however, was that whilst the Jews in Nehemiah's time were seeking to forget the sabbath laws, those in Jesus' time were adding more and more petty additional rules.

## QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 Who was involved in the sabbath trading in Nehemiah's time?
- 2 Why was Nehemiah within his rights to insist on greater sabbath observance?
- 3 How did Nehemiah force home his beliefs and how was Jesus' attitude and action different?
- 4 What principles were at stake in each of the two passages?

## QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 1 What is the difference between Nehemiah's and our own position in seeking to keep one day in seven free from widespread trade?
- 2 How can we apply the statement that 'the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath' in our current context of fighting to keep Sunday special?
- 3 Which of the two passages more closely reflects the position today in (a) society at large and (b) your own Church? Which particular principles from the two passages studied are relevant to each?

## **Special days - Slavery or freedom?**

**Romans 14:1-8**

**Hebrews 4:1 -11**

### **BACKGROUND**

In the fourth and final study of the series, we move through the curtain from old to new covenant. We now need to take fully on board the loss of the special nature of the sabbath as a covenant sign with Israel but retain the full value of one day in seven being required for worship, rest and as a safeguard against the exploitation of the weak.

We must continue to distinguish carefully between the application of sabbath laws to the Jews, observance of the 'Lord's day' for Christians and the value of the one day in seven rhythm of life for society in general.

In the Romans passage, Paul is dealing with sensitive issues of the Christians' cultural setting. Eating meat offered to idols and observing different 'days' were matters of considerable debate to these first-century Christians. When read in conjunction with Colossians 2:16 and Galatians 4:9 -1 1, it is clear that Paul is referring to more than just monthly or annual feasts but also the weekly celebration of the sabbath. In dealing with the issue, Paul recognises a place for conscience to decree the use each Christian makes of one day in seven.

In Hebrews we have a discussion of the principle of rest. We have now turned full circle, for it is this principle which underlay the origin of sabbath for the Jews in the book of Genesis. However, whereas the rest was not entered into by the Jews, it is a reality for the Christian, both in the present and for the future.

## QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 In what ways would the 'weak and miserable principles' which Paul talks about in Galatians 4:9-11 lead to slavery?
- 2 Are there parts of our Sunday observance that border on slavery rather than releasing us to proclaim our Lord and act justly?
- 3 What examples does the writer to the Hebrews give to describe the failure of the Jews to enter God's rest?
- 4 How can we relate the weekly 'sabbath-rest' to our own salvation?

## QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 1 How do we judge people (Christian or not) with respect to their use of Sunday?
- 2 If we are not to judge others, should we not just allow a free-for-all and leave God to decide each individual case on its merits?
- 3 If the Christians' sabbath-day rest is a present and constant reality, why do we need to formalise it in law?