

# ***Basic Biblical Christianity Series***



## ***Volume One:***

**Are Christians obligated to keep God's laws  
and commandments today?**

**Are Christians today obligated to keep the seventh-day Sabbath?**

**What is the true gospel? And how is the gospel linked to salvation?**

**Where will you spend eternity? With Jesus—in *heaven*?**

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# **Table of Contents**

## **Volume 1:**

- Chapter One    Are Christians obligated to keep God's laws  
and commandments today?
- Chapter Two    Are Christians today obligated to keep the  
seventh-day Sabbath?
- Chapter Three    What is the true gospel? And how is the  
gospel linked to salvation?
- Chapter Four    Where will you spend eternity?  
With Jesus—in *heaven*?





## **Are Christians obligated to keep God’s laws and commandments today?**

IN MAINSTREAM CHRISTIANITY, Christians are taught that the laws and commandments of God found in the Old Testament have been “done away with.” This teaching is based on the mistaken idea that “obedience to the Law” will have a nullifying effect on God’s grace. A number of passages written by Paul seem to indicate this—but only because they are greatly misunderstood. We will look at some of these passages and see whether Paul upheld obedience to the Law or not.

But first, what laws are we talking about? No one disputes that we are not to steal, lie, commit adultery, murder, etc. The basic moral laws of the Old Testament are not in question—i.e., the Ten Commandments, certain laws governing interpersonal relationships, etc. And obviously, the laws that revolve around Temple rituals or the priesthood or sacrifices are, for now, suspended (what God will reinstitute in the messianic age to come remains to be seen).

That really only leaves a handful of laws and commandments that have, frankly, proven to be a stumbling block for many. In fact, these laws are held in *contempt* by modern Christianity. The reason is simple: *they look Jewish*. This includes laws dealing with clean and unclean foods; the observation of the seventh-day Sabbath (one of the Ten!); and ordinances outlining God’s annual high days (also Sabbaths). There are a few more, but these are the real stumbling blocks.

Mainstream Christianity stems from the thoughts and ideas of “early church fathers” such as Marcion, Ignatius, Origen,

## Chapter One

Augustine—followed by Martin Luther, whose teachings inspired the Protestant Reformation. These theologians all shared numerous ideas and philosophies, but it was their *antinomian stance* that has largely shaped Christian creeds as we now know them. (Antinomian simply means *against law*.) These scholars held great contempt for the Jews—because they rejected and killed the Christ—and sought to separate Jesus from His Jewishness and worked to disassociate Christianity (as they defined it) from Judaism. So anything that looked Jewish had to go. (Most Christians today have *no idea* of the true origins of their beliefs!)

### What did Jesus say about the Law?

To be sure, salvation is, ultimately, the result of grace—God’s divine favor expressed through Jesus’ sacrifice. But does that negate the need for Christians to obey the laws and commandments of God? No one is better qualified to answer this question than Jesus himself. After all, who knows more about salvation than the one who died to make salvation possible? So let’s see what Jesus has to say on the matter of our obedience to “Old Testament law.”

A good place to start is Matthew 19, where Jesus told a young man that if he wanted to enter into eternal life, he must “keep the commandments” (verse 17). Just to make it clear, Jesus went on to list a few of the Ten Commandments. Jesus had earlier said that we are to live by *every word* that comes out of the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4)—and remember, the Ten Commandments were *spoken by God* in Israel’s hearing (Ex. 20).

But to make the question super clear, we need only turn to Matthew 5. Here, in His “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus said: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; **I did not come to abolish...**” (verse 17). This should be enough to settle the issue: Jesus did *not* abolish the Law. According to Greek lexicons, the word for *abolish* means what it says: to render vain, deprive of force, discard, annul, etc. *Robertson’s Word Pictures* says it means “to loosen down” as one would take down a tent. You get the picture: the Law remains, still in force.

*Are Christians obligated to keep God's laws  
and commandments today?*

So why would anyone imagine that Jesus came to annul the Law through grace? As we will see, He actually did the exact opposite!

Let's finish the verse: "I did not come to abolish, **but to fulfill.**" Right here is where mainstream Christianity goes off the deep end—teaching that Jesus fulfilled the Law on our behalf by living a perfect, sin-free life. He kept the Law in our stead; His righteousness is *imputed* to us. But is such a thing even possible? If you get a bunch of speeding tickets and I have a perfect driving record, can my record be imputed to you? If I earn a degree in medicine, can I just impute it to you as if you actually earned it?

The Greek for fulfill is *pleroo*, meaning primarily "to make full, to fill up, i.e., to fill to the full; to cause to abound; to render full, i.e., to complete; to fill to the top, so that nothing shall be wanting; to make complete in every particular, to render perfect." As Robertson's notes, Jesus came to "reveal the *full depth of meaning* that [the Law] was intended to hold."

While *pleroo* can also mean to *fulfill* in the sense of "bringing something to pass," the meaning here is made quite clear by what Jesus went on to do: He noted several laws from the Old Testament, showing each law's *deeper spiritual meaning or intent* behind its mere letter-of-the-law application. Thus, He indeed made the Law fuller, more complete, *more binding*.

Jesus went on to say that as long as heaven and earth stood, no part of the Law—not even the most minute character of the Hebrew alphabet in which it was originally written—would "pass away" until everything had been fulfilled (verse 18). He then warned of dire consequences for anyone who would break even the *least* of the commandments—and teach others to do likewise (verse 19).

Thus, to anyone willing to give these passages an honest read, it seems quite clear where the Author of our salvation stands on obedience to God's laws. And contrary to many Protestant teachers, the obligation that Christians keep the Law did not *change* with the apostle Paul's teachings. Writing late in the first

## Chapter One

century—long after Paul’s death—the apostle John emphasized how we demonstrate our love for God: we “keep His commandments”—which “are not burdensome” (I John 5:3).

### What did Paul say about the Law?

Let’s look a few passages by Paul that are typically misunderstood in mainstream Christianity. Each of these is used to falsely teach that the laws and commandments of God are obsolete. But first, we need to understand some things about this apostle.

Paul had an unwavering commitment to the laws and commandments of God as presented in the Old Testament. He taught the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), which would certainly imply that he upheld the Law—including the Sabbath, holy days, food laws, etc. Remember also that Paul was a Pharisee. The Pharisees, like all “religious” Jews, were strict in their adherence to the Law. Long after becoming a convert to Christianity, Paul used his standing as a Pharisee as a means of self defense (Acts 23:6)—indicating that he was still accepted as a Pharisee (see Acts 22:3; 26:5).

Paul said: “But I confess to you that according to the Way which they call heresy, so I serve the God of my fathers, believing all things that are written in the Law and the Prophets” (Acts 24:14). Here, “all things” would certainly include the laws and commandments of God. Yet this apostle’s words have been unfairly misrepresented in mainstream Christianity in order to justify an *antinomian* stance. As we look at the following passages, what we will see is that Paul was not against God’s Law. Rather, he was against the *wrong use* of the Law. He was against using the Law (or any other law) as a means of obtaining “right standing” with God. True “right standing” with God can only be achieved through faith in Christ’s sacrifice. So when we read Pauline passages that seem to be anti-Law, they are actually only warning against the *wrong use* of the Law.

Let us first look at a passage in Romans 3. “Therefore by the deeds [works] of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his



*Are Christians obligated to keep God's laws  
and commandments today?*

sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God **without the law** is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets" (Rom. 3:20-21; KJV). The phrase "without the law" is taken to mean that law-keeping is irrelevant to the Christian, who now has the "righteousness of God" imputed to him or her. But all Paul is saying is that a person can *only* be justified—put in *right standing* with God—through Christ's sacrifice, not through works of any kind. This justification is the result of God's righteousness, His goodness—and is not dependent on law-keeping. Thus it is "without" (or separate from) the Law. This operation of God's grace does not annul law-keeping—which Paul always upholds; it simply means that justification cannot be earned by law-keeping. Here is a better translation of the passage: "Therefore, by works of law there shall no flesh be justified before Him; for through the law is the knowledge of sin. But now, the righteousness of God [leading to justification] that is separate from law has been revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets."

Another misunderstood Pauline text is Romans 6:14—typically taken out of context. Read in isolation, it gives the appearance that Christians are no longer required to keep the laws and commandments of God: "For sin shall not rule over you because **you are not under law**, but under grace." The phrase "you are not under law" is taken to mean that Christians today are under no obligation to keep the Law—for they are under grace. But remember, sin is the breaking of God's Law (I John 3:4). And Paul is adamant here that once we have come under grace, we are to *not* continue in sin—breaking God's laws and commandments. Notice his opening statements, which actually set the context for the entire chapter: "What then shall we say? Shall we continue in sin, so that grace may abound? MAY IT NEVER BE! We who died to sin, how shall we live any longer therein?" (verses 1-2). So what does he mean by not being "under law"?

Being *under grace* and *under law* are placed in opposition: either you receive justification by God's grace (under grace)

## Chapter One

or you achieve that status by works (under law). But as many passages (such as Romans 3:20) show, it is impossible to be justified in God's eyes by works; it can only come by grace via Christ's sacrifice. Being "under law" means you are trying to *earn* justification by your works. But once we are under grace, we are still obligated to obey God's laws and commandments and have good works. We just cannot *earn justification* through them. Here is the entire relevant passage: "For sin shall not rule over you because you are not under law [for forgiveness and justification], but under grace [for forgiveness and justification]. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace? MAY IT NEVER BE! Don't you realize that to whom you yield yourselves as servants to obey, you are servants of the one you obey, whether it is of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" (verses 14-16).

Paul is most emphatic in his teaching that salvation is through faith in Jesus' sacrifice. Since we have all sinned, we all need the resultant death penalty removed. That is accomplished by faith in Christ's death. But Paul is equally clear that this is only an initial step—achieving justification or "right standing" with God. This "right standing" is often referred to as "righteousness." But it is vital to understand that this "righteousness" is a status (being justified, reconciled to God) conferred on us because of Jesus' death and His role as mediator. Actual "righteousness" is a quality that we must actively develop—through the power of the Holy Spirit. It results from habitually *doing* what is right and good. Thus Paul can declare: "Therefore, having been justified now by His blood, we shall [yet] be [finally] saved from wrath [the death penalty] through Him [Jesus' work in our lives]. For if, when we were [once] enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His own Son, much more then, having been reconciled, we shall [yet] be saved by His life [by Jesus living in us]" (Rom. 5:9-10). Thus, only the "doers of the Law" will ultimately be deemed righteous in God's sight (Rom. 2:13).

*Are Christians obligated to keep God's laws  
and commandments today?*

To the end of his life, Paul upheld the laws and commandments of God. He taught obedience to God's Law as a *way of life* to all who professed faith in Christ—whether they were Jew or Gentile. Indeed, Paul made no distinction between Jew and non-Jew, proclaiming that circumcision was irrelevant—but that the keeping of the Law was most relevant: “For circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; rather, the keeping of God's commandments is essential” (I Cor. 7:19).

As noted earlier, many aspects of the Law are not relevant today as they are tied to the Temple and priesthood. But many of God's laws are still very relevant—especially the Ten Commandments (including the Sabbath command!), the laws dealing with God's festivals, and those concerning which foods are “clean” and thus *safe* to eat. Think of the Law as a *fence*: it keeps us safe and away from harm! And it tells us how to approach and worship God the way *He* wants to be worshipped—such as what day *He* set apart for worship, the seventh-day Sabbath.

Simply put, the laws and commandments of God describe a way of life based on *loving God* and *loving neighbor* (Matt. 22:36-40). They are God's gift to us, so that by following them we might live a long and happy life!

Recommended reading:

*How Did Jesus Christ Fulfill the Law and the Prophets?*  
*The Apostle Paul's Teachings on God's Laws*



## Are Christians today obligated to keep the seventh-day Sabbath?

THE WEEKLY SABBATH is one of the greatest *gifts* God has given to mankind—*all* of mankind. But today, Christians completely disregard the seventh-day Sabbath, which falls each week on Saturday (actually observed from Friday evening to Saturday evening—see Lev. 23:32). They are told that the original Sabbath is a relic of the Jews’ religion—that Christians today, because they are under the New Covenant, are not required to keep *any* day holy. But is this true? Does it really matter *which* day you keep holy—or if you keep *any* day holy?

Arguments against Sabbath-keeping typically fall into two categories: 1) the original Sabbath has been superseded by Sunday-keeping; or 2) the seventh-day Sabbath has been *fulfilled* in Christ—i.e., that *He* is now our “rest.” But denying the validity of the Sabbath requires us to ignore or unfairly “explain away” numerous biblical passages. For starters, Jesus said that the Sabbath was “made for man”—*not the Jews*. Indeed, the Sabbath is linked back to creation itself—making it as unique and permanent as the heavens and earth themselves. And it is remarkably included among the premier laws of God, the Ten Commandments, indicating a clear sense of invariability. Still, as noted in Part 1 of this series, mainstream Christian theology disdains anything that looks “Jewish.”

We will examine these questions: has Sunday replaced the biblical Sabbath? If so, on what authority? Has the seventh-day Sabbath been fulfilled in Christ? If so, how? What does the Bible actually say? And why is Sabbath-keeping enjoined on *all* mankind in the Messianic age to come? But first, let’s look at the day itself—its meaning, purpose, and design.

## *Are Christians today obligated to keep the seventh-day Sabbath?*

### **Why God created the Sabbath**

As noted, the Sabbath was made *for man*—for our health and wellbeing (Mark 2:27-28). It was ordained—and thus “created”—by God as He *rested* on the seventh day of the creation week. By design, we *need* rest—not just daily, but a weekly respite. Research shows that humans have an innate biological rhythm that needs to be reset every seven days. Through the Sabbath, God was showing humanity something profound about how He wanted people to live. So God rested *to teach us* to rest.

The Sabbath also is a memorial honoring God as Creator—wherein we show our appreciation for all His blessings. And, according to Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Sabbath observance was also to serve as a reminder that the Israelites had once been slaves in Egypt—but were freed by God. Likewise, the Sabbath should remind Christians that we have been freed from this world and our previous bondage to sin. Sunday observance cannot accomplish any of these vital purposes.

But there are two additional *key* purposes to the Sabbath—which Protestantism completely misunderstands: 1) The day points prophetically to the coming Messianic age; and 2) Its observance is a vital key to a thriving relationship with God. We will cover these two points below as we examine common misconceptions about the Sabbath that are held by mainstream Christianity.

From creation, the Sabbath was sanctified (set apart) as a day of rest and a day of worship (Gen. 2:1-2). God likely began teaching Adam and Eve on that very first Sabbath, as the Bible reveals that God personally talked with Adam and Eve from the earliest days. It was eventually codified as one of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:8, 11). But was the Sabbath kept prior to that? The Bible indicates that indeed it was. While there is no biblical record of God ever giving such laws and commandments to Abraham (or his sons), Genesis 26:5 does say that Abraham “obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.” This would certainly have included the Sabbath. Weeks prior to Mount Sinai, God *already*

expected Israel to be keeping His commandments and laws (Ex. 16:4, 28-30)—specifically the Sabbath, used in this account as a litmus test to see if the Israelites would submit to Him. As we will see, God *still* uses the Sabbath as “test command” to see if people will submit to His authority.

### Opposition to the Sabbath

A common argument against Sabbath-keeping is that the Sabbath was given to Israel as a sign to *distinguish* them from the rest of the world—and that Christians today do not need such a sign. Granted, keeping the Sabbath can and will make one “stand out.” But God did not command Israel to keep the Sabbath expressly for that purpose. Nor do we keep the Sabbath today for that reason. As we see in Exodus 31, God established the observance of the Sabbath as a perpetual sign between Israel and Himself. Verse 13: “Truly you shall keep My Sabbaths, for it *is* a sign between Me and you throughout your generations **to know that I am the LORD** Who sanctifies you.” First, what does God mean that the Sabbath is a *sign* between Himself and Israel? Signs exist to *inform*, to tell somebody something. But they can also serve to *remind*. For example, God created the rainbow as a *sign* to “remind” Him of His promise to never again destroy mankind by a flood (Gen. 9:12-17).

So who is the Sabbath sign for? For Israel—to remind them that they belong to God, that they have been sanctified or set apart from the world *by Him*. Read it again: Sabbath-keeping is a “sign between Me and you [so that you will] know that I *am* the LORD Who sanctifies you”—so that you might *remember* that I am Jehovah, the one who has sanctified you.

Protestants, however, along with most scholars, insist that the Sabbath sign was for the world’s benefit—so that the *world* could distinguish between a Jew and a non-Jew. But no biblical text says that the purpose of Sabbath observance is to identify a person as belonging to God. Exodus 31 clearly says that keeping the Sabbath should remind one of *who God is*—and that He alone has set you apart from the world. In reiterating Israel’s history,

## *Are Christians today obligated to keep the seventh-day Sabbath?*

the prophet Ezekiel notes this Sabbath sign: “And also I gave them My Sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that *they* might know that I *am* the LORD Who sanctifies them” (Ezek. 20:12). This verse is almost identical to Exodus 31:13. But note verse 20, where God is instructing a wayward Israel: “And keep My Sabbaths holy; and they shall be a sign between Me and you, **that you may know that I *am* the LORD your God**” (Ezek. 20:20). This verse places the emphasis on Israel knowing *who their God is*—“so that you will know that I am Jehovah, your God.”

As noted above, Sabbath observance is a vital key to a thriving relationship with God. Strongly suggested in these passages is this profound truth: Without Sabbath observance, you simply *cannot know God intimately*—cannot know who He truly is. And you most certainly will not know Him as the God who has *set you apart* from this world.

The time we spend each Sabbath with God and Christ is special—and cannot be duplicated on any other day. Think of it this way: If you have a particular appointment with a doctor, for example, and you show up on a different day, you won’t see the doctor. You missed your “appointed time.” The Sabbath is our weekly “appointment” with the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus (Matt. 12:8). No other day will do—and He won’t be there on Sunday! Yes, we fellowship with God and Christ *every day*; but the Sabbath is a *pecially appointed time* for extraordinary fellowship! God’s Word *tells us* how *He* wants to be worshipped—such as what day *He* set apart for worship, the seventh-day Sabbath. We don’t get to choose which day; we only get to choose whether we will obey—or not.

Another common argument against Sabbath-keeping is that the Sabbath has been superseded by Sunday. Actually, this argument has largely fallen out of favor by theologians today because they find it difficult to defend this position—and they admit as much. There simply is no authority for the idea. Nowhere in Scripture is there even a hint that the seventh-day Sabbath has been replaced by Sunday-keeping. The only example we have

## Chapter Two

throughout the Bible is that of Sabbath-keeping: Jesus and the early church kept the Sabbath; Gentile converts were taught to keep the Sabbath; and the Sabbath was defended and upheld decades after the apostle John's death by followers such as Polycarp and Polycrates.

Early proto-Catholic “fathers” *hated* anything that was remotely Jewish—so they despised the Sabbath. Sunday worship was adopted in place of the Sabbath because of its *presumed* association with Jesus' resurrection. As with today, it was popularly believed that Jesus was crucified on Friday and raised from the dead early Sunday morning—meaning He was *not* in the tomb three days and three nights, which was the *only* sign He gave that He was the Messiah (Matt. 12:39-40). (Do the math: Good Friday afternoon to Easter Sunday morning—doesn't add up.) A careful reading of the Gospel accounts will show that Jesus had *already been raised* from the dead before various disciples arrived at the tomb early Sunday morning. In fact, He was raised late on the Sabbath day.

But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Jesus *was* raised early on Sunday morning. Would this be justification for ditching the seventh-day Sabbath for Sunday worship? You would still need some *authority* for such a change. And remember, Jesus said that even He did not come to annul *any* of God's commandments (Matt. 5:17). So even *if* a Sunday resurrection scenario was true, what would be your authority to annul one of the Ten Commandments? To dismiss something that was integral to creation itself? To disregard the unanimous example of Sabbath-keeping demonstrated throughout the New Testament?

Protestantism is derived from Catholicism via the Protestant Reformation. Yet, while boldly claiming to *solely* follow Scripture, Protestants still managed to retain Sunday worship in full disregard for the Sabbath (again, anything Jewish was taboo). The Catholic Church even called Protestant leaders out on their hypocrisy, acknowledging that *even they knew* Sunday was not scriptural!



## *Are Christians today obligated to keep the seventh-day Sabbath?*

The only “authority” for Sunday worship is Catholic *tradition*—which they openly admit. Add to that the authority of the Roman emperor Constantine, who in 325 made Christianity the empire’s state religion—and Sunday its official day of worship.

Remember, Jesus said He was Lord of the Sabbath. So, *who* is lord of Sunday?

Overwhelmingly, however, the number one argument for not keeping the Sabbath is that Christians today have already entered into a spiritual *rest*—typed by the physical Sabbath, but now realized in Jesus. This idea *seems* logical since a number of Old Testament types *do* find fulfillment in Christ. But is this accurate? Has the Sabbath been *fulfilled* in Jesus? Unfortunately, the “rest” Jesus has presumably given Christians today is, according to Protestant theology, a reprieve from keeping the laws and commandments of God! Note this telling quote, typical of what Protestants believe: “By saying, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27), Jesus was restating the principle that the Sabbath rest was instituted to relieve man of his labors, just as He came to relieve us of our attempting to achieve salvation by our works. We no longer rest for only one day, but forever cease our laboring to attain God’s favor. Jesus is our rest from works now...” (*How is Jesus our Sabbath Rest?* [www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-Sabbath.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-Sabbath.html)).

This teaching of course stems from the misguided idea that any works we do are an attempt to *earn* salvation. As covered in Part 1 of this series, being under the grace of God for the forgiveness of sin in no way absolves us of our obligation to obey God’s laws. Indeed, we were created to do good works (Eph. 2:10). Protestants are quick to point out Matthew 11:28-20, where Jesus said that His yoke was easy, His burden light—that only *He* could give us true rest. But this passage in Matthew 11 clearly refers to a *rest* from the burden of sin, which can only be found in *following* Christ.

It seems Protestants have found their “proof text” in Hebrews 4, which they use to show that the Sabbath only pointed to

## Chapter Two

a “spiritual rest” now found in Christ. As we will see, however, the passage in question actually proves the validity of the Sabbath and shows that it actually points to the coming Messianic age!

In Hebrews 4, the writer (likely the apostle Paul) says that the original generation of Israelites that left Egypt was denied entry into the Promised Land—described as God’s *rest*—because of their unbelief. But he holds out hope that *we* have a similar opportunity before us today of entering into that same *rest*—if we are found faithful. Obviously, we are not entering into the Promised Land—so the assumption is made by scholars that this present rest must be *spiritual*, found in Jesus. Paul goes on to link this rest with God Himself resting on the *Sabbath* at creation; Protestants take this to mean that the real purpose of the Sabbath was to point to this same “spiritual rest.”

But the Protestant analogy is all wrong, and ignores the plain statements made by Paul that the “rest” Christians seek is *yet future*—not something we can actually enjoy now. Notice these clear facts: In verse 1, the promise or hope of entering God’s rest is *open* to Christians—indicating it is actually yet future: a *promise*, a *hope*. And Christians could still “fall short” of it—be denied entry into that rest. In verse 6, we see that “it remains for some to [yet] enter into” that rest—again, *future*. Verse 11: “We should be diligent therefore to [yet] enter into that rest”—lest we too are denied due to similar disobedience. None of this makes any sense if we have *already* entered into God’s *rest* via Jesus—that this *rest* is fulfilled in our present spiritual status. Clearly, then, this *promised* rest is future oriented.

Again, the Protestant analogy is wrong: the Promised Land was a type of the coming Kingdom age—that is the rest we seek and hope for. And we cannot enter into that *ultimate rest* as flesh and blood—but only through the first resurrection. Verse 10 shows this: God rested from His unique works on the original Sabbath; when we enter into His divine “rest” by becoming spirit composed sons and daughters of God, we too will finally rest from *our works*—the toil that comes with living in the flesh and dealing with trials and striving against sin.

## *Are Christians today obligated to keep the seventh-day Sabbath?*

I saved verse 9 for last. Paraphrased it simply says, “Therefore”—in light of what has already been stated—“there remains a keeping of the Sabbath for God’s people”—for *Christians*. Why does Paul make this statement? Because the Sabbath—far from being something that has been annulled or even fulfilled—still today *points us to* the coming Kingdom of God! The rest we actually seek, *typed by the Sabbath itself*, is that very Kingdom. So this verse actually *upholds* Sabbath-keeping!

### **Sabbath-keeping designed to *test* our obedience**

Some who oppose the Sabbath are quick to note that the New Testament does not command us to keep the Sabbath. This is actually true—there is no *explicit* New Testament command to observe the Sabbath. But Sabbath-keeping is clearly implied in the many passages that demonstrate the examples of Jesus and the early church. Plus, the apostle John—who long outlived Paul and the other apostles—wrote that loving God means *keeping His commandments* (1 John 5:3). So why is the Sabbath not commanded in the New Testament? There are at least two key reasons: First, the New Testament was written mostly to Jewish Christians who already understood and upheld the Sabbath; and Gentile converts would be following the example of the Jews in the congregations. But the main reason is this: God wanted to continue using the Sabbath as a *test*. If Sabbath-keeping was explicitly commanded, there would be no excuse for disregarding it. But God intentionally left a little “slack in the rope”—just to see who would obey Him and who would not.

God says to keep the seventh-day Sabbath holy; but we tend to find a multitude of reasons to dismiss the Sabbath. The real reason modern Christians don’t keep the Sabbath is because they have never *yielded* themselves to God. Paul identifies the root problem as one of the *heart*. He writes that “the carnal mind is enmity against God”—the *unrepentant* mind and heart is carnal, not spiritual; it is *at odds* with God and His teachings. Thus, it is “not subject to the Law of God; neither indeed can it be” (Rom. 8:7). The mind that is not *fully yielded to God* will

## Chapter Two

reject God's Law; will insist that it is obsolete; will disregard the Sabbath as a relic of an ancient religion. But the mind that is truly repentant, *that is yielded to God*, will seek to please God in every way—by obeying His laws and commandments—and will eagerly keep the Sabbath holy.

Here's how God describes that yielded mind and heart: "But to this one I will look, to him who is of a poor and contrite spirit and who trembles at My Word" (Isa. 66:2). Anyone who makes excuses and forms arguments against the Sabbath hardly *trembles* at God's Word. And *that* is the Protestant problem: they profess Christ, but *will not* live as He lived nor do as He taught (Luke 6:46).

Scripture says we gain understanding by *doing* what God says (Psalm 111:10). So if you have never kept the Sabbath, start now and you will soon learn what a wonderful blessing it is! The prophet Isaiah wrote that the Sabbath will be kept by the *entire world* in the coming Messianic age (Isa. 66:23).

So why not start today?

There are several additional Bible passages concerning the Sabbath that are explained in the study materials listed below.

Recommended reading:

*God's Plan for Mankind Revealed by His Sabbath and Holy Days*  
*The Apostle Paul's Teachings on God's Laws*



## What is the *true* gospel? And how is the gospel linked to salvation?

SOMETIME PROBABLY IN THE second year of Jesus' ministry, He sent His twelve apostles—still green but eager to serve their new teacher—out on a brief “missionary” trip. Working in pairs, they were sent out to areas populated primarily by Jews. They were given authority to heal and cast out demons—just as they had seen Jesus do. More importantly, they were instructed to preach the *gospel*—literally the “good news”—of the coming Kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-2, 6).

Yet one seemingly vital element was missing: they knew *nothing* of Jesus' impending death and resurrection. It was only after the apostles had returned from this early evangelical tour that Jesus began to hint at His coming death (Luke 9:22). Much later, the apostles still did not “get it” concerning Jesus' death and resurrection—they “understood none of these things” (Luke 18:31-34). Even after Jesus' death, they did not understand about His resurrection (John 20:9).

How could this be? How can one be called to preach the *gospel* and yet have no understanding of Jesus' atoning sacrifice? If, as we see in Protestantism, the “gospel” is all about Jesus and His redeeming death and resurrection, what gospel did the apostles proclaim in Luke 9? The answer is plainly given in the passage: they were sent to preach the *Kingdom of God*.

### **The gospel according to Gabriel**

Jesus came preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God (Luke 8:1; etc.)—that the very messianic kingdom devout Jews had been living in anticipation of (e.g., Luke 23:50-51) was soon

### Chapter Three

to be a reality. In his often overlooked message to Mary, the angel Gabriel succinctly lays out the good news of the Kingdom of God—identifying that kingdom with the house of Jacob. Concerning Jesus, he tells Mary, “He will be great, and He will be called the Son of the Most High. And God will give Him the very throne of his forefather David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32-33). So Jesus’ kingdom, the Kingdom of God, is actually a restored *Davidic* Kingdom of Israel—destined to eventually fill the earth (Matt. 13:31-33). Hence the disciples’ question at Jesus’ ascension: “Will you now, finally, restore Israel’s kingdom?” (Acts 1:6).

If the gospel is all about Calvary, why did Jesus “preach the gospel” for three years without, during that time, presenting any information about His death and resurrection? Yet we read in Hebrews 2:3 that salvation *first* began to be proclaimed by Jesus himself. Indeed, as we will see, Jesus linked belief in the gospel—*belief in the kingdom*—with salvation itself!

Protestantism preaches a feel-good gospel of just “getting saved” in order to go to heaven. It is a gospel disconnected from Jesus’ own message—a message very much revolving around geopolitical realities. For example, the renowned Billy Graham wrote: “What is the gospel? [Jesus] came to do three days work, to die, be buried, and be raised.... He came not primarily to preach the gospel ... but he came rather that there might *be* a gospel to preach.” Note Graham’s obvious focus on the *messenger*, not His biblical message. Dismissive of Jesus’ message, the ever popular C. S. Lewis wrote: “The epistles are for the most part the earliest Christian documents we possess. The gospels came later. [But remember, Jesus preached *before* the epistles were written.] They [the four gospel accounts] are not the gospel, the statement of Christian belief.... [The] epistles [of Paul] are more ... central [to Christian belief] than the gospels.”

### **Paul's approach to the gospel**

Such language sets up an imaginary dichotomy between the gospel accounts and the writings of Paul—yet Paul taught “all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14), which would have included a literal kingdom-gospel just as described by the prophets and just as taught by Jesus. Martin Luther, as well, ignored Jesus’ teachings in the gospel accounts and based his teachings solely on Paul’s letters. Calvin did likewise. Their idea was that Jesus preached a “Jewish” message up to the cross, after which Paul took the real “gospel of grace” to the Gentiles.

It seems the evangelical gospel of modern Christianity denies Jesus’ own kingdom message in favor of a largely *distorted view* of Paul’s “gospel.” Granted, Paul’s approach to the gospel does tend to focus more on grace and redemption—the salvational aspect of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Paul was primarily concerned with the *how* of the kingdom—how one can come to participate in that kingdom. Plus, Paul was dealing with Gentiles—who had no prior national anticipation of such a kingdom—and how they could gain access to God’s kingdom without “becoming Jews.” But the apostle fully understood and boldly proclaimed the *same* kingdom-gospel that Jesus inaugurated. A key passage in this regard is found in Acts 20, where Paul says his mission was to testify of the “good news” of the *grace* of God as he proclaimed the *Kingdom* of God (verses 24-25).

Paul taught that the promise of the Kingdom of God was an expression of God’s goodness and mercy—while showing that entry into that kingdom is indeed predicated on grace. Similarly, Paul focuses on the resurrection of Jesus because it is only through the work of a *living* Messiah that the kingdom can be established—to make eternal life accessible to all. But a message of grace does not exclude or deny the vital message of the Kingdom of God as introduced by Jesus—a kingdom that is political, territorial, *literal*.

### The gospel's link to salvation

True Christianity must be rooted and anchored in the exact message of the historical Jesus—a message of a literal *kingdom that would bring salvation*. So how is the kingdom-gospel linked to salvation? Why did Jesus emphasize *belief* in His gospel? (Mark 1:15). In a Hebraic context, *belief* implies the adoption of ideas that fundamentally change the way a person not only thinks but *lives*; to believe in the Messiah meant to *fully live by* His teachings and standards. Belief in the gospel of the kingdom means one would live for that kingdom; thus, one would then be found in harmony with God's way of life and eligible for eternal life when that kingdom is established.

Popular Christianity teaches a gospel of “getting saved” by “asking Jesus into your heart.” What kind of non-biblical language is that? True salvation, however, is directly linked to *participation* in the world-ruling Kingdom of God. This is why the thief on the cross said, “Remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42)—even *he* understood that salvation was a consequence of the establishment of Jesus' messianic kingdom.

To put this another way, it is *only* within the context of the Kingdom of God that salvation is offered to men at all. Indeed, such salvation takes place only on *three* levels. First, those who are presently called and chosen of God (John 6:44, 65; Eph. 1:4-5)—and who remain *in* Christ throughout their lives—will inherit eternal life through the first resurrection. This occurs at Jesus' return and as His Davidic kingdom is literally being established; these are referred to as the first-fruits of God's harvest (James 1:18; Rev. 14:4). They make up the very Bride of Christ, which will rule alongside Jesus in the messianic kingdom (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Second, throughout the messianic age the masses of humanity will find salvation as they learn to live in harmony with that Israel-based kingdom. Ultimately, every Gentile nation will seek to emulate Israel—will “take hold of the garment of a Jew saying, ‘We will follow you, because we know God is with you’” (Zech. 8:23). Again, the key is *belief* and *participation* in the



***What is the true gospel? And how is the gospel linked to salvation?***

Kingdom of God. (Just for fun, ask a Protestant, “What did Jesus mean when He said, ‘Salvation is of the Jews’? How does that statement fit into Protestant theology?”)

Finally, all who have ever lived and died without salvation will *come to life* in the second resurrection (Rev. 20:11-15)—called the Judgment (John 11:24; Heb. 9:27)—and be offered salvation. But again, participation in the kingdom is key. (A later installment in this series will deal in detail with the resurrections.)

Ultimately, the *true* gospel as preached by Jesus the Messiah and the early church is the message of God’s salvation—a salvation that directly hinges on the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ shed blood and resurrection are vital aspects of that gospel, showing how God has graciously made a way for men to be reconciled to Him and ultimately inherit eternal life.

Recommended reading:

*A Biblical Repudiation of So-called “Replacement Theology”*  
*The Appointed Times of Jesus the Messiah*



## Where will you spend eternity? With Jesus—in *heaven*?

WHEN I WAS ABOUT 20, I went to meet a friend at the mall for lunch. As I waited for my friend to arrive, I was approached by a local Baptist preacher. I had seen him a few times before—walking the mall, “witnessing” to anyone who would listen. Somehow I had always managed to avoid him. But not today. “If you die tonight, do you know for sure you’ll go to heaven?” he asked me. The man, probably in his 60s, was friendly enough. I took a deep breath, determined not to get into an actual discussion with him. “No,” I answered. “No, I don’t.” This just baited him. He started going on about heaven and hell and sin and the blood of Jesus. When he finally paused for a moment, I jumped in. “Why would I want to go to heaven? Jesus isn’t going to be there.” He stared at me, mouth open, not sure how to respond. This was clearly not the reaction he had anticipated. Luckily for me, he just shoved a give-your-heart-to-the-Lord tract in my hand and walked off.

How many Christians—sincere as they can be—have actually thought this through: You want to spend eternity in heaven *with* Jesus—right? But if Jesus isn’t going to be in heaven, why would you want to go there? Your only source of accurate information on this question is the Bible—not what some mall-roaming preacher has to say. So what *does* the Bible have to say?

Yes, presently Jesus is in heaven, sitting at the Father’s right hand (Heb. 10:12-13). But as numerous Bible passages show, Jesus *is* returning to this earth. He will quite literally *stand* on the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4), ready to put down all

## *Where will you spend eternity? With Jesus—in heaven?*

opposition and rebellion on the earth as He sets about to establish the Kingdom of God (Rev. 19). But get this: He's *not* going back to heaven. So *if* you do manage to get to heaven (which you won't), you will be very disappointed. Because not only will Jesus spend eternity right here on the earth, even the *Father* will eventually make His eternal home here (Rev. 21:3).

Jesus has a job to do—right here on earth. Read it for yourself—as succinctly presented by the angel Gabriel in his encounter with Jesus' mother, Mary. Concerning Jesus, he tells Mary, "He will be great, and He will be called the Son of the Most High. And God will give Him the very throne of his forefather David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33).

What does this passage mean to you? Do you even *believe* Gabriel's all-important message? If not, then you will probably go your way and continue thinking you're going to spend eternity with Jesus in heaven. Plainly, however, Jesus is going to spend eternity on *earth*, ruling over the "house of Jacob"—which means *Israel*—from the same throne God once gave to King David. This physical, geo-political *kingdom* will grow until it encompasses the entire world—with all Gentile nations grafted in over time (Matt. 13:31-33; Rom. 11:11-26; Zech. 8:23). *And it will never end*. Did you ever wonder why Jesus said the meek would "inherit the earth"—not heaven? Now you know.

Jesus also said that *no one* has ever gone to heaven—except Jesus himself, or course, who came from heaven (John 3:13). Peter references David's messianic prophecy of Jesus' death and resurrection, noting that David was dead and buried and had himself *not* ascended into heaven (Acts 27:25-35).

Yet "going to heaven" is a prominent teaching in mainstream Christianity—why? Where do Protestants get this non-biblical idea? The problem is that Christians have for centuries believed that humans have an "immortal soul"—which must "go somewhere" upon the demise of the body. They simply refuse to *believe* Jesus' plain statement in John 3:16 that the precise *opposite* of having "everlasting life" is to actually *perish*—to

## Chapter Four

have no life whatsoever. Look up the word—it means to “cease to exist.” Ask any homemaker about perishable food—it goes bad and you get rid of it.

Indeed, Orthodox Christendom would have us believe that death is little more than the death of the body, while the still-conscious “immortal soul” goes on to an eternity of bliss in heaven, or to an eternity of torment in an ever-burning hell. But is this what your Bible actually teaches?

### **Do you have an immortal soul?**

Contrary to what many think, Protestantism does not get its doctrines from the Bible alone. Many, in fact, are of pagan origin. The “immortal soul” concept, for example, does not come from the Bible. If you believe the Bible is the Word of God and the only reliable source of knowledge about God and His plan for mankind, then the question is, “What does the Bible teach about life after death?”

Most religious leaders today continue to teach the immortality of the soul, despite the fact that the Bible teaches the exact opposite—that the human soul is *mortal*. As we will see, in the Garden of Eden God did not *give* Adam a soul; rather, He breathed life into Adam and he *became* a living soul (Gen. 2:7). From a biblical perspective, a soul is not something you *have*—the soul is the *whole* living person. Indeed, God *alone* has immortality (I Tim. 6:15, 16).

The immortal soul idea can be traced back to ancient Babylonian mythology, which in various forms spread through the then-civilized world, eventually centering in Egypt in the third and second millennia BC. Greek mythology came mostly from Egypt, and its gods were simply the old Egyptian gods under different names. In the so-called “Golden Age” of Greek civilization, belief in various deities was overlaid gradually with a body of philosophy promoted by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc. A major part of Platonic philosophy was based on the supposed *dualistic nature* of man—the idea of an immortal soul trapped

## *Where will you spend eternity? With Jesus—in heaven?*

inside a material body. Thus, the conscious “inner person” is actually an “immortal soul” that originated in the heavens and came down to dwell inside a material, physical body. The material body was deemed temporary and essentially evil. Accordingly, the hope of the “spiritual man” was that his conscious immortal soul could return to heaven at the death of the material body. It is interesting that today Protestants talk of a person “going home” when they die.

Most post-apostolic “church fathers” were brought up believing ideas such as the immortality of the soul prior to becoming “Christian.” Through their highly influential writings, they eventually infused such ideas into the doctrines of the Roman Church. The Protestant Reformation—while it did help to correct some doctrinal errors—continued to promote the immortal soul heresy, which today underlies a great deal of Protestant (as well as Catholic) doctrine.

What the Bible says about the soul requires some study. The Hebrew word translated “soul” is *nephesh*, defined as “a breathing creature, i.e., animal or (abstract) vitality...” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, Hebrew Lexicon*). The various uses of *nephesh* simply refer to the *physical life* of air-breathing creatures—including human beings.

When God created Adam, He made *him*—not just his body—“of the dust of the ground.” Adam did not *receive* a soul, but “became a living soul” (*nephesh*). The soul is what a person *is*—not something he “has.” It is the *complete* being.

Can a soul die? In Ezekiel 18:4 we read, “The soul [person] who sins [without repentance], will die.” For emphasis, the statement is repeated in verse 20. Some point to what Jesus said in Matthew 10:28—“Fear not those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul”—as if the soul could not be destroyed. But they fail to read the rest of the passage: “But rather fear him [God] who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [*gehenna* fire]” (*KJV*). Notice that Christ did not say this *gehenna* fire burns the soul for eternity, but that it

## Chapter Four

*destroys* the soul—burns it up, causing it to cease to exist. Christ made it clear that the soul is not immortal and has no life or consciousness apart from the body. A better translation would read: “Do not fear those who can only destroy your body, but have no power to permanently end your life; rather, fear God, who has the power to both destroy your body and permanently end your life in the lake of fire.”

Some misunderstanding of the biblical teaching on the soul may result from the fact that the Bible also teaches that man has a *human spirit*. The Hebrew word translated “spirit” is *ruach*, which in some places is also translated breath, wind, or *mind*. In the New Testament, “spirit” is translated from the Greek *pneuma*, typically also meaning the *heart* and *mind* (e. g., Heb. 4:12).

Job 32:8 says there is a “spirit in man.” Several passages in Proverbs refer to this human spirit (Prov. 15:13; 16:32; 20:27; 25:28). This inner spirit, which we all have, is not a separate or additional “being”—it is not an “immortal soul” trapped inside of us. It is a non-physical dimension that God gives to each of us and is what actually makes us *human* (Isa. 42:5; Zech. 12:1). It is the human spirit added to our brain that gives us a *conscious mind* with self-awareness—through which we are able to learn complex subjects such as language, mathematics, design, music, etc.—and experience a wide range of emotions. Without this spirit, we would essentially be no different than animals (I Cor. 2:11).

It is important to understand that even with the addition of the human spirit, it is the whole physical and spiritual package that makes up the *person*—the *soul*. Again, we do not *have* a soul; the *whole person is a soul*. *Nothing* about a person retains consciousness after death (Psa. 146:4).

The Bible is clear that death is the total cessation of life, including consciousness. In fact, the Bible describes the death of humans as being identical to the death of animals (Eccl. 3:19, 20). Death is the same for all—whether righteous or unrighteous, faithful or unfaithful (Eccl. 9:2). In death, a person’s thoughts perish—he or she knows nothing, has no consciousness, no

## ***Where will you spend eternity? With Jesus—in heaven?***

awareness (Eccl. 9:5). They are neither looking down from “heaven” nor roasting in a “hell” somewhere in the bowels of the earth. They are simply dead. And their *only* hope for life again is through a *resurrection*.

### **The resurrection—a Christian’s true hope**

Hebrews 9:27 tells us that it is appointed to *all* to die once. This first death (and lying dead for decades or even centuries afterward) is neither a reward nor a punishment. Because of sin, it is simply what happens to everyone—for in Adam we all die (I Cor. 15:22).

But God is not willing that anyone should perish—utterly cease to exist (II Pet. 3:9). So He has made a way for all who have lived and died to be raised again to new life—through a *resurrection*. The patriarch Job seemed to understand this. He asked, “If a man dies, will he live again?” He gives the answer: “All the days of my appointed time [in the grave] I will wait, until my change [release from death] comes. You will call, and I will answer [come to life]; for You will long for the work of Your hands” (Job 14:14-15). Job knew he would have to wait in the grave for an unknown period of time before God would raise him up—from being dead to being alive. Similarly, the prophet Daniel was told that he would rest in the grave but ultimately “stand in your lot” in the latter days—a clear reference to death and resurrection (Dan. 12:13).

For those whom God has called during this present age—a comparably *very* small group, *chosen* by God for a special purpose ahead of the masses of mankind—that resurrection will come at Christ’s return. Indeed, the hope of every true Christian is not heaven—it is the resurrection.

Throughout the New Testament, we see a clear emphasis on the hope of the resurrection—not on going to heaven. In fact, there is literally *no* mention of Christians going to heaven, contrasted by scores of passages expressing the desire for and hope in the resurrection to life to occur at Jesus’ return. For example, Paul wrote that his entire focus for his own life was that he

## Chapter Four

might qualify to be in “the resurrection of the dead” (Phil. 3:10). He expressed no desire to go to heaven; for Paul, eternal life was bound up in the resurrection.

Mainstream Christianity, however, seldom mentions the resurrection. Frankly, they are baffled by the idea because it is difficult to reconcile a *resurrection to life* with post-death immortality in heaven. After all, why would one need to be resurrected from the grave when they are already enjoying eternal life in heaven? It makes no sense. The immortal soul teaching is deeply entrenched in nominal Christianity—and it leaves them with a dilemma: how to explain the resurrection. Ultimately, they have been forced to *invent* a non-biblical answer: the doctrine of “glorification.” Essentially, this teaching says that while the *soul*—the real person, fully conscious, complete with one’s personality, thoughts, etc.—goes to heaven immediately upon death, the *body* must yet be raised at Jesus’ return and rejoined with the soul. Does this mean that those who “go to heaven” are merely disembodied spirits? Do spirits even *need* bodies anyway? And if the resurrection is just all about the *body*, why, again, is there *so much emphasis* in the New Testament on the resurrection being the *one and only hope* of every Christian? It just doesn’t add up.

In John 6:39-40, Jesus makes the truth plain. He declares that of all those whom the Father had given to Him, who genuinely believe in Him, He would raise them to “eternal life”—*when?* At the “last day.” In other words, they would have *no life at all* until they are raised from the grave at the last day—at Jesus’ return. Throughout the New Testament, eternal life is never associated with having an “immortal soul” or with “going to heaven”—it is *always* associated with the resurrection.

Paul makes this clear in his critical treatise in I Corinthians 15. He says in verse 22 that just as all die in Adam, all will be “made alive” in Christ. When? Paul says there is an “order” or sequence involved: Jesus received eternal life at His resurrection—He was the *first*. Then, those who “belong to Christ”—



## ***Where will you spend eternity? With Jesus—in heaven?***

those called during this age—will be resurrected “at His coming” (verse 23). Thus, no one gets *life* of any kind except through the resurrection at Jesus’ return—which means there is no such thing as “eternal life in heaven.” The two are simply incompatible.

Back in verses 16-18, Paul writes: “For if the dead are not raised, [then] neither has Christ been raised. But if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; [and] you are still in your sins, and those who have fallen asleep [died] in Christ have then perished.” *Perished*—the same word we looked at in John 3:16. Read between the lines here. Paul is simply saying that *if you die*, you have essentially *perished*—unless there is a resurrection. You have a fully bio-chemical existence. Death means you *cease to exist*, short of a resurrection. That is your *only* hope. Note that Paul does not say that “if there is no going-to-heaven” your faith is in vain; he says, *if there is no resurrection* your belief in Jesus has been an illusion.

Again, *why* all this emphasis on the *resurrection* of the “dead in Christ” at Jesus’ return and not a word about going to heaven? It just doesn’t add up.

Still think you have an “immortal soul”? Look at one final passage from I Corinthians 15. Paul says unequivocally that “this mortal must put on immortality” (verse 53). You don’t have immortality. It must be *given to you* through the resurrection. Or is everything Paul wrote in this chapter just about the body? Do you really need an immortal *body* to match your immortal *soul* already in heaven? As we have seen, Paul says that it is only through the resurrection that you are *given life*, that you will not utterly *perish*, and that you *become immortal*. Does it really make sense that this is only referring to the body? Such confusion.

### **Some difficult passages**

There are a handful of New Testament passages that *seem* to indicate that Christians go to heaven at death. But as we will see,

## Chapter Four

these passages are misunderstood—and only *suggest* the idea of “going to heaven” if that idea is *already presumed* and thus “read into” the passage. Importantly, we must view such passages in the light of the clear passages we have already examined.

First, we should understand that Jesus and the New Testament writers compared death to *sleep*, a Hebraic idea solidly based on the Old Testament (Psa. 13:3). For example, in the account of Lazarus’ death, Jesus said he was *sleeping* (John 11:11-14). When Jesus and the disciples later arrived at Lazarus’ home, He said to Martha, “Your brother will rise again” (verse 23). What a great opportunity to comfort everyone by announcing that Lazarus was in heaven. Instead, Jesus offered the hope of a *resurrection*—something Martha already partly understood: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (verse 24).

The idea that death is likened to sleep is important. When you sleep, you are *unconscious*—you have no idea what is going on around you and no awareness of the passing of time. Whether you are dead for a day or hundreds of years, you likewise have no knowledge of the passage of time. When you wake up after a night of sleep, it seems like you just went to bed—because you had no knowledge of the passing of time. Likewise, when a person is resurrected, the last thing they remember is dying—or whatever was their last living memory. So the metaphor is appropriate. This is why those who are “dead *in Christ*”—who died in an intimate personal relationship with Christ—are also spoken of as being “asleep in Jesus” (I Thess. 4:14; compare I Cor. 15:18). Keep this in mind as we look at a couple of difficult passages in Paul’s letters.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote that, for him, to go on living “is Christ”—meaning he could *continue* serving Christ as an apostle—but that to die was actually better in that he could simply rest in the grave with his “next waking moment” being the resurrection itself (Phil. 1:21-22). Paul added that he thus had a desire to *depart to be with Christ* (verse 24). Many take this to mean that he would die and go to heaven. But the text

## *Where will you spend eternity? With Jesus—in heaven?*

does not say that. Yes, the idea that he would “depart” clearly refers to his death. But he would only go to the grave to await the resurrection—whereupon he would then be with Christ. *Paul understood this.* He understood that he would “sleep the sleep of death” (Psa. 13:3), with no knowledge of the time—in his case, hundreds of years—that would pass before he would actually be with Jesus. But for Paul, his *next waking moment* would be in Christ’s presence!

In a similar passage, Paul wrote that he would rather be “absent from the body” in order to be “present with the Lord” (II Cor. 5:8). For some, this suggests that Paul thought he was going to heaven. But to be “absent from the body” just means *death*. Paul knew that his *life* would figuratively be held in reserve by God, to be restored to him in the resurrection—at which time he would be “present with the Lord.” Paul understood that death meant he would—in his next waking moment—be raised to spirit-composed immortality. So he was quite willing to “absent” from his tired, aging body!

Just as Peter wrote, this promised inheritance of eternal life is figuratively *held in reserve* for us “in heaven” (I Pet. 1:4). But this doesn’t mean we go to heaven to receive it; rather, it is “revealed” at Jesus’ return (verse 5).

Sometimes misunderstandings occur because of poor translation and incorrect punctuation. In an often-quoted text used to prove that we go to heaven, it is assumed that Jesus told one of the thieves crucified next to Him that he would join Jesus that very day in paradise (Luke 23:43). The text is generally read, “Truly I say to you, ‘Today you will be with me in paradise.’ ” But remember that the original Greek had no punctuation; that was added by translators. So the passage could just as easily read, “Truly I say to you today, ‘You will be with me in paradise.’ ” This places the thief’s participation in “paradise”—which refers not to heaven but to the Kingdom of God on earth—at some future time. Moreover, the statement as generally rendered is patently false—for both the thief and Jesus went *only* to the grave that day. Thus, the word “today” can only refer to

## Chapter Four

when Jesus said those words.

### A second resurrection

In Revelation 20, John writes that the resurrection of the “dead in Christ”—which occurs at Christ’s second coming—is the “*first* resurrection” (verse 5). This means there must be a *second* resurrection. Indeed, the same verse adds that “the *rest of the dead* did not live again until the thousand years were finished”—referring to the millennial reign of Christ and those raised to immortality in the first resurrection. Remember, God is not willing that anyone should perish (II Pet. 3:9), and Jesus said that the time was coming when *all* who are in the graves will hear His voice and be raised to life (John 5:28-29). Everyone will have an opportunity for salvation; it is all a matter of timing.

Currently, only a tiny minority of mankind has been called by God (John 6:44, 65)—and far fewer have actually come to *true* conversion. Jesus refers to His true Church as a “little flock” (Luke 12:32). Peter tells us that judgement is currently *ongoing* for this “house of God” (I Pet. 4:17). Thus, when a converted person dies “in the faith” (or “in Christ”), their judgement by God has already taken place. But the time of judgment for “the rest of the dead” has not yet come. They are simply waiting, asleep in their graves, for the second resurrection—at which time they will have their opportunity for salvation. Looking again at Revelation 20, we see that in this general resurrection “the dead, small and great, stand before God”—having been raised to *physical* life to face judgement and be offered eternal life (verses 11-13).

Thus, no one goes to heaven—*ever!* Indeed, God’s entire plan for mankind is played out right here on earth. And both Jesus and the Father will make their eternal home right here as well!

Recommended reading:

*God’s Plan for Mankind Revealed by His Sabbath and Holy Days  
Why Were You Born?*

*What Happens to the Dead?*

## *Notes*

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