
First Day of the Weeks

by: Ronald L. Dart

Just for this program, try to put yourself in the mind of one of the original disciples of Jesus. How would you have been different from what you are today? How would you think differently? How would you look at the world? What would your world view be? Well, in the first place, you would have been a Jew. Like Jesus himself, you would have been a regular in synagogue attendance and you would've been a Sabbath keeper. Because throughout the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, Jesus and His disciples were Sabbatarian, that is Sabbath keepers. They were in the synagogue every Sabbath Day and they would not have thought about working on a Saturday.

The Sabbath Identifies God

The Sabbath, you have to understand was more than just another commandment, it was more than a mere doctrine, it was a matter of religious identity. The Sabbath was clearly the identifying sign that answered the question: Who is your God? To change the Sabbath to another day, for Jesus or for any of his disciples, would not have been merely a change in doctrine or ideas, it would have been tantamount to changing their God.

Here is what the Scripture says, it is in Exodus 31:13 "Speak to the children of Israel saying, Verily my Sabbaths you shall keep for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations that you may know that I am Jehovah that does sanctify you." Remember that Jesus and His disciples were Jews. All of them were, and they were observant Jews at that, so when I read the Scripture like this one here, what were they supposed to think? Well, they would have thought that immediately, that this is the thing that says I'm a worshiper of Jehovah instead of being a worshiper of Baal. Listen to what else it says: Verse 16, "So the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations for a perpetual covenant, {17} It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever, for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed."

So, if you were one of the original disciples of Jesus, this would've been a part of your religious upbringing, a part of the very fabric of your beliefs, that the Sabbath day was a perpetual covenant, it was established forever, and it identified your God. You wouldn't have thought about, or considered possible, a change in the Sabbath day. The Sabbath would not have been just another doctrine to believe or not believe. It would've been the irrevocable sign of the identity of your God.

Abandoning the Sabbath?

Now, how and when did all that get changed? Why would you, if you were a disciple of Jesus, at some later time, abandon the observance of the Sabbath in favor of Sunday. Especially after this thing that the Sabbath is a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between God and the children of Israel forever. Why would you think of that and what would have been the consequences of that change? Would you have expected Jesus to say something about it, to explain the change or there would have had to have been a moment in time when the change came into effect, right? Being good Jews, you or some of your close friends would have, well, you would have had a problem with the change. The fact is that nearly everything about the Christian faith, somebody had a problem with it. Can you imagine that the entire body of the disciples of Jesus, who were all Jews at the time, kept the Sabbath, and then the next week observe Sunday instead? With no explanation, no comment, not a ripple. Well, it is kind of hard to imagine it, isn't it? So, what did happen?

Did Jesus' Resurrection Change Everything?

Well the conventional wisdom is that the crucifixion of Jesus and the resurrection from the dead, changed everything. The first thing to face-up to is this, that there's not a word in the New Testament that says that. You would really expect that a change of this magnitude would be explained somewhere, that there would be a passage that gives us, not merely the change, but the reason for the change. The Sabbath had a theology that went with it, it identified who your God was. You are a worshiper of Jehovah, not Baal, and it was the Sabbath that established that identity. So, there should be a statement, just as strong as the original statements about the Sabbath, to explain who our new God is and what we are going to do about it. No such passage exists. And of course, there was no change in their God.

The First Day of the Week

Now there is a general presumption among Christians who do not keep the Sabbath, that the church began meeting on Sunday immediately after the resurrection of Jesus and they did it, because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday morning. Now this is based in its entirety on eight New Testament texts, that mention the first day of the week. There are eight and only eight that do this.

The superficial impression is that the church was meeting regularly on Sunday, the first day of the week. This is entirely misleading. Six of these Scriptures, for one thing, refer to the same events on the same day, and that is the day of Jesus' first appearance to His disciples after His resurrection. So that only leaves two other passages that might lead one to this conclusion.

No Greek Word for 'Week'

There's something else you should know about these passages, there is no Greek word for 'week', in any of these passages. In fact, there is no Greek word for 'week' found in the New Testament at all. That's right, in every case, in the New Testament where you see the word 'week', the word in the Greek is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word: 'Sabbath'.

Take this one for example. It's in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican and it is found in Luke 18:10: "Two men went up to the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. {11} The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, saying God, I thank you, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this publican. {12} I fast twice in the week."

Now wait a minute, what does he mean by that?

Literally the Pharisee says, "I fast twice of the Sabbath", because there is no Greek word for 'week' here. He is after all a Jew, talking in Jewish terms about what he did. No Pharisee would fast ON the Sabbath. And so when he says "I fast twice of the Sabbath", it is an idiom referring to the period of time between the Sabbaths. It is as simple as that. Twice from one Sabbath to the next Sabbath this man fasted. That's all that it meant.

The Morrow After the Sabbath

Now about the eight instances in the New Testament where the expression, "The first day of the week" is found, the first thing you should realize is, that the Hebrews did not identify days of the week this way. As far as I know the Greeks didn't either. The Hebrew manner of designating Sunday would have been to call it "the morrow after the Sabbath". In other words, they would have normally said, if they're just talking about Sunday as Sunday, they would have said: "On the day after the Sabbath we did this and went there". It is that simple.

First Instance

Now here is what the first instance says literally: Matthew 28:1 "Now after the Sabbath, as the first of the Sabbaths (plural) began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb."

Now that's an odd expression isn't it? "After the Sabbath as the first of the Sabbaths began to dawn". What does it mean? Well there are seven Sabbaths between Wave sheaf Sunday and Pentecost. The day that is being mentioned here is the first day of the 50 days leading to Pentecost. It was the day when the first of the first fruits were offered to God. It was also the day of Jesus' presentation to the Father as the first of the first fruits from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:23). It was an important day, it was a festive day in the Jewish calendar, because up until this particular day, nothing of this year's grain crop could be eaten. The first thing they had to do was cut a sheaf of grain, prepare it, present it before God as the first of the first fruits (Leviticus 23:9-16).

Well, the morning after Jesus' resurrection when Mary tried to touch Him (John 20:17), He said "Don't touch me". Later in the same day, He did allow Himself to be touched (Matthew 28:9-10).

He said don't touch me because I'm ascending to my Father and the presumption is that, since the New Testament tells us elsewhere that Jesus is the first fruits from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20), that He was presented to God the Father at the same time, the first fruits of the ground were presented in the Temple before God. So consequently, this day, this first day of the weeks leading up to Pentecost, is an important annual day. Not merely a day of the week, but a special day of the year, the day which was the beginning of the spring harvest.

As I said, there are eight of these references to the first day of the week. Maybe one of the others will clarify this matter.

Now every one of these places in the New Testament where you find this expression "the first day of the week", the word "day" is not in any of them. Now this is a curious thing, and the word "week" isn't there either. As I said before, the word is "Sabbaths" in the plural.

Second Instance

So, as we come to Mark 16:1 which is the next one, we can understand what they are saying: "When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. {2} And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun."

But literally what this says is: "Very early in the morning, the first of the Sabbaths". Now this was not the Sabbath Day, of course, it is an expression that basically means, the first of the weeks that lead up to Pentecost. It is day one of the seven-week period.

Third Instance

Okay, here's number three, Mark 16:9: "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven demons." Literally, it says: "Now when Jesus was risen early the first of the Sabbaths".

Another important thing to know is that this passage does not really say that Jesus was risen early Sunday morning. There were no witnesses to the moment Jesus' resurrection. It is giving us the time, not of His resurrection, but of the appearing to Mary. "Now when Jesus was risen, (comma) early the first day of the Sabbaths He appeared first to Mary Magdalene". This is what He is really saying here. So here we have, so far through three of these, there is not a thing in the world that would tell us one of the other about when the church ought to meet or what should be done with the Sabbath Day. All it is doing, all about the same time, is telling us about Jesus' first appearances to His disciples after His resurrection.

Fourth Instance

Number four is Luke 24:1: "Now upon the first of the Sabbaths, very early in the morning, they came to the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them." Nothing there. It's the same thing.

Fifth Instance

Number five is John 20:1: "The first day of the week comes Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, to the sepulchre, and sees the stone taken away from the sepulchre." It is the same thing. It is the same expression. The word "day" isn't there, the word "week" isn't there, it is the first of the Sabbaths.

Sixth Instance

Number six is John 20:19: "Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week (or the first of the Sabbaths), when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you." Now that is sixth of the instances, all referring to the events of the same day. That thins out considerably the argument that some new custom had started in the church. The disciples were meeting together late that afternoon, but there's nothing here to suggest that anything new was going on. They were frightened and confused and did the natural thing, they huddled together trying to make sense out of what had happened to them that day. So, we haven't found anything here about a new custom of meeting on Sunday versus the Sabbath, have we? If I were one of those disciples, I would have found nothing here to change anything concerning the Sabbath Day, would you? If there were going to be anything, wouldn't someone have to explain something about this to us.

Seventh Instance

That leaves us with two to go. This one is in First Corinthians 16:2. This is an interesting passage because it has been widely misunderstood and widely misapplied. Sometime before this epistle was written a prophet of God had gotten a vision from God about an upcoming famine in Jerusalem. People were going to be starving in the streets and once this information got out to the church, the churches all over Asia and in Greece decided that they needed to get together and send help to Jerusalem.

Now if you know anything about famines, you know that sending money is not going to do anybody much good, because there's no food to buy. So, what they had to do was to send food, and the way they're going to go about sending food was to send grain, which is shippable and transferable. It is a staple of life in this part of the world, because bread was more stable than what potatoes would be today. Okay, so they were going to send a shipment of grain from all over this area.

Collection for Saints in Jerusalem

Now in First Corinthians 16:1 Paul is writing to the church in Corinth about the offering or the collection for the Saints and about what they were planning to do. He says this: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do you. {2} Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come". Now let's stop. First of all, Paul is not saying "On the first day of the week", he is saying "On the first of the Sabbaths". This is the same expression identically as everywhere else. The word "day" is missing, and the word for "weeks" is the plural

for Sabbath. Okay. Literally Paul said, "Upon the first of the Sabbaths let every one of you lay by him in store." Now this is not a Sabbath Day, this is a work day, of collecting the harvest of grain for shipment to Palestine. It was the first day of the harvest, it was not a regular first day of the week, the reason is important. This offering had to go to Jerusalem. Paul was going to be leaving and he did not want any delays involved in this and therefore he said "On the first of the days that you do the harvest, day number one, get out there and prepare this amount that you going to send to Jerusalem. Lay it by yourself in storage so that when I come you won't have to go into the fields to get it."

Simple isn't it? All that Paul is telling them to do is to get to work on the first day of the harvest, get out there and get this grain together, so that we can get it off more quickly when I get there.

An Offering on Sunday?

When you understand the background, and it's obvious to anyone who's read his Bible carefully, you really ought to spot this. The use of this passage for taking up an offering every Sunday is really quite thin to anyone who knows what is going on. I have gone into churches and pulled out little envelopes on the back of the pew and it has a Scripture on it. The Scriptures is "On the first day of the week let everyone of you lay by him in store what God has prospered him." So, we are going to take up an offering in church on Sunday morning because of this Scripture? Well, not because of this Scripture, because that's not what the Scripture is even remotely about. You may have noticed, there's not a word here about a church meeting.

Eighth Instance

Well we have one Scripture left in the New Testament that mentions the "first day of the week". This one is Acts 20:7 "Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight."

Now this is the only passage in the New Testament that suggests the possibility that the church met on the first day of the week. And even here, it is a Saturday night, not Sunday, and it is also not merely the first day of the week, it is that particular first day of the weeks (Sabbaths) that led up to Pentecost.

Change the Sabbath?

Now this is really a thin rule upon which to base a change in something as central to the faith as the Sabbath day, isn't it? Remember we started thinking at the beginning of this program about ourselves being among the original disciples of Jesus. Now we know everything that's in the New Testament. Is there anything in the New Testament that would have led us to abandon the centuries-old practice of Sabbath observance? God had said it was a sign of His own identity, which He commanded on the death penalty, as matter-of-fact, it was such a serious matter for them, that it had become right along with circumcision, the core beliefs actually that made one a Jew.

Would we have laid all this stuff aside, on nothing more than this? Now here is our problem. We have the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence that the church ever met on the first day of the week at all. What we have is incidental, that is to say, it's an isolated incident, not a custom of the church, and we have the idea of Christians abandoning the observance of the Sabbath, which we have already seen is tantamount to changing Gods, without any explanation of the change anywhere in the New Testament. The idea is that it was a Sunday resurrection of Jesus that prompted that change.

No One Witnessed Jesus' Resurrection

Well, we have an even bigger problem than that. Okay, are you ready for this? No one in the New Testament bears witness to the time of Jesus' resurrection. Why? It's simple, no one witnessed it.

You may have to go back and read again to refresh your memory on this, but the fact is that no one in the New Testament witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. We have all kinds of witnesses that He was alive, Sunday morning on, but no witnesses as to the time of his actual resurrection. For that we only have circumstantial evidence, but that circumstantial evidence is very persuasive.

Three Days and Three Nights

Let's start with Jesus' own testimony as to what He said about it himself. In Matthew 12:39 "Jesus answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation looks after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah: {40} For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Now there simply no way to get three days and three nights between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning. We all know that. The way you can get three days and three nights in this is between Wednesday afternoon and Saturday evening. It is about the only way you can do it. Jesus was crucified on the day before a Sabbath. That is as clear as crystal in the New Testament, but what is not apparently crystal clear to everyone, is that Sabbath was a high day. It was the First Day of Unleavened Bread, which was as much a Sabbath as a Saturday was. That Sabbath was not a Saturday, it was Thursday.

You'll find references beginning in John 19:30, when Jesus was on the cross and He had received the vinegar, said, "It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up His spirit. {31} The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the Sabbath Day, (for that Sabbath Day was a high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away."

Now in some years, the weekly Sabbath and the Sabbath high day of the First Day of Unleavened Bread will fall upon the same day. But they didn't always, in fact, commonly you'll find the First Day of Unleavened Bread on a Thursday and the regular weekly Sabbath on Saturday.

Now in John 19:41 "In the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. {42} They laid Jesus there therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was close at hand." Now all of this conspires together to tell us something very important. One is that Jesus died late in the day. They took Jesus down late in the day, and because they didn't have very much time, they buried Him close at hand.

Bread Crumbs

The writers of the New Testament did not anticipate our problem. They never imagined that anyone would use a Sunday resurrection to abandon the Sabbath day, so they didn't cover these bases. However, when we look at this whole thing together, Luke and Mark left us with some bread crumbs to follow, that open up a new way of looking at this. Now keep in mind, they were in a rush to get Christ buried before the Sabbath day came on. Then having buried him (Mark 15:47) "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus beheld where he was laid." (Mark 16:1) "And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought sweet spices, that they could come and anoint him."

This is not difficult to understand in the sequence of events, is it? They buried Him late and got Him in the grave quickly. After the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James went out and bought some sweet spices. I said Mark and Luke had left us some breadcrumbs and here in Luke 23, we have some more bread crumbs on this.

Luke 23:54 He says "That day was the preparation (when they put Christ in the grave), and the Sabbath drew on. {55} And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. {56} And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the Sabbath Day according to the (fourth) commandment."

Do you realize what they said here? They didn't see the need to clarify this for us, but they accidentally left us these bread crumbs. They bought their spices after the Sabbath, and they prepared the spices before a Sabbath, which tells us there were two Sabbaths that week with a day in between, Thursday and Saturday.

So, Jesus was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth which means His grave. Jesus was resurrected and left the tomb Saturday evening about sunset and NOT on Sunday morning!

The early church had to know that. Now the reason why Sunday morning was important and that one in particular is because it was the "Wave Sheaf of the firstfruits" that was presented in the Temple on that morning at about the same time, when they were first seeing Jesus alive. It was the day of the year that was important not so much the day of the week.

Why are 3 Days and 3 Nights Important?

Now why was the three days and three nights important? There's a story in 11th chapter of John that's fascinating. A good friend of Jesus, Lazarus, was sick, but Jesus delayed going to him. Jesus seems to have deliberately waited until Lazarus was dead and not only dead, but three days

dead, before he actually showed up to raise him from the dead. When he got there, He approached the tomb and He told Martha: "Let's get the stone away from here", and Martha said, "Lord by this time his body will be stinking, he's been dead four days".

Now consider this little item from the N.I.V. study Bible about this issue. "Many Jews believed that the soul remained near the body for three days after death in the hope of returning to it." If this idea was in the minds of these people, they obviously thought all hope was gone and Lazarus was irrevocably dead. Now you know this is a common thing down through history, the worry about the fact that somebody might come to or revive, when they thought they had been dead. This is the idea behind having a wake, let's lay the body out in the living room here for a couple days, and let's see if old Bob is really dead or not. In fact, there are stories of people who were thought to be dead, and they weren't.

I guess one of the reasons for embalming a dead body is that when it's embalmed, we're sure.

Did You Find Anything to Change the Sabbath?

It was important that Jesus be in the grave for three days and three nights less someone claim He had merely revived and had not really been dead. So where' does this put us? Well it puts us with a late Wednesday crucifixion and death and burial and a late Saturday resurrection.

Now think back again to our original premise. Put yourself in the mind of an original disciple of Jesus, a Sabbath keeper, one who went to the synagogue all of his life and who saw the Sabbath as a sign of who your God is. Would you have found anything in any of these Scriptures or passages or ideas from the New Testament, that would have led you to think that the day of worship should be switched from the Saturday Sabbath to Sunday? Did you find anything that would tell you that you could abandon the Sabbath day? No, not really. There is no reason or excuse for the abandonment of Sabbath in favor of Sunday, not a hint of the abandonment of the Sabbath nor any real separation from the synagogue in New Testament Christianity. So, if this change didn't get made, while the New Testament was being written, when did it get changed? We will talk about that next time.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. What are your thoughts about the point that the Sabbath was the sign to identify to others who your God was?
2. What are your thoughts about the Sabbath versus Sunday?

3. Do you agree with Mr. Dart that if the Sabbath was ever changed that there would be an explanation somewhere in the Bible of the change?
4. What are your thoughts about the point that the days of the week were counted from Sabbath to Sabbath, and that there is no actual Greek word for 'week'?
5. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's point that the phrase "the first of the Sabbath" was the first Sabbath of the seven Sabbaths count before Pentecost?
6. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's explanations of the eight instances that mention the first day of the week?
7. Is there anywhere in the Bible that would explain the idea "to abandon the centuries-old practice of Sabbath observance?"
8. What are your thoughts to the point that there are no witnesses to the moment when Jesus was resurrected; therefore, we have no idea the time of His actual resurrection?
9. What are your thoughts about the importance of three days and three nights?
10. Is it possible to understand the New Testament fully without understanding God's weekly and annual Sabbaths?