

Sabbath Reforms

Bible Background • NEHEMIAH 13:4–31
Printed Text • NEHEMIAH 13:15–22 | Devotional Reading • MARK 2:23–27

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson we will: **KNOW** and **UNDERSTAND** that the Sabbath is to be honored; **SHARE** with others the importance of honoring the Sabbath; and **PLAN** to honor the Sabbath.

In Focus

Marcus volunteered as a Sunday School worker at his church. He also worked full-time to support his wife and three kids. God blessed him with a promotion at his job, which required that he work beyond a normal 9-to-5 day, including traveling to do site visits out of town. Soon however, due to the economy, his company laid off several people. While Marcus did not get laid off, his workload increased in order to make up for the shortfall in the reduction of staff.

Because of his heavy workload and travel schedule, Marcus began to miss a lot of Sunday School. Most Sundays he was too tired to attend Sunday School, and sometimes he would miss church altogether. His wife became very concerned and discussed her feelings with Marcus, but he refused to listen. She then turned to their pastor. When the pastor first spoke to Marcus, he resisted and insisted that in order to keep his job, he needed to keep his current schedule. Through the prayers of his wife and pastor, Marcus' spiritual eyes opened and he learned how to truly trust God—and that included setting aside a day for worshiping God.

We must always give God the firstfruits of everything He affords us, and He will in turn bless us with more—including our time. Today's lesson is about honoring the Sabbath.

Keep in Mind

“And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy” (Nehemiah 13:22, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV Nehemiah 13:15 In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals.

16 There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?

18 Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath.

19 And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.

20 So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice.

21 Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath.

22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.

The People, Places, and Times

God's Law. When God first established the Children of Israel as a nation, He did not just deliver them from the Egyptians and give them a land to dwell in; He provided everything they needed in order to fully function as a proper nation. From Exodus to Deuteronomy, we read how He set out a comprehensive structure, which framed the constitution of their lives. He provided laws for personal injuries, property rights, civil and criminal matters, and various other situations, as well as details regarding the people's worship. He even outlined the feasts and holidays they should celebrate. In return, God required their utter obedience to Him as their Ruler. They were to show complete submission to Him as their King and total adoration of Him as their God.

However, time and time again through history, we see Israel's continued rebellion and

disobedience to God, which eventually led to their exile. In Nehemiah, hopes existed that the Israelites would not repeat the past, but would instead live a life obedient, committed, and dedicated to the ordinances of God.

Background

After the nation of Judah rebuilt the wall, the Israelites continued to slowly rebuild their nation. Rebuilding their nation required not just the physical effort of constructing houses, roads, and the Temple. Their laws, ordinances, and spiritual framework needed reshaping, too. The wall provided safety and security from outsiders and set a boundary around them as a nation. As a result, immediately following the wall's completion, scribes read the Law aloud to inform and set the groundwork for their constitution.

Once the law was read, this motivated the remnant in Judah to confess their sins and

recommit to God as a nation based on the original law He ordered. They made a covenant and set out detailed obligations, which they would comply with in order to please God. This document set the legal framework for their establishment as a nation with Nehemiah as governor over the land. He and the people voted for leaders to rule over various provinces set up across Jerusalem. In addition, the Levites were reestablished as priests, and procedures were created for the Temple such as levitical priest service, tithes, and worship.

At-A-Glance

1. Sabbath Observance (Nehemiah 13:15–18)
2. Keeping the Sabbath (vv. 19–22)

In Depth

1. Sabbath Observance (Nehemiah 13:15–18)

Once the Israelites accepted the law again it meant they also accepted observance of the Sabbath. “The formal institution of the Sabbath is a basic part of the Mosaic Law system. Each division of the law contains specific sections relating to the practice of the Sabbath: the moral law (the Ten Commandments), the civil law (Exodus 31:14), and the ceremonial law (Leviticus 23:3). The keeping of the Sabbath was a sign that God truly ruled Israel. To break His Sabbath law was to rebel against Him—an action meriting death (Exodus 21:14). Society was not to seek advancement outside of submission to God. Therefore, all work except acts of mercy, necessity, and worship were forbidden on the Sabbath” (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1106). To disobey the Sabbath meant to profane the holiness of the day, or to make it unclean or unholy.

In the newly established nation, Nehemiah observed that some Israelites did not observe the Sabbath. He found some treading wine presses, bringing in sheaves, saddling donkeys, and selling produce and goods on the Sabbath. The Israelites performed these tasks so much on the Sabbath that merchants from other nations began to come through the gates on the Sabbath to do business with the Israelites.

Nehemiah challenged the leaders of Judah regarding their conduct in how they broke the Sabbath. He reminded them that such behavior originally contributed to their demise and exile from the Promised Land. If it continued and they did not correct it, such behavior would certainly bring wrath and contribute to another downfall. Nehemiah reminded them about this; he also took corrective action by closing the gates to the city so that the Israelites could not leave the city to conduct business and outside merchants could not come into the city to conduct business. “And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, (he) commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of (his) servants set (he) at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day” (Nehemiah 13:19).

In the Old Testament, to observe the Sabbath was a key law the Israelites needed to follow. If they broke the law and disobeyed God, they needed to cleanse themselves. Nehemiah commanded the Levite priests to cleanse themselves in order to assist with keeping the gates as well as to sanctify the Sabbath. To “sanctify” refers to a “separation from ordinary use to a sacred purpose” (McClintock and Strong, 331). The Sabbath day was set aside for Judah to focus on God—to rest from all their daily labor and a day of obedience to Him as King and Ruler over all their lives and possessions.

2. Keeping the Sabbath (vv. 19–22)

When we compare the Old Testament with the New Testament, a number of references indicate that keeping the Sabbath refers more to a principle than the strict literal observance. For example Colossians 2:16 says, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.” Additionally, in Mark 3, we see Jesus healing on the Sabbath and Mark 2:27–28 (NASB) recounts, “Jesus said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.’” What God established under the law in the Old Testament was still expected in the New Testament, but in a different way.

Some denominations believe that believers are obligated to keep a formal Sabbath day to occur on either Saturday or Sunday. They feel that this is a part of the moral system as set out through the Ten Commandments, which should bind all Christians. Other denominations do not take the Sabbath observance literally, but believe it should be taken figuratively and instead keep the Sabbath through a worship day on Sunday, which is observed by attending church.

“The Sabbath is a means by which a person’s living pattern imitates God’s (Exodus 20:3–1). Work is followed by rest. This idea is expressed by the Hebrew word for Sabbath, which means ‘cessation.’ ... a time for God’s people to think about and enjoy what God has accomplished ... (It) holds the promise of the ultimate salvation that God will accomplish for His people. As certainly as He delivered them from Egypt through Moses, so will He deliver His people from sin at the end of the age through the Great Redeemer (Genesis 3:15; Hebrews 4:1). ... (Also,) the Sabbath includes the idea and practice of... a day for public convocation (Leviticus 23:3)” (*Nelson’s*, 1107). On this special day, His people could gather together in public worship to signify their submission to

His lordship over them and their way of living (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12).

Regardless of one’s understanding of whether the Sabbath should be formally or symbolically kept, the key purpose of why God instituted it should always be maintained. We keep a Sabbath day in order to rest from our daily jobs, conducting of business, anxiety or worry. We keep a Sabbath day in order to reflect on the goodness of God and His blessings toward us. We keep a Sabbath day in order to set aside and take time out of our week to publicly worship Him as a way to demonstrate our submission to His Lordship over our lives.

Search the Scriptures

1. What were the Israelites doing which contributed to their breaking the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15–20)?
2. What negative things could occur when the Israelites profaned the Sabbath (vv. 18, 21)?

Discuss the Meaning

Describe the various meanings of the Sabbath and the reasons Christians should keep it, regardless of denomination.

Liberating Lesson

Some of the biggest problems facing our country is our diminishing reliance on God, decline in church attendance, and reduced regard for Christian-based principles. How can believers help reverse this trend and work toward building up our country?

Application for Activation

The busyness of life can distract Christians from performing basic duties, such as reading one’s Bible, praying, meditating on God’s Word, and even attending church. Due to family commitments, job responsibilities, and many other tasks we must do each day, sometimes we forget or neglect to take time out for God. As you go through this week, make a point each

day to spend time talking to God. If you feel as though time will not permit, try God. You will see that once you take time for Him, He will in turn give you the time required to take care of everything you need.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

"Bible Words – Phonetic Pronunciation." <http://www.betterdaysarecoming.com/bible/pronunciation.html> (accessed January 21, 2012).

McClintock, John, and James Strong. *Encyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. IX. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1891.

"Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon." <http://www.biblestudytools.com> (accessed January 20, 2012).

Youngblood, Ronald, and Herbert Lockyer, gen. eds. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995.

Say It Correctly

Deuteronomy. doo-tuh-**RON**-uh-mee.

Nehemiah. nee-(h)uh-**MI**-uh.

Sabbath. SA-buhth.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

A Sabbath to the Lord

(Exodus 16:13–26)

TUESDAY

Keep the Sabbath Holy

(Exodus 31:12–18)

WEDNESDAY

Honoring the Sabbath

(Isaiah 58:9c–14)

THURSDAY

The Lord of the Sabbath

(Mark 2:23–27)

FRIDAY

Doing Good on the Sabbath

(Mark 3:1–6)

SATURDAY

Restoring the Sanctity of the Temple

(Nehemiah 13:4–14)

SUNDAY

Restoring the Sanctity of the Sabbath

(Nehemiah 13:15–22)