

COURSE LECTURE NOTES

Course: The Sabbaths and Feasts **Subject:** JR 201 The Sabbath and Sabbaths

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Introduction

Shabbat Shalom! For centuries the Jewish people have greeted each other with this wonderful phrase on Saturday, their special day of rest. The phrase means “peaceful Sabbath” and refers to the weekly day of rest God gave to the Jewish people centuries ago.

While the Sabbath is central in Jewish life, some believe that God gave the Sabbath for all mankind and only later gave it specifically to the Jews as their special day. In addition to this understanding, when Christianity became the official religion of Rome, Sunday was declared and actually enforced as the Sabbath for Christendom.

In the prophetic season in which we are now living, many Christians are being called by God to discover the Jewish roots of their faith. This has resulted in a growing number of Christians wanting to learn about the Sabbath. The purpose of this lesson is to discover what the Bible says about the Sabbath.

The Meaning of the Sabbath

The word “Sabbath” is found 135 times in the Bible. It is mentioned 75 times in the Hebrew Scriptures and 60 times in the New Testament. Additionally, the plural form of the word, “Sabbaths,” is found 35 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. The word refers to the seventh day of the week and basically means to rest or take an intermission. The Hebrew word for Sabbath is “Shabbat.”

The Purpose of the Sabbath

The basic purpose of the Sabbath is to provide a day for people to rest from their labors and spend time in fellowship with God and one another. In addition to this

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basic purpose, God gave the Sabbath to the Jewish people for two very important reasons:

1. It was a sign of the covenant God had with them (Ex. 31:12-17)
2. It was a visual aid or picture of the Messiah who would come and give them a greater rest in their souls (2 Tim. 3:14-17; Matt. 11:28-30; Heb. 4:9-11).

The Sabbath in the First Testament

Let's now see what the Bible says about the Sabbath in the First Testament. We'll start with the references before Moses.

The Sabbath Before Moses

THE SABBATH AT CREATION (Gen. 2:1-3)

The very first idea of a Sabbath is found in the creation account. It reads as follows, *Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. (Gen. 2:1-3)*

While the word Sabbath is not actually used in this Scripture, scholars of all persuasions have recognized this creation account to be the origin of the Sabbath. The Scripture tell us that God created the heaven and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh day. God didn't rest because He was tired. The Scripture says He rested because He was through. God ended His work. It was finished! Because He was finished, God set apart (sanctified) the seventh day as a special day of rest.

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THE SABBATH AND THE GIVING OF THE MANNA(Ex. 16:23-30)

The first express mention of the Sabbath is found in Exodus 16. This is the story of God providing manna for the children of Israel as they were making their way to Mt. Sinai. The Scripture reads:

Then he said to them, “This is what the LORD has said: ‘Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.’ ” So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. Then Moses said, “Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none.”

Now it happened that some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none. And the LORD said to Moses, “How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! For the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day. (Ex. 16:23-30)

We learn in this Scripture that God sent manna from heaven each morning to provide the daily bread for the Israelites. On the sixth day, God told them to gather twice as much because the next day was the seventh day, the Sabbath. God declared it a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD, when the people would finish with their labor and spend time meditating on the goodness of God revealed in creation and their redemption from Egypt.

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God instructed the people not to go out on the seventh day. There wouldn't be any manna. However, some folks didn't obey. They went out anyway and came home empty handed. God was angry with the people. They finally got the point and obeyed. It was only the mercy of God that spared them (Ezek. 20:12-21).

From the creation account and the story with the manna, we learn that God gave the Sabbath before He formalized it with the people through Moses and the giving of the Torah.

The Sabbath and Moses

THE SABBATH AT SINAI (Ex. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15)

The next reference to the Sabbath is at Mt. Sinai when God gives the Torah to Moses and the people. Exodus 20:8-11 reads, *Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.* (Ex. 20:8-11)

The Deuteronomy passage adds, *And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.* (Deut. 5:15)

This reference is the one of the Ten Words (better known as the Ten Commandments) which God gave to Moses and the people. This special day of rest was a reminder to the people of the fact that God was the Creator

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of the universe as well as the One who redeemed them from Egypt. God did for Israel what Israel could not do for herself. He redeemed her with power and blood.

They were slaves in Egypt and could not redeem themselves. They could rest in what God had done for them. Pharaoh was defeated. The victory was theirs. The struggle was over. Now they had a whole day to rest from their labors and meditate on the goodness of God. The Sabbath would be a weekly reminder that He had set them free.

THE SABBATH AS A SIGN (Ex. 31:12-17; Ezek. 20:12)

The Sabbath was a special sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Exodus 31:12-17 reads, *And the LORD spoke to Moses saying, "Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you will keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you.*

Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.

Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.' " (Ex. 31:12-17)

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When God said He gave the Sabbath as a sign, He meant it would be a pledge or seal guaranteeing His commitment to keep His promises to the children of Israel to give them a land, to make them a great nation, and to redeem the world through them. God had made these promises to Abraham and his descendants and the Sabbath was the guarantee that God would do what He said. When the people rested on the Sabbath they were resting in the faithfulness of God to keep His word.

This is similar to what kings in ancient times did when they entered into a covenant with lesser nations. The king would place his seal in the covenant document. The seal was the guarantee or pledge by the king to the lesser nation that he would uphold his part of the covenant. The people could rest in the king's pledge.

Likewise, Israel could rest in her God. The Sabbath was a weekly reminder that He had redeemed them by His will. He had set them apart unto Himself and He would perfect or bring to completion the things that concerned them (Ps. 138:8).

THE SABBATH AS A VISUAL AID

God said, "You shall keep My Sabbaths." There were numerous Sabbaths which God called "holy convocations" or "holy assemblies." The Hebrew word for this sacred assembly is *mikrah*. It means "rehearsal." The Sabbaths were a dress rehearsal preparing the people for One who would come as the Lord of the Sabbath to give rest to their souls.

The weekly Sabbath served as the basis for the other sacred assemblies of the Lord. They were all pictures of the Messiah who would embody the spiritual reality of the Sabbaths. The Sabbaths are given in Leviticus 23 (the

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Feast) and Leviticus 25 (the Seven-Year Sabbath and Year of Jubilee). They are:

1. The Weekly Sabbath - Lev. 23:3
2. The First Day of Unleavened Bread - Lev. 23:7
3. The Last Day of Unleavened Bread - Lev. 23:8
4. The Feast of Pentecost - Lev. 23: 21
5. The Feast of Trumpets - Lev. 23:24
6. The Feast (Day) of Atonement - Lev. 23:26
7. The First Day of the Feast of Tabernacles - Lev. 23:35
8. The Eighth Day at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles - Lev. 23:36
9. The Seven-Year Sabbath - Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:1-7
10. The Year of Jubilee Sabbath - Lev. 25:8-55; 27:17-24

As the children of Israel kept the Sabbaths, they would be acting out the drama of redemption as a full dress rehearsal in preparation for the Messiah who would embody the true meaning of the Sabbaths in His own life and ministry.

God decreed that if anyone broke the Sabbath, they should be put to death (Ex. 31:14-15; 35:2; Num. 15:32-36). This sounds very harsh and unloving for what we might consider a “minor infraction.” However, God established this severe penalty because of what the Sabbaths pictured for the people. If someone refused to keep the Sabbath, it showed they rejected God’s redemptive provision for them. If God left them unpunished, then eventually the entire nation would lose God’s picture of redemption and reject Him.

Even though the people were not to work on the Sabbath, God did make exceptions for them to perform their religious duties such as the priests preparing the showbread and offering sacrifices at the tabernacle, and

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later the Temple (Lev. 24:8; Num. 28:9-10). The Sabbath was so important it had its own special song called, “The Song of the Sabbath” (Ps. 92). In later centuries, the rabbis ruled that it was permissible to violate the Sabbath in order to save a life in times of emergency.

The Sabbath and the Prophets

THE SABBATH A DELIGHT

God gave the Sabbath to be a blessing to His people. In Bible times, life was hard. Work was strenuous. There were no convenient, labor-saving devices such as washing machines, dishwashers, tractors, lawnmowers, disposal diapers, etc. People were exhausted just trying to make a living.

The Sabbath was a tremendous gift from God to people whose tired, aching bodies needed a rest. It was the one day of the week when they could spend time with God and family. They could break their monotonous routine. They could “take an intermission.” They could refresh their spirits and souls. No wonder the prophet Isaiah calls the Sabbath a delight. Who wouldn’t be delighted in such a day of rest and relaxation.

Isaiah writes, *If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath [keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath], from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself [find joy] in the LORD (Isa. 58:13-14)*

In this Scripture, God calls the Sabbath, “My holy day, the holy day of the LORD.” Although the people were to

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honor God each day of their lives, this was the one day of the week set apart especially for this purpose. The Sabbath was God's gift of time to honor Him.

The people were not to go their own ways, find their own pleasures, and speak their words. Instead, they were to spend the day studying, meditating, praying, and fellowshiping with God and one another as a family. God would bless the people with great joy as a result of being in His presence (Ps. 16:11).

THE SABBATH AND FOREIGNERS

The Sabbath was such a blessing that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob expected foreigners who accepted Him as their God to keep the Sabbath. Isaiah writes:

Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come, and My righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man [mankind] who lays hold on it; who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing evil.

Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant—" (Isa. 56:1-2,6) (See also Ex. 20:10.)

God links the Sabbath with His covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Foreigners who turned from their idols and accepted the God of the Jews as the one true God entered into the Abrahamic covenant and became part of the commonwealth of Israel. As part of the covenant people of God, it was natural that they keep the Sabbath. God says He will bless the son of man (mankind in general) who keeps the Sabbath.

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Of course, just “keeping the Sabbath” would not please God. He expected the people to keep the Sabbath with a right heart. This is why He added the phrase, “keeps his hand from doing evil.” God would bless the one who honored the Sabbath outwardly and inwardly by expressing love toward God and each other.

PROFANING THE SABBATH

Unfortunately, God’s people did not always delight in the Sabbath. Either they didn’t keep it, or they didn’t keep it as God intended. This is one of the reasons why they were defeated by Babylon, Jerusalem burned, and the people taken captive.

Jeremiah writes:

Thus the LORD said to me, “Go and stand in the gates of the children of the people, by which the kings of Judah come in and by which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem; and say to them, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, you kings of Judah, and all of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who enter by these gates.’ ”

Thus says the LORD: ‘Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers. But they did not obey nor incline their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear nor receive instruction.’ (Jer. 17:19-23)

God goes on to say that He will bless the people if they will obey (vrs. 24-26). However, if they do not obey, there will be tragic consequences. The reason is because the commandment to keep the Sabbath was basic to the whole

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structure of worship and recognition of the LORD as their covenant God in creation and redemption.

God forewarns, *But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched. (Jer. 17:27)*

God told the people not to kindle a fire on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:1-3). Because the people did not obey, God kindled a fire in Jerusalem and it burned as Jeremiah predicted.

Ezekiel tells us further that the people profaned the Sabbath, even the priests:

You have despised My holy things and profaned My Sabbaths. (Ezek. 22:8.

Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and the unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. (Ezek. 22:26)

THE SABBATH AND NEHEMIAH

When the people returned from exile under the leadership of Nehemiah, they renewed their covenant with God promising to obey Him and keep the Sabbath. They took an oath and pronounced a curse on themselves if they disobeyed. (See Neh. 9-10.)

Humans often make promises they don't keep, even to God. They mean well, and the spirit is willing, but the

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Flesh is weak. Once again, the people profaned the Sabbath. Nehemiah writes:

In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day in which they were selling provisions. ... Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, 'What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day?

Did not your fathers do this, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.' (Neh. 13:15-18)

Nehemiah took the appropriate action to stop the work on the Sabbath. Then he says, *And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day.* (Neh. 13:22)

THE SABBATH BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

Those zealous to keep God's commands learned to honor the Sabbath. During the time between the Testaments, when they were attacked on the Sabbath by the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes, they refused to fight. We learn in 1 Macc:

Many pursued them, and overtook them; they encamped opposite them and prepared for battle against them on the Sabbath day. They said to them, "Enough of this! Come out and do what the king commands, and you will live." But they said, "We will not come out, nor will we do what the king commands and so profane the Sabbath day." So they

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attacked them on the Sabbath, and they died, with their wives and children and livestock, to the number of a thousand persons. (1 Macc. 2:32-34,38)

It didn't take long for the leaders of the resistance to realize they would be completely destroyed if they didn't defend themselves. We read, *When Mattathias and his friends learned of it, they mourned for them deeply. And all said to their neighbors: "If we all do as our kindred have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and for our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth."*

So they made this decision that day: "Let us fight against anyone who comes to attack us on the Sabbath day; let us not all die as our kindred died in their hiding places."(1 Macc. 2:39-41)

During the intertestamental period the development and prominence of the synagogue led to the Sabbath becoming a day of worship and study as well as a day of rest. From the time of Ezra to the time of Jesus, *Torah* study was given great emphasis and many restrictions and rules were formulated by the rabbis as a practical way of observing the Sabbath. A great body of oral law and traditions was forming.

The rabbis were rightfully zealous to keep the Sabbath. Unfortunately, their rules and regulations were so stifling, the Sabbath became a burden rather than a blessing. Eventually, the rabbis declared 39 classes of prohibited actions regarding the Sabbath. These prohibitions led to many hairsplitting "thou shall nots" which were in effect during the time of Jesus. More about this in the next lesson.

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Personal Study Review

INSTRUCTIONS:

Answer the following questions by submitting a typed answer for each question, double-spaced on one page. There should be a separate typed page for each question.

1. Explain the purpose of the Sabbath.
2. What did God say about the Sabbath:
 - A. Before Moses?
 - B. With Moses at Sinai?
3. In your own words, explain the meaning and significance of:
 - A. Isaiah 58:13-14
 - B. Isaiah 56:1-2,6
4. Explain why God made “such a big deal” through the prophets warning the people about keeping the Sabbath.
5. Explain how you can apply what you have learned in this lesson to your life.