

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 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).

Words You Should Know

A. Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15) shabbath (Heb.) — A day of ceasing to work or a time to rest.

B. Testified (vv. 15, 21) `uwd (Heb.) — Bore witness, affirmed solemnly.

Say It Correctly

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

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

Sabbath. SA-buhth

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.

NLT

Nehemiah 13:15 In those days I saw men of Judah treading out their winepresses on the Sabbath. They were also bringing in grain, loading it on donkeys, and bringing their wine, grapes, figs, and all sorts of produce to Jerusalem to sell on the Sabbath. So I rebuked them for selling their produce on that day.

16 Some men from Tyre, who lived in Jerusalem, were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise. They were selling it on the Sabbath to the people of Judah—and in Jerusalem at that!

17 So I confronted the nobles of Judah. “Why are you profaning the Sabbath in this evil way?” I asked.

18 “Wasn’t it just this sort of thing that your ancestors did that caused our God to bring all this trouble upon us and our city? Now you are bringing even more wrath upon Israel by permitting the Sabbath to be desecrated in this way!”

19 Then I commanded that the gates of Jerusalem should be shut as darkness fell every Friday evening, not to be opened until the Sabbath ended. I sent some of my own servants to guard the gates so that no merchandise could be brought in on the Sabbath day.

20 The merchants and tradesmen with a variety of wares camped outside Jerusalem once or twice.

21 But I spoke sharply to them and said, “What are you doing out here, camping around the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you!” And that was the last time they came on the Sabbath.

22 Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and to guard the gates in order to preserve the holiness of the Sabbath. Remember this good deed also, O my God! Have compassion on me according to your great and unfailing love.

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 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 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

1. 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 us 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:

More Light on the Text

Nehemiah 13:15–22

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.

In today’s text, we see an assertive Nehemiah who refused to allow the Sabbath to be profaned. This was happening by trading, buying, and selling in the Temple. This was against God’s command. He was concerned with honoring the Sabbath. In Hebrew, “sabbath” is shabbath (shab-bawth). This refers to the seventh day of the week and can also be a day of atonement. God had done so much already for the Israelites in delivering them from bondage, helping them to build the wall of Jerusalem, and returning their dignity as a nation. Nehemiah was not going to tolerate sin in the camp. He would not tolerate them working at their vineyards, preparing loads to take to a marketplace, and otherwise carrying on with their normal chores. This day was set aside to worship the Lord—to bring praises and thanksgiving to Him—and nothing less would be tolerated.

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.

To add insult to injury, men from Tyre brought fish and various wares and sold them to the Israelites on the Sabbath. They had the nerve to do it in Jerusalem on the Lord's Day—the day set aside for worship. This happened where the new wall had been built. Nehemiah found this offensive and knew that it would be offensive to the Lord. He knew that His people had gotten in trouble with the Lord in the first place because of their disobedience. This was the primary reason they were sent into captivity for 70 years and needed deliverance. Under his watch, Nehemiah made sure that God's rules were obeyed.

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

Nehemiah contended with the nobles of Judah. In Hebrew, the word "contended" is riyb (reeb) and it means, "strove physically," "confronted," "made a complaint." He let them know that the activities were very much out of order on the Sabbath. Something had to be done right away to alleviate the problem. In fact, he called these activities "an evil thing." The word "evil" in Hebrew is ra` (rah). It means, "bad," "disagreeable," "malignant," "displeasing." In Nehemiah's sight, selling and buying on the Sabbath was profane. In Hebrew, "profane" is chalah (khaw-lal), meaning, "to defile," "pollute," or "desecrate."

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.

Nehemiah saw the blatant disobedience as bringing more wrath upon Israel, as their fathers' disobedience had done. In Hebrew, the word "wrath," (charown, khaw-RONE), means "anger," "heat," "burning of anger." In other words, he reminds them that it was their disobedience that brought about God's wrath before. They would not risk this disobedience bringing His wrath again.

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.

For Nehemiah, profaning of the Sabbath was so serious that he took charge and commanded that the gates be shut and that they not be opened again until after the Sabbath. He ensured that God's Day would not be violated in any way. This sent the merchants and sellers the message that it would not be business as usual on the Sabbath. This was a holy, consecrated day set aside to worship a holy God.

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.

Nehemiah was willing to lay hands on anyone who did not heed his words. It was so important that they not disobey God's commands that he was willing to take anyone to task who did not clear their wares from the wall.

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 next step was a time of purification. Again, Nehemiah showed his great leadership by commanding the Levites (those set aside by God to do special work for Him) to cleanse themselves and to sanctify the Sabbath day. In Hebrew, "sanctify" is qadash (kaw-dash), and it means "to be set apart," to be "consecrated," or "to be hallowed." The Sabbath is a holy day because our God is holy. Nehemiah recognized this and was not willing to violate God's commands. After restoring the sanctity of the Sabbath, Nehemiah then asked God to remember him and show mercy toward him. In other words, Nehemiah did not want God to bring punishment like Israel experienced in the past. He wanted to be remembered when God was passing out His blessings.

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)