

Chapter Nine

The Rabbinic standards regarding Shabbat

Besides the Biblical food laws, the Sabbath¹ is frequently seen as another identifier of the Jewish people. Although not exclusively for the Jews, as we will see in a later chapter, it is almost universally recognized as a practice that does set Jews apart.

To separate out the traditions of men surrounding the Sabbath, it is necessary to first look at the actual Biblical teachings. The reader is invited to look up the following commands and some related concepts about the Sabbath that are contained in the Bible. Write the ideas in your own words.

- Exodus 16:23-29 ...
- Exodus 20:8-11 ...
- Exodus 31:13-17 ...
- Exodus 35:2-3 ...

- Leviticus 23:3 ...
- Leviticus 24:1-9 ...
- Numbers 28:4-10 ...
- Deuteronomy 5:12-15 ...
- Numbers 15:32 ...
- Nehemiah 10:28-31 ...
- Nehemiah 13:15-22 ...
- Isaiah 56:2-7 ...
- Isaiah 58:13,14 ...
- Isaiah 66:23 ...
- Jeremiah 17:21-27 ...
- Amos 8:5 ...

Why might it be significant that the Sabbath is mentioned at the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis 2:2,3 before there were any people that could be called “Jewish” and before there

was a Torah from Moses? Can it be truly said that the Sabbath is just a “Jewish” thing? More on this in a later chapter.

The text in Genesis 2:2,3 states, “On the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because he rested in it from all his work of creation which he had done.”

When it says that God rested after finishing all His work, does that imply that He was tired? That sounds silly, doesn't it? What does “rest” mean here? It says that God ceased from His work. The Hebrew word for ceased is “yishbot” and is related to the word “shavat”. This is where the term Shabbat comes from. The text tells us that God “ceased” from His work because it was done and complete. He spent the time of Shabbat enjoying His creation. That is the key to understanding how we are to relate to the Shabbat.

God has placed within us the need to have a weekly cessation of our everyday work to simply enjoy the fruit of our labor and to enjoy Him and His provisions for us. God knows that mankind has a strong tendency to keep working, sometimes never stopping to rest. We are designed by God to take a serious break each week. People who violate this principle run the risk of attaining burnout, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

God also sanctified or set apart the seventh day as that day of rest. This is from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday according to our reckoning of the weekly calendar. Why this time frame? The Jewish calendar has always reckoned the next day starting at sundown based on God's own design shown in the Genesis texts as "there was evening and morning, one day".

So, how have the traditions of man affected our understanding and practices regarding the Shabbat? The rabbis have created a seemingly never-ending list of definitions and prohibitions that make the day anything but a day of rest and grace.

As an example, the Torah does state in Exodus 35:3, "You shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations on the Sabbath day." Is that because kindling a fire involves so much work? I do not think so. I think it reflects the idea of not "creating" since Shabbat is reflective of resting from the prior six days of creating. It is permissible to utilize an existing fire on Shabbat, just not start a new one. Ok, I can accept the simplicity behind this. Apparently, the rabbis cannot. They have determined that starting a car engine on Shabbat is a violation since there is the creation of a tiny spark of electricity that is tantamount to "kindling a fire". In Israel, the elevators have a "Shabbat Mode" that has them stop at each floor going up and going down on Shabbat but not the other days. Why? Because the rabbis have determined that pushing the elevator button makes an electrical connection

that is, again, kindling a fire. The same is true for light switches in the home, etc. As an aside, if your electrical switches are prone to “kindling a fire”, you might want to consider hiring an electrician. You might have a bigger problem than violating a rabbinic rule regarding Shabbat!

When does it stop? It doesn't. Rules for Shabbat observance exist prohibiting opening an umbrella, running, clipping fingernails, squeezing orange juice, brushing teeth, and braiding hair. Some in the Orthodox community pre-tear toilet paper for use on Shabbat because “tearing” involves “work”. Some Karaite Jews even go so far as to avoid going to the bathroom at all on Shabbat because that act itself is considered “work”. My opinion is if you have to do a natural bodily function like going to the bathroom and “try” not to until Shabbat is over, THAT is a heck of a lot of “work” that destroys the peace of Shabbat!

In highlighting the above rabbinic concepts, I do not intend to demean the sincerity of religious Jewish people who are attempting to follow a path of piety and obedience to what they believe are requirements that emanate from God. It is simply to show how far the traditions of men have taken their understanding and definitions and how that has created a legalistic treadmill of “works righteousness” that is so opposed to God's grace. It is hard for people who are thus deceived to accurately

perceive the grace and mercy of God and His gracious provisions that He created for us to enjoy.

There are many more thoughts about the Shabbat we could delve into and will in a later chapter. The purpose here, however, is to see the simplicity of the Shabbat and get a glimpse of its purpose and gracious provision from our Heavenly Father given to us all for our benefit. Yeshua said in Mark 2:27, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” It is a provision of God’s grace for our enjoyment and protection, not a device to impose harsh, stringent legalism.

1. Shabbat is the Hebrew word for Sabbath