

## **Sabbath commands**

### **(Exodus 16:21–30)**

In verse 5 of the present chapter, Yahweh gave a general command to Moses regarding the gathering of the manna. There he ordered that on the sixth day of the week a double portion of manna should be collected in order to provide for the sixth and seventh days. In the paragraph now under consideration, Moses provides specific regulations relating to that law. These are the first Sabbath laws of the Bible. 16:21. And they gathered it morning by morning each according to what one could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

This verse serves as a general introduction to the next section. The Hebrews have mended their ways, and now they are obedient to the commands of God regarding the manna.

A repetitive expression for the time of gathering is employed here: literally, ‘in the morning, in the morning’. Reiteration of the preposition and the noun signifies entirety in distribution—in other words, it expresses the idea that the Israelites collected manna each and every morning.

16:22. And it came to pass on the sixth day that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for one [person]. And all the leaders of the congregation came and they told it to Moses.

Some commentators believe that the double amount of manna on the sixth day was a surprise to Israel when the people went out to the fields. Based on that discovery, they say, Moses then used the opportunity to instruct the Hebrews in the Sabbath principle. But the fact of the matter is, the Sabbath law did not simply come out of the blue. God had already explained it to Moses in verse 5. The existence of the Sabbath is assumed in the present verse; it had existed since the time of creation in Genesis 2:1–3. 16:23. And he said to them, ‘This is what Yahweh says, “Tomorrow is a Sabbath, a holy Sabbath to Yahweh; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil. Whatever is left over, you shall keep for yourselves until morning.” ’

On the same day as the events of verse 22 (the sixth day), Moses tells the people that the next day is to be observed as a Sabbath day. It is a ‘holy’ day—that is, one that is set apart, unique and special; that, of course, reflects the account of the original creation: ‘Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made’ (Gen. 2:3).

The command concerning cooking reads literally: ‘That which you will bake, bake. And that which you will boil, boil.’ In both phrases, an imperfect verbal form is followed by an imperative of the same root. This is the idem per idem principle which serves to provide the subject with total freedom in carrying out a command.

‘You shall keep [it]’ is the same command that was given to the Israelites in Egypt in regard to saving the Passover lamb until the proper moment of sacrifice (12:6). These things must be done according to God’s timing and laws.

Two basic interpretations have been proposed for the general command of this verse. The first is that all the manna had to be baked or boiled on the sixth day so that the Sabbath would not be profaned by cooking on it; the second view is that the Israelites were to bake and boil only the manna which they needed on the sixth day; uncooked manna would not be contaminated on the Sabbath. In other words, the law had nothing to do with cooking on the Sabbath. On the basis of the idem per idem formula, the latter explanation appears to be the most appropriate.

16:24. So they saved it until the morning as Moses commanded, and it did not smell or have worms in it. The Hebrews obeyed God’s orders as they were given through Moses. The result is that the manna gathered on the sixth day kept overnight; it did not become contaminated or rancid, in contrast to what happened on the other six nights. If they hoarded manna on those days, it would be spoilt by morning (v. 20).

The general sense of the verb for ‘save’ is ‘to rest’: ‘So they rested it until morning.’ Actually, because of the command it was the Hebrews who were to rest, not the manna.

16:25. And Moses said, 'Eat it today because today is a Sabbath to Yahweh; today you will not find it in the field.'

Verses 23–25 contain the first instances of the noun Sabbath (Hebrew, *sabat*) in the Bible. Certainly the concept existed as early as creation, yet the specific name of the day is not revealed to the reader until this time.

The definite noun translated 'today' occurs three times. It is for emphasis, to underscore the uniqueness of the Sabbath to the people of Israel.

16:26. 'Six days you may gather it, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath; it will not be there.'

The formulation, 'Six days ... but on the seventh day' first appears in the Bible in this verse, but it becomes idiomatic for the Sabbath laws throughout the Torah (see Exod. 20:9–11; 23:12; 31:15, 17; 34:21; 35:2). This literary convention is another indicator that the central ideas and laws of the Sabbath are present in the story of the manna. It is again important to note that these concepts precede the giving of the law at Sinai.

16:27. And it came to pass on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, and they did not find [any].

A prepositional phrase serves as the subject of the sentence. 'From the people' (preposition *min*) is a partitive marker referring to a part of the subsequent noun (cf., 2 Sam. 11:17; 2 Kings 9:33). The word 'some' is a solid translation. The subject is so general, however, that one cannot determine the extent or number of the people involved in the disobedience.

Ezekiel, a sixth-century prophet of Judah, alludes to this event by saying, 'So I took them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them my statutes and informed them of my ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live. And also I gave them my Sabbaths to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes, and they rejected my ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live; and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned' (20:10–13). Implied in the prophet's account is the idea that the scene was one of widespread violation. Exactly how many people were involved in defiance is a mystery, however.

16:28. Then Yahweh said to Moses, 'How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?'

Clearly, the 'commands' and 'instructions' that God is speaking about are the Sabbath statutes that have just been elaborated. Again, God is testing the obedience of his people. They, however, are failing miserably.

The Lord's charge against Israel (through the covenant mediator Moses) is similar to his assault upon Pharaoh. In Exodus 10:3 the Lord said to Pharaoh, 'How long will you refuse?' The Hebrews are thus acting like the Egyptian king; that is, stubbornly disregarding the Word of God. But God has warned them. If they continue to act in disbelief and rebelliousness, then they will receive the same diseases/plagues that fell on Egypt (see 15:26).

16:29. 'See that Yahweh has given you the Sabbath; therefore he is giving you bread on the sixth day for two days; everyone shall stay in his place; no one shall go out from his place on the seventh day.'

Yahweh himself is speaking here. He announces that the Sabbath is a divine gift to the people of Israel. Thus it is right to emphasize the joyfulness of the day. It is not something that the Hebrews celebrated in Egypt—Pharaoh was an oppressor and he would give them no time for rest. Unfortunately, many of the Hebrews apparently saw the Sabbath as oppressive, and that is why they disobeyed and went in search of manna. They had got it the wrong way round (see Deut. 5:15). P. D. Miller sums up the meaning of this verse by saying, 'Here is an explicit statement in a narrative about the Sabbath that it is the gift of the Lord. In a larger way that is clearly the point that the Exodus form of the commandment means to make by reading the Sabbath into creation and identifying the Sabbath as blessed by the Lord and hallowed. That is, the Lord's blessing of the Sabbath is the providing of the Sabbath as a gift for human existence.'

While I would strongly disagree with his statement that the Sabbath is to be read into creation—rather than being integral to it—yet, his emphasis upon the Sabbath as blessing is quite accurate.

16:30. So the people rested on the seventh day.

The verb ‘rested’ is šābāt, from which derives the noun ‘Sabbath’. Consequently, the opening phrase could actually read, ‘So the people kept the Sabbath’ (cf. Lev. 23:32).

The reader should also note the assonance in the verse: the verb is šābāt and the word for ‘seventh’ is šēba’. Thus the section ends on a lovely and highly poetical note.

### **Application**

Many in the church today feel that the Sabbath/Lord’s Day is oppressive and burdensome. They act as if the day were one of drudgery and dull legalisms. That general misconception is unfortunate, because the Sabbath is to be a day of celebration and joy. Even Karl Barth, with whom we have little in common, recognizes the jubilant and joyful nature of the day: ‘On this day he is to celebrate, rejoice and be free, to the glory of God. In this celebration, joy and freedom he will be obedient. To withdraw from it under any pretext would be disobedience.’ That, of course, is Jesus’ point when he says, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27). It is for humanity’s well-being; it is a blessing; and it is to be a delight.

When I first began teaching, a number of my students were convicted of the necessity of keeping the Sabbath. They believed that the day should be set apart for acts of piety, necessity, mercy and rest. Their main concern was the idea of not being able to study on that day. An odd thing happened, however. When they kept the Sabbath their grades actually improved. They worked diligently the other six days of the week and they looked with eager anticipation to the Sabbath—and it became a day of joy to them. God makes a grand promise to his people about the Sabbath:

‘If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath  
and from doing as you please on my holy day,  
if you call the Sabbath a delight  
and the Lord’s holy day honourable,  
and if you honour it by not going your own way  
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,  
then you will find your joy in the Lord,  
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land  
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.’