

Jericho and the Sabbath Day

By Ted Gatza

The Sabbath Law

The Sabbath, a holy day of rest, was one of the Old Testament laws God commanded the Israelites to observe. It appears as the Fourth Commandment in the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai. On that day, God said that no work was to be done.

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor, and do all your work. But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD your God: in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: why the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

The law was explicit regarding what was prohibited: any work (Ex. 20:10), kindling a fire (Ex. 35:3), gathering food (Ex. 16:26–30), and carrying burdens (Jer. 17:21–22). Violating the Sabbath brought serious consequences. As stated in Exodus 31:14–15:

“You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who defiles it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done, but the seventh is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall surely be put to death.”

God’s instructions were clear. Violate the law and lose your life. The seriousness of not obeying this command is recorded for us in Numbers 15:32-36, where a man was put to death because he gathered sticks on the Sabbath.

The Events at Jericho

The events at Jericho present a unique situation. When the people were finally permitted to enter the promised land, the first city God gave them was Jericho. What is particularly noteworthy about the siege is that God instructed the Israelites to march around the city. The procession consisted of armed men leading the way, followed by seven priests bearing rams’ horns. The Ark of the Covenant followed them, and the rearguard brought up the procession.

The people remained silent as they marched for six days while the priests blew the horns. On the seventh day, as they circled the city, they were commanded to shout when they

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heard the sound of the horns. At that moment, the walls fell, and God gave them the city and the victory (Josh. 6:5–21).

As we consider what took place, it is evident that on the Sabbath day they marched, carried the ark, and blew trumpets. Was this a violation of the Sabbath command to not do any work? Did God, the Lawgiver, cause them to violate His own law? These are questions that require an answer.

Purpose of the Sabbath

To understand what occurred at Jericho, we must first understand the purpose of the Sabbath and why God declared it to be holy. First, the Sabbath served as a remembrance of the creation; Exodus 20:11 states that God rested on the seventh day. Second, it commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage by God (Deut. 5:15). Third, it functioned as a sign between God and Israel (Ex. 31:13).

The Sabbath was not simply a day of rest; it was a weekly reminder to look back and reflect on God as Creator. It was a God-ordained memorial day tied to creation and redemption under the Old Covenant—a day when the cares of the world were to be set aside and Israel's attention directed toward God. It was His way of reminding them who He is, what He has done, and who they are as His people. The strict reinforcement of this law was necessary, for there would always be those who had no desire to remember or give God the glory.

Sabbath Day Work

Even though the command not to work was given, there was work that was done on the Sabbath. For example:

- **Sacrifices:** Offered by the priests (Numbers 28:9-10). The priests performed additional sacrifices on the Sabbath. Two lambs were offered every Sabbath, along with grain and drink offerings. These were in addition to the daily sacrifices.
- **Incense:** The burning of incense every morning and evening (Ex. 30:7-8). Since this was a daily duty, it continued on the Sabbath, indicating that worship practices were maintained even on the day of rest.
- **Showbread:** The replacing of the showbread (Lev. 24:5-8). The bread of the Presence was set in order every Sabbath, involving baking fresh bread and removing the old.
- **Temple Duties:** Maintenance by the priests and Levites, including opening/closing gates and assisting in worship (2 Chron. 23:4).
- **Assemblies:** It was a day of sacred assemblies (Lev. 23:3) where the people gathered for worship.
- **Circumcision:** Required on the eighth day (Lev. 12:3). When it fell on the Sabbath, it was performed.

All of these examples demonstrate a consistent truth: the priests were actively engaged in work on the Sabbath day, yet they remained blameless because their actions were

commanded. Work performed in service to God, in accordance with His law, did not constitute a violation of the Sabbath.

Justification for Jericho's Seven-Day March

What occurred at Jericho was neither an exception to the Sabbath law nor a violation of it. If God commanded something to be done, even on the Sabbath, it was to be obeyed. At Jericho, the carrying of the ark and the blowing of the trumpets by the priests indicate that this was a divinely directed religious procession, much like the work performed by the priests on the Sabbath.

Marching around the city at God's command was not ordinary labor. It was a religious act of faith. Hebrews 11:30 tells us, "*By faith the walls of Jericho fell down...*" There was no sinful violation because there was no disobedience. Sin is defined by John as "*...the transgression of the law*" (1 Jn. 3:4).

In Conclusion

The events at Jericho were not a Sabbath violation because God directly commanded the action. It was not ordinary work; it was sacred obedience. It was similar to the priests working on the Sabbath. Finally, the Sabbath law was never in conflict with the immediate will of God. What was done at Jericho was done in religious obedience, not transgression.

Christians today understand the importance of obeying God's commands. Just like God's commands at Jericho, our obedience stands between His word and the victory that is to be achieved. To do anything else will result in our defeat.

Sadly, disregard for God's commands is what we see in the religious world today. The grace of God will never be tolerant of disobedience. Each of us must remain vigilant while "*holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught...*" (Titus 1:9a).

Let us never forget the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath.