

## LESSON 5 ARTICLE - OBSERVE THE SABBATH IN A HOLY WAY (20:8–11)

**20:8** “Sabbath” is the English reflex of a common Hebrew word (*šabbāt*) meaning “stopping/stoppage/cessation.”<sup>48</sup> The Sabbath is the “stopping [day]”, the day on which one’s regular work ceases both for the sake of giving laborers a break from their daily routine and for the sake of providing a focus on God that is periodically (weekly) heightened. Most English translations render this verse as “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” or “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy,” rather than the NIV’s “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” Which is correct, the traditional rendering that suggests that the *purpose* of remembering the Sabbath day is that it must be kept as a holy day—a day belonging to God—or the NIV, which suggests that the *means* of remembering the Sabbath day is by keeping it a holy day? Either translation is technically possible for the Hebrew wording (*lě* + infinitive construct with pronominal object suffix), but the choice made by the NIV translators represents the less likely option and the traditional translation the more likely, especially in light of the following explanatory material that describes the timing of the day as a weekly break (remember it each week, and don’t keep working during it) as distinctly separate from its religious purpose (a day that God blessed and made holy, i.e., set aside for God).

**20:9–10** What this explanation portion of the word/commandment prohibits is not any sort of exertion, or the preparing of food, or the feeding or watering of animals, or anything else necessary to get through the day in an agrarian culture. Rather, it prohibits duplicating on the Sabbath any of the usual labors of the other six days that can possibly be stopped without actually causing someone or something harm. People and animals would still need to be fed; lactating animals would still need to be milked; priests would still work within the sanctuary. Matt 12:5 But to the extent possible, all workers were to receive a day of rest.

How the Israelites might choose to distribute various sorts of minimal chores, such as feeding animals and preparing food, is not specified. Such necessities would have to take place at any rate, and those who truly tried to keep the covenant law would easily discover the fairest ways to make everyone’s workload minimal on the day of rest and to provide compensatory rest for those who labored on the Sabbath out of necessity. The goal was no laboring at all; some unavoidable work would nevertheless have to be done by those who served food to people or took care of flocks and herds.<sup>52</sup>

The *change* the Sabbath brings about in one’s weekly routine makes it a refreshing day rather than the absence of activity therein. A “desk worker” might enjoy more activity on the Sabbath.

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<sup>48</sup> שָׁבַת does not per se mean “rest” as has often wrongly been conjectured. Cf. G. Robinson, “The Idea of Rest in the Old Testament and the Search for the Basic Character of Sabbath,” ZAW 92 (1980): 32–42. This does not mean, however, that the purpose of the Sabbath cessation did not include rest for laborers human and animal; it simply means that the point of the law is a cessation at the end of the work week that must be observed whether or not someone thinks he or his animal is tired enough to need it. The motivation should be that the worker must stop working because God’s law says to stop working and to attend to worship, not because the worker thinks that he or his servant or his animal “needs” or “has earned” rest and relaxation.

<sup>52</sup> The impossibility of actually doing nothing at all on the Sabbath was always obvious. In the NT, Jesus clarified this commandment by emphasizing its purpose, which is to give a break from work to human beings, not to restrict people from doing what is enjoyable (e.g., Matt 12:1–12 and par.; Luke 13:10–16; John 7:22–23). Paul helped New Covenant believers relate to the Sabbath by calling attention to its purpose of granting rest to workers, with the understanding that such a rest could come on virtually any day as long as it was not denied (Rom 14:5; cf. Col 2:16).

