

# Covenant Sign



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Gen. 2:2, 3; Exod. 20:11; Exodus 16; Heb. 4:1–4; Exod. 31:12–17; Deut. 5:14.*

**Memory Text:** “Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant” (*Exodus 31:16*).

The seventh-day Sabbath is like a nail that—*Thwack!*—with unbroken regularity returns us each week to the foundation of all that we are or could be. We are so busy, running to and fro, spending money, making money, going here, going there, going everywhere, and then—*Thwack!*—Sabbath comes and reattaches us to our foundation, the starting point of everything that follows, because everything that is anything to us becomes that only because God created it and us to begin with.

With unceasing regularity, and with no exceptions, the Sabbath silently hurls over the horizon and into every crack and cranny of our lives. It reminds us that every crack and cranny belongs to our Maker, the One who put us here, the One who “in the beginning” created the heavens and the earth, an act that remains the irrefutable foundation of all Christian belief and of which the seventh-day Sabbath—*Thwack!*—is the irrefutable, unobtrusive, and unyielding sign.

This week we look at this sign in the context of the Sinai covenant.

**The Week at a Glance:** Where does the Sabbath have its origins? What evidence proves that the Sabbath existed before Sinai? What makes the Sabbath such an appropriate covenant sign?

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 29.

## Origins

How often we hear the phrase, the “old Jewish Sabbath.” Yet, Scripture is clear that the Sabbath existed long before there were any Jewish people. Its origin is found in the Creation week itself.

**Look up Genesis 2:2, 3 and Exodus 20:11. Where do they clearly, and unambiguously, place the origin of the Sabbath?**

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Although Genesis 2:2, 3 does not identify the “seventh day” as the Sabbath (this identification comes first in Exodus 16:26, 29), it is clearly suggested in the phrase “he rested on the seventh day” (*Gen. 2:2*). The word *rested* (Hebrew, *shabat*) is closely related to the noun *Sabbath* (Hebrew, *shabbat*). “The word ‘sabbath’ is not employed [in Gen. 2:2, 3], but it is certain that the author meant to assert that God blessed and hallowed the seventh day as the Sabbath.”—G. F. Waterman, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), vol. 5, p. 183. Evidently, Genesis 2:2, 3 teaches the divine origin and institution of the Sabbath as a day of blessing for all humanity.

Read Mark 2:27. Jesus says that Sabbath was made for, literally, “man,” meaning humanity as a whole, as opposed to the Jews alone.

**Why would God Himself rest on the seventh day? Did He need it? What other purpose might His resting have served?**

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Although some commentators have suggested that God needed physical rest after Creation, the true purpose of God in resting was to provide a divine example for humanity. Humankind also is to work for six days and then to rest on the seventh-day Sabbath. Theologian Karl Barth suggested that God’s resting at the end of Creation was a part of the “covenant of grace,” in which humankind was invited “to rest with Him . . . to participate in [God’s] rest.”—*Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, Ltd., 1958), vol. 3, p. 98.

God in His love called the man and the woman on the day after their creation to fellowship in rest, to establish intimate communion with Him in whose image they had been made. That fellowship and communion was to last forever. Since the fall of humankind, the Sabbath has offered a weekly high point in one’s life with the Savior.

**If someone were to ask you, “How has keeping the Sabbath benefited your relationship with the Lord,” how would you respond?**

## Sabbath Before Sinai

“And he said unto them, This is that which the LORD hath said, To morrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the LORD: bake that which ye will bake to day, and seethe that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning” (Exod. 16:23).

Skim through Exodus 16, the story of the manna provided to Israel, in the desert, before Sinai. Notice what this account reveals:

1. Only a regular portion of manna could be used each day; but on the sixth day a double portion was to be gathered.
2. No manna was given on the Sabbath.
3. The extra portion needed for the Sabbath was preserved from the sixth day unspoiled, while the manna would not keep on any other day.

**What** does this story reveal about the sanctity of the Sabbath before the giving of the law at Sinai? (See Exod. 16:23–28.)

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“In fact, the equation of the Sabbath with the seventh day, the statement that the Lord gave the Israelites the Sabbath, and the record that the people, at God’s command, rested on the seventh day, all point unmistakably to the primeval [at Creation] institution of the Sabbath.”—G. F. Waterman, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), vol. 5, p. 184.

**There** is a lot more about the Sabbath in Exodus 16 than first meets the eye. Look at the questions this passage answers for us:

1. Which day is the preparation day for the Sabbath?
2. Which day of the week is the Sabbath?
3. Where did the Sabbath come from?
4. What kind of day should the Sabbath be?
5. Is the Sabbath a day of fasting?
6. Is the Sabbath a test of loyalty to God?

How does your understanding of the Sabbath today match with what is taught about the Sabbath in Exodus 16?

## Covenant Sign

“ ‘ “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” ’ ” (*Exod. 31:16, 17, NIV*).

Four times in Scripture the Sabbath is designated as a “sign” (*Exod. 31:13, 17; Ezek. 20:12, 20*). A “sign” is not a “symbol” in the sense of a thing that naturally typifies, represents, or recalls something else, because both share similar qualities (for example, a symbol of a fist often denotes “might” or “power”). In the Bible, the Sabbath as a “sign” functioned as an outward mark or object or condition intended to convey a distinctive message. Nothing in the sign *itself* particularly linked it to the covenant. The Sabbath was a covenant sign “ ‘ “between me and you throughout your generations” ’ ” (*Exod. 31:13, RSV*) only because God said it was.

**Why** would the Lord use the Sabbath as a covenant sign? What is it about the Sabbath that would make it so appropriate as a symbol of the saving relationship with God? As we remember that a crucial aspect of the covenant is that we are saved by grace and that works cannot save us, what is it about the Sabbath itself that makes it such a good symbol of that relationship? (*See Gen. 2:3, Heb. 4:1–4*.)

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What is fascinating about the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant of grace is that for centuries the Jews have understood the Sabbath to be the sign of Messianic redemption. They saw in the Sabbath a foretaste of salvation in the Messiah. Because we understand redemption as coming only from grace, and because we understand the covenant to be a covenant of grace, the link between the Sabbath, redemption, and the covenant is made clear (*see Deut. 5:13–15*). Thus, contrary to common opinion, the Sabbath is a sign of God’s saving grace; it’s not a sign of salvation by works.

**How do you understand what it means to “rest” on the Sabbath? How do you rest on the Sabbath? What do you do differently on that day that makes it a “sign”? Could someone who knows you look at your life and see that the Sabbath really is a special day for you?**

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## Sign of Sanctification

“ ‘You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you’ ” (Exod. 31:13, RSV).

An exceptionally rich Sabbath passage is Exodus 31:12–17, which follows the Lord’s directions for the building of the sanctuary and the establishment of its services (Exod. 25:1–31:11).

The concept of the Sabbath as a “sign”—a visible, external, and *eternal* sign between God and His people—is expressed here in this manner for the first time. The text itself contains some fascinating concepts worthy of our study. Two new ideas are joined together in this text:

1. The Sabbath as a *sign of knowledge*.
2. The Sabbath as a *sign of sanctification*.

Consider the sign aspect related to knowledge. The Hebrew understanding of knowledge includes intellectual, relational, and emotional aspects. “To know” did not simply mean to know a fact, particularly when a person was involved. It also meant to have a meaningful relationship with the one known. Thus *to know the Lord* meant to be in a right relationship with Him—to “serve” Him (1 Chron. 28:9), to “fear” Him (Isa. 11:2), to “believe” Him (Isa. 43:10), to “trust” Him and “seek” Him (Ps. 9:10), and to “call on” His name (Jer. 10:25).

**Look** up each of the texts in the above paragraph. In what ways do these texts help us to understand what it means to “know” the Lord?

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In addition, the Sabbath has significance as a sign of sanctification. It signifies that the Lord “sanctifies” His people (*compare Lev. 20:8*) by making them “holy” (Deut. 7:6).

The sanctification process is as much the work of God’s redemptive love as is the saving and redeeming work of God. Righteousness (justification) and sanctification are both activities of God: “ ‘I . . . the LORD . . . sanctify you’ ” (Lev. 20:8, RSV). Thus, the Sabbath is a sign that imparts the knowledge of God as Sanctifier. “The Sabbath given to the world as the sign of God as the Creator is also the sign of Him as the Sanctifier.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 350.

**Consider the Sabbath day and the process of sanctification, that of *being made holy*. What role does Sabbath keeping have in this process? How can the Lord use our experience of keeping the Sabbath to help sanctify us?**

## Remembering the Sabbath

**“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy”** (*Exod. 20:8*).

The Sabbath was and is a sign for humanity to “remember.” The use of the word *remember* can serve various functions. First, *to remember* something implies looking backward, looking to the past. In this case, the Sabbath points us to the fiat Creation, which climaxed in the institution of the Sabbath as a weekly day of rest and special communion with God.

The injunction to remember also has implications for the present. We are not only to “remember” the Sabbath (*Exod. 20:8*); we also are to “observe” and “keep” it (*see Deut. 5:12, RSV*). Thus, the Sabbath has important implications for us now, in the present.

Finally, remembering the Sabbath also points us forward. The person who remembers the keeping of the Sabbath has a promising, rich, and meaningful future with the Lord of the Sabbath. He or she remains in the covenant relationship, because he or she remains in the Lord. Again, when we understand the covenant to be a relationship between God and humankind, the Sabbath, which greatly can help strengthen that relationship, comes into specific prominence.

Indeed, in remembering Creation and its Creator, God’s people also remember God’s gracious acts of salvation (*see Deuteronomy 5:14, where the Sabbath is seen, in this context, as a sign of deliverance from Egypt, a symbol of the ultimate salvation found in God*). Creation and re-creation belong together. The former makes the latter possible. The Sabbath is a sign that communicates that God is the Creator of the world and the Creator of our salvation.

**“By keeping His Sabbath holy we are to show that we are His people. His Word declares the Sabbath to be a sign by which to distinguish the commandment-keeping people. . . . Those who keep the law of God will be one with Him in the great controversy commenced in heaven between Satan and God.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 160.**

**Look at this statement from the Lord’s servant. What is it about the Sabbath that makes it something that can distinguish us as “the commandment-keeping people,” perhaps more so than any of the other commandments?**

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**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, pp. 968–970, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7; “The Observance of the Sabbath,” pp. 349–351, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6; “From the Red Sea to Sinai,” pp. 295–297, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

The Ten Commandments define comprehensively and fundamentally the divine-human and human-human relationships. The commandment at the center of the Decalogue is the Sabbath commandment. It identifies the Lord of the Sabbath in a special way and indicates His sphere of authority and ownership. Note these two aspects: (1) the identity of the Deity: Yahweh (LORD), who is the Creator (*Exod. 20:11, Exod. 31:17*) and who thus holds a unique place; (2) the sphere of His ownership and authority—“the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them” (*Exod. 20:11, NASB; compare Exod. 31:17*). In these two aspects, the Sabbath commandment has the characteristics that are typical of seals of international, ancient Near Eastern treaty documents. These seals are typically in the center of the treaty documents and also contain (1) the identity of a deity (usually a pagan god) and (2) the sphere of ownership and authority (usually a limited geographical area).

“The sanctification of the Spirit signalizes the difference between those who have the seal of God and those who keep a spurious rest day.

“When the test comes, it will be clearly shown what the mark of the beast is. It is the keeping of Sunday. . . .

“God has designated the seventh day as His Sabbath [Ex. 31:13, 17, 16 quoted].

“Thus the distinction is drawn between the loyal and the disloyal. Those who desire to have the seal of God in their foreheads must keep the Sabbath of the fourth commandment.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 980, 981.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① Read Leviticus 19:30. Notice how it links the sanctuary and the Sabbath. Considering what we have learned so far about what the Sabbath is a sign of, why does that linkage make so much sense?
- ② Ask yourself this question: Has Sabbath keeping helped strengthen my walk with the Lord? If not, what changes can you make?

**Summary:** The Sabbath is a covenant sign that reaches forward to the time when the plan of salvation will be consummated. It points back to Creation, and as a sign of the covenant of grace, it points us to the final re-creation, when God makes all things new.

## Bawling Tattoo Artist

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Dr. Hernando Díaz was assisting a patient at the Adventist Medical Center in Medellín, Colombia, when a shadowy figure at his office door startled him. It was a shaven-headed man covered with explicit tattoos. Tattoos formed a black-and-blue web over his head. Tattoos covered his arms and hands.

“It’s my turn to see you,” the man declared.

“Please wait for your turn,” Hernando said.

Several minutes later, the man entered the office and immediately broke into tears. The big, burly bloke was bawling like a baby. Hernando looked at the man’s paperwork. It said he was HIV positive. “I don’t want to have HIV,” the man said, tears streaming down his tattooed cheeks.

“What happened?” Hernando asked. “What do you do?”

“I’m a tattoo artist, and the body is my canvas,” the man said.

“How did you contract HIV? Are you promiscuous or a homosexual?”

The man said he was neither and had contracted HIV through his work.

“But I don’t want HIV,” he said. “I don’t want to die.”

“There is Someone who can heal you,” Hernando said. “I know you may not believe in God, but He can help you.”

The man acknowledged being an atheist. But he was willing to reconsider.

“Do you want me to pray for you?” Hernando said. “Do you want to accept Jesus as your Savior?”

“Yes,” the man said, weeping.

Hernando led the man through the sinner’s prayer. When the man said Jesus’ name at the end, he fell to the floor.

Hernando sent the tattoo artist away for a second HIV test. The next week, the man returned with a happy grin on his face. “I don’t have HIV,” he said. “I want to give thanks to God and you because God has healed me.”

Follow-up testing had given him a clean bill of health. He considered his HIV-negative status to be a miracle from God.

Months later, Hernando and his wife, Erica, were shopping at a mall when they heard someone screaming, “Doctor! Doctor!” The tattoo artist ran over to Hernando and lifted him off the ground in an enormous bear hug. He

praised God for working a miracle in his life.

The tattoo artist is one of dozens of people led to Jesus by Hernando, a 60-year-old Seventh-day Adventist physician serving at the Adventist Medical Center on the campus of Colombia Adventist University in Medellín.



*This quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open a missionary training center at Colombia Adventist University.*



**Study Focus:** *Exodus 31:16****Part I: Overview***

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The Sabbath goes beyond being a mere allotment of time; it is a promise of a rich and meaningful relationship with God. It is a day we set aside everything in our lives except God and take time to strengthen our relationship with Him.

***Part II: Commentary***

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The Sabbath can be understood only if we consider its genesis. The term “rest” in Genesis 2:3 derives from the Hebrew verbal form *shabath* (to repose, to celebrate, to cease, to desist from labor, to put to an end, to rest, to be completed, to keep Sabbath, to observe). Interestingly, this verb is linked to observing the weekly *shabbat* (sabbath, sabbath of sabbatic observance). Read Leviticus 25:2. See Francis Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, pp. 991, 992.

**Origins**

From the start, *sin-based commands* were not needed for Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, because there was no sin. On the other hand: “The law of God existed before the creation of man or else Adam could not have sinned.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, March 14, 1878.

Meanwhile, the authoritative example of Adam’s Father keeping the Sabbath was more than a commandment. From Eden’s perspective, a created son follows the example of a Creator-Father. Hence, centuries before the Jews came to be, the Creation Sabbath became an unrivaled memorial in time, validating Christ as cosmic Creator and Sovereign (see *Matt. 12:8, Mark 2:28, John 8:58*).

Therefore, *Shabbath* (Sabbath) fulfills a cosmological, rather than just a theological, function. It serves to explain how Yahweh felt about His creation. In essence, Yahweh imprinted a divine seal on this day as an immutable testament of His majestic role as cosmic Framer. Hence, when Yahweh *rested* on the seventh day, He *held it in divine reserve for the cosmos*.

“Sabbath is the pause that refreshes. The pattern is six days and one day. Six days of work and one day of rest. . . . Yahweh the cosmic symphony conductor orders His composition on 6/7 time. One, two, three,

four, five, six, rest!”—Charles E. Bradford, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*, p. 58. “The Sabbath of the fourth commandment was instituted in Eden.”—Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 295.

### **Sabbath Before Sinai**

“Missiologists recognize a Hebraic consciousness among the African peoples. . . . W. W. Oliphant, an African church leader in the early years of the twentieth century, says that the ‘Sabbath in Ethiopia [has] been kept from the days of Nimrod, about 2140 B.C. (read Gen. 10:8, 9), that is 700 years before the birth of Moses. . . . Africans or Ethiopians had been Sabbath observers from the days of Nimrod, the son of Cush.’ ”—Charles E. Bradford, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*, p. 26.

### **Covenant Sign**

“The Sabbath is a covenant sign ‘between me and you throughout your generations’ (Exodus 31:13; compare Ezekiel 20:12). . . . The person who keeps the Sabbath in the right spirit thereby signifies that he or she stands in a saved relationship with God.

“The Sabbath as a sign imparts to the believer first of all the knowledge that the Lord is his covenant God. It also indicates that the Lord ‘sanctifies’ His people (Leviticus 20:8; 21:8; 22:32; Ezekiel 37:28). . . .

“The Sabbath functions in yet another sense as a sign. It serves as a mark of separation, indicating to people of other religions or to people who do not keep the Sabbath that a unique relationship exists between God and His Sabbath-keeping people.”—Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant*, pp. 86–88. (Read *Exodus 32 and Deut. 5:15.*)

### **Sign of Sanctification**

The Creation Sabbath is indeed God’s sanctuary enshrined in time. In other words: “Yahweh, having put His best into His creation, declares it very good. Then, consummate artist that He is, God takes the fabric of time and makes something special out of it, the Sabbath, a cathedral in time, sculpted from hours and minutes and spun out of the stuff of eternity. A gift from His own heart.

“It should be observed that God does not make the Sabbath and bring humanity to it. He creates Adam and Eve and brings the Sabbath to them.”—Charles E. Bradford, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*, p. 51. (See *Ezek. 20:12, 20.*)

### **Remembering the Sabbath**

“Israel knew her neighbors only too well for the comfort of the prophets. . . . We cannot escape the fact that around the fireside the elders recounted the days of Creation and most certainly the day to which all others pointed, the Sabbath. The ‘big story’ was fixed in the collective psyche of primeval peoples. Knowledge of Sabbath could be forgotten only in

rebellion against the God who created all things.

“This is why the Sabbath command begins with ‘remember.’ Sabbath always harkens back to the Creation event (Ex. 20:8–10).

“If Yahweh commands us today to remember the Sabbath, there must have been a time when He first commanded its observance. Indeed, this is the message of Israel’s experience with the manna, which Yahweh sent on six days but withheld on the seventh. In this instance He does not repeat the command because, even before Mount Sinai, they knew. . . . The fact that the word ‘remember’ is attached to the command indicates that it has been given before and does not need to be constantly reiterated.”—Charles E. Bradford, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*, pp. 79, 80.

The word “remember” was included because we need “to say ‘yes’ to the Lord of the Sabbath by making [ourselves] available to Him. It means to acknowledge God’s doing rather than trusting [our] own achievements. It means to stop worrying about [our] own wants and start thinking about the needs of others. . . . It means forgetting self and selfish interests in order like Mary to honor Christ as the special guest.”—Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today* (Berrien Springs, MI: Published by Author, 1988), p. 99.

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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God’s law says that the Sabbath is to be kept holy and that on it we are to do no work. The Hebrews took this command rather seriously. The Pharisees and other teachers of the law emphasized that to “carry a burden” was considered work. To avoid misunderstandings, they were very specific about what a burden was. A burden was food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

- 1. With such strict restrictions, one can imagine the many hours people spent arguing about what a neighbor should or should not have done on the Sabbath. In what ways are we stuck in similar legalistic ruts? What are the dangers of being legalistic? Does this mean we should dismiss church standards that are not completely biblical? Explain.**

2. It has been said that teaching is false if it produces a religion that consists solely or mainly of the observance of externals. How is it easy to confuse spirituality—one's relationship with Christ—with religious practices? What are the dangers of doing so? How might there be a danger of the Seventh-day Adventist Church falling into such a trap?

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3. In ancient times, the Jews' observance of the Sabbath gained them a reputation for laziness. Based on your Sabbath observance, do you think people view you as law-abiding or God-loving? What is the difference between these two characteristics? Do your Sabbath-keeping practices center on what you can and cannot do? Or do they center on strengthening your relationship with your Savior? Discuss.

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4. The new covenant is an agreement between God and you that is based on an intimate relationship. The Sabbath is quality time you spend with God. Obviously, then, Sabbath keeping is important to one's covenant relationship. How can we restore the sanctity and joy of the Sabbath to both individual and corporate lifestyles?

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5. Most religious people, if they think about it, will admit to the desirability of devoting one day a week to God. Indeed, some will say that they devote every day to God. What, however, is the evidence that God is concerned that we honor not just any day but the day He has sanctified and specifically set aside for that purpose?

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6. In our world people devote a huge amount of time and money to amusing themselves and doing a variety of things that presumably help them to "unwind." How can the rest that we are supposed to enjoy on the Sabbath be distinguished from largely self-centered entertainment and amusement?

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7. God, as we understand Him, would probably not need to rest because He was tired in our sense of the word. Yet, Genesis tells us that God rested on the seventh day. Why might God have needed to stand back from His work and “rest”?
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8. We are told in the Bible (*Exod. 31:13*, for example) that the Sabbath is to be a sign of Israel’s—and, we can infer, our—commitment to God. Is it possible that we could observe it in such a way that it would convey a message that is the opposite of what is intended? How so? How can we be sure that our Sabbath keeping represents God’s ideals?
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9. How does the Sabbath communicate the utter uniqueness of God as compared to other gods or things that people might regard with worship or special esteem?
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10. Using the Sabbath as a barometer, check to see if you base your religious beliefs on rituals or a relationship with Jesus. How did Jesus’ Sabbath activities reflect His relationship with His Father? What specific changes do you think you need to make in your Sabbath-keeping practices?
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