

Your Sabbath Murmurings Come Before God!

*Do you sometimes let down in keeping God's Sabbath holy?
Ancient Israel's mistakes in Sabbath keeping — and the results
— are recorded as a warning to all Christians.*

By Selmer L. Hegvold

Visualize yourself reliving ancient Israel's experiences, and as you do, think about what your actions and reactions probably would be.

Imagine what it must have been like to be a slave in Egypt. To have Moses, on behalf of Almighty God, demand your freedom. To witness the miracles God performed to secure your release. To walk through an uncomfortable desert toward an unfamiliar destination.

And imagine what it must have been like, after living in a pagan society all your life, to have God's law revealed to you — to have been offered the chance to live a way of life whose rewards were abundant physical blessings and happiness.

Perhaps Israel's experiences — particularly with the Sabbath — have not registered in the way God intended when He inspired them to be written and preserved for you. Only the bare outline of these experiences is preserved, but these facts are most interesting. Israel's experiences with the Sabbath should say something to those of us who claim to be Christians today. Sometimes we fall down in complying with God's directions and, like Israel, grumble and complain. And, even if we don't real-

ize it, our murmurings are directed at God!

Sabbath forgotten

The Israelites' life in slavery was a rigidly restricted existence. During their wretched sojourn in Egypt, they lost significant knowledge of the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They even lost much of the knowledge of how to keep the Sabbath and, of course, its meaning.

One of God's objects with His rescued people was to restore the knowledge of the way to His great blessings. God works through human instruments, and that was the first important lesson He revealed to Israel. He set before them Moses and Aaron. Through startling miracles, God built for his two servants prestige and awe in the eyes of the people.

Experiencing with the Egyptians the first three of the plagues God caused, Israel became more and more willing to listen to God's directives through Moses. They observed their first Passover and survived the sweep of the death angel through the land. They left the land of bondage with great joy and a "high hand" the night after the Passover (Ex. 14:8).

Once free of Egypt, Israel was introduced to the discipline of God's way. He had effectively destroyed their fear of the Egyptian gods, the pantheon that held sway over their lives and customs!

After God miraculously brought Israel through the Red Sea, He introduced to them the purpose of His Sabbath. Having observed no similar period of time — having worked seven days a week for their Egyptian taskmasters — the people were lacking full understanding of why God had hallowed this one day of every seven.

The children of Israel were like little, untutored children. No one but God could have chosen such remarkable means to instill reverence in their minds for His holy Sabbath! Had you been an Israelite in the wilderness stretching before Mt. Sinai, you, too, would have been impressed. Do you, having the Spirit of God, respect it thus today? Notice how and what God taught the people about His Sabbath.

Food from heaven

Providing daily food for the millions camped in the wilderness posed no problem to the great God. He could have provided sustenance for them in any number of ways. He chose to do so with quails in the evening and manna in the morning. Quails flying into the campgrounds must have been a curious sight. But quails of themselves were not unusual. They were natural creatures.

Manna was an entirely different phenomenon. It never had existed before. In fact, so strange was it to



The man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath paid with his life for not respecting God's holy time!

the puzzled people that they asked one another, "What is it?" *Manna* (meaning, "What is it?") derived its name from this question. Thereafter it was called *manna from heaven*. Israel lived on this and quail for the remaining years of their sojourn, while isolated from all worldly influence.

Exodus 16 shows the impact of the lesson of the manna. None should miss it — it is a lesson for us today. We should be thankful we can learn from Israel's experience, and not have to live through it personally.

God wanted to impress Israel with a daily miracle! They were helpless of themselves to provide a living from the barren wasteland around them. They needed to learn that God demanded absolute obedience. Freedom from Egypt? Yes! But now, implicit obedience to God was the alternative. The Israelites were to become *willing* slaves of God in order to know real freedom.

God chose to begin that lesson with His divine bread from heaven. The lesson proved painfully embarrassing to many.

Implicit obedience demanded

"Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they

will walk in my law, or no. And it shall come to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily" (Ex. 16:4-5).

A specific measure of the precious food was to be gathered each morning. Nothing more, and nothing less:

"Gather of it every man according to his eating, *an omer* for every man, according to the number of your persons; take ye every man for them which are in his tents. And the children of Israel did so, and gathered, *some more, some less*" (verses 16-17).

Those with larger families gathered more. The elderly or the very young children gathered less.

Another miracle was performed! "And when they did mete it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; they gathered every man according to his eating" (verse 18). An omer per person. It must have astounded the people when, after they had deposited their food for the day in their tents, they found the exact measurement of manna God had commanded sitting before them. Now read on.

"And Moses said, Let no man leave of it till the morning. Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto Moses; but some of them left of it until the morning" (verses 19-20). God must have shaken His head in exasperation. He determined to correct the recalcitrant Israelites in a stern but comical manner. After this lesson, few would err a second time.

"But some of them left of it until the morning, and it bred worms, and stank: and Moses was wroth with them." When morning broke over the desert plain, perhaps Moses' wrath turned quickly to mirth as he observed the frantic activity in scattered tents among the vast host encamped about him. The uproar no doubt affected even the innocent neighbors.

When the rebels first arose from their beds to prepare their morning repasts, nothing appeared any different. The shock came quickly, however. Bedlam must have broken out in tent after tent! Screams rent the still morning air: "Worms! Worms!

Filthy worms are crawling everywhere in our tent!" Bedding and clothing began flying out into the open air as whole families, their noses stopped tightly against the awful stench, struggled to freshen their garments and belongings in the outside air.

God had warned, and the Israelites had not heeded. Now the result was plain for all to see. The wayward among them had been singled out and corrected. It was a secret that could not be kept. The stench probably swept over the dwellings of all the people encamped.

Certainly thereafter, when the chastened people went out each morning to gather the manna, they eyed the sweet wafers with a new, healthy respect. And each person collected exactly the amount authorized by God through His servant Moses.

Sixth day singled out

Five days of the week of instruction had passed. At sunset came the beginning of the sixth day of the week. A new principle — one that many today seem to have missed — was about to be explained to Israel. When properly applied, this principle sets the stage for a relaxed Sabbath.

In the morning of the sixth day the people busied themselves gathering manna for their families. Each person this time collected his allotment of two omers of manna.

"And it came to pass, that on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for one man: and all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. And he said unto them, This is that which the Lord hath said, Tomorrow 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" (verses 22-23).

This instruction created no problem for most of God's host. But to some it proved too much for their weak faith in God. When the sun rose on the seventh day of the week, the skeptics were found to have moved out under the stars the previous evening. They slept outdoors with all their belongings stacked beside them. They were determined not to be caught indoors again with worms and

rank manna! What a chagrined group they must have been when they found their neighbors untroubled by the previous problems.

Some of the hard-to-convince and stiff-necked among the 12 tribes went out to gather on the seventh day, refusing to understand: "And it came to pass, that there went out some of the people on the seventh day for to gather, and they found none. And the Lord said unto Moses, How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws? See, for that the Lord hath given you the sabbath, therefore he giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day. So the people rested on the seventh day" (verses 27-30).

The sixth day is special. It was set apart by God as the time to prepare all the fine things we should enjoy on the Sabbath without the labor normally entailed during the other days. How many use it for that purpose? How many still profane the Sabbath by regarding it as no different than the previous six days? The lesson is

clear in these verses, if we will see and consider.

The day before the Sabbath, whether it be the weekly Sabbath or one of the annual Sabbaths, was the day of preparation for that Sabbath. "Now the next day, that followed the *day of the preparation*, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate" (Matt. 27:62). The apostle John also refers to the "preparation day" (John 19:42).

In order to make the weekly Sabbath a day of rest, relaxation and enjoyment above all other days, God provided for a day of preparation, that no laborious work need be done on His Holy Day.

The Sabbath established

Numbers 15:22-31 illustrates how seriously God regarded His instructions about the Sabbath: "But the soul that doeth aught presumptuously, whether he be born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproacheth the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he hath despised the word of the Lord, and hath broken his commandment,

that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him" (verses 30-31).

Do we take the Sabbath lightly? Let's pray we don't, or that if we have so done, we repent quickly and begin to obey wholeheartedly.

One man tested God on His Sabbath commandment and paid with his life under the terms of the Old Covenant. God had earlier been willing to mercifully correct in noninjurious ways. God was compelled, however, to use the death penalty to deal with this challenge!

"And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. . . . And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall be surely put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses" (verses 32-36).

A chill must have settled over the camp as the people who had witnessed the execution went back to their tents. The event had a strong impact, and the people now understood the importance God attached to His Sabbath day!

There is an amusing but true expression, "We are too soon old, and too late smart." We need to review the lessons of ancient Israel's experiences and avoid their mistakes.

Can you see yourself erring as some of them did? Don't be too sure you wouldn't. You, too, have human nature, and not enough of God's nature. You should be able now to view the Sabbath in a new, more appreciative way. The Sabbath is a blessing, not a burden. Anticipate each Sabbath day with excitement and gratitude.

Examine the way you approach, observe and keep each Sabbath, and regard the Sabbath for what it truly is — a great gift to man from the great, giving God. Then rejoice in God's holy Sabbath day! □

The Sabbath is a joy, a blessing, a marvelous gift from the Creator God. Truly rejoice in it!

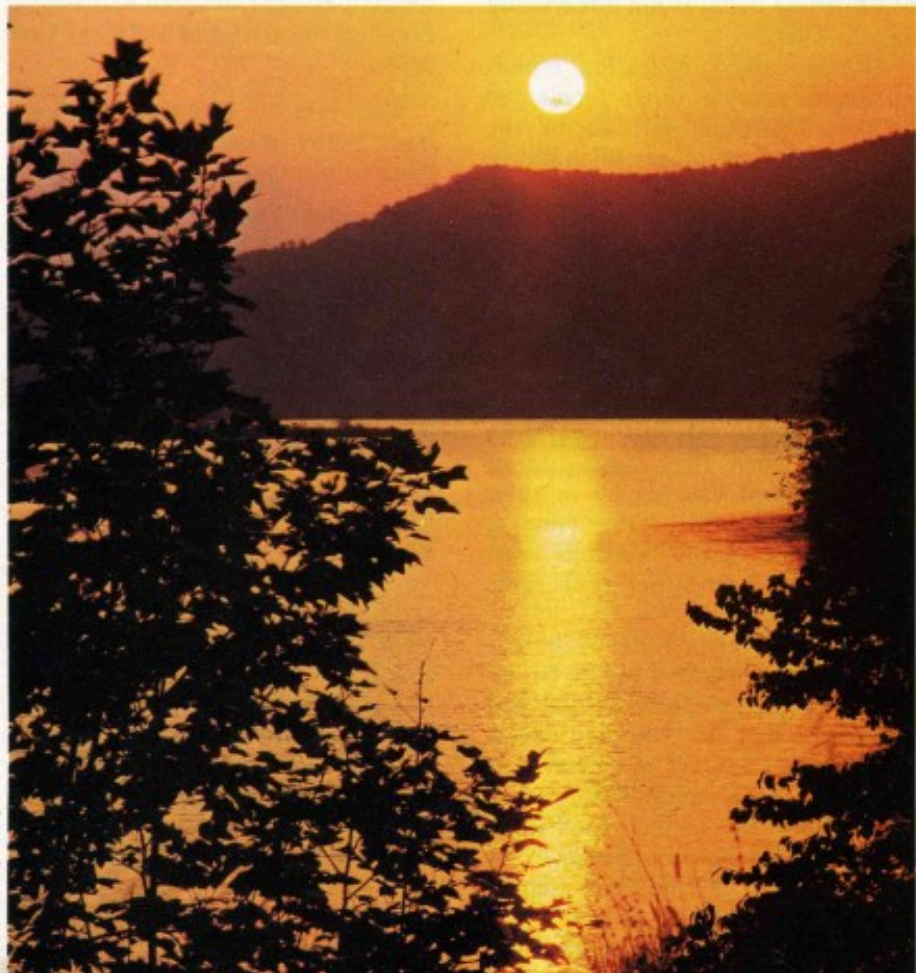


Photo by Jerry Covey