

NO WORK & NO SERVILE WORK

What is Food Preparation?



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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
is from the *King James Version*.

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“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

—Exodus 20:8-11

PREFACE

As the sun sets on a Friday evening, true Believers begin observance of God’s weekly Sabbath. The seventh day of every week is set aside and ordained by the Creator as a day that is a holy observance and remembrance that God created the heavens and earth and all physical life in six days and rested on the seventh; therefore, He forbade any work to be done on that day.

But what is work? Some holydays, such as the seventh-day Sabbath, are “no work” days while others are “no servile work” days. What is the difference? God never says things without a reason or purpose so does the Bible explain them? What about food preparation? There are many different viewpoints on what is allowed or forbidden. Some are strict while others more lenient. Are there common rules that all should follow for food preparation? This booklet attempts to aid in finding answers to these questions.

CHAPTER 1

Meaning of the Sabbath

The seventh-day Sabbath was established by God:

GENESIS 2:2-3 And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

After working six days, God rested on the seventh day; therefore, He commands all life to likewise rest from their labors on that day:

EXODUS 20:8-11 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who *is* within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that *is* in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

The command to cease from labor and rest applies to both people and animals. In effect, God desires the whole world to spend the seventh day of the week resting just as He did on the seventh day after the creation. Working six days and then resting for one is actually a specific and unique pattern established by God:

EXODUS 31:13-17 “Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. 14 ‘You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does *any* work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. 15 ‘Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does *any* work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. 16 ‘Therefore the children of Israel shall keep

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the Sabbath, to **observe the Sabbath** throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. 17 **'It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel** forever; for **in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.**' "

Observing the seventh-day Sabbath in the unique seven-day weekly pattern of working six days and resting one acknowledges that the One True God created the seventh-day Sabbath, declares Him as the only Creator of the heavens and earth and all life, and sanctifies unto God those who believe these things. Altogether, observing the seventh-day Sabbath is a sign of people who KNOW that the One True God is the Most High above all other gods.

No Work vs No Servile Work

Perhaps the most recognizable aspect of the seventh-day Sabbath is that it is a day of rest, as is plain from the meaning of the word. But the seventh-day Sabbath is much more than a day to sleep, which is quite different from resting. In all regards, Sabbath-rest begins by ceasing from *work*:

EXODUS 20:8-11 "Remember **the Sabbath day**, to keep it holy [*the seventh-day Sabbath is a holyday*]. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day *is* the Sabbath of the LORD your God. *In it* **you shall do no work**: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who *is* within your gates. 11 For *in* six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that *is* in them, and **rested the seventh day**. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

The Hebrew word for *work* is *mla'kah* (H4399). It refers to physical work but "never servile" (according to Strong's). In the literal definition, it embraces craftsmanship, service, business, or occupation, whether it is a source of livelihood (engagement in business, occupation, profession, or trade) or personal labor. The

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command of “no work” used for the seventh-day Sabbath applies to almost every living thing¹:

DEUTERONOMY 5:14 but **the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.**

“No work” applies to family, servants, foreigners, and animals. It covers work that is craftsmanship, service, business, or occupation whether it is a source of livelihood or personal labor. This includes the work of a servant; even though it is usually involuntary work it is still personal labor. “No work” forbids all that can be construed as work by man or beast.

But notice that the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), Day of Trumpets, and the first and last days of the Feast of Tabernacles have the command “no servile work” in Leviticus 23:21, 25, 35, and 36. “No servile work” is translated from two Hebrew words. The first is *`abodah* (H5656), literally meaning *no regular work*. It is followed by the same word used for weekly Sabbath, *mīl'kah* (H4399), meaning *no work*. Together, they are usually translated “no servile work.” or “no regular work.”

Understanding the difference between “no work” and “no servile work” is difficult from word meanings alone. They do not differentiate whether “no work” is more or less restrictive than “no servile work.” Clearly, *mīl'kah* (H4399) covers every kind of work associated with man and beast. On the other hand, *`abodah* is directed toward work performed by servants, not freemen. The root of *`abodah* is the verb *`abod* (H5647), which means *to serve* or *to enslave*, referring to the work of those in positions of servitude. This is reflected in translating the two words as “no servile work.”

¹ Also Exod. 20:10; 23:12.

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The key to the differences is within Scripture. The seventh-day Sabbath and the holydays are under either prohibitions of “no work” or “no servile work” except for one—both are given to the first and seventh days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread:

LEVITICUS 23:6-8 ‘And on the fifteenth day of the same month *is* the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. 7 ‘On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; **you shall do no [servile] work on [H5656 = ‘abodah + H4399 = mla'kah]** it. 8 ‘But you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD for seven days. The seventh day *shall be* a holy convocation; **you shall do no [servile] work [H5656 = ‘abodah + H4399 = mla'kah] on it.**’

Scripture plainly designates both the first and seventh days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread as “no servile work”. However, these two holydays were commanded to be “no work” days when the Law was given at Mount Sinai but God added an **exception**:

EXODUS 12:16 ‘On the first day [*of the Feast of Unleavened Bread*] *there shall be* a holy convocation, and on the seventh day *there shall be* a holy convocation for you. **No manner of work [H4399 = mla'kah] shall be done on them; but that which everyone must eat—that only may be prepared by you.**

The exception to “no work”—*mla'kah* (H4399)—is that food preparation is permitted. The first and seventh days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread are the only two holydays in the Bible where both “no work” and “no servile work” are given for the same days. The designation of “no work” is distinguished by an exception for food preparation. It seems reasonable that “no servile work,” then, is the equivalent since it has no exceptions.

BIBLICAL DEFINITIONS:

NO WORK = *mla'kah* (H4399)—forbids ALL WORK—craftsmanship, service, business, or occupation whether a source of livelihood or personal labor—by everyone including family, servants, foreigners, and animals.

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NO SERVILE WORK = `abodah (H5656) + mla'kah (H4399)—forbids all work except FOOD PREPARATION.

From this, “no work” is the most restrictive since no one is allowed to perform any kind of work. While “no servile work” is similar, food preparation is allowed.

No Work & No Servile Work—Which Holydays?

Having established the meanings and distinction of “no work” and “no servile work,” the following lists the holydays according to the specific commandments. Note that even though the two holydays of the Feast of Unleavened are “no work” days, the exception of food preparation in Exodus 12:16 place them in the “no servile work” category in accordance with Leviticus 23:6-8.

“NO WORK” HOLYDAYS:

- Seventh-Day Sabbath²
 - Exod. 16:29; 20:9-10; 23:12; 31:14-15; 35:2; Lev. 23:3; Deut. 5:13-14.
- The Day of Covering (Atonement³)
 - Lev. 16:29; 23:28, 30-31; Num. 29:7.

“NO SERVILE WORK” HOLYDAYS (ALLOWS FOOD PREPARATION):

- 1st & 7th days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread
 - 1st Day: Exod. 12:16⁴; Lev. 23:7; Num. 28:18.
 - 7th Day: Exod. 12:16⁴; Lev. 23:8; Num. 28:25.
- Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)
 - Lev. 23:21; Num. 28:26.
- Day of Trumpets

² The seventh-day Sabbath is a holyday—Lev. 23:3.

³ It is the Day of Covering, not Atonement. Refer to the [Sabbath Thought 2025-08-30 Day of Atonement or Day of Covering](#) or the [Bible Study Atonement—Covering Sin](#).

⁴ “No work” with the exception of food preparation.

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- Lev. 23:25; Num. 29:1
- 1st & 8th days of the Feast of Tabernacles
 - 1st Day: Lev. 23:35; Num. 29:12.
 - 8th Day: Lev. 23:36; Num. 29:35.

Why “No Work” Days?

The Law of God is purposeful and intentional; therefore, there must be reasons for the two different work restrictions. Examining the grouping of holydays according to “no work” and “no servile work” presents an interesting possibility of what may distinguish holydays that allow food preparation and those that do not.

“No work” was commanded for the seventh-day Sabbath and the Day of Covering (Atonement). What is common to these days? Read the commandment for seventh-day Sabbath observance:

DEUTERONOMY 5:14-15 but **the seventh day is the Sabbath** of the LORD your God. *In it* you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who *is* within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. 15 And remember that **you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there** by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

The ancient Israelites were captives in bondage and slavery in Egypt. While Scripture does not specifically say, they likely worked every day without a break. In other words, they not only did not know much of anything about the seventh-day Sabbath but could not observe it by ceasing from work even if they did. When God rescued them out of Egypt, they journeyed into a wilderness where God had to provide them food in the form of manna and quail. Even though they brought their flocks and herds with them, they apparently faced starvation:

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EXODUS 16:3 And the children of Israel said to them, “Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat *and* when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to **kill this whole assembly with hunger.**”

As a result, God provided manna in the morning and quail in the evening:

EXODUS 16:12 “I [*the LORD*] have heard the complaints of the children of Israel. Speak to them, saying, ‘**At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread [*manna*]. And you shall know that I am the LORD your God.**’ ”

Why did God do this? In addition to teaching them about the seventh-day Sabbath, He wanted them to “**know that I am the LORD** your God.” In addition to the seventh-day Sabbath being the sign between the Most High God and His people, seventh-day Sabbath observance was also meant to teach faith in God for His PROVIDENCE to sustain the people.

The same is true for the Day of Covering. The Great Tribulation and Day of the LORD (vengeance of God) are future events that bring terrible destruction upon the world. During those days, many will be enslaved and imprisoned by an evil world under the control of Satan, the Beast, and False Prophet. After God takes His vengeance upon the world, He liberates those held captive from bondage and slavery:

PSALMS 107:2-5, 10, 13-14 Let **the redeemed [*captives liberated after the Day of the LORD*]** of the LORD say so, whom **He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy, 3 and gathered out of the lands,** from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. 4 They wandered in the wilderness in a desolate *desert by the way*; they found no city to dwell in. 5 Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. 6 Then **they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them** out of their distresses. ... 10 Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, bound in affliction and irons *captive*— ... 13 Then **they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He saved them out of their**

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distresses. 14 He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their chains in pieces.

The Day of Covering portrays rescuing the survivors of the Great Tribulation and Day of the LORD. These captives will cry out to God to be saved and He hears them. As they journey to Jerusalem to meet with Jesus Christ, He will provide food and water for them along the way:

ISAIAH 49:9-12 That You [*the LORD*] may **say to the prisoners**, 'Go forth,' to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.' "**They shall feed along the roads**, and their pastures *shall be* on all desolate heights. 10 **They shall neither hunger nor thirst**, neither heat nor sun shall strike them; for He who has mercy on them will lead them, even **by the springs of water** He will guide them. 11 I will make each of My mountains a road, and My highways shall be elevated. 12 Surely these shall come from afar; Look! Those from the north and the west, and these from the land of Sinim."

So, the seventh-day Sabbath and Day of Covering are linked to events in which God rescues captives from bondage and slavery and sustains them by His PROVIDENCE. The rescued captives had no choice but to rely upon God for their food and water⁵.

Now examine the holydays designated as "no servile work" days and, for the moment, omit the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These include the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Day of Trumpets, and the first and eighth days of the Feast of Tabernacles. They are all observances that portray God bringing children into His Kingdom or executing vengeance upon the wicked of the world.

The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) is the late spring small wheat harvest of Firstfruits of the saints into God's Kingdom. In fact, it is called "the Feast of the Harvest [of] the Firstfruits" and "the Feast of Weeks of the Firstfruits of the wheat Harvest."⁶ The next holyday is the Day of Trumpets, which focuses on the vengeance of God

⁵ Num. 20:1-13.

⁶ Exod. 23:16; 34:22.

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referred to as the “Day of the LORD's vengeance.”⁷ Finally, the Feast of Tabernacles is the early autumn main wheat harvest, part of the “Feast of Ingathering,”⁶ representing the final great harvest of mankind into the Kingdom of God. As such, these all have an aspect of judgment unto eternal life or eternal death.

What about the heretofore unmentioned Feast of Unleavened Bread? While the first and seventh holydays during this feast are “no servile work” days, they were first given a “no work” command along with an exception for food preparation. A major component of the Feast of Unleavened Bread is the liberation of the ancient Israelites from bondage and slavery in Egypt:

EXODUS 12:17 ‘So you shall observe **the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this same day I will have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt.** Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as an everlasting ordinance.

The Exodus from Egypt, however, is the *result* of God’s judgment against the Egyptians who enslaved the ancient Israelites:

EXODUS 7:4 “But Pharaoh will not heed you, so that I may lay My hand on Egypt and bring My armies *and* My people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt **by great judgments.**

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is both a time when God provided for the ancient Israelites as well as judgment against Egypt. This is fitting since these holydays were designated both as “no work” (with an allowance for food preparation) and “no servile work”.

SUMMARY: The seventh-day Sabbath and the Day of Covering are times in which people rely upon the **providence** of God. The first and seventh days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Day of Trumpets, and the first and eighth days of the Feast of Tabernacles have common aspects of **judgment.**

⁷ Isa. 34:8; 61:2; Jer. 46:10.

Why No Food Preparation

What do the days in which “no work” is commanded, with an implicit prohibition against food preparation, have in common? The PROVIDENCE of God. After rescuing the ancient Israelites from bondage and slavery in Egypt, God provided food for them everyday except on the seventh-day Sabbath, which God commanded to be a day of rest. Instead, He provided twice as much on the sixth day:

EXODUS 16:13-15, 22-26 So it was that **quails came up at evening and covered the camp**, and in the morning the dew lay all around the camp. 14 And when the layer of dew lifted, there, on the surface of the wilderness, was a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15 So when the children of Israel saw *it*, they said to one another, “**What is it [= manna]?**” For they did not know what it was. and Moses said to them, “**This is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat.** ... 22 And so it was, **on the sixth day, that they gathered twice as much bread [manna]**, two omers for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. 23 Then he said to them, “*This is what* the LORD has said: **Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath** to the LORD. Bake what you will bake *today*, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.’ ” 24 So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. 25 Then Moses said, “**Eat that [which remains from yesterday] today, for today is a Sabbath** to the LORD; today **you will not find it in the field**. 26 “**Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none.**”

God provided manna and quail for six days but on the sixth day gave them twice as much to sustain them through the seventh day.

When the ancient Israelites fled Egypt, they only brought with them enough unleavened bread to last a short time; presumably, the journey from Egypt to the wilderness across the Red Sea. This is the memorial of the days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread:

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EXODUS 12:39 And they [Israelites] baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they had brought out of Egypt; for it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared provisions [for a long journey] for themselves.

The lack of unleavened bread was not an immediate issue during their flight out of Egypt but they only had provisions for a short while. After that, they would need food and water as indicated by the statement “nor had they prepared provisions” for a long journey.

The “no work” command that implicitly prohibits food preparation reinforced that the people had to rely upon God for provisions; even food preparation had to be done in advance so they could keep the Sabbath as a day of rest.

The Day of Covering portrays God rescuing the captives after the Great Tribulation and Day of the LORD and bringing them to Jerusalem. This is a long journey as noted by the fact that the fulfillment of those events takes place over a year⁸. Coming out of bondage and captivity means the people have no means to survive on their own, so they must rely upon God to provide food and water for them along the way⁹:

JOEL 2:18-19 Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, and pity His people. 19 The LORD will answer and say to His people, “Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil, and you will be satisfied by them;” I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.

The surviving captives liberated after the Great Tribulation and Day of the LORD are fed by God as He brings them to Jerusalem.

Again, the seventh-day Sabbath and the Day of Covering are both “no work” holydays. The Sabbath is a reminder that the ancient Israelites relied upon God for their food and water during their forty years in the wilderness and the Day of Covering portrays God providing for the future survivors of a destroyed world.

⁸ Isa. 61:1-2; 63

⁹ Isa. 49:9-12.

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So “no work” holydays are meant for people to seek after God, not to rely upon themselves. That is why “no work” implicitly prohibits food preparation—observance of these days is a reminder of God’s providence! Avoiding food preparation on the seventh-day Sabbath and the Day of Covering, which is obviously a day of fasting for most¹⁰, is a time to seek God and rely upon His merciful promises to provide for people, just as Jesus said:

MATTHEW 6:31-34 “Therefore do not worry, saying, **‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’** or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 “For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For **your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.** 33 “But **seek first the kingdom of God and His [just]ce], and all these things shall be added to you.** 34 “Therefore **do not worry about tomorrow**, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Conclusion

There are two statutes that forbid work on the holydays. The seventh-day Sabbath and the Day of Covering are days in which “no work” is permitted. This is the cessation of all work—craftsmanship, service, business, or occupation whether a source of livelihood or personal labor—by family, servants, foreigners, and animals—including food preparation. The need to eat on the seventh-day Sabbath is the reason the sixth day of the week (Friday) is the Preparation Day¹¹—a time to prepare food and whatever else is required for the Sabbath that begins at sundown. These are times to reflect upon the *providence* of God.

The other holydays, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), Day of Trumpets, and the first and eighth days of the Feast of Tabernacles, are “no servile work” days. It is the same as “no work” except that food preparation is allowed. These are times of *judgment* in God’s

¹⁰ For more information about fasting, refer to the booklet [Fasting—Afflicting the Soul, Humility, & Prayer](#).

¹¹ Exod. 16:23.

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plan of salvation. In fact, these holydays are truly *feasts* in every sense of the word. They are celebrations in which the bounty of food is to be enjoyed.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is unique because the first and seventh days were “no work” days with an exception for food preparation but later designated as “no servile work.” The distinction seems clear that “no servile work” implicitly allows for food preparation. These days are memorials of the ancient Israelites rescue from bondage and slavery by God and His *providence* to sustain them in the journey. Their liberation was a result of God’s *judgments* against their captors, so the Feast of Unleavened Bread has aspects of both the providence of God and judgment.

CHAPTER 2

Precepts of the Law

The seventh-day Sabbath is a day of “no work,” which implicitly prohibits food preparation. The same is true of the Day of Covering but, since it is a day of fasting for most, food preparation does not generally apply. Not so for the weekly Sabbath. There is no requirement to fast, although that is certainly appropriate. Instead, eating food is usually part of the day.

What does no food preparation prohibit in light of the fact that eating is allowed on the weekly Sabbath? It is certainly a statute in the Law of God but is hard to understand, especially in modern times. So it is important to understand the purpose of the Law as well as how to apply it.

The Law of God ultimately defines agape love¹². Keeping the Law is the beginning of growing in that singular characteristic that **is** God¹³. The Law is composed of statutes, judgments, and testimonies. As a whole, it is precepts (principles) that teach a way of *thinking*. The Law is more than “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” rules—it is a guide to personal thinking and decision-making, which is necessary because statutes, judgments, and testimonies alone do not address every situation:

PSALM 19:8 **The [precepts] of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart:** the commandment of the LORD *is* pure, **enlightening** the eyes.

The Law is fulfilled by not only obeying the specific statutes but also applying its **principles** motivated by “thoughts and intents of the heart”¹⁴ with a humble striving to please God.

How does one understand and apply the Law to food preparation? Like most things, they can be applied differently by people

¹² Matt. 22:37-39.

¹³ 1 John 4:8, 16.

¹⁴ Heb. 4:12.

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because of the many unique situations. Folks in sub-Saharan Africa may slaughter animals and cook food over wood fires; very much like the ancient Israelites in the wilderness. People in northern climes typically buy pre-prepared food from grocery stores and use modern stoves to cook on but they live in cold climates that many heat with wood, a situation that does not exist in tropical Africa.

Applying statutes that do not specifically address a situation requires **thinking** like God because He is the Author of The Law. The Bible captures His words; i.e., the thoughts of His mind, which are agape love toward us¹⁵. This is why the Law is:

1 JOHN 5:2-3 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And **His commandments are not burdensome.**

The Law of God was never meant to be a BURDEN, but do not confuse burden with inconvenience.

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The prohibition of food preparation on the weekly Sabbath was never meant to be burdensome. With this in mind, there are a few biblical instructions that help with understanding why the Sabbath is distinguished by no food preparation. Begin with this statute:

EXODUS 35:2-3 "Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. 3 **You shall kindle no fire** throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath day."

What exactly is kindling a fire? If kindling a fire on the weekly Sabbath is forbidden, does that mean people cannot heat their home with a wood-burning stove? Why did God forbid kindling a fire on Sabbath? What else is forbidden?

¹⁵ Jer. 29:11; John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:9.

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NUMBERS 15:32, 35 Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man **gathering sticks [foraging for wood] on the Sabbath day.** ... 35 Then the LORD said to Moses, "The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall **stone him** with stones outside the camp."

EXODUS 16:5, 22, 24, 26 "And it shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily." ... 22 And so it was, on the sixth day, *that* they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. ... 24 So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. ... 26 **"Six days you shall gather it,** but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none."

Kindling a fire, gathering wood, and collecting quail or manna were all forbidden on Sabbath. But God obviously allows and expects people to eat on Sabbath:

EXODUS 16:23, 25 Then he [*Moses*] said to them, "This *is what* the LORD has said: 'Tomorrow *is* a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. **Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.**' " ... 25 Then Moses said, "**Eat that [which remains from yesterday] today,** for today *is* a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field.

Food preparation is not allowed on Sabbath but eating is expected. What IS food preparation? Notice how God summarizes the prohibition of food preparation on Sabbath:

EXODUS 16:29 "See! For the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread [*manna*] for two days. **Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.**" 30 So the people rested on the seventh day.

God summarized the restrictions of food preparation on the Sabbath as **"Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place."** What does this have to do with food preparation?

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Much about cultures and languages has been lost or diluted over the last 2,000 years, but imagine what was involved in preparing food. The diet of the ancient Israelites consisted of meat (quail) in the evening and bread (manna) in the morning. They were to bake or boil their food on the Preparation Day and lay aside the remainder of the food they had prepared to consume the next day, which was the Sabbath.

Gathering Wood

Cooking over a fire requires wood. Wood had to be collected for fires because cutting wood is unbelievably arduous if it was even possible (how many owned an ax?). Without modern tools, dead trees were useless because they are too big to cut or split even with primitive tools, too heavy to haul, and too lengthy to burn in a small campfire. Instead, they gathered smaller limbs and branches. These would burn faster than logs, meaning more limbs or branches were required. That likely required several trips for a single day's supply. A cart would help, but it was still significant time and effort to haul it over rough ground and hills, even with service animals. Nearby limbs and branches would be quickly cleaned out so the distance increased every time they collected wood for the day, especially if they were in the same place for weeks or months. Millions of people can quickly clear a forest of dead limbs and branches so it would not be surprising if it took hours to forage for the wood necessary for one single day.

Kindling a Fire

A fire is necessary for cooking. It would be fairly simple to stoke a fire from the hot coals of the previous night or use hot coals kept in an insulated leather bag (an ancient practice). But there were certainly occasions when new fires had to be started such as after fleeing Egypt or arriving at a new campsite. They did not have matches or lighters so kindling a fire—starting one from scratch—was done with primitive tools. Using a bow and stick, two pieces of flint, or flint and iron to start a fire is incredibly laborious. It requires finding or making tinder (grass or thin shavings of wood)

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because primitive tools cannot ignite even small twigs. These tools took a long time to ignite the tinder on a day without rain or wind. Once the tinder is smoldering, careful attention is required to produce a flame that can be fed with progressively larger material. Building a fire from scratch is not easy and a great deal of work. Today, it is common to burn huge piles of brush and trees using a lighter and diesel fuel that ignite within seconds. Is that work? Perhaps, but it is nothing compared to kindling a fire with primitive tools. Would God have forbid kindling a fire if it was as simple as using matches and lighter fluid or turning a knob on a stove? Who knows, but kindling a fire with primitive tools is very laborious.

Gathering Food

Eating requires food. God provided quail and manna but the people had to find and gather them. Even though the quail came into the camp, gathering up live birds is work. The manna, on the other hand, fell outside the camp so hundreds of thousands of people had to wander over a large area collecting it and bring it back. Realize also that the manna nearest the camp was quickly gathered up by those who foraged early, increasing the distance as time passed.

Processing Food

Food had to be prepared for cooking. Every quail had to be killed, plucked, and butchered. That is a time-consuming and messy process. The feathers and innards would also not be left inside the camp. They would not only attract unpleasant flies and unwanted critters but would produce a terrible, rotten odor. The offal had to be disposed of outside the camp, possibly by burying it. Imagine the quantity of feathers and innards from millions of quail every single day. But even the manna had to be processed:

NUMBERS 11:8 The people went about and gathered *it* [the manna], **ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it;** and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil.

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Manna was prepared by grinding it on a millstone or beating it in a mortar with a pestle, all of which was time-consuming work.

“Remain in Place”

At this point, only now is everything ready to cook the food, which was, by comparison, the easy part. Everything leading up to this required effort and time outside the camp gathering and processing food, collecting wood, and also occasionally kindling a fire (starting it from scratch) in order to finally cook the food. It should now be understandable why the two primary statutes for “no work” on Sabbath are: **1) do not kindle a fire and, 2) remain in place** (essentially, the area around the tents within the camp). Remaining in place precluded gathering food and water or collecting wood.

It is understandable why one man gathered wood on Sabbath. To prepare for two days was much more work than one. It is likely that many of the ancient Israelites spent much of every weekday simply preparing food to feed themselves and their families. God commanded that they stay in their places inside the camp and eat the remainder of what was prepared on Friday so they could rest and spend time with God.

CHAPTER 3

Is Cooking Part of Food Preparation?

The ancient Israelites clearly ate food on the weekly Sabbath that was prepared on the Preparation Day. It is also obvious that it was arduous work, especially compared to modern times. Even cooking over a fire was more difficult than today. So, what does this mean for Sabbath observance today? Does anything pertaining to food preparation today compare to the level of effort in ancient times?

The “no work” statute implicitly prohibits food preparation. Specifically, God says 1) do not kindle a fire and, 2) remain in place (areas around the tents within the camp). The latter precludes gathering food and collecting wood. However, is cooking part of food preparation?

For the ancient Israelites, boiling something would have required collecting water from a stream or spring but leaving the camp was forbidden. Baking required pots and roasting likely required a spit or skewer for the meat, which would require poles fashioned for the purpose. Obviously, water could be collected and spits and skewers prepared before Sabbath. But, again, does food preparation include cooking?

The Bible is clear that gathering wood and food on the Sabbath is forbidden. However, it never explicitly says whether food preparation includes cooking or not:

EXODUS 12:16 ... No manner of work [*H4399* = *m̄la'kah*] shall be done on them; **but that which everyone must eat—that only may be prepared by you.**

The word “prepared” has a wide and broad meaning so the question of whether or not food preparation includes cooking on the Sabbath is unclear. Notice again these specifics:

EXODUS 16:23-25 Then he [*Moses*] said to them, “This is *what* the LORD has said: ‘Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. **Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that**

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remains, to be kept until morning [the Sabbath].²⁴ So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. ²⁵ Then Moses said, **“Eat that today [the remainder from yesterday], for today is a Sabbath** to the LORD; today **you will not find it in the field.**

It may seem obvious, but was everything actually cooked on the Preparation Day? Did the “remainder” to be eaten on the Sabbath consist of leftovers of **cooked** food or was it food that was only **prepared** for cooking?

Verse 24 it says that the remainder did not stink or have worms. This is happened to the manna during the first six days of the week if it was left overnight¹⁶. Does the absence of a stench and worms indicate the leftover manna on the Sabbath was cooked or simply preserved in its raw form by God? The manna presents a difficult situation. It apparently melted with the heat of the sun¹⁷ and yet they kept some in an omer that went into the Ark of the Testimony or Covenant¹⁸. It is impossible to say if it was preserved by cooking or if it was simply preserved by God.

But these verses also mention baking and boiling. Manna was apparently cooked in pans or baked into cakes¹⁹, not roasted or boiled. Meat, on the other hand, was typically roasted²⁰ or boiled²¹. Moreover, most meat does not go bad in less than a day once it is cooked. Was it only the manna that would stink or have worms or did that also happen to the meat? In either case, does their expectation that the food would stink or have worms indicate that the remainder of the food on the next day, the Sabbath, was uncooked? It is impossible to say, but Scripture is not clear whether or not cooking was part of food preparation.

¹⁶ Exod. 16:20.

¹⁷ Exod. 16:21.

¹⁸ Exod. 16:32.

¹⁹ Num. 11:8.

²⁰ Exod. 12:8-9; Isa. 44:16.

²¹ Exod. 12:9; 23:19; 29:31;

Food Preparation in Modern Times

Today, flipping a light switch or pushing an elevator button is **not** kindling a fire. Those are ridiculous notions. Likewise, turning a knob on the stove or heating a frozen dinner in the microwave is **not** work. It takes more effort to use a toothbrush or bathe.

Modern life is difficult to align with ancient practices. In cases where something is not specifically allowed or forbidden, principles of the Law must be the guide. This is why it is critical to understand **precepts** of the Law! If we are motivated by “thoughts and intents of the heart” with a humble striving to please God, then all actions should be evaluated according to the intentions of the Law—how God *thinks*.

In modern times food is usually purchased at a grocery store and kept in a refrigerator, water flows from a tap, and food is cooked on a stove with the turn of a knob. Considering that modern food preparation is a far cry from ancient times, does cooking food amount to work? It is a hard question to answer. A lot of food today also does not require cooking, such as a sandwich or salad. Pre-cooked frozen dinners are also available that can be easily heated in the oven or microwave. Is that cooking?

There is no single answer of what food preparation means in modern times, so it may be helpful to pose some questions and comments regarding food preparation on Sabbath:

- 1) Can food be prepared and cooked before Sabbath? Considerations might include having to work on Friday until it is almost sundown (especially during winter months in northern climates), preparing food for infants or children, special-needs diets, or larger Sabbath gatherings.
- 2) There is no doubt that turning a knob on the stove is not the same as kindling a fire—it is not work anymore than flipping a light switch or getting water from a faucet. Most food kept in the refrigerator is ready to cook and requires little or no processing. So, does cooking today constitute work? Scripture is unclear about whether cooking is prohibited. Is it a simple

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meal or does it resemble a banquet? Is the meal intended to provide for a family or a gathering of brethren? How much time and effort is required?

- 3) Reheating leftovers might be necessary because some refrigerated foods, especially meats and potatoes, are hard to eat otherwise. Is that work or simply a necessity because refrigerators are the modern way to keep food from spoiling? Is there a difference between reheating leftovers and cooking?
- 4) What about cooking with wood? What is required to get a wood stove going? Is it a matter of simply brushing the ash off of hot coals to reignite it? Does kindling a fire with matches and lighter fluid or a gas starter constitute “work?”
- 5) If the weather suddenly turns cold on Sabbath, does God intend people to suffer without heat? Is it work to kindle a fire on a cold day with matches and lighter fluid?

Certain things are, or at least border upon, work and generally should be done on the Preparation Day. These include shopping for food (this could also a matter of ‘buying and selling’²²), washing dishes, taking out the trash, and cutting and splitting wood. The level-of-effort today for any aspect of food preparation is a far cry from that of the ancient Israelites but the statute of the Law is “no work.” Even though things are easier, they may be unnecessary for Sabbath and should perhaps be avoided in keeping with “no work.”

Sabbath Travel

Regarding the statute to “remain in his place” on Sabbath, the Jews today limit travel to a ‘Sabbath distance’ as kept by the Pharisees. This has been estimated to be the distance from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem²³, about 2/3 mile or 1.2 km. It presents two problems, however. First, if someone went from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives on Sabbath to pray, he could not return until

²² Neh. 10:31; Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-22.

²³ Acts 1:12.

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sundown. The other is that there is actually nothing in the Law that limits travel distance on Sabbath. It is a tradition of men and likely one of several such things Jesus did not violate “lest we offend.”²⁴

However, simply because there is no biblical limitation for travel on Sabbath, does that mean it can be ignored? This is an example of situations that should receive some consideration. Is there a difference between walking and driving? Fellowship is a blessing for those who are able to gather together and most travel on Sabbath for that very purpose. Cruising past the beauty of this earth going to or from a Feast, especially in the fellowship of family or brethren, can be wonderful and uplifting. On the other hand, it is very tense and aggravating when driving in congested Los Angeles traffic or on hazardous roads. Legitimate considerations for travel on Sabbath or holydays include poor night vision, work obligations, available funds, transporting brethren, and doing other Good Works. At the very least, considering what travel is unnecessary is thinking in terms of precepts of the Law.

Violating the Law & Remaining Guiltless

When it comes to applying the precepts of the Law to daily life, there are important principles to consider. Notice this example²⁵:

MATTHEW 12:10-12 And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him [*Jesus Christ*], saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—that they might accuse Him. 11 Then He said to them, “What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift *it* out? 12 “Of how much **more value then is a man** than a sheep? Therefore **it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.**”

Doing Good Works for others on Sabbath is not only lawful but *required* by the Law:

²⁴ Matt. 17:27.

²⁵ Also Luke 13:15; 14:5.

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DEUTERONOMY 22:1-3 “You shall not see your brother’s ox or his sheep going astray, and hide yourself from them; **you shall certainly bring them back to your brother.** 2 “And if your brother *is* not near you, or if you do not know him, then you shall bring it to your own house, and it shall remain with you until your brother seeks it; then you shall restore it to him. 3 “You shall do the same with his donkey, and so shall you do with his garment; with **any lost thing of your brother’s, which he has lost and you have found, you shall do likewise;** you must not hide yourself.

These verses say nothing about doing them on Sabbath even though it is work. What statute or precept allows this to be lawful on Sabbath as noted by Jesus?

MATTHEW 12:1-8 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And **His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.** 2 And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said to Him, “Look, **Your disciples are doing what is not lawful** to do on the Sabbath!” 3 But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: 4 “how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? 5 “Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? 6 “Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple. 7 “But if you had known what *this* means, ‘I desire **mercy and not sacrifice,**’ you would **not have condemned the guiltless.** 8 “For **the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.**”

Above all, mercy (compassion) is greater than sacrifice. God’s compassion permitted David and his followers to *unlawfully* eat the showbread and priests to work on Sabbaths. Do you understand what Jesus said here? Even though they broke the Law, Jesus said David and the priests were **guiltless!** They sinned and, yet, were **sinless!** Jesus Christ is Lord and Ruler of the Sabbath so He has the authority to establish the Law under mercy and set compassion above law-keeping. This was not something new because He was quoting from 1 Samuel 15:22, Hosea 6:6, and Micah 6:6-8. When

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this transpired, the disciples could have said to Jesus, “We are hungry and will go into town to get the food we prepared yesterday. We will see You in a couple of hours.” Instead, what they did allowed them to continue in the presence of the Emanuel²⁶ (“God with us”) who was Jesus Christ—their Teacher and Lord! Good Works are absolutely permitted even on Sabbath and holydays. Lastly, Jesus made it abundantly clear that those who condemn others will not be in the Kingdom²⁷.

There will never be enough rules to cover every situation and it is impossible for everyone to keep the Law exactly the same way much less perfectly. The Pharisees tried to enforce this and became overlords and hypocrites. Keeping the Law is an individual matter of the “thoughts and intents of the heart”. David, the priests, and disciples were sinless because they were not being rebellious. They had physical needs or obligations that could not be met under the strict letter of the Law so God was merciful. Why did David do it when he knew it was unlawful for him to eat the showbread? David *meditated* on God’s Law day and night²⁸ and understood the Law of God²⁹ as well as its precepts—he knew *how* God thinks!

The Law is more than specific statutes because the entirety of it is a record of God’s thoughts. Learning, understanding, and practicing statutes of the Law teach principles of God’s ways:

ISAIAH 28:9-10 Whom shall he [God] **teach knowledge**? and whom shall he make to **understand doctrine**? *them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts.* 10 For **precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept**; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, *and* there a little.

Knowledge and understanding of the Law is not only knowing specific commandments but using the statutes to build precept upon precept in order to *think* like God. The Sabbath is a day of “no work,” so the statutes that regulate food preparation should be

²⁶ Also Matt. 10:38-42.

²⁷ Matt. 23:33.

²⁸ Ps. 1:2.

²⁹ Ps. 119:97-100.

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considered from *God's* perspective. It is a day of rest to spend with Him. Difficulties arise because flesh and blood have physical needs that cannot be avoided. Trying to decide how to meet those needs that align with “no work” is the challenge.

Summary

Life was difficult for the ancient Israelites compared to modern times. Collecting wood, kindling a fire, gathering food, preparing food, and cooking were a major part of their lives that did not change much even after they entered the Promised Land. Making a list of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” rules for food preparation or travel on Sabbath and holydays in modern times is impractical. They would not apply to everyone and likely would be too restrictive for some and too liberal for others. How each one tries to obey the Law of God can be unique and different according to personal circumstances so personal decisions should never be subjected to the judgment or condemnation of others. Above all, making rules that are not in the Bible could be a sin of adding to or taking away from Scripture³⁰. Aside from specific statutes, precepts (principles) are guides to keeping the Law in all cases: 1) keeping the Law is showing love toward God; 2) Jesus said His commandments are not burdensome; 3) in rare cases where the Law is violated (knowingly or not), Jesus said people are guiltless (if they are not being rebellious but motivated by “thoughts and intents of the heart”³¹ with a humble striving to please God); and 4) judging or condemning the choices others, especially if based upon traditions of men, can lead to death.

³⁰ Deut. 12:32; Rev. 22:19.

³¹ Heb. 4:12.

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