

How Can I Observe the Sabbath Without a Congregation?

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25th day of the 4th month 5851 years after the creation of Adam

The 4th Month in the Sixth year of the Third Sabbatical Cycle

The Third Sabbatical Cycle of the 119th Jubilee Cycle

The Sabbatical Cycle of Earthquakes, Famines and Pestilence

The Year of the Tithe for the Widows, Orphans & Levites

July 11, 2015

Shabbat Shalom Brethren,

How Can I Observe the Sabbath Without a Congregation?

I hear this question a lot. In fact, I used to ask this question a lot. You may feel the pull of the Holy Spirit to observe the Sabbath. You may find that your heart and perspective toward the scriptures, the Israelites of old and the land of Israel today is different than those you currently worship with at church on Sunday.



But now what? You don't know anyone else who is pursuing these things; there's no gathering on the Sabbath that you can be part of. How can you keep the Sabbath on your own? What should you be doing? What about the command of assembling with others on the Sabbath?

Don't Disregard the Inclination

The first thing to do is hold on to that inclination. Don't discard what you're hearing because you don't have a congregation, don't know how to do it or don't have anyone else to do it with. You can do this with just you and Yeshua. In fact, this could be some of the sweetest times you have with him, just being alone together, following only your heart and his voice for how to worship him on the Sabbath.

If God is leading you to keep the Sabbath on your own, then He's got a good reason. While it was awhile before I could fully observe the Sabbath every week, I studied Messianic perspectives on my own for two years before God raised up a congregation in my area. I prayed and prayed for God to lead me to others pursuing the same interests, but in hindsight I can see why I needed to be on my own for a time.

It was so that I could hear directly from God and know that it was his leading. I could not point to a teacher or leader or even a friend that had influenced me to pursue this path. I knew beyond a doubt that this was God's leading alone. It forced me to seek him only for my questions and understanding. I needed this time with just God to plant my feet firmly for when opposition came, and to also be able to recognize who to "congregate with" when the time came.

If God is leading you to keep the Sabbath, you can do this. He will provide guidance and a way for you to do what he's asking.

Biblical Guidance for Keeping the Sabbath

There are commands for how to observe the Sabbath, but there are also many things man has created to honor this special day. I'll distinguish between those here. I encourage you to keep as many of the Bible's commands as you can, but then be free to find your own "tradition", things meaningful to you that you can weave into your day.

The most concise instructions are in Leviticus 23:3:

“There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a sabbath to the Lord.”

These instructions are repeated, specified and illustrated over and over throughout the Old Testament and include:

- Set apart the seventh day of each week as a holy day – Exodus 20:8-11, 31:13-16, 35:2, 5:14, Genesis 2:3
- Rest from your work and producing/production – Exodus 16:23-29, 5:14-15
- Refrain from pursuing your own interests – Isaiah 58:13-14
- Assemble with other believers – Leviticus 23:3
- Give an offering – Numbers 28:9-10, Nehemiah 10:32-33
- Refrain from buying and selling / conducting commerce – Jeremiah 17:19-27, Amos 8:5, Nehemiah 13:15-22

While other instructions for keeping the Sabbath can be inferred from scripture, these are the most straightforward and foundational components.

Observing the Sabbath Without a Congregation

Once you take away the work, pursuing your own interests, shopping, errands, projects and business, and add in gathering with other believers and bringing an offering – what God’s trying to say is, “Save one day just for me, where you can focus your attention on our being together.” The verse I feel sums up the spirit of the Sabbath is Isaiah 58:13-14:

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

He desires to be with you without all the distractions. He desires for you to find the joy and strength in him that can only be found when you begin setting aside the Sabbath for him.

Bringing an offering is easily done in your home. Look at all the examples we have in the Bible of various offerings:

Praise and prayer (Psalm 141:2)

Justice and righteousness (Amos 5:24)

Justice and charity (Proverbs 21:3)
Fasting (2 Kings 18:5-7)
Thanksgiving (Psalm 116:17)
A broken spirit (Psalm 51:17)
A contrite (repentant) heart (Psalm 51:17)
Money or something with monetary value (Matt. 2:11)
Mercy and acknowledgement of God (Hosea 6:6)
Spend additional quiet time in His presence (Psalm 48:9)
Rededicate your life in service to Him (Rom. 12:1; Matt. 6:24-27)
Praises (Heb. 13:15)
Doing good and sharing (Heb. 13:16)

Assembling with other believers can now be done virtually in your home. While it doesn't meet the full intent of joining with other believers, many online meetings can provide virtual experiences that build our faith, broaden our perspective and increase our sense of community. Some I recommend are:

- International House of Prayer Live Stream – Live worship, prayer and teaching, 24/7 (not Messianic)
- Lion & Lamb Erev Sabbath Service – A Messianic service including worship and teaching, recorded each week live, then available on demand until the following Sabbath.
- Hebraic Roots Network Programming – A constant stream of Messianic teaching from reputable teachers, check the program guide to plan your time.

With the various distractions and tangents available on the Internet, I would caution you to limit your time and to stay on the sites you planned to visit. While there are a myriad of Godly and useful ministries, this is your day to focus on only what God has for you.

If there's a Bible study available in your community on Saturdays, that may be a good option for you. I don't recommend abandoning your Christian gatherings altogether. Assembling with other believers is a key part of growing in our walk with Yeshua. In my case, I found others in my Sunday church congregation who were studying Messianic perspectives, and eventually a small group of us began meeting on the Sabbath. That group has now grown into the congregation I was praying for.

Once you put aside your own projects and pursuits, there are so many ways to be with God and enjoy his special day: Study, worship, reading his word, praying – and don't forget actually resting, doing nothing is okay on this day. I find that it's sometimes easier to do if I get out of the house, physically away from the distractions. Walking, driving to a beautiful scene, sitting in a peaceful or joyful place can be wonderful ways to be with God. Here are some resources I recommend to enhance Messianic study and Bible reading.

Additional Ways to Celebrate

While not commanded in the Bible, many traditional customs for observing the Sabbath can also enhance your experience.

Setting Apart the Sabbath

As we said earlier, setting apart the Sabbath from the rest of your week is commanded in several places in scripture. However, there are no specific instructions for doing so. It is customary to mark the beginning and end of the Sabbath with a bit of ceremony that encapsulates the spirit of the Sabbath. These rich traditions have been passed down through the centuries and, in some cases, slightly modified for Messianic believers.

Based on Genesis 1 and other scriptures, the Sabbath begins and ends at sunset. Here is a guide to the time of sunset in your local time zone.

Friday night at sundown is referred to as Erev Sabbath (Sabbath Evening). This is a time traditionally spent in the home with family or friends. The shofar is blown to mark the beginning of the Sabbath. A meal is shared, bread and wine/juice are offered and blessings are recited over the Sabbath, the food and each other. (A link to traditional blessings is included below.)

This can be an easy way to include others in your Sabbath observance, even if they don't typically observe it. A simple meal made in a slow cooker or bought before sundown is a good way to avoid overworking that night. While Exodus 12:16 allows for the preparation of food on the Sabbath, some people prepare food for the entire Sabbath ahead of time, so they can minimize their time in the kitchen.

Likewise, just before sundown on Saturday, there is a short ceremony called Havdalah (meaning to differentiate or separate). It consists of overflowing wine/juice and the scent of spices representing the overflowing joy and sweetness of the Sabbath.

During the Sabbath

Jewish tradition provides many beautiful practices for the Sabbath day as well. Again, reciting of Biblical prayers and blessings are typical. The Torah (or the whole Bible for Messianic believers) is celebrated with thanksgiving. Prayers and blessings over Jerusalem are offered.

Prayers & Blessings

- Restoration Ministries has prepared a reference guide (siddur) containing the traditional prayers and blessings from a Messianic perspective. Erev Sabbath starts on Page 11, Sabbath starts on Page 40, and Havdalah is on pages 88-89.
- Covenant Designs offers a beautiful set of Sabbath candlesticks, a covering for the Sabbath bread, and a book specifically for celebrating the Sabbath in the home, including blessings and traditional recipes for the Sabbath.

Weekly Bible Portions

Most of Judaism and most Messianic congregations throughout the world follow a Bible reading schedule. While not one of God's commandments, this unifying practice can be a powerful way for God to speak to his collective people each week.

Based on the Hebrew language of the original Torah scrolls, the rabbis from ancient times (likely the 6th century BCE) codified the most obvious breaks in the texts from Genesis through Deuteronomy. These are called Parshiot (portions or the singular "parsha") and flow differently than the chapter and verse notations we see now, which were not in the original texts. There are 54 parshiot from Genesis through Deuteronomy. These are paired with scripture from the prophetic and historical books of the Bible thematically related to each week's Torah portion, and called the Haftarah. Messianic believers have also added related scripture from the Apostolic writings (New Testament) for each Torah portion. There are one-year and three-year reading schedules that include portions from all three sections of the Bible to be read each week.

- Lion & Lamb Ministries' schedule of readings provides all three portions (Torah, Haftarah and Apostolic) for an annual cycle.
- Restoration of the Torah provides insightful, Messianic commentary on each of the 54 portions.
- Here at Sightedmoon.com we have the 3 1/2 year Torah portions that we are doing in alignment with the Sabbatical Cycles.

Getting Started

- Set a date to begin, then clear your schedule for as many Friday nights and Saturdays as you can (or as much time as you can during the 24-hour period).
- Tell your family and/or friends you're taking a day off and invite them to join you in doing so for whatever portion of it they can.
- Make a plan for your 24 hours. Decide what you'll do with your time beforehand. If you have no plan, it's easy to get pulled into other peoples' plans or let other projects creep in.
- Turn off your phone and check it only once or twice for the most urgent issues. (Treat this like a date day with the Lord.)
- Anticipate what might come up to pull you away from your time with Yeshua, and do whatever you can to pre-empt it beforehand.
- Plan your offering and be deliberate about the giving of it (as you would to give someone a gift).

Be aware that the enemy does not want you observing the Sabbath. Once you commit to doing it, don't be surprised to find opposition, unexpected emergencies, doubt or discouraging thoughts and emotions. Avoid conflict; modify your plan to fit any physical ailments or limitations that arise, submit to God any last minute obstacles that threaten to keep you from observing it. Don't let the enemy steal the gift of the Sabbath God is trying to give you.

Resolve to follow only God's leading. He will empower you to do his will. Persist in doing what you can and expanding it over time.

As you begin your day, don't let the rules or do's and don'ts discourage or dominate you. I can attest that as you are diligent in spending this day with Yeshua, you will be motivated to do whatever it takes to simplify that day and protect that time. The do's and don'ts will become a distant memory, irrelevant to you and Yeshua's special day. This will be the highlight of your week, your favorite day, the day you can't wait to reach and hate to end. You will enter into new joy, rest, intimacy and perspective for the rest of your week and, indeed, your life.

“⁶ And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.”

Isaiah 56:6-7

May the peace and joy of the Lord be yours as you begin keeping his Sabbath.