

How the Sabbath is Determined: The Land vs. the Individual

Is the Sabbath determined by an individual's own experience? Can a person's individual seven-day cycle guide them into a correct cycle of Sabbath observance? What happens, for example, when we cross the dateline and enter another country that is keeping a Sabbath out of sync with our own? Is that reason to maintain a personal unbroken sequence of days as individuals? Definitely not! Because people travel so much these days, all our personal weekly cycles would be telling a different story, so by maintaining our own cycle, every day of the week would be sacred to somebody. Fortunately the Bible clarifies that confusion.

The sun passing overhead, not an individual's body clock, is what determines the Sabbath in any given place. The Scriptural roots for this are found in Leviticus 25. The first part of the chapter (verses 1–7) describes the Sabbath of the land; the Israelites were to let the land lie fallow every seventh year after their entry into the Promised Land. It was specifically called “a Sabbath to the Lord” (v.4). The second part of the chapter (verses 8–22) describes the year of jubilee—based on 7 cycles of the Sabbath of the land—in which any land sold to strangers was to return to the tribal landowners, and any Israelite sold as a slave had to be released. This special festival dramatically combines the themes of the gift of the land and human redemption—all under the umbrella of the Sabbath. In other words, the land and the Sabbath belong together.

The prophet Jeremiah underscores the importance of the Sabbath and its connection to the land with prophecies of judgment because of the desecration of the Sabbath. He laments the extent of idolatry in the land, and prophesies judgement upon the people and upon the land because of it. All the people's wealth and treasures, their temple, their inheritance; all this would be lost. In chapter 17, forever-burning fire at the beginning of the chapter (v.4) and unquenchable fire at its end (v.27) ties together a literary unit, therefore linking the sin of idolatry and the desecration of the Sabbath with the land and judgment upon it. This is further evidence of the intimate relationship between the Sabbath and the land.

The outcome and climax of all this is seen in 2Chr 36:21.

The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

So the land kept 70 “Sabbaths” during the 70-year Babylonian captivity while the majority of the inhabitants of Judah were exiled in Babylon. Jeremiah explains that for each year they were in captivity their deserted land lay fallow—had a Sabbath rest—to make up for all the times the Judeans neglected the Sabbath rest for their land. This neglect also flowed on to their weekly Sabbaths. The exile taught them that when they interrupted, neglected or ignored the God-given Sabbath cycles the results were seen in the land being desolated and deserted and the people becoming slaves again. In other words, the Sabbath is connected to the people through the land. The passage of the sun over the land determines both the time of day and the weekly cycle, fulfilling what was decreed at Creation—that the sun would rule the day (Gen 1:16).

Therefore, the experience of crossing the dateline and then worshipping on a day out of a person’s weekly sequence is no justification for thinking that a body of land can do the same. A person may be able to make that adjustment, but a body of land cannot. The seven-day cycle is not tied to individuals; it is tied to the land.