

A Sabbath Day's Journey

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All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

Some enjoy taking a casual stroll on the Sabbath. To many, it is a meditative activity that is conducive with the command to relax and reflect on the purpose of our existence. This has led to an interesting question. How far can a person walk on the Sabbath without violating the fourth commandment? Some are of the opinion that the book of Acts reveals a limit that God set regarding how far an individual can walk on the Sabbath. This view is derived from a detail recorded by Luke when he wrote:

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey (Acts 1:12).

Respected archeologists are convinced that the Mount of Olivet was between 1,000 and 1,500 meters from Jerusalem. This is equivalent to less than a mile. As a result of Luke's statement, a few individuals have come to believe that this distance represents a limit as to how far a believer may walk on the Sabbath. But, is this the truth?

In order to answer this question, it must first be understood that God never declared an acceptable distance for walking on the Sabbath. In the book of Acts, Luke only noted what had become a tradition among the Jews. It was likely a tradition derived from the land allotted to Levites within the cities of Israel (Num. 35:4-5). Others believe it was the distance individuals might walk to the Tabernacle from their tent within the camps of ancient Israel (Exo. 16:29). Ultimately, the Jewish people came to consider this distance an acceptable measurement to walk on the Sabbath which led to it becoming "a Sabbath day's journey."

What must be understood is that Luke's reference was not a validation of Jewish tradition! The author merely used this term to relate how far it was from Olivet to Jerusalem. Notwithstanding, this measurable distance traveled by the disciples cannot be found within the guidelines of God's laws, His statutes, or judgments.

With this in mind, consider the case of Jericho. That ancient city was discovered by Charles Warren in 1868. Extensive investigations using more modern techniques were made under the direction of Kathleen Kenyon between 1952 and 1958. Because the story of Israel's march around Jericho has significantly affected millions of people, believers tend to think that the city was much larger than the actual site reveals. The archeological dig found the perimeter of Jericho to be approximately 600 meters. Understanding that the assembly of priests and soldiers would have begun the march from a distance away from the city; God's instructions required them to walk more than a mile each day. The assembly was also commanded to repeat this exercise daily for seven consecutive days. This means that one of those days would have been a weekly Sabbath. God would not have told them to march around the city if it violated the fourth commandment. A man or woman in good health can leisurely walk one mile in about 20 minutes. This would not be considered a strenuous task, or an unnecessary exertion of energy.

Another point to consider is that the entire nation of Israel did not march around Jericho. The only people told to carry out the orders were seven priests, some of the Levites to carry the

Ark, and men of war (Jos. 6:2-6). This march was a carrying out of orders commanded by God. It was instruction priestly in nature, and as such could be performed on the Sabbath without violating the day.

Christ said that the work priests performed for the required offerings on Sabbath was permissible (Mat. 12:5). Circumcision was to be performed regardless of which day of the week it was (John 7:23). The truth is, any order from the Almighty Himself could never be considered a violation of His law.

Additionally, Christ made it clear that the Sabbath permits work that is necessary to preserve life or property. This is commonly known as an “ox in a ditch” principle (Luke 14:5). The march around Jericho was part of God’s plan to establish and protect the nation of Israel. Thus, He commanded them to conquer Jericho. This too would fall into the category of activities permitted on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15-16).

Consider a more dramatic example from the story of the Exodus. God told Israel to keep the Passover on the 14th and then to walk out of Egypt the next day while transporting all of their possessions along with the supplies taken from the Egyptians. More than two million people proceeded to walk day and night from Goshen all the way to the edge of the Red Sea. Therefore, Israel journeyed on day and night on the first and last day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread as well as traveling on the weekly Sabbath (Exo. 13:21). Still, Israel did not violate the Sabbath commandment.

Another example is found in the record of the Apostle Paul’s ministry. When visiting the city of Philippi with Timothy and Silas, these men walked out the city to place where people gathered for prayer and fellowship on the Sabbath:

And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there (Acts 16:13).

Finally, most people today do not need to walk to a gathering of brethren. They generally drive in heated or air-conditioned vehicles. There is no prohibition for this either, but it can be argued that traveling unnecessary long distances would not be appropriate. In that context, God’s people need to be cautious about what we do, and our motive for doing it, on the Sabbath. God commanded His people to keep it holy. The Prophet Isaiah wrote:

If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, *from* doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking *your own* words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD (Isaiah 58:13-14).

Thus, while it is not wrong to take a meditative walk on the Sabbath, we should consider our reason for doing it. God does not dictate a “safe” distance to travel, but rather He gives us criteria relating to our motive for any activity on the Sabbath. Are we delighting in keeping God’s holy day, and not using it to take hikes or doing our own pleasure? Each person must consider these things as we strive to respect God’s law in order to qualify for His Kingdom.