

Is Fire Prohibited on the Sabbath?

By Terry Moore and Art Braidic

© 2015 the Eternal Church of God

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

The Bible states that using a fire in order to cook food is not to be done on the Sabbath: As Moses wrote:

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 (Exodus. 16:23).

The reason Moses told Israel not to cook food on the Sabbath relates to the work involved with cooking. The process of preparing food to be cooked typically requires much effort. This kind of labor detracts from the purpose of God's Sabbath and therefore cooking food is forbidden.

In addition, God explained that fire used with the intent of doing work is also prohibited. But does this mean that we can never have a fire burning for any reason on the Sabbath?

The answer to this question is first found by examining the context of God's command to build the Tabernacle in the wilderness. After Moses received God's instructions, he descended from Mount Sinai and his face shone. Moses covered his face and instructed the people by stating:

These *are* the words which the LORD has commanded *you* to do: 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. You shall kindle no fire throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath day (Exodus 35:1-3).

The inclusion of Sabbath restrictions in the midst of conveying God's instructions to build the Tabernacle makes it obvious that the issue is creating a fire for the purpose of doing work. Before telling Israel that they "shall kindle no fire," God related that "Whoever does any work on it (the Sabbath) shall be put to death." However, some do not consider that the focal point of this statement is work, and instead focus on the word "fire."

To properly understand God's intent, we must take into account God's previous instructions to Moses regarding the construction of a holy Tabernacle. With this in mind, continue reading the following verses:

And Moses spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying, "This *is* the thing which the LORD commanded, saying: 'Take from among you an offering to the LORD. Whoever *is* of a willing heart, let him bring it as an offering to the LORD: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and scarlet *thread*, fine linen, and goats' *hair*; ram skins dyed red, badger skins, and acacia wood; oil for the light, and spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones, and stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate. All *who are* gifted artisans among you shall come and make all that the

LORD has commanded the tabernacle, its tent, its covering, its clasps, its boards, its bars, its pillars, and its sockets; the ark and its poles, *with* the mercy seat, and the veil of the covering; the table and its poles, all its utensils, and the showbread; also the lampstand for the light, its utensils, its lamps, and the oil for the light; the incense altar, its poles, the anointing oil, the sweet incense, and the screen for the door at the entrance of the tabernacle; the altar of burnt offering with its bronze grating, its poles, all its utensils, *and* the laver and its base; the hangings of the court, its pillars, their sockets, and the screen for the gate of the court; the pegs of the tabernacle, the pegs of the court, and their cords; the garments of ministry, for ministering in the holy *place*—the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, to minister as priests.” And all the congregation of the children of Israel departed from the presence of Moses (Exodus 35:4-20).

The context of this passage is constructing the tabernacle. God commissioned Israel to provide the materials and craftsmen necessary to build the Tabernacle with all of its furniture, hardware, utensils, and garments for the priests. Because there was much work to do, God chose to first relate the importance of remembering to keep the Sabbath during this construction process. This was done for a specific reason. Israel was about to begin construction of the glorious Tabernacle. Although these tasks were ordained by God, and the Tabernacle would be holy, absolutely no work on this project was to be done on the seventh day.

The process necessary to work with wood and metal in ancient times is important to consider. It was necessary for workmen to employ fire as a means to melt, bend, shape, and form everything from tools, to ornaments, bolts, pins, furniture, utensils, and to dye fabrics. In fact, extreme heat is used in a similar way today when doing such work.

The fact that God chose to restate the fourth commandment just before Moses related the instructions to build this extraordinary place of worship, makes it evident that the admonition to not kindle a fire on the Sabbath was regarding fire employed while performing work on God’s holy project. The Eternal was informing the people that, as important as this project was, the commandment to not do any work on the Sabbath still stood. Therefore, the fire used by an individual’s in their craft or trade was prohibited on God’s holy day.

Despite the context of this edict to not kindle a fire on the Sabbath, some consider the account of a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath as another example indicating that no fire is allowed on the seventh day. But does this account pertain to fire or simply to work? Consider a second point in the following passage, and take note of what it does and what it does not say:

Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day (Numbers 15:32).

The English translation states that this man was found “gathering sticks” on the Sabbath day. This has caused many to assume that he was seen outside the camp gathering small branches in order to kindle a fire. However, we must be honest and admit that the Scriptures never state that building a fire was his intent. In fact, the term “sticks” comes from the Hebrew word *ates* which could mean any kind of wood—even wood associated with craftsmanship and construction. Thus, it is possible that this man’s intent was to gather wood for a purpose other than making a fire.

Nevertheless, the term “gathering” seems to indicate that the wood collected by this man may have been relatively small pieces. In either case, regardless of what his intention was, even the gathering of branches is a task prohibited on the Sabbath. Thus, God determined that this

incident was to be an example relating how the Eternal feels about deliberate disregard for His law. His judgment for breaking the Sabbath was death:

And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. 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." So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died (Numbers 15:33-36).

These verses have sometimes been taken out of context causing a number of believers to conclude that God prohibits any fire burning on the Sabbath. This belief has caused some to refrain from turning on a stove or heater. But we must be honest and consider what this passage does not say. It does not say that having a fire burning on the Sabbath is wrong. It does not say that all fires must be extinguished before the Sabbath begins. The reason is that God's issue is not heat or the incineration of wood. His concern is performing labor on the Sabbath, and that enables us to understand the meaning of Exodus 16, Exodus 35, and Numbers 15.

The kindling of the type of fire that is prohibited on the Sabbath regards fire for the purpose of doing work. God was not referring to maintaining fire necessary for people to stay warm in cold climates. For this reason, the Eternal never states that His people are to refrain from having any form of fire on the Sabbath.