

So what in the world could cause Muslims to take up the Jewish cause here in the United States?

What could cause Muslims to ignore hundreds of years of animosity and violence toward their Jewish brothers and sisters and motivate them to speak up on their behalf?

In a word: **the Sabbath.**

Camille came across a headline last week on the Internet that caught my eye. A Jewish high school in Colorado was facing a potentially divisive issue. Due to the school's success on the basketball court, they faced the possibility of playing in their state league's championship game. This would be reason to celebrate, of course, but there was one problem: the championship basketball game was scheduled for **Sabbath, March 8**—which is actually today. To play in the championship game would force them to betray their convictions, of course, and they confronted the league about possibly changing the date of the championship game.

The league insisted that they would not change the date—that the school entered the league, and the season, with the understanding that they would potentially have to play their playoff games on Sabbath. Congressmen in Colorado took up the cause of the school, and so did an Islamic Civil Rights group. Such spokespersons insisted that it was unconstitutional to not accommodate a school's wish to play a game on a day that their religious convictions didn't prevent them from participating in. The irony of the whole thing, of course, is that according to the league's policy, games could not be played on Sundays for religious reasons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.examiner.com/a-1249534~Islamic\\_group\\_supports\\_Jewish\\_school\\_teams\\_plea.html](http://www.examiner.com/a-1249534~Islamic_group_supports_Jewish_school_teams_plea.html), cf. also <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2008/more/02/27/sabbath.colorado.ap/index.html>, both accessed on March 7, 2008.

Unfortunately, the school lost in the semi-finals, which were not played on Sabbath, so it was kind of a moot point; but what do you think about such a predicament? Would you have made such a “stink” about it? Would you have played?

Sadly, the reality is that many Seventh-day Adventist counterparts want to make it so that the Sabbath is not all that big a deal anymore. There are plenty of people out there who have no problem playing basketball on the Sabbath; or spending a sunny summer Sabbath afternoon catching some rays on the beach; or whatever else the case may be.

What about you?

Of course, those of us who may be sitting here and saying, “**Oh, no. I don’t do that. I don’t touch a ball on the Sabbath. I don’t work on the Sabbath. I don’t go swimming on the Sabbath. I don’t eat out on the Sabbath,**” and we are feeling pretty smug and good about us because we avoid all the “**bad**” things. But lest we feel pretty self-righteous about our Sabbath practices, let us be reminded that, when it comes down to it, it is not particularly what we *do* on the Sabbath, but if what we are doing is a heart-response to God; an experience of faith.

Speaking to this subject, one of my seminary professors who I talked about a few weeks ago, Dr. George Knight, addressed people who avoid “cooling down” at all costs on Sabbath. It may be 110 degrees outside on a Sabbath afternoon and we refuse to cool ourselves down. He said

something that I thought was pretty appropriate, **“I would rather be praising God in the water, than cursing Him on the dry land.”**

Now, please don't take that the wrong way. So, lest I get myself into deep water—I especially don't want to get myself into **“deep water”** on the Sabbath because I'm not supposed to go in above my ankles—let us turn to Ezekiel this morning. We need to get into the Word of God.

We are looking at **Ezekiel 20** this morning. I'm sure that if you've ever given the book of Ezekiel much thought before, this was probably one of the places you familiarized yourself with. As a kid, growing up, I remember quoting a few passages from this chapter before. It was one of the only passages in Ezekiel that I recall looking at. Of course, my exploration into this chapter consisted of looking at one or two verses, but as I've explored this chapter a bit this past week, I've come to a deeper understanding and appreciation for God's message.

Please look at **verse 1** of the chapter. We must not look over the introduction to Ezekiel's prophecy in this chapter. Notice that Ezekiel says that it came to pass in the **“seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month.”** We could look at that and say, **“Well, that's nice: Ezekiel had a thing for dates and just wanted to keep good track of when certain things happen.”**

But Ezekiel doesn't give the date for simply giving the date's sake. Remember, one of the most important things to remember about scripture—and I've said this a few times, I'm sure—is that every passage has been placed there for a reason. There are no **“throw away”** portions of

scripture. The human writer—under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—does not simply introduce facts to us for arbitrary reasons. There is always a deeper meaning behind such facts.

And what is that deeper meaning? Well, interestingly, if you were to look at **Jeremiah 52:12** you would notice that on the exact same day, five years later, Jerusalem was destroyed once and for all. So God comes to Ezekiel, exactly five years prior to Jerusalem's destruction, and gives him an important message of warning for His people. He's hoping, of course, that such a message of warning will bring His people into repentance so that the destruction doesn't have to take place five years later.

And thus, this chapter is an end-time plea. It has eschatological significance. Are we not living in the end-times as well? Are we not living in a time when destruction is soon to follow? Thus, do you think that, perhaps, Ezekiel's message in this chapter has relevance to us? Remembering, of course, that the book of Revelation refers to Ezekiel more than any other Old Testament book.

So in this end-time setting, God once again gives a warning cry to His people. And in that warning cry, He again returns to a reminder of their history. I hate to sound like a broken record, but God's method of sharing His message is always within the context of our past. He always tries to bring up the past so that we will be reminded of His goodness and that our appreciation for Him will deepen.

I love, especially, how God puts it in **verse 6** where He says, "**On that day I raised My hand in an oath to them.**" Can you see it now? God is standing there before Israel and Judah, raising His

hand, swearing to be faithful to them. Such a picture of a God who has a deep covenantal love for His people!

Unfortunately, as we've seen previous to this, the people's response is less than beautiful. God says that they **"rebelled against Me and would not obey Me."** Over and over again in this chapter, God makes this claim. His people have been rebellious and disobedient. Even though God raised His hand to them, pledging to be faithful to His people and making a marital vow to Him, they turned their back on Him and went the other way. They wanted nothing to do with God's goodness. How it must have broken the heart of God!

It is awfully revealing, though, that at the heart of Judah's rebellion was the Sabbath. Three times in this chapter God plainly states that His people have **"defiled My Sabbaths."** Doesn't it only seem appropriate that the observance/non-observance of the Sabbath was a sign in Israel's last days, just as it will be for ours? Five years later and everything would come crashing down for Israel. It was the end. And at the heart of that message was the Sabbath, just as it will be for us.

What does God say in **verses 11 and 20?** **"Moreover, I also gave them My Sabbaths to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. . . . Hallow My Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me, and you that you may know that I am the Lord your God."**

**“But wait a minute, pastor,”** someone says, **“These verse talk about *Sabbaths*. How do we know that this is talking about the seventh-day Sabbath, and not simply the yearly festivals and Sabbaths?”** Thank you for much for asking, I’m glad you did.

In fact, many commentators interpret these **“Sabbaths”** here precisely that way. And just yesterday, when I talked with my dad about my sermon for the day, I asked him this very question. His response? He said, **“Well, I am not sure that you can make a case for either interpretation from this passage.”**

On the contrary, dear friends, I want to show you irrefutable evidence that the Sabbaths that God referred to here are not simply the yearly Sabbaths and festivals, but the seventh-day Sabbath. This is kind of the academic portion of my sermon, so you can take out a piece of paper, if you wish, and take a few notes. And we have to very quickly go through this.

I want to give you four, very quick evidences that this is, in fact, the seventh-day Sabbath that God is referring to.

- 1. Ezekiel 20:12 is almost a word-for-word quote from Exodus 31:13.** If you’ll turn there very quickly, you’ll see what God says in that place in scripture, noticing how closely it mirrors Ezekiel. What does **Exodus 31:13** say? **“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.’”** And if you drop down to **verse 15** you will notice that it is abundantly

clear that this is talking about the seventh-day Sabbath. This evidence could probably stand alone, but there are three other evidences that give weight to this fact.

2. **There are only 15 places in the Old Testament that refer to “My Sabbaths” and it is abundantly clear that, each time, they refer to the seventh-day Sabbath.** We just looked at one of those places, but
3. **The only “Sabbath” that God ever instructs Israel to “keep holy” is the seventh-day Sabbath.** We need not go any further than the Ten Commandments to recall that this is true. This is one of five places in the Old Testament, besides our passage in Ezekiel, that God tells His people to “keep holy” the Sabbath, and it is always in reference to the seventh-day Sabbath.
4. **Ezekiel 44:24 also speaks of “My Sabbaths” and there, Ezekiel also mentions the “appointed feasts.”** So, Ezekiel, himself, seems to make the point that the “My Sabbaths” are in distinction from the “appointed feasts.”

So as we look at this passage of scripture, it seems abundantly clear that the “Sabbaths” that God is referring to is the seventh-day Sabbath. And that seventh-day Sabbath has apocalyptic significance in Israel’s history, just as it does in ours.

“Okay . . . so this is talking about the seventh-day Sabbath,” you say, “So what?” Well, I’m also glad you asked that question also.

Notice, especially, that God tells us in **verse 20** to “**hallow My Sabbaths.**” How have you done in “**hallowing**” God’s Sabbath lately? The word for “**hallow**” is the Hebrew word *qadosh*—did you get that?—and it literally means to “**set apart**” or to “**consecrate**” or to “**make it holy.**”

Incidentally, this is the same word that Moses utilizes to describe what God did with the Sabbath in the very beginning. He *qadoshed*—He set it apart, made it holy—it. And, by the way, in God’s wonderful creation act in the very beginning, the Sabbath was the only thing that God *qadoshed* or set apart. As He went about His creative acts in the very beginning, everything was good and very good, but there was only one thing that He made holy: the Sabbath.

So God invites us to set the Sabbath apart, just as He has set it apart. Isn’t it neat that we are called to do something to the Sabbath that God Himself does with it? And by so setting it apart and making it holy, we imitate God. What a wonderful privilege! There is at least one thing we can be sure of that when we take part in it, we are reflecting God and doing His will. When we set the Sabbath apart and making it holy, we are reflecting the creative acts of God.

Yet the word that is utilized here has more significance than simply keeping it holy, or setting it apart. The way that the Hebrew utilizes the word signifies that we are not simply to “**keep it holy,**” but we are called to “**keep it intensely holy.**” So God says to us, “**Friends, if you will but just keep my Sabbath intensely, then they will be a sign, a symbol, a special bond between you and Me.**”

Perhaps one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Abraham Heschel, has written one of the greatest expositions on this wonderful day. Many Adventists owe a lot of appreciation to this man for the way he writes about the Sabbath with such illustrative imagery. Among other things, he refers to the Sabbath as “**A Palace in Time,**” thus telling us that when we enter into the joy and experience of the Sabbath, we are entering into a royal palace. One

need not go to the **White House** or **Buckingham Palace** to experience royalty and riches. One need only enter into the joyful rest of the Sabbath to experience these things.

Similarly, I'd like to read a few thoughts that Heschel has proposed elsewhere. I think he has caught the idea of what it means to keep the Sabbath "**intensely**" holy. Listen to his beautiful words:

**The Sabbath is the most precious present mankind has received from the treasure house of God . . . . In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil there are islands of stillness where many may enter a harbor and reclaim his dignity. The island is the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs as well as of attachment to the spirit . . . . All our life should be a pilgrimage to the seventh day; the thought and appreciation of what this day may bring to us should be ever present in our minds.**<sup>2</sup>

His last thought is precisely the reason why God instructs us in the Ten Commandments to "**remember the Sabbath day.**" If we find ourselves going through a trying time and it's a Monday, Wednesday, or whatever day, we can simply "**remember the Sabbath day**" and it will lift our Spirits; to know that God has the rest of the Sabbath for us.

So what about you? Do you keep the Sabbath "**intensely**" or do you defile it? Sadly, I must admit in my own life that I probably do "**defile**" it.

I read an interesting article recently that talked about one man's commitment to the Sabbath. He's an 80-year-old man who is from South Africa. What is remarkable about this man is that he's a marathon runner. Even though he's 80, he regularly runs in the **Two Oceans Ultra Marathon** in South Africa. Rather than simply being the 26.2 miles that a typical marathon is,

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 18, 29, 89.

this Marathon—which has been dubbed “the world’s most beautiful marathon”—is 34.8 miles long! And this man, Eric Webster, has run it five times.

Now, at the age of 80, he simply runs the half marathon, which is only 13 miles long. But here is an 80-year-old man running marathons! Do we have anyone over 80 here who runs marathons?

What is even more remarkable than that, however, is that the marathon is on the Sabbath, yet Webster has never had to bend his convictions about not running on the Sabbath. Why? Because, for the last 19 years, Webster has organized a Friday running of the Two Oceans Marathon—and this Friday running is officially recognized by the Two Oceans organizers. So Webster, and about 50 other individuals who are either Adventist, Jewish, or people who are officiating the next day, get to run this marathon officially, yet a day early.

What a remarkable man! He could have easily said, “**Well, I guess I just won’t run in the Marathon.**” Or, he could have just as easily said, “**Well, maybe God won’t mind it if I just run one time a year on the Sabbath.**” I know individuals who do run on the Sabbath in such events. I am not judging their personal spirituality, but look how much attention this one man has brought to the beauty of the Sabbath by organizing such an event. A whole community is now aware of the Sabbath because of this man’s desire to run in this race, yet on a different day.

Webster doesn’t avoid running on Sabbath because he’s legalistic, of course, but because he has a deep desire to keep the Sabbath intensely; to maximize his day of rest and time with God.

Reflecting on this subject, he said,

**If I felt it was in order for me to run races on Sabbath, I would be honor-bound to open up all Sabbath sport to our young people. That means cricket matches, soccer matches, baseball, basketball, swimming galas, etc. . . Of course, if we can argue that perhaps we have been too strict on the question of Sabbath races and should ease up we must insist this is the way to go for all young people in all sports (perhaps with the exception of boxing as it might be hard to argue for Sabbath-keeping while knocking your opponent down).<sup>3</sup>**

Here's a man who is a tremendous witness of what it means to keep the Sabbath intensely holy. Sadly, though, for many of us, we have gone from keeping it intensely holy, to simply keeping it holy, until, finally, we will cease to keep it holy at all. It is a slippery slope, I know. But how God must weep when we ignore Him altogether on His special and holy day, to engage in other activities that do not bring us closer to Him or help our fellow man.

And incidentally, I am not sure how many of us can keep the Sabbath “**intensely**” holy when we're wasting it away in a deep slumber.

But lest we draw up our list of dos and don'ts for proper Sabbath observance, I would remind you that the Jewish people got into trouble when they started going that. And, in fact, probably much of their legalistic Sabbath observance resulted from a reading of passages like these ones here in Ezekiel. They wanted to make sure that they never went into captivity again, so they made it a point to keep the Sabbath perfectly.

A few years back, the General Conference debated the merits of coming up with a list of Sabbath “guidelines” that the members could reference when trying to stay within the bounds of keeping the Sabbath intensely holy. They wisely decided against doing such a thing. The reality is,

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<sup>3</sup> [http://spectrummagazine.org/articles/spectrum\\_interview/2008/02/25/run\\_and\\_not\\_be\\_weary](http://spectrummagazine.org/articles/spectrum_interview/2008/02/25/run_and_not_be_weary), accessed on March 7, 2008.

friends, having rules and regulations is not truly a reflection of whether a person is “**keeping the Sabbath**” holy, anymore than having rules and regulations for a marriage signifies that the relationship is being kept holy.

With that being said, there are things that I choose not to participate in on the Sabbath. I don’t find that playing sports on the Sabbath, going out to eat on the Sabbath, buying things on the Sabbath, or many other things, help me keep the Sabbath “intensely.” I do not see how such things reflect my desire to keep the Sabbath intensely holy.

Avoiding such things doesn’t indicate my holiness for the Sabbath, of course. The Sabbath should more than just a list of dos and don’ts. I realize this is somewhat hard when we have children, but we need to figure out a way to put a positive spin on Sabbath observance. Believe it or not, the Bible tells us to call the Sabbath a “**delight.**” Not only that, but the Hebrew utilized in **Isaiah 58** instructs us that the Sabbath is to be a “**royal delight.**” The word that is used is the highest form of delight a person can take part in.

This is not to say that we need to resort to entertaining ourselves on the Sabbath, or our children, but what would happen if we viewed the Sabbath as a time of joyous delight—yes, a time to have “**fun,**” in the Lord?

What does God want from us? He invites us to keep the Sabbath **intensely** holy. I am not sure what that looks like for you, friends. I have not been called to be the Sabbath police. Neither

have you, incidentally, but let each of us ask the Lord how we can, by faith, enter into that rest of intense holiness. Let us ask the Lord how we can, by faith, call the Sabbath a royal delight.

I want to end with a story. I read this a few months back in a book I got for Christmas, from my wife, called *The Search for God at Harvard*. The book is written by a man who was an Orthodox Jew who wrote for the *New York Times*. He convinced the *Times* to give him a year off to enroll at Harvard Divinity School, and this book is a reflection from his time there.

But he also weaves in his own life story. As I said, he was raised an Orthodox Jew—which is the strictest sect of Judaism. His personal faith was a constant roller coaster, trying to reconcile his Judaism and his life.

But probably the greatest cause for concern out of everything was his family situation. He came from a very dysfunctional family. His parents were always at one another's throats. They were constantly arguing with one another, and accusing each other of everything under the sun. Eventually they divorced, which he didn't feel solved anything at all. In fact, over 30 years later, he was still trying to get over his parents' divorce and felt like he should literally have a chance to sue his parents over the trauma that their divorce caused him.

But amidst all of the chaos that went on in his family, there was always one particular moment that inevitably brought peace to the family, and especially with his parents. In a sense, it was a literal haven and refuge for the writer. Though it's a bit longer, listen to what he writes, and I will just read it directly from the book:

**There was another element of that life that I loved. Friday night. It was a time when, by the magic of the Sabbath candles, we were transformed into a happy, picture-book family. The recriminations and bickering would cease and the music would begin. Dov [his brother] was just a baby at the time, but Shalom [his older brother] and I would sit at the gleaming white table in our “Shabbat outfits,” dark blue pants and white cotton shirts open at the collar. Our hair was still wet from our pre-Sabbath baths, and it was combed neatly across our foreheads. Yarmulkes were bobby-pinned to our head. My mother waved her hands over the lighted candles and covered her eyes as she stood in a silent moment of meditation. Afterwards, she took us into her arms and kissed us, lingering an extra moment to drink in our freshness. She told us that we looked like the two angels that tradition says accompany the men home from the Friday-night synagogue service.**

**When, a little while later, my father returned from the synagogue, we lined up in front of him for the Sabbath blessing, the eldest, Shalom, first and then me. “May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe,” he said invoking the two grandsons of Jacob who, as Joseph’s children, were especially beloved. Bending down to reach us, my father cradled our heads between his strong hands as he recited the blessing. “May He bless you and keep you . . . and give you peace.”**

**My father, who worked hard all week managing and selling real estate, became our rabbi and cantor on Friday night. He took us through the mal singing the joyous melodies of the Hasidim and the resolute songs of the Chalutzim, the Israeli pioneers who, we were told, were singing the same songs as they worked to turn the desert green. My mother, a confirmed “listener” rather than singer, hummed along with a smile of contentment on her face.<sup>4</sup>**

What a picture of keeping the Sabbath intensely holy, huh? Amidst all of the chaos, fighting, and bickering, this family would enter into a weekly “**Palace in Time**” and enjoy the peace that only heaven can bring. The beautiful experience still rests firmly in this man’s mind today.

Isn’t that the ultimate picture of what the Sabbath is all about? Amidst all our busyness and strife, God gives us a weekly 24-hour Palace in Time that we can enter into, knowing that, like this man’s father, God cradles our heads between His strong hands and declares a blessing of peace upon us?

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<sup>4</sup> Ari L. Goldman, *The Search for God at Harvard* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 54, 55.

Friend, is there strife in your life? Maybe you, like this man, literally come from a family that has intense fighting and bickering. How God longs to give you that 24-hour Palace in Time that we can keep intensely holy, so that we can be refreshed with God's Everlasting Love. Maybe we simply get burned out from trying too hard, from thinking that we're in this battle alone. But God wants to remind us that He gives us a time to rest in Him. In fact, the Sabbath is a reflection of the reality that God desires that our whole lives be intensely resting in Him.

Would you like to enter into that **Palace in Time**? Would you like to call the Sabbath a “**royal delight**”? Would you like to, by God's grace, keep His Sabbath intensely Holy?

He invites you into that **Palace in Time**. He begs us to join Him.