

June 2020

Dear Brethren:

Even in the best of times it is not easy to keep God's commanded Sabbaths. Making a change in personal, family, and economic priorities to begin to carve out one-seventh of your life *every single week* to make that time *holy time* is a huge commitment, not to mention the keeping of *annual* Sabbaths in the spring and autumn—especially the eight-day Feast of Tabernacles. When someone first comes to the knowledge of God's Truth and acknowledges the sanctity of these *holy days*, it requires major changes which become very disruptive to the former "normal" life.

If God calls someone to see this hidden Truth, but then that individual deems the sacrifice too great, he/she may run from that knowledge and refuse to honor those weekly and annual Sabbaths. This is always a very individual choice. But those who recognize the value of God's ways—coming to cherish the hope of being a part of Jesus Christ's coming Kingdom, which is pictured by those Sabbaths—will make necessary, howbeit painful, changes to their lives in order to show God that they really do *agree with Him*. Whether called out of this world as an adult, or else perhaps having grown up in a family already possessing this knowledge and then having to evaluate it for oneself as a young adult, we each face a moment—a crossroads—when we either commit to this Way of Life or else choose to do something else. And the issue of *weekly and annual Sabbaths* is often a major consideration because of the sacrifice involved to actually *keep* these Holy Days as God requires.

Is it any wonder God said that respect for *His Sabbaths* would be *the sign* between God and His people?

Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for *it is a sign between me and you* throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you (Exodus 31:13) [emphasis mine throughout].

I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; And hallow my sabbaths; and *they shall be a sign between me and you*, that ye may know that I am the LORD your God (Ezekiel 20:19–20).

There are many requirements of God's Law that will set apart the true believer from the non-believer. Yet God says that the *Sabbath command* in particular is *the real sign*. If so, what are the full implications for us today?

Is Sabbath Resting a Command for Laziness?

One of the issues that makes holy Sabbaths difficult to observe is that God requires more than just "resting" on those days. No doubt we are required to rest. But in what way?

Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work . . . (Exodus 20:9–10).

Well, does this mean then that God intends His Sabbaths to be *lazy days at home*? Hardly. God requires *assemblies* on all of these Sabbaths!

Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, Concerning the feasts of the LORD, which *ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations*, even these are my feasts. Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, *an holy convocation*; ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings (Leviticus 23:2–3).

The word *convocation* means a public meeting or assembly. It is an *holy assembly*! An assembly made up of whom? *People who care about honoring God*, that's who!

My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? (Psalm 42:2)

The answer to this question—"When shall I come and appear?"—is: When God commands us to appear! And He commands our appearance for every weekly and annual Sabbath day.

With that in mind, how do we actually do it? There is no way to have a proper assembly of people unless it is planned and organized in advance. And even on the actual day of the assembly, the requirement of all parties to travel to be at a designated place—not to mention the efforts to manage the meeting before, during, and after—seems like the very opposite of "resting." In fact, any organized assembly, by its nature, is usually *a lot of work*—the very antithesis of rest. How then can God command His people to rest, but at the same time to assemble? Is that not contradictory? No, actually, it is not!

The key is understanding what *kind of work* God prohibits on His Sabbaths. He is not talking about prohibiting "all physical exertion." He is not commanding that we laze about our homes in order to honor Him. No, the prohibition is specifically against *servile work*!

In the first day ye shall have an holy convocation: ye shall do *no servile work* therein. But ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD seven days: in the seventh day is an holy convocation: ye shall do *no servile work* therein (Leviticus 23:7–8).

If "not working" means lolling about in our bathrobes and fuzzy slippers, God made that very difficult for Israel to accomplish when He commanded them not only to have convocations, but also to perform a huge number of extra animal sacrifices on those holy days. The reality is, even though we are not required to perform animal sacrifices, keeping the Sabbath as God requires is still hard work! But the difference is, it is not to be the same exertions that we perform on the other six days of the week *to serve our own interests*. The work we are to do on God's Sabbaths is about honoring Him specifically by applying ourselves in *worship and devotion to His spiritual things*. The distinction is made more clear by God's inspiration through Isaiah:

If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, *from doing thy pleasure on my holy day*; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, *not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words*: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father . . . (Isaiah 58:13–14).

The key then is recognizing the difference in *where our physical efforts are to be directed*. We either direct them toward taking care of our own priorities (whether that is work, family, recreation, or any other agenda of our own choosing), or else it is a *sacrifice of our own wills* to expend energies specifically for the expression of love and devotion to our Creator God, who commands that we appear before Him and commune with Him on His holy Sabbaths.

So God's command is to rest from our *normal cares, duties and responsibilities*, and on the Sabbaths to turn those energies to honoring God in a very special way, including the attending of an assembly where He promises to meet with us to receive our offerings. It is not an absence of all work, but simply a change in *the kind of work* that we are to perform.

A Test of Priorities

Yes, in the best of times it is difficult to keep God's Sabbaths, and that is why so few ever really do so. There are some who agree with the concept of Sabbath-keeping, but only in the same way that many agree with the concept of personal exercise for health (just as one

example). "Yes, I agree that I need to get out and exercise for my health, and I plan to do so as soon as I have more time, and as soon as the weather is nicer." This statement describes the hedging that often stands between the *philosophical embrace of* and the *dutiful application of* a particular principle. If physical exercise is truly required for good health, then it deserves the sacrifice of personal time to make it happen, and at all times of year, regardless of the weather. Anything less than that is simply disingenuous.

The same is true for those who come to accept that God's Sabbaths must be kept. How many over the years have said, "Yes, I really want to come to Sabbath services, and I really want to attend the Feast of Tabernacles, and as soon as things work out better for me, I hope to do so." The truth is, we always find time for the things that we really love most. And the things that we love less by comparison will always get short shrift. All of this is part of God's ingenious way of forcing us *to show* whether we truly love Him *first before all*, or not.

And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might (Deuteronomy 6:5).

But take diligent heed to do the commandment and the law, which Moses the servant of the LORD charged you, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and to cleave unto him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul (Joshua 22:5).

Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart (Jeremiah 29:12–13).

The truth is, many of those whom God has called have not shown that kind of love and commitment. They are *fair-weather believers* only. One of the names of our God is Jealous (Exodus 34:14), and He makes no apology for requiring that His called ones put Him *absolutely first*, never second—behind *anyone or anything*. Our willingness to prove the existence of that love by keeping Sabbaths properly has always been a key litmus test of our true priorities.

As Jesus was suffering persecution and torture on His way to being crucified, He prophesied concerning the evils that would soon befall Israel (Luke 23:28–31). He spoke of the *degree of evil* that men are willing to perpetrate against their fellows, and said, "For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" (Luke 23:31), meaning, if they behave so terribly when things are good, what do you think they will do when things are really bad?

With that concept in mind, if we find it difficult to obey God's command to keep Sabbaths when things are *relatively good*, how many will be faithful in observing them when things really do get hard? If you are one who has been compromising many of God's commands, but believing that when "the really big tests" come along you will be able to stand up and make correct choices, you are kidding yourself. If you find it hard to put God first right now—when things are comparatively good—when things get much worse in this world, you simply will continue *the same pattern of compromise* that you have been practicing before now. Old habits die hard.

Does God Suspend Convocations for Man's Convenience?

But what if we are ones who have been making necessary sacrifices up until now to keep God's Sabbaths and proving it by going out of our way to attend holy convocations every year, week by week, and season by season? This year, things in the world are very different. Never before—in our time—have we seen countries around the world collectively *lockdown* society in order to thwart a virus pandemic. Even the "freest" nations on earth have suspended personal liberties of religious worship and free expression in order to achieve "a greater good." At the time of this writing, we are still in the midst of the crisis. In many jurisdictions, church assemblies are considered "non-essential," and people gathering together to worship—or even caught traveling to an assembly by road or using public transportation—are threatened with penalties. "Surely," many say, "God would not want us to take the risk of being fined or imprisoned for violating a lockdown order." But is that conclusion really true? How many "inconveniences" does God expect us to endure and overcome in order to put Him first? In other words, how "serious" is God about having us appear before Him to worship?

There are many churches that have *caved in* to these newest government threats, suspending their own convocations and advising parishioners to stay at home. Many have attempted to use modern technology (internet videoconferencing) as a substitute. They justify this as being what God wants them to do. Sadly, this includes many Sabbath-keeping groups which came out of our own parent organization and which still claim to respect God's Sabbaths. They too, along with many Protestant denominations and Catholic dioceses, have said that God's command to convoke *in a place where He has placed His name* is secondary to man's edict to stay at home. By their actions, these church leaders are really saying that God considers His own command for convocation to be secondary to *man's herding scheme* to "flatten the curve" and head off a public health threat. But does God really see it that way? Do you really believe that God has *put an asterisk* next to the Sabbath command? "Keep my Sabbaths* (unless a more important crisis emerges in the world that man needs to fix)." How absurd!

Many of these cowardly church leaders have tried to justify their actions by claiming that God is the author of the quarantine principle, therefore we should all see the "stay-at-home edict" as God's biblical will. In other words, when any contagious disease is present, *all healthy people* should stay home to prevent transmission. Where do you find any such principle in the Bible? God is indeed the author of quarantine, but *only for those who exhibit clear signs of contagious disease in the flesh* (Leviticus 13)! You will find no place in all the Bible that shows that God commands healthy (symptomless) people to stay at home just because they *might have* come into contact with someone who *might have* had a virus that is spreading. It simply is not there! Anyone who claims to be honoring God's Sabbath command, but then who applies such a standard to Sabbath-keeping, is either innocently deceived or else deceitfully culpable. That scheme will never *hold water*.

How else do we know this to be true?

When the Going Gets Tough . . .

What did God actually command to His people who would live *in the last days* before the return of Jesus Christ—the time when things will get more difficult than *at any time* in human history?

Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) . . . *Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together*, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and *so much the more*, as ye see the day approaching (Hebrews 10:23, 25).

Does this sound like God wants us to convoke on His Sabbaths only up to a "reasonable point"? Or is He saying that as it becomes more and more difficult to live in this evil generation (as in the days of Noah), we are to exert *even more effort* to make His holy convocations a priority? Yes, that is exactly what He is saying! God is confirming that His commanded Sabbaths are *not optional!* In other words, if we are physically able, He wants us to *keep meeting and worshipping* Him in those physical church assemblies.

When Peter asked Jesus, in essence, how insistent He was about the need to forgive others, Christ made it clear that forgiving was not just to the degree of seven times seven, but to *seventy times seven* (Matthew 18:21–22). In the very same way, His command to convoke on His Holy Sabbaths is not just up to the time we endure *light to moderate* persecution, but "*so much the more*, as ye see the day approaching." Between now and Christ's return, we are guaranteed to see *more threats, more persecutions, and more abominations* in this world under Satan's wrath. Does God really intend that the Church suspend organized worship of

Him because Satan gets to tell us to "stay home"? As the old saying goes, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Likewise, when it gets harder and more threatening to put God first, the truly faithful will step out—pull out all stops—and obey no matter what. Where will you fall within these last days amidst prophesied tests for the spiritual Church of God?

Will God's People Become More Faithful, or Less So?

We began by asserting that *in the best of times* it is difficult to obey God, and our struggle with Sabbath-keeping is a perfect example of that. Therefore, when circumstances in this evil world get *much worse*, the pressure to compromise becomes exponentially greater. Is it any wonder that Christ asked an apparently pessimistic rhetorical question in light of terrible times of tribulation to come?

And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless *when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?* (Luke 18:7–8)

Yes, indeed. How many will have put on enough of God's Holy Spirit to give them the courage to continue obeying God when times get really bad? Who will trust God enough to make that journey outside their homes to convoke before Him in a place where He will place His name, especially when government officials threaten those who do so?

Will God let some of His people face persecution, including arrest? He says that some will indeed suffer the injustices of modern-day Egypt and Babylon, and will even become martyrs:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter (Romans 8:35–36).

Paul is quoting from Psalm 44:22, showing that God at times, for reason, will allow His people to suffer injustice, like sheep for the slaughter, and they will not be saved from that severe persecution on their own preferred timetable. God will always intervene to avenge His beloved "speedily," but that describes *how He sees* the timing from His perfect viewpoint, not at all the way we see it from our own. And because God often does not choose to act as quickly as we desire Him to, many of God's people—under pressure from persecution—turn back from faithfulness, even as did ancient Israel in the wilderness.

So Jesus was not being a pessimist when He prophesied that *many*, under extreme pressure, will begin to compromise. He was just stating the fact of what many will do when God permits Satan to amplify evil in the last days:

For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold (Matthew 24:7–12).

Yes, the *love of God* among His called people will become harder to find, because extreme persecution for obeying His commands will not only make love harder to perform—requiring incredible personal faith—but will also draw *extreme criticism and hatred* from those *who are not obeying God!*

We find it difficult to imagine how the simple exercise of our own personal faith in obeying God could make anyone else angry. Why cannot we all just live and let live? But that is not how it works. Satan is intent upon bringing persecution to the ones who truly have been called by God—the ones in line to become the firstfruits, and thereby to replace him on thrones, ruling with Jesus Christ. He hates God's people and will bring tremendous pressure to bear, seeking to destroy them. So that persecution will not be merely accidental, based upon time and chance. In part, it will be the result of satanic influence to stir up targeted hatred against the faithful. But how might that actually be accomplished? Many of you who live with unconverted family members already know what it feels like to deal with contention over your beliefs. But that is only minor compared to what is coming for all of us.

How Your Sabbath-keeping Offends Others

Why might others become hateful and wrathful toward you, even though you are just trying to practice your own personal faith in peace?

Recall that one of the serious threats to humanity in the last days, which Christ warned about, is impending pestilence (Matthew 24:7). We have not even begun to see the kind of *real pestilence* that God said is coming. *Real pestilence* will kill the healthy as well as the weak—the children as well as the aged. And wearing a mask or practicing "social distancing" will not help one iota. That day truly is coming. Yet, even this current falderal over a *relatively minor* virus is very revealing. It is revealing because it allows us to gauge

the *fear response* in a population, regardless of whether the physical threat turns out to be serious or not.

When people are afraid, they respond defensively (and often irrationally) to try to save themselves, as well as the things that they most care about. If you, even innocently, get "in their way," watch out! It does not have to be just someone who hates your religion. If people are being told that we must all stay home in order to "save lives," then if you are not staying home for whatever reason—whether going to church services or otherwise—you now are deemed a *threat to society*, because you are thumbing your nose at this "necessary" precaution. People will judge that, by your choosing to go out anyway against orders, *you are putting them in danger!* Perhaps someone in your household who never really cared about your religion before will now care, because you might be *bringing pestilence back to their abode*. This is just one way that your innocent obedience to God's command to convoke on Sabbaths could wind up putting you in the bullseye for persecution.

The Judas Syndrome

Another source of persecution in times of crisis comes from those *who know the Truth* like we do, but who are compromising personally out of their own fears and deceptions. They will not convoke before God, and to make them feel better about their own faithless choices, they want you to stay home as well. But if you *take your life in your hands* and step out to go to Sabbath services anyway, you may be making these others feel guilty by comparison. You need not say or even think anything ill about them for what they are doing (or not doing). But *your action* merely to embrace personal risk in order to put God first may be the instrument by which their own consciences becomes defiled. If they are not willing to learn from your light—but insist upon justifying themselves—the result may be an attempt to heap ridicule upon you, even to the point of turning you in to the authorities!

Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended (Matthew 13:21).

What else might some of these former church members do who allow persecution to cause them to become *offended at the Word*? What about those who have separated from a faithful fellowship in times past because of some perceived slight by the ministry or the laity? Might any of these who previously had an axe to grind decide to "rat you out" for violating a stay-at-home order? Is that postulation really so farfetched? Hardly.

In a very small way, it has already happened. Example: We recently came to know that someone who likely has "a bone to pick" with our little fellowship called the local police to "snitch" on us for holding "unauthorized" meetings on Saturday, in violation of the state stay-at-home order. (It may have been someone who heard a sermon from late March which we posted on our church website that called out these other groups which have suspended their Sabbath services, and confirmed that we intend to continue meeting in order to obey God.) Someone knows this remnant church's "take" on putting God before men, and apparently sought to do us harm by calling the police (the call could have been from anyplace in the USA or even abroad). A police officer, known to one of our members, revealed that they did indeed drive by the church meeting facility after that call, but saw no outward violation, so they did not pursue it. We were blessed by God, for sure.

But why did this happen at all? None of our meetings are being staged or orchestrated to bring attention to ourselves, so we are not looking to make some political statement by showing outward disdain for the state governor's order. We are being discreet. We simply want to be left alone to worship our God as required. (And by the way, these particular Sabbath meetings are happening in a state within the USA that still permits small gatherings to occur if social distancing protocols are observed, so no real violation was occurring at all!) Why then were we targeted (apparently by someone who cares about God's Truth to some extent and listens to our online sermons)? Could it be that this person's own conscience was tweaked by our admonition to act in faith, and they saw an opportunity to silence us and to make *the self* feel better about faithless personal choices? Or was it someone who vindictively simply saw an opportunity to get us into trouble with the authorities?

We may never know all the facts, but what we do know for certain is revealing. Someone did call the police, and the police did respond and follow up. Is this not exactly one of the ways that Christ's prophecy of betrayal within God's own church at large might actually occur, when those who are compromising begin to "sell out" the innocent to human authorities, just like Judas Iscariot did? Satan—the enemy of God's Church—will indeed use *the compromisers* of that Way to try to attack those who are struggling to be faithful. They truly will *hate one another and betray one another*, because Jesus Christ said it will be so!

It is not a question of whether or not this will happen, but *who* will get caught up in it. Will you get caught up in that *spirit of betrayal*? How do you know that you will not? If you have strayed from faithfulness and have become bitter against those who are truly upholding God's divinely-revealed Way—even by allowing offense in your life in very small ways—it may become a "small opening" that God permits to allow Satan's deception to infect you and to turn you into a Judas Iscariot. Judas was not really any more evil than many in this world. He was simply typical of human beings in general. Judas was being led by Satan "against his will" to sell out Christ, and he still had a conscience, because after he did it his

conscience smote him to the point that he took his own life. It is certain that the very same dynamics will again play out in the days leading to the return of Jesus Christ. And anyone who is playing *the compromise game* is vulnerable to being a target of Satan for the persecution of others.

If you are too weak to obey God now, why do you think you will be "strong" to resist the deception of Satan and that spirit of offense? Someone in the last days will honestly believe they are doing God's will by selling out the faithful.

They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service (John 16:2).

Betrayal by former church members will occur. And some of them will think they are the ones honoring God while they do it. How will you know the difference?

Will Anyone Still Observe the Sabbaths?

With all of these sources of threats toward God's people—both within and without the Body—how many will be resolute enough to fight through every obstacle and still meet on Sabbath days to honor God, especially when *real tribulation* sets in? Will Christ truly find the manifestation of real faith on the earth, or will all have succumbed to compromise to one degree or another to "save their skins"? The temptation will be real, and it will be intense. Some of you are already experiencing, in a very small way, what that kind of pressure feels like.

With that in mind, what is required in order for faithful brethren to continue keeping Sabbaths properly—as holy convocations?

First, it takes a *legitimate ministry* to call the assembly in God's name. If the ministers are not truly ordained and sent by Jesus Christ, He will not appear at the meeting. In days of future persecution, this requirement will still be valid and necessary.

Second, it takes individual brethren who have the personal faith and conviction to actually attend the meeting. God will be there, but will anyone show up to meet Him? If no one has the faith to step out against personal threats, there still can be no effective assembly.

Third, a *physical assembly* of the church requires a *physical* place to meet. The ministers may have the authority to call a meeting, and there may be a few brethren who are not too afraid to show up, but we still have to have a *real place* to convoke. Under the

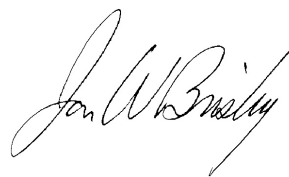
current government lockdowns, most places we have rented from outside vendors have been taken away from us. This means that many of those brethren must now meet in a home of one of our members, or else an assembly becomes impossible.

But what if none of our members in a particular area volunteer their homes to be used for a church service? What can the ministry do? Very little. Going forward, it is likely going to require *brethren who are willing to host a meeting at their own homes*, bringing the additional threat of being persecuted by local authorities for doing so. Would you have the faith, not only to attend an "illegal meeting" someplace else, but to host a meeting so that the church can convoke before God? That will take an additional measure of faith. And if we have no one with that ability *and willingness*, we are still in danger as a church of failing to honor the Sabbath properly.

If you have never hosted a Sabbath meeting before, would you be willing, if the church had no other option? If not, why not? There may be real obstacles, like having no suitable space. But some of you might be able to come up with a creative solution, if you simply have the determination to "think outside the box."

If we are to be among the very few who will continue to keep God's Sabbaths *properly* by holding holy convocations—even when unparalleled tribulation descends upon us—we can be among the few who will remain under *the single sign* of God. If we refuse to *forsake the assembling of ourselves together*, no matter what man may do to us, we can become real witnesses for Jesus Christ and prove that we love God more than anything else in the world. May Thy Kingdom come!

Yours with love in Jesus Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally on the page.

Jon W. Brisby