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The Sabbath-Breaker

15: 32-36

The Sabbath-breaker DIG: What was the man's sin? Do you think his punishment was justified? Why? Why not? Why did Moshe have to wait for ADONAI's direction? What does it mean for a person to be "cut off from his people?" What does that mean?

REFLECT: Ask the Lord to help you to follow the requirements of His Word. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you have chosen to ignore His Word in favor of your own way. Ask ADONAI for the wisdom not to commit intentional sin and willful disobedience.

Divine punishment has to be more severe at the beginning of a new Dispensation.

We must leave **Caleb** and **Joshua** now to discuss another important individual in this parashah. Here we have the first instance where a person was put to **death** for breaking **the Shabbat**. It seems that **the Holy One** was making a critically important point here. **YHVH** wanted to demonstrate to all **Isra'el** that **His** commandments were to be followed just as **He** gave **them**. Moreover, in taking **the man's** life, **God** was teaching us all the utter importance of **Shabbat** to **the LORD**. If someone ate non-kosher food, they were ritually unclean in the evening and after an immersion. But if **Shabbat** was clearly violated, it meant **death**.²⁸³

While the people of Isra'el were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on Shabbat (15:32), which was an intentional violation of the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10-11, 31:12-17, 35:1-3). By his action, this man was mocking God. The book of Numbers is not in strict chronological sequence, and this event is put here to give an example of a person who sinned intentionally (to see link click [Cj](#) - Unintentional Sin: When an individual commits an intentional sin). The story of **the man** caught **gathering wood on the Sabbath** is especially troubling because the exact nature of **his** offense is unclear. Obviously **he** broke **the Sabbath**, performing some forbidding act of work, but what exactly was it that he did? It is often proposed that **he** was **gathering wood** to make a fire. Therefore, **his** violation was the intention of making a fire on **the Sabbath**.

But this explanation is problematic. Can a man be punished for an offense **he** only intended to commit but actually did not commit? **The man** never did build a fire. How could **he** be **stoned** for that?

It seems most likely to me that **the man's** offense was that of **gathering**. It was not that **he** was carrying a load of **wood**. He was **gathering wood**. **Gathering** is a means of acquiring and producing livelihood. Recall that **the Israelites** were not to even attempt to **gather** manna on **the Sabbath (Exodus 16:16-24)**. It would seem that **gathering**, procuring and acquiring are violations of **the Sabbath**.²⁸⁴

When **the man** was caught **gathering his wood**, **Moses** had **him** incarcerated until **they** could find out what **ADONAI** wanted done with **him**. **Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moshe, Aaron and the whole congregation. They kept him in custody, because it had not yet been decided what to do to him (15:33-34)**. This is the only time incarceration is applied to the Torah. **Moses could not decide the case of the wood gatherer. Was the act in violation of the Sabbath? Assuming that it was, how should the offender be punished? Gathering wood on the Sabbath is clearly not mentioned anywhere in the Torah as a violation of the Sabbath. The only explicit Sabbath prohibitions in the Torah regard work and burning a fire (Exodus 35:2-3). Thus, the question before Moshe may well have been: Did gathering wood on the Sabbath constitute work? The decree of the holiness of the Sabbath was known to them, but not the punishment for its violation.**²⁸⁵

Then ADONAI said to Moshe, "This man must be cut off from his people" (15:35). Being **cut off from the people** meant no longer being a member of the covenant community of **Isra'el** or receiving any of the blessings associated with its membership. The person was simply denied fellowship or access to the Tabernacle or Temple in later times. This was a deadly consequence. **In rabbinic literature the penalty is called *karet*, or "cutting off." In priestly literature, the penalty of *karet* was understood to include a series of related punishments at the hand of God, ranging from the immediate death of an offender, as in 20:17, to his premature death at a later time, and even to the death of his descendants. In Mishnah Sanhedrin 9:6 and Mishnah Keritot 1:2, this penalty was characterized as *mitah biydei shamayim*, or "death at the hands of heaven." Since in 7:20-21 *karet* is mentioned in the context as childlessness, there is the implication that it took that course as well.**²⁸⁶



Such a one was to **be put to death**; the entire community was to **stone him to death outside the camp** in order to indicate that **they** shared the responsibility (15:36a). **This was the most commonly prescribed Israelite capital punishment (Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:1-4) because it either avoided ritual contamination, which would be transmitted by direct contact or by being under the same roof as the dead body (Exodus 19:13; Numbers 19:11 and 14), or to avoid the shedding of blood and subsequent blood guilt (Genesis 9:5-6; Numbers 35:33).**²⁸⁷ So the whole community brought him outside the camp and threw stones at him until he died, as ADONAI had ordered Moshe (15:36b).

But some have wondered why the punishment had to be so harsh. Believers would commit worse **sins** later and didn't die. If you trace the Scriptures through the various Dispensations, divine punishment has to be more severe at the beginning of a new Dispensation. Therefore, **the sin of the man gathering wood** was punished severely at the beginning of the Dispensation of Torah (see the commentary on **Exodus Da - The Dispensation of the Torah**). Another example of this is **Nadab and Abihu** (see the commentary on **Leviticus Bh - The Death of Nadab and Abihu**). **They** burned the incense in an improper manner and **God** killed **them** right in **the holy place**. Later, worse **sins** were done in the Temple, but the punishment was not as severe because **Ha'Shem** is always harsher at the beginning of a new Dispensation.²⁸⁸ It is certainly true that the severe punishment of **Ananias and Sapphira** was carried out at the beginning of the Dispensation of Grace (see the commentary on **Acts At - Ananias and Sapphira Lie to the Ruach**). It was a crucial time for the early **Messianic Community**, just as it was for **the Wilderness generation**, and such impurity, **sin**, scandal and **satanic** infiltration could have corrupted the entire **community** at its root.²⁸⁹

Shabbat has to do with cessation from normal work. Moreover, as we have stated elsewhere, **the LORD** used **the Shabbat** concept to describe what it means to believe in

Yeshua. When we trust **Him** for our salvation, according to **Hebrews**, we enter into an eternal **Sabbath-rest** (see the commentary on **Hebrews At - A Sabbath-Rest for the People of God**). This involves ceasing from our “labors,” that is, attempting to create our own eternity and instead resting in the work **Messiah** did for us.

Since **the Shabbat**, then, is a fundamental picture in Scripture for what it is like to rest in **Messiah**, **ADONAI** was striving to impress upon **His people** the importance of not destroying that Torah picture by failing to carry it out. Breaking **the Shabbat** as this man clearly did, was like smudging up the “salvation portrait” **God** was painting when **He** instituted the physical **Shabbat**.²⁹⁰

Certainly this **man** knew **ADONAI’s** mitzvot, and yet **he** intentionally disobeyed them. Apparently **he** was **gathering wood** to start a fire, but it was against the mitzvah of the Torah to do so (**Exodus 35:1-3**). For believers today, it is a dangerous thing to say, “I’ll go ahead and **sin**, because I know I can ask **YHVH** to forgive me.” **Paul** answered that line of thinking in **his** letter to the believers in **Rome** when **he** said: **Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer (Romans 6:1b-2 NIV)**. Believers who think like this use **God’s** promise in **First John 1:9** as a “good-luck charm” to get them out of trouble after they have deliberately disobeyed **Him**. Professing believers whose lifestyle repeatedly and intentionally **sin** probably aren’t believers at all (**First John 2:19, 3:7-10, 5:1-5 and 18**). And the B’rit Chadashah contains similar dire warnings about the impossibility of forgiveness in cases of deliberate apostasy (see the commentary on **Hebrews Ci - If We Deliberately Keep on Sinning, No Sacrifice for Sin is Left**). True believers who **adopt** this careless attitude will be disciplined by **the Father** until they submit to **His** will (see **Hebrews Cz - God Disciplines His Children**). They use this “good-luck charm” understand neither the awfulness of their **sin** nor the high cost of **God’s** grace.²⁹¹

*Dear **Holy** Heavenly **Father**, Praise you for your perfect **holiness** and great love! How awesome that You are my **Defender (Psalms 68:5, Isaiah 19:20)** and **Deliverer (Second Samuel 22:2, Nehemiah 9:27, Psalms 18:2, 40:17, 70:5, 140:7, 144:2)**. Your love and care are such great comforts! It is wonderful that **You** so desired to have a loving relationship with me that you planned the path of salvation so that I could be united to **You** forever. **He [God] made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Messiah, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment - to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Messiah (Ephesians 1:9-10)**.*

Your perfect holiness (Isaiah 6:3) goes hand in hand with **Your** great love, and **Your** wisdom graciously fits the two together (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). **You** look for humble contrite hearts that seek **You** so **You** can fill them with **Your** love and **righteousness**. Proud hearts that are full of themselves, have no room for **You** and will not be able to receive **Your righteousness (Isaiah 57:15, 19-21)**. **They** do not give **You Your** rightful place in their lives as their **Lord and King (Romans 10:9-10, Revelation 19:16)**. How terrible it will be for those who know **You** only by name and have not turned from their **sin** to love and follow **You (Matthew 7:21-23)**. It is important to remember that there is a requirement for a relationship with **You**. The requirement is purity of hearts, which can only come by loving and receiving **Messiah's righteousness. He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21)**. Give me the wisdom to live a life of love for **You**, turning from all pride and **sin** and cleaving tightly onto **You**. In **Your holy Name** and power of **Messiah's** resurrection. Amen