
FIRST PERSON

Sabbath or Medical School?

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I was delighted when I was admitted to medical school. As an Adventist student at a state university in a predominantly Moslem country, I felt ready to face the academic challenges and also to remain faithful to my Christian convictions.

For the first five years of my university studies, by God's grace, I managed to solve all Sabbath problems. Theoretical or practical exams that fell on Sabbath could be replaced with an oral exam on weekdays, so I never had to attend lectures, do lab work, or sit for examinations on the Sabbath.

However, at the end of my fifth year, the examination regulations changed. There would be no more oral exams. In one way, this was a welcome change since written exams are scored more objectively. But the six-subject exams would run from Monday through Saturday. I told the student association president of my problem with the pediatrics exam, which was to be held on Sabbath. He suggested that I go ahead and sit for my other exams while he tried to arrange things for me.

So on Monday I sat for my internal medicine exam. On Tuesday, I sat for the second subject, obstetrics-gynecology. Still nothing had happened. So I went to see the university president. I was happy to discover that as a Moslem, he supported Adventist convictions regarding Sabbathkeeping. Once he had stayed with an Adventist man who owned a big-city hotel in Indonesia. While there, he observed that the owner paid the workers on Friday before sunset, so he knew about Adventist convictions regarding the sanctity of the Sabbath.

The university president advised me to report to the chairman of the exam committee and then to discuss my problem with the director of the department of pediatrics. Walking out of the president's house, I felt delighted that the highest man in the university supported me.

However, when I met with the chairman of the exam committee, I was shocked at his fury. He said, "Do you think the angels will chop your head the moment you do your exam on the Sabbath? How can the regulation of the state university be changed because of one student? Impossible!"

My friends were not very supportive. One said, "I don't understand why you have to be so particular. It's already so very difficult for you to enter the state university, and now you are adding another problem. Just don't be a fanatic. Go ahead and take your exam for two hours, and then ask God for forgiveness."

Another friend in the surgery department informed me that he

had seen my score for the recent surgery exam: 98, almost perfect. He said, "Just go ahead and sit for your exam on Saturday. The next time you might not score that high!"

Despite the minimal support, I continued taking my exams on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. On Sabbath I went to church fully aware that when the results came out, I would be announced as having failed my exams. At that time, the school had a system whereby failing in one subject, however well you scored in the other five, meant retaking the exams for all six subjects.

Although I was extremely sad I remembered the verse in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "God. . . will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (NIV). The week after I received the depressing results, I went to the student association president to arrange for the next exams, which would be held in three months. He said, "Oh, this is too early. Just report two weeks prior to the exam." Two and a half months went by swiftly and before I realized it was time for me to see him again. To my surprise, he told me, "We have tried unsuccessfully to reschedule the exams. You have no alternative but to change your attitude."

I went to the academic dean. While I was in the waiting room, I saw a pharmacology professor. He had heard about the "fanatic" student who was willing to accept failure because of her religious convictions. Coming directly to where I was sitting, he said, "I've asked the oldest Christians in the world, the Roman Catholics, and

they said that you have to keep Sunday holy."

I didn't know how to answer him because there were so many doctors surrounding me—Moslems, Catholics, Protestants! I remembered Matthew 10:18-19, "You will be brought into the presence of governors and kings because of me. . . . But . . . never worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be told at the time what you are to say" (Phillips). So I quickly prayed for the right answer. I heard a small voice whispering into my ear, "Answer with this, 'Oh, I am just following what the Bible says!'"

At once, that pharmacology professor put the folder he was holding under his arm and pointed at the doctors surrounding me, saying, "You all have sinned against God. The Bible asks you to keep Sabbath holy and not Sunday. Be converted!"

I felt grateful that he had done my preaching for me. Then I went to see the academic dean, who talked with me for about half an hour. He said, "Be logical with your religion."

I answered, "I realize that religion may not seem logical at times. For instance, when a certain group of people pray to God, they feel they have to face a certain direction. Is that logical? God is omnipresent, so you can call to Him anywhere and at any time. So why do people keep on with these practices? Because they are meaningful in terms of their convictions."

Finally he said, "I am sorry. I want to help you but I just do not know how. My suggestion is go straight to the pediatrics professor." I told myself this would be my last effort. If I didn't succeed, I would go abroad to an Adventist medical school. I might have problems, but at least I could become a physician someday.

I brought this matter to our prayer meeting. The church elders said, "You are a pioneer. You have to be patient and fight for your convictions. What's going to hap-

pen to the rest of the Adventist medical students in the lower levels? They do not have the money to go abroad. Let's bring this matter to God in prayer!" The whole church prayed for me that night.

Then I went to see the pediatrics professor. He was really upset and said, "There is no way to change the regulation of the university because of only one student."

His wife, a lawyer, sat with us in the living room and defended me, saying, "This is a *pancasilais* country. Everyone has the right to religious liberty." A debate ensued between them, while I prayed silently that the Lord would bless this debate to the glory of His name. Finally, the pediatrics professor said, "We will reschedule the exam for you." So on Friday after the surgery exam I took the pediatrics exam, and then was isolated in one of the staff houses until the students sat for the exam on the following day, Saturday, at eight o'clock. Then I was released to go to church. When results came out, praise the Lord, I had passed the exam.

Later, while working in each department, I was allowed to leave the hospital from Friday sunset until Saturday sunset. However, I had to work longer in each department to make up for the many

Sabbaths I had missed. After I finished one department, I had to wait for the next batch of students before continuing to another department, which made my schooling much longer than normal. Yet I was happy to be able to observe the Sabbath all through my years of schooling in a non-Adventist medical school.

At graduation time, I had one last problem. All the services are conducted on Saturdays. Again I went to see the student association president. He said, "Please give in just this once! It is impossible to have all the professors march for you, the only graduate, on weekdays." But he asked me to come back the following week after he talked with the academic dean. When I returned, I received word that I had to wait for another two weeks because the academic dean and the dean of the school of medicine had found it difficult to solve my problem. Finally, after two months, and several more discussions, they agreed to hold a special graduation on a weekday, with all the doctors marching and me as the only graduate. As a result, the Adventist medical students in the lower levels also received a special graduation.

As I look back on my experience, I feel that God was by my side—encouraging and sustaining me through all my struggles. I praise Him for His goodness and greatness. The medical degree has allowed me to serve as a channel of God's grace to others, ministering to their physical and spiritual needs. My prayer is that God will help us all—students and professionals—to have such a close relationship with Him that we will truly be His ambassadors. As Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15, NKJV).

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