

The Sabbath Sunset or Dark?

Recently, an issue has emerged within the church concerning the precise timing of the Sabbath. It has been the longstanding position of God's church that the Sabbath begins and ends at sunset. However, recently, some have questioned this understanding and now contend that the day begins not at sunset but rather at dark.

It has even been suggested that in order to ensure that God's Sabbath is fully honored, His people should begin their Sabbath observance shortly before sunset on Friday and conclude its observance shortly after dark on Saturday evening, a practice embraced by some conservative Jews. This practice stems from the belief that the Bible is unclear on the specific timing of when a day begins. Therefore, it is better to err on the side of this expanded view rather than risk violating this very important commandment.

However, is it possible to know when God's Sabbath commences and ends? Further, would God, who is infinite and so precise with respect to His law, be so imprecise concerning the beginning of a time He calls holy?

It is the official position of **Blow the Trumpet** that both scholarship and the scriptures reveal that God does have a precise time that marks the beginning and end of His Sabbath. The following texts reveal that time.

Note: When considering these texts, it is important to understand two terms: *sunset* and *dark*.

Sunset

Sunset occurs when the land is covered in shadows but the sky remains light for a certain period of time. It takes place when the sun is no longer visible.

Dark

Dark occurs when all sunlight has passed from the sky. This takes place several minutes after sunset.

Unger's Bible Dictionary

Article: *Time* "Day: From an early period, the time of reckoning the day was from sunset to sunset, and this became the Jewish method. (Lev. 23:32; Ex. 12:18)"

Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia

Article: *The Sabbath* "The Hebrew weekly day of rest and worship, which was observed on the seventh day of the week, beginning at sundown on Friday and ending at sundown on Saturday."

Manners and Customs of the Bible

Article: *Hours of the Day* "The Jewish day was reckoned from evening to evening... While the night was divided into watches, the day was divided into hours; each of these hours being one twelfth the time between sunrise and sunset... The first hour began at sunrise, the sixth ended at noon, and the twelfth ended at sunset."

Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Edersheim)

"Just as the sun went down, three men, each with a sickle and basket, set to work... They first asked of the bystanders three times each of these questions: 'Has the sun gone down?' 'With the sickle?' 'Into this basket?' On this Sabbath?' and lastly, 'Shall I reap?'" Further, Edersheim provides the exact time and way that the wavesheaf was cut. According to Edersheim, it was to be waved on the morrow after the Sabbath (Lev. 23:10-11). The Jews therefore cut the sheaf at sundown, the end of the Sabbath. The Sadducees took this to mean the weekly Sabbath and the Pharisees the annual Sabbath. Still, the concern was that they not reap until the sun was down because they recognized that sunset was the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the next day.

The Temple, Its Ministry and Services, As They Were in the Time of Christ

"It was really done after sunset on the 15th, which was the beginning of the 16th of Nisan."

DOES NEHEMIAH STATE THAT THE SABBATH BEGAN AT DARK?

Some believe that the book of Nehemiah suggests the Sabbath begins at dark. This is based on Nehemiah 13:19. "... And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the Sabbath: and [some] of my servants set I at the gates, [that] there should no burden be brought in on the Sabbath day."

Does "began to be dark before the Sabbath" indicate that the twilight time occurs before the Sabbath? Does this mean that Sabbath begins at dark? Notice first that the phrase is not saying that the sky began to be dark. It says the gates began to be dark! The words "began to be dark" are from the Hebrew *tsalal* (Strong's 6751). This word connotes "the idea of hovering over; to shade as twilight or opaque, begin to be dark, shadowing." It is identical to 6749, which means "to tumble down or to settle by a waving motion, to sink."

The word can include the idea of a shadow of twilight, but the overwhelming sense is that of sinking down or shadowing. Further, in the context of the verse, the gates would not be "twilighting." Instead, the gates were beginning to "shadow." Their shadow was beginning to lengthen as the sun continued to sink – so as to create shade that is twilight-like. There is only one other place where this word is used in the Bible; that is Ezekiel 31:3. There it says "Behold, the Assyrian [was] a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs." Here the word simply means shadowing. This is what happens prior to sunset. The shadows grow greater and darkening begins.

Expositor's Commentary Comment on Neh. 13:19

"...The gates began to cast long evening shadows" even before sunset when the Sabbath began. The Israelites... counted their days from sunset to sunset... The precise moment the Sabbath began was heralded by the blowing of a trumpet by a priest. According to the *Mishna*, "on the eve of the Sabbath, they used to blow six more blasts, three to cause the people to cease from work and three to mark the break between the sacred and the profane."

Matthew Henry's Commentary Re: Mt. 13:19

"He ordered the gates of Jerusalem to be kept shut from the evening before the Sabbath to the morning after."

The New World Translation

"And it came about that as soon as the gates of Jerusalem had grown shadowy before the Sabbath..."

The Emphasized Bible

"... When the gates of Jerusalem made a shadow before the Sabbath..."

THE GOSPELS REGARDING SUNSET

The gospel of Mark records an event when many people were brought to Jesus to be healed.

"And forthwith when they were come out of the synagogue, they entered into the house of Simon and Andrew, with Jesus and John. But Simon's wife's mother lay sick of a fever, and anon they tell Him of her. And He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up and immediately the fever left her, and she ministered unto them. And at even when the sun did set, they brought unto Him all that were diseased and them that were possessed with devils." (Mk. 1:29-32)

Notice these people were brought to Jesus "at even when the sun did set." The word for "set" in this verse is from the Greek *duno* and means "to go down, to set." It is referring to the position of the sun, not the color of the sky. In other words, when the sun had gone from view.

A FINAL THOUGHT

God is a god of great precision. James characterized Him as One in whom is "no variableness or shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17). This being the case, it is hard to imagine that God would be so imprecise with respect to when a day begins when one of His most important commands requires that knowledge.

It is clear that the Sabbath begins with the setting of the sun. At that time, the sun has gone from view and the land is in complete shadow. People may have varying opinions about when the sky becomes dark but there can be no dispute about when the sun has set. When it comes to defining the point at which days begin and end, it is better to use the scriptures and empirical evidence than the traditions of men and a subjective standard.