

Does the Sabbath Begin at Sunset, or When it is Dark?

By Terry Moore

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All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

It has been the longstanding position of God's Church that the Sabbath begins and ends when the sun has set below the horizon. However, there are some who question this understanding and contend that the Sabbath begins somewhere between sunset and dark. It has even been suggested that to ensure God's Sabbath is fully honored people should begin their Sabbath observance shortly before sunset and conclude its observance shortly after dark. Those who adhere to such beliefs claim that the Bible is unclear regarding the specific timing of the Sabbath.

Can we know exactly when God's Sabbath begins and ends? Would God, who is both accurate and precise with respect to His law, be so imprecise concerning the beginning of a time He has designated as holy? Can we be sure of the exact beginning and end of any day of the week? The answer is yes. The Scriptures reveal that God does have a precise time that marks the beginning and end of each day.

Definition of Terms

Before considering these texts, it is important to understand exactly what the terms "sunset" and "dark" mean. Sunset is the time that occurs when the sun is no longer visible on the horizon. It is when shadows cast by the sun can no longer be seen, but the sky remains light for a period of time. The time after sunset, when there is still light from sun that can be seen in the sky, is known as twilight and dusk. It is that period of time that some claim is ambiguous leaving room for several arguments to be made as to when dusk ends and dark begins.

Dark occurs when all sunlight has completely passed from the sky. This takes place 60-90 minutes after the sun has set. As to when dark actually begins, this can be argued. Jewish tradition suggests that it is when three stars are visible. Others contend that it is a time that cannot be accurately pinpointed, but likely occurs as soon as many stars are visible.

When considering the definitions of sunset and dark, we need to ask ourselves; would God allow the beginning of each day, including His holy Sabbath, to be a vague window of time open to interpretation? The answer is no. God has given us a command to keep the Sabbath holy. Therefore, He would not leave us wondering when the Sabbath begins and ends. He has provided the answer in the Bible.

It Is Written

To understand when a biblical day ends, and a new one begins, we must start by going all the way back to the beginning of our present world's existence—back to the seven monumental days of re-creation. Here we will see how God set things in order, and actually designated the exact time of this transition:

God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day (Genesis 1:5).

As this first day of re-creation came to an end, God designated the time periods that constitute a day. Certainly, God is not saying that from sunset to sunrise is a day. From evening to morning is actually a period of night. Thus, it is clear that God is saying that evening, the night time, and morning, the day time, constitute an entire 24 hour day.

The original text for “evening” uses in Genesis is the Hebrew word *ereb* which means; dusk and night (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, H6153). Some contend that, since this word also means “night,” therefore it can also mean dark. That contention stems from the fact that dusk is considered an actual part of the night and therefore “ereb” does not solely indicate a complete darkness, but simply tells us when the nighttime period begins. It begins after the sun has set—dusk.

As God continued to create upon the earth, He repeatedly designated the beginning and ending of each day as being dusk and sunset. In every case He uses the word “ereb” to indicate when the day begins:

So the evening and the morning were the second day (Genesis 1:8).

So the evening and the morning were the third day (Genesis 1:13).

So the evening and the morning were the fourth day (Genesis 1:19).

So the evening and the morning were the fifth day (Genesis 1:23).

So the evening and the morning were the sixth day (Genesis 1:31).

Another indication of sunset being the turning point for a new day is found in the statutes of cleanliness. In the book written to the Levitical priesthood we find many edicts by the Eternal regarding those who come into contact with unclean things. These individuals shall officially be clean after they had washed and when the sun had set on the horizon. For example notice the admonition to those who had touched something unclean:

the person who has touched any such thing shall be unclean until evening, and shall not eat the holy *offerings* unless he washes his body with water. And when the sun goes down he shall be clean; and afterward he may eat the holy *offerings*, because it *is* his food (Leviticus 22:6-7).

This statute by God is one that is repeated throughout the book of Leviticus. God continually set a pattern of uncleanness until after the day comes to an end, at sunset, and the new day begins. Notice a few the more than 30 verses where this is stated:

But all *other* flying insects which have four feet *shall be* an abomination to you. By these you shall become unclean; whoever touches the carcass of any of them shall be **unclean until evening**; whoever carries part of the carcass of any of them shall wash his clothes and be **unclean until evening**: The carcass of any animal which divides the foot, but is not cloven-hoofed or does not chew the cud, *is* unclean to you. Everyone who touches it shall be unclean. And whatever goes on its paws, among all kinds of animals that go on *all* fours,

those *are* unclean to you. Whoever touches any such carcass shall be unclean **until evening**. Whoever carries *any such* carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean **until evening**. It *is* unclean to you. These also *shall be* unclean to you among the creeping things that creep on the earth: the mole, the mouse, and the large lizard after its kind; the gecko, the monitor lizard, the sand reptile, the sand lizard, and the chameleon. These *are* unclean to you among all that creep. Whoever touches them when they are dead shall be unclean **until evening**. Anything on which *any* of them falls, when they are dead shall be unclean, whether *it is* any item of wood or clothing or skin or sack, whatever item *it is*, in which *any* work is done, it must be put in water. And it shall be unclean **until evening**; then it shall be clean... And if any animal which you may eat dies, he who touches its carcass shall be unclean **until evening**. He who eats of its carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean **until evening**. He also who carries its carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening (Leviticus 11:23-40).

In every case, the word for “evening” throughout this passage is the word *ereb* meaning “dusk.” Some may wonder what the significance of evening is in this ritual. It is because, as each new day begins, the new day brings us another opportunity to live a life free from that which is unclean. The unclean represents sin. For more on this subject, please read our book explaining—*Why the Unclean and the Clean*. The Eternal continues His proclamation of this cleansing ritual throughout chapter fifteen of Leviticus as He states:

And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When any man has a discharge from his body, his discharge *is* unclean. And this shall be his uncleanness in regard to his discharge—whether his body runs with his discharge, or his body is stopped up by his discharge, it *is* his uncleanness. Every bed is unclean on which he who has the discharge lies, and everything on which he sits shall be unclean. And whoever touches his bed shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**. He who sits on anything on which he who has the discharge sat shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**. And he who touches the body of him who has the discharge shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**. If he who has the discharge spits on him who is clean, then he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**. Any saddle on which he who has the discharge rides shall be unclean. Whoever touches anything that was under him shall be unclean **until evening**. He who carries *any of* those things shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**. And whomever the one who has the discharge touches, and has not rinsed his hands in water, he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**... If any man has an emission of semen, then he shall wash all his body in water, and be unclean **until evening**. And any garment and any leather on which there is semen, it shall be washed with water, and be unclean **until evening**. Also, when a woman lies with a man, and *there is* an emission of semen, they shall bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**. If a woman has a discharge, *and* the discharge from her body is blood, she shall be set apart seven days; and whoever touches her shall be unclean **until evening**. Everything that she lies on during her impurity shall be unclean; also everything that she sits on shall be unclean. Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**. And whoever touches anything that she sat on shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean **until evening**. If *anything* is on *her* bed or on anything on which she sits, when he touches it, he shall be unclean **until evening**. And if any man lies with her at all, so that her impurity is on him, he shall be unclean seven days; and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean. If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, other than at the time of her *customary*

impurity, or if it runs beyond her *usual time of* impurity, all the days of her unclean discharge shall be as the days of her *customary* impurity. She *shall be* unclean. Every bed on which she lies all the days of her discharge shall be to her as the bed of her impurity; and whatever she sits on shall be unclean, as the uncleanness of her impurity. Whoever touches those things shall be unclean; he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be **unclean until evening** (Leviticus 15:1-27).

Again and again, God declared that a person will officially become clean after the sun has set and a new day begins—at dusk. In the book of Deuteronomy, this point is made crystal clear as Moses recorded yet another edict by God:

If there is any man among you who becomes unclean by some occurrence in the night, then he shall go outside the camp; he shall not come inside the camp. But it shall be, when evening comes, that he shall wash with water; and **when the sun sets**, he may come into the camp (Deuteronomy 23:10-11).

Another irrefutable scripture is found in the command to keep the Passover. In this vitally important ceremony, God told the Israelites both how and when to sacrifice the Passover animal. It was to be done when the day of Passover begins. This new day is clearly shown as when the sun has fallen from view:

You may not sacrifice the Passover within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you; but at the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide, there **you shall sacrifice the Passover at twilight, at the going down of the sun**, at the time you came out of Egypt (Deuteronomy 16:5-6).

Another indicator of sunset being the beginning of a new day comes from the rules set by Samson when giving the Philistines a time frame to guess his riddle. The expiration of this 7-day contest expired when the sun had set:

Then Samson said to them, “Let me pose a riddle to you. If you can correctly solve and explain it to me **within the seven days of the feast**, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing. But if you cannot explain *it* to me, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing.” And they said to him, “Pose your riddle, that we may hear it...” So the men of the city said to him on **the seventh day before the sun went down**: “What *is* sweeter than honey? And what *is* stronger than a lion?” And he said to them: “If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle!” (Judges 14:12-18)

There are also many scriptures in the New Testament that show us when a new day begins. One of these is found in the account of Mark when Christ healed Simon’s mother-in-law. After this healing had taken place, the Sabbath was coming to an end and the people were beginning to come to Christ to be healed:

Now as soon as they had come out of the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. But Simon’s wife’s mother lay sick with a fever, and they told Him about her at once. So He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and immediately the fever left her. And she served them. **At evening, when the sun had**

set, they brought to Him all who were sick and those who were demon-possessed (Mark 1:29-32).

The people knew that the Pharisees did not approve of Christ healing on the Sabbath. In order to avoid persecution, they brought the sick to Him after the Sabbath ended—after “the sun had set.” The word translated as “set” in this verse is from the Greek *duno* and means to go down. 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, they brought the sick to Christ.

The apostle Paul also made a wonderful statement about how to live a peaceable life with our family and neighbors. In this, he recorded inspired words of wisdom that declare how we should settle our minds and attitudes before the end of each day. Notice how this scripture sets the tone for a sense of peace that should be reached **before** a new day begins:

Be angry and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath (Ephesians 4:26).

In Exodus, Moses records another edict by God that falls into line with good and honest behavior. In this, God tells us to act justly when borrowing from a neighbor, and to not let the day end without giving them back something that they may need to be comfortable throughout the night:

If you ever take your neighbor’s garment as a pledge, **you shall return it to him before the sun goes down**. For that *is* his only covering, it *is* his garment for his skin. What will he sleep in? And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I *am* gracious (Exodus 22:26-27).

Moses again records another proclamation by God that is similar in nature. In this, God tells us to act fairly, and in a timely manner, to those needy individuals whom we may be hiring for labor:

You shall not oppress a hired servant *who is* poor and needy, *whether* one of your brethren or one of the aliens who *is* in your land within your gates. **Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it**, for he *is* poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the LORD, and it be sin to you (Deuteronomy 24:14-15).

God tells us to not let his day go by without paying those who are relying upon a day’s employment wages. They may need this money more desperately than we know. By doing as God commands, we are to “not let the sun go down.” We are not to let that day pass on to the next without fulfilling our commitment to them.

A Point of Contention

One argument posed by the “dark” proponents, is that the book of Nehemiah suggests the Sabbath to begin at dark. This is based on the following scripture:

So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted *some* of my servants at the gates, *so that* no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day (Nehemiah 13:19).

Does the notation that “it began to be dark before the Sabbath” indicate that dusk occurs before the Sabbath begins? Notice first that the phrase is not saying that the sky began to be dark. It says the gates “began to be dark.” The KJV renders it as “when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath...” The Complete Jewish Bible translates “So when the gates of Yerushalayim began to grow dark before Shabbat...” The reason for these renderings is because the words “began to be dark” are from the Hebrew *tsalal* which mean “the idea of hovering over; to shade as twilight or opaque, begin to be dark, and shadowing” (*Strong’s*, H6749). The sense of this scripture is that the gates were beginning to shadow. Their shadow was beginning to lengthen as the sun continued to lower—so as to create shade. Several biblical scholars have also come to the correct conclusion about Nehemiah 13:19.

Expositors Commentary

...The gates began to cast long evening shadows even before sunset when the Sabbath began.

Gill’s Commentary

...when the shadows of the eve of the sabbath were stretched out upon the gates... as the sun was declining, the shadows through the houses in Jerusalem, and mountains about it, spread themselves over the gates.

Even some modern translations of the Bible recognize this truth about Nehemiah 13:19, and have made it clear in their text.

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...

Christ’s Definition of the Daytime

Finally, there is a statement by Christ which references the length of the daytime period of each day:

Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world” (John 11:9).

It is believed that Christ made this statement in Jerusalem close to the Passover and His crucifixion—in the spring. During this time, sunrise to sunset is within 30 minutes of being an exact 12 hours. Though He may have been speaking generally, from His divine perspective, Christ rightly said that there are 12 hours in the daytime time period of each day. In addition, we know that the total length of each day is 24 hours and no one would argue this point.

However, if the Sabbath were to begin at dark and not sunset, as some believe, each day of the week would also begin likewise. If this were the case, then the nighttime would begin 60-90 minutes after sunset, and the daytime would begin 60-90 minutes before the sun has risen. Therefore, the nighttime period of each day would be much shorter than the daytime period. In this scenario, the nighttime would last approximately 9-10 hours and the daytime would be about

14-15 hours. The unfounded theory would make Christ's statement inaccurate and false. Even those who believe in the "dark" starting point would be reluctant to say that Christ was mistaken.

How then, can we match Christ's statement to the beginning of a new day and the Sabbath? The answer is clear. God has set things in order and designated a specific time where we can visibly know when the Sabbath begins. It is when the sun is no longer visible and has set on the horizon.

A Final Thought

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

It is clear that there is a designated time for each new day to begin. God set a specific time to separate each day from one another and to know exactly when the Sabbath begins. It would not be a vague window of time leaving opportunity for personal opinions about whether it is dark enough to be considered the beginning of a new day. Instead, it is a time when all who keep the Sabbath can look to the horizon, and see the sun go down and observe God's Sabbath from sunset to sunset.