

# Leviticus 23:3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/lev/lev-23/leviticus-233/>

*God declares the sabbath day to be one of His appointed times*

The first appointed time given in Leviticus 23 is the *sabbath day*. God set apart the *seventh day* from the other *six days* when He rested from His creative *work* in Genesis 1. The Hebrew word for *work* here is “melaka” and is the same word used in the creation account in Genesis, that God ceased from His work. According to tradition the *sabbath day* starts every Friday at sundown and continues until Saturday at sundown. God proclaims the *seventh day* to be a *sabbath of complete rest* and states *You shall not do any work on the sabbath day*. Jewish tradition defines 39 works that are prohibited on the *sabbath day*. God proclaims the *seventh day as a holy convocation*. The Hebrew word for *convocation* is “miqra” which can mean “rehearsal.” God gave His *appointed times as holy rehearsals* for a messianic event in the future. Hebrews 4 promises a “rest” to believers who faithfully complete their earthly stewardship in obedience. That “rest” is to receive the reward of the inheritance—to possess their possession. The picture given of this in Hebrews 4 is that of Israel entering the Promised Land. The faithful generation is the one who possessed their inheritance.

The Jewish religious leaders repeatedly contested with Jesus about His interpretation of keeping the *sabbath*. This was of course full of irony, since they were contesting with He who appointed the *sabbath* (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:17). Jesus’ philosophy of the *sabbath* might be summed up in this verse:

“Jesus said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:27).

This makes clear that God’s purpose in initiating the *Sabbath* was for the benefit of humans, which is an important context to keep in mind for the topic. Jesus noted exceptions to drive home this point as well as showed that Priests were exempt from the *sabbath* commands while serving in the tabernacle (Matthew 12:5). The priests are commanded to tend the lamps on the golden lampstand and the fire on the altar in the tabernacle continually, even on the *sabbath day* (Leviticus 24:3). Lighting a fire outside of the tabernacle on the *Sabbath Day* was punishable by death (Exodus 35:2-3).

Jesus also points out in Matthew 12, “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the *sabbath*, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the *sabbath*” (Matthew 12:11-12).

The commands of the law, whether positive commands (a command to do a good work) or negative commands (a command to refrain from a prohibited work), have a hierarchy of value. Fulfilling a positive command like helping your neighbor get his sheep out of a pit would over-rule the negative command *You shall not do any work*. It seemed that what Jesus faced was

people focusing on the letter of the law without seeing the bigger picture of the law, which was to spur human flourishing. Focusing on the letter typically leads to legalism, which leads to abuse to ourselves and to fellow humans—precisely the opposite of the *sabbath* law’s intent.

The spirit of the law is how we are to serve, as Paul points out in Romans 7:6. The spirit of the law is justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). The *sabbath day* was created for man to *rest* from his work. Jesus points out in the gospels that God gave the *sabbath day* for mankind and mankind was not in some way made for the *sabbath day*. Jesus’ statement sounds a lot like a very famous phrase in Judaism, “Israel has not kept the *sabbath*, but the *sabbath* has kept Israel.”

The *sabbath day* appears to be a rehearsal for the millennial kingdom, where Christ returns to earth to set up His Davidic Kingdom, pointing to the universal age of *complete rest*. One may look at the *sabbath day* as a type of the millennial kingdom where each person will enjoy the shade of their fig and vine (Micah 4:4). A “type” is a person or event in the Old Testament that symbolizes or prefigures a person or event in the New Testament.

The book of Hebrews speaks of the *sabbath “rest”* that might also be a shadow, a picture of the millennial kingdom which is to come:

“For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. So there remains a *Sabbath rest* for the people of God.”  
(Hebrews 4:8-9)

In this passage, the focus on *rest* is in connection with work. The author of Hebrews emphasizes that rest does not come until all the work is done. Hebrews 4 states that a *rest* was offered to the generation in the wilderness; they could have entered the Promised Land and possessed their inheritance. Then they would have completed their work, and could have *rest*. But because of their unbelief when the ten spies brought an evil report of God’s promised land, they did not inherit that *rest*, because they did not finish their work. Besides Joshua and Caleb only the Israelite children who were 20 years old or under got to inherit the *rest* (i.e., possessing the Promised Land).

The Apostle Paul declares that all the stories in the Old Testament were written for our benefit (1 Corinthians 10:11). The story of the Israelite rebellion in the wilderness was written that we might not follow the same pattern of unbelief and miss out on our inheritance, the rewards of living a faithful life (2 Corinthians 5:10). But there is a larger context where the church has a job to do, and when that is finished, the world will be ready for the millennial kingdom. As Jesus stated:

“This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

God is using His people to proclaim the gospel of Jesus’ kingdom to all nations. When that work is done, the “end” of this age will come, and the millennial kingdom can begin. During that millennial kingdom, the *sabbath* will still be practiced (Ezekiel 46:1-12).

In the book of Exodus God declared the *Sabbath day* to be a “perpetual covenant”:

“So, the sons of Israel shall observe the *sabbath*, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.”

(Exodus 31:16)

The statement phrase *in all your dwellings* that appears within the phrase of *it is a sabbath to the LORD in all your dwellings* is attached to certain commands in the law of Moses. It indicates that this command is to be observed irrespective of whether the person lives within the boundaries of Israel. The *sabbath* is required *in all your dwellings* which means “wherever you live.” This passage omits a frequently used statement “when you enter the land that I am giving you,” which usually precedes commands that are only relevant to those who live in the land of Israel. This indicates that the sabbath applied to any Jewish person living anywhere. Similarly, many of the commands and statutes in the book of Leviticus are only applicable if the Jewish temple is in operation. The sabbath however is not dependent upon the temple.

### **Biblical Text**

**3 ‘For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation. You shall not do any work; it is a sabbath to the LORD in all your dwellings.**