

God's Rest

-J. Wilbur

There is a “rest” into which God desires man to enter. But this “rest” is not analogous to the types of physical rest so often enjoyed by man. God’s rest is not a *time* where all thought is eternally set aside and replaced with amusement. It is not a *place* where “good” people eternally enjoy their favorite hobbies. And it is certainly not the ceasing of all conscious thought. Not surprisingly, these views prevail in the world today.

Sadly, even evangelical Christians sometimes paint a picture of God’s promise of rest in these terms, saying, in essence, that God’s rest is sitting peacefully in heaven, under the shade of a willow tree with nothing to do but blissfully sigh for all eternity. And this, it is said, will come as a *reward* for having faith.

As if heaven and comfort were the goal, one often hears: “Just believe in Jesus and you’ll go to heaven”; or “Trust in Jesus, and when you die you’ll go to heaven, and all your problems will disappear.”

It is perfectly true that faith alone in the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross yields a soul eternity in heaven. It is perfectly true that for all who have placed their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, whom God has raised from the dead, a time will come where “all tears shall be wiped away...” (Rev 21:4), but these are not the primary purpose of God’s promised blessing and they are not what

is meant when God exhorts men to “*enter into that rest*” (Heb 4:11).

The abolition of sorrow and an eternity in the bliss of heaven itself are merely incidental facts of something infinitely greater. The primary point of God’s blessing toward the believer is the Lord Jesus Christ *Himself*. “Rest” is simply the means by which a believer can fellowship with *Him*: and not only in some far-off future, but right now! Today!

It is recorded, “...*on the seventh day God ended His work ...; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work ...*” (Gen 2:1-2). The contrast presented between what God did on the first six days and what He did on the seventh is plain; it is the difference between “work” and “rest.”

During the first six days, He established a relationship with man: first by creating an environment to sustain him (Gen 1:1-25); then by creating man himself (Gen 1:26-27; 2:7; 2:21-25); and finally by instructing the man, providing a basis on which the relationship was to exist (Gen 1:28-30; 2:15-16). This was God’s “work.”

On the seventh day, God did nothing more to *establish* that relationship, rather He sought to *enjoy* it. He “walked” with man, His creation and companion (Gen 3:9). This was God’s “rest.”

From Adam’s point of view, God placed him in an environment where he had nothing to do of urgency (Gen 2:8-9; 2:15-17). When he grew tired, he could sleep. If he grew hungry, he could pluck the fruit from a nearby tree, and eat (Gen 1:29-30; 2:9; 2:15-17; 3:2). There was nothing to deter him from enjoying fellowship with his Creator.

Adam was placed directly into a personal relationship with God: a relationship he had done **no work** to establish. This man knew only rest. And, just as in God’s rest, man was the focus, so it was intended in man’s rest, that God should be the focus.

With Adam’s transgression, of course, came much sorrow. It not only resulted in the sin nature and man’s accountability to God, it also required God to change the very way in which man lived.

God said to Adam, “*Because thou hast ... eaten of the tree, ... cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee...; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread...*” (Gen 3:17-19).

Now, instead of being focused on God, Adam would be almost completely occupied with his own survival. He must eat to live, and the ground has been cursed. Whereas before, the ground brought forth abundantly, it would now need to be worked. Adam would no longer have the kind of freedom to fellowship with God that he once did.

This curse on the ground has served an important purpose throughout history. God has used it as a throttle for the wickedness of fallen man. Concerning the nation of Israel, for example: when the nation was obedient, God blessed with rain and the “increase of the land” (Lev 26:4); when the nation was disobedient, the land would be “cursed” (Deut 28:18; see also Zech 14:16-21).

In effect, as they desired fellowship with God, the curse on the ground (i.e. the curse of Gen 3:17) was eased in order to facilitate that desire: “And I will walk among you...” (Lev 26:12; compare Gen 3:8). And, as they rejected God, the curse on the ground was hardened to, in effect, slow down their fall into pagan idolatry, which always leads to moral bankruptcy (Deut 28:14). Just as concerns over survival will hinder a man from fully enjoying a relationship with God (as with Adam), so it will also hinder him from fully indulging himself in wickedness.

Through varying the curse on the ground, God has shown that He will *allow* man to fellowship with Him, but it is through the law given to Israel, His redeemed people, that He shows that He actually *desires* that fellowship.

“*Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, ... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day ...*” (Ex 20:9-11; Ex 31:17; 35:2). Because of the curse on the ground, mankind was required to work in order to survive. This was all-

encompassing. It applied to every nation and every family. But God, after establishing a relationship with the nation of Israel, gave them this law of the Sabbath. There was now one group of people on earth for whom God desired “rest” from that necessity of work.

The Sabbath was not given so that the people of God would have time for their hobbies. It was not given for self-indulgence. But, it was also not a time where *nothing* was to be done.

The reason for the Sabbath day was so that the Israelites would have a time when they would not worry about their survival. As a result, they would be perfectly free to fellowship with God, their Redeemer.

For example, in the Sinai wilderness, a double portion of manna was given on the sixth day (Ex 16:5). The implication is that the people would have no worry for their survival on the Sabbath; therefore, no hindrance to fellowship with God. On the Sabbath day, Israel was free to fellowship with God much as Adam once was. When Adam was hungry, he simply took from a tree and ate. When an Israelite was hungry on the Sabbath, he drew from God’s sixth day provision and ate.

Over the centuries, the nation of Israel lost God’s intended purpose for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27-28). The Lord Jesus points out on one occasion that the priests of the temple work on the Sabbath as they do

every other day of the week, and are blameless (Mat 12:5). In other words, the same law that says an Israelite is not to work, commands the priests to continue working (Numb 28:9).

On another occasion, the Lord Jesus points out that when a male child is born, the child is circumcised on the eighth day even when that day falls on the Sabbath (John 7:22; Lev 12:3). These things were work. The key, therefore, to understanding God’s true purpose for the Sabbath is through examining, not what work was forbidden, but rather what “work” was commanded or allowed on the Sabbath day.

Worshipping and serving God *were right* to do on the Sabbath day. God met all the physical needs of the people prior to the Sabbath in order to free them from the curse of work which for six days demanded their full attention. The seventh day was commanded to be for “rest.”

Through commanding that no “work” should be done on the Sabbath, God guaranteed that every Israelite would have time for God, if he desired it. By the Sabbath laws (day and year, see Lev 25:4), God showed His own desire for their service and their worship: in other words, their fellowship (Ezek 46:3-4; Isa 66:23).

Israel was promised that they would enter “*unto a land flowing with milk and honey*” (Ex 3:8;17). As that name implies, this land would bring forth its “fruit” abundantly (Num 13:26-27). Therefore, after God’s people took the land, they would not have a concern for their survival.

Through the great fertility of that land God would provide for their needs. Consequently, they would have great freedom to give to God the fellowship He desired of them. God would give them rest.

Today, man is once again exhorted by God to enter into His rest (Heb 4:10-11). But, as has been shown, this rest is meant to facilitate fellowship with God, not self-indulgence (Rom 6:1-2). Rest is not given indiscriminately. Israel had been redeemed. They were already in a relationship with God when the rest was offered.

And, just as God had done all the work in establishing a relationship with Adam, so He did all the work in establishing a relationship with Israel. Israel had done nothing to merit this relationship; it was a gift. Today, once again, the promise of rest is given only to the redeemed: those who have been bought out of the slavery of sin by the precious blood of the Lamb (1 Pet 1:19).

To the believer, it is not the ceasing of physical work that the “rest” of the Old Testament illustrates. Rather, what has ceased are the futile works meant to *establish* a relationship with God. It is the believer’s concern for his *eternal* “survival” that has ended.

The fear of death should never again divert his attention from fellowship with God through Christ, *his* redeemer (Heb 2:14).

Believers lean on the fact that through the finished “work” of Christ alone, their relationship with God has been firmly established; they have entered into “rest.”

So then, as God rested on the seventh day and sought to enjoy His relationship with man, so too should every believer in Christ Jesus the Lord desire to enjoy this same relationship (Heb 4:9-10): his relationship with His God.

God’s rest then is not a reference to heaven. To be sure, heaven will one day facilitate the rest God desires for His people in a way heretofore unknown. Because sorrows and pains will have ceased, there will never be a distraction from enjoying real fellowship with the Creator.

But, God’s rest begins at the moment of salvation. It is *then* that a person is placed in the “garden,” immediately *after* the “work” has been entirely accomplished by God. As it was in Adam’s case, so also it is in the born-again believer: God alone has established the relationship, and *now* it is simply to be enjoyed.

Of course, God never forced Israel to remain close, and in time, they drifted. They became carnal in enjoying God’s physical blessings and ignoring the One who blessed. They no longer desired fellowship with God.

As a result and according to God’s promise, He hardened the curse on their land (Deut 28, 31:20-32:43, 32:37-38). In time, He allowed foreign invaders to take that land and eventually, the nation of Israel was scattered altogether.

However, though many centuries of discipline have elapsed, that nation has remained chosen of God. The relationship God “worked” to establish with Israel still exists (Rom 9-11).

Likewise, the believer is in a permanent relationship with God through Christ. He is eternally secure (Rom 8:33-39). He is never, however, *forced* to fellowship with God; he is never *forced* to enjoy his relationship with his Creator and Redeemer.

Just as Israel was once free to bring offerings in worship to God during times of rest, but was never *forced*, so it is with a believer today, one who has “entered into that rest” (Heb 4:11).

Every true believer should be seeking that same companionship and fellowship with his Savior that his Savior desires of him (John 14:3): to worship Him (Heb 13:15); to know Him and His rest (Mat 11:28-30); to learn of His ways (1 Cor 4:17); to grow in obedience to Him (1 Pet 1:2-16); to seek His wisdom (Col 1:9-11); and to serve Him selflessly (Rom 12:1).

The believer has already entered into God’s rest, and must not abuse it through complacency, apathy, or carnality as did Israel. It is God’s desire for men, not simply that they should be saved, but that they should walk closely with Him, and know Him, through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 3:7-12).