



The Sabbath Rest

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The Sabbath is one of the most misunderstood observances in the Bible. The legalism adopted by the Jews over the Sabbath has bled forcefully into the parts of the Christian church that take the Sabbath seriously. Most other Christians appear to be just as ignorant about the true meaning of the Sabbath, but in a disinterested sense. In this message we will see how to recover God's full intent for us in the Sabbath. We will find that it is a state of continual rest in the provision of God for us in Christ through faith in the Gospel.

God's Rest

We will begin with a set of scriptures that are probably the most obscure concerning the Sabbath. But, sometimes it is the somewhat hidden things that are the most valuable and beneficial to us. These verses will be the focal point of our study.

Hebrews 4:1-11 (Phillips New Testament)

¹Now since the same promise of rest is offered to us today, let us be continually on our guard that none of us even looks like failing to attain it.

²For we too have had a Gospel preached to us, as those men had. Yet the message proclaimed to them did them no good, because they only heard and did not believe as well.

³It is only as a result of our faith and trust that we experience that rest. For he said: 'So I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest'; not because the rest was not prepared — it had been ready since the work of creation was completed,

⁴as he says elsewhere in the scriptures, speaking of the seventh day of creation, 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works'.

⁵And in the passage above he refers to "my rest" as something already in existence.

⁶No, it is clear that some were intended to experience this rest and, since the previous hearers of the message failed to attain to it because they would not believe God, he proclaims a further opportunity when he says through David,

⁷many years later, "today", just as he had said "today" before. 'Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts'.

⁸For if Joshua had given them the rest, we should not find God saying, at a much later date, "today".

⁹There still exists, therefore, a full and complete rest for the people of God.

¹⁰And he who experiences his real rest is resting from his own work as fully as God from his.

¹¹Let us then be eager to know this rest for ourselves, and let us beware that no one misses it through falling into the same kind of unbelief as those we have mentioned.

Let us quickly survey these verses to outline what we are looking to study.

Verse 1: The author exhorts us to beware that we are in danger of missing or "failing to attain" a promise from God - a promise of "rest."

Verse 2: The verses before Hebrews chapter 4 had been discussing the Israelites who wandered in the desert for 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt. So, the references to "those men" and "they" in verse 2 are referring to these people. This verse makes it clear that the Gospel contains the promise of entering God's rest, and that a version of the Gospel has been preached to both us and the Israelites. But, the Israelites did not apply their faith to God's promise - they heard only and did not believe - and so it did them no good.

Verse 3: It is belief in the Gospel that causes us to experience God's rest, a rest that was prepared and has been ready since the end of creation.

Verse 4: In this verse the author specifically links entering God's rest to the Sabbath by citing Genesis 2:2 where God rested (meaning "ceased from doing additional work because the work was perfect and complete") after the six days of creation.

Verses 5-7: The author is quoting from Psalm 95:7-11 where David (who lived some 400 years after Moses and Joshua) exhorts people of his day to not harden their hearts towards God as the Israelites of the Exodus had.

Psalm 95:7-11

⁷For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. To day if ye will hear his voice,

⁸Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness:

⁹When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work.

¹⁰Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways:

¹¹Unto whom I sware in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.

God states through David that the Israelites of the Exodus tempted Him, did not know Him or His ways, and therefore did not enter into His rest. The author of Hebrews is making the point that the rest of God was still available in the day of David since David is imploring the people of his time to enter God's rest.

Verse 8: Joshua leading the next generation of Israelites into the Promised Land did not cause them to enter God's rest since David is still pleading for people to enter God's rest in his day.

Verse 9: Since that rest was available in David's time, it is available to us today.

Verse 10: The end of verse 10 is another clear reference to Genesis 2:2. By entering God's rest, we cease from our own works in the same manner as God did on the original Sabbath. This will be one of the key points we will examine later in this study - what did the Sabbath look like for Adam and Eve?

Verse 11: The author warns us that entering into God's rest is not easy, to the point that we must actually "work" to enter it.

So, the general message is that a Sabbath Rest is available to us as Christians today through faith and trust in the Gospel, a rest that was never successfully entered into by the Jews prior to the advent of Christ. We are encouraged to be diligent in entering into that rest lest we fall subject to the same kind of unbelief as the Jews.

To fully understand the Sabbath Rest and enter into it, we need to understand the original Sabbath, the history of the Sabbath, how the Jews failed to enter into the Sabbath Rest, and the full message of the Gospel.

The Sabbath is first mentioned in Genesis when God rested on the seventh day after the six days of creation.

Genesis 2:2-3

²And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.

³And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.

Notice that at this point the seventh day of the week is not called the Sabbath nor has it been instituted as a mandatory observance. It is also important to note that God blessed the seventh day. This blessing is the primary aspect that God wanted the Israelites to understand in their observance of the Sabbath.

The first indication that this day was to have some importance in the eyes of the Lord was after the Exodus when the Israelites were given daily manna to eat.

Exodus 16:29

See, for that the Lord hath given you the sabbath, therefore he giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.

The key principle illustrated here is that the Israelites only needed to work six days and through trusting in the blessing of God they would have provision for seven days. When this would be practiced by the nation of Israel, it was intended to be a demonstration to others of the power and nature of God. The Jews would work less and be more fruitful than all their neighbors simply due to their relationship with God. The Sabbath was intended to be a testimony to others of a *relationship* with God.

It was not until the Law was given by God to Moses that this type of observance was formalized. Here we also see the Lord linking the Sabbath explicitly to an observance of the seventh day of creation. It should be clear from these verses that the blessing of the Sabbath observance flows directly from God's blessing of the first Sabbath.

Exodus 20:10-11

¹⁰But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Having an extra day's worth of provision each week after only working for six days could be explained away for other reasons. Therefore, God also instituted a year-long Sabbath that was to occur every 7 years.

Leviticus 25:3-4,20-22

³Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof;

⁴But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the Lord: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard.

...

²⁰And if ye shall say, What shall we eat the seventh year? behold, we shall not sow, nor gather in our increase:

²¹Then I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years.

²²And ye shall sow the eighth year, and eat yet of old fruit until the ninth year; until her fruits come in ye shall eat of the old store.

God was attempting to make it clear that a blessing was available that through working $\frac{6}{7}$ of the time (on a weekly or yearly basis) AND placing faith and trust in God the Israelites would have all of their needs met. This was intended to be a clear testimony to others of their relationship with God.

But, in all of the observance over the years in Israel, something was lost with regard to the Sabbath. The Sabbath was intended to be a weekly reminder to the Jews of their trusting relationship with God where He blesses them and meets all of their needs. But, it had become a legalistic observance of rules as so much of the Jewish religion had. This is what the writer of Hebrews is trying to tell us. The Israelites of the Exodus did not enter into the Sabbath Rest because of their unbelief. For their descendants, from Joshua and through the time of David and on until the coming of Christ, the Jews did not enter the Sabbath Rest through observance of the Sabbath because of their unbelief.

Probably the greatest testimony that the Jews failed to enter into God's rest is God's banishment of Israel from the Promised Land for the exact number of years it would take to make up for all of the Sabbath years they failed to observe. For 490 years Israel failed to keep the seventh-year Sabbath. This accumulated up to 70 years of missed Sabbaths. This is the exact length of the Babylonian captivity which allowed the land the rest it had not received for almost 500 years.

II Chronicles 36:20-21

²⁰And them that had escaped from the sword carried he away to Babylon; where they were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia:

²¹To fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years.

The Jews did not mix faith with the word of the Lord spoken to them. They heard what was said, but they did not believe it in their heart. If it had changed their heart, the message would have been manifest in their actions. And, this is the lesson for us. We need to take heed of the Gospel to the point that it changes our heart and therefore our actions also. If we do not apply faith to what we have heard, we will fall victim to the same kind of unbelief that kept the Jews from entering God's rest.

The Sabbath as an Old Testament Type

As with many other practices God instituted in the Jewish religion, the observance of the Sabbath was actually only a type (imperfect practice, incomplete picture) of a future New Testament reality. It was intended to give the Israelites a basic understanding of a truth that would only make complete sense once Christ had come. That the Sabbath was such a type was made plain by Paul in his letter to the church at Colosse.

Colossians 2:16-17

¹⁶Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days:

¹⁷Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

The Sabbath was only a shadow of things to come. So, our task is to understand the original Sabbath and God's intent for its observance by the Jews and then apply the full revelation of the Gospel to the picture. By doing so, we will arrive at the Sabbath Rest that God had prepared for us from the foundation of the world.

The Original Sabbath

One of the keys to understanding the Sabbath is to review the first Sabbath *from the point of view of Adam and Eve*. So often the Sabbath is studied from God's perspective in that He is the one that the scriptures describe as "resting" from His work. But, God instituted the Sabbath for people and did so for a reason. That reason is embedded in the experience of Adam and Eve.

God created humans at the very end of creation. They were the final documented creation and were the crown jewel of creation. The reason God did it this way was so that Adam and Eve would have the things they needed. If they were created before light, they would not have been able to see. If they had been created before the land was separated from the sea, they would have had to tread water. If they had been created before plants, they would have had nothing to eat.

The end result, and the thing we want to carefully observe, is that Adam and Eve were created and immediately placed into a perfect garden with everything they needed from the very beginning. They entered the Sabbath Rest with God being fully provided for with no work needing to be done. They simply had to receive. No striving, struggling, begging, searching. Just peace, rest, and having their needs met in a relationship with God.

This is the picture of the Sabbath from our perspective. It isn't about simply abstaining from work. It is about having been fully provided for so that there is no need to work. There is a distinct difference between these. One is a legalistic struggle to follow rules often in situations that seem to require different attitudes and actions. The other is a restful position of gratitude and realization that everything has been provided for.

Our Sabbath Rest

Now we are ready to finally put the entire picture back together. The key verses from the passage in Hebrews are repeated below.

Hebrews 4:9-11

⁹There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.

¹⁰For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.

¹¹Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.

And so, we have arrived at what God really wants us to understand. The writer of Hebrews says that there remains a rest for God's people. The entrance of the Israelites into the Promised Land and the Sabbath observances in the Old Testament did not fulfill it. The Sabbath was an imperfect practice and picture of the rest that the Father provides for us through His provision for us. The full nature of this rest cannot be understood outside of the Gospel.

Now, note the parallel. Adam and Eve were created and entered a Sabbath Rest in which they were fully provided for. In becoming a Christian we are a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17). In a perfect parallel, those who respond to the Gospel and become new creatures are to enter a Sabbath Rest in which they are fully provided for.

As a new creation, God intends us to enter a Sabbath Rest just as Adam and Eve did just after they were created. Their Sabbath Rest after creation was a picture of the Sabbath Rest a new Christian is intended to enter. Entering the Christ-life means entering into a relationship where all that you need has been provided by a loving Father through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Sabbath Rest is a continual relationship with God in which we cease our works and simply trust God for all that we need spiritually, emotionally, and physically. This means we should cease from striving to receive from God or meet our own needs in our own strength. In essence the Gospel says that everything a Christian needs has been provided by the sacrifice of Christ. And, finally we are warned that accepting the full Gospel and entering God's rest is so difficult for us that we need to literally labor (work) to rest and avoid falling into unbelief as the Israelites did.

References

- All scriptures were taken from the King James Bible, except where noted otherwise.

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