

God's Rest: Genesis 2:1-3  
Ben Reaoch, THREE RIVERS GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH  
Sunday morning, May 6, 2007

What comes to mind when you think of rest? A relaxing afternoon in the park? A nap? A full-night's sleep? A vacation? Retirement? We live in an interesting world. It seems that everyone is looking for rest, but very few know where to find it. Many will finally make it to the park, or the luxurious vacation, or the "care-free" retirement, and yet they are still without rest. They are still restless. They could be in the most serene, peaceful environment, and yet there is still an inner restlessness that doesn't go away. There's a nagging regret, or irritation, or sense of discontentment, and true rest remains elusive.

There are many things about our particular culture that make it difficult to find rest. We live in a fast-paced society with wireless internet, cell phones, laptops, iPods, palm pilots, blackberrys, conference calls, airplanes, fast food, TVs, CDs, DVDs, and MP3s, and the list could go on and on. I was talking to a guy on the plane last week, and as soon as we landed he pulled out his blackberry to check his email messages. I asked him how he likes the little gadget, and he said it's helpful in ways but can also be very annoying because he gets messages constantly. I find that to be an interesting commentary on our culture in general. We have surrounded ourselves with so many "conveniences"; we end up feeling trapped by them. These technological advancements are meant to help us save time, and so we would think they could help us find more rest. But instead the opposite has happened. The gadgets and conveniences just complicate and accelerate our frazzled lives.

And, of course, this just shows us that the novelties of our culture are not the root problem. The root problem is sin. Sin is why we are restless. Sin is why we can't find rest or peace or contentment. We are sinners who have turned away from our Creator and are seeking to find rest apart from Him. That, however, is impossible. You may spend your whole life (and many do) striving to make more money, planning a nicer vacation, finding a nicer house, saving for a better retirement, thinking that those things will bring you the rest you desire. But the truth is that all of those things will leave you just as restless as you are now, if not more so. True rest is not found in any material possession or pleasure. True rest is found only in God, and it is available to us through Jesus Christ. Augustine said in a prayer to God, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You." Apart from a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, there is absolutely no true rest. There may be sleep, and various comforts and pleasures that are a result of God's common grace. But there will be no true lasting rest.

This morning we're going to look at what the Bible teaches about God's rest, and we'll begin by reading Genesis 2:1-3. Last week we studied chapter 1 and saw the goodness of God's creation. He created everything out of nothing, and He created mankind in His image. He did all that in the first six days, and now on the seventh day, He rests.

Genesis 2:1-3 should really be understood as part of chapter 1. As you may know, the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible were not there originally. Moses, who wrote the first five books of the Bible under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, did not

write little numbers into the text. The divisions that we see in our Bibles were added in the Middle Ages simply for the sake of being able to reference specific portions of Scripture. This is one of those places where we might wish that the division was made in a different place, because chapter 2:1-3 really complete the narrative of chapter 1. Then 2:4 begins the next section with the important phrase, “These are the generations of . . .” That phrase appears several more times throughout Genesis, and it organizes the storyline.

So think of 2:1-3 as the conclusion to chapter 1 rather than as the introduction to chapter 2. Chapter 1 has recounted the events of days 1-6 in creation, and now these verses describe the seventh day. God has spent six days creating the universe, and He has used great care and intention in doing so. Now, on the seventh day, He rests.

What does it mean in verse 2 where it says, “he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done”? What does it mean that God rested? Does it mean that God was tired? Was He exhausted after six full days of creating? After all, that was an amazing feat of strength and energy. But God was not tired. God is omnipotent, meaning He is all-powerful. His power is infinite, and therefore even after creating the entire universe out of nothing, He was no less powerful than when He began.

God did not rest because He was tired. He rested because He was finished creating. Verse 1 says, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.” Genesis 1:1 and 2:1 are kind of bookends to the days of creation. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” and then chapter 2 begins, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished.” Then verse 2, “And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.”

The word “rested” here is from the Hebrew verb *shabbat*. And it’s the noun form of that verb that means Sabbath. There’s no command in these verses for US to rest on the seventh day. It only tells us that God rested on the seventh day. But look at how God consecrates this day in verse 3, “So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” There’s something very special about this seventh day. God blesses it, and He sanctifies it. He makes it holy. He sets it apart.

Later in the Old Testament we begin to see God’s purpose for the seventh day, the day of rest, the Sabbath. Exodus 16 is the first place where the noun, Sabbath, is used. It’s when the Israelites are in the wilderness and God is giving them manna from heaven. And it says that “on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread” (v. 22). And Moses said, “This is what the Lord has commanded: “Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord” (v. 23).

Then, a couple chapters later, we find the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. The fourth commandment reads, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (vv. 8-11).

Now it becomes clear that God’s rest on the seventh day was intended to be an example for Israel. Just as God worked for six days and rested on the seventh, so also the

Israelites are to work for six days and then rest. They are to keep the Sabbath holy. It is to be set aside as a special day, a day of rest. Then in Exodus 31 we see that the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a *sign* between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you’” (vv. 12-14). Then a few verses later God continues, “It is a *sign* forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” (v. 17).

Just as circumcision was the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, we see here that the Sabbath is the sign of the Mosaic covenant (God’s covenant that came through Moses to the Israelites). And the fulfillment of that sign in the Old Testament was the Promised Land. God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and gave them the Promised Land as their inheritance. In Deuteronomy 12 Moses refers to the Promised Land as “the rest” and “the inheritance that the Lord your God is giving you” (v. 9). Also in Psalm 95 we read that some were not able to enter God’s rest, meaning God did not let them enter the Promised Land because of their hard hearts.

So this is the significance of the Sabbath in the Old Testament. God rested on the seventh day. Israel was to rest on the seventh day as a sign of God’s covenant with them. And their observance of the Sabbath pointed to God’s great work in delivering them from Egypt and taking them to the Promised Land, where they would have rest from their enemies. There’s a problem, though. The Promised Land did not provide the peace and rest that the Israelites were hoping for. Not because there was anything wrong with God’s gift, but because there was a problem in the Israelites’ hearts. They were sinners, just like we all are. And they squandered their inheritance. They rebelled against God and worshipped other gods. They did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And eventually, because of their sin, God cast them out of the Promised Land. After 70 years some of them were able to return to the land, but the ultimate rest was still unfulfilled.

Now we fast-forward to New Testament times, and we see Jesus clashing with the religious leaders of his day over the issue of the Sabbath. They accused Him of not keeping the Sabbath, because He did things that they thought should not be done on the Sabbath. Not things that the Old Testament explicitly condemned, but legalistic details they had added to Sabbath observance. So, for instance, they condemned Him and hated Him for healing people on the Sabbath. How astonishing, and how insane. And how ironic, that this day meant to represent God’s rest, could be turned into a burdensome yoke that brought the opposite of rest. They took something that symbolized God’s grace and our rest in Him, and they turned it into a legalistic effort. They were so wrapped up in their petty little rules that they entirely missed the whole point of the Sabbath, who was standing right in front of them. Jesus looked at them “with anger,” the Bible says, “grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5).

In another place, Jesus and His disciples were going through some grain fields on the Sabbath, and the disciples began to pluck heads of grain to eat. And the Pharisees accused Him of breaking the Sabbath. Jesus responded by reminding them of when David and those with him “entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat” (Matthew 12:4). And He reminded them of the priests, who “profane the Sabbath,” because they have to work on the Sabbath, and yet

“are guiltless” (Matthew 12:5). Then Jesus said, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:7-8).

Jesus was trying to show them that the Sabbath day is but a shadow, and HE is the substance, to use Paul’s words from Colossians 2. “[The Sabbath, and other things] are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17). The Sabbath is not about observing a day. It’s not about following certain rules. The Sabbath is about Christ. And it’s about the rest that He gives His people.

The question comes to mind, Should WE keep the Sabbath? Are Christians today required to keep the Sabbath? And if so, how? Most would agree that we are not required to keep the Sabbath exactly as it was commanded in the Old Testament. The Sabbath, being Saturday, the seventh day of the week, is no longer the focal point for Christians. Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday, the first day of the week, and so we gather for corporate worship on Sunday, to celebrate His resurrection.

But many Christians would argue that the commands for Sabbath rest in the Old Testament should now be applied to Sunday. Sunday should now be the day of rest for Christians. And while that may seem like a logical and compelling argument, I don’t find anything in the New Testament that says we are required to rest on the Lord’s Day. Of course, there’s nothing that says we shouldn’t rest on the Lord’s Day, either. And we certainly should have regular times of rest. Life is not all about work. But whether or not you observe the Lord’s Day as a day of rest is a matter of personal conscience. What we certainly SHOULD do on the Lord’s Day is gather with other believers to worship our Savior together.

This is what the early church did. We see them in Acts 20 gathering to break bread and hear Paul preach on a Sunday evening. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul instructs the church to put something aside as a collection for the saints “on the first day of every week.” On the first day, Sunday, the Lord’s Day. Then the apostle John, in Revelation 1:10, makes reference to the Lord’s Day. He writes that he “was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day,” when his visions began. In the New Testament there is an emphasis on Sunday as the day for corporate worship and fellowship and giving. And I believe that’s where our focus should be.

Concerning the details of whether or not you should mow your lawn on Sunday, or go to a ballgame, or work at your business, I believe those are issues of personal conscience, and any rules we might seek to construct would be sheer legalism. Let’s not become Pharisees here. Our sinful hearts are so prone to legalism. But in Romans 14:5-6 Paul writes, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” It seems natural that Paul would have been thinking of the Sabbath here, along with other Jewish holy days. And the point is that there aren’t any hard and fast rules about this. Love the Lord, and seek to honor Him in whatever you do. But don’t be bound by legalistic guilt, and don’t judge others for how they choose to spend their Sundays. This is one of those issues where various people within our congregation may have different convictions about this. And that’s perfectly OK, as long as each person is convinced in his or her own mind, and is seeking to honor the Lord.

Don't misunderstand this. We MUST pass judgment on behaviors that are clearly condemned in Scripture. Paul would never say, "Whether you commit adultery or not, let each person be convinced in his own mind." No. Adultery is always wrong, all the time, for everyone. But Sabbath observance is different. It is a matter of personal conscience, and we must not judge one another based on the different convictions we might have.

I want to close by talking about how all Christians DO keep the Sabbath. We may differ on specific activities that we do or don't do on the Lord's Day, but here's how we all must keep the Sabbath today, and every day: Trust in Jesus Christ. Rest in Him. He is the substance that the shadow points to. He is the ultimate meaning of the Sabbath rest. God created the universe in six days, and then He rested on the seventh day. Not because He was tired, but because He was finished. And He wanted to set this pattern for work and rest, and by design He used this seventh day rest, this Sabbath day rest, as a pointer to the ultimate rest that can only be found through Jesus Christ.

The last passage I want to read is in Hebrews 4:1-11. This is an amazing passage about the ultimate significance of the seventh day, the ultimate significance of God's rest. Verse 3 says, "we who have *believed* enter that rest." Do you see that it is by believing that we enter the rest? Believing IS resting. It's the opposite of working. There's no more work to be done. Christ accomplished the work, and there's nothing we can add to His work. What we must do is rest in Him by believing in Him, trusting in Him.

As verse 10 says, "whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." God's rest is heaven. It wasn't the Promised Land. That was just another pointer. God's eternal rest is heaven, which will be enjoyed by all those who give up working and simply rest in Him.

Let's heed the exhortation in verse 11, "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience." That command is a little perplexing, isn't it? How does one strive to enter God's rest? If you can't enter by working, but only by resting, then how do you *strive* to enter? Doesn't striving sound like working? I think it depends on the nature of the striving.

Chapter 3:12-13 shed light on this, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." You see, the striving is not about outward appearances. It's not about producing a righteousness of your own. It's not about being good enough. The striving has to do with your heart. Where is your heart? What do you love? What do you hate? What are you putting your hope in? It's at this level that we strive to enter God's rest. We strive to fix our eyes on Jesus, so that we'll see more of His beauty and greatness, and be less enticed by sin. And we need one another in this fight of faith. We need to exhort one another constantly, Look to Jesus. Sin won't give you what you really want. Sin can't cure your restlessness. Rest in Him!

Are you resting in Him today? In your frazzled, fast-paced life, where are you seeking rest? Is your hope in the comfortable house, or the vacation, or retirement? Don't fool yourself. None of those will bring you the rest you're seeking. Rest in Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect, sinless life, died a sacrificial death for sinners like us, and rose from the dead on the third day. He is coming back someday, and when He does, all those who are resting in Him will enter His eternal rest. All work will cease. Trials and tears will be no more, and we will delight in His all-satisfying rest for eternity.

