

## **Excursus: The Matter of Rest in God's Purposes for His Creation**

*Rest* is a key theme in the Hebrews epistle, and for good reason. Indeed, it would be impossible for the writer to make his argument without bringing the concept of rest into it. For his intent was to demonstrate that God's design for His creation – centered in man – has its focal point and fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah. And there are two fundamental characteristics of the creation as it conforms to its true nature and design. Those characteristics are identified by the Hebrew concepts of *shalom* (peace) and *shabbat* (rest). And though they're distinct concepts, they form an inseparable union. Each necessarily implies the other, so that neither can exist without the other. Furthermore, each finds its meaning in relation to the other, so that neither can be understood except in terms of the other. Thus peace and rest are woven together throughout the Scripture as it tells the story of God's hand in His creation unto its final destiny.

*Rest* and *peace* are inseparable, and together they answer the question of the creation's meaning and purpose. Or, put another way, they together comprise the truth and righteousness – that is, the *rightness* – of God's world. At the same time, *shabbat* and *shalom* are *theocentric* (God-centered) concepts. This is because the creation reflects and testifies of God (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:20). He created all things for Himself, and everything finds its meaning in relation to Him (cf. Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 15:27-28; Colossians 1:15-16). Thus rest and peace pertain to the creation, not as it is in itself, but as it exists and functions in relation to its Creator.

Three foundational truths follow from these observations:

- 1) First, peace and rest are *relational* concepts that speak to right relation between God and His creation. Only then do they pertain to relationships among created entities.
- 2) From this it follows that peace and rest are lost whenever the Creator-creation relationship is compromised.
- 3) Since the fall of man resulted in alienation between God and His creation, it also brought the end of peace and rest. Therefore, any promise of the creation's reconciliation and renewal must hold out the recovery of peace and rest.

These truths, then, produce certain expectations regarding the scriptural record and its message. First of all, one would expect to find these two concepts at the center of the creation account in Genesis. Secondly, the Scriptures should represent them as forfeited with man's fall, and then promote them as a focal point of any future restoration. Indeed, this is exactly what one finds, so much so that the themes of peace and rest are key threads that run through and bind together the entire scriptural narrative, from the opening of Genesis to the climactic closing of Revelation.

### **The Meaning of Rest and its Relation to Peace**

Again, because rest and peace are inseparable concepts, one must consider both – and in their proper relation – in order to rightly consider either. Each implies the other, but in a specific way: *Peace is the premise of rest, and rest expresses, and so testifies to, the existence of peace.* Defining the concepts biblically shows how this is the case.

1. *Peace* (shalom) signifies much more than the absence of conflict or unrest. Again, it is a relational concept: Peace characterizes a thing when it exists in perfect harmony with itself, all other things, and God Himself. Peace expresses the truth of God’s creation. Cornelius Plantinga puts it this way: “*The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.*” (Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be)

And if it’s true that peace is “the way things ought to be,” it follows that peace is the way God intends His creation to be; the way he created it to be. Peace is the state of the created order when it exists and functions in conformity to the truth of its design and function as determined and devised by its Creator.

2. *Peace* and *rest* (shabbat) are inseparable and mutually dependent, and this suggests that they are closely related in their qualities and dynamics. In fact, this is exactly the case. Like the concept of peace, *rest* transcends common human notions about it. Rest isn’t about the absence of activity, or even our familiar notions of settledness and contentment. This ought to be clear from the fact that, like peace, rest concerns the creation as such, and not simply human beings. If God designed the entire created order to exist in a state of rest – and He did, and if this rest characterizes God Himself, then it must transcend the sort of rest known to and experienced by human beings in their natural existence.

Two aspects of rest, then, provide insight into its nature as the Scripture understands it: The first is its intimate and inseparable relationship with peace, and the second is its divine quality – the fact that rest first characterizes God, and only then His creation. With this in mind, the creation account in Genesis is the place to begin, for that’s where the concept of rest is introduced and these two aspects come into view.

- a. The Scripture introduces rest as God’s response to His work of creation (Genesis 2:2-3). After completing that work, and finding it “exceedingly good,” God *rested*. The point isn’t that His working days were done. Such a notion wouldn’t have occurred to the original audience. Beyond that, the Scripture shows that God continues to be actively engaged in His creation; He isn’t the far-off, disengaged deity imagined by deists, but the God who has never stopped working to bring His creation to its intended goal (cf. John 5:15-21 with Ephesians 1:7-11).

The Genesis account shows that God rested from His *creative* labors. That task completed, He was free to turn His attention to ruling His creation. The immediate context suggests this, but the wider narrative makes it clear, especially to the original audience. For they would have interpreted the creation narrative as a *temple* story – the account of God constructing a sanctuary where He purposed to dwell in His creation; the place where heaven and earth were to come together.

In the ancient Near Eastern world, temples were envisioned as divine inhabitations. They were the places where gods had their earthly residence. But more than that, they were places of *enthronement*; ancient peoples regarded temples as throne rooms from which deities conducted their rule and carried out their interaction with the people they presided over.

*“The role of the temple in the ancient world is not primarily a place for people to gather in worship like modern churches. It is a place for the deity – sacred space. It is his home, but more importantly his headquarters – the control room. When the deity rests in the temple it means that he is taking command, that he is mounting to his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role.”*

(John Walton, The Lost World of Genesis One)

Temples were understood to be royal residences where gods took up their *rest* – not relaxation, retirement, or cessation of activity, but inhabitation for the sake of administration. And so it was for the God of Israel (ref. Psalm 132:7-14; cf. also 1 Chronicles 28:2; 2 Chronicles 6:41; Isaiah 66:1). Thus Greg Beale comments in his book, The Temple and the Church’s Mission:

*“God’s rest both at the conclusion of creation in Genesis 1-2 and later in Israel’s temple indicates not mere inactivity, but that he had demonstrated his sovereignty over the forces of chaos (e.g., the enemies of Israel) and now has assumed a position of kingly rest further revealing his sovereign power... Accordingly, it is not coincidental that David initially conceived of building God a temple only after ‘the Lord had given him rest on every side from all his enemies’... David prepares for the building of the temple, but he does not construct it because he had been ‘a man of war’ and had ‘shed blood’; furthermore, he did not build the temple because, while there was ‘rest’ externally, there was still political unrest internally that needed to be quelled before Solomon [whose name derives from the Hebrew ‘shalom’ – yet another linking of rest and peace] could assume the throne and then build the temple... God’s dwelling in Israel’s temple was conceived as the rest of a divine king who had no worries about opposition.”*

The issue, then, in God’s rest – which Genesis highlights as the apex of His creative activity – isn’t the cessation of His work, but the commencement of a different mode of work. ***God’s rest commences His new work as loving Lord of all creation – the work of sovereignly administering His relationship with His creation that was the very purpose and goal of His creative labors.***

And so the original Israelite audience would have interpreted Genesis 2:1-3 in terms of the Creator-God taking up His residence and rule in the creation-temple He’d fashioned for Himself. God created the cosmos – and the earth in particular – to inhabit it and rule over it as its wise and loving Lord. But He intended to do so through *man*, the creature formed in His own image and likeness to be image-son (hence 2:4-15 follow vv. 1-3). The sons of Israel understood this, *but they also recognized that they, Abraham’s elect seed, were at the center of this design.*

Read and interpreted in its own ancient Israelite context, it's immediately apparent that the creation account focuses on the issues of purpose and function, not material origins. The text concerns itself with the questions of *why* and *to what end* the created order as God's handiwork, not *what* material and mechanisms He used to bring it into existence. The original Hebrew audience would have read it this way, marveling at the power and goodness of the Creator to create a dwelling place that He could flood with the glory of His presence and love, thereby extending to something beyond Himself what He eternally enjoys in Himself. The Genesis narrative describes the construction of a creation-temple, and thus points to the Creator's intent to "be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28; cf. also Acts 17:24-29; Revelation 21-22). But the Israelites for whom the account was penned would have interpreted this truth through the lens of their own identity and calling: The Creator-God had chosen them, Abraham's covenant household, to play a crucial role in the realization of His all-encompassing goal.

- b. This understanding of the concept of rest shines light on the correlation between it and peace. *Peace* speaks to the harmonious perfection of God's creation, and this perfection expresses itself in *rest*. This is evident first in the fact that a perfect creation leaves nothing to be desired, nothing more to do. If God's creation was perfect according to His designs ("exceedingly good"), then it was *shalomic*, and shalom results in *shabbat* (rest). Thus God rested from His creative labors because there was nothing more to add and nothing to alter. But the *perpetuity* of the seventh day (cf. Genesis 2:1-3 with 1:5-31) – the day God designated as His *shabbat* – suggests that this rest signifies more than the completion of the work of creation. Drawing again from the temple concept discussed above, this perpetual rest indicates a new state of the Creator-creation relationship. *The shalomic creation was now able to carry out the purpose for its existence, even as God could now be God to it and for it.* Henceforth, and in accord with the Creator's intent in creating, the Creator-creation relationship was to be defined by *rest*.

*"The end of God's creative work brought about a new type of time, blessed and set aside [sanctified], presumably in order that what was created could now be. The Seventh Day was to be a day for fruitfulness, for dominion, for relationship."*  
 (New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, emphasis in original)

This understanding of the seventh day may at first appear foreign or strained, especially to those accustomed to thinking in terms of literal days and the notion of a weekly Sabbath observance. But it is clear that Genesis 2:1-3 doesn't establish a Sabbath ordinance; it simply defines the seventh day as "post-creation" time arising from completion and perfection (ref. again Genesis 1:31-2:3). In the Bible, the number seven indicates fullness, completion, and perfection; as such, it is the number of shalom. Thus God commended and sanctified the seventh day: *He set apart for Himself and the praise of His glory the shalomic perfection He had so marvelously brought about.* And this new, post-creation time is God's perpetual shabbat, in that He has taken His seat in His creation-temple – His "resting place" – and begun to administer His dominion as Creator-Lord.