

Chapter Thirteen

Entering God's Rest

Having learned something of our own makeup and that of our enemies, we must now seek to understand the *mainline principle* God has given us as the major, positive operating feature of life: *how to rest while working*. This one principle is the key to an effective and fulfilled life and is applicable for both preventive and corrective maintenance. It is another way of describing our walk of faith.

Our approach may seem a bit strange and oblique, for it involves a study of a most unlikely subject--the sabbath. But as we proceed, I think you'll agree that God wants to teach us some vital truth through this rather obscure subject.

What's the Sabbath All About?

There is a remarkable lack of basic understanding about the sabbath, perhaps not without good reason. For right in the midst of God's commandments covering the most significant, and far-reaching moral and spiritual issues there is this almost capricious and seemingly irrelevant word:

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; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all For such a seemingly inconsequential matter, the Lord speaks at considerable length on this subject, in contrast with "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20:13) a few verses later. He has just four words to say about murder, but ninety-four words on the sabbath. How come? Is the sabbath really that important? Many of us don't pay the slightest attention to this fourth commandment in God's law.

So what's happened? Did God make a mistake? Is his Word less than inspired? What's wrong here?

I've learned that any apparent anomaly in the Word of God is a clue that shouts out loud for further investigation. And usually, further study reveals a most significant vein of truth. God likes to intrigue our thinking: "It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out" (Prov. 25:2). Let's be God's royal family.

I have several lengthy books in my library concerning the sabbath which completely miss the point, and there are sabbatarian sects that do likewise. Many have argued for lifetimes about which day to keep, thereby obscuring the real issue and missing the point of God's truth. The sabbath was a key issue with the Jews in our Lord's day, but neither then nor now does there seem to be much light generated as to its real significance. It seems that we tend either to overwork the subject in a legalistic nit-picking way or else to slide right by without trying to discover the real import of the sabbath.

Facing Some Problems

Perhaps the best way to begin our investigation of the sabbath and its significance is to confront some of the obvious problems about it and ask some crucial questions. Here are some rather intriguing and puzzling facts to consider:

1. *All except the sabbath commandment are repeated in the New Testament.* For instance,

"Honor your father and your mother..." Exodus 20:12 is repeated in Ephesians 6:2. Also, "Do not lie to one another..." Colossians 3:9 is the equivalent of "You shall not bear false witness..." in Exodus 20:16.

2. *There is no equivalent to the sabbath commandment given in the New Testament.* On the contrary, in the New Testament we read: "One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5).

3. *The Lord Jesus seemed to take particular pains to do some of his works on the sabbath day* (e.g. John 5:2-18).

It seems there's something wrong here, a glaring inconsistency between the testimonies of the Old and New Testaments. Let's try to unravel the puzzle by asking (and answering) some crucial questions: 1) What does "sabbath" mean? 2) To whom was the sabbath given? 3) What is God's *intent* in the sabbath idea? 4) Is there a New Testament parallel or fulfillment of the sabbath? If so--what is it?

In regard to the first question, I used to think that sabbath meant "seventh," since it was the seventh day, but now I know that *sabbath is from a Hebrew word* which means "rest." Keep that in mind, for its significance carries all the way through our study.

Commanded--To Whom?

The sabbath was given as a command to the nation Israel and was invested by God with a "sign" character:

"Say to the people of Israel, '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.... Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant.

It is a *sign* forever between me and the people of Israel (Ex. 31:13 and 16-17, italics mine).

Therefore [for this reason] he says, the Lord commanded Israel to keep the sabbath. For *what* reason? It was to help them remember how the Lord redeemed them from slavery. After all, it should have seemed like a pretty good idea to them, since they had been seven-day-a-week slaves! The sabbath was to be a time of memorial and meditation on God's redemptive work of freeing the slaves.

The law, including the sabbath command, was *not* given to the Gentile nations: "When Gentiles *who have not the law ...*" (Rom. 2:14, italics mine). Nor was the commandment given to Christians: "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath" (Col. 2:16).

So what's it all about? Should we ignore the whole business unless we happen to be Jews? No. Let's not give up too soon. Remember (1) that we need to try to discover God's *intent* in the sabbath idea, and (2) that the nation Israel is designed to picture the individual Christian believer so that we may learn from Israel's history (1 Cor. 10:11).

What's the Idea?

In giving the sabbath command to Israel notice that the Lord relates it to the creation account in Genesis: "...for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth... and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it" (Ex. 20:11). Apparently God wanted his people to reflect back upon the rest God was enjoying following his creative activity as we read in the Genesis account: "So God blessed the seventh day... because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:3).

But what is the nature of his rest? Was God tired? Did he run out of energy? If we understand that God is the

source of *all* power and energy, then it's clear that he was not suffering from an energy shortage. And according to Isaiah, he doesn't get tired, for "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary..." (Isa. 40:28).

What, then, is the nature of this rest? Well, first it seems obvious that God had ceased from his activity, so inactivity is *part* of it. But I think there's more. When God had finished his work of creation, the account in Genesis says, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). The Lord was simply *enjoying* his creative handiwork, and this is the key ingredient in God's rest--his entering into and enjoying all that he had made. The first clue as to God's intent in the sabbath, then, is this picture of the God of creation relaxing and enjoying the result of his work.

God Went Back to Work

This peaceful rest of God, however, was brought to an abrupt end. In the very next chapter of Genesis (Chapter 3) we read of the entrance of sin into the picture, and God had to start working again! Because of his great love, he could not rest *apart* from his creation (man), and he couldn't rest *in* man because he had turned away from God. His first work was the work of creation, but now he engages in the work of re-creation, the redemption of an alienated race of men to make them part of a *new* creation. The balance of the biblical record is the account of God's redemptive work to restore the *rest* that was lost through sin to both God and man. We see man's need for reentry into that rest in such Scriptures as these:

Therefore, while the promise of *entering his* [God's] *rest* remains, let us fear lest any of you be judged to have failed to reach it (Heb. 4:1, italics mine).

So then, *there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God*; for whoever *enters* God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his (Heb. 4:9-10, italics mine).

Let us therefore strive *to enter that rest*... (Heb. 4:1 la, italics mine).

On God's side of the question, we see that the restoration of rest for him comes through the responsiveness of men's hearts in the obedience of faith. In Isaiah 66 we read: "Thus says the Lord: 'Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house which you would build for me and *what is the place* of my rest?'" (Isa. 66:1, italics mine). (Notice that the universe is just so much furniture to God!) Here the Lord asks the most pointed question of all time: Where do you think I should live, and where is the place I can call "home" and enjoy my rest? He answers his own question in the next verse: "...this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2).

For what will God look to this man? Is it not for the place *where he can rest and* feel at home? And what makes it possible? Is it not the inward attitude of that man's heart? Humility--the opposite of pride; contrition of spirit--the opposite of hypocrisy and cover-up; trembling at God's word the opposite of ignoring God or resisting him; these are the things which make God feel at home and at rest in the heart of man. The heart of the man who denies God entrance is the only place in the universe where *God is denied access*.

Hell is going to be an eternal pain in the heart of God because the ones who go there refused him a home. They resisted his offer to enjoy the life and presence of the One who made them and who has yearned to restore the rest they have missed. The ultimate expression of missing God's rest is hell, while the current evidence of men having missed God's rest is the restlessness of the age--men looking everywhere and trying everything (except God) to gain the satisfaction and fulfillment they lack. It's no wonder Christ pleads, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock..." (Rev. 3:20). He is saying, "Won't you let me in?"

My Name Is Israel

Returning to God's key examples from which we are to learn, look at Israel's heart in response to God's appeal, recorded in his word to the Hebrews:

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your

hearts as in the rebellion [of Israel], on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their hearts, they have not known my ways.' As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall never enter my rest'" (Heb. 3:7-11).

As we look at Israel's history, referred to here, keep in mind that the nation of Israel pictures each one of us in a very personal way. Through the graphic illustration of the victories, trials, and failures of the Hebrew nation, the Holy Spirit means to teach us of God's special love and provision for us, as well as to reveal to us the stubbornness of our own hearts.

· What got the Israelites into the wilderness situation? It was unbelief (Heb. 3:19); thus they failed to enter into all that God had made ready for them (pictured by the land of Canaan) to enjoy his rest in the place of spiritual victory.

· Did they have to remain in the wilderness for forty years?

No. It appears that the journey to the promised land could actually have been made in a few weeks.

Did God know about the obstacles they faced? Yes, and he promised his victory over them.

· What is the name of the leader who finally took Israel into the land? It was Joshua (which means "the Lord God saves").

· What is *your* leader's name? Mine is Jesus, the English equivalent of "Joshua." He *is the Lord God who saves!*

After these sober reminders, the writer of the Hebrews has this word for us: "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience" (Heb. 4:11).

Invitation to Rest

In order to analyze something you usually have to pull it apart or break it down into its basic components. We have just such a situation here: a lot of little pieces labeled "sabbath" lying around, but we have only a vague idea of how they're supposed to fit together again. The one who puts all the pieces together is Jesus. He is the New Testament parallel and fulfillment of the sabbath, and he is the reason the sabbath command was not given in the New Testament. Instead of a command, Jesus issues an invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you *rest*. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find *rest* for your souls" (Matt. 11: 28-29, italics mine).

Our Lord invites all who are tired of going it alone under a heavy load to join up with him. Do you see now what the sabbath is all about? "So then, there remains a sabbath rest [Greek, *sabbatismos*, the only occurrence in the New Testament] for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9). We find our rest by faith in our living Lord! He finds his rest in the obedient and loving response of our hearts as we keep on trusting him! Life is intended to be our enjoying him and his enjoying us!

Resting While Working

What does the sabbath commandment have to say to us? Is it irrelevant? Far from it; it points up the most vital aspect of Christian life--the rest that comes from counting on the one to whom we're yoked, the Lord Jesus, for every need of our lives. The result, he says, is that "...you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:29). The soul, remember, is the emotional, mental, and volitional aspect of our being. Who doesn't need a mind at rest, emotions at peace, and a securely anchored will?

But what's the yoke all about? If you recall, the yoke is a *working* device designed to team up two animals to work together. But what does our Lord promise? He says, "...I will give you *rest*." Do you suppose he could

be talking about *resting while working*? Now there's an attractive proposition! All of us have discovered the difference between "work" and "toil." We can be working very intensely at some things and enjoying every minute of it--resting while working. Or we can be really *laboring* at some totally unappealing and odious chore, and hating every minute of it!

What the Lord is offering is a working partnership to make all of life a joy instead of a drag. That's why he says, "For my yoke is easy [pleasant, not harsh] and my burden is light" (Matt. 11: 30). As someone has well said, "The rest that Christ offers is not a rest *from* work, but a rest *in* work--not the rest of inactivity, but of harmonious working of all the faculties and affections--of will, heart, imagination, conscience--because each has found in Christ the ideal (and only) sphere for its satisfaction and development" (J. Patrick in *Hastings' Bible Dictionary and Vine's Expository Dictionary of the New Testament*).

And how do we do it? We *come* to him and *learn* from him as he invites us to do. Herein lies the key which unlocks all the abundance of life and joy our hearts desire!

This is what the sabbath is all about, and far from being out of place in the Ten Commandments it has the most far-reaching significance--for Israel and for us. Israel missed God's deeper intent for the sabbath when they took it as bondage instead of blessing. We miss it when we fail to see that the sabbath concept for the Christian is not the observance of a day but rather a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a week resting by faith in the sufficiency of our strong Lord!

How to Do It Wrong Without Trying

I know a man, a Christian, for whom everything is going wrong: He can't make enough money....He owes everybody....His wife is divorcing him....He's emotionally "all shook up"He's doubting God's goodness....His life is in turmoil. In short, he's not enjoying rest--he's troubled and miserable.

Is God being unfair to him? Doesn't God keep his promise to supply our needs? Is he unfaithful? Oh, there's one thing I failed to mention--he is persisting in a particular sin, sexual immorality, and there is no rest, the Lord says, for the wicked. "Learn from me," he says. But this man isn't listening or learning; he is being just plain wicked! No wonder he has no rest for his soul. No wonder his heart is troubled and his life is a shambles.

Do you see how our choices determine the degree of rest we enjoy? If I walk by faith, I enjoy rest and victory. If I am disobedient, I will end up wandering through a wilderness of troubles and heartaches. We can have it either way. We make the choice.

Making God Weary

Though God doesn't get tired, we can sure make him weary. Dr. Willard Aldrich beautifully expounds this theme of the weariness of God:

THE WEARINESS OF GOD

"Does God get tired?"

"What could weary 'the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth' who 'does not faint or grow weary' (Isa. 40:20)?"

"What could possibly tire the One who created a universe of throbbing energy? Molecules in motion, suns radiating heat, galaxies of heavenly bodies hurtling through space, all bear witness to the boundless energy of Omnipotent God. What could weary such a God?"

"The Prophet Isaiah not only reveals that God neither faints nor grows weary but that He renews the strength of those who wait upon Him so that...They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint' (Isa. 40:31).

"Yet this God is said to be made weary. What can weary God?"

"Four things are said to weary God: *Religion that has degenerated into mere form and ceremony* wearies God. The religious observances which He had ordained for ancient Israel, but which were being celebrated without regard to their spiritual significance and moral requirement, were a stench in the nostrils of God. 'Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them' (Isa. 1:14).

"Could your religion be a weariness to God?"

"*God wearies of the unbelief of men who will not hear His Word and trust His promises.* Such is the story of King Ahaz who reigned in Judah about 700 years before Christ's coming into the world. King Ahaz refused to ask for a demonstration of God's power when God through His Prophet Isaiah commanded him to ask for a sign. And Isaiah rebuked his unbelief and disobedience to God by saying, "Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?" (Isa. 7:13)

"Are you guilty of wearying God through your unbelief and disobedience? Have you obeyed God's command to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? God will judge those...who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (2 Thess. 1:8)

"*God grows weary of our sin.* Isaiah charged the nation Israel with wearying God by persistent wickedness. He voiced God's complaint, '...you have wearied me with your iniquities' (Isa. 43: 24).

"Many voices are being raised today to say that how we live is a matter of indifference. Either God doesn't care, or there isn't a God to care. **BUT DO NOT BE DECEIVED BY SUCH DECEITFUL VOICES.** There comes a time in God's dealings with men and nations when He so tires of their iniquity that He gives them over to judgment. Preceding the destruction of the world by the flood in the days of Noah, God said, 'My spirit shall not abide in man for ever. . .' (Gen. 6:3).

"*Nothing wearies God more than man's attempts to justify evil conduct.* And the justification of evil is characteristic of the day in which we live. The so-called "new morality" throws off the restraint of God's moral law and judges that evil which is acceptable to society should no longer be considered evil but good. But God wearies of such perversion of moral truth.

"Of this weariness the Prophet Malachi wrote: 'You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" ' (Mal. 2:17).

"Such Divine weariness is a prelude to Divine judgment. Although God is rich in mercy, gracious and long-suffering not willing that any should perish, yet He grows weary of *religious hypocrisy, unbelieving disobedience, ungodly iniquity, and justification* of evil as though it were good.

"It is bad enough to fall into sin. It is proof of deep moral disorder when God's moral standards are distorted so that wrong is called right and evil is considered good.

"Is it possible that God has grown weary of religious formalism, unbelief, wickedness and self-justification in you?"

The only way we can truly be effective in helping anyone to spiritual victory and emotional stability is by ENTERING GOD'S REST ourselves and then showing others how to do the same. In a world full of turmoil there is a quiet island of peace and confidence in which we can live by trusting the One who said, "COME TO ME" and "I WILL GIVE YOU REST."

Why do we rob ourselves of this rest?

Why do we weary God with our blatant unbelief?

Why do we rob God of *his* rest--in us?

WE DON'T NEED TO! There is a rest for the people of God.

A Question of Intent

We left one open question, of those we posed at the beginning of this study. Why did the Lord Jesus seem to take pains to do his works on the sabbath? And did he break the sabbath law?

First of all, it seems apparent that the one who said he came to *fulfill* the law would hardly act in violation of it. But how do we square this with his actions recorded in John 5:2-18, where he healed a lame man on the sabbath and instructed him to carry his pallet?

We need to observe that the actual instruction given by God through Moses in the law did not forbid either healing someone or carrying a mat on the sabbath. But these legalistic Jews, bound by their own additions to what God had said in the law, were quick to accuse the Lord on the basis of their own traditions. So neither of these charges that Jesus violated the sabbath is valid.

But there are also the Lord's own statements on the sabbath: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27), and "...the Son of man is lord of the sabbath" (Mat. 12:8), and, "So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath" (Mat. 12:126). All of these statements hit at the deeper intent of the sabbath and cut right through the legalistic surface issues.

Going back to John 5, it records "...this was why the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he did this on the sabbath" (John 5: 16); "But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working still, and I am working'" (John 5:17). And this brings us full circle. Originally the sabbath was connected with the creative activity of God and his resting to enjoy his creation. Then sin entered and he had to go to work all over again. Then at Sinai, the sabbath was invested with the significance of being a memorial to God's *redemptive* actions in redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt. In all of this the Jews apparently never caught the real significance and value of *rest*--whether physical or spiritual. Now, the Lord Jesus identifies himself with the Father in his work--work made necessary by the unbelief of man, work dedicated to man's restoration to harmony with the purposes of God--enjoying his rest.

Jesus, a Sabbath Breaker?

Did our Lord *really* break the sabbath? His own words give us the answer:

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5 19).

Here is one who can say, "I always do what is pleasing to him [the Father]" (John 8:29). That means he keeps perfectly the intent and spirit of the sabbath, for he *always* walked by faith, enjoying the rest of God.

Thus, our Lord is the perfect example of how to keep the sabbath in accord with its original intent and purpose--a fact that is seen by the perfect poise and composure he enjoyed and displayed in his earthly life and ministry. He was never flustered or hurried, not hounded and harried by time and circumstances as we are so often. His life is a perfect exposition of resting by faith in the sufficiency of his Father's loving care!

No wonder he says to us: "Come to me--take my yoke--learn from me--and you will find REST"! For "As the living Father sent me," he says, "and I live because of [by] the Father, so he who eats me [as the bread of life] will live because of [by] me" (John 6:57).

Do you like *life*? Do you appreciate *rest*? They are only available in Jesus Christ.

Jesus, I Am Resting...

The great old hymn says it so well:

Jesus, I am resting, resting In the joy of what thou art; I am finding out the greatness Of thy loving heart.

Thou hast bid me gaze upon thee, And thy beauty fills my soul, For by thy transforming power Thou hast made me whole.

Oh, how great thy loving kindness, Vaster, broader than the sea!

Oh, how marvelous thy goodness, Lavished all on me!

Simply trusting thee, Lord Jesus, I behold thee as thou art, And thy love, so pure, so changeless, Satisfies my heart.

Ever lift thy face upon me, As I work and wait for thee; Resting 'neath thy smile, Lord Jesus, Earth's dark shadows flee.

Jesus I AM RESTING, resting In the joy of what thou art, I am finding out the greatness Of thy loving heart!

(Jean S. Pigott, 19th century)

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