

### **3. God Rested on the Seventh Day** (The Rest of God – God is continuing to work)

#### **Resume**

We have seen the scope of the Sabbath from creation to the eschaton. The concept of the Sabbath is not limited to the one day a week and going to church. It is a sabbath of the whole of our lives. As Calvin says regarding the Sabbath, ‘This is not confined within a single day but extends through the whole course of our life, until, completely dead to ourselves, we are filled with the life of God.’ That is why the fourth commandment is the fulcrum on which the other nine commandments rest. The worship of God and the care of humanity are our responses to the creator and redeemer of our lives. We have seen that the twin bases of the fourth commandment are creation and redemption. Jesus is both creator and redeemer and that is why He is the Lord of the Sabbath. On the cross when Jesus said ‘It is finished’, He echoed the completion of the creation. The one eternal covenant of creation includes bringing back the whole of creation to be in union with the Creator. This is where we wrestle with the rest of God and the continuing work of God.

#### **The Rest of God**

The creation was completed in six days. Humanity was created on the sixth day. Humanity’s first full day of existence is the seventh day, the day God rested from all the work He had done. Humanity’s existence is to live in the rest of God, the seventh day. We will explore what this entails.

God completed creation in six days and rested on the seventh day. This is a theological statement. What I mean is that this is a statement about God and His love for His creation. The fourth commandment is based on this statement. What we have done with the fourth commandment is that we turned theology into anthropology and made one day in seven as our rest day. We do that on the first day of the week basing it on the resurrection of Christ. We have discussed that last week.

However, in the hymn that we have sung, we have these words in the second verse.

Creator and Father, with grace You labour still  
To make a world in which all delight to do Your will.

That seems strange from what is written in Genesis that God rested on the seventh day. Jesus said the same when He declared this to His disciples.

But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” (John 5:17)

In view of this, we need to re-think the way we understand the rest of God. We need to start with the seventh day when God rested. The ‘Seventh Day’ is a much-forgotten day, much like the forgotten Father in Trinitarian theology. In fact, the seventh day refers to a period in God’s time. We are living in God’s seventh day.

There has been much discussion on the meaning of the ‘day’ in Genesis. Some have said that it is a 24-hour day. Others believe it to be a period of time. I think the latter is the case. If the ‘day’ is a period of time, then we are living in the ‘seventh day’, the period of the rest of God. So, to live in the rest of God is to live in the ‘seventh day’. We are in the seventh day of God, creationally speaking. So says K Barth,

‘... time of man begins... on the basis of the work God has done before his time and not with reference to any work still ahead of him. The time of man begins, therefore, with a day of rest and not a day of work; with freedom and not with obligation; with a holiday and not with a task; with joy and not with labour and toil; under the Gospel and not under the Law.’ (K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 111:2, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960, 457f.)

God rested after the six days of creation. It is not a rest from fatigue. We do not reason from our mode of thinking to God. When we do that, we will imply that the rest of God is a break after the heavy work of creating and so we do likewise. Not in the least. I need to say again that the rest of God is a theological statement. We must not turn that into anthropology. It is the completion of creation and the term ‘rest’ means

that there is not more creating to do. All that God has intended for His creation has been completed and is good. There is no humanity Mark II or plan B for creation. It is not a creation that continues to evolve, meaning that there will be a better human species, biologically speaking. If that is the case then the creation cannot be said to be good.

We have to take on two sets of contrasting themes this morning. The first is the rest of God contrasted with the continuing work of God. The second is the invitation to enter into God's rest contrasted with the call to 'make every effort to enter that rest' (Heb. 4:11).

### **The Rest of God and the Continuing Work of God**

When we read the account of creation and see that God has completed His work after six days, we have come to understand that He took a rest and had nothing more to do. In fact, that was the teaching with the rise of science a few hundred years ago. God has completed the work of creation. He has put into the universe He created immutable chemical and physical laws and the creation was to run according to those laws. What this does to theology is that it dissociates the creator from His creation. That is false. One of the books that radically changed Christian thinking is titled, 'The God who Acts' by G Ernest Wright. It came out in the 1952. His thesis is that God is intimately involved with what He has created and is continuing to bring His creation towards fulfillment. The fulfillment is not the result of an autopilot process computerised by the physical and chemical laws, but by the hand of the unchanging God. Today we know that what is immutable is not the laws of science, but God Himself. The creation lives in the seventh day which is the rest of God. We will work out what this implies as we go on.

Thus, the rest mentioned in Genesis 2 is a rest from the work of creating. However, God is continuing to work as we have noted above. What is the work of God that Jesus was talking about? This is the work of bringing His creation towards the fulfillment. This is the work of bringing creation back to Himself. This is the work that God will do regardless whether His creation has gone wayward or not. But the work of creation has been completed and creation exists and lives in the rest of God, i.e. the completed work of God and that has immense relevance to our understanding of God and the Christian life. God is not disconnected from His creation. He continues to be involved in His creation. We often think that God is there to solve our problem as if our problems and difficulties remain central. That is not so. God is not there to give us a prescription for our troubles. He wants us to live in His will, i.e. in His rest, in what He has completed.

### **The Invitation and the Effort to enter the Rest of God**

Before we try to work this out, we need to see another account relating to the rest. After Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt, they were to enter the Promised Land where they would have rest as God had promised them.

"Remember the word that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, saying, 'The Lord your God is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land.' (Jos. 1:13)

Scripture talks about the 'rest of God' and the people are to enter into it. What this means is that the people of God are to live and to enjoy all that God had given and blessed them with. We will say more about the blessing of God on His creation next week.

This expression, 'the place of rest' was used in relation to the occupation of the Promised Land. Joshua led the Israelites into the land after their release from Egypt. The people of God, the Israelites, were to have rest in the land. Of course, we know that does not mean that they need not do anything at all. They still need to till the land for their livelihood. What it means is that they have a place of their own where they can live with God in their midst as symbolised by the central placing of the tabernacle.

However, the writer to the Hebrews argues another scenario. There is to be another rest for the people of God. That is our text for this study.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. <sup>2</sup> For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. <sup>3</sup> For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

“As I swore in my wrath,

“They shall not enter my rest,”” (*past*)

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. <sup>4</sup> For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” <sup>5</sup> And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

<sup>6</sup> Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, <sup>7</sup> again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts.”

<sup>8</sup> For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. <sup>9</sup> So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God (*future*), <sup>10</sup> for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his (*present*).

<sup>11</sup> Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

(Heb. 4:1-11)

This is a complex passage with three time frames, past, future and present. It speaks of the failure of those in the past to enter into the rest of God. The reference was to the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness ‘because they were not united by faith’ (Heb. 4:2). They were denied entry. We live in the rest of God on the basis of faith, That is why they were told not to harden their hearts when they hear the message of God.

However, under Joshua, they entered the promised land. This may appear that they had entered into the rest of God because they had entered the promised land, but this was not so. Though scripture mentioned this as the ‘rest’ (Jos. 1:3), this was a prefigure of the future rest. ‘... there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God’ (Heb. 4:9).

We need to remember that the purpose of this passage is to contrast the work of Joshua and Jesus, to show the superiority of what God has done through Jesus to bring in the real rest. It is true that Joshua led them into the promised land (of rest), i.e. a home with God, but this was said to contrast it with the rest of God since creation.

Finally, there is a present rest, ‘whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his’. We thus share in the rest of God. We have to talk about the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’. We need to have this distinction in God’s time frame. We are in the ‘rest’ of God, but there is going to be the ‘perfect rest’ in the ‘not yet’. However, for the ‘now’, that rest is found in (the absent) Jesus Christ who said,

<sup>28</sup> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28-30)

We are exhorted to ‘strive to enter into that rest’. This does not imply that we need to work to enter into that rest. Rather, this serves as a warning that we do not fall into ‘the same disobedience’ as the Israelites in days of old.

We are used to think of work before rest. God has completed His work for creation and for us now, it is ‘rest’ before work. For God, it is work before rest. For humanity our joy is to be found in the rest of God before work. Therein lies the predicament for humanity. Humanity was created on the sixth day and is straightaway sent into the seventh day, the rest of God, and this is where humanity lives.

The psalmist reflected on the disobedience of Israel and they were thus prevented from entering God’s rest.

<sup>7</sup> ... Today, if you hear his voice,

<sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

<sup>9</sup> when your fathers put me to the test  
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

<sup>10</sup> For forty years I loathed that generation  
and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart,  
and they have not known my ways."

<sup>11</sup> Therefore I swore in my wrath,  
"They shall not enter my rest." (Ps. 95:7-11)

The rest of God is entered into by obedience. The incident at Meribah was cited to show that the disobedience of Israel was what denied them from entering into the rest of God. But we know that they finally entered the Promised Land. So, in citing this incident, the psalmist was not referring to the rest in the land, but to the final dwelling with the creator God. Thus, the rest that has been mentioned in Hebrews and Psalms is not the same as the rest from Israel's enemies when they settled on the land of Canaan as is recorded in the book of Joshua.

A long time afterward, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, (Jos. 23:1)

We must not mistake the temporal rest in the land with the true rest of the seventh day.

Man cannot be creative, meaning he cannot create out of nothing. He lives in the completed creation of God. His mandate is to cultivate the creation that God has given to him and that is to be done with the acknowledgment of the Creator, i.e. to live in the rest of God. The exhortation to us is not to refuse the rest of God, i.e. in all that God has given. It is the life of trust in the Creator and Redeemer. Only Joshua and Caleb entered into the Promised Land. The rest of the Israelites perished in the wilderness because of unbelief. That is why the psalmist wrote, 'O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness'.

After the incident of the golden calf, Moses while praying to God received this assurance.

<sup>14</sup> And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." <sup>15</sup> And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. (Ex. 33:14-15)

He realised the importance of God's presence with His people and if God is present then there is rest. The rest for us is a participation in the rest of God. It is the Sabbath rest. We find our rest in Him by trust and obedience. That is the nature of our participation in the rest of God. That is why the writer to the Hebrews says, 'Let us therefore strive to enter that rest'. It is not a striving by works but striving to trust and to obey. In that way we would not miss out on the rest of God like the people of Israel in the past.

As Augustine prayed, 'You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless, until it finds its rest in You.' This rest in God is tied with the presence of God and this is the same when we consider the blessing of God and His holiness in the next two weeks.