

Sermon 18, Learning God’s Rest, Matt. 11:28-30

Proposition: God created, then rested, new-created, then rested — and He invites us to enter His rest by pausing our work, embracing His holy day, and finding our refreshment in Him

- I. The Pattern of God’s Rest
 - A. First Creation followed by God’s Sabbath Rest, Gen. 2:2-3
 - B. Exodus New Creation followed by Rest in the Promised Land, Josh. 23:1
 - C. Jesus’ New Creation followed by a “Sabbath Rest”, Heb. 4:9
- II. The Description of God’s Rest
 - A. God’s Rest Is His Refreshment in His Work of Creation, Ex. 31:17
 - B. God’s Rest Is Not a Total Cessation from Work, John 5:16-17
 - C. God’s Rest Is Inseparable from the Sabbath Day, Heb. 4:9
- III. The Lessons from God’s Rest
 - A. God Works, Then Rests
 - B. God Calls Us to Share His Rest Through Worship, Psalm 95
 - C. To Rest Like God Does Not Mean Idleness, Matt. 11:28-30
 - D. To Rest Like God Is to
 - 1. Cease Your Daily Work on the Sabbath, Gen. 2:2
 - 2. Embrace Holiness, Gen. 2:3
 - 3. Find Refreshment in God, Ex. 31:17

The State of the Church ¹	The Threefold Rest Proper to that State
Creation/Law of Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. God rested from all His works of creation B. Man called to enter God’s rest by faith and obedience C. A day of rest as remembrance of God’s rest and pledge of man’s rest
Levitical System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. God rested from all His works of delivering Israel from Egypt and giving them rest in Canaan (Isaiah 51:15-16) B. Israel called to enter God’s rest by faith and obedience in Levitical worship C. A day of rest commemorating both creation and redemption from Egypt
Gospel Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Christ rested from His work of saving the world B. The church called to enter Christ’s rest by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Faith (not works) bringing peace with God b. Satisfaction in and submission to God C. A day of rest changed to the first day of the week to

¹ Chart taken from John Owen’s commentary *in loc.*, esp. 274-6, 261.

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, you and I are desperately in need of rest. Likely at least one of you will nod off before the end of this sermon. To state the obvious, God has designed us to spend one-third of our lives in sleep. But there is also a spiritual rest, a spiritual rest that is promised by Jesus Christ in one of the most memorable passages in the gospels. The same evangelist who recorded “Blessed are the poor in spirit” a few chapters later quotes the great invitation of Christ issued: “Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, *and I will give you rest.*” Jesus promises rest. And He could not have picked a fitter audience to promise it to than frazzled twenty-first century Americans. We do not take siestas. About 80% of American adults consume caffeine daily. Yet Jesus promises rest, and our passage in Hebrews is predicated on the reality of that rest.

Well, over the next three weeks we’re going to talk more about the rest that Jesus promises as it is specifically applied to us in Hebrews 4. But today I want to talk about the biblical background of that rest. You see, God’s rest does not come out of nowhere, as Hebrews 4 acknowledges. It was present at the beginning, in Genesis 2 — and it persists down to the present day and into eternity future. If you feel the need to work, good: you are like God, who works until now and will continue to work. But if you feel the need to rest, that too is like God, who rests until now and will continue to rest. He invites us to enter His rest by pausing our work, sanctifying His holy day, and finding our refreshment in Him.

I. The Pattern of God’s Rest

There is a very clear pattern of creation followed by rest that occurs three large-scale times in Scripture.

A. First Creation followed by God’s Sabbath Rest, Gen. 2:2-3

The first and most obvious of these is contained in a foundational text at the beginning of Gen. 2. Ch. 1 describes the six-days’ work of God, how He created three different realms on the first three days and then filled those realms on the second three days. On the seventh day, God completed His work which He had done. Creation was finished. He had done what He set out to do, which was to finish the heavens, the earth, and the hosts of living things that fill them.

Wherever we look, brothers and sisters, we see a world bursting with life. It is the very deadness of the other planets in the solar system that confuses and confounds us. We are always looking for life on those other planets, hypothesizing about Martians or bacteria on Titan. Yet every space probe returns information suggesting that there is no life on those other planets — not a solitary fruit fly or cockroach. The earth is a different story. Everywhere there is life, and the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, the insect kingdom, the bacterial and fungal kingdoms, work together in the most impressive harmony. God filled the earth, all right, before telling humanity to likewise fill it.

Well, after His work of creation, He rested. He took the seventh day and rested. What can that possibly mean? We have no clear idea of what the divine life is like, what the difference between working and resting is for the Almighty. But we do have a clear idea of what the

difference is for us, and Jesus tells us forthrightly that Moses' description here is for our sake. We are called to rest for one day out of seven because God did. He didn't do it for Himself, but for us. He made the Sabbath for man.

B. Exodus New Creation followed by Rest in the Promised Land, Josh. 23:1

Well, a one-time incident is not a big deal. Fine. God rested after creating the world. But brothers and sisters, there is a very important theme in Scripture called the new creation. You see, though God completed the first creation, He describes redemption in creational terms. This theme emerges repeatedly throughout Scripture. I don't have time to show you many references, but I just want to talk about a couple. The clearest reference to the "new creation" in Scripture is found in Galatians 6:15, "For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (NAS). Paul says "You Galatians are all in a tizzy about circumcision, but the new creation is the really important factor." What is this new creation, Paul? It is what the Bible elsewhere terms "salvation": "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2Co 5:17 NIV). Paul is picking up on Isaiah's language: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isa 65:17 NAS).

All right — so these passages refer to new creation in Jesus, which we are just about to talk about. Why do we also refer to God's Exodus work as a new creation? One major reason is the close association Scripture makes between Exodus and new creation:

For I am the LORD your God, who stirs up the sea and its waves roar (the LORD of hosts is His name). And I have put My words in your mouth, and have covered you with the shadow of My hand, to establish the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, "You are My people." (Isa 51:15-16 NAS)

The act by which God constituted Israel as His people, i.e., both the call of Abraham and the "refounding" of the nation under Moses, is explicitly compared here to creating the heavens and the earth.

Look also at how the Red Sea crossing is narrated: at the Red Sea, God divided the waters from the waters. How? Oh, yes, by a wind from the LORD. "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters", and they were divided.

Anyway, there are more parallels here. Suffice it to say that the Bible describes the Exodus in the language of new creation. And that new creation was followed by rest in the land of Canaan. Notice the words of Joshua 23: "when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side. . ." (Jos 23:1 NAS). That rest is not just a temporary, enemy-free respite. It is a broader description of life in the land:

When you cross the Jordan and live in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies around you so that you live in security, then it shall come about that the place in which the LORD your God shall

choose for His name to dwell, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution of your hand, and all your choice votive offerings which you will vow to the LORD. (Deu 12:10-11 NAS)

Notice the association between rest and worship. That is important. That is absolutely key in our Psalm 95 text too, which begins with worship and ends with rest.

Well, the first creation was followed by God's rest. The Exodus new creation was followed by Israel's rest, a rest which the wilderness generation failed to enter. The rest is characterized not just by freedom from enemies, but also by freedom to worship according to the Levitical system.

C. Jesus' New Creation followed by a "Sabbath Rest", Heb. 4:9

Well, brothers and sisters, we now have two points in the pattern. I'd like to point out that the pattern also continues in the New Testament. I just quoted the great NT texts about the new creation. To be in Christ is to be a new creation; at the end, too, Revelation says that God will create the new heavens and the new earth, in the consummation of the new creation.

But Jesus' cross-work and especially resurrection inaugurated the new creation. Everyone who is united to Him in a resurrection like His has been resurrected/born again into the new creation, implying very clearly that Jesus Christ is the firstfruits of the new creation. To be one with Him is to be a new creature. The old is gone, the new is here! That is true for *anyone* who is in Christ.

Well, brothers and sisters, that new creation is followed by a sabbath rest. Our text right here says so. "There remains a sabbath rest for the people of God." You are going to hear this rant a lot from me over the next few weeks. Allow me to tell you even weeping that many who claim the name of Christ interpret this text to mean that there does not remain a sabbath rest for the people of God. That is one of my biggest pet peeves in the world of evangelical biblical interpretation. They will say "The writer means that we have a rest in heaven but that we do not get a day off like old covenant Israel did." With all due respect, brothers and sisters, that is garbage. That is literally reading "There remains a sabbath rest for the people of God" as "there does not remain a sabbath rest for the people of God."

Can I give you a hint? If your exegesis of the passage allows you to insert the word "not" into the passage without changing what you say is the passage's meaning, you're exegeting wrong. The writer had a perfectly good word for "rest" that he was using earlier in the passage. And he stops using it so that he can use the word *sabbatismos* instead. That's what all major modern translations except the NLT render the phrase "Sabbath rest." (Yes, the KJV/NKJV do not use the word "sabbath," opting for the simple translation "rest" which is accurate as far as it goes but omits too much of the overtones.)

Allow me to mention that when the other two great works of God were finished, the rest began right away. There was not a multi-millennium waiting period. Israel had rest in Canaan within fifty years or so of exiting Egypt. God had rest and refreshment the day after He stopped creating. And it stands to reason that the rest spoken of in Hebrews 3-4 is a this-worldly reality

too. No one denies that heaven is the ultimate rest. But before we get to heaven, we have rest here, particularly on the day of rest but also at all times in Christ.

II. The Description of God's Rest

Well, that is the pattern — major work of God followed by rest. One work of creation, one typological work of redemption, and one real and final work of redemption, each with its corresponding rest. But that prompts a question: what is the rest of God?

A. God's Rest Is His Refreshment in His Work of Creation, Ex. 31:17

Well, Ex. 31 defines God's rest with a further word: refreshment. This is the feeling of taking a break, of becoming fresh again, of regaining your vitality and zest. That is what God experienced when He rested on the seventh day. God's rest is refreshment, presumably refreshment through His sight of His own works as very good.

B. God's Rest Is Not a Total Cessation from Work, John 5:16-17

That said, Jesus told the Jews that His Father is working until now, and that He is also working. His healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda showed that the work of making men whole is not contrary to God's rest. God rested from all His works on the Sabbath that has no evening, but that did not and does not stop Christ from performing the work of making men whole and of upholding all things by the word of His power. He also does the ongoing work of making intercession for us.

C. God's Rest Is Inseparable from the Sabbath Day, Heb. 4:9

Finally, we can say positively that God's rest is inseparable from the Sabbath day. His original rest after the creation week took place on the Sabbath day; and that same Sabbath rest remains for the people of God. God's rest is, I think, larger than the weekly Sabbath, but the weekly Sabbath makes no sense apart from God's rest. God rested so that we would know to work six days and rest one.

III. The Lessons from God's Rest

Well, brothers and sisters, that is the pattern, with an all-too-brief analysis of what God did when He rested. What should we take away from this survey of God's rest?

A. God Works, Then Rests

Well, in all three instances, God works, then rests. He finishes His work before He takes a rest. In like manner, His first call to us is to work: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." That is the general description of what your activity ought to be. If your daily round does not do that, then you are not engaged in a lawful calling. But after the call to fill the earth and subdue it comes the statement that God rested the seventh day, and because of His own example of rest He blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

What, then, of the reality that through the resurrection of Christ God moved the day of worship to the first day of the week? What becomes of "Work, then rest"? There's a sense in which God worked so that we can rest, and even so that we can rest first. In another sense, though, it's more accurate to say that our first task is to work, and what's important is not the order within the week but the order within the pattern. Six days you shall labor and do all your work; then, and only then, may you take one to be the Sabbath of Yahweh your God.

God worked, then rested. If you are not doing your share of work during the six days you are not prepared to keep the Sabbath by resting on the first day.

B. God Calls Us to Share His Rest Through Worship, Psalm 95

Secondly, I would point out the obvious from Psalm 95. The first part of the Psalm is about worship, and then it starts to speak of entering God's rest. Let me just say that those are connected. We rest in God by coming into His presence with singing and making a joyful noise to Him with psalms.

Just as Israel could rest in the land through Levitical worship, we rest in Christ through new covenant worship. This rest does not exclude all work any more than God's rest excludes all work. One of the restful works we must do is to worship God.

C. To Rest Like God Does Not Mean Idleness, Matt. 11:28-30

Indeed, let me say that more clearly. To find rest in Christ, to move from laboring and being heavy laden to enjoying rest in Him, involves taking His yoke upon you, learning from Him, and carrying His light burden.

Notice that there is still work going on when you come to Christ. It is lighter work, not so heavy — but there is still a burden to carry, still a yoke to bear. That yoke is defined further as learning from Christ. The Christian life is a life of rest — but that rest requires the traditional leisure activity of study and learning. You get to sit down with the word of God open on your lap and learn who your Savior is. You get to spend time with Him and learn to be gentle and lowly of heart. And when you spend that time, do that work, you will find rest for your souls.

You know what's not restful to the soul? Having to be high and mighty all the time. Having to impress everyone with your superiority. That is not restful. Being better than everyone is frankly exhausting. But being lowly, knowing your place, studying the lessons that Jesus Christ places before you to learn — that is rest for the soul. But you're still bearing a yoke, metaphorically pulling a load. You are still carrying a burden — the burden of obedience. That burden is far lighter than the burden of disobedience, the sin and guilt you used to carry around. But is it not nothing; it is something, something best described as a yoke and burden.

You are still working when you follow Jesus. But it is light work, work that refreshes, work that grows you into the man you are called to be in Him.

D. To Rest Like God Is to

So if I can end with a short summary of how to enter the rest of God, the rest which Adam was invited into, which Israel was invited into, which you are invited into, I would point to three things.

1. Cease Your Daily Work on the Sabbath, Gen. 2:2

The first way to rest like God on His holy day is to quit doing your daily work. If you're a student, lay your studies aside. If you're a homemaker, put aside the laundry, dishes, and cooking as much as possible. If you're an architect, don't plan buildings; if you're a chef, don't prepare meals. If you're a teacher, don't grade or make lesson plans; if you're a farmer, don't plant or harvest. Yes, there are deeds of necessity. Sometimes the cows have to be milked, the babies have to be changed, the lights have to be kept on. But in terms of your calling, you are

well-equipped to know what is necessary and what is unnecessary. The word of God that discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart tells you to rest on the Sabbath day that you might enter into God's own rest after creating and saving the world.

2. Embrace Holiness, Gen. 2:3

The second thing to do is to embrace holiness. That means to seek it, to engage in it. Remember, holiness is a statement of purpose. The holy thing exists for God. To embrace holiness is to use the entire day for God. Use Sundays to learn from Jesus how to be meek and lowly in heart. Use Sundays to gather with the saints and hear and see what your Savior is like. If you are exhausted, tired, overworked, and burning out, I beg you to come back tonight for evening worship. That is how you find rest for your souls — by coming to Jesus and tasting the rest that comes from learning His ways.

Those who don't know His ways will not enter His rest. Those who study His ways and learn to follow them find rest for their souls.

3. Find Refreshment in God, Ex. 31:17

They also find refreshment in God. God was refreshed when He finished the work of creation and began to rest. Do you need some freshening up? Are you weary and heavy laden? Then find refreshment in God by resting. That does not mean "take a nap." It means going to Jesus and learning from Him how to be meek and lowly in heart. It means coming into His presence with singing, worshiping and bowing down before the LORD your maker. It means hearing His voice with a soft heart.

That's how you can and should be diligent to enter God's rest. Don't follow the wilderness generation's example of disobedience. Strive to enter God's rest, because God has invited you to this special privilege and if there's one thing He dislikes, it is when we reject His particular favors. Now is the time, today! Strive to enter His rest. Amen.