

SESSION 5: REST AND WHAT REST REALLY MEANS

In Genesis 2:2, the Bible says, 'God rested from all his work.' This followed directly after the completion of day six of the physical creation of the world, the cosmos. What does it mean that God rested? The word 'rest,' when looked at from a Western viewpoint, might suggest sleep, relaxation, or even taking a vacation. None of these definitions come anywhere close to describing what 'rest' would have meant to the Hebrew people in the ancient world, to whom these words were addressed.

Professor John Walton, in his book *Survey of the Old Testament*, wrote that 'rest' meant 'governance.' He gives the illustration (an American illustration) of a Presidential race or campaign. The winner of the campaign, after being declared President, takes up residence in the White House and from the Oval office begins the all-important task of governing the country!

'Rest' in Genesis 2 means just that! God, having finished the inaugural part of his creation project, is now getting down to the business of governance, of outworking his 'creation project' towards completion. For example, and as we have already seen, Eden was never meant to be isolated in one small portion of the earth—the earth was to be one big flourishing Garden of Eden. God's presence was to fill the entire earth as the waters covered the sea, and Mankind was to multiply, filling the entire earth with families, clans and nations comprising of ordered societies, thriving cities, and industries.

God's governance of his creation project—bringing what was created as perfect to completion, for all eternity—was what God's rest was all about!

So, let's be clear. God does not sleep, right? Psalm 121:4 says, "Indeed he who watches over Israel does not slumber nor sleep." Nor has he ever ceased working! Jesus said, in John 5:17, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

Work, for God, *prior* to Genesis 3, was creating his physical universe. Work, for God, *following* Genesis 3, was his work of governance—bringing his creation project to completion.

In addition, and as we have previously seen, Man, being the pinnacle of God's creation project, was made in God's very own likeness and image, for the express purpose of 'governing' together with God.

So, God's 'human project' was to see Man enter into God's rest, to see Man qualify for 'governance' of God's creation project, with God.

So, let's begin to think about this, in the context of the Story of the Bible. The Hebrew nation, or Israel, was called to possess the land of Canaan.

But what was that really all about?

Was possessing Canaan all about occupying a relatively small piece of real estate, or was there more to it than that? Or was the possessing of the Promised Land an opportunity for Israel to qualify for higher purposes? To enter God's rest, and from Canaan, to rule together with God over the nations of the world? Paul seems to think so, when in Romans 4:13, he said, "Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world."

The writer to the Hebrews also seemed to think that the possession of Canaan meant far more than simply occupying a piece of real estate as well. He seemed to think that it was all about qualifying Israel to enter into God's rest—into governance with God!

In Hebrews 3:7-11, in reflecting on the failure of the Israelites to enter into Canaan, he says, "So, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did.' That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So, I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

The wilderness testings, were to Israel, what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was to Adam and Eve!

Joshua, who came after Moses, along with the 'Joshua generation', seemed to fail in similar fashion. The writer to the Hebrews, says in Hebrews 4:8 and 9, "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day."

Both Moses and his generation, as well as Joshua and Joshua's generation, failed to enter God's rest. They failed to qualify for co-rulership with God by demonstrating humble submission, and obedience to God's will, and thus becoming partakers of God's divine nature. But rather, like Adam before them, they were idolatrous, self-seeking, rebellious and disobedient, and so totally disqualified themselves in being heirs to rule God's kingdom, together with God, over all creation.

But there is hope. Perhaps the most exciting verse, at least for us, in the Book of Hebrews is Hebrews 4:9, which says, "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God." Man may fail but God never does. Encouragingly, God's purpose stands firm and his faithfulness to that purpose, to his 'creation project' and to his 'human project', will succeed.

And this is where our lovely Jesus comes into this amazing Story. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in

heart, and you will find **rest** for your souls. For **my yoke** is easy and **my burden** is light.”

Was Jesus talking here about helping people overcome stress and anxiety due to their very busy lives, as is so often preached? Or is he talking to the chosen people of God, who had been promised rest, but had constantly, generation after generation, fallen short?

Rest is all about coming into that unity, that oneness, with God – partaking of his divine nature in order to rule and reign, with him. Hebrews 4:10 says, “For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their own works, just as God did from his.” This is exactly what Jesus is saying in Matthew 11 when he says, “Take my yoke upon you, learn from me, and you will find rest find your souls.”

Furthermore, rest is not a given, just because we say we are born again. Hebrews 4:11 says we must “therefore **make every effort** to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”

The challenge for us then, once we are born again, is to embrace the true grace offered in Christ, which teaches us how to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, to cease living independent, self-willed, disobedient lives and submit to Christ's Lordship and his will.