

Strive to Enter That Rest

In the name of him with whom *all* things are possible, dear friends in Christ: In today's Epistle lesson the writer of Hebrews makes reference to Genesis chapter two where we read: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."

So, there you go: God worked six days making everything, and then he took a day off to chill. It's a truth that every Sunday school student knows. As Bible believing Christians, we take it for granted. But as Lutherans, let's ask "What does this mean?" Think about it: *God rested*. It's a logical inconsistency, an oxymoron. God is an eternal, all powerful spirit. He doesn't get tired. Yes, he was busy with all the work of creation, but it's not like it wore him out. Unlike us, he doesn't need to rest—ever. As the psalmist declares, "He who watches over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps." Besides, the work of creation includes God's continuing provision for all that he made in the creation. We confess this in the Catechism: "God made me and all creatures ... He also gives (present tense) me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home and so on ... He richly and *daily* provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil." When does he do all this? Every day. All the time. He never takes a break. I hate to think what would happen to the creation if he did.

I'm not sure what it means to say that God "rested"; but I know this: he didn't do it for himself or because he needed to; no, it was his gift to humankind. He made the Sabbath for man, not man for the Sabbath. He gave his people a weekly vacation. In giving the Sabbath commandment to Moses at Sinai he said "I established the pattern for you. You do what I did. Do what you have to do in six days. Get what you need to done. Then take a day off. Rest." This was an unheard of concept in the ancient world. In the age before machines and modern agriculture people worked feverously, continuously, every day just to ensure they had enough food to eat. And very often they fell short of that goal. They had no food or too little to fill their aching stomachs. The idea that they could afford to take a day off would have sounded insane. But that was the point. Resting on the Sabbath was an act of faith. The Lord was telling his people, "Yes, you *can* afford to do this. You rest. *I've* got you covered. I created you. I have a plan to take care of you. I'll make sure you have enough to eat. Trust me." Observing the Sabbath was an act of confidence in God's gracious provision. It was to be a celebration of the Lord's goodness and generosity. It was to be a day of rest for the body but even more for the mind – the mind beset by worries and anxieties that if I don't get all this work done, I won't have enough to get by. The opposite of rest is restlessness. It's lack of peace of mind. The point of the Sabbath is that we rest in peace because of God's work. No worries. He will take care of us.

There's more to this. Near the end of Israel's forty years of wandering in the desert, as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land and receive their inheritance, the Lord through Moses reiterated the Law that he gave them at Sinai. It's pretty much a word for word repetition—except with the Third Commandment, the one about remembering to keep the Sabbath. Oh, the commandment itself is the same, but the Lord gives a different reason for requiring his people to keep it. The first time he said it was because of his work in creation and

the pattern he established then. The second time around he says, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." That's why you are to keep the Sabbath.

When they were slaves in Egypt they never got a day off. They worked all day every day until they dropped. And to the sound of cracking whips they got up the next day and did it again. No matter how hard they worked, they remained slaves. They couldn't work their way out of it. That took the Lord's work. Only he could accomplish that for them. And he did – with ten devastating plagues that brought the Egyptians to their knees begging the Israelites to leave their land lest God destroy them all. The Sabbath rest was to be a reminder of God's work of salvation for his people. Your work can never save you. Rest in peace with supreme confidence that God does all to work your salvation.

And so he did – sure, in bringing his people out of slavery in Egypt, but even more in the greater salvation that he had planned for his people that the Exodus under Moses only prefigured. I speak of the salvation from the slavery to sin and death that Jesus, God's Son, worked for us on the cross. Then with hands that had worked mighty miracles made weak through submission and outstretched arms affixed with nails to the tree he bore the full penalty of our sins as the righteous wrath of the Father was poured out upon him. There he worked for us the salvation we could never achieve for ourselves – on a Friday, the sixth day. And having finished all his work for our salvation, on the seventh day, the Sabbath, God rested – rested in the stone cold tomb. Ah, now we know what it means to say that God rested.

God rested so that we his people could rest in peace knowing that he's got us covered for everything: our creation, our ongoing provision for all that we need in this life, and our salvation. When? Every day, all the time, at each and every moment. Faith in Jesus means that we enjoy the Sabbath rest 24/7. No worries. No fears.

This is what the writer of Hebrews is driving at. He writes specifically to Jews who grew up steeped in all the ceremonial laws and traditions that the Lord handed down through Moses and who have now come to faith in Jesus. The overall theme of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus is the fulfillment of all those ceremonial laws and traditions. The main point being that now that we have the fulfillment, we no longer need the types and shadows that only prefigured and pointed to the reality we have in Christ. To be sure, to go on practicing the ceremonial laws and traditions would be to deny that now have the reality.

So, for instance, in Old Testament times the Lord commanded his people to offer sacrifices for their sins. Jesus is the fulfillment of those sacrifices. So, we don't need to offer sacrifices anymore. All the work to take away sins is done – by God in Jesus Christ on the cross. To go on offering sacrifices would be saying that Jesus didn't do it all, that we need to add to what he has done.

So also with the Sabbath day. It was a picture, a foreshadow, of the rest that God gives us in Christ Jesus. In Christ we have that rest all of the time. So, properly understood, we no longer have a Sabbath day. No, Jesus is our Sabbath. We rest in peace in him at all times, every day.

Now, the main concern of the writer of Hebrews is that his original audience wants to keep on practicing the old forms and ceremonies that have now been fulfilled in Christ and are therefore no longer needed. And we can understand this. Imagine how hard it would be to give up all your dearly cherished customs and traditions. Suppose I said we are no longer to

observe Christmas and Easter and Baptism and the Lord's Supper. You'd come unglued – and rightly so. But that's exactly what Jews who came to faith in Jesus had to do. Their major holidays like Passover and the Day of Atonement were cancelled – fulfilled by Jesus. Their form of worship – the sacrifices – were done away with; fulfilled by Jesus. Their Saturday Sabbath was ended; fulfilled by Jesus. They had to come into a whole new way of thinking. It was incredibly hard for them. Even more, so strongly were they attached to their traditions that many of them had the sense that by making the change, they were doing something wrong. Instead of setting their minds at ease, it worried them. It made them anxious, restless. They felt that they should be doing something more and keep on doing things the way they used to. But to do so, would be to deny the work that God has done in Christ Jesus. This is why the writer of Hebrews is telling them that the rest they're seeking is found only in Jesus and to strive to enter that rest.

Mercifully, this hang up over observing the old forms and traditions is not a problem for us. We've grown up in the Christian faith and tradition. We never had to make the switch. But we *are* still beset with fears and anxieties. Instead of rest we have restlessness. We worry about finances and the economy, we're anxious about politics and policies, we wonder with trepidation about where this country of ours is headed. We worry about things as if the Lord God Almighty who has promised to love and care for us were no longer on his throne graciously controlling all things for the good of his people. At times, when dealing with people who were nearing death's door, I've heard them say, "I'm concerned. I hope I've done enough to earn my salvation." Others I've spoken to carry a burden of guilt for sins long past – terrible sins, for certain – but they worry that these sins somehow put them beyond the reach of God's grace and forgiveness, as if Jesus didn't die for those sins too. Understanding the way Satan tempts and taunts, I think it's right to say that we all deal with such fears on occasion.

Let's call these worries what they are: sins and lack of faith. They are a denial of God's love and work for us in Christ Jesus – in Jesus who came to give us perfect and complete rest in him. Repenting of these sins of unbelief and worry, let us strive to enter *that* rest that in life and when facing death we may rest in peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!