

Tracing the Importance of Rest for God's People throughout the Two Covenants

There are two important questions everyone must ask regarding the purpose of the Bible. (1) "What is God's intent in giving us His Word?" and (2) "If it is correct that 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever,' then what does God's Word say about *how* we glorify and enjoy Him?"

When we correctly answer those two questions, we have discovered the general theme of God's Word. I propose the overall, general theme of the Bible – both Old and New Testaments – is God's desire that we rest in Him. "Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

God's preeminent desire for His people is not that we work; not that we serve; not that we worship; not that we love; not that we forgive; not that we pray; not that we witness; and not even that we glorify Him. God's preeminent desire is that we rest in Him. Only after we find our rest in Him will we have the desire to serve, to worship, to love, to forgive, to pray, to witness and to glorify. If this concept were in the form of a principle, it would sound like this: ***Our rest in Him becomes our glory of Him.***

Rest in the Old Testament

Rest is the theme of the Bible from the beginning. God created the universe and then He rested. The Hebrew word translated "rest" in Genesis 2:2 is *shabbat*, from which we get our English word *Sabbath*. God did not rest on the seventh day of creation because He was tired, for it is said "*The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary*" (Isa. 40:28). God rested because His work of creation was a "complete and perfect" work, or as the KJV translators put it – "very good."

When God completes a perfect work that He performs, the appropriate response is rest.

When God chose the Jews as His people from among all the nations of the earth, He gave them a commandment to rest on the seventh day of the week (Lev. 23:2-3). The weekly Sabbath rest from physical work was to be a picture of God's people resting in Him. Any Hebrew who violated the weekly Sabbath rest was put to death (Num. 15:32-36). This penalty may sound harsh to modern ears, but the punishment conveys God was serious about the Sabbath itself and what it pictured.

In addition to every weekly Sabbath rest, every seventh year became a year of agricultural rest (Heb. *shmita*) for the Hebrews and their land (see Lev. 25:1-8). God's people could till, sow and harvest for six years, but they were to leave the ground fallow and rest it from sowing and harvesting during the seventh year. God promised the Hebrews, "*I will so order My blessing for you in the sixth year that it will be bring forth the crop for three years*" (Lev. 25:21). Israel was to rest in His provision, promises and faithfulness.

Finally, in addition to a weekly rest and a seventh year sabbatical land rest, after completing seven sevens of agricultural rest – that means 49 years – God commanded the Hebrews to celebrate another entire year of rest called the Jubilee Year (the 50th year). The Jubilee Year began the tenth day of the seventh month (Tishri) which was The Day of Atonement. The Jews called The Day of Atonement "The Sabbath of Sabbaths" and of all the sacred days in Israel, commencement of Jubilee was the most sacred (Lev. 25:8-17). "This fiftieth year is sacred – it is a time of freedom and of celebration when

everyone will receive back their original property, and slaves will return home to their families" (Lev. 25:10). During Jubilee, captives were to be set free, debts were to be forgiven, and the Hebrews were taught to rest in God's perfect provision. Rest, not work, was the predominate theme of the Law.

The Hebrews were taught that "The Law was only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the reality themselves" (Heb. 10:1). Just like seeing a shadow tells you that a real person is coming, so too the Old Covenant Law, including the commandments to rest (Sabbath Laws), was a shadow that prefigured the One who would come and give real, eternal rest. The major consequence of sin is labor, "sweat work," and "thorns and thistles" in the harvest. Sin produces the opposite of rest, and the Law foreshadowed God's determination to wipe out the destructiveness of sin through the Anointed One.

The problem with the Jews is that they not only violated the Law of God when it came to rest, they ultimately rejected the One whom the Law prefigured.

The Hebrews Refusal to Rest

Moses led God's people in an exodus from Egypt in 1491 B.C. Due to a lack of trust in God's faithfulness to fulfill His promise of bringing them safely into the Promised Land, Israel wandered for forty years in the desert. Again, the opposite of rest is restless, laborious wandering.

Finally, Joshua led the Hebrews in 1450 B.C. into the Promised Land. The Jews conquered and divided the lush land among their twelve tribes. Israel finally rested in God's abilities and not their own, and the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. When Israel became tempted again with the delusion of self-sufficiency, they labored on their own at Ai and lost the battle. God was teaching His people the principle of resting in Him even in time of conflict.

After taking possession of Canaan, the Israelites initially obeyed God's Sabbath laws regarding rest. But as time passed, the Hebrews began looking around at other nations, and they began to beg God for a king to rule over them. It looked easier from their perspective to trust in a monarchy rather than to rest in a theocracy. "Set a king over us like all the nations who are around us" (Deut. 17:14).

The Apostle Paul says, "When Israel asked for a king, God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years" (Acts 13:21). Bishop Ussher's chronology places Saul's coronation as king of Israel in 1095 B.C. The crowning of Saul as king of Israel marks the exact year the Hebrew people stopped observing Sabbath rest. Institutional systems designed to give people security without promoting rest in God – regardless of whether the system is corporate, political, or religious in nature – will create within people a sense of self-sufficiency.

For 490 years after Saul's coronation as king, God's people refused to keep the seventh year agricultural rest commandment. The reason for their refusal is not given, but it couldn't have been because of ignorance. The Law of God was clear, and it was clearly understood by the Hebrews. In spite of God's expressed command that they rest in Him on various *Sabbaths*, the Hebrew people began tilling, sowing, and harvesting crops during the seventh year. Those 490 sabbat forsaking years (from 1095 B.C. to 605 B.C.) meant the seventh year agricultural land rest was not kept by Israel seventy times (70 x 7 years equals 490 years). When God initially gave Israel the Law on Mt. Sinai, He told the people what would happen if they refused to observe the Sabbaths.

"I will lay waste your cities as well and will make your sanctuaries desolate...I will scatter you among the

nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become wasted. Then the land will enjoy its sabbaths all the days of desolation while you are in your enemies land; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it will observe the rest which it did not observe on your sabbaths, while you were living on it" (Lev. 26:31-35).

God raised up Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon to punish Israel 490 years after Israel stopped practicing sabbath rest upon Saul's coronation as king (1095 B.C.). The year was 605 B.C. It was King Nebuchadnezzar's first year on the throne. His father, King Nabopolassar, had defeated the Assyrians four years earlier (609 B.C.), leading Babylon to become the world's second great empire (Assyria had been the world's first). In 605 B.C. King Nabopolassar abdicated the Babylonian throne and gave it to his son Nebuchadnezzar II. King Nebuchadnezzar led his army to Jerusalem to make war against the Hebrews. God's judgment of Israel had begun.

God used King Nebuchadnezzar to fulfill the promise He made to Israel in Leviticus 26:31-35, a promise of judgment via desolation and destruction if the Hebrews violated God's Law regarding rest. Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem in 605 B.C., the first of what would eventually be three Babylonian attacks on the Jewish capital city (605 B.C.; 597 B.C.; and 587 B.C.) In the first siege, Nebuchadnezzar captured Daniel and a handful of other young Hebrew men and took them back to Babylon to serve in his court (see Dan. 1). The prophet Daniel would never again return to Israel.

King Nebuchadnezzar came back to Jerusalem in 587 B.C. for his third and final attack against the capital city of the Jews. He laid siege to the city for several months and eventually succeeded in 586 B.C. in demolishing the Hebrew Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar carried away the rest of the Jews into Babylon. The year 586 B.C. marks the beginning of what is commonly called the Babylonian Captivity for the Jews. Israel experienced God's promised judgment for their violations of Sabbath Law. Understanding the reason for the Babylonian captivity crystallizes one's understanding of the Old Testament, particularly the Law and the Prophets and the historical narratives, for all these writings deal with Israel's refusal to rest in God, as well as God's promised judgment on Israel for their violations of His command to rest.

70 Years of Judgment for Babylon and for Israel

The number 70 is the number of years associated with God's judgment upon both Babylon and Israel. God promised He would raise up Babylon to desolate Israel for their sin, but He would only allow Babylon 70 years as a world power before He would make them become servants of other nations and free His people from their captivity. Throughout Scripture, God orchestrates pagan nations to accomplish His purpose, but then punishes those same nations for their free-will rebellion against Him. A sovereign God is able to orchestrate all events, even sin, for ultimate good.

"This is what the LORD says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you (My people) and fulfill My good word to you...' (Jeremiah 29:10). "'When seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,' declares the Lord, 'for their iniquity...I will bring upon Babylon all My words which I have pronounced against it, all that is written in this book which Jeremiah has prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings will make slaves of them, even them; and I will recompense them according to their deeds and according to the work of their hands'" (Jeremiah 25:12-14).

Babylon became a world power when it defeated Assyria in 609 B.C., but 70 years later, in 539 B.C., just

as God promised, God brought the Babylonian kingdom to an end. God used the Medes and the Persians and their combined armies under the leadership of the remarkable Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, to defeat the mighty Babylonians. Cyrus and his Persian engineers diverted the river running underneath the walls of Babylon and dried up the river bed. The Medo-Persian army then snuck into the walled city of Babylon, breaching the impenetrable walls of Babylon, crawling on their bellies underneath the walls.

The very night the Persians invaded Babylon, King Belshazzar and his 1,000 Babylonian princes were drinking themselves into a drunken stupor inside the Palace Walls of the Great Hall (see Daniel 5). The city of Babylon, fortified by walls people consider to be one of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World, fell to King Cyrus and the Medo-Persian army during one night of fighting.

The 70 years of Babylonian self-sufficiency were up (609 B.C. to 539 B.C.). The Hebrew prophecies of God's judgment against Babylon, prophecies given decades before Babylon's actual fall, are gripping portrayals of what happens to any person or country of people, whether Hebrew or not, who deem themselves sufficient and the Creator God unnecessary (see Isaiah 13:9-13 as an example of a prophecy predicting the downfall of Babylon). God also judged His people, the Hebrews, with 70 years of desolation for their self-sufficient refusal to rest in God. Of all the nations on the earth, Israel should have known better. In the last chapter of Chronicles, the chronicler describes the reason for 70 years of Hebrew desolation and exile at the hands of the Babylonians: "The land (of Israel) enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD" (2 Chronicles 36:21).

Israel's punishment at the hands of the Babylonians was to be 70 years to make up for the 70 Sabbatical years of agricultural rest that Israel refused to keep beginning with Saul's anointing as king (1095 B.C.) and ending with Nebuchadnezzar's first appearance at Jerusalem (605 B.C.).

"The whole land will be a desolation and a horror... (until) seventy years are completed..." (Jeremiah 25:11-12). Wherever you put the starting and stopping point of the 70 years of desolation for Israel – either from 609 B.C. (the initial rise of Nebuchadnezzar) to 539 B.C. (the fall of the Babylonian Empire to Cyrus the Persian); or from 586 B.C. to 516 B.C. – there can be no denial that God used the Babylonians to destroy the First Temple, to desolate the land, to scatter His people among the nations, and to fulfill His promised judgment against Israel for refusing to rest.

Daniel's Vision of Eternal Rest in the Eternal King

During the Babylonian exile, Daniel wrote the book that bears his name. Daniel states in Daniel 9:2 that he knew how long Jerusalem would be desolate because he had read Jeremiah: "I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years" (Dan. 9:2). Then, later in the same chapter, Daniel records an amazing vision that God gave him through the angel Gabriel. It is a vision regarding another 490 years. I'm sure Daniel must have caught his breath when he heard ("seventy sevens") because the desolation Israel was experiencing in his day was a result of Israel's previous 490-year period of refusing to rest. He must have deemed his vision troubling for his nation because it spoke of an additional 490 years of sin, culminating in the final abolishment of the Temple, Jerusalem and the Jewish way of life. Yet the vision included some good news as well. The vision is found in Daniel 9:24-27

True rest comes and is found in the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and inauguration of a New Covenant.