

“THE END AT THE BEGINNING”

This passage provides the basis for the fourth commandment, the command to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Too often, Christians handle the Sabbath command by going to one of two extremes: they either view the Sabbath as something that is no longer in effect at all or they keep the Sabbath in such a manner that Sunday is turned into a day that is devoid of all joy. Both of these extremes lose sight of what the Bible teaches about the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not intended to be a burden, but a blessing. It is a gift from God, a gift to be cherished and used to its full advantage. It stands as a sign of God’s promise to fulfill his purposes for this world. In this sermon, I want to explain how we can learn this from these verses in Genesis 2.

As we have studied Genesis 1, we have seen that the structure of the passage shows us that man is the crown of God’s creation. Man was created last; he was created in the image of God; and he was given dominion over everything else in the world. Man is the crown of creation in the sense that he has been placed in it to rule as God’s representative.

While the creation of man is the climax of all that God did on days one through six, there is also a sense in which the structure of Genesis 1:1-2:3 places an emphasis upon the seventh day as the crown of the creation week. Our passage begins by summing up the work that God completed on days one through six, saying: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.” When the seventh day comes, God has finished the work that he set out to do when he began to create the world. He has brought

everything in the world into existence and he has set it all in order by his word of power.

Now his work is done.

In a previous sermon in this series, I mentioned that Genesis 1 employs the analogy of a human workday to describe the work that God did when he created the world. We can see this when we consider the meaning of the refrain that comes at the end of each of the first six days: “And there was evening and there was morning, the first [or second, third, fourth, fifth, or sixth] day” This phrase stands out, because it is not the typical way in which we measure a day. We usually think of a day as beginning at sunup and ending at sundown, because that is when we do our day’s work. The span from evening to morning is when we rest from our daily work. And this is exactly what this phrase means in Genesis 1. Each day, God is pictured doing his work of creation and then resting from that work from evening to morning. Then, on the next day, he again sets about his creative work, and the pattern is repeated up through day six.

This pattern of work-rest-work reaches its climactic conclusion on day seven. At this point, God has completely finished all of his work of creating, and nothing else remains to be done. This is why the phrase “And there was evening and there was morning” is missing on day seven. On this day, God does no work at all. He devotes the entire day, not just the period from evening to morning, to rest. By the way, the Hebrew word translated as “rested” in verse 2 is *shabat*. This is where the term Sabbath comes from. The Sabbath is the day of rest.

What kind of rest was this for God? Obviously, it was not as though God needed to rest because he was worn out after completing the task of creating the heavens and the earth. We need to remember that the concepts of work and rest are being employed as analogies in this text. The fact that we get tired after doing our work is one part of the analogy that doesn't carry over, because God never grows tired or weary. Instead, God's rest on the seventh day was a rest from his work of creating the world. He is completely satisfied and delighted in the work that he has done. His creation meets with his full approval, and he no longer needs to do any more creating. On the seventh day, God enjoys his finished work.

As I said, one of the things that distinguishes day seven from the other days is that it does not contain the closing formula "And there was evening and there was morning." This indicates that the seventh day never came to an end, at least in one sense. Of course, in a literal sense, it did have an end. The sun surely went down at the end of that seventh day and it surely rose again the next morning to start the eighth day. But the fact that our passage makes no mention of this, especially when it is a key feature in the description of all of the other days, is significant. It serves as a signal to us, indicating that there is something very different about the seventh day in comparison to the other days. It tells us that the rest into which God entered after completing his work of creation is a rest that continues up to this day, and will continue on into eternity. Jesus indicates this in John 5:17, where he responds to those who were criticizing him for healing on the Sabbath with the statement, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." In other words,

Jesus does his healing work on the Sabbath because God has been doing his work of redeeming the world ever since he first entered his Sabbath rest. We find another New Testament reference to God's continuing Sabbath rest in Hebrews 4, where the promise that God extends in the covenant of grace is described in terms of entering into the same rest that God entered into after he completed his work of creation. That passage says that we who believe in Christ enter the rest that God established when he finished his work of creating the world.

These passages help us to understand that the Sabbath was instituted as a memorial of what God accomplished when he created the world as completely good. At the same time, it also stood as a sign of God's promise that he would not allow his purposes for the world to be frustrated. In other words, the Sabbath functions as a sign that points to the end which God has appointed for this world. From the very beginning of creation, the Sabbath points to the goal towards which God is directing all history. From the beginning, God had his final purpose in view. As it says in the last chapter of the Bible, God is "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." [Rev. 22:13]

All of this helps us to see why it is so important for us to keep the Sabbath. As we have seen in our study of Jesus' parables in Mark in our morning worship, one of the key features of the kingdom of God as we presently experience it is the fact that it is invisible to human sight. While it is true that the new creation has begun with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can only know this by faith, not by sight. In the words of Hebrews 4,

“there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,” a Sabbath rest that is still held out to us as a future hope. This Sabbath rest that still awaits us is the Sabbath rest of heaven, the rest that we will enjoy with God in the new heavens and the new earth. We have not yet entered into that rest. This is why the Sabbath still serves as a sign for God’s people today. The Sabbath is a sign that points to our final rest with God in our eternal home.

These verses in Genesis 2 tell us that God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. In blessing the seventh day, God bestowed his favor upon it and made it a fruitful and productive day. This implies that those who keep the Sabbath will enter into the blessings that God pronounced over the Sabbath when he instituted it. In making the seventh day holy, God set it apart as a day that is distinct from all the other days, a day on which man should meditate upon his Creator. God is worthy of such meditation because of the fact that he is our Creator. As we read in Revelation 4:11, God is worthy to be praised because he created all things:

“Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

All things exist for the sake of God’s glory. The setting apart of the Sabbath day as a day to worship the Lord and meditate upon him helps remind us of this. When man observes

the Sabbath as the Bible intends it to be observed, he acknowledges God's lordship over his total life and over the entire creation.

Contemporary Christians need to recover a robust, biblical practice of Sabbath keeping. This is challenging in our culture, a culture that has made Sunday into a secular Sabbath devoted to professional sports and other leisure pursuits. But we need to see that we are only cheating ourselves, and our families, when we settle for worldly substitutes for Sabbath rest. We need to remind ourselves of what the Sabbath is all about; that it is a sign promising that God will bring this world to its appointed end. And for those of us who belong to Christ, that means heaven. The Sabbath should be a foretaste of heaven, a preview of our eternal rest.

For this to happen, we need to make good use of our Sabbaths. Make the Lord's Day the highlight of your week. Take time to prepare for corporate worship. Get a good night's rest on Saturdays. Read over the passages that will be preached on the Lord's Day. Spend time praying for yourself, for the preacher, and for your fellow worshippers before you come to worship. And when you return home from worship, spend time thinking and talking about the sermon. And meditate upon it throughout the week, seeking the help of the Holy Spirit in applying it to your life.

The Sabbath should be a day of celebration. We celebrate many things in life - birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, victories, and other important moments. And it is right that we do so. But Christian celebration should go much, much further than worldly celebration. The world's idea of what constitutes the good life doesn't include God. But

these verses in Genesis expose that as sheer folly. They show us that the only way to truly enjoy this world is to enter into God's enjoyment of it, to enter into his Sabbath rest. Our weekly Sabbath helps keep us focused on that truth. It is a gift from God, a gift given at the very beginning of history for the purpose of pointing us to the goal of history. As John Newton put it in one of his hymns, the Sabbath is the

Day of all the week the best,
emblem of eternal rest.