

The Joy of Rest

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Date: 03 September 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Ross. If you've got a Bible with you, it'd be worth just keeping it open at those few short verses there at the start of Genesis chapter 2, but such incredibly significant verses that really, I hope we'll see this morning, kind of resonate throughout the rest of the Bible.

Okay, the last two weeks in America, the number one song in the charts has been a song by a guy called Oliver Anthony. I don't know if anyone's heard that. It's been a kind of a big surprise. He'd not had any previous musical fame, no previous chart success, but he's gone straight in at number one for two weeks. It's very basic. It's kind of hymn and a guitar, sort of country song.

It's not particularly cool, but it opens with these striking words where he sings, I've been selling my soul, working all day, overtime hours for useless pay, so I can sit out here and waste my life away, drag back home and drown my troubles away. It's obviously a sentiment that in America at least has resonated with enough people to get that to the very top of the charts, and various people have been talking about that song for various different reasons.

But I heard it for the first time this week, and what struck me was how that song, how that song that has connected with so many people, how it really opens with the opposite of this biblical idea of rest that we're digging into this morning. Here is a man struggling with the ongoing, soul-crushing, life-draining work that defines his existence. And here is Genesis 2 speaking about a God of rest. And as we'll see, a rest that we are invited into and invited to join with him.

And so as we deal with these verses, with the seventh day, with rest, with the Sabbath, all these big ideas, I think that's such a great reminder that we are not just dealing here with a kind of a churchy question. We are not just kind of homing in on what you can and what you can't do on a Sunday, although I think it will shape how we choose to spend our Sundays. But actually, we are dealing with the far bigger picture of how the Bible offers something better, and how that's possible in a world which, as we've seen so often, feels so broken, and where genuine rest is so far from so many people's experience. We're going to look at this theme, we're going to look at these verses in kind of three stages, really. First looking back, and then looking forward, and from there seeing how we can work out that rest in the present. And so let's start off looking back, back to the very beginning, as we see here in Genesis. And as we look back, we see this, that rest is the goal of God's perfect creation.

[3 : 0 4] Rest is the goal of God's perfect creation. This is one of the places where the chapter divisions in our Bibles aren't especially helpful here, because it would be easy to think, wouldn't it? Well, we've done creation in chapter one, we've looked at that over a couple of weeks. Now we're in chapter two, here is something else, here is a new focus. But actually, these first three verses of chapter two very much fit in with, very much should be with chapter one. Let me just show you that briefly.

If you have a look down at verse four of chapter two, you'll read it says, these are the generations. That is a phrase that comes 10 times in the book of Genesis. That is always the start of a new section, a new thing happening in Genesis. And so our verses one to three before verse four are still part of this initial section, really this prologue, a lot of people call it in Genesis. Why am I kind of laboring that point? Well, that's significant, because it shows us that this rest isn't detached from creation, but actually that rest is the goal. It is the fulfillment of creation. Now we understand rest and God's plan for rest as we look at it in the context of God's work of creation in Genesis chapter one. So then what is the rest that these verses are speaking about, are introducing? Because as we said, this is a huge thread that we can follow throughout the unfolding picture of the Bible. It all starts back here. What is this rest? Is it simply that God is a bit tired? You know, it'd be fair to say, Genesis chapter one, he's been pretty busy. He's created the whole universe. Is it that God has just kind of had enough, can't really be doing with this anymore, just needs a break, wants a rest?

Well, I think we have to say no to both of those, because God is not limited in his strength or his endurance. Certainly God isn't kind of quitting halfway through his work. These verses make that point really clearly, don't they? The heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.

We've seen over the last couple of weeks how God has created order, and God has created fullness, fullness, and no longer are things without form and void or empty, as they were described in verse two of chapter one. Now everything is formed, and it has been filled. And we saw at the end of chapter one, it was described by God himself as very good. God has completed his perfect work, and really that's what this rest is in the Bible. It is the appreciation of everything being exactly as it should be.

Rest is the goal of God's perfect creation, as it means stopping to enjoy all the good that God has done.

[6 : 15] See how God blesses, it says, the seventh day. That's the first time anything in the Bible is blessed. That blessing that comes from God, having done all he has set out to do, and having done it very well, making it all very good. And notice here a couple more things that stand out from the rest of the pattern we've seen throughout chapter one. Firstly, that phrase, the seventh day, is repeated three times in the three verses. Every other day only gets one mention. But there is something climatic, there is something emphatic about this seventh day. It's not just a bit added on at the end.

It's a real focus, it's a climax. And notice also that there's no end to this seventh day. Every other day closes with that refrain, and there was evening, and there was morning the first day.

The second day, right through to the sixth day, each day has this line drawn under it. It's closed, it's done. And yet the seventh day isn't drawn to a close in that way. I think the point is that this isn't God saying that in his ideal pattern for things, okay, well, one day out of seven, you're going to catch a break.

Or I work this out on a calculator, 14.3% of the time you get to have a rest. I know the point is this is not the exception. This is the rule. This ongoing rest is the goal of God's perfect creation. We were made to enjoy with God the goodness that he created. We were made for the ongoing rest of living in a world where there is no sickness and no death, where we don't have the struggle and the hardship of suffering through things, maybe with no end in sight.

We were designed for an ongoing rest of living in a world where relationships between one another are not fought and strained, where people, including ourselves, haven't developed that me-first attitude that we all suffer from, where people don't use others for their own benefit or look to drag them down, where we don't have to stop to worry about people's motives or intentions or our own motives and intentions. We were made for this ongoing rest, and this is important, of a world where work is a joy. It's good to say here that this isn't rest in opposition to work. This Genesis creation account makes it clear that work isn't a bad thing. We see in these verses that God works.

[8 : 54] God has been doing work. Jesus later on in John's Gospel will say that God continues to work. We saw last week that God gives humanity work. It is Genesis 3, it's the fall where work becomes frustrated and frustrating, where it becomes tainted as toil. But the rest God designed us for encompasses the goodness of the work he's given us, the fulfillment, the satisfaction, even the joy that that can bring. And perhaps most importantly of all, this rest is enjoying all the goodness of God's creation as it points us to him, the perfect creator. To be truly with God is to truly enjoy that perfect relationship with him that we were designed for, to celebrate all he's done. That is the true rest that the Bible is speaking about here. And so again, we keep on kind of banging this drum in these opening verses of the Bible to say it is good news. It is good news. In a world where so many people identify with that feeling that they are selling their soul, working for nothing, wasting their life away, that actually we were created for more. We were created for better. And when we think of this biblical picture of rest, isn't that what we desire? Isn't that what we desire? And again, the Bible opens with such an attractive picture of God, of the universe he created, of our place in that, and of this idea of rest, the climax of that really, enjoying everything just as it should be in God's presence.

And these opening couple of chapters of Genesis are like an incredible work of art, like a masterpiece. And yet sometimes we can spend a lot of our time within the church, perhaps standing so close to that, discussing different interpretations of such small sections of that that we actually just forget to stand back and appreciate it in all its wonder. And it is good for us to think about the details.

It's good for us to be clear on things. But it's really good for us just to stand back and say, wow, look at that. Look at what God has designed. And we want to recognize the beauty, the good news of it all, this incredible big picture that we want to point people towards, that we want to invite people to, that we want to find our place in, rest in all its fullness. Rest is the goal of God's perfect creation. So again, the incredible foundation of the opening of Genesis, just how good what God calls very good really is, the rest which we are made for. And yet, if you've been with us for the last couple of weeks, or even if you just live in the real world, as we all do, you'll know that actually we don't live in this Genesis 1 and 2 world anymore. That in Genesis 3, we have the fall where sin, imperfection, rebellion comes into our world. We're not going to dig into that now. We'll get there in a couple of weeks. But the result of that is that everything is knocked out of balance.

Everything is tainted. And this perfect rest that we see here is shattered. And again, that's why we can look at this and we can say, this is the world we want. But we also recognize this isn't the world we currently have. This isn't the world around us. And that is not because the Bible is unrealistic.

It's not because the Bible has got things wrong. It's actually exactly what we would expect our world to look like if we follow the Bible's picture of something that is perfect, but has been corrupted. Something that is no longer that the goodness in which it was made, that leaves us yearning, longing for more. And so really, the question as we think about this rest, as we see it here in Genesis 2, in all its fullness, is, well, is that it? You know, have we blown it? Has it gone?

[13 : 18] Last week, I was away Wednesday, Thursday night for a mini conference. I was put up in a nice hotel in Cumbernauld, which isn't the nicest place, but the hotel was very nice. I was pretty excited because I'd planned, I hadn't told anyone this, but I'd planned that I would have a bit of a lie-in.

Not long, but I figured I could get up at half past eight in the morning, still make full use of the buffet and be ready for when things started at nine. So I was looking forward to this. That was my plan. Unfortunately, about 7 a.m., I discovered that my room, which was a nice room, but was right above the service entrance to the hotel. And some incredibly loud people were making an incredibly loud delivery of metal things on a rattly trolley and kind of bashing around for about 15 minutes or so.

So I'm not expecting a huge amount of sympathy before I put it out there. I certainly didn't get any. But the point is that once my rest had been disturbed, I couldn't get it back. I couldn't get back to sleep. My lie-in was over. I had to get up. I had to forget about that plan. I had to extend my breakfast. So it was fine. It was fine in the end. But when we look at our verses this morning, you know, we kind of look at that rest, that rest that's been disturbed, and we say, well, can we ever get that back? Or is it done? Do we just have to kind of draw a line under that and say, well, that would have been nice, but it's never going to happen? Because it sounded great, didn't it?

Most importantly, the question we ask is, is that rest still God's plan? Is that still God's goal for his creation? Or is it over? Well, the big story of the Bible shows us that God is still committed to his original purposes. And that as we look at Genesis 1 and 2, in light of the rest of Scripture, we see that God is committed to the restoration of what was lost. We've seen that rest is the goal of God's perfect creation. We see, secondly, that rest is possible through Jesus's perfect redemption.

Jesus himself speaks those well-known and beautiful words in Matthew's gospel. He says, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

[15 : 55] It's no coincidence that Jesus uses that word rest there. Jesus is fully aware that that is a seriously loaded term in terms of the Bible, in terms of Scripture, in terms of God's plan.

And elsewhere, Jesus will call his people to take up their cross and follow him. Elsewhere, he'll say that his disciples will suffer. And so Jesus, as he offers rest, certainly isn't saying, you know, just come to me and your problems will disappear. Just come to me for an easy life.

Jesus is not promising to airlift his people out of this fallen world, but he is promising. He is promising that through him, God will restore that perfect rest, that harmony that was, and which remains at the goal of his creation. And that rest is kind of like a window that has been smashed and there's nothing we can do. We can't put that back together. We can't reconstruct that.

But God, through Christ, has promised to do that. And we can look back and see this rest was God's goal. We can look forward and see that through Christ, he has made it possible again.

Because as God finished his work of creation after the sixth day, so Jesus finished his work of redemption on the cross. It is finished, Jesus says. His last words on the cross in John's Gospel.

[17 : 22] And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. At the cross, Jesus takes all the pain and the penalty of all the brokenness, the unrest of all the brokenness, the unrest of our fallen world.

The consequences of sin, of life opposing God's good design that we all contribute to, that we are all guilty of. And yet he dealt with that on the cross so that peace could be restored between us and God.

And so that we could once again look forward to being in that rest that God has promised. Rest is possible through Jesus' perfect redemption. That's why the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament can say there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. He goes on to say, let us strive to enter that rest. He's not speaking there about striving in terms of trying to earn it, rest about anything we can do. The whole point of that book of Hebrews is to keep on holding on to Jesus because he alone can and will bring us back home into that rest if we trust in him, into the perfect future, the perfect new creation that God has promised and made possible through Jesus, where that rest is perfectly restored and where we have access in through Christ if we trust in him.

So incredibly good news again in this passage. We look back, we see rest is the goal of God's perfect creation, but we look forward and see still rest is possible through Jesus' perfect redemption.

That is where we're heading. That is the goal, the destination of God's people. Let's finish now by spending some time thinking about the here and the now, living out that rest in the present. We are not in Genesis chapter 2 anymore. We're not yet in the new creation. So what about here and now in the trials of life? What difference does this make?

[19 : 26] How do we live out this rest in the present? Well, the first thing to say is that this is a joy and a rest that we can have and experience a foretaste of each and every day in the present.

Although we've not reached our final home, perfect rest, we are still, the Bible says, able to enjoy something of that rest here and now if our trust is in Jesus, as it means that we can rest from thinking that it is our work to earn our salvation. We can rest from thinking that it's what we do that will dictate how God responds to us. It's only through Jesus.

And to live out that rest, as the book of Hebrews says, means to keep on coming back to Jesus and holding on to him. Let me give you a couple of examples, I think, of how that kind of rest works out in our day-to-day lives. Number one, it's the rest of knowing that I'm not good enough.

The rest of knowing that I make all sorts of mistakes and that I cannot make them right. And actually, that's true of all of us. Perhaps there are just parts of your life where you feel just like a kind of a blanket of shame lies heavily over them. And yet Jesus offers us rest.

Jesus knows all of these things, all of our past, all of our secrets. And yet Jesus offers us rest. The rest that comes from knowing that we don't earn it, but that through the forgiveness Jesus offers, we are welcomed back to our creator God and we can have a place in that perfect rest to come.

[21 : 07] That rest that comes from knowing we haven't blown our chance, but we can constantly come back to Jesus and he forgives. We can still enter that eternal, perfect rest through Christ. Another example, it's the rest of knowing that I don't need to be defined by comparison relative to other people. I mentioned how I was away last week. It was with a whole load of other ministers. You can imagine how fun that was. I don't know if you've had that thing where you've been in a room with loads of people who do the same thing as you, but you assume they just do it better, more organized, more gifted, just better overall. We're so kind of wired for comparison, aren't we? Especially with those who are our peers. You know, how are other people doing with their parenting compared to me? How are the people I graduated alongside doing compared to me?

How do I match up to my colleagues or my classmates? We're so wired for that comparison. And that comparison is exhausting. Constantly having to look around, constantly having to match up.

And yet the reason my time away was able to be encouraging and not exhausting, even with a 7am start, the reason it was able to be a time of rest was because it opened. The very first thing that anyone said was a retired minister who came and spoke to us, reminding us all that we could only give our best and that it is not our ministry, just as it is not your parenting or your career success or your exam results or what other people think of you that we'll save. But it is only Jesus.

Again, if we really hold on to that, that is a foretaste of that rest. That is being able to kind of pull some of that rest back into the present, that rest for our souls that Jesus promises.

A rest in the rat race from trying to measure up by knowing that Christ's incredible love for us will never change. That it is he alone who saves us and will save all who come to him.

[23 : 25] And so we live out this daily rest as we keep on clinging to Christ and all he has done. We can have that rest now, even in times of struggle, because of the eternal rest to come that Jesus has made possible. We enjoy a foretaste of that rest each and every day. And yet it's also, I think, important to say as we wrap things up, that the Bible does, from the very beginning here, mark out or blesses or makes holy, as these verses says, one day out of seven, one day of the week, where this rest perhaps takes on a different form, or we might say a more deliberate or concentrated form.

Because God's rest on the seventh day is clearly designed here as a pattern for us to follow. We mentioned in a previous week, the word that the Genesis uses for created is a word that is only used of God. And yet the word used here for God's work at the start of Genesis chapter two, is just the usual word for work that humans do. The idea is we're supposed to kind of identify ourselves with what's happening here. Okay, God rested from his work. I do work. I need to rest from my work. Now that's spelled out for us in the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20, the fourth commandment, we read this, remember the Sabbath day. No, it's not creating the Sabbath day. It's remembering how God has established already in the pattern of creation. It goes on to say, six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work.

It goes on to say, for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.

The Bible says that in light of God's perfect creation, that we are called one day in seven to this day of particular holy rest. And that means having a particular focus on Christ, who as we've seen is the one who makes our rest possible. That is why kind of gathering as a church is a key part of the Sabbath or a Sunday, the Lord's day, whatever you want to call it. I wonder if you've ever thought that, you know, if today is all about rest, why can I not just stay in bed? You know, certainly if you've got children and you're here this morning getting them up, getting them dressed, getting them out to church, that is an effort. That is not a restful start to a day. There were lots of people here this morning from 9am, setting up speakers, putting out Bibles, pulling out tiny cups of communion wine.

It takes forever. It takes a lot of people putting in effort and sacrifice to make church happen. Why do we do that if Sundays is all about rest? Well, it's because as we've seen, rest in its fullest biblical sense is not about just sort of putting our feet up and having our, you know, the focus on ourselves, having some me time. Rest is about coming to Christ, about fixing our eyes on him, about helping one another fix their eyes on him because he and he alone is the provider of eternal rest. God, in his perfect wisdom, has said, look, one day a week you need to, a real focus on that in a particular way. The prioritizing of being together with God's people is a specific outworking of that. Again, the book of Hebrews that has a lot to say as it picks up these themes in the New Testament. It says, not neglecting to meet together as some, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another all the more as you see the day, that's the day of our eternal rest, as you see the day drawing near. Now, I would love that to be what defines our Sundays. I would love that to be what our Sundays are built around, both at church and at home, encouraging ourselves and encouraging one another in Christ. Taking that time of rest to point to the one who offers eternal rest in a way that leads us together to worship him. That that will be the foundation for one day in seven.

[27 : 48] I've perhaps shared this before, but a few years ago on Mother's Day, I provided a pretty decent breakfast in bed with nominal help from my children. I kind of ticked the Mother's Day box and got on with the rest of the stuff that the day included. I was reminded that halfway through the afternoon in words I've never been allowed to forget, it was very politely pointed out to me, that actually it's Mother's Day, not Mother's morning. And I've never been allowed to forget that. But I think that can easily be our attitude towards Sunday, can't it? You know, go to church, tick that box, kind of dash off for whatever the rest of the day holds, and that kind of part of my life gets parcels away and put on hold. But actually, what would it look like to keep that day holy, set apart, for us to enjoy Christ together? Whether that is in sharing hospitality, whether that is in serving together, whether that is doing something we enjoy together, but talking with Christ as the focus, whatever it might be, pointing to Jesus as the one who welcomes us into eternal rest.

We're always very aware that we don't want to be legalistic, where Sunday just becomes a whole list of stuff that you can't do, and it's everyone's least favourite day of the week. It should be the high point of the week. I think if we're honest, we're much more likely to swing the other way, where Sunday is kind of just basically Saturday, but with a church service at the start.

And actually, when we do that, we miss out, and we miss the point. And Sunday becomes another day, kind of on the rat race of the world, rather than the high point of the week, anticipating the rest, which is the goal of God's perfect creation, and where we point one another to Christ, who makes that possible. We're only able to do that with real joy if God is our number one thing in our lives. If we recognise the greatness of this rest, and the greatness of the redemption of Christ, which means that we can enter it once again, if we recognise that stepping back from other things is allowing us to focus on a better thing.

One author has written a book with a great title, Rest as Rebellion, it's called, where he speaks about keeping this command to rest on the Sabbath as a way where we can publicly push back against a world that is motivated by productivity, or experiences, or always having the next thing.

What can you give? What can you do? And actually, we can show that there is a better way, which is to enjoy the rest, which is the goal of God's perfect creation, and which is possible through Christ's perfect redemption.

[30 : 37] And so we prioritise that rest individually, as a family, as a church, that time to rest in his presence, to focus on him, and to celebrate the rest that we and our universe were made for.

Let's pray together.