

The New Covenant Concept of "Rest"

Background - the Old and New Covenants

The Old Covenant was an agreement between God and Israel, given through Moses. It was a conditional promise, in which God's blessings were tied to the nation's obedience. Unfortunately, since the nation persistently failed to keep their part of the agreement (Acts 7:39-43, 51-53), these blessings frequently had to be replaced by judgment.

This covenant was weak, because the people's hearts were corrupt - and the rules and regulations of the Old Covenant could not change them. Because of this, God told Israel, through the prophet Jeremiah, that he would one day replace this Old Covenant with a new one. This New Covenant would create changes *within* the heart, changes which the Old Covenant could not accomplish (Jeremiah 31:31-34). This New Covenant has been put into effect through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and it now replaces the Old Covenant (Hebrews 8:6-13, 9:15, etc.).

The book of Hebrews compares these two covenants, and shows that the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant in every way. It not only fulfils what the Old Covenant could not do, but it also embeds God's moral values in the very hearts of those who come under its effect. More than that, many of the blessings which the Old Covenant could only give partially, the New Covenant gives totally. The contrast is so great, that the book of Hebrews describes the Old Covenant provisions as but a mere "shadow" of the New Covenant "realities."

One of these "realities" involves the issue of "rest."

The Issue of "Rest"

Throughout the book of Hebrews, the author focuses on the fact that the temporary *physical* realities of the Old Covenant were intended to teach about eternal *spiritual* realities. These eternal realities, which could not be attained by the regulations of the Old Covenant, are an intrinsic part of the New Covenant.

The New Covenant concept of "rest" has several dimensions. To start with, we enter that rest when we trust God for our salvation. Jesus told his listeners to come to him, if they wanted to find rest for their souls (Matthew 11:28-29). This includes rest from our attempts to "appease" God (or a false god) or to earn salvation through our own efforts. It also includes a rest from the burden of man-made rules, regulations and rituals (compare to Luke 11:46) - and even from the never-ending ceremonial obligations of the Old Covenant (Hebrews 10:1b).

This rest has ramifications that go beyond our entering into salvation. It impacts our day-to-day living, in that we can now trust God, rather than worry about the future (Matthew 6:24-34). After all, hasn't God already guaranteed that he will use *all things* that happen, to accomplish good in our lives (Romans 8:28)?

This rest influences not only what we *don't* do (such as no longer worrying about the future, and not trying to "get saved" by our own efforts), but also what we *do*. The book of Hebrews constantly stresses the fact that genuine trust (the means by which we enter God's rest) is inseparably linked to obedience. Specifically, obedience is the *outworking* of genuine trust. And so, our rest becomes not an expression of laziness or an excuse for disobedience (the way the world sometimes views "rest"), but a *call to action*. We begin to understand that living for sin, for self, or for the pleasures of life is an *assault* on rest, and we patiently learn to resist and attack such a lifestyle. We begin to *strive* for the type of life that is compatible with rest - a life of obedience to God. We desire to grow in our expression of love - both for God and for other people (Matthew 22:37-40). To choose any other way of life is to fight against a life of rest!

As long as we live in a world that is influenced by sin, our rest will only be partial. First, though we have entered rest, we must fight to keep it. Our struggle is not against people, however, but against spiritual evil, against temptation to sin, and against the tendency to be sidetracked by the temporary pleasures of this world. Hebrews 11 is a testimony of

those who struggled to stay in this rest. They were victorious, because they trusted God and kept their focus on the eternal rest that he would bring. We are told to follow their examples (Hebrews 12:1-2).

We need to remember (and we must strongly emphasize this) that the greatest expression of this rest is not yet here. It will occur in the future. This will include not only a rest from all our struggles against sin (our sinful inclinations, temptations, etc.), but also our entrance into our future inheritance - everything that is a part of being in the presence of God. In contrast, those who do *not* belong to God will enter an eternity in which there is *no rest*, forever.

This New Covenant concept of "rest" can be seen in the Old Covenant, in the weekly Jewish Sabbath. As shown in Exodus 20:9-11 and 31:15-17, this weekly Sabbath had its basis in God's rest, on the seventh day of creation. (On that day, God rested from his activity of creating the heavens and the earth - and he is still resting from that activity. Creation is finished; God will *never* have to go "back to work," as far as creating the world is concerned.) Though this Old Covenant Sabbath rest occurred weekly and lasted only one day each week, it was a reminder of God's "Sabbath rest" that, having begun, will never come to an end. (There are other ways in which God continues to work - see John 5:17 - but it does *not* involve the activity referred to in Genesis 1.)

Hebrews 3 and 4 focus on a *different* Old Covenant picture of "rest." This is the "rest" that Israel experienced, when they entered the promised land (after their departure from Egypt and journey through the wilderness). Like the New Covenant concept, this rest was reserved for those who trusted and obeyed God. Those who rebelled against God were not allowed to enter that rest (see Hebrews 3:11, 3:16-19). Yet even for those who did enter that rest, it was only partial and temporary (compare to Hebrews 4:8). This imperfect, partial rest, under the Old Covenant, was but a picture of the eternal, complete rest that is part of the New Covenant.

These two examples illustrate the nature of the Old Covenant expressions of rest. They were temporary or limited in scope. This stands in contrast to the rest we receive under the New Covenant. Our rest is permanent and (when Jesus returns) it will be complete. It is like God's rest, which began on the seventh day of creation and will continue forever. No wonder Scripture admonishes us to make every effort to enter that rest (Hebrews 4:11)!

Rest and Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes focuses on life "under the sun." It looks at all the types of activities we get involved in, as we go through life, and explores the issue of what gives ultimate meaning to life. The final conclusion, when we focus on life "under the sun," is that life is characterized by weariness and turmoil. It is a burden that is characterized by a constant "chasing after the wind." Ultimately, everything is temporary. If we are striving for meaning *without* having a focus on God, there is no rest.

Is the author of Ecclesiastes being pessimistic or cynical? Absolutely not! He's being truthful and honest! It's the person who is unwilling to face the facts, who is living in denial.

It is only when we live with an eternal perspective, that life can have lasting meaning. It is only when we reach the same conclusion that the author of Ecclesiastes reached, that our whole duty is to fear God and do what he says, that value can be extracted from this ultimately meaningless world - a world that will one day be consumed by fire (2 Peter 3:10+).

The "rest" of the New Covenant is the answer to the question raised in Ecclesiastes. More than that, it is the same conclusion that we find in Ecclesiastes - but described in different words. Those who have entered God's rest *do* "fear God and do what he says" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). They no longer pursue the values (and meaninglessness) of the world. Instead of "chasing after the wind," they "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33) - which is an everlasting kingdom - and they find it! They know that the day of justice will come (compare to Ecclesiastes 12:14), and in Christ, they are ready for it.

This is truly a rest that surpasses *anything* the world has to offer!