

A Sabbath Rest for Preterists (and other Believers)

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IF JESUS HAS ALREADY how should Christians live today? That is the pressing question of our time. Preterists have become very adept at proving from the Scriptures when the second coming had to have taken place, but they haven't fully entered into the spiritual significance of how it changes our life, and this hinders the rest of God's church from entering into preterism.

One of the obstacles holding back futurists from accepting preterism is the uncertainty of what it means for how we live today. When I talk to futurists, they ask a very good question—if Jesus has already returned, why isn't the world a better place? Life on our present earth doesn't match the fabulous descriptions the Bible gives of a time when righteousness and love rule the planet. Part of the answer I would like to suggest is that God is aiming for something very different than what we are aiming for and therefore we aren't truly on the same page as God is.

The page that God is on is our salvation, a salvation that is too amazing for words. When we understand eschatology aright, the great benefit is that it opens our eyes to see this salvation for what it really is. Futurists can't fully embrace its greatness because of the cloud that hangs over their heads. Because they are waiting for a mighty judgment to happen, they tend to underestimate the power and character of grace, and so they long for God to use force to usher in a better world. I find that futurists by and large have a poverty mindset, and this for a very good reason. They do not believe that the work Jesus has already done is enough to change the world. Is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by itself sufficient to achieve God's ultimate goals for this world? Or is there something else God has to do? Their answer is yes, God has to do something more. Namely, there must be a second coming that takes away all the bad people. That is how God reaches his ultimate goals. Needless to say, this option is not available to preterists. For us, the "only" thing we have is our salvation, and we need to grasp its significance.

One example of this poverty mindset in the church is that it is weakened by the burden of incessant waiting for God to act and do something that will shake up the world. Among evangelicals, it is considered to be a great virtue to wait and wait for God to "show himself in a

mighty way.” After all, evangelicals are waiting for him to come back and right the wrongs plaguing our world. This is reflected in one of the current praise songs that the church sings, called “Take Courage.” One verse goes like this,

*So take courage my heart
Stay steadfast my soul
He’s in the waiting
He’s in the waiting
And hold onto your hope
Watch your triumph unfold
He’s never failing
He’s never failing*

This song acknowledges that Christians are not at rest, hence its admonition to “take courage.” It is an example of how Christians ever romanticize the struggles they go through as they endure long waiting. One can hear many a heroic tale of how a believer was threatened by doubts within and desperate circumstances around him, yet he grimly held on. What is wrong when pastors and teachers praise people for having a profound sense of waiting in their spirit? The problem is that it introduces a serious disquiet into our spiritual life. The world is like an ocean full of storms and pounding waves. This world inherently is given to instability and disquiet, and now we have Christians who are taught to expect that something is missing from God’s work and that they have to wait for God to supply that missing something. The church has cultivated Christians with waiting spirits that now match the lack of rest in the world around them. However, God has promised us something much better than the waiting that drags down many Christians today.

It starts with this simple idea—God has finished all his work. Therefore, we are not waiting for anything to happen. More precisely, there is no waiting in our spiritual life. Of course, we wait for many things in world—in lines at the store, for the birth of a child, for a new job, for a spouse, for a cure to COVID-19—but I am talking about spiritual waiting. We are not waiting for anything in our spiritual life. We are not waiting for God to do something. This might seem like a small matter, but it is one of the most radical things a person can experience on planet earth, because it means that even in a world like we have today, the Christian life should be one filled with rest.

Hebrews 3:7-4:11 describes this rest; it is not a human rest but a divine rest that God himself lives in. Much of this section is a stern warning to listeners to heed its admonitions, but I want to focus on three verses, Hebrews 4:3a and 4:9-10. The first verse says that the generation Moses led out of Egypt did not enter that rest, but as for us,

... we who have believed enter [present tense] that rest.

The entering of rest is now according to Hebrews 4:3, but the implications of a future second coming keep futurists from enjoying this rest today. For them, God's work is not done. There is a cloud hanging over the horizon, because any day the sky will start to fall. Secondly, verses 9-10 explain how that rest applies to us,

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

These two verses tell us that this rest is the same as the Sabbath rest God experienced on the seventh day of creation. To appreciate this truth, we must go back to the story of creation. We find there the surprising teaching of Genesis 2:1-3, which says,

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 his 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.

When we hear the word "rest," we think of fatigue, and we ask, did God get tired from creating the heavens and earth? Yet we know that God does not grow weary, and even here there are clues that this rest is not the rest of recharging one's batteries. Rather, it is the rest that comes from the joy and contentment of a work done perfectly because it corresponds to God's plan for righteousness. Rest teaches us about the nature of God's goodness. In creation, God did exactly what he needed to do to achieve all his spiritual purposes for creation. Nothing could be added and nothing could be taken away from his work (Eccl 3:14). The measure of God's righteous work is that there is nothing missing from it. That is why he made the Sabbath rest holy, completely inhabited by every fiber of his moral being. We don't understand what it is to be good if we do not understand the Sabbath rest that is connected to God's good work. Goodness is inherently complete in its nature.

Verses 9-10 tell us not only that God has rested from his work but also that we rest from our own work. This is even more astounding. What can this mean that we rest from our works? Don't we have lots to do on this planet? It is a mess, after all.

Today, God has given us the same Sabbath rest that he experienced on the seventh day of creation. This changes the way we view what we do. For example, every good deed and act of obedience we carry out in this life is not filling in the holes of something missing from God's work. It is not achieving something that needs to be achieved. This last statement is especially important for American Christians. American culture worships achievement, and American Christians follow American culture by worshipping spiritual achievement, but achievement is excluded from the Sabbath! If I have a need to achieve, I am really saying that something is missing from the work of God. Instead, our work is our experience of God's goodness. Even more, when we do good, we begin to experience heaven, just as Revelation 21 teaches us that heaven has come down to earth. We experience God's completed work when we do what he did, and the clinching test is that every deed is accompanied by a divine rest in our souls. When we help a brother, when we bless our families, when we give to the poor, we feel the peace of God's finished work. However, if we do something good for God and don't feel rest in our souls, then there is something wrong with our obedience.

Now we can see how little we understand God's plans for us. For example, suppose you have an opportunity to share preterism with a fellow futurist brother or sister in Christ. You faithfully share good biblical teaching but unfortunately the other believer does not accept or maybe even understand the powerful points you have made. At that point, are you at rest? It seems to me that most often we are not at rest. It breaks our heart when people don't respond the way we want them to, and we pray and pray and ask God to "help them get it!" In fact, Christians often do acts of obedience that are not accompanied by the rest of Hebrews 4, and their hearts anguish as they look for some results in this world from what they have done. Our deeds don't lead to rest because we don't see them result in the changes we want to see, and we feel that our labor in the Lord is in vain (1 Cor 15:58). This is what God delivers us from. We are forever delivered from the burden of trying to achieve things in our spiritual life, of trying to change the world, because God's perfect work has completed the achievement process. That means we can rest in our obedience. God has guaranteed that every good thing that Christians do achieves his eternal purposes regardless of what we observe with our eyes. It doesn't depend on other people and

their responses and it doesn't depend on what does or does not happen in this world. When we speak aright the message of the Bible, we can rest assured that God is fulfilling his good purposes no matter how people respond to us. Let me summarize four points:

1. God is in his Sabbath rest, because his work is complete and it will achieve everything his heart desires.
2. We are in God's Sabbath rest. This means our work is the opportunity for us to experience God's goodness and achievement.
3. If we believe Hebrews 4, we will be in complete rest when we do anything for God.
4. If we obey but our hearts do not feel rest, then that shows we have not rested from our works and have failed to enter into God's Sabbath rest.

The Sabbath rest ends creation and is the end state of God's plans and timetable. Today, we live with God in a permanent Sabbath! Note that because our rest is a Sabbath rest, there is no waiting for anything. The work is done. There is nothing left to accomplish, and because preterists are the only ones who know that God has finished his work, we are the only ones who can truly see Hebrews 3-4 for what it really is and apply it with full gusto to our lives today. Preterists should be the most restful people in the universe.

Let me circle back to my earlier question. If God has finished all his work, then that means he has already done everything he needs to do to accomplish his goals for this world. I do not mean that the world is perfect. I do mean that what God intends the world to become will be the fruition of his already accomplished work.

Let me add one caution to this article. Some people may hear the word "Sabbath" and the words "the work is done" and conclude that there is nothing left for them to do, so they can fold their hands together and do nothing. Nothing could be further from the truth. God's idea of Sabbath does not mean inactivity or laziness, but I will have to leave the biblical explanation for this to a follow-up article.

What do you think, reader? Are preterists the most restful people in the world today?