

Prayers

To God

Read Psalm 131 and be at peace with God as you pray. If you feel you cannot find that peace, let your quest become your prayer.

For myself

Lord Jesus Christ, You have given me Your gracious gifts, and I appreciate the many blessings You have given me. Help me therefore to put together everything You have given me in my baptism, in Your 'Body and Blood' and through the gifts and fruits of the Spirit, and so much more, that I become the person You made me to be in Your Kingdom. I desire nothing more than Your presence! AMEN

For others

Weekly theme: Justice

Pray for people who are imprisoned unjustly. Pray that organisations such as Amnesty International will do their work well, although not religious in foundation, pray that it will pursue justice.

Meditation

Everything You have made is good, Great God of Creation,
And in Creation we see You; as You open our eyes!

Light gives illumination, life and incalculable joy,
The world's splendour offers so much more than knowledge;

Vegetation nurtures life, with never ending scenic beauty,
The seasons curiously surprise us with their patterned delights;

Creatures give us joy, and are a challenge to our knowledge,
We struggle with each other, though must we look after them;

Whether alone or together, people never cease to amaze,
With their variety, ingenuity, intelligence and artistry;

Everything You have made is good, Great God of Creation,
And in Creation we see You; as You open our eyes!

Bible Passage

Genesis 2:1-4a

¹ Then the whole work of the heavens and the earth was finished. ² Since God finished the work that He had been doing on the seventh day, He rested on that day from all His work. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creation He had done.

⁴ This is the record of when the heavens and the earth were created.

Review

These incredibly powerful and awesome verses conclude the opening story of Creation in the Bible. The famous seventh and last day is described not in Genesis 1, with its great emphasis on the deeds of God. There, formal statements are used by God to give structure to His works; *'and God said'*, or *'evening came and morning came, the ... day'*, but now, the language softens. After six days of immense creativity and power, the story comes to its conclusion in simple rest. At the end of the week, God's power is evident not in the doing of things, but in the wisdom, control and discernment of when to stop. God, who had been at work for six days, announces that all is finished and He will now rest. The seventh and last day of Creation is to be used for the inner creativity of rest, and God pronounces the day *'blessed'* and *'holy'* (2:3). The seventh day has now become a day not just of rest and the absence of work, but a day of remembrance of God's creative power, and reflection of what He has done.

Interestingly, the word 'Sabbath' is not used here in this text, though we all know that the seventh day is the 'Sabbath' day of rest. The text teases us about this because the two Hebrew words closest to 'Sabbath' are 'shebi'i' (meaning 'seven') and 'shabat' (meaning 'finished'), and both appear close together in verse 2. No-one who read the text in ancient times would have been in any doubt about what this meant; it was God's instruction to honour Him by 'finishing' work on the 'seventh' day, as a 'Sabbath', as it came to be known.

This Sabbath day is unique to Jewish life and how we approach it has become a matter of great concern for Christians as well as Jews, even though the early Christians felt liberated from Sabbath Law and generally met to worship Jesus as Lord and God in the early hours of Sunday, the first working day of the week! As we begin to think about the Sabbath, it is not as simple as we might think, and we should remember at least that meaning of the word is something between *'seventh'* and *'finished'*. What we do know for sure is that although many cultures divided up seven days into a week, it was only the Jewish people who ceased to work on the seventh day. They connected it with God's blessing, and the remarkable idea of *'holiness'* found in this text (2:3).

God's blessing, however, is different from being *'holy'* (2:3). This is a word meaning 'separate', in the sense that God is different and therefore separate from His Creation. Despite the wonder of everything made in the first six days, nothing else created by God is called *'holy'*, not even the men and women who are made in God's *'image'* (1:27), and we should not expect this anyway because holiness is a property of God Himself. Holiness essentially describes the difference between God and the rest of his creation; it is part of God's divine nature, because He is a different form or existence from His creation.

So here in this passage, for the first time, we find God calling something he has made *'holy'*, separate and distinct from the rest of creation because it represents something of the very character of God. The Sabbath is *'holy'* (2:3). In the Old Testament in general we might

expect that the Temple or the city of Jerusalem (Zion) might be holy, or perhaps even the Ark of the Covenant or the Tent of the Tabernacle in which it was kept. However, God declares here in his passage that His nature and presence are found specially in this day, called the 'Sabbath'. The Sabbath is instituted here as a requirement to rest just as God '*rested*' (2:3), so God's rest is an example to all humanity, and keeping it is the fourth of the '*Ten Commandments*' (Ex 20:8-10) given by God to Moses to define the life of God's people. The Commandments were given not because they were new, of course, but because they established the moral principles written in to the very nature of a creation, and they made explicit what God saw as '*good*' with His creation.

Although it may seem obvious to you on a first reading, there are two small points of interest in this passage which are often missed. Firstly, it is not really clear whether first, God stopped work just 'before' the seventh day and therefore leaving the entire day clear of work, as we might expect, or second, whether God stopped work 'on' the seventh day, meaning at some time in the course of the day! The text says literally that God finished working '*on the seventh day*', and from the point of view of the Hebrew language, either could be possible! The long tradition of the Sabbath as a complete day of rest, however, makes it doubtful that those who wrote this story down for us intended any other meaning than a complete rest on the seventh day, the 'Sabbath'.

Secondly, scholars are not sure about exactly where the first account of Creation ends. If we read on, it is obvious that at some point in verse 4 we start another account of what happened when the world was made by God (see the whole of 2:4). The first half of the verse reads, '*This is the record of when the heavens and the earth were created.*' But it is not obvious whether this phrase concludes the account we have just read which starts in Genesis 1:1, or whether this begins the account that continues from this point; '*This is the record of when the heavens and the earth were created*

I am of the opinion that the first half of verse 4 concludes the first story starting in Genesis 1, and this is my reason. The account of the seventh day does not finish with the words '*evening came and morning came ...*' as with the other days (1:5,8,13,19,23,31), it describes the whole of creation as a '*record*', meaning a '*genealogy*' (2:4a). The word '*record*' normally refers to a record of ancestral births, as we find in many places in the Bible (see Matt 1:1-15), but if we see the first half of verse 4 as the conclusion of the first Creation story, then it makes sense. It sets the seal on the story of creation as God's 'Birth Certificate' for Creation. The world is God's, and it is alive!

We will pick up the second story of God's creative work tomorrow from half way through verse 4!

Discipleship

Application

The Sabbath for today?

There is a long journey from the great celebration of the blessing of the seventh day of rest in Genesis 2 to command number four of the Ten Commandments. Equally, there is a long journey from then until the time of Pharisaic Sabbath legalism in the days of Jesus. Certainly, Jesus was well aware of the difference between God's original will for the Sabbath and human elaboration of it when He said, '*the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath*' (Mark 2:27). He said these words to help the disciples discern God's ultimate will and they still help us as we seek to work out God's perfect will for us in being obedient to His first command in the Bible, to have one day a week rest! Perhaps the best thing we can take from a study such as this is the conviction that by joining God in having a rest on a Sabbath

day we enjoy the gift of His presence. Certainly, I am personally convinced from this passage that any form of legalism about the Sabbath which stretched beyond the simple principles of rest to honour God is not God's way.

The meaning of the story ...

People have a fixation with exactness and legalism, which is probably why some like to make a god out of the Sabbath. The magnificent description of Creation by God which we have in Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a is more like great literature than a scientific thesis, and God's Word imparts to us in a few poetic words the truths of our existence within the world we experience. Mere science or legalism will not do, for as well as order, our human world is filled with beauty and awe, good and bad; and darkness as well as light; all this is described in the first story of Creation in Genesis, and science cannot touch such things.

The language of Genesis inspires us not by telling us God's Word with the repetitious correctness of a computer, but through the power of the flow of words, of sequences as well as twists and turns, and of poetic rhythm and artistic beauty. A student of English knows they cannot understand their subject without reading Shakespeare, and I wish that students of science could understand they may not grasp the merits and benefits of science for humanity unless they read the poetry and genius of Genesis 1. We need to read this Scripture not for any science we think it might contain, but for its historic and eternal truth about humanity and the experience of the world in which we live.

Ideas for what to do

- Examine your own use of God's gift of the Sabbath. How can you better receive and use the Sabbath and so get a better focus on your own work and possibly your own ministry for the Lord?
- Pray that God's people will gain a better understanding of the gift of the Sabbath, and see it not as an imposition, but a means to liberty and freedom in spirit. Pray that what happens in church on Sunday will be honouring to God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does the Sabbath mean to you, and how do you practice it?
2. In what ways has this study given you a glimpse of how you might better receive and use the gift of God's Sabbath?
3. Do you believe that the Church has the right attitude to the Sabbath? If not, what is wrong and how may it be corrected?

Final Prayer

Lord God, You have made the world with immense forethought, power, wisdom, compassion, planning, freedom, and indeed, every form of creative expression we can imagine. The thought that you hold all things in existence even now is amazing, and we can barely imagine what it must be like to be in Your position, with the whole of the Created order in sight, both all great and large things, and all small details. Yet Lord God, it is all within Your grasp, and You are the One true Maker of our world and we love You. May we continue in that love forever! **AMEN**