

How, and What it Means to “Rest in the Lord”

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, May 7th, 2017

Jesus said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” ~ Matthew 11:28

From the story of creation to the book of Revelation *rest* is a recurring theme: rest from labors, rest from war, rest even for the *land* between crops and, most particularly, rest for our souls. In the Old Testament this rest is meant quite literally as a cessation of any physical work, but in the New Testament the Lord warns that we will not find true rest – or peace – in *anything* of this world, rather, as He said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but (as He also said) have confidence, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Taken to the extreme we know that this tribulation can even include torture and death, as it did for many of the earliest Christians. And again, the Lord predicted all of this, particularly in *Matthew* where He sent the disciples out, saying they would be hauled before governors and kings, persecuted, betrayed even by family members and, yes, put to death. Still, He said, whoever “endures to the end will be saved.” And VERY curiously it is in this *same context* that He also told them not to be afraid of those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul, for ... “*the very hairs of your head are all numbered*” (Matt. 10:19-22 & 30; see also Matt. 16:24-26). Clearly the hairs of one’s head refer to something more than this natural life.

So we have the teaching in Revelation 14:13, “‘Blessed are those who die in the Lord.... Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, *and their works follow them.*’” This, too, is a curious passage when you think about it: *rest* and *works* occurring together as expressions of the same idea. We’ll come back to this in a few minutes.

Meanwhile the simple advice in Psalm 37 begs the question, HOW CAN we “Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him...”? How can we possibly be at rest in the midst of turmoil and persecution? How can we lay down our lives for the Lord’s sake and be at peace about it? *And how can we rest from our labors when our works follow us?* Literally that seems to mean either that we still have things to do, or that we’re still thinking about the things we’ve done. (OK, so that may be restful – being pleased with what you have accomplished – but beware of pride: THAT would not be resting in the Lord.)

Well, first of all it’s a matter of focus – and perspective. You may remember the story of the Lord approaching His disciples during a storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 14:22-33). As they saw Him there, walking on the water, Peter asked permission to join Him, and as he also began to walk on the water, “when he saw that the wind was boisterous he was afraid” and began to sink. But when He cried out to the Lord to save him, the Lord reached out His hand and lifted him up again. The lesson is clear: stay focused on the Lord, NOT on your problems. As Moses told the Children of Israel on the shores of the Red Sea, “Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today... (For) the Lord will fight *for* you, and you shall hold your peace” (Exodus 14:13-14).

Bishop Keith spoke about this last week with an emphasis on the *active* quality of true patience, that is, not just sitting around waiting for something to happen but conscientiously *striving* to

keep the Lord and His Providence in the forefront of our minds. Only in that way can we prevent the obstacles of our own self-centered, worldly concerns from *interfering with His work*.

A similar theme emerges from every story of successful conquest in the Word, not to mention the doctrines of the New Church which remind us repeatedly that the One who does the real work of providing for us is not us at all, but the Lord! We just have to get out of His way.

This is why prayer is so important – not that we should or even could get whatever we ask for (since for the most part we have no idea what is really best for us), but prayer helps us stay focused on the Lord. And when we're focused on the Lord – really focused on Him – and mindful of the things He teaches in His Word, our conscious thought is drawn away from our worldly concerns and directed to eternal life. Of course the thought of eternal life by itself isn't enough to keep us from being discouraged if we continue to worry about *ourselves*, since for the most part we are all well aware of our shortcomings, but the point is to stop thinking about ourselves and think instead about His love, His wisdom and His power – like Peter calling out to the Lord on the water. Yes, of course he was concerned for his life, but it was when he looked up and looked to the Lord that he was saved.

But of course that's not all. Another important concept repeatedly stressed in the heavenly doctrines is the influence of angels and spirits on us *and the powerful significance of recognizing that influence* rather than assuming all our thoughts and affections simply well up from within ourselves. Either way you slice it, if you make this assumption (consciously or unconsciously) you're in trouble – first of all because it's not true, and believing a falsity is never helpful. But seriously, if you think your good ideas and feelings come from yourself you take credit from something that is not yours and risk becoming arrogant and stupid because of it. And if you think your bad ideas and feelings come from yourself you enter into a vortex of self-criticism and discouragement that can be almost impossible to overcome. So we read,

“If man believed, as is the truth, that all good and truth originate from the Lord, and all evil and falsity from hell, he would not appropriate good to himself and account it meritorious, nor would he appropriate evil to himself and account himself responsible for it” (DP 320).

The net result of acknowledging this source of our thoughts and feelings (which we call influx) is that we can recognize and accept the freedom *and responsibility* we have to choose between them, rather than choosing either to love or to hate *ourselves!*

But getting back to our children's talk this morning, one of the most important teachings about rest in the Word is the series about the Sabbath, which is a Hebrew word that literally means rest. You all know the third commandment about the seventh DAY being a day of rest, and you know as well that it is not just about physical rest but that it represents the spiritual rest that follows a lot of hard work to overcome the selfish and worldly inclinations of our lives.

It begins with the story of creation, in which God did all the work of making everything and then “rested on the seventh day” and blessed that day and sanctified it (Gen 2:1-2). Then in the Ten Commandments Israel was instructed also to rest on the seventh day because that is what the Lord did, and so in doing likewise they were reminded of Him and the fact that He is the one who continues to make and provide everything. But again, the real meaning goes much deeper

than just taking a day off. It has to do with *giving our own ideas a rest* and “being still” in the acknowledgment that all of our spiritual growth (reformation and regeneration) is the result of HIS work in us (TCR #302). This is why in the Christian world the Sabbath has become “a day of instruction in Divine things... and of meditation on such matters as pertain to salvation and eternal life – and, as well, a day for the exercise of love towards the neighbor” (TCR #301).

In case all this doesn't sound very restful, consider all the *other* stuff we like to do on Sundays: - mow the grass, plant or weed the garden, go on hikes or sight-seeing ventures, play sports – all *sorts* of things that require quite a lot of energy and effort. The point is, we find these things restful because they are a break from our routine, they provide rejuvenating exercise, and they are *mentally* relaxing. So they're good! But notice how these activities are all still focused on the things of this world, and we find them relaxing because we love the things of this world! If we really loved the things of spiritual life we would find learning about them and reflecting on them even *more* relaxing, refreshing and restful. We would LOVE coming to church, we would love reading, reflecting, discussing and applying the things we learn and all this would be the highlight of our week which is typically filled with all the other *distractions* of worldly life.

Notice, though, that the law of the Sabbath is not just a weekend thing. In Exodus we also read,

“Six *years* you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove” (Ex. 23:10-11).

So now we have the seventh day law applied to the land itself in terms of whole years when the fields and vineyards and orchards were not to be worked. No doubt the Israelites figured out a system for rotating cultivated fields so that they could continue to grow all that they needed – just as we sometimes rotate our weekly days off depending on our employment. But the real point of all this is the symbolism relating to our spiritual lives.

In the Word the land represents the church, either as a corporate body or as an individual person. So when the land has rest the meaning is that we have rest, natural rest for the land, spiritual rest for us. In this connection we are taught that there are two main states or stages in our spiritual lives, the first, a state of learning and understanding the goods and truths of faith, and the second, a state of willing and loving those goods and truths. The first state is represented by the sowing and working of the land; the second by letting it rest (AC #9274). The two states are well described in TCR #571, where we read,

The first state is called reformation, and the other regeneration. In the first, a man looks from his natural state towards the spiritual and desires to attain it; in the second, he becomes a spiritual natural man. The first state is formed by means of truths which will belong to faith, and by which he looks towards charity; the second is formed by means of the goods of charity, by which he enters into the truths of faith; or, what is the same thing, the first is a state of thought from the understanding, the other is a state of love from the will. When this [second] state begins, and as it progresses, a change, a complete turn round as it were, takes place in the mind; for the love of the will flows into the understanding, guiding and leading it to think in agreement with its love.... He then acts from charity, and

speaks from faith; he feels the good of charity, and perceives the truth of faith. *He is then in the Lord and in peace, and thus [is being] regenerated.”*

The point in connection with the Sabbath is that learning and understanding can be a lot of work. It can be fun, even exciting, certainly stimulating as things churn in your mind, new insights develop, new connections present themselves and new questions arise, begging for answers. But it can also be a strain, as you come to grips with concepts that may be foreign to your thinking or challenging to your previous convictions – especially concepts that force you to rethink your choices in life. Remember, the Lord Himself said He did not come to bring peace, but a sword! (Matt. 10:34), and that sword is the truth of His Word “cutting through joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). This is no contradiction: the fact is we can’t have peace without eternal vigilance in applying the truth to our spiritual lives.

But as we do this work and gradually come to some resolution about it, feeling the love that it expresses and loving what we have learned, then the Lord can give us regular, even frequent days of rest. We just have to remember to take those days “off” and really honor Him.

This Sabbath state is actually an introduction to heaven (See TCR #721). It’s all about the full conjunction of the truth you *know* with the good you *love*, so that any anxiety or doubt, any *difficulty* you may have had as you have *worked* to turn your life around is replaced by the peace and confidence of your growing connection with the Lord and your empowerment by Him to feel and share His love. In effect you will “rest in Him” *because HE will be resting in you*, inspiring and providing the disposition to love and serve others without any real concern for yourself.

In summary now, the question we asked in the beginning was “How, and what does it mean to “rest in the Lord?” and the answer, at least for today, is that there are three important things you can do if you want to achieve this state: –

1. Focus on Him instead of yourself, thinking about the things He teaches.
2. Remember that all your thoughts and feelings flow in from the spiritual world; so don’t take too much blame or credit. Your job is simply to choose your supplier.
3. As you do the work of learning and reflecting on spiritual things, regularly take time off to notice, acknowledge and share the love that the Lord is giving you.

Yes, there will be set-backs, and there is always more work to be done. But that keeps just us humble, and mindful that it is the Lord who really does the work *for* us when we make room for Him. So, as He said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

“The reason the Lord’s yoke is easy and his burden light is that to the extent that we resist the evils that well up from love for ourselves and the world, we are led by the Lord and not by ourselves. Then the Lord resists those things within us and removes them” (HH #359:e).

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus* 20:8-11 & 23:10-12
Psalms 37:1-11, *Matthew* 11:28-30 and *True Christian Religion* #302 & 304