

LESSON 221

WORK, REST, VANITY

Related Scripture: Hebrews 4:1-11

KEY VERSE: "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God."—Hebrews 4:9.

Lesson Scripture: Exodus 20:8-11;
Ecclesiastes 2:4-11, 24-26; 7:23

Introduction:

Work and rest, work and rest, work and rest—this is a natural cycle of life. When the work is useful and suitable, the rest can be welcome and satisfying; when the rest is appropriate and refreshing, vigorous and productive work can follow.

The Creator Himself has set the pattern, and His creatures fall miserably in their pursuit of happiness when they break the pattern.

If all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, as the saying goes, we may observe on the other hand that all play and no work makes him a bum.

We need, however, not only a proper alternation of work and rest, but also proper objectives in view, both as we work and as we rest. We were made to enjoy God; so when our only thought is to enjoy ourselves, we are doomed to disappointments and grief.

Solomon learned this great lesson and related his human experiences and conclusions in a divinely inspired book, Ecclesiastes. Moses in Exodus set forth the divinely ordained pattern of six days of work followed by one day of rest in full fellowship with God; Solomon in Ecclesiastes records the result when man perverts his labors to the service of self and his rest to revelry.

Note the following outline:

1. Sacred Week, Ex. 20:8-11
 - a. Day to remember, 8
 - b. Days of rigor, 9
 - c. Day to rest, 10
 - d. Days of record, 11
2. Selfish Wealth, Eccl. 2:4-11
 - a. Wealth and Wisdom, 4-9
 - b. Desire and delight, 10
 - c. Vanity and vexation, 11
3. Sensual Woes, Eccl. 2:24-26; 7:23
 - a. Woe of experience, 24
 - b. Woe of egotism, 25
 - c. Woe of envy, 26
 - d. Woe of error, 7:23

Notes on the Printed Text:

Sacred Week, Exodus 20:8-11.

Attempts to change the work-and-rest cycle to a different number of days have not been too successful. Why not rest every sixth day, every fifth day, or every tenth day? The answer is simple: our Creator ordained a seven-day week, and so constituted us that this is the best possible rhythm of days for our health and happiness.

Day to Remember, 8.

Sabbath-keeping did not begin with the ten commandments. The fourth commandment does not announce the sabbath as something new, but mentions it as something to be remembered and kept. For earlier mention see Exodus 16:22-30 and Genesis 2:1-3.

Days of Rigor, 9.

People who work as they ought for six days can rest as they ought on the seventh. The command to work, though not often emphasized by religious teachers, is rigorous enough in the word of God. Those who never work can never know the meaning of rest. God commands those who can work to work.

Day to Rest, 10.

Following six days of honest labor we can appreciate a day of rest. The emphasis is not on any particular day of the week but on a day of rest after six days of work. With the Jews, and with a few Christians who wish to follow Jewish customs, this comes on what we call Saturday. New Testament Christians, however, adopted the custom of meeting for worship and rest on the first day of the Jewish week, the day of our Lord's resurrection, which we sometimes call the Christian sabbath.

Days of Record, 11.

Here and in Genesis 2:1-3 we find stated the origin of the Old Testament sabbath. It celebrates the completion of the first week of recorded history—the week in which "Jehovah made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day."

Selfish Wealth, Ecclesiastes 2:4-11.

Ecclesiastes is the inspired record of worldly wise but uninspired thinking. Centuries before the earliest known writings of secular philosophers, Solomon outthought them all and recorded in inspired scripture the natural, varied, and contradictory conclusions of human wisdom at its best apart from divine revelation. His observations "under the sun" were from the vantage point of unsurpassed wisdom, wealth, and power.

Will worldly wealth, sought with no higher motive than self-satisfaction, bring true happiness? Solomon answers the question for us, and all the experience and observation in the world returns the same answer.

Wealth and Wisdom, 4-9.

Having given us a list of accumulated properties and possessions, including slaves and hired entertainers along with houses, lands, and material wealth "more than all that were before me in Jerusalem," Solomon adds: "Also my wisdom remained with me."

Money makes fools out of some people, or rather provides opportunity for their natural folly to be revealed; but here the wealthiest of men was also the wisest (on the human level): surely if happiness is to be found in wealth, he should have found it.

Desire and Delight, 10.

Most of us tend to feel frustrated when we are unable to get what we want, and imagine how delightful it would be if we could have all we desire. This wise and wealthy king had the power and the means to have everything he wanted in this world: he denied himself nothing.

Vanity and Vexation, 11.

And having labored to gratify his every desire, having piled up more wealth and luxury than any other man, what did he find? "Behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun." This is the voice of experience.

Sensual Woes, Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 7:23.

Another apparent road to human happiness that is followed by many is the way of sensualism. Solomon tried this too, and found it deceitful and disappointing. Illicit sex, addiction to alcohol or other drugs, gluttony, and other forms of wantonness finally lose their appeal as the flesh is surfeited while the spirit is starved.

Woe of Experience, 24.

Even with his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, Solomon found "nothing better for a man" (that is, in fleshly pleasure) "than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor." But he remained wise, and so he realized that for all his labor this too "was from the hand of God." Even the sensualist, whether he realizes it or not, is dependent upon the mercies of God, not only for the fruits of his labor but even for the very appetite which fades as it feeds.

Woe of Egotism, 25.

If the question sounds egotistical, no doubt it is. Perhaps no one dared to wound the king's perverted pride by out-doing him at the table. But what shall they do whose god is their belly (Phillip. 3:19) when their god has indigestion, or develops an ulcer?

Woe of Envy, 26.

Envy of other men's supposed good fortune, imagining that material possessions or the lack of them is evidence of being "good before God" or the contrary—"This also is vanity and vexation of spirit."

Woe of Error, 7:23.

Some innocent readers and many pernicious heretics mistake the false conclusions of Solomon's human reasoning in Ecclesiastes for divine truth. The revealed truth is that at one point or another in his reasoning he came to these false conclusions. He himself tells us truly here, "I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me."

Key Verse:

"There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God."—Hebrews 4:9.

"Rest" here represents a different Greek word from the one used several times in the context. In this verse the word "rest" is "sabbatism" or "sabbath-keeping." The Old Testament sabbath served its purpose in celebration of the original creation; the New Testament sabbath, the first day of the week, celebrates the new creation in the resurrection of Christ. This is the sabbath-keeping that remains to the people of God.