

Rest

Hebrews 4

While I was working on this sermon, I noticed a book sitting on my bookshelves. Titled “Addicted to Busy: Recovery for the Rushed Soul,” it had ironically been sitting on the shelf waiting for when I wasn’t too busy and could read it. As the back of the book describes it, “We are all spread too thin, taking on more than we can handle, trying to do so much—almost as if we are afraid that if we were to take a moment of rest, we might discover that all our busyness is covering up an essential lack in our lives. But God never meant for us to be so busy. God desires for us peace. God desires rest.”

It’s hard to talk about rest, especially in a time when the first rounds of tests and projects are coming or have come, and the farm fields are full of tractors, trucks, and combines, working as long as there is daylight, and even past that, in order to get the harvest in. We have busy days and boring ones, wasted days and stressful all-nighters. It used to be that people went to bed when the sun went down and rose to work when the sun came up. That doesn’t happen anymore. Technology enables our greedy pursuit of money, fame, power, and pleasure to continue unabated by the pattern of creation. Alarm clocks, electric lights, and even field lights at the stadium let us blur the God-ordained division between light and darkness. We may be able to work from home more than we could before the pandemic, but the trade-off is that we can’t unplug, but have to constantly be available. “The day in its creatureliness and wonder is wholly lost to us,” writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “We have withdrawn from its power. We no longer allow ourselves to be determined by it. We count up the days and tick them off. We do not accept the day as a gift; we do not live it.”

And all of this has taken a toll on us, as we resort to sugary, caffeinated drinks from across the street and other stimulants just to stay awake until lunch. Our bodies are tired. We are worn out because of the pace at which we sprint through life, “chasing after the wind,” rushing from minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day, and week to week. Our workaholic and play-hard attitudes have robbed us of the abundant life God wants us to experience. As Solomon declares, “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for [God] grants sleep to those he loves” (Psalm 127:2). Scientists estimate that entire months and years of our lives are gone because of the stress we endure from lack of sleep. Our violation of the need for rest is sinful, and we bear the judgment for it in our bodies. But sleep is not the only rest we need, nor is it the most important.

Crops need to be rotated. Land needs to lay dormant from time to time. A forest cannot grow forever, or it will choke itself by its intertwining roots. Trees grow old and fall, beetles eat their bark, and fire eats what is left. And then years later, after the land has lain dormant, new life springs up and saplings sprout again. Work and rest are built into the rhythm of creation. God has ordained it for all his creatures. Polar bears and frogs and even the busy bee hibernate for the winter before rejoining the ranks of diligent doers in spring. God rested, and the earth rests. And so should we.

Our devices remind us to rest. They have to be recharged and restarted periodically. If something starts going wrong with a piece of technology, the first thing any tech support worker will tell you is to turn it off and then on again, often letting it stay off for a bit before

turning it on again. Our devices need to rest, and so do we.

“Rest in the Bible really means more than having a rest...,” writes Bonhoeffer. “It means completion. It means the peace of God in which the world lies; it means transfiguration. It means turning our eyes wholly toward God’s being, toward worshiping God.”

That brings us to God’s command for Sabbath rest. It seems strange that God gave a commandment to rest to the people of Israel who had been slaves in Egypt. Yet that was exactly why they needed to rest. As slaves, they couldn’t rest. They weren’t in control. Now, as free people, they could rest. But they could think they were in control of everything. Resting also reminded them that they were not in control, that not everything was dependent on them. Resting reminded them they were dependent on God. That’s why the Promised Land was described as rest.

But the Promised Land wouldn’t be the rest they’d hoped for. The sins of ancient Israel corrupted and defiled that ancient Promised Land in many ways, and they couldn’t rest. They were surrounded by enemies they’d failed to drive out. They turned away to false gods in the hopes of good harvests and a good life, but the idols demanded more and more and could never be satisfied. They had enough to be sufficient and content with what they had, but they kept grasping for more and more. We in our time haven’t been any better.

Hebrews 4 continues to show how Jesus is greater than anything the people could have trusted in before, including the promise of rest in the Promised Land. The names “Joshua” and “Jesus” are different translations of the same word. Coincidence? Jesus is our Joshua leading us to the Promised Land He has won for us. Repentance and forgiveness is giving us

something eternally better than that first Promised Land. The rest we look ahead to is the eternal rest promised not just when we die, but when Jesus returns to make all things new. In the Bible, and still today, observant Jews keep Saturday, the Sabbath, as a day of rest and re-creation with God and one another. The New Testament teaches that the earthly Sabbath has been fulfilled in Jesus (Colossians 2:16-17), and promises us an eternal Sabbath. “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” (Hebrews 4:9-10). That’s the promise of heaven, when all the work and worry of life will be no more.

The Promised Land of Canaan, life lived in the land of promise, is where true rest can be found. Rest is not merely inactivity, or the opposite of work. Instead, rest is the realization and celebration of God’s promise. It is life in the Promised Land.

The word for rest used in Hebrews is the same word used when Genesis 2 describes God’s rest after creation. Christians are able to delight and rest in God’s grace in the present, but we know the great and final rest still lies ahead. The Sabbath rest we await is greater than the weekly Sabbaths observed by the Israelites of the Old Testament. It’s greater than the rest of the Promised Land. It’s the rest that grounds and animates us. The Father’s seventh-day rest, redeemed by Jesus, waiting for the Holy Spirit’s work to bring it to fulfillment.

Sabbath rest? That means no more life wearing you down. Our present is filled with comings and goings. Do this; go do that. Even when it’s satisfying, it wears us down. And it’s not just the body. Your mind seldom rests. You plan, how shall we handle this or that? You are concerned, you fret, you worry. “Toil and trouble; they are soon gone and we fly away”

(Psalm 90:11). As God rested from all his labors on the seventh day of creation, so rest from all your labors awaits you, but don't imagine you'll be inactive. Your resurrected and glorified body, your mind and spirit renewed to perfection, will be more active than ever. As God delighted in His work on the seventh day, you will be fully engaged in wonder, love, and praise at your Creator and Redeemer.

Now because of Jesus, we do not just wait in anxious expectation for a day of final rest. We have our rest today! Jesus is our Sabbath rest. He forgives us for all the time we've wasted, spent, and squandered, and all the ways in which we've abused our bodies and misused our time, staying addicted to busyness.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29). Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, and he gives rest to all who call on him. As we heard earlier, letter to the Hebrews says that all who believe in him will enter into his rest (Hebrews 4:3). We claim this promise in Jesus' name because of the forgiveness and peace he won for us on the cross. Jesus Christ is our Sabbath rest.

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