

Rest for the Weary

Introduction

What is the longest time that you have ever gone without sleep?

When I was a child, I went to a sleepover at a friend's house with several other girls. A couple of us decided that it would be fun to stay awake all night. We did it, but I'm sure I crashed when I got home the next day.

Then there was the time when Isaiah was a baby that we were going to take a trip to visit my family in Mississippi, which is around a 10-hour trip. George and I decided that it would be easier on Isaiah for us to drive through the night so that Isaiah could sleep in the car. Neither of us realized how hard that would be for the two of us, though, having to drive all night with no sleep. We never did that again.

Our bodies are made for rest. The longer we try to go without rest, the more obvious our need for it becomes. In fact, our bodies make it quite clear through many warning signs that we need to stop and rest.

What are some physical signs that you experience when your body needs rest?

There's an episode of the Dick Van Dyke Show where the main character Rob tries to break a record by staying awake for 100 hours for a radio promotion. The humor of the episode is found in the way that Rob's mental and physical capacities increasingly diminish the more tired he becomes. His speech is affected. The doctor has him recite the "Peter Piper" tongue twister every hour, and the more tired he becomes, the more trouble he has getting the words right. His reflexes are impaired, as he finds it harder and harder to do simple tasks, like putting a record on the record player. Even his emotional state suffers. He ends up having a meltdown over a cat that got stuck in a tree. Our bodies have a way of letting us know when we need rest.

In the same way that we need physical rest, we also need spiritual rest. Unfortunately, spiritual rest is easier to overlook, or neglect, than physical rest. The signs of spiritual fatigue are not as obvious as those of physical fatigue, but there are signs.

What are some signs that we are spiritually fatigued, or in need of spiritual rest?

For me, I get irritable, emotional, resentful. There's a lack of joy in my life when I have neglected spiritual rest. I talked about that last time in our introduction. That's why I chose this topic for our class, because I figured that I'm not the only one who struggles with this. This study is the result of my trying to learn how to find spiritual rest. To start off our study, there are a few things we need to know about spiritual rest.

First, God created people to need rest.

When God created the world, He included certain rhythms, or repeating patterns, that point to our need for rest.

What rhythms do you see in creation that point to a need for rest?

The first one we see is found in Genesis 1:3-5:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

On the very first day of creation, God institutes a rhythm of day followed by night, a rhythm that repeats over and over and again. It establishes the most basic rhythm of our lives—wake up in the morning, work through the day, rest at night, then repeat. Our entire lives consist of this daily rhythm of work followed by rest. We've already talked about what happens when we try to break this rhythm by neglecting to rest.

The next rhythm that God institutes is found in Genesis 1:14: "And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and for years."

God created day and night on day one of creation, but on day four, He created the sun, moon, and stars to give light during those times. He also created these things for another reason. He used them to establish seasons. Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter all occur based on the position of the earth in relation to the Sun.

How do the seasons reflect our need for rest?

In the Spring, plants begin to grow. It's like morning, and the earth is waking up. Then during Summer, the plants work to grow abundantly and thrive. Fall brings about the ripening and harvest. Fall is kind of like twilight, when things are slowing down. Finally, comes Winter, when the earth and many animals rest, similar to nighttime. This cycle repeats year after year. It's also a rhythm of work followed by rest.

The rhythms of day/night and of the seasons seem to indicate a need for physical rest. However, God did institute a rhythm that points to a need for spiritual rest.

Can you guess what that rhythm is?

We read about this one in Genesis 2:2-3:

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.

Initially, this day of rest may appear related to physical rest because it says that God rested from His work. However, we know that God doesn't get tired. He doesn't need rest (Psalm 121:3-4; Isaiah 40:28). Also, He blessed the day and made it holy, or set apart for His purposes. So, it must be pointing to more than just physical rest.

As we read about this day, which is called the Sabbath elsewhere, we learn that it actually served a higher purpose. We'll discover what that purpose is a little later, but we see from the rhythms instituted by God Himself that we were created to need rest, and not just physical rest, but a spiritual Sabbath rest.

Second, God commanded His people to rest.

God didn't just incorporate this rhythm of Sabbath rest into our world, hoping that we'd notice and follow His example. He thought it important enough to actually command His people to rest multiple times. We read it in Exodus, chapters 16, 20, 31, and 35; in Leviticus 23; and in Deuteronomy 5. Time after time

throughout the Old Testament, God tells His people to remember the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8), to keep the Sabbath (Ex. 31:14), to rest on the Sabbath (Lev. 23:3). It seems clear that God wants His people to set aside a time of rest.

But why? What is the significance of this Sabbath rest? Let's read Exodus 31:12-17 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

According to these passages, what was the importance of the Sabbath?

From these passages, we see that the Sabbath was to be a day of physical rest, in that no work was to be done. More importantly, though, it was to be a day of remembrance. They were to remember how God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. They were to remember that, just as God set aside that seventh day as holy, so God set them apart as holy and made a covenant with them. They were also to remember their redemption, how God brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

Nancy Guthrie, in her book *Even Better than Eden*, describes the purpose of the Sabbath this way:

The weekly Sabbath was intended to jog Israel's collective memory concerning God's sufficiency and supply in the past and his promise concerning the future. They were to remember his work of creation as well as his work of redemption. It was to serve as an ever-present sign of loving relationship between God and his people...Sabbath keeping would set God's people apart as being so well taken care of by their God that they could take a day to rest.¹

So, the Sabbath was a day of rest and a day of remembrance, but it was also a day of refreshment. The word used in Exodus 31:17 has to do with taking a breath, or being refreshed as from a current of air.² It's been hot this week, and sometimes the hot, humid air can feel heavy and oppressive. It can be hard to breathe. So, imagine that you're out working in the heat, and you're tired and out of breath. Suddenly, a cool breeze flows by, and you are finally able to breathe a refreshing breath of fresh air. That's what the Sabbath is meant to be...a breath of fresh air in a busy, exhausting week.

Unfortunately, that's not what the Sabbath became for God's people.

Third, God's people corrupted His rest.

Although God created people to need rest, and He commanded them to rest, God's people corrupted that rest. We see this in Isaiah 1:10-17 and Amos 8:4-8.

According to these passages, how did the Israelites corrupt the Sabbath in the Old Testament?

We see that the Israelites were observing the rituals that were commanded for the Sabbath and other holy days, yet they were leading sinful, wicked lives. They were trampling the needy, and oppressing the poor. They were dishonest and greedy in their business dealings. They thought that because they went through the motions of the rituals, that God would accept them. However, according to John MacArthur, "God found all sacrifices meaningless and even abhorrent if the offerer failed in obedience to His laws."³ God had no interest in their hypocritical ritualism, because their hearts were far from Him.

¹Guthrie, Nancy. *Even Better than Eden*, 98-99.

²<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h5314/esv/wlc/0-1/>

³MacArthur, John. *MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 759.

Nancy Guthrie also describes the Israelites corruption of the Sabbath:

God had given them the Sabbath, intending that his generous gift would make them generous to one another, but instead they used even the Sabbath to take advantage of one another. They didn't see the Sabbath as a gift. They saw it as a burden. Instead of allowing the Sabbath to shape their lives and their hopes, instead of using the day to nurture a love relationship with God, they pushed him away with their cruelty and hypocrisy.⁴

So, in the Old Testament, Israel corrupted the Sabbath with their hypocritical ritualism...going through the religious motions, yet leading wicked lives. Do you think that, by New Testament times, things had improved? Unfortunately not, because now Pharisees are on the scene.

What did the Pharisees teach about the Sabbath?

The Pharisees are notorious for their overabundance of regulations regarding the Sabbath. I did a Google search and found an Orthodox Jewish website, called the Orthodox Union, that listed 39 categories of Sabbath work prohibited by law.⁵ These include things like carrying, burning, writing, cooking, washing, sewing, tearing, knotting, untying, plowing, planting, reaping, harvesting, threshing, grinding, kneading, combing, weaving, unraveling, building, demolishing. And those are just some of the 39. Unlike the Israelites in the Old Testament, the Pharisees maintained an outward appearance of righteousness, believing that this pleased God. However, their hearts were no closer to God than those of the Old Testament Israelites.

Nancy Guthrie describes it this way:

While Israel repeatedly failed to keep the Sabbath as God had commanded, the day came when her leaders sought to remedy the problem. They didn't do so with hearts turned toward God in joyful obedience; instead they heaped on additional rules. Legalism devoid of love for God robbed the Sabbath of its intended purpose and meaning, turning it into a burden instead of a gift.⁶

When I look at the Old Testament Israelites corruption of the Sabbath compared to the Pharisees', I see opposite extreme reactions. The Old Testament people were antinomian in their approach, believing that, because they were God's chosen people, and because they were following the rituals, that God would accept them no matter how they lived. They didn't see the importance of obeying the Law. The Pharisees had the opposite reaction of legalism, believing that the Law wasn't enough, and that their added man-made laws would earn favor with God. However, both groups were completely wrong in their understanding of what it meant to observe the Sabbath. Both groups made keeping the Sabbath a burden, but the real problem for both groups was that their hearts were far from God.

So, we've looked briefly at the idea of Sabbath rest throughout the Bible...how God created people to need this rest, and how He commanded them to observe this rest. We also saw how the people corrupted this rest. But what does any of that have to do with us?

⁴Guthrie, 101.

⁵https://www.ou.org/holidays/the_thirty_nine_categories_of_sabbath_work_prohibited_by_law/

⁶Guthrie, 102.

Fourth, we need to clarify what Sabbath rest means for us.

What does Sabbath rest mean for us, as New Testament Christians? When we read about Sabbath rest in the Bible, it's usually referring to the one day each week set aside for God. We would equate that to Sunday, the day we've set aside to rest and worship.

As for what that day should look like, that's a highly debated question among believers. Some believe that we are still obligated to observe the Sabbath, as the Israelites did, but others believe that the coming of Christ nullified that command. We actually still find among believers today the two extremes that existed among the Israelites. Some believe that, because we're under grace, it doesn't matter how we live, including what we do on our day of worship, which is Sunday. Others claim that Sunday is the "Christian Sabbath," and they want to impose a list of dos and don'ts for that day. I suspect that the truth is somewhere in the middle. However, this study is not about answering that question. I'll leave that between you and God. I do believe, though, that we can benefit from the concept of Sabbath rest.

What are some benefits that we may obtain from observing Sabbath rest?

Earlier we talked about the significance of the Sabbath for Israel. It was to be a day of rest, a day of remembrance, and a day of refreshment. I believe that those are benefits that we, too, can get from observing Sabbath rest.

By observing Sabbath rest, we can rest from our work. There's always work to be done, isn't there? Sometimes we get so focused on our to-do list that we wear ourselves out trying to do it all. We work all day, fall exhausted in bed at night, then get up the next day and do it again. What we don't get done during the week, we try to catch up on the weekend. That can lead to stress, burn-out, even sickness, if we're not careful. God knew that our bodies just can't handle that. He also knew human nature, and that we might not choose to rest on our own. So, He incorporated a time of rest for us, when our bodies can get the physical rest that we need to better serve Him through the week.

By observing Sabbath rest, we can also remember what God has done. In her Bible study entitled *7 Feasts*, Erin Davis talks about spiritual amnesia. By this she means the propensity that people have to forget all that God has done for them.⁷ The Israelites certainly had that propensity, which is why God commanded them so many times to keep the Sabbath. Unfortunately, we are all prone to spiritual amnesia. Erin Davis writes, "When life goes on, day after day, week after week—without rhythms of remembrance—it's too easy to forget who God is."⁸ She also says that the Sabbath is an example of how God invites us to change the pattern of our lives—"to look up from our work and rest in His work; to stop gazing at ourselves and to gaze at Him instead."⁹

Finally, by observing Sabbath rest, we can be refreshed. Remember that cool, breath of fresh air on a hot day that I spoke of earlier? That's what this rest offers. When we're tired, when we're burned-out, when we've forgotten about God (yet again), Sabbath rest can revive us.

How does observing the Sabbath change the rhythm of your life? How can it help you remember who God is and what He has done? How does it refresh you after a long week?

⁷Davis, Erin. *7 Feasts*, 30.

⁸Ibid., 155.

⁹Ibid., 46.

Finally, we need to be cautious as we seek to find spiritual rest.

By this I mean that there are a few things we must remember:

First, we must remember our need for spiritual rest, which we need every day. Having a day set aside for God is great. We certainly need the benefits that come from our weekly corporate worship, but that's not enough. Especially for those of us who may not find Sunday or church attendance very restful. If you've got little kids who can't sit still, or if you are busy teaching and ministering on Sunday morning, Sunday may not provide the rest that you need.

Even if you do find the Sunday service restful, though, you still need more frequent rest. In the book *A Month of Sundays*, author Glenda Mathes writes, "God instituted the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. We must set aside one day each week for worship and rest. But true Sabbath keeping includes an attitude of worship and rest that He calls us to develop daily."¹⁰

Just as sleeping only one night a week would never work, so resting spiritually only one day a week won't work. We need to rest, to remember, and to be refreshed on a daily basis, and the rest of the lessons in this study will teach us how to do just that.

Second, we must remember the purpose of spiritual rest, which is to help us focus on God. Both the Old Testament Israelites and the Pharisees forgot that. Both groups, in their own way, were just going through the motions of the Sabbath while neglecting God throughout the week. Neither group understood that the purpose of the Sabbath was to bring them closer to God. Both groups turned the Sabbath into a burden.

If we're not careful, we can fall into that same trap. In fact, I've been there, seeing Sunday as burden. I've spent so many Sundays going through the motions, then neglecting God all week. Instead of just going through the motions on Sunday, we need to remember the reason that we're there is to draw close to and worship God. We also need to incorporate rest into our daily rhythm.

It's too easy to forget about God through the week as we go about the rhythm of our day. So many other things demand our attention, and we only have so much time and energy to give. We have to be intentional in setting aside part of our day to focus on God in a significant way. Through the lessons of this study, we'll be discussing practical ways to incorporate rest into our day. But although we'll be discussing practical things that you can do to help you find spiritual rest, the rest is not found in the doing. These things are intended to lead you to Christ. HE is the source of rest, which leads to my final point.

Third, we must remember the source of spiritual rest, which is Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus offers us rest in Matthew 11:28-30:

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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

¹⁰Mathes, Glenda. *A Month of Sundays*, viii.

When we're struggling spiritually, we may think that if we just try harder, things will get better. We equate our spiritual health with our performance. The more I do, or the better Christian I am, the better off I will be spiritually. So, we think we need to read the Bible more, or pray more, etc.

However, with that mentality, we're just placing a heavy burden on ourselves that will cause us to tire more quickly. Rest is not found in more work. That should be obvious. So, the purpose of this study is not to give you more work to do in using the spiritual disciplines. This study is to teach you how to use the spiritual disciplines to come to Christ so that you can rest in Him. Rest is not our ultimate goal; a closer relationship with Christ is the goal. Spiritual rest is a helpful byproduct of that relationship.

So, we were all created to rest and commanded to rest, but I'm sure we've all corrupted that rest in some way. My prayer for this study is that it would help us all to set aside even just a short time each day for rest and remembrance, so that we can be refreshed as we spend time with Christ.