



Matthew 11:28-30
Hebrews 3:18-4:11

They call it R & R. It's a term that started life with the military: rest and recuperation. The concept of rest has become more important in our society over the last century or so. Before the end of the nineteenth century, rest and relaxation was something enjoyed mostly by the wealthier classes. The only day off people had in a week was Sunday – the Sabbath. The concept of holidays, particularly paid holidays only really took off after the 1st world war and it started a golden age for towns like Felixstowe which saw it benefit from tourism until the 1960s.

Work, particularly hard work was seen by some as good for the soul. It was known as the Protestant work ethic. I first came across it when I became a student. It interested me because I'd been brought up in church and had never ever heard anyone preach on the virtues of hard work. Yes, you have to work to live, but the idea that hard work is virtuous seemed a bit tenuous as a Christian idea as I recall that hard work and toil are consequences of the Fall!

I looked it up again this week and I find actually that the Protestant Work Ethic comes from a late 19th century sociologist called Max Weber. In fact I first came across him as I struggled with a sociology course I did that I mentioned in another service a few weeks ago. Weber was interested in looking at the influence of religion on society, in this case work but I'm not convinced he had any particular faith himself. That said, Weber did identify a trend by Western industrialists to find a religious excuse to exploit people.

That said, when we look at the Word of God we find that rest is a fundamental part of creation. We read how God created the world in six days and on the seventh He rested.

Genesis 2: 2 By the seventh day God finished what he had been doing and stopped working. 3 He blessed the seventh day and set it apart as a special day, because by that day he had completed his creation and stopped working. TEV

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (NIV)

There are two ideas here. First of all on the seventh day God rested. Does God really need to have a rest? If you think about it, speaking the world into existence is pretty straightforward for God. Actually the Hebrew word here suggests cessation of activity rather than having a rest. God had finished what He had planned. When you complete work what do you normally do? I know what I do, I take a step back and look back, appreciate it, celebrate completion and all the rest of it. The end is the achievement of something. Resting isn't just about having a rest but taking time to appreciate life. The other thing that we need to add is that God rested from His work of creation. It doesn't mean that He didn't do anything else.

The second strand here is that God actually prescribes a day of rest. The traditional translations use the word holy but the Good News uses the words set apart as a special day. That's perhaps a good thing as the whole idea of the Sabbath – shabbat – was resting. It's what the word Sabbath actually means. It's amplified in the 10 Commandments: *"Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. 9 You have six days in which to do your work, 10 but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me. On that day no one is to work--neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country. 11 In six days I, the LORD, made the earth, the sky, the seas, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That is why I, the LORD, blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.*

Again, the holy is more the sense of making the day special. Interestingly there is no command to worship just to rest. The Sabbath was interpreted by both Jews and Christians as a day where there is an obligation to worship – so whether that be the Jewish Sabbath or the Christian Sunday (in the case of Sunday Sabbatarianism) worshippers can sometimes be as busy or as busier than on a work day which sort of

defeats the idea. An R & R day was about that – a time to rest and appreciate God's creation and the good things of life.

In fact the law had a whole range of Sabbatical years. Every seven years the land had to be totally rested – a practice still observed in Israel today albeit in a different form. Apart from people having the Torah read to them at Sukkot (Tabernacles) in that year, there was no religious connotation. Every 49 (50) years there was then Jubilee where slaves would be freed and land leases reverted although it isn't known how much Jubilee was ever observed in ancient Israel, although Sabbath years were.

Right at the centre of Sabbath then is the principle of rest. Rest is essential for creation. Actually it's even built into our bodies – we have to sleep regularly!

I've preached on Sabbath before when we did Just 10. For Jews the Sabbath is Saturday. A century ago most Christians saw Sunday as Sabbath. Look at diaries and you'll still find Monday as the first day of the week. There is no scriptural sanction for considering Sunday as the Sabbath. There just isn't anything in the Bible. So do we observe the Sabbath? Actually, most people do. We've adopted the principle of the weekend. In Spain Saturday is Sabado (the Sabbath). Sunday is Domingo (the Lord's Day). Saturday is a day of R & R for people. On Sunday they worship. That said, secularisation like in Britain has blurred all of this. And what about people who work on Sunday: like Ministers?

So a rest day is a God-given essential. Are we getting one? Are we resting on it? Here's an interesting perspective I read on it from a chap called Davan Huss:

One of the reasons that it is good to observe a Sabbath (a ceasing) is because it reminds us that we are not in the CEO chair of the world. All of us act like God, but we're not God. When we take time to rest and worship, we are saying, "God is in control and I am not." We've heard the "State of the Union" but do we wonder about the "State of the World?" The "State of the World" is fine- because He's Got the whole world in his hands.

So therefore rest is something that is God-ordained and in modern society should definitely well built in to our way of life. The opportunities are there, even if people have little idea of its religious origins!

However, rest goes beyond our week to week lives. I want to have a look at a couple of passages where Scripture deals with the principle of rest in a couple of different but not unrelated ways.

28 "Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. 30 For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light."

Actually this passage is not far off what I just talked about. The problem was that the Jews took the commandment about the Sabbath and turned it into the burdensome thing it is today. The context of this passage is that it comes in a series of confrontations Jesus had with the Scribes and Pharisees. The Message I think captures the essence of what Jesus was trying to say in this passage.

The Message: *28-30"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."*

Following Jesus should be a permanent Sabbath from legalistic religion! Following Jesus isn't about carrying burdens of obligation or guilt that religion brings. Quite the reverse. Rather than it being hard, we should find it easy. *"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest.* Jesus was referring to the ox teams of those days. To pull efficiently oxen were yoked together and the yokes were made so that they fitted well on each animal so they pulled together rather than against one another. Likewise, there would be balance between the stronger and weaker animal so that they could take the strain according to their ability. Jesus calls us to yoke up with Him because He doesn't want following Him to be a burden, quite the reverse, He wants it to be restful because He's taking the strain.

Is our walk of faith restful or is it a pain and a strain? Are other things in life damaging our life and witness as we seek to walk as followers of Jesus?

Are we properly yoked up to Him? Are we letting Him take the strain? Or are we trying to pull our own way through life, thinking we've got to do it ourselves, or thinking that we must do things so as we honour Him?

Yet He's not taking the strain and it's causing us pain.

Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. 30 For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light."

If the burden of life as one of God's people is too heavy, then He should be taking the strain because He wants to. Following Jesus should be a permanent Sabbath from legalistic religion! Following Jesus isn't about carrying burdens of obligation or guilt that religion brings. Quite the reverse. Rather than it being hard, we should find it easy.

In Hebrews the writer gives us another take on rest. It's another take on the fact that God rested on the seventh day of creation. It's not unrelated to what Jesus was talking about. The idea of rest in Hebrews is much the same. It is another application of the principle of Sabbath rest. In this cast he talks about the rest of the people of Israel who disobeyed God in the wilderness: *Heb 3:7 So then, as the Holy Spirit says, "If you hear God's voice today, 8 do not be stubborn, as your ancestors were when they rebelled against God, as they were that day in the desert when they put him to the test. 9 There they put me to the test and tried me, says God, although they had seen what I did for forty years. 10 And so I was angry with those people and said, "They are always disloyal and refuse to obey my commands.' 11 I was angry and made a solemn promise: "They will never enter the land where I would have given them rest!"*

The writer of the Hebrews alludes to the scripture in Numbers 14:20-23 here and when he says in 4v18 *18 And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? What's interesting when you go to the Numbers passage is that in the OT God says that the people will never enter the land, but the writer substitutes the land for His rest. 9 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; 10 for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. 11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*

So what is rest in the context of Hebrews? The writer is comparing the journey of the Hebrews of his day with their forefathers. The forefathers made a covenant with God in the desert and then broke it. Because of it, the people never got to see the land. They were quite happy to say yes to the covenant but despite the very presence of God in the fire and the cloud, their actions in worshipping the golden calf showed their actions to be words rather than a true faith and trust in God.

The writer compares the destination, the promised land to be the rest that comes as a result of faith in Christ. *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. 2 For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. 3 Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said.*

The rest the writer refers to isn't life after death, but an eternity that starts upon faith in Christ. *Now we who have believed enter that rest* The writer was probably addressing both believers and unbelievers so he encourages them in verse 11 *Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*

The rest that we have already entered into also has an interesting description *7 Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." 8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. 9 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; 10 for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.*

The Israelites got their land but actually it wasn't true rest as they had to fight for it so even by David's time it wasn't fully conquered. But rest in Christ is true rest. It's a Sabbath rest because His work is complete.

So rest in this context should be full and final because our eternity is assured in Christ. And that should characterise our lives. However we know that just as Jesus called us to rest, that despite the promise of eternal assurance, our lives are still plagued with doubts and we still have a failure to trust Jesus implicitly with all the worry that brings.

But for us we have entered our Sabbath rest. So what implications should that have for us?

1. To recognise that the work of Christ is finished and because our faith in Christ we have entered His rest and live in the assurance of that.

2. If we are in a state of resting, then we should learn to rest in Christ, to take on His yoke and let Him take the strain. We aren't guaranteed no problems for as long as we remain on the earth, but we do have one who can carry the load when we are yoked to Him.
3. *Verse 10 Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his* Our works are those things we do to try to reach God or please God. For the Hebrews, reaching God was about trying to keep law. Finding rest meant that they no longer had to. Let's learn to relax and enjoy our faith. I'm doing a morning series at the moment on the Holy Spirit. The wonderful thing about having entered God's rest, is we can relax and enjoy the fact that His Spirit is in us and all that He imparts to us. The problem is that many of us live like those that haven't entered the rest, or think it is when we have finished this life's work. No! His rest is now.

And the upshot. Let me conclude this with scripture *12 The word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together. It judges the desires and thoughts of the heart. 13 There is nothing that can be hid from God; everything in all creation is exposed and lies open before his eyes. And it is to him that we must all give an account of ourselves. 14 Let us, then, hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we have a great High Priest who has gone into the very presence of God--Jesus, the Son of God. 15 Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High Priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin. 16 Let us have confidence, then, and approach God's throne, where there is grace. There we will receive mercy and find grace to help us just when we need it.*

PS This wasn't intended as an exhaustive exposition on the subject of rest in scripture. It's just a few thoughts based around a couple of key passages.

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