

Mohan Seevaratnam
surveys a rich biblical
theme connecting to health
and well-being

A CALL TO REST

key points

- God the creator both worked and rested and this is a pattern for humans too.
- We are becoming a society enslaved by the demands of overwork.
- The purpose of rest is to ensure we are fruitful.
- We need to understand the natural rhythms of life and know what makes us fruitful and what does not.

Embracing rest is at the heart of our well-being and flourishing. When we rest we participate in the life of the creator God who both worked and rested. It has a key part in the vocational call to healthcare as with any other God-given calling. This article explores three kinds of rest that the Bible talks about.

Creation rest

Rest is present in the creation story. On the first full day of Adam and Eve's existence, God rested, and so did Adam and Eve. Here is an important life principle for our well-being. Rest is not primarily an escape from work and its toil. Rather, it is a launchpad for our work and service for God.

It was not because he was tired that God rested. His purpose was to set the standard for human beings to follow. Attitudes to Sundays have changed throughout the centuries. Paul writes: 'One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards

one day as special does so to the Lord.'¹ Nevertheless whatever our view about 'sabbath', we need to hold on to the creation principle of a 24 hour day of rest in a week. The Bible's first reference to something being holy is the sabbath.

Without being legalistic, how might we implement some of the principles of sabbath rest as busy 21st century Christians? We are becoming a society enslaved to work and activity, with a healthcare system that treats people as commodities. The biblical pattern of six days work and a day's rest is essential for the well-being of society, the NHS and for us individually.

Salvation rest

Another rest the Bible talks about is salvation rest. It is Jesus' work on the cross that has given us rest from our greatest enemies – Satan, sin and death. In the Old Testament whenever the people of Israel were obedient to God, God gave them victory in battle, and the land and people were given rest from their enemies. Jesus' work on the cross has given us ultimate rest.

Eternal rest

The third category of biblical rest is the eternal rest which is ours in heaven, where 'there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'² We can look forward to this eternal reality that speaks of a better place, which is our hope in Jesus.

So how then, might we live in the light of God's three categories of rest: (creation, salvation and eternal)? I suggest there are three concepts to consider as we think about how to rest well.

First: relational connection to God

Saint Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) a north African bishop and theologian wrote, 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.'³ He recognised that true rest for human beings finds its origin in our relationship and connection to God. Jesus himself recognised that time alone with his heavenly Father was not an optional extra. He made it a priority. Part of the purpose of the sabbath day rest as ordained in the Bible is to strengthen our relational connection with God. This includes worshipping together with God's people.⁴

But if rest starts with relational connection with God, then we need to shape our lives to prioritise it throughout the year. Reading the Bible, prayer and worship are foundational to our relationship with God. The outworking of that may be down to individual preferences. Some of us like worshipping God with loud music, some like quietness and reflection, some of us like both.

Some of us like reading Christian books or listening to sermons. We can connect with God and rest in God through going for a walk, gardening, sport or doing something active. These have different connective potential for each one of us. Jesus invites us to find rest for our souls in him,⁵ from the sins that weigh us down, from the cares of the world, and the sorrows that trouble us. God promises us a peace and a rest that will sustain us and carry us through to that eternal rest that is ours in Jesus.

Second: rest is about re-energising

One of the purposes of rest is to re-energise, to refresh and renew. Mark's gospel says:

'The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, Jesus said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."'⁶

Here we see Jesus prioritising rest over the demands of ministry and that of the crowd, and modelling a lifestyle choice to those first disciples and us as well. To rest well, we need to sometimes say 'no' – to work, to ministry, to doing good things. Having boundaries is essential if we are to rest well. We like to say 'yes', we want to help and please and serve wherever we can. It's useful to remember that

the need is not the call. In order to say 'yes' to what God has called us to do, we need to say 'no' to some of the other demands on our time.⁷

As well as paying attention to boundaries, we need increased self-awareness to know what things relax us and give us renewed energy. We need to understand better the rhythm of our lives in terms of days, weeks, months and seasons. God's intention is for us to have a good rhythm at every level:

- **Days:** Each day ideally needs structure that enables us to rest and work, to invest in relationships and recreation.
- **Weeks:** The seven days of the week are the next level of rhythm and should involve at least one day of rest. Our weekly routine should allow time for those God calls us to love as ourselves. Like our need for relational connection with God, we need time and space for relational connection with significant others: spouses, partners, children, friends, parents, work colleagues, and neighbours.
- **Months:** With these longer periods of time, it is good to stand back and get a broader picture of one's life, scheduling time for things that will refresh and re-energise.
- **Seasons:** Just as we have different seasons in our year in the UK, so we have different seasons to our lives. These include adolescence and adulthood, singleness and marriage, parenthood and children leaving home. Other seasons may include starting a new job or career, or studying for a course. In each of these seasons, we need to re-calibrate what it means for us to work and to rest.

Sleep is also part of re-energising. That time just before you go to sleep has to be one of my favourite times of the day. God has wonderfully created us so that for about a third of our lives we are called to rest in sleep; and we know a lack of sleep is related to a number of health issues.

Third: the purpose of rest is fruitfulness

Jesus said he came to give us life and life in abundance. Are our current work habits or lifestyle choices draining us – emotionally, physically or spiritually? It is not honouring to God when we are frequently feeling exhausted and in danger of burning out. Long-term, such sustained busyness is not good for us. This is not the way God intended us to live, nor will it help us live a fruitful Christian life. We need to recognise our limitations and learn to say 'no' more often. So is it time to do some surgical excision? Or to do some pruning? May we embrace more of God's rest for us and flourish more as the people God has called us to be.

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Without being legalistic, how might we implement some of the principles of Sabbath rest as busy 21st century Christians?

references

1. Romans 14:5
2. Revelation 21:4
3. Augustine. *Confessions*. London: Penguin Classics, 2008
4. Hebrews 10:24-25
5. Matthew 11:28-30
6. Mark 6:30-32
7. For advice on when to yes and how to say no and to take control of your life, see Cloud H, Townsend J. *Boundaries*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002