

1-1-1994

Rest

Ken Durham
ken.durham@lipscomb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Durham, Ken (1992) "Rest," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Rest

By Ken Durham

In the Oscar-winning film, "Field of Dreams," Ray Kinsella is wondering how he can afford to keep his Iowa farm with its magical baseball field. His friend the author Terence Mann tells him that people will not only come from far and near to see his field of dreams and drink in its nostalgic wonders, they will pay for the privilege. "They will come, Ray. They most definitely will come," Mann says, "They'll pass over the money without even looking at — for it is money they have, and peace they lack."

"Money they have, and peace they lack" captures well the malaise of our time: deep restlessness amidst great affluence. There is an energy crisis among us which has nothing to do with OPEC, a weary and heavy-laden fatigue of the soul. In spite of the finest offerings of our billion-dollar leisure and entertainment industries, contemporary America may be the most restless society in human history.

Years of ministry among men and women who work in the New York City and Washington, D.C. areas have introduced me to many of the young (and not-so-young) and the restless — gifted, energetic men and women who are fast becoming old before their time. They have been described as "\$100,000-a-year people who are in fact \$50,000-a-year people working two shifts." Their lives are filled but

unfulfilled, with a hunger for peace and refreshment that no golf course or Club Med or Disneyworld or home entertainment system, or even the great game of baseball, ever seems to satisfy. Something more is needed. If only someone could raise a hand over our tired and turbulent generation like Jesus did the Sea of Galilee and say with power, "Peace ... Be still."

Imagine this then. You drag yourself, anxious and exhausted, to your trusted family physician. She checks your vital signs, looks at this, listens to that, taps something else. Then she sits down, takes a prescription pad and writes:

Stop. Cease and desist. Lay your work aside. Avoid any extensive travel, heavy lifting, or laborious projects. Commit the time instead to restful and enjoyable activities only (prayer and meditation are especially recommended). This prescription to be applied one full day every seven days (no exceptions).

For many of us, only the force of a doctor's order might possibly convince us of our need to schedule some regular time for rest, quiet and prayer. Yet this is precisely what God prescribed by law for Israel:

“Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest” (Exodus 34:21).

Cease and Desist

Sabbath means first, to stop: “to cease, to abstain, to desist from, to terminate, to be at an end.”¹ The Sabbath or seventh day in the Jewish calendar was looked on as a day of cessation from one’s labor, and particularly as a day dedicated to God — a pause or rest providing the opportunity for getting to know God and for worshipping him.²

Genesis 2:1-3 states that when God had finished his work of creation, he “rested” from his work on the seventh day, and that he “blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested.” Is this a weary, overworked Creator? No, this is a merciful, compassionate Creator who points to the cessation of his work as a precedent for humankind: a period of labor interrupted by a period of rest. The Lord God does not grow tired or weary. But we do, and we look to him to find the renewal of our strength (Isaiah 40:28-31).

The record of God’s rest provides both the model and the theological basis for the fourth of the ten commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). The Decalogue made it clear that the Sabbath was the Lord’s day, elaborating more on it than any other of the ten. Sabbath was God’s gift to his people (Exodus 16:29), a day to be observed as he ordained.

Observing the Day of Rest

“Keeping the Sabbath” meant much more to Israel than simply laying aside one’s work for twenty-four hours. Observing a day of rest, as interpreted in a host of Old Testament texts, includes several facets of meaning. Hans Walter Wolff suggests five³:

1. The day of rest reminds us of **freedom conferred**. The Deuteronomy 5 text of the ten commandments calls to mind the Exodus event: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (5:15). Sabbath is a day to celebrate deliverance from all slavery and slave masters.

2. The day of rest frees us to **rejoice in creation**. The Lord christened the seventh day a “blessed” and

“holy” day (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:11). Once God’s magnificent work of creation has been completed, it is time to enjoy it, for it is “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Sabbath is a day to be enjoyed amidst the glories of

God’s very good world.

3. The day of rest encourages us to **bring help to the burdened**. Everyone benefits from the Sabbath — you, your family members, your household servants, your field

hands, your foreign visitors, even your work animals (Exodus 20:10). Sabbath is a day when homes become not only places for leisure, but also sources of refreshment and burden-lifting for others.

4. The day of rest aims to impress on us **the senselessness of incessant work**. It is wise and right to rest, even during life’s most hectic times: “even during the plowing season and harvest, you must rest” (Exodus 34:21). Sabbath is a day to give the body its essential opportunity to relax, refresh, and be restored.

5. The day of rest points ahead to **final liberty**. The Sabbath is celebrated “as a lasting covenant ... a sign between me and the Israelites forever” (Exodus 31:16-17). Sabbath is a day of covenant renewal, a prelude to the eternal rest with God.

Jesus, the Sabbath, and Rest

The Sabbath observance was an issue which galvanized Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees. He faithfully observed Sabbath as a day of worship (Luke 4:16). But while the Pharisees would allow for no work of any kind on Sabbath, Jesus contended that works of kindness and mercy were very much in the spirit of a merciful God’s original commandment (Matthew 12:1-14; Luke 13:10-17). Jesus did not neglect, violate or repeal the Sabbath; rather, he interpreted it correctly by blessing others. He caused no small stir by pronouncing people as more important than Sabbath traditions, and himself as “Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28).

The Lord of the Sabbath demonstrated its proper humanitarian application. But Jesus also understood Sabbath in an existential way, for he knew well the human ache for rest (John 4:6). Look for instance at Mark’s description of a sequence of events during Jesus’ public ministry (Mark 6:30-56). “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest,” he told twelve tired men, hoping for a respite from

*Jesus did not neglect, violate
or repeal the Sabbath; rather,
he interpreted it correctly by
blessing others.*

throng so demanding that he and his band could not even eat. But around the next bend waited another enthusiastic crowd. Jesus' compassion drew him to them, but eventually the disciples grew weary and edgy. "It's late; send them away," they said. "No, feed them," he answered. The multitude miraculously fed, Jesus and the disciples made their way to a quiet mountainside. Jesus stayed on land alone, while the disciples spent a memorable night aboard a boat on the lake. But it would not be long before they were immersed in people again.

Mark chapter 6 provides a clear picture of Jesus struggling to maintain for himself and his disciples a reasonable balance: between ministering to the endless needs of the crowds, and sustaining their own physical and spiritual well-being. It was not always possible, but he obviously kept their need for rest and quiet a high priority in the midst of an enormously taxing schedule.

Strength for the Journey

Many Christians today consider the Sabbath as an anachronistic notion, merely one of the Old Testament practices deleted from God's holy imperatives in the New Testament era. True, there is not restatement of any such command in the New Testament text, and the early Church clearly shifted their meetings to Sunday, their "Lord's Day" (Revelations 1:10). The first day of the week became the Christian day of assembly (Acts 20:7) in celebration of the victory won on Resurrection Sunday.

But while the worship day has changed, it is difficult to imagine that the Sabbath *principle* — setting aside time both for worship and for rest — is any less applicable to New Testament Christians. If the ancients needed to bring their lives regularly to a screeching and reflective halt, do hurried and harried mothers need less to do so? We need our strength renewed for the journey, too.

A Christian application of the Sabbath principle begins with the recognition of our need to weave regular times of rest into the fabric of our daily lives. God commanded rest that Israel might be impressed with the fact that rest is not a luxury, but a human necessity. The human heart works on an essential work-rest rhythm. It beats about thirty-six million times a year, first exerting itself in contraction (the systolic period), then resting (the diastolic period). Work, rest, work, rest — it is the basic rhythm of life.⁴ To push ourselves beyond the reasonable limits of our physical, emotional and spiritual energies, Wayne Oates says, is to act "as if you don't have a body."⁵ But we do have bodies, bodies for whose care we are accountable because they are God-given, and Paul would add, blood-bought (1 Corinthians 6:20). In-

herent in the Creator's design of our bodies is the need to rest, to sleep, to be refreshed. To ignore that need is to abuse the gift of our bodies and to defy the one who designed them.

The Spiritual Discipline of Rest

So, how do we get the rest we need? As with any other spiritual discipline, we must work at it. (For some, learning to rest is hard work!) We develop those "habits of the heart" that provide strength to the whole person, recognizing that physical training is valuable, and spiritual training infinitely more so (1 Timothy 4:8). Here are some key areas where we find our rest.

Time Off Work. The Bible teaches both the value and dignity of work (Genesis 2:15), and the sin of idleness (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10). But it also tells us that ceaseless labor is foolish and futile. We may applaud the successful workaholic (while he or she is still standing), but God counters that there is more to life than a job, and it is both unwise and counterproductive to work constantly. We can always find a reason to keep pushing ourselves, but God commanded Israel to stop every seventh day, even (perhaps especially) during the most hectic seasons of the year (Exodus 24:31).

The Sabbath violation (in fact the first occurrence of "Sabbath" in scripture) is recorded in Exodus 16. The newly-delivered Israelites were already grumbling about their desert cuisine when God sent them manna, fresh daily bread from heaven. The people were to gather only enough for that day's consumption, excepting a double amount on the sixth day so none would have to be gathered on the seventh day. But true to human nature, the Sabbath found some compulsive manna-gatherers out in the fields looking to increase their supply, "but they found none" (16:27).

God will provide. He is a providential God. To work without reasonable rest is to distrust that provision, to try to provide by our own efforts what we do not trust God to provide. We are not defined ultimately by the jobs we do or the paychecks we earn. God make a higher claim on our lives and loyalty: we are his first of all, and we are not saved by our work, but by his. The rest God instituted was meant to interpret our work, to make sure we know to whom it is properly dedicated.⁶

Sleep. Many people boast that they need little sleep, but studies show that most of us need seven to eight hours of sleep per night to function at our best and to stay healthy. (People who sleep five hours or less per night have a higher mortality rate than those who get seven to eight.)⁷ Our bodies must have what Shakespeare called the "sleep that knits up the

ravell'd sleeve of care, "or our spirits will only become more unknit and unraveled.

One of the proverbs advises that if we wish to lie down without fear and enjoy sleep that is sweet, we must "preserve sound judgment and discernment" (Proverbs 3:21-24). In the ancient wisdom literature, sound judgment and discernment always meant right ways of thinking about God. The ground for a good night's sleep is best prepared by prayer and promises from the Word of God: his forgiveness, his saving grace, his unconditional love. These are the ingredients of sweet sleep (and not tomorrow's troubles, Jesus said; those will keep till tomorrow [Matthew 6:34]). "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Psalms 4:8).

Diet and Exercise. God does not care about our physiques or our figures; those are matters of modern fixation and flirtation. God cares about our health. So we must take seriously Paul's admonition to "honor God with you body" (1 Corinthians 6:20). We do not pay him honor with chronic couch-potato leisure or junk-food bingeing; we only abuse his gift. Even our attempts to rest sometimes aggravate our affliction, as in the case of the typical American coffee-break. A cup of coffee (or cola), a doughnut, and a cigarette — and you shoot enough caffeine, fat and sugar into your nervous system to send it into orbit!

Health experts all agree. For good health we all need clean air (no smoking, less pollution, proper breathing), pure water (and more of it than most of us drink), good food (a balanced diet providing adequate vitamins and fiber, and for most of us, less sugar, salt, cholesterol, and fat), and some form of regular exercise. A personal spiritual inventory calls for honest answers to the questions, "Am I honoring God with the body he gave me?"

Rests Along the Way. We can get some of the rest we need in small doses, with a little creativity and planning. Coffee breaks, lunch breaks, children's nap time — pauses in the day's work routine can be brief but effective oases of refreshment. These "rests along the way" provide time to pray, read the Bible, meditate, listen to soothing music, nap, or practice deep breathing or relaxation techniques. An unhurried walk, preferably in the sunshine and fresh air, can lift our eyes again to God's "very good"

creation.

This is my Father's world,
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and tress, of skies and seas,
His hand the wonders wrought.

The noisier our lives are externally and internally), the more we need moments of quiet. Noise is a major contributor to stress, as shown in studies of

people who work in large airports and industrial factories. Jesus made sure he found times and places for prayer and quiet. Luke says not occasionally but "often" he went out to "lonely places" for prayer (Luke 5:16). Why? Presumably, to get

away from people! And why? So he could come back to people, refreshed, oriented, ready to serve and love them again.

Prayer. In *The Secret Garden*, little Mary Lennox unlocks a door and discovers a garden that was once a place of peace and beauty, but now is neglected and cluttered, almost dead. Our prayer lives can become like that untended garden. Beautiful things that would grow there are crowded out by the clutter we allow to accumulate in our hearts.

Someone has said that peace is not the absence of trouble, peace is the presence of God. Rest for the body's sake is healthy; but rest that opens our hearts to the Father is a multiplied blessing. Here we speak, and we listen, and in his presence sort through all the confusing and discordant sounds in our noisy hearts. There is no more important spiritual discipline than prayer, which is the proper companion to virtually every other spiritual discipline: fasting, study, meditation, submission, service, confession, worship. We acknowledge with Augustine: "Thou has made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it rests in Thee."

Worship and Celebration. In the catalogue of "the appointed feasts of the Lord" in Leviticus 23, the Sabbath heads the list. These were the joyful festivals of Israel, times set apart to commemorate God's grace and goodness. Israel used Sabbath to celebrate their deliverance, their family-ties, their world, and their future. For Christians, Sunday is our gospel day, our bright and shining day both rest and resurrection. That is why, Hans Wolff, "We should put more brightness into Sunday."⁸

*Someone has said that peace is
not the absence of trouble,
peace is the presence of God.*

The missing ingredient in so many restless lives is joy. We know how to have fun, recreation, amusement and an infinite variety of other leisure-time activities, but these diversions can never be primary life-sources of joy. "Joy," said C. S. Lewis, "is the serious business of heaven." Jesus wanted nothing more for his followers than "that my joy many be in you and that your joy may be complete: (John 15:11).

We foster a most unbiblical view of worship if we act as though it is limited to the confines of our church buildings. Our Christian homes need a counter-part to the ancient Jewish Sabbath meal, a sacred family time in which candles are lit, good food is served, scriptures are read, laughter is shared, and children are blessed:

"Father of Mercy, O continue thy lovingkindness unto me and unto my dear ones. Make me worthy to rear my children that they walk in the way of the righteous before thee, loyal to thy law and clinging to good deeds. Keep thou from us all manner of shame, grief and care; and grant that peace, light and joy ever abide in our home.⁹

Rest and Peace. Jesus' most poignant invitation was the promise of rest for the weary and burdened

(Matthew 11:82-30). Ironically, he said that rest would come by way of a yoke. "My yoke is easy," he said, perhaps referring to the well-fitted yoke that allows the workman or the work-animal to do their task. In coming to him and learning from, he will find both rest for our weariness and strength for our work.

Our culture has devised a fiendishly-efficient formula for breaking a person. Push him to succeed at all costs. Convince him he has to prove his worth every day. Work him overtime, so his home and church life suffers. And when he begins to fade, give him a quick-fix of something (alcohol, nicotine, caffeine) that provides short-term relief and energy. And let the stresses of life do the rest. It works all the time.

Work and rest, work and rest. That is the healthy cadence of life, as ordained by the Creator. If we ignore and desecrate this basic rhythm, we will pay the price. But if we will order our lives to include those regular moments of rest in which we can rediscover both ourselves and our God, we can receive again the healing of his peace.

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.¹⁰