

Sabbath Resting

1 Jan 2023

A while ago one of our grandsons was at our place stretched full length reclining on our couch watching TV. Emblazoned across the front of his T shirt were the words *I'm not lazy – just resting*.

That's OK. It is important to rest – for all of us. It is a human need because it is a practical and essential thing for the good of our metabolism. But when we look at rest in the context of our spiritual health- there is much more to it.

Rest is literally translated in scripture as the *ceasing of action – tranquillity* and is first mentioned in the narrative of creation. God had been active and after the 6 periods of creation, all was complete and it was good - even very good!!¹ In the 7th period God rested and the rest was special – because the text tells us that God declared it holy and sacred. To rest, we quickly realise is part of God's nature plan and purpose.

In the creation story we are thus introduced to a core truth – that there is a divine purpose in stopping and resting. All the actions of God are divine and perfect and so when the intense activities that brought all things into existence ceased – God rested in sacred and divine serenity

¹ Gn 1:31

during which as an artist would, God took time and stillness to drink in the wonder of all that had been done.

Sacred resting has become synonymous however with the Sabbath as the description of a day – a period of time without activity, because the rhythm of resting on the 7th day is the 4th of the 10 commandments. and so not working and ceasing practical activities for a day became and still is for many a thing of legalism – an ordinance to obey – and the obedience becomes more important than the sacred nature of the rest that it is there for.

The 10 commandments are recited twice. The first is in Exodus 20 and the 4th commandment to keep the Sabbath holy and for work and activity to cease is explained because God himself rested and he made the day – holy. So - rest is not about doing nothing. It is about retreating into a dimension of existence that is outside of, beyond and above what we do from day to day and is a space for our soul to be nourished, nurtured, refreshed, and encouraged. God did this for himself and God wants this for us.

The second recital of the 10 commandments is in Deuteronomy 5. The 4th commandment is the same, but this time the explanation is quite different. The reason given is that the people were to –

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath.

So why the difference ? The first tells us that *rest* is what God does. And whatever God does is sacred and divinely sanctioned.

The second tells us what we are to do. The reference to deliverance from slavery is a reminder of our redemption by God's grace and so in true humility we should take a quiet retreat into the state of our hearts in thankfulness, away from the madding crowd. Rest therefore is about us worshipping.

Today's world is all about action. The expression 24/7 summarises how little time we feel there is to do all we think we have to if we are to take our place in the world today. We are in danger of losing the ability to see beauty and hope because of the clamour of competition, ambition and frenzy.

Remember, David says –

Be still, and know that I am God

Ps 46:1

We say that we want to know God better. Well, David clearly believed that a path to knowing God is through tranquillity – quietness and stillness – when all of the voices that babble inside us are silenced – when all of the voices that shout from outside of us are silenced - when all of the pressures and distractions of that invade our composure are shut out. There is a sacred serenity that enables us deepen our knowledge of God.

Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*

“It is not necessary for us to be anxious about putting our thoughts and prayers into words as we meditate. Silent thinking and praying that comes only from listening can often be more beneficial.”

I while ago I purchased a really comfortable fabric swing seat that I have suspended from a beam outside our French doors. I sit in it these lovely nights and in the cool of the evening I use it as a prayer place. I reflect prayerfully upon the day and I bring prayers for my loved ones and others, but I never finish because I fall asleep !! The sleep is really lovely. I have come to realise that falling asleep doesn't mean that I am a failed pray-er. It is a peaceful response to a serene experience which is really nice and nourishing for me. Thanks be to God !!

Walter Bruggemann's title to his book that is the inspiration for this ministry series *Sabbath as resistance* is a challenge to secularisation that rolls out a way of living that is Godless. Secularisation has an energy that is sourced in a conspiracy to keep humanity away from God and any consciousness of God. Therefore the sacred rest that enables one to know God, to see that God is there, and that God is good, and that enables one to reflect in tranquillity upon the gifts of God's grace in our lives and that produces that serenity of faith, - needs to be intentionally pursued against the tide and pull of the modern world.

Bruggemann calls Christians to stand against the tide and refuse to live as what he calls *depleted selves*. We can be broken by exhaustion.

There is a modern example of this. The Marxist Soviet regime carried an 11 year experiment creating a universal working class called the proletariat and abolishing weekends and holidays. There was to be no ceasing from work and industry. Serving the state was touted as the highest calling for human existence and the traditional breather of weekends and holidays was seen as a weakness of the West. People would only get a rostered day off as a crumb from the state. The experiment failed, because productivity declined, motivation and energy to work reduced and gradually dissipated and other insurmountable consequences finally took over – such as illnesses and physical and emotional fragility that rendered people incapable. The effect upon relationships and upon families who could no longer take control of their own quality times, bred resentment and animosity.

Bruggemann makes a very strong point about the fact that God himself rested. There are passage in the early books of Moses in which some of the commandments are singled out for further explanations, and Bruggemann takes one in Exodus 13 looking again at the 4th commandment to keep the Sabbath (the passage is the second of today's OT readings Ex3:15-17). The command it is said is a permanent sign of God's covenant with the Israelites. They were never to forget the importance of sacred rest and the passage concludes by again reminding the reader that on the 7th day God

ceased activity – stopped working. But then the text states that God was *refreshed*. Bruggemann points out that word in this passage is a slight variation to the root word for *rest* found in other passages. This is a small but penetrating adjustment when compared to other passages which he suggests is very significant for us, because why would an omnipotent and infinitely capable God need to be *refreshed*? Did God get tired?

No. God is taking rest not as a weary workman but as an example for us to follow for the nourishment of our souls. This is what God wants for us and to be refreshed and replenished by sacred rest, not because of exhaustion, but because we want to feed our souls and worship in thankfulness. (IVP Bible Dictionary)

May this Sabbath bring rest and joy to our hearts and our homes.

May today be a little less go, go, go, and a little more slow... slow... slow...

May we care less about things, and care more for people.

As we relax in God's love, may we take time to listen and remember that we are all God's children.

Amen!

Stan Thorburn