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## A Christian Perspective on Leisure

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The Bible knows nothing of “a problem of leisure.” . . . The general standpoint of the Bible is that it is “folly” (i.e. sinful) to be idle between daybreak and sunset.... Hence we must not expect to derive from the Bible any explicit guidance upon the right use of leisure. (Richardson, 1952, p. 51)

I believe Alan Richardson (1952) is correct in stating that the Bible does not provide us with explicit guidance concerning leisure. However, I believe he is wrong in depicting the life of the person living in the biblical world as one preoccupied with work. The Hebraic lifestyle, which included Sabbath observance and the notion of a blessed life in the land, suggests that there was more to life than work. And, although there is not a fully developed theology of leisure in the Bible, there are numerous biblical elements which may guide us in our understanding of leisure.

This paper will focus on two biblical elements relevant to a biblical understanding of leisure: the principle of the Sabbath and the concept of rest. These biblical elements cannot be equated with leisure; however, they provide material to flesh out a Christian understanding of leisure. The elements of sabbath and rest will be developed to illustrate that a biblical understanding of leisure encompasses both a rhythm to life (which includes a quantitative dimension of leisure) and the quality of life which God offers us (a qualitative dimension of leisure).

### THE SABBATH

The principle of the Sabbath is more central to Israelite life than any of the other Old Testament instructions. Not only is the Sabbath Commandment longer than any of the other commandments in the Decalogue, but the principle of the Sabbath is reformulated and discussed throughout scripture. My discussion of the Sabbath will start with the creation account and then trace through Scripture the teaching on this principle. From this material I will attempt to extract some general principles which are applicable and relevant to leisure.

### THE CREATION ACCOUNT

In the Genesis account of creation, the work of creation took six days; then God rested from His labor on the seventh day. There is a distinction between six days of labor and the seventh day of rest.

In the creation account the word “sabbath” (*sabbat*) does not occur, but the root (*sbt*) from which sabbath is derived is found at the end of the creation account in Genesis 2:2,3.

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

The creation account ends with a focus on God: God blessing the seventh day, God making the seventh day holy, and God resting from his work. What is the significance of God resting? Commentary on God’s resting in Gen. 2:2,3 is supplied by Exodus 31:17 where we read: “. . . for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.” The important point here is that God stopped and rested. God is a God whose very nature is one of rest.

The creation account suggests that not only is God a God whose nature is one of rest, but rest is also an essential component of human nature. The creation account depicts the first complete day of humanity’s life as a day of rest, a day to rest with God and reflect upon God’s work of creation. Only after this first full day of rest do humans turn to their work. Claus Westermann (1974) writes: “The work which has been laid upon man is not his goal. His goal is the eternal rest which has been suggested by the rest of the seventh day” (p. 65). Not only does the divine rest on the seventh day indicate the goal of

creation, but, as Karl Barth (1958) has suggested, it is the summons to humanity to enter upon history and to enter life participating in this rest:

The goal of creation, and at the same time the beginning of all that follows, is the event of God's Sabbath freedom, Sabbath rest and Sabbath joy, in which man, too, has been summoned to participate. It is the event of divine rest in the face of the cosmos completed with the creation of man—a rest which takes precedence over all of man's eagerness and zeal to enter upon his task. Man is created to participate in this rest. (p. 98)

Thus, from God's resting on the seventh day we see not only a rhythm to life in which there is one day's break in seven, but also a quality of life characterized by rest.

### Exodus 16

There is no further mention of the word "Sabbath" in the Bible, nor explicit reference made to Sabbath-keeping until Exodus 16 which outlines regulations for the Israelites to gather and prepare the manna while they were wandering in the wilderness. Each day, while the Israelites were in the wilderness, God provided a fresh supply of manna; each day it had to be collected afresh, for the manna from the previous day would rot and smell. But on the sixth day God sent a double supply of manna. Obeying the instruction of the Lord, Moses instructed the people, "This is what the Lord commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning' (16:23). What was saved for the seventh day "did not stink or get maggots in it" (16:24).

Yet some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather their manna, but we are told "they found none" (16:27). This comment, writes Hans Walter Wolff (1972), is "an almost humorous criticism of our restless, over-zealousness for work . . ." (p. 73). Work on the seventh day is ridiculed as foolish, for its results are nil; it fails to acknowledge that God supplies what is needed. Exodus 16, then, relativizes humanity's work—one day in seven is to be set aside for rest. This is possible because it is God who provides what is needed to live.

### THE MOSAIC LAW AND THE SABBATH COMMANDMENT

The Sabbath Commandment is found in all accounts of the Mosaic Law (Exodus 20:8–11, 23:12, 31:12–17, 34:21, 35:1–3, Leviticus 19:3, 23:1–3, 26:2, Deuteronomy 5:12–15). In my examination of this material two questions need to be considered. First, what reasons are given for observing the Sabbath? Second, how is the Sabbath to be observed?

#### Why is the Sabbath to be observed?

In his article on "Sabbath" in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Hamilton (1980) identifies four motives given in the Mosaic Law for observing the Sabbath. Let us examine each one of these motivations.

**The analogy of God resting.** In Exodus 20:8–11 we encounter the first reason provided for observing the Sabbath day: the analogy of God resting at the end of the creation account.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

On the basis of His own rhythm of six days of activity and one of rest, God blesses and hallows the Sabbath day for Israel; the model is six days of work and a seventh day Sabbath (see v. 9). What is the significance of this motivation for Sabbath observance? First, the appeal to the creation account in the Sabbath commandment demonstrates that the rhythm of God's six days of activity and one of rest is to be the pattern for a rhythm of six days of work and one of rest in human life. Richardson (1952) writes, "Our human rhythm of work and rest is a refraction of that image of God, in which we were made" (pp. 53–54).

Second, the appeal to the creation account suggests that Sabbath observance is to be characterized by a certain attitude or posture before God. By recalling that God rested on the seventh day, the Israelite, in the act of Sabbath rest, "experienced his God as a God whose very nature was one of rest" (Johnston 1983, 95). Furthermore, the Sabbath, as outlined here in Exodus 20:11, "is an invitation to rejoice

in God's creation, and recognize God's sovereignty over time" (Hamilton 1980, p. 903). Abram Heschel (1966) writes:

To observe the seventh day . . . is to celebrate the creation of the world and to create the seventh day all over again, the majesty of holiness in time, "a day of rest, a day of freedom," a day which is like "a lord and king of all other days." (pp. 19–20)

Thus, the Sabbath was not primarily for restorative purposes but time to be seen simply as God's time, a time to consider God and his purposes. The Sabbath was a time for the Israelites to recognize that life was a gift from God and not just the result of human work. As such the Sabbath qualified the Israelite's workaday world by putting one's six days of work into proper perspective. Exodus 20:11 suggests that the day of rest forcefully reminds humans, once every seven days, that they live in a world which contains not only all one needs but also many other things to enjoy. "So the Sabbath, which brings to an end the week, becomes for Israel an invitation to enter into, and rejoice in the blessings of creation" (Dumbrell, 1984, p. 35).

In summary, the appeal to creation theology in Exodus 20:11 suggests two dimensions to Sabbath observance. Quantitatively the Sabbath is to be a one-day break from the other six days of work. Qualitatively the Sabbath is an invitation to experience God as a God whose very nature is one of rest and also to rejoice and celebrate in God's creation.

**Remembrance of deliverance from Egypt.** Although the Ten Commandments as recorded in Exodus 20 are almost the same as the account of them in Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath commandment is a noticeable exception. A different motive for observance of the Sabbath is found in the Deuteronomiac account of the Decalogue where the Sabbath command is linked with God's deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt:

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant and maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day (Deuteronomy 5:12–15).

In this account the reason for keeping the Sabbath day is the affirmation that Yahweh had liberated and delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. As such, the "Sabbath was a remembrance that Israel rested ultimately in God's graciousness" (Johnston, 1983, p. 89). It is the Exodus redemption which makes possible the new life in the land, and thereby Edenic rest. Without the redemptive activity of God, the original notion of Sabbath rest is impossible. Yet the expectation of "rest" was not realized in Israel's experience, and finally Israel was exiled from the land. The Epistle to the Hebrews (4:8–10) reminds us that although Israel did not enter this rest, there still exists a Sabbath rest for believers which is a fulfillment of creation's purpose.

In light of the fact that Israel did not enter the promised rest, it is interesting to note, as Johnston (1983) points out, that the later Deuteronomiac account shifts "from a focus on God to a stronger emphasis on the human need for relief from the oppressive reality of much work" (p. 90). The Hebrew word *shamor* ("observe the Sabbath day") has a definite ethical connotation as compared with the Hebrew word *zachor* ("remembering the Sabbath") which is found in Exodus 20:11. Furthermore, the Deuteronomiac version of the fourth commandment includes the ethical justification "that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do" (5:14). Here is a humanitarian emphasis. The necessity to abstain from human toil on the Sabbath for human benefit is emphasized in the phrase "may rest, as you do." As such the Sabbath is also for human rest, restoration, and recreation.

**The Sabbath as a humanitarian ordinance.** A third motivation for observing the Sabbath, a humanitarian one which we have already noted in Deuteronomy 5:14–15, is more clearly stated in Exodus 23:12: "Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed." In this verse the only purpose given for the day of rest is that the dependent laborers and domestic animals experience rest and recuperation. The word "refreshed," which is used to describe the alien or the slave born into an Israelite household is the exact same word which is used to describe God's rest on the seventh day in Exodus 31:17. According to Exodus 23:12, then, the Sabbath was especially for the benefit of those who were severely burdened with work and were under the orders of others.

The implication of this humanitarian motive for observance of the Sabbath is that all members of society should both work and rest. As Gerhard Hasel (1983) points out, the Sabbath reminds us of “the social emphasis on equality of all human beings (free persons and servants) under God” (p. 194). Thus, the biblical view does not lend support to a social structuring of society such as in the Greece of Aristotle’s day when slaves made it possible for a few to have a life of leisure, nor does it support a leisure class who live a life of conspicuous consumption at the expense of a working class such as is described in Thorstein Veblen’s (1899/1934) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The humanitarian motivation for the Sabbath suggests that all are entitled to a break from work, and therefore leisure, in at least a quantitative sense.

**The Sabbath as a sign of the covenant.** The fourth motivation for observance of the Sabbath is that it is a sign of the covenant:

The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested. (Exodus 31:16,17)

In this passage the Sabbath is not only a sign of the covenant but is itself called a covenant. Sabbath observance is also claimed to be the sign of Israel’s allegiance to God in Exodus 31:13. The Sabbath was to be observed not only within the context of a relationship with God, but it was a sign of the relationship.

What implications does this covenant motivation for Sabbath observance have for our study of leisure? While some benefits may accrue from observance of one day’s rest in seven, leisure like the Sabbath may find its true meaning and reach its fullest potential when one lives in relationship with God.

## HOW IS THE SABBATH TO BE OBSERVED?

In the Mosaic covenant, the Sabbath rest is a matter of detailed regulations. All work is forbidden and what constituted work is delineated with great precision. The Sabbath was to be kept by all on every seventh day. The references to the family, servants, and all other members of the Hebrew household, animals, and sojourners listed in Exodus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 5:14 guarantee that no one over whom the male Israelite had authority would have to work; therefore, everyone would be able to rest from work.

It is not only laborious work that is prohibited, as is the case on many of the holy days; on the Sabbath “you are not to do any work” (Leviticus 23:3, compare to “do no *regular* work” of Leviticus 23:7,8,21,23,35,36; Numbers 28:18,25,26; 29:1,12,35). The gathering of food, the lighting of fires and the collecting of firewood are all forbidden (Exodus 16:25–30; 35:1–3; Numbers 15:32–26). The phrase in Exodus 34:21, “even during ploughing season and harvest you must rest,” stresses that even at the busiest time of the year in an agricultural society the Sabbath was to be kept. Especially in such busy times humans need a day of rest.

How the Sabbath was to be observed is summarized in Exodus 34:21a: “Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall cease work!” (NEB). The sabbatical legislation declared that life was best lived in a rhythm wherein all people both worked and then refrained from work. In this sense the Sabbath was a quantity of time in which no work was performed. Likewise, leisure may be understood quantitatively as a period of time in which no work is performed.

But was the Sabbath only a quantity of time in which no work was performed? The Sabbath is enumerated among the sacred festivals, “the appointed feasts of the Lord” (Leviticus 23:1–3). The Sabbath and worship are linked together by the joint command given both in Leviticus 19:30 and in 26:2: “Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary.” The Sabbath was a day of worship as well as a day of rest from labor. However, rest was itself an expression of worship; no distinction was made between rest and worship—resting was worship. Thus, the Old Testament taught that the Sabbath was to be observed not only by a cessation from work but also by a rest which was of the nature of worship.

## The Prophets and the Sabbath

The prophets’ utterances concerning the Sabbath only apply what has already been revealed in the Pentateuch. Although the prophets spoke critically of the practices that occurred on the Sabbath, they did not condemn the Sabbath itself but rather a misuse of the Sabbath. The prophets also pointed to the blessings which follow from a correct observance of the Sabbath.

For example, Isaiah decried the ritualistic Sabbath observance of his day (Isaiah 1:12,13) and in a classic passage outlines what will follow from a true observance of the Sabbath:



If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD. (Isaiah 58:13,14)

Amos, who passionately contended against the many abuses in the sacrificial cult (4:4ff.; 5:21ff.), brought down judgment upon the grain dealers who could not wait for the Sabbath to be over so they could sell their wheat and deceive the people through "skimping the measure, boosting the price, and cheating with dishonest scales" (8:5). The misuse of the Sabbath was also condemned by other prophets who interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent exile of the Israelites to be partly the result of the desecration of the Sabbath (Jeremiah 17:27; Ezekiel 20:23–25).

In conclusion, the prophets' words contradict humanity's inclination to make life secure or add to life's abundance by nonstop, uninterrupted work. Yet the Sabbath suggests that "human life has a higher significance than being merely a struggle for existence" (Wolff, 1972, p. 73). Work is only to occupy six days of the week. Work on the seventh day is not only unnecessary but prohibited. So, there is a rhythm to life—six days of work and one of rest.

### **JESUS AND THE SABBATH**

Jesus demonstrated a rhythm of work and rest and taught his disciples to take rest: "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). Furthermore, Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath upheld the authority and validity of the Old Testament law. But, on several occasions (Matthew 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–28, 3:1–5; Luke 6:1–11, 13:10–17, 14:1–6; John 5:9–18, 9:1–14), he reacted against the Pharisees who stifled the spirit of the sabbatical teaching with their restrictive oral and written tradition. On these occasions, Jesus put human need above formal external compliance with the Sabbath legislation. It was not wrong to pick and eat grain on the Sabbath nor was it unlawful to perform works of mercy or to heal on the Sabbath day. Yet Jesus never did or said anything to indicate that he intended to abolish the Sabbath along with the relaxation and other benefits such a day of rest offers. Jesus' emphasis was on keeping the spirit of the law and not only on an external observance of the law (Matthew 5:17–48). Jesus explained the true meaning of the Sabbath by teaching that it "was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath suggests that leisure is more than quantitative; it also has a qualitative dimension to it. The Sabbath's one day of rest in seven is not just a day of inactivity. It is not just a time period, but a time set aside for humans, a time for bringing healing and wholeness. The same may be said about leisure. Leisure is not just a quantitative segment of life but a quality of life closely related to wholeness and fullness.

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH AND THE SABBATH**

The first Christians, as faithful Jews, worshipped each day in the temple at Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 5:42), went to the synagogue (Acts 9:20; 13:14; 14:1; 17:1,2,10; 18:4), and respected the law (21:20). Very likely the early Jewish Christians also kept the Sabbath. In the epistle to the Colossians (2:16ff.), the Sabbath is to be understood as "a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

#### **Summary on the Sabbath**

In concluding our discussion of the biblical Sabbath, let us review three general principles that are applicable to our discussion of leisure. First, the Sabbath reminds us of the social equality of all human beings under God. All who work and labor, especially those burdened by work, are entitled to one day's rest in seven (Exodus 20:10; 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14–15). Thus, a society in which a few members enjoy a life of leisure based upon the endless work of the many is inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture. All are entitled to leisure at least in a quantitative or free-time sense. From a biblical point of view, the emphasis on social equality found in the Sabbath legislation would seem to negate any attempt to define leisure in terms of a leisure class.

Second, the Sabbath points to a rhythm in life—a rhythm of work and nonwork (leisure in a quantitative sense). This was evidenced in the creation account, the Exodus manna story, the Mosaic law, and the words of the prophets. So, the Sabbath inculcated that Israel's life possessed the element of time free from work. The implication for our study is that the Sabbath suggests some rhythm or cycle of leisure (in a quantitative sense) and work is necessary for well-being and wholeness.

Whether or not we still see the Sabbath commandment as binding, it remains instructive regard-

ing God's concern for the rest of humans. The rhythmic pattern to life, which the Sabbath suggests, may constantly serve as a model for us in shaping and scheduling life. The great benefit of a sabbatical structure to life is to provide special time each week for physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional renewal which leads to better health both for the individual and society,

Third, the Sabbath suggests that leisure may be defined in more than a quantitative sense, for the Sabbath is more than a time period, more than one day in seven. In the Old Testament, the Sabbath, as a day of abstaining from work, is not entirely for the purpose of restoring one's lost strength and enhancing the efficiency of one's future work. Rather than simply an interlude between periods of work, it is the climax of living. Heschel (1966) describes the Sabbath as "not a date but an atmosphere . . . a taste of eternity—the world to come" (pp. 21, 31–30). The Sabbath suggests the attitude for humanity's basic posture in relation to God. I have argued from the creation account that rest is basic to the nature of humanity. In fact, I stated that the divine intention to humanity is not work but the eternal rest symbolized by the rest of the seventh day. Thus, humanity's chief end is not to labor but to enjoy God forever. The appeal to creation theology in the Exodus account of the Sabbath commandment suggests that the Sabbath is an invitation to the Israelites, in the act of Sabbath rest, to experience their God as a God whose very nature is one of rest and to rejoice in and celebrate in God's gift of creation. The sabbatical legislation commanded a Sabbath rest which was of the nature of worship. The prophet Isaiah described the Sabbath as a delight. Jesus taught that the Sabbath was a time for bringing healing and wholeness. All this evidence conclusively suggests that the Sabbath, and likewise leisure, is more than a time of non-work; it has a qualitative dimension. I conclude that the biblical Sabbath teaches us that leisure need not be merely an external cessation from work in the rhythm of human life, but that it may also be an internal spiritual attitude; leisure reaches its fullest potential when our lives are lived in relationship with God.

### THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF REST

Leisure is frequently equated with the biblical concept of rest. Several writers (Dahl, 1972; Houston, 1981; Sherrow, 1984) draw parallels between leisure and Christ's offer of rest in Matthew 11:28–30. Therefore, it should be fruitful to examine the biblical concept of rest and its implications on our study of leisure.

Before proceeding to examine the biblical concept of rest, two introductory comments can be made. First, it is natural that we should move from an examination of the Sabbath to a discussion of the theology of rest. Although the developed Old Testament theology of rest utilizes different terminology than that used in Gen. 2:1–4, Dumbrell (1984) points out that the close link "between such 'rest' and the Sabbath which epitomized the concept was always maintained (see Exodus 20:11 where the two concepts of 'sabbath' and 'rest' are brought together)" (p. 35). The close link between rest and Sabbath culminates, as will be explained, in the Sabbath-rest of Hebrews 4:9.

Second, the belief is expressed throughout the Bible that God has given, or will give, rest to His people. Yet Gerhard von Rad (1966) notes, "Among the many benefits of redemption offered to man by Holy Scripture, that of 'rest' has been almost overlooked in biblical theology" (p. 94). Perhaps this overlooking of the biblical concept of rest partly explains the fact that Christians have a well-developed theology of work but not of leisure. Biblical theology has stressed Salvation History as something distinct from the earthly realm. It has ignored large portions of biblical revelation including the wisdom literature and the nature psalms. Salvation has been narrowed to mere deliverance while the significant themes of blessing, land, and rest have been ignored.

### THE THEOLOGICAL USES OF "REST"

Let us now turn our attention to the biblical concept of rest, first by examining the Hebrew root for rest along with its major theological uses and then by tracing the development of the concept of rest through Scripture. According to Leonard J. Coppes (1980), writing in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, the Hebrew root of rest (*nuah*) "signifies not only absence of movement but being settled in a particular place (whether concrete or abstract) with overtones of finality, or (when speaking abstractly) of victory, salvation, etc." (p. 562). At least three important theological uses are associated with this root: a psychological-spiritual (personal peace), a martial (rest from enemies), and a soteriological (salvation rest) use. If leisure includes a qualitative dimension, a condition of our being, then these uses of rest must have some relevance for our understanding of leisure.

### **The Deuteronomic notion of rest: Rest in the land**

We first meet the promise of rest in Deuteronomy:

- You have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you. (12:9)
- When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall. . . . (Deuteronomy 25:19)

In Deuteronomy the concept of rest is grounded in and equivalent with possession of the land. Canaan as Israel's inheritance was to be a place of rest. Von Rad (1966) stresses that we must not spiritualize this concept of rest which was a direct gift from the hand of God: "[It] is not peace of mind, but the altogether tangible peace granted to a nation plagued by enemies and weary of wandering" (p. 95).

The concept of rest to which Deuteronomy frequently refers is associated with the notion of a pleasant, secure, and blessed life in the land (15:4; 23:20; 28:8; 30:16). Dumbrell (1984) connects this pleasant life in the land with the creation account:

Israel will enjoy the gifts of creation in the way in which they had been meant to be used. In this theology of rest we are clearly returning to the purposes of creation set forth in Genesis 2:1–4 and typified by the Eden narrative, namely that mankind was created to rejoice before the deity and to enjoy the blessing of creation in the divine presence. The notion of rest in both Genesis 2:2 and the book of Deuteronomy implies this. (pp. 121–122)

There is a sense in which the promise of rest was fulfilled in the Old Testament, in terms of rest in the land, and this fulfillment is first expressed in the book of Joshua:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel had failed; every one was fulfilled. (Joshua 21:43–35, see also 1:13,15; 22:4)

Later in 2 Samuel, we read that the Lord had given rest in the land and will continue to do so during David's reign as king: "the king [David] had given him rest from all his enemies around him" (7:1). Then the word of the Lord came to Nathan instructing him to tell David that, among other things, the Lord Almighty "will also give you rest from all your enemies" (7:11b).

The fulfillment of the promise of rest may, even more clearly, be identified with the time of Solomon. In Solomon's blessing which followed his prayer of dedication for the temple he acknowledged the fulfillment of God's promise to give his people rest:

Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. (1 Kings 8:56)

Thus, it can be said that the divinely given rest was experienced by the nation of Israel during the times of Joshua, David, and Solomon. Yet, as we will see later in our discussion of Hebrews 3 and 4 there is a real sense in which the promise of rest was not fulfilled in the Old Testament.

### **THE CHRONICLER'S NOTION OF REST: THE LORD GOD RESTING AMONG HIS PEOPLE**

The Chronicler's notion of rest swings away from the Deuteronomic conception of rest. "Rest from all your enemies" becomes a gift which God bestows periodically upon pious kings. Not only is Solomon a "man of peace," (1 Chronicles. 22:9), but God also grants rest during the reigns of King Asa (2 Chronicles 15:15) and King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:30). In this same book, Solomon is now considered as a "man of peace, in an entirely new way, the fundamental characteristic is not that Israel obtains rest, but that God comes to rest in the midst of his people" (von Rad, 1966, 97–98). Solomon ends his long prayer of dedication for the temple with the following exalted messianic invocation:

Now arise, O LORD God, and come to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. May your priests. . . be clothed with salvation . . . O LORD God, do not reject your anointed one. Remember the kindnesses promised to David your servant. (2 Chronicles 6:41–42)

Now added to the promise that Israel as a nation would receive rest is the additional anticipation that God will finally come to rest among his people, Israel.

At this point let us summarize the strands in the complex of ideas about rest in the Old Testament. One strand is seen in Deuteronomy where the land is called Israel's resting place, for Israel was to obtain rest from all her enemies in the land she would inherit (12:9,10; 25:19; see also 3:20). A second strand of ideas concerning rest suggests that God has His resting place in the land and particularly in His sanctuary at Zion. This idea is especially evident in Psalm 132:7–8, 13–14 (compare to 2 Chronicles 6:41) and Isaiah 66:1. Elsewhere these two strands are joined so that the people's resting place is simultaneously God's resting place. An excellent example of this synthesis of the two motifs is recorded in 1 Chronicles 23:25, when David said, "The Lord, the God of Israel, has granted rest to his people and has come to dwell in Jerusalem forever."

### REST IN PSALM 95

Another development in the concept of rest is found in Psalm 95 where the resting place of the people is not only the resting place of God but is God's rest itself.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways." So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest." (Psalm 95:7–11)

"Today" presents a new hope of salvation in contrast to the one forfeited by those who participated in the desert wanderings. This saying depends upon the concept of rest articulated in Deuteronomy in that the nation is still the subject of the rest. However, the place of rest is now different. The Lord God says, "They shall never enter my rest." The resting place is God's rest. This refers to a gift of rest which Israel will only reach by a totally personal entering into her God. It is in this form that the Old Testament concept of rest is taken up by the writer to the Hebrews.

### REST IN HEBREWS 3 AND 4

In Hebrews 3 and 4 the word "rest" (*katapausis*), which is first introduced in the quotation from Psalm 95 in 3:11, is repeated in 3:18, and is found six more times in chapter 4. We read:

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. (Hebrews 4:10,11)

Here the writer to the Hebrews refers to at least two distinct, but related, types of rest: (a) "a Sabbath-rest for the people of God," and (b) God's own rest on the seventh day of creation (see also Hebrews 4:4). The bringing together of these types of rest suggests that the Sabbath-rest, which remains for the people of God, is similar to God's resting from all His works at the end of creation (Genesis 2:3). The rest for the people of God is now viewed as the realization of God's intention in the creation to bestow such a rest on humanity. After the Fall, God's initial purposes for humanity's enjoyment of rest are made possible through His redemptive acts among His people. But the resting place in the promised land and in the temple at Jerusalem only aim towards the realization of God's purposes in creation. Now in Hebrews the final consummation is depicted as a heavenly rest, the antitype of the rest in the promised land alluded to in Psalm 95:11. There is no doubt that the final consummation of this rest is future, but it would be incorrect to view this Sabbath-rest as being totally in the future. The time frame of the rest in Hebrews is summed up by C. K. Barrett (1956): "The rest, precisely because it is God's, is both present and future" (p. 372).

What exactly is this Sabbath-rest? Biblical scholars describe it in a variety of ways. Jean Hering (1970) comments that this rest "must not invoke merely the notion of repose, but also those of peace, joy and concord" (p. 32). Donald Hagner (1983) writes:

the author has in mind the ideal qualities of the Sabbath-rest, namely peace, well-being and security—that is, a frame of mind that by virtue of its confidence and trust in God possesses these qualities in contradiction to the surrounding circumstances. In short, the author may well have in mind that peace and sense of ultimate security "which is far beyond human understanding" (Philippians 4:7). (p. 52)

### REST IN MATTHEW 11:28–30

According to R. Hensel and C. Brown (1978), "The concept of rest finds its ultimate and deepest development in Matthew 11:28ff" (p. 256), when Jesus said:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke



upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28–30)

How is the rest received? These verses, notes Edward Schweizer (1975), obviously imply that toil and labors do not lead to rest. Rather, it is through coming to Jesus that one will find rest. “The rest is identical with the yoke of discipleship” (Hill, 1972, p. 208). From their union with Jesus, His disciples will receive refreshment and renewal that will enable them to carry their load without finding it heavy or burdensome (see also 2 Corinthians 4:16). W. Robertson Nicoll (1900) points out that the literal translation is “I will rest you” which means more than “give you rest” (p. 155). The Christian finds rest for the soul through the assurance of the presence of the Risen Lord.

What is this rest? First, the rest is present. The future tense—“you will find rest”—indicates not a future hope, nor a rest in heaven, but a rest immediately available to all who follow Jesus. Second, the rest is not that of inactivity or idleness; it includes a yoke of discipleship. There is no discipleship without a task. Jesus does not promise freedom from work, toil, or burden, but a rest or relief which will make all burdens light. R.V.G. Tasker (1961) summarizes:

Certainly Jesus does not promise His disciples a life of inactivity or repose, nor freedom from sorrow and struggle, but He does assure them that, if they keep close to Him, they will find relief from such crushing burdens as crippling anxiety, the sense of frustration and futility, and the misery of a sin-laden conscience. (p. 122)

Third, H.L. Ellison (1969) points out that “rest for your souls” refers not merely to the inner being but to the whole person.

## SUMMARY ON REST

As we come to the end of this discussion of the biblical concept of rest, the question to be asked is what all this has to do with the concept of leisure? If we accept the classical conception of leisure which sees leisure as a condition of life and a state of being, then for the Christian the biblical concept of rest is very descriptive of what leisure may be. While we cannot derive an operational definition of leisure from our discussion of rest, our discussion supplies a wide variety of clues which are descriptive of leisure: a pleasant, secure, and blessed life in the land, for as Preece (1981) notes “We don’t rest in a doctrine, we need a place to put our feet up, but a place in which God is personally present” (p. 79); an entering into God’s rest, a rest of completion, not inactivity, such as the Creator enjoyed when He had completed His works; a Sabbath rest of peace, joy, wellbeing, concord, and security; a relief and repose from labors and burdens; a peace and contentment of body, soul, and mind in God. While these elements of rest available through fellowship with God will be consummated in the heavenly rest, they are at least partially a present reality. These elements of rest are one way of describing the quality of life which may be seen as fleshing out the qualitative dimension of leisure.

## CONCLUSION

A study of the biblical concepts of Sabbath and rest suggests that leisure may encompass two dimensions—a quantitative and a qualitative: one related to our doing and the other to our being. First, the Sabbath teaches a rhythm to life—six days of work and one of non-work. Second, the Sabbath inculcates a spiritual attitude for a person’s basic posture in relation to God—one of rest, joy, freedom, and celebration in God and the gift of His creation. This qualitative dimension to life, descriptive of leisure, can also be seen in the biblical concept of rest which ranges from a pleasant, secure, and blessed life in the land to a peace and contentment of body, soul, and mind in God.

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