

**Rest: Body and Soul**  
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A few days ago, I was talking to one of my neighbors, catching up on his summer.

In the course of our conversation he told me that his life is so full he has to stay up till 12 or 1 every night to get everything done.

Between his work, his volunteering in the community, helping his kids with homework and shuttling them to activities, and the stuff he does around his house, he feels he just can't get to everything unless he stays up past midnight every night, with no real let up over the weekends.

I know him pretty well. I said, "I know a guy who wrote a book about hurry and busyness and time and rest. I bet he'd be happy to give you a copy of his book. You might find it worth reading."

He figured out I was talking about myself. He grinned and said, "Maybe he could read it to me while I take a nap."

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My neighbor is not alone in feeling overwhelmed by all he has to do.

It's interesting. We all know that COVID led to a massive reset in our use of time. Everybody threw overboard all but the absolute essentials, and suddenly we experienced margin in our lives that some of us had never experienced before. Once we got a taste of that, we all determined we were never going back to the craziness.

Well, here we are six years later, and the findings are interesting.

On the one hand, now that we're "back," most people *are* actually doing a bit less. We are commuting less, socializing less, attending church less, serving less in our churches and communities, and traveling less. Overall that adds up to each of us spending an average of a half hour more in our homes each day, plus getting about twenty more minutes of sleep each night. That's significant.

But . . . the research also shows that, despite having a bit more time on our hands, we don't feel any more rested. Many Americans describe themselves as feeling "chronically rushed," "overwhelmed," and "emotionally exhausted."

We all feel just as maxed out as we used to, maybe even more so. The numbers are striking. 78% of Americans report that they badly need a break, and one in five cannot remember the last time they felt fully rested.

And though we have a bit more time on our hands, how we spend that time is not necessarily encouraging. We drink and abuse drugs more – significantly more. There was about a twenty percent increase in alcohol and drug use during COVID, and that never came back down once we got through the virus. We are part of a culture that is choosing to medicate itself in the face of how overwhelming life is.

And we spend more time on our screens. We aren't just trying to medicate ourselves, we're trying to distract ourselves from how disagreeable and difficult life is.

Between an average of 185 phone or smartwatch checks a day, plus general internet surfing, shopping, gaming, and streaming entertainment, the average adult in the US spends roughly five to seven hours a day on screens *outside of work*.

For teens and younger adults that number often reaches eight or nine hours. A day.

Yesterday on my way home I watched a man get off a bus in front of me and step right in front of a moving car. He never saw it. He was looking at his phone.

We're filling our time, but with what? The nutritional equivalent of Twinkies and Ho-Hos. Junk food.

The word entertainment literally means "hold you in between," suspending you between meaningful activity and meaningful rest. Which of you – after spending an evening binge-watching Pokemon Master Journeys, or shopping for things that till a moment ago you didn't know existed but suddenly you can't live without – which of you have gotten up from a blank screen, and said, "Wow, what a restorative way to spend my time! I feel so refreshed!"

That's not rest. And that's not all.

We desperately need rest, but we are part of a culture that frowns on it. As sleep researcher Kat Duff put it, our culture is "enamored with wakefulness." Not only does our world not encourage rest, it views it with suspicion, putting "resting" and "being a slacker" in pretty much the same category.

72% of Americans say rest is something you have to earn. But how do you know when you've done enough to earn it? Little wonder that 40% say that when they relax, they feel guilty. We are busy working, and then we are busy not working, but we rarely truly rest.

Can you identify with any of that?

Crazy busy has become the norm again. And that's especially true in the fall – which seems to be coming sooner with each new year.

Work gears up. School kicks in. And we're back to shuttling our kids around town from activity to activity. Sports have become year-round commitments, with travel sports taking over every weekend, as we scramble to help our kids keep up in a driven world.

Falling victim to what I call Offspring Deprivation Anxiety, we cram our kids' schedules with endless activity in the dread fear that by leaving one thing off their childhood resume we will deprive them of a meaningful future, leaving God out of it completely. And in doing so, we train them to be just as driven as the world they are joining.

In my book *Tranquility*, I talk about the impossible position the world puts us in when it comes to time and hurry and busyness. The world's solution to the problem of time is just like my neighbor's: *just try to fit an infinite number of things into a finite amount of time.*

But God calls us to a very different sort of life, in this as well as in almost every other dimension of life. The biblical perspective on time is not to try to cram everything in, but to *use our God-given gifts to do those things God calls us to, to live a life of his making and leading, and to trust him with the rest.*

That last phrase is an intentional play on words: "trusting him with the rest" not just meaning we entrust to him and his care all those things that we personally are not called to do. But also "trusting him with the rest" meaning receiving the gift of coming to a full standstill in the presence of God and experiencing from him the gift of true replenishment, body and soul

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This morning, before we jump any further into the fall, with its endless demands and its frenetic activity, and before we read another headline that convinces us that being anxious and overwhelmed and exhausted all day and all night really is a reasonable way to spend our time, I want to take a few minutes to remind us what the Bible teaches us about rest. And then I want to tell you just a bit about my summer leave.

If we were to sum up what the Bible teaches about rest, I think we could do so in three sentences.

**First, from God's perspective, rest is not only a necessary thing, it's a good thing.**

We are resentful of resting, seeing it as something that gets in the way. And our culture is suspicious of rest, framing it as a necessary evil rather than as a good and necessary thing.

But the God who created us knows what we need. He knows that as human beings we are limited in our strength and capacity, and he knows our experience of life is tiring and often overwhelming, so he holds out rest to us as a good.

Interestingly, according to the first couple of chapters in the Bible, when God created Adam and Eve, he created them just in time for them to watch the day come to an end and the night to start, because the Hebrew day began with sunset. So before they did anything to earn it or need it, they were given rest. And then the next day, their first full opportunity to enjoy the daylight, was the Sabbath, a day given over to rest. Clearly rest as earned reward is not a biblical perspective.

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton has Adam and Eve standing under the starry sky on the first night of their existence saying, "You made the night, Maker Omnipotent, and you made the day. We extol your goodness infinite, both when we wake and when we seek, as now, your gift of sleep."

From a biblical perspective, we work from a place of rest, not rest once we're finally done working. Have you ever thought about that? Does the rhythm of your life reflect that?

## **Second, God gives us rest.**

Rest for the body comes to us as a gift from God in three forms.

### *1. The first form is nightly sleep.*

God designed us with a need for regular physical rest and recalibration, and then he gave us sleep as a gift to meet that need.

Psalm 127.2

In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves.

Just to be clear, that passage doesn't mean that if you struggle with sleeplessness or insomnia God doesn't love you. That's not the point at all. The passage is saying sleep is a gift from God, and part of how he gives us sleep is by reminding us that he will faithfully provide for all of our needs. So we don't need to be anxious, staying awake late into the night, scrambling to meet our own needs. We can lie down to a full night of sleep and trust him and his faithful care for us.

As Psalm 4.8 says,

In peace I will lie down in peace and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

*2. The second way the gift of rest comes to us is in a weekly day free from work.*

Deuteronomy 5.12-15 says

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.

Sabbath – *shabbat* – means "stop." God calls us to a day each week when we stop doing the things that have to be done on the other six days.

It's interesting that, as we go from the Old Testament to the New, Jesus doesn't abolish this day each week of coming to a full stop. Instead, he reaffirms it, reminding us that it is a gift from God for our replenishment.

Mark 2.27

He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for – that means, is a gift for – humanity."

Sharon and I have practiced a pretty rigorous sabbath for more than thirty years, drawing a hard line around doing any work or anything that feels like work: paying bills, powerwashing the deck, cutting the grass. At first we thought there was no way we could afford to take that time. Now we think there's no way we could afford not to take that time.

*3. And the third way the gift of rest comes to us from the Lord is in the form of times of retreat, when we pull away from the press of life into solitude and silence in the presence of the Lord.*

That's a rhythm that Jesus himself practiced, often heading out to remote places to have time with his Father (Mark 1.12, 1.25, 1.45, 3.13, 6.46, Matthew 14.13, 14.32, 15.29), and it's a practice into which he invited his disciples as well, such as when he selected them as his disciples, or when they returned from their two-by-two ministry and he said to them

Mark 6:31

Jesus said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

Jesus invites us to step out of the press of life, out of the relentless routine, and to retreat, spending unrushed time with the Lord in creation, enjoying quiet and being alone in his sweet company

One of the places I went for a retreat this summer is a beautiful new retreat spot just fifteen minutes from here called Eremos Acres. I would sure encourage you to consider taking a retreat there.

*Eremos* means solitary or secluded. It's the word used in the New Testament to describe both the places where Jesus went when he got away to pray and spend time with his Father, and the place where he invited his disciples to go when he said, "Come away with me to a *quiet place*."

The God who made us knows we weren't made to skimp on our sleep and fuel ourselves with energy drinks and just keeping going and going. That's the sort of life encouraged by the driven world around us, but that's not the sort of life God calls us to or made us for.

He gives the gift of rest: nightly sleep, a weekly day free of work and anything that feels like work, and regular times when we can step out of the rhythm and retreat into solitude and silence and creation.

Are you receiving his gifts of rest? Is there something you need to adjust in your life to make more room to receive those God-given gifts of sleep and sabbath and retreat?

**But there's more. He doesn't just *give* us rest. He *is* our rest.**

This is one of the most important and most overlooked secrets of the Christian life.

Psalms 62.1 says:

My soul finds rest in God alone.

When we give our lives to God, he doesn't just give us things we need. He gives us *himself*, which, as it turns out, is the one thing we need most, because he is the thing for which we were made.

As human beings we were made by God to find our rest and our peace and our satisfaction in relationship with him, him alone.

As you know, Jesus occupies the epicenter of the Christian faith. And as he walked through this anxious and overwhelmed world, and carried out his ministry, Jesus took that truth about God, that our souls will find rest only in God, and insisted that it applied to himself, God in the flesh. He said:

Matthew 11.28-30

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.

What does it mean to find rest for our souls in Jesus?

Think about why we are restless, and what creates unrest in us.

- Our alienation from God? Jesus died to close the distance between us and God, to reconcile us to himself.
- Our alienation from ourselves? Jesus came to heal us, to put us right, to make us whole.
- The meaninglessness of life? Jesus came to make our lives rich with meaning by inviting us to live our lives for him. He rescues us from a life bent in upon ourselves, opening us up toward God and out toward others in a life of love.
- Questioning our own value? Jesus looks into the eyes of those he loves and says, "You are precious and honored in my sight. I love you so much that I gave my life in exchange for yours."
- Confusion about who we are? When Jesus died on the cross, he purchased us for himself. We belong to him. We are his.
- Uncertainty about our direction in life? Jesus takes us by the hand and leads us forward, leading us by his Spirit into the life he has for us.
- Feeling alone? Jesus promises he is with us, wherever we are, whatever our circumstances. There will never again be a time when we are alone. And he places us in an eternal family of brothers and sisters who love him and love us.
- Overcome by pain and suffering? Jesus promises to work all things together for good, to redeem the difficult and make it beautiful for those who are his, a promise his own death and resurrection bear out.
- Fearful about the future and where things are going in this broken and divided world? Jesus is the king, seated on the throne. He orders all things in keeping with his good and loving purposes, and one day God will bring all things together under his feet.
- Overwhelmed by the presence and power of evil around us? Jesus will return and judge the world, and when he does, he will rid the world of all that is dishonoring to God. The work he began in us he will carry through to completion. He will make us glorious beings who perfectly reflect him, and we will enjoy eternity in his presence in a world without death or tears.

Jesus says, "The rest and peace and satisfaction you long for is found in me alone. Come to me, and I will give you rest for your souls."

Have you heard him say those words to *you*? Have you found your rest in him? Have you put your trust in him, the one for whom you were made?

If you're outside the Christian faith and you're curious what that means, talk with a Christian friend and ask them how they have found rest in Jesus. Or come be part of my Conversation about Christianity in a couple of weeks and let's explore that together.

With that quick overview of what the Bible teaches about rest, let me turn now to my summer renewal leave, and how I experienced the gift of rest, body and soul.

### **Renewal Leave Report**

As you may be aware, out of a desire to honor these biblical principles about rest, Covenant has a very generous renewal leave policy that makes provision for the members of our ministerial staff to get away for an extended time of rest and prayer and study every seven years.

This summer it was my turn, and I was blessed to enjoy a renewal leave, starting in mid-May and wrapping up a couple of weeks ago.

The first two weeks ended up being spent in recovery from my collar bone surgery – which is doing great – and two more weeks later in the summer went to denominational work, but I ended up having eight very rich weeks of renewal.

During those eight weeks Sharon and I drove ten thousand miles through fifteen states and visited seven national parks. I took four retreats and twenty five hikes and went kayaking twice and sat under the night sky five times. I saw bears and a moose and some bighorn sheep, and along the way I collected about 81 rocks – all from places where you are allowed to pick up rocks.

Right at the start of the summer, God gave me Psalm 52.8 as a passage that felt like God's invitation to me for during the leave, a picture of what it looks like simply to look to him and flourish in his presence and find my rest in him. It says:

But I am like an olive tree  
thriving in the house of God;  
trusting in the Lord's unfailing love.

God's invitation was just to seek him, pursue him, enjoy him, rest in him.

Here's a quick picture of what the summer held as I did so:



The leave began for Sharon and me with a gathering of our four kids, their spouses, and our six grandkids in Greenville, South Carolina. Several other times during the rest of the summer we had some great unrushed connections with different portions of our family.



One of the most important themes of the summer was time in creation. Years ago I became persuaded that for me, and I think for most of us, time in creation as a spiritual discipline was crucial to my spiritual growth and depth.



When I first came here twenty-nine years ago, I made a commitment to get a day away in creation at least once a month.



Over the past ten years I've let that commitment slip, but this summer I was immersed again in the beauty of creation, and I come back with a renewed commitment to spend regular time with God outside in his world.



One of my four retreat this summer was at nearby Eremos Acres, one was in Michigan on Lake Huron, one was in South Carolina on Lake Wylie,



and one was at a ranch in the Sangre de Cristo mountains in Colorado.

Speaking of retreats, the example of my dear friend Richard White has led me to take an annual prayer retreat at the start of every fall. It's coming up in a couple of weeks. During that time I'll be praying for every one of you by name. If there is a specific way I can pray for you, please let me know. There's information about how to do that in the eNews.



While I was in Colorado I went up to Denver for our denomination's General Assembly and I was asked to lead an assembly-wide discussion on the first day. Franki and Brently were also there for the assembly, which was a gift, and Franki took this picture of me as I was readying to lead that conversation.

I know some of you may have heard some things about the assembly, and would like to know more about where we came out on some of the issues we were wrestling through. I actually found where we landed to be incredibly encouraging. Michelle and Brently and I plan to tape a conversation about the assembly later this week to fill you in. I think you'll be encouraged by what you hear.

This summer I also spent extended time studying the Book of Ephesians, which will be the focus of our preaching for the academic year, starting next Sunday on our fall Kick-Off Sunday, and going all the way through to Memorial Day.

About a year ago, God led me to that book as the next chapter in our conversation together. You may know Ephesians is where our calling comes from. Ephesians 5.2 says, "Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." What an incredible book. I can't wait to dive into it with you.



The last two weeks of the summer leave concluded with a grand trip out to Utah, Arizona, and Colorado.



I love the scale, the grandeur, and the beauty of the West.



The mountains, the canyons, the cliffs, the layers of rock – it's breathtaking.



Seeing how God used natural forces as a tool in his hands to sculpt wonders like Delicate Arch – amazing.



Certainly one of our favorite places was the slot canyons near Page, Arizona. The way the torrents of water running through these canyons carved the sandstone canyons is just incredible. How God puts his glory on display in this world of his!



Psalms 95:3-7 says

The Lord is a great God,  
a great King above all gods.  
He holds in his hands the depths of the earth  
and the mightiest mountains.  
The sea belongs to him, for he made it.  
His hands formed the dry land, too.  
Come, let us worship and bow down.  
Let us kneel before the Lord our maker,  
for he is our God.



We didn't just see his artistry in the mountains and canyons around us, but we also saw it whenever we looked up at the sky overhead, and saw a different work of art every day.



Psalms 16:1-2 says

The heavens declare the glory of God.  
The skies display his craftsmanship.  
Day after day they continue to speak;  
night after night they make him known.

And not only the daytime sky. I mentioned that I spent time under five different night skies throughout the summer. I don't have a good picture, but I've never seen the sky clearer. It was incredible.



After a week in Utah, we drove to Dillon, Colorado, where we met up with four friends we've known for 37 years: Michael, Beth, Rick and Kathleen.



During the nine years we lived in Colorado Springs, we were in a small group with them, and we spent lots of time together, sharing meals, sitting for each other's families, coaching each other's kids, and we often took our families up to Dillon on vacation together.

The six of us have stayed close, connecting via Zoom once a month. And now, all these years later, the six of us gathered in Dillon at the very place we always stayed. What a gift to have that time of not only of remembering but also of reconnecting and making new memories.

And on the last night we were together, we grabbed a bunch of sleeping bags and went out on the golf course to gaze at the stars and watch the meteorites shoot through the sky, and we laid there in silent awe.

Psalm 104.1-2

O Lord my God, how great you are!  
 You are robed with honor and majesty.  
 You are dressed in a robe of light.  
 You stretch out the starry curtain of the heavens.

The summer was rich with time with the Lord, with whom I had so much time, in his word, in prayer, and amid the beauties of his creation. It held lots of joyful time with family and special time with friends. But one of the greatest joys of the summer was unquestionably spending extended, unrushed time with my best friend.



When we are here in the normal rhythm of life, one of our favorite ways to spend time is to go for walks hand in hand. What a privilege to be able to do that in such amazing places all across the country! We sure enjoyed our time together.

Sharon and I just want to thank the Session and the Trustees for making these renewal leaves available to me and to the rest of our ministry staff. What a valuable gift!

We want to thank the amazing Covenant staff for covering things so capably in our absence. What a gift you gave us! There wasn't one moment, even in the midst of some of the challenging pastoral needs you faced, and ministry programs you led, when I had even a moment's concern about your ability to serve this church family well.

And we want to thank you, our Covenant family, for giving us the gift of this time away. It was a sweet gift, and we come back full, and rested, and ready to jump back in.