

## Failure to Rest: *Battling Unbelief* Hebrews 3:7-4:1

*"So we see that they were unable to enter (His rest) because of unbelief"*

**Busyness.** It is a common word that we all experience, much like "breathing" or "eating". It is the cry of our day. "I'm so busy, I'm so tired, I have no time" have become liturgical prayers that hope for the response, "Lord have mercy". Just think about how we respond to common questions:

*How are you?* "Busy."

*How's work?* "Busy."

*How are your kids doing?* "Their lives are so busy. I feel like I'm part chauffeur, part event coordinator."

*How was your vacation?* "I'm tired! I need a vacation after my vacation."

*How are things in your marriage?* "We are like ships passing in the night and too exhausted to talk."

This level of busyness is not going away, is only ramping up, and has created dire consequences. We have created new words and phrases like "stressed out", depression, and "burn out". Collectively these have glaring consequences. *"Stress, depression, and burn out leads broken bodies, broken minds, broken marriages, broken hearts, and broken churches* ("burnout" is the cause of 20% of pastoral resignations)<sup>1</sup> Our present culture is known as the **"Age of Anxiety"** or the **"Age of Depression"**, and as a result, tranquilizers have become the most widely prescribed drugs, to which one observer commented, "Millions of suburbanites seem to find that 'the good life' is only endurable under sedation."<sup>2</sup> Though pressure of life is nothing new, there is an unprecedented shift in our culture toward running ourselves into the ground, ever pursuing **more**, more speed, more efficiency, more production, and more possessions. In fact, we have more of everything in our culture, except happiness.

We live in a day of unprecedented technological conveniences. We have vacuum robots that sweep and vacuum on their own, access to any kind and type of food everyday, we can physically get around the world within hours and days, not weeks and months, and we can communicate with people 24 hours a day, around the world, in various ways. We are the most connected generations, yet one of the loneliest. We seek to be on our phones and tablets in public, and seek to be constantly connected in private, sacrificing both real relationships and true solitude and contemplation with the Lord. All of these has not led to more rest, but less. Futurist such Julian Huxley in the 1920's and John Maynard Keynes in the 1930's believed that since the world would produce all it needed, the biggest problem would be what to do with time of leisure. In 1967, testimony to a Senate subcommittee claimed that by 1985 people could be working just 22 hours a week or 27 weeks a year.<sup>3</sup> Clearly this has not been the case, since people are working at a bigger breakneck pace today than ever before. What futurists, sociologists, and the government failed to calculate is the capacity of our heart to want more than we can have, and the more we have the more we have to keep, and the more we keep the more stress and pressure we feel. Any margin in life is tapped, **REST is a bad word** (or a mythical word), and burnout is the norm.

**But this is NOT THE WAY God intended.** How do we live and think differently? Or, are you feeling exhausted, busy but still discontent, always moving but never feeling like you are moving anywhere? As I walked with the families of this church, talked with people in our community, and prayerfully

<sup>1</sup> David Murray, "RESET: Living a Grace-paced Life in a Burnout Culture", p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swenson, M.D. "Margin", p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Swenson, 114.

considered what we needed to hear from God's Word, I was convinced we needed to get to a place of **Biblical REST**. This primarily comes out of a ***theological and pastoral concern***, both from what the Bible addresses and what we observe. We are going to anchor this discussion in Hebrews 3 and 4, but it will also bring us back to the beginning at Creation and to the End, where we will find final rest. Our spiritual health, joy, and even the gospel is at stake.

### **Theological Concern of our burnout culture**

- **Busyness without rest is slavery, where rest was designed for freedom -**

"Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor 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....that your male servant and your female servant **may rest as well as you**. *You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath.*" **Deuteronomy 5:12-13, 15**

In the OT, the nation of Israel found itself in Egypt for 400 years, of which 250 were lived as forced slaves. They made bricks. They made them everyday of the week, all week, month by month, year by year, generation by generation. The Egyptians believed that by building to the glory of Pharaoh, they would bring glory to themselves. In other words, they had an insatiable desire to earn the pleasure of their gods, so the Israelites became a means to that end. When God brought them miraculously out of Egypt into the wilderness, they were able to **finally rest**. This did not mean they did no more work, but now they lived in freedom. They would gather manna on six days, but NOT on the seventh, as some realized as they found none on the seventh (Exodus 16:7). Even during the busiest time of year in an agrarian culture, during plowing and harvesting, they would rest (Exodus 34:21). This **distinguished Israel from other nations who had to work seven days a week to try to earn a living**.

Nothing has changed. Some are always willing to work non-stop to get ahead. But functioning this way is NOT FREEDOM, but bondage to a world system that is controlled by the prince of the power of this air who convinces that we can never stop.

- **Rest required faith in the Lord, busyness requires faith in self -**

Rest is an expression of **freedom, but also a declaration of faith**. When we are willing to stop with MORE TO DO, when there are things left on the table, we recognize that God is in control, not us. ***"Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."*** (Psalm 46:10) God rested on the seventh day not because He was tired, but because there was no more to create, since everything created was good (and very good). Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Father because His work of redemption was finished (Eph. 1:20). When we rest, ceasing from activity and action we recognize that God does not need us, that He is at work, and that we can trust Him.

### **Pastoral Concern of our burnout culture:**

- **Busyness without rest deceives our measure of maturity**

We parade our busyness as a badge of honor. In fact by responding to questions of "how's it going" with "I'm so busy", we feel justified that what we are engaged in is important and valuable. Tim Kreider wrote an article called "The Busy Trap" in which he said *"Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness. Obviously your life cannot be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, and in demand every hour of the day."* Now, to clarify, there will be

a certain activity attached to faithfulness. We never get the impression that Paul took much time off. Yet even as we observe the life of Jesus, who's life was full and full of meaning was never rushed and took intentional time with his followers and His Father. Busyness alone is a terrible barometer of maturity, since we'd expect someone with no knowledge of God to act this way.

*"Presence of extreme busyness (without intentional and meaningful rest) in our lives point to deeper problems - a pervasive people pleasing, a restless ambition, a malaise of meaninglessness...you have dangers your never have time to consider."*<sup>4</sup>

- **Busyness without rest can steal our joy**

God designed us worship him and created us perfectly so that we would not die and had no tension between worship and work, rest and restlessness, leisure and laziness. However the Fall corrupted all of this, and we are now **finite** creatures who get tired, get more and more broken physically, and have inherent limits. God KNOWS THIS because He designed us. **When our lives are frantic and frenzies, we are more prone to anxiety, resentment, impatience, and irritability.** This is NOT a revolutionary idea. God gave us common graces like sleep, good food, exercise, and **usual rest** because we cannot do everything. When we sleep we are reminded that the world goes on without us, and God is still in control. When we realize that God *stopped* creating means we do NOT have to have the next thing to be happy and can have contentment with what we DO have. **Margin is the space between our load and our limits.** It means that we must determine what's possible for us as finite creatures and then schedule **less than that.** In that margin is typically joy, contentment, opportunity for service, the inefficient expression of love, and rest in the Lord. Busyness will kill us, so we must kill it first.

- **Busyness without rest can rob our heart**

In a world filled with both **complexity AND opportunity**, busyness can steal our hearts from what's most important and valuable. In Mark 4, Jesus tells the parable of the sower, where seed was spread and where plants grew, weeds grew also. The thorns of life were the **cares of this world** and **the desire for other (more) things** (4:19). This means that we get caught up in all the things going on (car upkeep, school, work, budget, family, church, sports, etc), AND a growing desire for more things. As we get more, we have to maintain more, and what we own begins to own us. Our gaze begins to be fixed on our things, problems, and we look down for satisfaction and happiness, and are left wanting. Where we store and find our treasure is where our heart will be (Matt. 6:21).

We are all in this boat. We face the stresses of change, mobility, expectations, time pressures, work, relationships, frustration/anger, lack of control, fear, and competition, which leads us to be **overloaded** with activity, choice, debt, decisions, fatigue, media, technology, possessions, people, commitments, noise, information, and general hurriedness. It's no wonder we have **physical** responses like rapid pulse, increased blood pressure, palpitations, ulcers, unexplained fatigue, weight changes, insomnia, etc. Its no wonder we have **heart** reactions like depression, withdrawal, apathy, anxiety, impatience, anger and hostility, followed by **behavioral** symptoms, like quick bursts of anger, bossiness, changes in sleeping patterns or sexual desire, accidents proneness, reckless driving, compulsive shopping, alcohol, increased use of tranquilizers, and sudden tears. This can easily lead something to break, called **burnout**, where you simply give up.<sup>5</sup>

Are you needing rest? Let's unpack *how the Bible addresses these things*. We'll look at the foundational aspects for a couple of weeks before drawing some practical and implicational conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Deyoung, "Crazy Busy." p. 31

<sup>5</sup> Swenson, 49-52.

**Failure to Rest is not a new problem** (7-11)

*"Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways,' As I swore in my wrath, **They shall not enter my rest.**'"*

**Rebellion of Israel**

- **Context of Hebrews** - The book of Hebrews points out the greatness of Jesus, that He is better than the angels (ch. 1-2), better than Moses (3-4) and the High Priest of a better covenant. What's interesting about how the Holy Spirit had the author of Hebrews write is the fact that he is basically an exegete of the OT, applying what happened to OT Israel with Judaism of his day. He will apply the physical rest of the promised land with Spiritual rest offered in Jesus. So we have to be cautious and careful to understand this context as we seek to apply the type of rest that is talked about. This section is basically a direct quote from **Psalms 95:7-11**, which would have been read by those in exile.
- **History of Israel's rebellion** - There are two main rebellions cited here. In **Exodus 17**, the people tested God, grumbling and complaining that He had not provided water for them and they thought they'd die. "Is the Lord among us or not?" was their cry, and God was none too pleased. The second was in **Numbers 14** as they gathered at Kadesh Barnea on the brink of entering the promised land. When the spies returned with a despairing report, the people mutinied and wanted to desert. Because of this, God said that all those **20 years and above would die in the wilderness, never finding rest** (14:26-30). This group saw the work of the Lord for years, experienced deliverance from Egypt, yet DID NOT BELIEVE, which caused outward rebellion. Because of this, they could NOT ENTER REST.

**Lesson from Israel**

There is no rest for the rebellious of heart. Rest is truly found when we are at peace with God, and that can come by faith in Christ alone. This cautionary tale is even more concerning when we realize that the people of Israel saw and experienced God's power and care first hand, and STILL did not believe.

**Failure to Rest is an issue of our heart** (12-19)

*"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an **evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another day, as long as its called 'Today', that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'** For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear to that they would not enter **His rest**, but to those who were disobedient? **So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.**"*

**Problem of an unbelieving heart**

God wants our heart. Our minds comprehend and understand, but our conviction to follow and affection to worship come from our heart. This why the people of Israel could **see** with their eyes, comprehend God with their minds, but disbelieve in their heart. When our heart goes astray, it simply means that we trust ourselves instead of God, we rely on ourselves instead of Him, and when He does not deliver the way we expect Him too, we respond in rebellion, complaining, and desertion.

- **Sin is by nature deceitful and deceiving** - Sin is by nature deceitful, meaning it does not play fair and is based on a lie. The people of Israel were self-justifying, meaning they thought they were in the right, were reasonable, and that God SHOULD have responded. Heart drift is rarely the full frontal attack but will always clip away at our flanks. It will replace the best with good things, the most valuable with lesser things. Sin wants us to be satisfied with far less than God wants for us. It calls us to question God's goodness at every pass. And this all happens in slow, unseen ways that may not even change our externals but carries our hearts away.
- **You can experience God's grace, but still be in unbelief** - The reality of our salvation (and the teaching of Hebrews) is the fact that faith in Christ will persevere until the end. God saved some out of Egypt that were not saved to enter the promised land. Just because we experience God's grace in one area does not mean we have entered into the rest of salvation. Persevering to the end is a mark of true faith, not a prerequisite we can conjure up. In other words, true saving faith will trust in the Lord until the end, and will continue on throughout our lives. This means that rest, real rest, is that of salvation and that true rest will be missed if we do not truly believe in Jesus for salvation.

### Solution for an unbelieving heart

- **Exhort each other continually** - We should never underestimate the importance of the church body and believers in our lives. The caution is to **"take care"**, a strong command that we would give to someone heading into grave danger. We are told to **encourage or exhort** each other, which means to come along side and speak into our lives in both cautionary and positive ways. What is at stake is belief, and with belief is the very heart of salvation. It is true we cannot lose our salvation, but it is an awareness that there is a war raging against us. There is a reason we are so committed to things like Shepherding Groups. We commit to each other around God's Word to make sure we continually call each other back to the center of faith, which is Christ our Lord. Yes, we care for each others physical needs, but that is a secondary issue. We need each other to make sure we are not being swayed by the world's system, our own desires, and the constant cares of the world. That means I need positive reassurance but also hard conversations that people are willing to have with me.
- **Decision to see the lie and understand our heart** - *"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless indeed you fail to meet the test."* (2 Cor. 13:5). God calls us from the illustration of Israel, to the Psalms, to Hebrews that our hearts can easily go astray, can be found to be unbelieving. It is the call to each of us to make sure that our hearts are not being hardened. That means: *we respond in humility, knowing our propensity to think we are right.* We engage with others who can see us more objectively. We seek Christ in the Scriptures, which gives us a clear understanding of who He is, not what WE THINK He is. We yield ourselves to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, who guides us in the truth and convicts of sin.

### Failure to Rest can be changed, starting TODAY

#### The hope and caution of TODAY

*"The sheer pace of life affords us many excuses for sacrificing the important on the altar of the urgent. (D.A Carson)"*

The emphasis throughout Hebrews 3 is "TODAY". That means yesterday was important, but decisions need to be made in the present, not banking on something we did in the past. This is very hopeful on

one hand, as we can make decisions today to change the trajectory we've been on. If you are overly exerted and exhausted, its because you are not resting in the Lord. This can change today. You can confess your sin of unbelief, repent of the fact you've been trusting in your own works, and yield yourself completely to Christ. Even if you are a true believer, there are undoubtedly areas of your life that you have NOT believed God or trusted Jesus. The caution is this: far too often we think that because we made some sort of decision in the past, the present does not matter. Nothing could be further from the truth. True faith will always and continually follow and persevere. Today is the day because there may not be a tomorrow for us.

### **The object of belief and REST**

So how do we rest? Where do we start? *"Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* (Matt. 11:28). Before we start with the practical sides of sleep and cessation of activity, we begin by evaluating our relationship with Jesus. This is consistent with marriage counseling and financial planning: how do we fix our relationship with our spouse or money? We correct our relationship with Jesus. Rest is found in a person, not a gimmick. Rest is found in the work of Christ, not in the effort I can give.

*"Amazingly, Jesus does not call us to leave our comfort zone but to find it. He invites us to cast weariness and labor aside and to seek the comfort of His rest. If the invitation seems odd to those who know nothing other than their own haggard effort, the proffered remedy sounds stranger still. Jesus does not advise us to organize our lives more responsibly and create some space for rest. **Jesus speaks of rest as something we find.** This kind of language reveals an important dimension of rest. It is **objective in the sense that it lies outside of ourselves. Rest is not an inner state that can be produced by thinking a certain way or placing ourselves in the right conditions. It is obtained only by entering into a relationship. When we find Christ, we find rest.**"<sup>6</sup>*

So I encourage you to stay with us these few weeks, to be open to evaluate, to be honest about where you are at, and to ask the Lord to soften your heart. None of us here can cause you to believe, but we can call you to it. My prayer is that we will all make decisions by His grace to continually place our trust in the Lord and find the freedom to rest.

**Next Week: Hebrews 4:1-13:**

*The Foundation of Rest: Entering God's Rest*

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<sup>6</sup> John Koessler, *The Radical Pursuit of Rest*, p. 28.