

# ***Rhythms of Rest***

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The legendary jazz pioneer Miles Davis once said, “It’s not the notes you play. It’s the notes that you don’t play.” The classical composer Claude Debussy said something similar a couple of hundred years before that, “music isn’t just about notes but the spaces between them.”<sup>1</sup> We could say the same about our life: it consists not just of what we do, but also of what we don’t do.

The majority of our brain space and effort goes into doing, whether it’s our accomplishments at work, studying to get a degree, our kid’s activities, our house projects, or the next deadline that we have to meet. So much of our days are consumed with what Charles Hummel called “the tyranny of the urgent”.

My life is very much that way. I run on passion, ambition, and caffeine. For someone who used to be a procrastinator, there’s a cruel irony in my life that much of my work life consists of one deadline after another, between ministry and my seminary classes. I bought a fixer-upper house that always has projects that need to be done. Often at the end of the day, it’s hard for me to let myself relax because my mind is scanning for something I might have forgotten to do or what I need to do next. When I’m not careful, my brain has a really hard time flipping the switch to being “off”, which is something my wife has had to deal with far too many times. Sometimes I might be physically present, but my brain is somewhere else!

**Psalm 127** was written during a time where it would be challenging to leave work, too. Scholars believe that this Psalm was likely written during the construction of the second temple in Jerusalem, which was a project that had a lot riding on it. Earlier, the Babylonians had come in and obliterated their city, the city walls and their beloved temple. Now they were trying to rebuild all of it. The old temple was glorious and storied as God had met with the Jews there in powerful ways. I would imagine the architects and builders were pulling some all-nighters and emergency meetings as they were stressed about the monumental task of building this temple that encapsulated the identity of their people and was the place where God would meet with them.

Then, there’s the fact that their city was vulnerable to attacks from outsiders. Especially because their wall was reduced to rubble, the Israelites would be like sitting ducks until this vital source of protection was rebuilt. There would be guards every night watching over the city, ready to sound the alarm if invaders came. It would be hard to relax under that kind of circumstance!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/arts/music/silence-classical-music.html>

Finally, this was an agrarian culture. Their very survival depended on soil, rain and sun; conditions that they didn't have control over.

It's in this environment that the psalmist is reminded, "Unless we do what we do with God, all this work will amount to nothing." In **Psalm 127:2**, he lands on the phrase, "**God grants sleep to those he loves.**" This Psalm helps us to know that **rest helps us to live from who we are rather than what we do.**

There's a saying, "We're human beings, not human doings." **Psalm 127** helps us to ask how we can live from our being rather than our doing. It helps us to hang up our illusions of self-sufficiency and never-ending drive to productivity. We naturally like to put great emphasis on what it is that we do. It's not unusual when we first meet someone, we'll ask, "What do you do?" It's not that what we do is bad... in fact, work is a part of God's good creation!

Work existed before sin ever came into the picture. In the very beginning of scripture, God *creates* the heavens and earth. God likes to work. He's an artist and a builder who makes order out of chaos. When God creates humanity, in Genesis 2, we see that he puts them in charge of creation and they get to work.

Your work is good, whether it's administrating, teaching, cleaning, building, managing, or homemaking, it's something God designed to be fulfilling. Your work matters. Like God models in creation, we take things that are wild and chaotic then make it ordered and fruitful. We partner with God in co-creating the world that we live in.

But there comes a time to step back from the work and rest. Genesis shows us that after God spent 6 days working, creating and building, he rests. He stops. He puts down the work to savor and enjoy what he had.

In musical terms, rhythm is written not just as notes that are played, but also rests that create the space for the music that takes place. In our life, there are rhythms of work and rest. Effort and relaxation. Breathing in and breathing out.

No one modeled this kind of living better than Jesus. Not only do we want to follow his example, but as we read the Old Testament scriptures, we find that it is all fulfilled by him. So let's look at some of the rhythms that Jesus modeled so that we can live like he did, out of a sense of who we are as God's children rather than what we do.

### **Rest Rhythms:**

**First, Sleep.** "Go to bed" might be the most profound spiritual advice some of us need to hear today! Again, the Psalmist states, "**God grants sleep to the ones he loves.**" God created our bodies that need to rest and replenish. Sleep is our body's built-in way of accepting our own limitations as finite creatures. If you average 8 hours of sleep a night for your life, it means you spend 1/3 of your life unconscious! Rest is a major part of life! Or at least it should be...

For our productivity-obsessed culture, it's no wonder that the second most traded commodity after oil is coffee! Caffeine blocks the chemical that tells us it's time to rest up. Often times, people wear their lack of sleep like a badge of honor. If we share, "I only got 3 hours of sleep last night," we are only partially complaining but mainly bragging. Who needs sleep when there are things to do?

Sleep helps to even out our emotions, which is why lack of sleep increases depression and anxiety. Lack of sleep leaves us unable to deal with stress. We are more likely to get sick when we don't have sleep and many diseases are linked with lack of sleep. In fact, the less you sleep the more likely you are likely to die and early death. Our life itself is dependent on how much sleep we get!<sup>2</sup>

When you look at Jesus' ministry, you get the idea that he knew how to pace his life and live from a place of rest and trust in God. In **Mark 4**, he's in a boat with his disciples crossing the lake when a massive, life-threatening storm breaks out. Waves are crashing into the boat and it's nearly filled with water. What's Jesus up to while this is happening? **Mark 4:38**, *"Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion."*

The disciples are freaking out, preparing to meet their maker and Jesus is blissfully napping! They wake him up and ask him, "Don't you care if we drown?" Jesus rebukes the wind and waves and the storm dies out. **Verse 40**, *He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"* It takes faith to sleep the way that Jesus did. It takes faith for us to rest in the fact that God is still working even when we aren't. Jesus' ability to sleep in the midst of imminent death shows his trust in God to take care of him.

Sleep is spiritual. It's an act of trust. It's a way of entering into rest in God. When I first started to try and pray, I would find it wasn't unusual for me to feel sleepy. I was embarrassed that on occasion, I had dozed off while I was attempting to pray! I've heard others over the years express the same thing. Maybe that isn't an accident.

God created us as embodied creatures, we have bodies that are meant to glorify God! Sometimes we treat what's happening in our body as a nuisance rather than a signal. If you're trying to pray and find that you're distracted or sleepy, that's not a sign that your prayer isn't working, it's a sign that God is working on you! If you notice your emotions are heightened or you have anxiety, God wants you to pay attention and take care of yourself. Pete Scazzero says, "The body is a major prophet, not a minor one." The Holy Spirit is speaking to us through our bodies telling us to put down our phones, eliminate our distractions and go to bed at a reasonable time.

One of the practices I've started to have in my life is silent retreats. It helps me to have a few days with just myself and God to pay attention to whatever He might be telling me. Last year, I went out on my retreat and began with a time of talking to Jesus about my life. I was coming from a hectic season of school and work and I had a lot to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/20/630792401/sleep-scientist-warns-against-walking-through-life-in-an-underslept-state>

say to him. After I was done talking, I just listened and paid attention to whatever I sensed from Holy Spirit. I asked God what He wanted me to do. I waited. Before too long, I began to feel how exhausted I was. Unplugging from my phone, computer and life showed me how tapped out I had become. I felt this sense that Jesus was inviting me to rest. So, I lied down and took the most glorious nap I think I've ever had. Over the next couple of days, I spent time reading, journaling and praying, but the one takeaway I had from that retreat was that God blessed me with absolutely incredible sleep. He knew what I needed! The best spiritual practice many of us can do today when we get home is to take a nap!

The second Rest Rhythm, **Solitude**, is another way that we rest in God. The **Gospel of Mark** starts its first chapter with the major ways that Jesus began to bring God's kingdom to earth. It's a busy chapter with a flurry of activity: that of Jesus' opening time of ministry. It had some big moments: his baptism, the gathering of his disciples and some heavy-hitting miracles and healings. Immediately after all of this activity, we see in **Mark 1:35** " *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.*" Jesus' ministry was so connected to his being with God that the Gospel-writers take note. This was a repeated pattern of Jesus' ministry. Before and after some of the greatest works, Jesus goes alone to be with God. If he needs to leave the noise and the work behind to commune with God, what does that say about us?

Solitude is an important way that we tend to our own souls by being still in God's presence. It's "when fears are stilled and striving ceased." It's being replenished in God's presence as we spend time with Him.

Solitude is different than isolation. Isolation is characterized by loneliness and the kind of emptiness that sets in when we are relationally cut off from God and people. Isolation tends to leave us feeling empty and deflated. Solitude is accepting the invitation to rest in God's presence. So how do we practice solitude well?

Scripture, prayer and journaling are great ways to practice solitude. It's easy to think that when we spend this kind of time with God, to imagine that if we're doing it correctly, then we feel very Zen, peaceful and connected. It's like when someone lines up their Bible with their latte and they're #blessed, we think that our solitude needs to look a certain way. But in my experience, solitude has more going on than that. Sometimes it's me fighting with a life situation and processing it with God. Sometimes it's me wondering where God is. Other times it's me feeling confused or frustrated by a Bible passage that I'm reading. At first, when I felt that way, I felt like somehow I was doing it wrong.

But, in fact, I think this is such an important part of solitude. It's where we wrestle with things and then, at the end of it, relinquish control to God. It's where I can lay out my frustrations or be where I really am in the presence of unconditional love. When I'm allowed to be who I really am in the presence of that kind of love and grace, it changes

me and how I look at the world! If you are looking for how to enter into time with God, one of my favorite prayers to pray is this: *“Here I am, here you are, here we are together.”* Sometimes I will just pray this and enjoy sitting with God.

The third Rest Rhythm is **Sabbath**. The word “Sabbath” comes from the Hebrew word “Shabbat.” It literally means “to stop.” It can also mean “to delight.” Jesus observed the Sabbath every week. In fact, this is one of the places where he got into trouble with the religious leaders of his day. For them, they turned Sabbath into an obligation to observe their empty religion. But Jesus observed Sabbath in the way it was intended to be understood, which was as a time where healing could take place.

Pete Scazzero defines the Sabbath as a twenty-four-hour block of time where we do 4 things: stop, rest, delight and contemplate. We stop work, enjoy rest, practice delight, and contemplate God.<sup>3</sup>

Danielle Strickland says, “Sabbath is not just rest from making things. It is rest from the need to make something of ourselves.”

We practice Sabbath not to have some empty religious observance, but as a part of our identity as being liberated in Christ. God wants us to live out of a life that’s sustained by Him, which means that we have permission to stop. It’s how we let God define us rather than the false gods of accumulation and accomplishment. Sabbath is when we accept our limitations and savor the blessings that God has given us.

Sabbath comes from the very fact that after God created the world, he rested. John Mark Comer notes that **Genesis 2:3** says, *“God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.”* Before this, God created the animals and blessed them, telling them to multiply. God then does the same with humanity... blessing them and telling them to be fruitful and multiply. Then God blesses a *period of time*. What does this tell us? That time in Sabbath rest has the capacity to give life. Life is tiring, even when you love the things that you do. Sabbath is the way that God restores our life. So if you are feeling weary, how about trying a day where you stop, rest, delight and contemplate the Lord?

Finally, the fourth Rest Rhythm is **Surrender**. The end of Psalm 127 almost seems like a different Psalm than the first 2 verses. It talks about the blessing of children. How is this related to sleep and not working in vain? In fact, I have long loved the first 2 verses of Psalm 127 but have had a really hard time with this latter portion.

My wife and I have struggled with miscarriages. Is this Psalm saying that I don’t have God’s blessing since I wasn’t able to have kids? If we look at all of scripture as being fulfilled in Jesus, that can’t be the case. Jesus never had kids in the biological sense, yet his life was so full that billions of people around the world seek to follow him and be like him.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/4-steps-to-a-meaningful-sabbath/>

What this Psalm is getting at is that childbearing is much like sleep in the fact that we control neither of them. Think about it: do you make yourself go to sleep? No. You create the conditions where it's possible, but sleepless nights tell us we don't always control our rest. Same with childbearing.

My wife and I have experienced this painful reality firsthand. We're overjoyed now that we're pregnant and are amazed at the process of how a child is created. The child grows exponentially every couple of weeks, but we don't really do anything to make it happen!

Resting in God is a process of taking off the pressure to be in control. Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, shows us what this is like when he is filled with dread over the suffering he's about to endure. Then he prays, **Luke 22:42** "Yet not my will, but yours be done."

This is a prayer of surrender. It's not to say that God wants us to go through suffering, but that even when we do, it is still used to bring about his Divine purpose. God is working to build something of our lives that will be lasting.

Psalm 127 reminds us that we are limited and finite, but that ultimately we can trust in what God is building. When we do that, new life will spill out from our own. This is the good work that Jesus invites us to take up where we partner with him and live from a place of surrender and trust.

Let's pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you which one of these rhythms God is calling you to take.