

What Does It Mean to Rest in God?

A Biblical and Theological Exploration for Those Who Have Never Learned to Stop

I used to think that rest was something you earned. You worked hard enough, long enough, and then—if you were lucky—you got a weekend, a vacation, a moment to breathe. Rest was the reward at the end of striving. Maybe you've lived that way too.

But the more I've sat with Scripture—really sat with it—the more I've realized that I had the whole thing backwards. In the Bible, rest isn't the reward for work. Rest is where you begin.

Part One: It Started With God

We don't have to look very far. Genesis 2:2–3 tells us that on the seventh day, God finished the work He had been doing, and He rested. Right there, in the very first pages of creation, before sin, before struggle, before any of the complexity of human history—God rested.

“On the seventh day God finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His work.” — **Genesis 2:2**

Now here's what strikes me: the Hebrew word used here is Shabbat (שַׁבָּת). It doesn't mean collapse. It doesn't mean exhaustion. Shabbat means to cease, to stop, to desist—not because you can't go on, but because the work is complete. God didn't rest because He was tired. The universe doesn't tire out its Creator. He rested because what He had made was good, and He wanted to delight in it.

Hebrew (Gen 2:2): Shabbat (שַׁבָּת) — to cease, to stop intentionally; from a root meaning ‘to sit down’ or ‘to desist’. Not passive exhaustion but active completion.

This reframes everything. Rest, from its very first appearance in Scripture, is not about running out of steam. It is a declaration: the work is done, it is good, and now I receive it. Rest is an act of trust and delight, not a sign of weakness.

And here's the uncomfortable question that follows: if the omnipotent God of the universe built rest into the very rhythm of creation—why do we think we're exempt?

Part Two: Rest as Freedom—A Word to Former Slaves

When God gave the Sabbath command at Sinai (Exodus 20:8–11), He anchored it in creation. But when Moses restates the commandments in Deuteronomy 5, something remarkable happens. The reason changes. God doesn't say “because I rested.” He says:

“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 5:15**

This is no small thing. Israel had spent generations in Egypt where no one asked them when they needed to stop. Pharaoh's economy ran on their exhaustion. They were defined by their output. Their worth was measured in bricks.

And now God says: rest. Not as a luxury. Not as a reward. But as a sign of who you are now. You are no longer a slave. Slaves cannot rest—they rest only when their master permits. Free people can stop, because their identity is not tied to their productivity.

Slavery says: “If I stop, everything falls apart.”

Freedom says: “God is my provider, not my productivity.”

The Sabbath wasn't just a day off. It was a weekly declaration of identity.

Centuries later, when we carry our phones to bed, when we check email on vacation, when we feel guilty for sitting still—we have not escaped Pharaoh's logic. We've just internalized it. The taskmaster is now inside us.

Biblical rest invites us to ask: what does my busyness actually say about what I believe? If I cannot stop, perhaps I do not fully trust that God sustains the world while I sleep. Perhaps my productivity has quietly become my god.

Part Three: The Manna Lesson—Learning to Trust Tomorrow

In Exodus 16, God provided manna for the Israelites in the wilderness. Each morning it appeared. Each day they gathered enough for that day. And here's the key detail—if they tried to store it overnight (except before the Sabbath), it rotted. Worms. Stench. Gone.

God forced His people into a rhythm of daily dependence. You could not hoard. You could not control. You had to believe, every single morning, that God would show up again.

For those of us who struggle to rest, this story cuts close. We hoard. We stockpile contingencies. We stay up late planning because we're afraid of what tomorrow might bring if we're not prepared. But the manna lesson is this: the scarcity you fear is not real. The God who provided today will provide tomorrow. Rest is only hard when we don't actually believe that.

Part Four: Rest Is a Presence, Not a Place

One of the most tender verses in the entire Old Testament appears in a moment of crisis. Moses has just received devastating news that God may withdraw His presence from

Israel following the golden calf incident. Moses, terrified, presses God for reassurance. And God responds:

“My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” — **Exodus 33:14**

Do you see it? Rest is not a destination. It is not a quiet room, a cleared inbox, or a perfect day with nothing on the calendar. Rest is a Presence. Specifically, it is the presence of God.

This is why you can be externally busy and internally at peace. And this is why you can have all the outward conditions for rest—a holiday, silence, freedom from obligation—and still feel hollow and anxious. True rest is relational. It is found in walking with God, not in escaping responsibility.

Much of what we call burnout is not simply working too many hours. It is serving God without being with God. It is running on our own strength while using spiritual vocabulary. Moses understood: if the Presence doesn't go with us, we shouldn't go at all.

Part Five: Jesus, the Weary, and the Well-Fitting Yoke

We arrive now at one of the most well-known and least-understood invitations in all of Scripture:

“Come to Me, all 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**

The Greek word for rest here is *anapausis* (ἀνάπαυσις)—a beautiful word meaning relief, refreshment, intermission. A pause that genuinely restores. But notice that Jesus pairs it immediately with a yoke.

Greek (Matt 11:28): *Anapausis* (ἀνάπαυσις) — relief, refreshment, intermission; from *anapauō*, to give rest, cause to cease. Used in the Septuagint for Sabbath rest.

Greek (Matt 11:30): *Chrēstos* (χρηστός) — translated ‘easy’ but better rendered ‘well-fitting’ or ‘kind’; used of a yoke custom-made for the animal wearing it so it doesn’t chafe.

A yoke, in the ancient world, was a wooden beam fitted across the necks of two working animals. It bound them together so they could pull as one. A *chrēstos* yoke was one that had been shaped specifically to the animal—one that didn't chafe or wound.

Jesus is not offering rest as the absence of engagement with life. He's offering to carry the weight with us—and in doing so, to replace the crushing yokes we've been carrying with one that actually fits.

Think about the yokes you're wearing right now. The expectation that you must always be productive. The fear that you're not enough. The pressure to prove, to perform, to never slow down. Jesus didn't give you those. You picked them up somewhere along the way—from a parent, a culture, a wound. And He's inviting you to lay them down.

Many of us are exhausted not because life is hard, but because we are carrying yokes Jesus never gave us.

Part Six: Mary and Martha—Choosing Presence Over Proving

Luke 10 gives us one of the clearest portraits of the rest-striving tension in the Gospels. Martha is hosting Jesus. She's working, preparing, serving. Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening. And Martha finally snaps.

“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” — **Luke 10:40**

What strikes me about Martha is that she wasn't doing anything wrong. She was being hospitable. She was serving the Lord. But listen to Jesus' response:

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one.” — **Luke 10:41–42**

Greek (Luke 10:41): Merimnaō (μεριμνάω) — to be anxious, to be pulled in different directions; from merizō (μερίζω), to divide or split. Anxiety literally fragments the soul.

Anxiety, in the Greek, is a word that means to be pulled apart in different directions. Martha wasn't just busy—she was fragmented. Her soul was scattered across a hundred concerns. And it was making her resentful, not just tired.

Mary had chosen something different. Not laziness. Not passivity. She had chosen presence. And Jesus says this is the ‘one thing needed’—the part that will not be taken away.

We live in a culture that rewards Martha and forgets Mary. Busyness signals virtue. Rest gets called laziness. And yet here is Jesus, in someone's living room, saying: being with Me matters more than performing for Me.

Part Seven: The Soul That Finds Rest in God Alone

The Psalms are the prayer book of the people of God—and they are full of people who are not resting. People who are fleeing, grieving, questioning, crying out. And yet, in the middle of it all, David writes:

“Truly my soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from Him.” — **Psalms 62:1**

Hebrew (Ps 62:1): Dumiyāh (דומיה) — silence, stillness, quiet trust; not the absence of noise, but the quieting of the inner life. Used of the stillness before dawn or the calm of a settled sea.

The Hebrew word here—dumiyah—is almost untranslatable. It's not just silence. It's the kind of deep inner stillness that exists even when the world around you is loud and threatening. It's the quiet of a settled soul.

And Psalm 23 takes us even deeper. “He makes me lie down in green pastures... He restores my soul.” The Hebrew word for ‘restores’ is shuv (שוב)—to return, to come back home. Rest is not just relaxation. It is restoration. It is being brought back to yourself.

Hebrew (Ps 23:3): Shuv (שוב) — to return, turn back, be brought home; the same root as the word for repentance (teshuvah). Rest involves a kind of homecoming to the self God made.

Notice also: “He makes me lie down.” Not ‘He suggests.’ Not ‘He waits until you're ready.’ Sometimes God forces us into rest—an illness, a closed door, a season of waiting—precisely because we will not stop ourselves. The Good Shepherd knows when the sheep need to lie down, even when the sheep don't.

Part Eight: The Final Rest—Finished Work

All of these threads find their fullest expression in the book of Hebrews. The writer, drawing on Psalm 95 and the pattern of Israel's wilderness failure, argues that the Sabbath rest God has always intended is not just a day—it is a life lived from the finished work of Christ:

“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from His.” — **Hebrews 4:9–10**

The theological logic here is profound. Jesus, on the cross, said “It is finished” (John 19:30). The Greek is tetelestai (τετέλεσται)—a commercial term meaning ‘paid in full.’ The debt is cleared. The work of redemption is complete. There is nothing left to earn.

Greek (John 19:30): Tetelestai (τετέλεσται) — perfect passive indicative of teleō; meaning ‘it has been completed’ or ‘paid in full.’ A term used on paid receipts in the ancient world.

This means that at the deepest level, the restlessness so many of us carry is a theological problem. We keep striving as if there is something left to prove—to God, to others, to ourselves. But the Gospel says: the work is done. Christ finished it. You can stop now.

You do not rest to earn God's love. You rest because you already have it, entirely, unconditionally, forever.

How Did Jesus Rest?

It's worth asking this question directly: what did rest look like in Jesus' own life? Because if anyone had reason to be perpetually busy—with three years to save the world—it was Him.

We see Jesus withdrawing to lonely places to pray (Luke 5:16). We see Him sleeping in the stern of a boat during a storm (Mark 4:38). We see Him attending weddings and dinner parties. We see Him sitting with individuals when crowds were waiting.

Jesus was not efficient by modern standards. He let interruptions happen. He lingered. He stopped for the one when He was on the way to the many. His rest was rooted not in having nothing to do, but in complete trust in His Father's timing. He didn't have to carry the weight of outcome—that was the Father's. His job was simply to do what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19).

That is the model for us. Rest is not the absence of work—it is work done from a place of trust, rather than fear. It is holding our responsibilities lightly, because we are not ultimately in control, and we were never meant to be.

For Those Who Have Never Rested Before

If you've read this far and you're thinking, “I don't even know what rest feels like,” you're not alone. Many of us grew up in homes where stillness was unsafe, where our value was entirely conditional on performance, where slowing down felt like a threat.

Learning to rest is genuinely hard. It can bring up anxiety, guilt, and an odd sense of purposelessness—because if we've been running for years, stopping forces us to face ourselves. That is exactly why it is spiritual work.

Start small. Five minutes of stillness is a beginning.

Name the yoke. What are you carrying that Jesus didn't give you?

Practice receiving. Read Scripture slowly. Sit in it. Don't rush to application.

Let God be God. Put down one thing today that you have been carrying as if the world depends on it.

Find community. Rest is easier when others model it for you.

The invitation of Jesus is not to a productivity system. It is to a relationship. “Come to Me.” Not ‘go to a spa.’ Not ‘sort out your schedule.’ Come to Him. That is where rest begins.

Closing Reflection

| “Where are you striving when Jesus is inviting you to rest?”

Take that question with you today. Not as guilt—but as an invitation. The God who rested on the seventh day, who freed slaves and gave them Sabbath, who came in flesh and said “Come to Me”—that same God is offering you something today that the world cannot give and cannot take away.

Rest. Holy, trusting, soul-restoring rest.

It was always meant for you.

Resting in God: A Deep Dive

Biblical • Theological • Personal

This study guide is designed for personal use alongside the devotional. Work through each section slowly—a passage or two per day is better than rushing through. Leave space to sit with the questions.

Section One: Key Words That Change Everything

The Bible was written in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Koine Greek (New Testament). Many of the richest nuances in the text are carried by specific words that don't translate perfectly into English. Understanding these original words unlocks the depth of what God is saying about rest.

שָׁבַת

Shabbat

[Hebrew]

Definition: To cease, to stop, to desist. From a root meaning to sit down or to settle.

Why it matters: God's rest in Genesis 2 was not exhaustion—it was intentional cessation. Shabbat implies that the work is complete and the worker chooses to delight in what has been made.

דִּמְיָה

Dumiyāh

[Hebrew]

Definition: Silence, stillness, quiet trust. The deep inner calm of a settled soul.

Why it matters: Psalm 62:1 uses this word for the soul's rest in God. It is not the absence of noise but the quieting of interior anxiety—possible even in turbulent circumstances.

שׁוּב

Shuv

[Hebrew]

Definition: To return, to turn back, to be brought home. The same root as teshuvah (repentance – literal meaning is to turn around).

Why it matters: Psalm 23:3: 'He restores my soul.' Rest is a homecoming—a return to God and the you he originally made, before the damage of striving and fear.

ἀνάπαυσις

Anapausis

[Greek (Koine)]

Definition: Relief, refreshment, intermission. A rest that genuinely restores rather than merely pausing.

Why it matters: Jesus uses this word in Matthew 11:28. It suggests not just stopping but being genuinely renewed—the kind of rest that puts something back that was taken.

χρηστός

Chrēstos

[Greek (Koine)]

Definition: Kind, well-fitting, gracious. Used of a yoke custom-crafted for its wearer.

Why it matters: Matthew 11:30: ‘My yoke is easy.’ The word doesn’t mean effortless—it means it fits. A chrēstos yoke doesn’t chafe. Jesus’ call on your life is shaped specifically for you.

μεριμνάω

Merimnaō

[Greek (Koine)]

Definition: To be anxious, to be pulled in different directions; from merizō, to divide or split.

Why it matters: Luke 10:41: Jesus uses this of Martha’s distraction. Anxiety is not just a feeling—it is a fragmentation of the soul. Rest, by contrast, is an integration.

τετέλεσται

Tetelestai

[Greek (Koine)]

Definition: It is finished / paid in full. A perfect passive verb—a completed action with ongoing effect.

Why it matters: John 19:30: Jesus’ final word. The debt is settled. The work is done. All our striving to earn, prove, or justify ourselves was rendered unnecessary at this moment.

Section Two: Passage-by-Passage Study

Genesis 2:1–3 — The Sabbath of God

Cultural context: In the ancient Near East, the creation accounts of surrounding cultures (like the Babylonian Enuma Elish) depicted their gods resting as a form of relief from labor. Our God rests differently—not from fatigue but from completion. His rest is an act of royal, sovereign delight.

Q1. How can we change our minds, now understanding what God’s day of rest meant? (it is done, It is complete, to sit in the completion.)

Your response:

Q2. Where in your life do you struggle to believe the work is ‘complete enough’ to stop?

Your response:

Deuteronomy 5:12–15 — Rest as Freedom

Cultural context: Slaves in the ancient world had no legal right to rest. The Sabbath command given to Israel was economically and socially radical—it applied even to servants and animals. This was not how other nations organized their labor.

Q3. In what ways have you internalized a ‘Pharaoh’s logic’ where rest feels like a threat or a failure?

Your response:

Q4. What would it look like to practice Sabbath as a weekly act of freedom and identity—not obligation? Who would you include?

Your response:

Exodus 16 — Manna and Daily Dependence

Cultural context: Manna is described as a fine, flake-like substance that appeared on the ground each morning with the dew. Scholars have debated its exact nature, but theologically its significance is clear: it could not be stored (except on the sixth day), forcing Israel into daily dependence on God's provision.

Q5. What do you tend to 'hoard' emotionally or practically because you fear scarcity?

Your response:

Q6. How might trusting God for 'daily bread' change the anxiety you carry about tomorrow?

Your response:

Matthew 11:28–30 — The Easy Yoke

Cultural context: Rabbis in first-century Judaism spoke of their interpretation of the Torah as a 'yoke.' To take on a rabbi's yoke was to accept his teaching and way of life. Jesus is contrasting His yoke with the heavy burden of Pharisaic legal observance—613 commandments, many of which had been elaborated into impossibly detailed rules.

Q7. List 2–3 'yokes' you are currently carrying that you don't believe Jesus placed on you.

Your response:

Q8. What would it mean to 'learn from' Jesus rather than just following rules? How is this different from how you usually approach faith?

Your response:

Luke 10:38–42 — Mary and Martha

Cultural context: In first-century Jewish culture, women were not typically included in the circle of a rabbi's students. Mary sitting at Jesus' feet—at His feet being the posture of a disciple—was itself a counter-cultural act. Jesus not only permits it but affirms it, elevating her choice above the culturally expected role.

Q9. Do you identify more with Mary or Martha in this season of your life? Why?

Your response:

Q10. What does 'the one thing needed' look like in practical terms for you today?

Your response:

Psalm 23 and Psalm 62 — The Shepherd and the Silence

Cultural context: The image of God as shepherd would have resonated deeply with Israel's pastoral culture. Shepherds in the ancient Near East didn't drive their sheep from behind (as in Western practice)—they led from the front. The sheep followed because they knew and trusted the shepherd's voice.

Q11. Psalm 23 says 'He makes me lie down.' Has God ever forced you into rest you wouldn't choose yourself? What happened?

Your response:

Q12. What does 'dumiyah'—that deep inner stillness—feel like for you? Have you ever experienced it? When?

Your response:

Hebrews 4:9–11 — The Sabbath-Rest That Remains

Cultural context: The writer of Hebrews is making a sophisticated argument drawing on Psalm 95 and Genesis 2. The ‘rest’ God promised Israel in Canaan was a type—a shadow—of a deeper rest that Joshua could not give them. That rest is now available in Christ, entered by faith rather than conquest.

Q13. How does knowing that Christ’s work is ‘tetelestai’ (finished) change how you approach your relationship with God?

Your response:

Q14. Where are you still trying to earn something that Christ has already paid for?

Your response:

Section Three: Theological Framework

Understanding rest biblically requires holding several theological truths together:

Rest is Trinitarian

The Father rested on the seventh day (Gen 2). The Son offers rest and models it (Matt 11, Luke 5:16). The Spirit produces the ‘fruit’ of peace (Gal 5:22)—which is rest at the level of the soul. Rest is not a spiritual technique; it is participation in the life of the triune God.

Rest is Eschatological

Hebrews 4 situates our present rest within an eschatological framework. We enter ‘today’ (v.7) into a rest that is both present reality and future hope. We taste now what will be fully realized in the new creation—a world without toil, sorrow, or striving (Rev 21:4).

Rest is Formational

Sabbath was not given to Israel simply as a day off. It was a practice designed to shape identity—to re-orient the soul weekly around who God is and who they were in Him. Regular rest forms us; the absence of it deforms us. We become what we practice.

Rest and Justice are Connected

The Sabbath extended to servants, animals, and even the land (Lev 25—the Year of Jubilee). To refuse rest for those in your care is a justice issue, not just a management issue. A theology of rest that doesn't address the systems that prevent rest for the vulnerable is incomplete. This includes people and children in your household, your domain, family etc

Q15. Which of these theological angles on rest is most new or challenging to you?

Your response:

Q16. How might your theology of rest affect the way you treat others—employees, family members, those who serve you?

Your response:

Section Four: Personal Application

Diagnostic: Where Are You on the Rest Spectrum?

Rate yourself honestly from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) on the following:

1. I regularly have time where I am doing nothing productive and I feel at peace with that.	Rating: ____
2. I can sit in silence for 10 minutes without reaching for my phone.	Rating: ____
3. I do not feel guilty when I take a day off.	Rating: ____
4. I feel connected to God's presence even during busy seasons.	Rating: ____
5. I am able to stop working when the day is over without anxiety about what's undone.	Rating: ____

30-Day Rest Practice

Choose one practice from each week to try. Note what you notice in the journaling space below.

Week	Practice Options	What I Noticed
1	5 minutes of morning silence before looking at your phone. Read one Psalm slowly before bed.	
2	One hour on the weekend with no agenda, no productivity. Simply be. Notice your discomfort.	
3	Identify one 'yoke' you are carrying that Jesus didn't give you. Write it down. Pray to lay it down.	
4	Take a full Sabbath day (from sundown to sundown, or whatever 24-hour period works). No work, no to-do lists, no errands.	

Q17. After working through this study, how has your understanding of rest changed?

Your response:

Q18. Write a prayer in response to what you've discovered. Let it be honest.

Your response:

Further Reading & Resources

For those who want to go deeper, the following are theologically sound and personally accessible:

- *The Rest of God* by Mark Buchanan — One of the most readable and pastoral books on Sabbath for contemporary Christians.
- *Sabbath as Resistance* by Walter Brueggemann — A short, prophetic treatment of Sabbath as counter-cultural resistance to the ‘acquisitive society.’
- *Working the Angles* by Eugene Peterson — Explores the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Scripture, and spiritual direction for pastors and Christians alike.
- *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero — Addresses the connection between emotional health and genuine spiritual rest.
- *Hebrews (NICNT)* by F.F. Bruce — For deeper exegetical study of Hebrews 4 and its Old Testament background.
- *A Hebrew and English Lexicon (BDB)* by Brown, Driver & Briggs — The standard scholarly reference for Hebrew word studies.
- *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG)* — The standard scholarly reference for Koine Greek word studies.

May you find, in Christ, the rest your soul was made for.

