

RETHINKING

# Rest

WHY OUR APPROACH TO  
**SABBATH**  
ISN'T WORKING



**GREGORY D. HALL**

FOREWORD BY JOHN H. WALTON

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BY  
GREGORY D. HALL

*Deep River*  
B O O K S

“Hall provides a wonderful exploration of a question at the heart of the biblical story—what does it look like for the world, and humanity, to be at rest?”

—Jon Collins, Cofounder  
BibleProject

“Our contemporary culture has no idea what it means to experience the rest God intended. What’s even more tragic is this—Christians have also lost their way. Gregory Hall invites us to rethink the meaning of ‘Sabbath rest.’ He rightly contends that God offers us something far beyond a lazy Sunday in a hammock. This book delivers a robust and fully developed biblical concept of the rest God intended for his children. The truths are not only profound, they are life-changing and full of grace.”

—Morris Dirks, Founding Director  
SoulFormation

“We live in a tired world. What people really need is a clear understanding of true rest. Hall offers this clarity by relating the Bible’s ancient Near Eastern context to the biblical story. Then he helps us practically apply Jesus’s offer of rest to our modern context. Many teachers write about sabbath today, but this work stands alone as truly unique in its approach and application.”

—Chip Bennett, Lead Pastor  
Grace Community Church, Sarasota, Florida

*Rethinking Rest: Why Our Approach to Sabbath Isn't Working*

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## FOREWORD

What does it mean for God to “rest” (Genesis 2:2–3) and what does commandment four mean when it indicates that people should somehow be part of that “rest” (Exodus 20:8–11)? What did Sabbath observance require for the Israelites? Were the Jews of Jesus’s time reading it correctly? How do Jesus’s statements about the Sabbath enhance our understanding? What does Jesus mean when he offers to give “rest” (Matthew 11:28)? Should Christians be concerned about Sabbath observance today?

So many questions! These are all legitimate inquiries and concern interpretation of Scripture, understanding the ancient world, theological issues, and correlating Old Testament and New Testament, as well as considering modern appropriation and practice.

Some Christians have developed extreme lists of requirements for observing Sabbath; others happily dismiss it as part of the Law that should be considered obsolete. Stepping into this flurry of confusion, Gregory D. Hall here leads us through a careful and insightful study of the issues. He offers sure-handed guidance through the murky waters that so often bog us down as we seek to understand God’s Word on this important and debated topic.

Combining the use of storytelling and careful textual work, Hall helps us to reevaluate many of the preconceptions about Sabbath that readers often have. In the process, he helps us reimagine what the Church is and does, and how we, as Christians, should understand our place in God’s plans and purposes.

If Christians can absorb Hall's ideas and put them into practice, they will find themselves freed from the tyranny that their presuppositions have imposed on them. They will be able to appropriate the essential truth of what it means when God rests as well as to regain an understanding of the rest that God offers to his people and to which he calls them. I do not believe that I am overstating when I suggest that this book can revolutionize your thinking about God, the Bible, the Church, and your own relationship with God.

John H. Walton  
Professor of Old Testament  
Wheaton College

## Additional Online Resources



[RethinkingRest.com](http://RethinkingRest.com)

At the beginning of each chapter, you'll see the "Additional Resources" QR code. This code links you to [RethinkingRest.com](http://RethinkingRest.com), where you will find free companion resources for the *Rethinking Rest* book. These resources are available for individual and/or small group use.

Suggestions for Scripture Pre-Reading

Bible Lessons

Discussion Questions

Teaching Videos/Audio

Author's Q&R Forum

Suggestions for Additional Study

Electronic Endnotes





## CHAPTER 1

# WHY RETHINK REST?

I don't know if you've noticed, but rest isn't working.

I'm not trying to say that the definition of rest is "not working." I mean: the concept of rest today is broken.

Humanity is a big group of tired people, and rest is proving to be more elusive than anyone ever imagined. As with most complex topics, people have come to very different conclusions about rest. Our ideas have become fractured and splintered to the point where most people don't really know what it is or how to get it. We are tired, and we have no idea how rest should interact with our exhaustion.

I'll use myself as an example. It seems like I'm tired most of the time. Sometimes I'm physically tired. At other times I'm mentally or emotionally exhausted—or all of these at once! I used to think that all I needed was a vacation. I often romanticized the idea. I was sure "the dream vacation" would include the ingredients to restore my soul. My wife Lisa and I would decide on a destination, negotiate the time off work, and buy the tickets. I imagined lying in a hammock under a

palm tree on a beach somewhere.<sup>5</sup> I was sure that was where I would find rest.

But here's how my vacations usually play out: After getting to the destination, it takes me about two days to unhitch from regular life. About four days in, I start getting the uneasy feeling that I should be getting back home. When it actually is time to return, that "travel day" returning home is usually exhausting. After we arrive back, unpack, and get ready to head off to work, I often feel more tired than before I left.

Please tell me I'm not alone here!

That "vacation" idea of rest can't be the answer we're all looking for. It's so temporary. It's so fleeting. It's so *expensive*!

So, where else should we look to sort out the mess of our unrest?

Many look to the Bible to fix what is broken. You might be one of those. It's a good place to look, because the Bible has much to say about rest—it is first mentioned in the story of the creation in Genesis, and the idea is woven all through the Old and New Testaments. With all that the Bible offers regarding rest, I'd like to think those who regularly read the Bible would have better "rest success" than those who don't. But I don't think that's true. I think Christ-followers are often just as confused as everyone else.

Part of the problem is that we've truncated the idea. What do I mean? "Sabbath" is the word Bible-believers might use if pressed to define "rest." But the weekly sabbath is only a small subcategory of rest. Rest is a robust and fully developed biblical concept. Godly rest is so much more than the weekly sabbath.

### **We've Made the Sabbath into a Cul-de-sac Conversation**

I think most people are familiar with the idea of a cul-de-sac. It's a type of street that dead-ends. It has a place to turn around, but it is not a through road. There's no exit other than going back from where you came.

We English speakers borrowed "cul-de-sac" from the French.<sup>6</sup> It's a term that literally means "the bottom of the bag." Like when you put your hand in a bag of potato chips and get to the bottom (because you've eaten

all of them). You just got “cul-de-sac-ed” (that’s not French; I just made that up) because there’s no place to go but back to the top of the bag.

That’s what sabbath conversations have become in the church today. They are cul-de-sac conversations. They don’t have any outlets. Let me explain what I mean.

There are so many different ideas about what sabbath might be that people rarely get past a simple definition of the term. Most people think sabbath is really only about the fourth commandment,<sup>7</sup> but the fourth commandment is only a small sliver of what the Bible says about sabbath, and most churchgoers can’t even agree what that commandment means. Following are some of the contemporary views based on interpretations of this commandment.

*Friday Night to Saturday Night:* We know the seventh-day sabbath in the Old Testament was a twenty-four-hour period of time beginning at sunset on Friday night. Some people in the church think Christians should return to a sabbath observance that mimics this Old Testament commandment.

*Sunday’s the Day:* Some Bible readers notice in the New Testament that the church would gather on Sunday. These folks would argue that Saturday was the old covenant sabbath, but that Christians today are under a new covenant and that the example is to observe sabbath on Sunday.

*Any Day . . . or Part of Any Day:* Others think there’s nothing special about one day over any other. They think God has given us more flexibility than that in the new covenant. They would say God doesn’t really care what day it is. In fact, a Christian might even be able to piece-meal parts of days together throughout the week to fulfill the sabbath idea.

*Christ Is the Sabbath:* Others look at some of the statements that Jesus made regarding rest and conclude that the idea of sabbath is really just something that points to Jesus’s ministry. But what does that even mean? While it sounds like a good “church answer,” this type of view is really hard to pin down and seems to lack “boots on the ground” practicality.

Those are just some of the ways people pursue defining the sabbath.<sup>8</sup> Because of the diversity in opinions, our modern-day conversations have made the sabbath a theological cul-de-sac. We open up the topic, and we think we're heading down "Sabbath Street," but we get so caught up on how to even define the term that we find ourselves at the bottom of the bag with nowhere to go. People get stuck in debates about what day it should be observed, or what types of things people should be doing on those days. There's no exit out of those conversations; they don't lead anywhere else.

In reality, the topic of biblical rest is a neighborhood of highly interconnected streets. And when we are able to back away from our current cul-de-sac conversation and see the whole neighborhood of rest, that's when we can begin to understand what God means when He offers "rest."

### **I Don't Think That Means What You Think It Means**

One of my favorite movies is the 1987 film *The Princess Bride*. Many of the actors from that film have gone on to have long and successful careers. For several of them, this was the film that propelled them forward. It is also a movie that has provided many memorable one-liners, like:

"People in masks cannot be trusted."<sup>9</sup>

"Never get involved in a land war in Asia."

"Mawwiage is what brings us together today."

Once, in a wedding I was officiating, I began the ceremony with this "mawwiage" line from the movie's wedding scene. It was received with a few isolated snickers in the audience, and a big smile from the groom. I enjoy trying to recite quotable movie lines in everyday circumstances, just to see who might notice.

One character in the movie, Vizzini, a "Sicilian man of genius," has a favorite word: "inconceivable." He says it quite often. In fact, he says it so often that he ends up using it in ways that are contrary to the word's meaning. At one point in the movie Vizzini thought he had killed the story's main character by cutting the rope he was utilizing to scale the

“Cliffs of Insanity.” When Vizzini sees that his foe hasn’t died, but is clinging to the side of the cliff, Vizzini uses his favorite word to describe the situation.

“Inconceivable!”

Another character, after having heard Vizzini use this word several times throughout the movie, responds, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

I think some of us have gotten to exactly that point in our conversations about biblical rest. We use the term . . . but I don’t think it means what we think it means. So let’s get out of the cul-de-sac, come back to the Bible, and start at the beginning. I propose we build our perspective on the whole of the biblical narrative. We will see how the Bible begins with a creation at rest in Eden under God’s rule and authority. We will see how that rest was disrupted and how God pursues His creation to reestablish restful rule.

The purpose of this study is to better understand biblical rest and to be able to negotiate the neighborhood well enough to arrive where God desires us all to land: in a place of true rest.

### **There Remains a Sabbath Rest**

We could begin our trip through the biblical “neighborhood of rest” at the creation, in Genesis, and weave our way all the way through to the end of the story in Revelation. We will make our way back to Genesis soon enough, but I’d like to begin in the book of Hebrews. This is by design. There’s a pivotal discussion in Hebrews 3–4 regarding the New Testament understanding of biblical rest. This discussion is unique because it directly connects the rest a believer experiences to the rest that God experiences. This connection is foundational if we are going to begin to rethink what rest is.

We are not going to look at that whole passage now. We’re just going to begin using it as a base camp from which to start our journey. There’s a specific passage in Hebrews 4 that will launch us back to the beginning of the story in Genesis.

Is sabbath rest really a concept on which modern believers need to focus? Let's consider what the author of Hebrews has to say:

For if Joshua<sup>10</sup> had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore, let us be diligent to enter that rest. (Hebrews 4:8–11)

This passage mentions the Old Testament character of Joshua. Joshua was Moses's right-hand man. Moses led Israel out of Egypt, received the Ten Commandments, and led the people for a generation in the wilderness. Then Joshua went on to lead the Israelites into the land that God had promised to Israel's ancestor, Abraham. The Promised Land, into which Joshua led the conquest, is often referred to as a place of rest.

Hebrews 4:8 suggests that if Joshua had given the Israelites true rest (through the conquest of the Promised Land), He (God) would not have spoken of another day after the conquest, when the concept of rest was revisited.

There's something important to notice here. In maybe the most important conversation about biblical rest in the whole of the New Testament, we're talking about Joshua. But who are we *not* talking about?

Notice the absence of Moses in this discussion. Moses is the character most closely associated with the Old Testament rules about how to observe the weekly sabbath day. Yet the author of Hebrews doesn't go back and suggest that the fourth commandment was the defining path to sabbath rest. In fact, the author doesn't mention any part of the Mosaic Law in his argument. But that's where our cul-de-sac conversations are on this topic in church culture today. We go to the fourth commandment and get stuck there.

Instead, this Hebrews discussion talks about how *Joshua* wasn't able to offer the Israelites true rest. If the fourth commandment had been the end-all, it seems like we'd be reading about that here in Hebrews. But that's not where the argument takes us.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began the dive into the topic of biblical rest in my master's program back in 2006. The road from those first ideas to the completion of this project has spanned a significant portion of my life and learning. And there is a "great crowd of witnesses" who have contributed to the process.

It was a professor, Dr. Gary Derickson, who first directed my eye to how Hebrews 3–4 refers back to the Israelites' crisis moments in the wilderness. He also pointed out how grumbling and complaining contributed to their experience of rest. My friend, Dr. Chip Bennett, was the first to suggest I look into Dr. John Walton's work regarding rest. It was Walton's ideas that shifted the foundation of my thesis. As I formulated my ideas into the final project for my doctoral studies, I received valuable input from several professors including, but not limited to, Dr. Karen Jobes, Dr. Warren Gage, Dr. Scott Manor, and Dr. Sam Lamerson.

It took several years, alongside some difficult life circumstances, to convert my doctoral project into the work you find here. I developed an outline from a class I taught at my church and began the writing process. So many people gave valuable feedback along the way. Thanks to my beta readers Rachel Baugh, Brenna Brutcher, Chandler Brutcher, Bob and Lori Cavell, Frank Fleming, Jodi Hall, Lisa Hall, Julie Haupt, Esther Libby, Jerry Morris, Madison Mullen, and Eric Weber. Rachel Baugh is solely responsible for editing out . . . the overabundance of . . . ellipses in my early drafts. Thank God I've been mostly cured of that. . . .

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has been a huge influence in the development of my thinking. He was willing to read my manuscript, then offered to work with me on several rounds of edits, encouraged me through the publishing process, and wrote the foreword to this book.

I also could not have finished this project without the encouragement of my wife Lisa. Thanks for sticking with me and giving great feedback, even though I didn't always receive it well. I'm working on that. Love you!

Finally, there are two people who I wish were still around to read this. My dad, Larry, passed away from cancer shortly before my doctoral graduation in 2017. I still resemble him in many ways, and I'm proud to keep his memory alive every time I burp. My big sister and only sibling, Jodi, passed away unexpectedly in her sleep in September of 2020. She and I got our picture taken with Santa for fifty-one straight years and she was my biggest fan. At times she was more excited about this book than I was! I grieve the fact that I can't personally hand these two family members a copy of the finished product.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Larry and Eleanor Hall; to my sister, Jodi; to my wife, Lisa; and to our children, Jacob and Nathaniel. We've seen a little of what the chaos of life can bring. Now, let's all get some rest!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory D. Hall is a husband to his high school sweetheart, and father to two twentysomething young men. He hosts the Rethinking Scripture Podcast, where he challenges listeners to rethink what they thought they already knew about the Bible. He's been a college athlete, public school teacher, real estate broker/investor, triathlete, small business owner, pastor, tour leader to Israel, and university professor. This medley of life experiences has meshed nicely with Greg's biblical training (MA in Theological Studies and Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching and Teaching), producing a unique perspective on some of life's most important themes. Greg teaches whenever he can, enjoys swimming laps, and doesn't spend enough time at the Oregon coast.

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