

Entering into

Sabbath rest is there as a free gift for all, if only we will receive it. The problem is that we're stubborn, perhaps don't want to accept anything we've not paid for, can't believe it's that easy, want to do it our way.

Martin Cavender writes

How do I handle God's call to sabbath in my life? How does it work? What, indeed, does the word really mean, given that it's more than just Sunday, or passivity? Is it all a matter of feeling guilty until one has attained sabbath perfection, or is there something else going on? At first sight the theology of Hebrews 3 and 4 and all their connections into the Old and New Testaments are pretty daunting. They suggest the



need for a sacrificial holiness which seems beyond my reach, along the lines of other awesome texts, such as Matthew 12: 36,37. But I'm beginning to grasp that it's not quite as simple as that, in either case.

Some disparate images – from St Paul, a famous passage in a letter to a new church – *'Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus'*. From a friend and ReSource missionary,

Matthew Grayshon, leading a sailing party in the Western Isles one summer, the memory of a day of flat calm, no wind in the sails, when Matthew stopped the engine and just let the yacht drift across miles of ocean, gently rotating in silence while he celebrated Holy Communion with his rather unnerved crew. And for Cesca and me, the wonder of being drawn aside from our route home from the hospital first to take our new born babies, each time, into Wells Cathedral, lay them in their carrycot on the floor in a side chapel and speak over them the only prayer we both knew, the Lord's Prayer; and then to make a rather relieved and sheepish retreat. Sabbath rest?

A gift from God

We can slip into a worldly rationalism about sabbath. We forget that it is a gift from God. I discovered this when I was granted a sabbatical, in the later years of serving the Archbishops'



So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God (Hebrews 4: 9)

the sabbath rest

initiative, 'Springboard'. I took advice, and found that most of my friends didn't see it as sabbath, but as study-leave. One wanted me to go to research the Church in the Far East and its implications for the Church in England; another suggested I spend time in theological reflection at Tantor in Israel (thinks – perhaps he was trying to tell me something). One Continuing Ministerial Education officer friend said he didn't want a sabbatical for himself because he couldn't decide what he would study.

Buckets and spades

It wasn't just my friends. Quite a lot of the Church seemed to have moved from God's way of seeing a sabbatical, as sabbath, to the University's way, as 'study leave' – I suspect helped by what I have constantly heard called 'the taxation implications'. Only Archbishop David Hope advised me that it should be 'pure buckets and spades'.

Buckets and spades was how Cesca and I handled it, sailing to France and spending three months there travelling in our tiny caravan. It was an amazing sabbath for us and brought us back to our home and me back to my work-place fired up and refreshed in ways we had not foreseen – as well as allowing us for our own sakes the fun both of following the 13th century Cathars of the Ariège (Montaillou, Mirepoix, Mont Segur and the rest), who had haunted me since I had first encountered them at school; and attending the Le Mans 24-hour race, sleeping in the car in the marvellously noisy car-park. Those three months re-established the priorities in our lives – thinking about it now brings back myriad snapshots and pleasures, down to one morning when the major decision was whether to have a white or a brown baguette for breakfast.

Receiving with faith

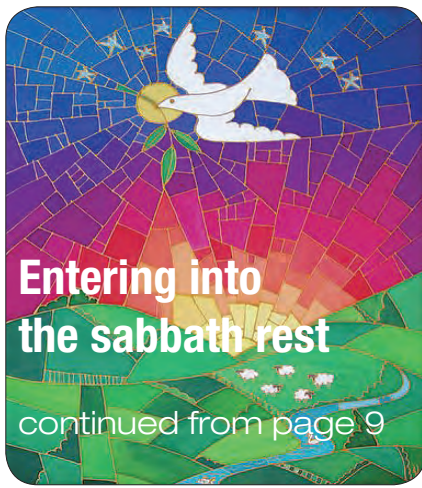
Hebrews 3 and 4 relate the offering

that God brings us but seem to carry a persistent and dire warning, *'Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it'* (4:1, NIV). Clearly this rest is not unconditional. The letter to the Hebrews can sometimes seem impenetrable, and Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, can be very helpful: *'We received the same promises as those people in the wilderness, but the promises didn't do them a bit of good because they didn't receive the promises with faith. If we believe, though, we'll experience that state of resting. But not if we don't have faith. Remember that God said, "Exasperated, I vowed, "They'll never get where they're going, never be able to sit down and rest"'. God made that vow, even though He'd finished His part before the foundation of the world.'* (Hebrews4: 3, The Message).

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Painting by Yvonne Bell



Building a golden calf

So it all hinges on our belief and faith. Sabbath rest is there as a free gift for all, if only we will receive it. The problem is that we're stubborn, perhaps don't want to accept anything we've not paid for, can't believe it's that easy, want to do it our way. We want to build our own golden calf (Exodus 20: 22,23; 32:1 – 35), reach after what Bishop Tom Wright of Durham has called 'the soteriology (doctrine of salvation) of Frank Sinatra' – or 'I Did it My Way'. Not for nothing is that song a great favourite at funerals.

The rest of God

William Barclay points out that the writer to the Hebrews is using the word 'rest' (*katapausis*) in three different senses – first, as 'the peace of God'; it is the greatest thing in the world to enter into the peace of God, that peace which passes all understanding. Secondly, as in 3:12, to mean 'the promised land'. To the children of Israel, wandering for years in the desert, the promised land was indeed the rest of God. Thirdly, he uses it to mean 'the rest of God', after the six days of creation, when all God's work was completed. Barclay says, 'This method of using a word in two or three different ways, of teasing at it until the last drop of meaning was extracted from it, was typical of cultured, academic thought in the days when this letter was written'.

The argument comes in steps. The promise of the rest of God for his people still stands; the danger is that we fail to receive it. The children of Israel failed to enter into God's rest, the promised land, and had to go round again for another 40 years (Numbers 13 and 14) having listened to the advice of the cowards rather

than the enthusiasm of Caleb and Joshua. Those people long ago missed their promised land, the rest they might have had – but that rest nevertheless remains on offer. The writer pins this on the creation story of Genesis 1 and 2, in which each of the first six days has a beginning and an end, an 'evening and a morning'. There is no mention of those for the seventh day, when God rested – and therefore, the Rabbis argued, the rest of God is forever. It is for you and me, and it is for now – which is why the writer speaks of 'Today' (4:7), with its wonderful echoes of God's revelation of His name to Moses in *Exodus 3:14* – not 'I was' or 'I will be', but 'I AM'.

Beginning to hear His voice

Receive my rest, God says to us. Again, echoes; this time of the words of Jesus, 'For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:28-30). Receive my Sabbath, the place of creation and re-creation. Enter into my rest and I can work in your life. And in saying this to us, God allows us to learn – when we first receive the gift of faith we are lifted into that rest; but we are quite capable of descending into panic (when my laptop collapsed last week). We need constantly to seek his rest, as the team and I eventually did in Zambia (p 3). We stand upright again, walk upright, not bowed down. We begin to hear His voice again, rediscover the confidence we had in the beginning (Hebrews 3:14), become partners with Christ and with one another, become vulnerable to one another in that unity in which God commands His blessing (Psalm 133).

It's like waking from sleep, crossing over from one existence to another. A favourite poem by E J Scovell, 'Child waking', is a lyrical description of that moment when a child stirs in the cot. The last two stanzas read:

*And hear how the trifling wound
Of bewilderment fetches a caverned cry
As he crosses out of sleep – at once to recover
His place and poise, and smile as I lift him over*

*But I recall the blue-
White snowfield of his eyes empty of sight
High between dream and day, and think how
there
The soul might rise, visible as a flower.*


I have the sense of God watching me make the move as I discover His rest, find Word and Spirit at play, my soul rising to him like a flower; and His knowledge that I may nevertheless

not be satisfied to remain in that rest, preferring to stride out in my own strength into the world that awaits. St Paul knew this, and says so in 2 Corinthians 12: 9,10.

Abundant life

Annie Dillard puts it well in her amazing book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: 'These are morning matters, pictures you dream as the final wave heaves you up on the sand to the bright light and drying air. You remember pressure, and a curved sleep you rested against, soft, like a scallop in its shell. But the air hardens your skin; you stand; you leave the lighted shore to explore some dim headland, and soon you're lost in the leafy interior, intent, remembering nothing'. We go on learning, day by day.

I don't believe God wants us to remain asleep, or half-awake. He wants us to be fully in his world, at work and play, alive with the abundance of life; but constantly in his rest, that place of belief and faith in which everything we touch, hear, feel, smell, see, every decision we make, every action we take is coloured by our resting in Him. Perfect love drives out all fear, the fragrance of the perfume fills the house which is also 'filled with the laughter of forgiveness and the conversation of grace', (as Eugene Peterson puts it), and God's Holy Spirit is at work in everything we are and do. That's what was happening in St Paul as he wrote to the Philippians and in Matthew in the Western Isles. That's sabbath rest for me – and I long to receive it and remain in it every day of my life.

And what of the young couple with the carry-cot in the Cathedral? They didn't come to belief and faith in God in a real way for another few years; but when they did they recognised that moment in the great church as part of God's beckoning to them and to their children, as part of the wonder of knowing that there is more, always more for the people of God, for whom 'a sabbath rest still remains'. 

about the writer

Martin Cavender left the law in 1992 to join the Archbishops' initiative in evangelism, 'Springboard' and now directs ReSource. Martin is married to Cesca and they work together in ministry from their home in Axbridge, Somerset. They have three married children and four grandchildren.