

Living into God's shalom world

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Our modern, busy lifestyles can insidiously drag us away from God and his ways.

The spiritual rhythms we need for healthy living have been severely disrupted and we haven't even noticed: 'Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car you are still paying for, in order to get to the job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it.'¹ Our lives are fashioned more by the sales, by sports events or the demands of work than by our connection to the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Strawberries in winter, apples in summer, air-conditioning, central heating and artificial lighting all encourage us to ignore God's rhythms.

Our 24/7 world demands more time and resources, convincing us that we can never slow down or take a break. Tragically, an increasing number of people are suffering from anxiety and depression, and the suicide rate is rising. The evidence suggests stress and pressures of overbooked schedules are major contributory factors to this growing problem.

Many of us know we are out of sync with God's ways, his vision and priorities, but don't know how to change. We have more tools than ever to steer our spiritual journeys but feel less in control. Spiritual practices, such as prayer and Bible study, seemingly add to our busyness, and are often the first thing jettisoned when we feel exhausted.

So, how do bring God's values back from the periphery to the very centre of our over-stressed and chaotic lives without being overwhelmed by a new set of time commitments? I believe the key lies in looking back to the rhythms of Jesus' life and creatively adapting them to the modern world.

Setting the pace

Rhythm is an essential part of life. Plants and animals alike respond to the daily cycle of light and dark. Biological rhythms pulse through our bodies in time to its beat. When we wake, hormones spring into action, increasing our heart rate, raising our temperature and adjusting our breathing. They nudge us to eat or exercise, encouraging us to develop physical routines in sync with their unconscious promptings. Other hormones prompt us to relax and fall asleep. These rhythms repeat daily, adjusting to the seasons and the changing length of day. These rhythms are rooted deep within the creation story. God's first act was to create a rhythm of light and darkness (Gen 1.5). This formed the basis for all God's continuing acts of creation and still governs most activity within the natural world.

There is, however, another rhythm proclaimed in the creation story that can unlock our disconnected lives. This is the weekly rhythm of work and rest – the only rhythm that has no counterpart in the natural world. This rhythm, which culminated each week in the practice of Sabbath, provided purpose and focus not just for the Jewish people but for early Christians as well.

Francine Klagsbrun calls the inauguration of Sabbath a miracle. No such day existed until it appeared full-blown in the Hebrew Bible.² Evidently Jewish philosophers puzzled for many years over Genesis 2.2: 'On the seventh day God finished his work' which implied that there was an act of creation on this day too. They concluded that what God created on the seventh day was shalom, life as God intended it to be, when God and all creation rested in the enjoyment and wholeness of a perfect world filled with love, peace and tranquillity. For Abraham Heschel, 'The essence of the world to come is Sabbath eternal ... and the seventh day in time is an example of eternity ... a foretaste of the world to come.'³ What a revolutionary concept. One day out of every seven we are privileged to glimpse eternity, to experience the joy, tranquillity, peace and abundance of life as God intended it to be. No wonder Jesus performed so many miracles on the Sabbath and criticised the legalisms and restrictive rules Pharisees inflicted robbing people of their joy and freedom. He wasn't downplaying its importance. Rather, he was giving breathtaking glimpses of that hoped for eternal shalom world where all will be healed, fed and provided for. Imagine how different our lives would be if we viewed the Sabbath this way – not just a day of rest but one to rejoice in God, enjoy our restored relationships with others and to feast on the glories of God's creation.

Living into the shalom of sabbath

The Jews yearned for a future in which Sabbath was a way of life seven days a week. Early Christians believed that through Christ's resurrection the wholeness of this eternal shalom world had arrived. Living together in loving communities that embraced widows and orphans, fed the poor, nursed the sick and shared resources drew them into God's shalom world. On the Sabbath they celebrated not just their relationship with God but also the glimpses they had caught of God's shalom world. They rested in the satisfaction of accomplishments that had glorified God over the preceding week and looked forward to how they could be God's shalom representatives in the coming week. Today, too, Sabbath should give us glimpses of the joy, tranquillity, peace and abundance of shalom. It should reaffirm our restored relationship to God, to the rest of humankind and even to God's creation. It should realign our life until all we do focuses on the celebration of God's eternal world that is breaking into ours. This is not a perfunctory 'Oh, I wish it were Sunday', but an active participation in bringing the joy, peace and abundant provision of Sabbath into our world.

A living in shalom 24/7

Shalom living doesn't come easily. It requires a reorientation of our entire lives not just on Sunday but every day. Several years ago, following a serious illness that was partly a result of my high-paced, over-committed life, I asked myself, 'How did Jesus spend his time on earth?', a question that for me has become a key to shalom living and a more relaxed but focused way of life. Jesus carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. He could have healed and preached 24/7. Surprisingly, he rarely seemed stressed out or overloaded. If Jesus truly offers abundant life then the patterns of his life must provide the best model for ours too. E Stanley Jones calls Jesus the 'revealer of the nature of life'.⁴ He says the way of Christ is written into the very make-up of our being – into our blood, our nerves, our tissues and our relationships so life 'works in His way and only in His way'.⁵ If we are not in step with God and his purposes then we are working our own ruin.

Centred in the Spirit

Jesus modelled four basic rhythms vital to shalom life. At the centre was his spiritual life, flowing from his intimate, personal relationship to God. It focused all else he did. Jesus paused regularly throughout the day to listen to God and directed his life according to God's instructions. He never made major decisions without spending at least a night praying for God's direction. Pausing for prayer throughout the day to reconnect to God and renew our spiritual energy, listening to God as part of our decision-making process, taking prayer retreats to refocus periodically all enrich our lives and bring us closer to God. How much less stress would we suffer if we gave this kind of priority to prayer?

Matthew, a London businessman we know, decided to follow Jesus' example. He sets aside five minutes four times a day for prayer and reflection. He starts the day with prayer and a psalm. On arrival at work he prays briefly to be God's love and compassion to his colleagues. On returning home Matthew spends a few minutes praying for his wife and family. Before bed he reads a Gospel portion and reflects on the day thanking God for what he had accomplished. He ends with a prayer for needs he had read about in the newspaper. Matthew says this practice revolutionised his life: 'Now everything I do connects to God and God's purposes. 'I enter each day excited by what God can accomplish in and through me.'

Embracing community

Jesus' second priority was community. Early disciples reasoned that since God is love and love can only be expressed in community, community must be essential to discipleship. Jesus spent more time forming a community of followers than he did preaching. He was always with disciples or in a crowd teaching, instructing and reaching out with God's compassion. This wasn't just a work relationship either. They enjoyed good food, fellowship and celebration. Taking time for fun, fellowship and celebration with friends and family, encouraging co-workers and fellow believers, should all be part of our spiritual rhythm.

When Susan, a young mother with two kids, recognised the centrality of community for her faith walk, she reorganised her week to spend more time with other young mothers and their kids. She and four friends met each morning in a different person's home. One Mum looked after all the kids while the others cleaned. Then they prayed together, read the Scriptures or shared good fun and fellowship. One morning a week they met in the house of a disabled friend who was unable to do her own housework.

Rethinking our work

The third rhythm that paced Jesus' life was work, not a job to put bread on the table – that he encouraged his followers to trust God for – his work priority was God's shalom world and he challenged his disciples to establish the same focus. To live into God's shalom world we must be concerned about wholeness not just for ourselves but for others too. Shalom comes when everyone – rich and poor, young and old, slave and free – can relax and rest without fear of hunger, or violence or pain. How can we fully experience God's shalom when 25,000 children die each day of hunger or while AIDS devastates so many poor communities? We are meant to be bringers of hope, healing and salvation, representatives of a world in which there will be no more crying or

hunger or pain. This doesn't mean we all become pastors or missionaries, but it does mean we focus our energy on God's priorities. This can be as simple as encouraging a work colleague or offering a helping hand to an elderly neighbour.

No wonder so many of those first disciples left homes and gave up jobs. They nursed the sick and cared for abandoned babies. They drew the poor, the destitute and the marginalised into their communities because they had a new purpose for life. As they met together in love and mutual concern God was indeed in their midst. As they reached out with love and compassion to overcome poverty, sickness and oppression they were indeed bringing glimpses of God's eternal shalom world into the present.

Several years ago Iona in Abbotsford, Canada, instituted a 'help out' morning that lives into God's shalom world. It all began when her neighbour Lorinne, forgot she had put eggs on to boil and went out for two hours. The exploding eggs penetrated every kitchen nook and cranny. The house reeked with the stench. As Lorinne shared about the daunting cleaning task her discouragement was palpable. Iona rearranged her schedule and arrived with cleaning supplies. By the time they sat down to tea two hours later, Lorinne's stress had given way to laughter. So began a weekly rotation around their cul-de-sac. They invited others to join them and started to tackle those daunting tasks that never seemed to get done. They move from house to house washing walls, weeding gardens, painting guest rooms and even building a fence. They also talked about life and faith, exchanging ideas, prayers and laughter. Iona told me, 'It is good for our homes but mostly it is good for our souls.' Now that is Sabbath living 24/7.

Learning to rest

I was relieved to see Jesus not only loved work, he also believed in rest. He encouraged his followers to 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Mt 11.28). Regular sleep is an essential part of God's plan. Surprisingly, recent medical research suggests afternoon siestas increase our productivity so much that we actually accomplish more than when we keep busy all day and a good night's sleep seems to boost our immune system.

All of these rhythms culminated in the greatest rest of all, that Sabbath rest of rejoicing in God and his shalom world. First, we rejoice in our restored fellowship with God. My husband, Tom, and I relax over breakfast and update our journals on Sunday morning. We reflect on how well we have maintained God's priorities during the preceding week. A good question to ask is, 'Where have you felt closest to God and God's shalom world and how have you helped others enter that shalom world?' The challenging part is looking ahead and asking, 'How in this coming week can I improve my relationship to God and better express God's love?' Then we head to church where we celebrate our restored fellowship with God by coming together with our worshipping community.

Second, we celebrate relationships and not just with friends and family. This is a day to rejoice in our inclusion in that great international community that is Christ's body. We are all part of the God's shalom community. As we go to church and interact with people from other cultures and backgrounds, we savour the rich diversity of God's family and the joy of sharing life with brothers and sisters from around the world. In sharing the bread and wine of communion, we are united not just with brothers and sisters from around the world but also with all those who have gone before us. We are also confronted with those for whom Sabbath is still little more than a dream – the destitute, the abandoned and the neglected.

Third, the Sabbath is a day to celebrate God's glorious created world. This is a great day to go for a hike, drive in the country or get out into the garden. Sometimes I love to just spend a few moments imagining that our creator is walking in the garden too, enjoying with me the beauty of all I see.

In a 24/7 world with no space for rest we buy our freedom from work and busyness with some hard choices. How could you live more fully seven days a week in the presence of God's shalom world? What choices should you make that will enable you to face in a different direction – towards God and the wholeness, peace and tranquillity of God's eternal world?

ENDNOTES

1 See J De Graaf, D Wann, TH Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2001), p. 36.

2 F Klagsbrun, *Jewish Days: A Book of Jewish Life and Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 9.

3 A Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), p. 74.

4 E Stanley Jones, *The Way* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), p. 6.

5 Ibid.

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