

Being Productive: Working from Rest (Part Two)

In the previous edition of this journal (22.4), Peter Heslam introduced the theme of 'Being Productive: Working from Rest'. This is the theme Faith in Business, which Peter directs, is currently focusing on in its output and events. It does so in partnership with the Mockler Center in the USA and Stewardship in the UK. Here Peter briefly develops the theme's theological framework.

When human beings are created, they are given work to do. But their first full day on earth is a day of rest. This establishes the principle of working from rest. It is seen in the life and teaching of Jesus. He taught that his yoke (a symbol of hard work) was easy when those who bear it first come to him for rest. And he often rested, and urged his disciples to do likewise, before an intense period of ministry.

All this was suggested in the first instalment in this series. But it went further, floating two key ideas. First, that rest is not merely a physical gift but lies at the heart of the gospel of salvation. As such, it is the destiny to which all human beings are called, in this life and in the life hereafter. Second, that rest, rather than work, is the key to fruitfulness or 'productivity'. In this second instalment, the biblical basis for these two ideas will be considered in a little more detail.

Rest in the Gospel

The idea that rest, rather than redemption, lies at the heart of the gospel may sound almost heretical. But what is redemption? It is a metaphor drawn from the world of finance that signifies the cancellation of a debt. According to the Hebrew Bible, debts were to be cancelled every seven years, during what came to be called the *Shemithah* – the Year of Release or Sabbath Year (Deut 15.1-3).

Against this background, the New Testament uses debt as a metaphor

for sin against God (Lk 7.41-43; Mt 6.12, 18.21-35; Col 2.13-14). According to the last of these references, 'God forgave us all our sins; he cancelled the unfavourable record of our debts with its binding rules and did away with it completely by nailing it to the cross'.

Here the Apostle Paul is using an additional metaphor to the debt metaphor. As reflected in John's telling of the passion, Roman executioners generally nailed to the cross above the head of the condemned person a written statement of their guilt.

Paul is saying, accordingly, that our debt records have been included in the destruction and obliteration of the cross. Christ's death cancels debt and thereby inaugurates a perpetual Sabbath Year in which the debt of sin is cancelled and God's people can enjoy rest, in their earthly lives and beyond (Hebrews 4). It is, then, for our rest that Christ died. In other words, rest is not a 'nice to have' for those who can afford luxury holidays and early retirements. Lying at the heart of the gospel, it is available to all.

Productivity

The idea that productivity relies on rest may also sound like dodgy theology. After all, the Bible recommends the following masterclass in productivity: 'Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest' (Proverbs 6.6-8). The Apostle Paul may well have taken this


masterclass, given his tireless labours (2 Cor. 11.21-28), and his injunction 'Anyone unwilling to work should not eat' (2 Thess 3.10).

But the encounter Jesus had with the woman at the well in Samaria helps put the productivity value of hard work into perspective. Here we find Jesus taking a rest: 'Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well' (Jn 4.6).

But look what happens. He has one of the most amazing conversations in the Gospels. It is all the more amazing for being with a Samaritan (despised by Jews) but also with a woman. Indeed, it is with a woman so disreputable that she needs to draw water from the well at noon, when the need for shelter from the heat was so great she would be less likely to be spotted out in the open.

We have, as a result, one of the most beautiful, vivid, enlightening and convicting passages of scripture that has helped transform lives around the world, across two millennia.

But did the immediate results also reflect such productivity? According to John, the woman responds to Jesus' offer of living water; she then goes to tell her fellow townspeople about Jesus; and then 'many Samaritans became believers' (Jn 4.28, 30, 39-41).

The story can function, therefore, as a paradoxical parable about the role of rest in productivity. It provides a model of 'being productive – working from rest'. 



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