

# Leisure

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I ENJOY a relaxing break

stretched out on the sun-bleached shores overlooking the gulf waters at Naples. It is not for everybody. Your leisure menu may vary from mine. Most know what they want from their time off from their job.

When do you stop working? How many hours at the job define enough? There is little discussion in the United States when it comes to the amount of work in which a person engages in a week or a lifetime. Each person decides for himself. Likewise each company decides for itself. Not so in the European Union.

There are significant differences between Great Britain and most of the member states regarding the length of the work week. It has been noted by the International Herald Tribune that there exists an ideological and cultural difference in the EU. For those in Great Britain, a strong call exists to preserve the freedom to work as long as one chooses. In France, among other EU states, it is mandated that the work week be no longer than 35 hours. Some find work so intoxicating that it is hard to stop. However, most want a long holiday. What should we believe about the relationship between work and

relaxation? What is acceptable when pursuing leisure?

The writers of the Old and New Testaments provide some interesting guidance when it comes to leisure. It is often thought that the Scriptures deal more with the importance and nature of work. It has much to say in that area. The beginning pages of Genesis deal with divine and human labor. God is introduced by His work of creation, followed by the call placed upon Adam and Eve to work in a Mesopotamian garden. Many characters in both Testaments are identified by their careers (shepherd David became King, Apostle Peter was a fisherman, and Lydia dealt in purple cloth).

There are many exhortations to guard yourself from being lazy.

“I went past the field of the sluggard,  
past the vineyard of the man who  
lacks judgment;

31 thorns had come up everywhere,  
the ground was covered with weeds,  
and the stone wall was in ruins.

32 I applied my heart to what I observed  
and learned a lesson from what I  
saw:

33 A little sleep, a little slumber,  
a little folding of the hands to rest-

34 and poverty will come on you like a  
bandit and scarcity like an armed man.”  
<sup>[a]</sup>

—Proverbs 24:30-

Christ warns his followers regarding the importance of diligent work with the parable of the Talents in Matthew 25. And the Apostle Paul expresses his concerns regarding those who do not work when he states,

“In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching<sup>[a]</sup> you received from us. **7**For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, **8**nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. **9**We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. **10**For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

—2 Thessalonians 3:6-10

Working hard is a virtue that the Scripture exalts. Is there any room for leisure, relaxation and fun? It is true that we are not given the formula for the number of days or weeks off for vacation—no hint of the perfect places to enjoy with our family. Yet we are told of the priority of relaxation and leisure.

Divine

King David lived a very dynamic life some 900 years before the birth of Christ. He grew up in a hard-working family that raised sheep and other live stock. He was accustomed to an agricultural lifestyle. He knew well how to protect himself from the forces of danger that exist in his line of work. David's upbringing proved to be a perfect nursery for becoming a warrior king. As king he often experienced a difficult life publicly and privately. On certain occasions he deserved the tension. Numerous times he brought grief upon himself when offending God and others. Yet he knew what it was to have a taste of leisure. He writes about it in the Psalms.

"The Lord is my shepherd I shall lack nothing, He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside the quiet waters, He restores my soul."

—Psalm 23:1-3a

There is no longer any reason to feel even a tinge of guilt when embracing leisure for those who work. Why? Because the concept and experience of leisure is divine. According to the psalmist, leisure is good. In fact we were made to taste and enjoy it. The desire and need of it is not a result of the fall. God set the stage for such pleasure when He spent the seventh day of history's first week enjoying all He had accomplished on the prior six days. The Jewish feast of tabernacles is another example of God instructing His people to stop their work and spend a week enjoying the fruit of their labor. But yes, they were also to remember and worship the Lord who was to receive thanks for His provision.

Real leisure is pursued in the context of worship. David says it is the Lord who is

his shepherd, who guides and leads him to such leisure destinations. The gracious, promise-keeping God who is King of Kings and Lord of lords provides such. It is only proper to acknowledge the one who affords us this gift. The psalmist provides a hint of insights into the nature and character of leisure.

## Nature and Character

### Directed by God

I don't like being under the control of others. There are certain places and times when you find yourself in such circumstances of tension. Some years ago I visited a man who for the previous eight months had been held in the Oklahoma County jail. No sooner had I walked through the metal detector than I discovered I had entered a highly controlled environment. I was told what I could carry on my person, where I could go, and when and whom I could see under the directed circumstances. Not a pleasant experience.

Many who are serious about their relationship with Christ believe that although God created the universe and sent Christ to die for sinners, He does not impose himself upon His creation; He is passive. That which happens in history is the result of people living out their lives in absolute freedom.

David's words come across very differently. He does not question God's sovereign direction in time of leisure.

"He makes me lie down ..."

"He leads me ..."

A shepherd who simply shares with his sheep where they can find rest is not a shepherd. He is a sign. This divine shepherd knows you and your needs.

"O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.

2You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

3You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

4Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD."

—Psalm 139:1-4

He knows my needs even better than I know myself. He is intimately knowledgeable about my physical, emotional, spiritual and social needs. My work, family, pain, struggles, discomforts and stress are well understood by the Lord. He directs my path, including my leisure.

## Provision

What resources are needed for a season of relaxation and rest? In the spring of '07, Debby (my girlfriend, who also is my wife) and I spent a long week in Puerto Rico. Our direct flight from Washington lasted no more than a few hours. The first several days were spent snorkeling off the remote Island of Culebra. The beautiful coral and fish incased in the clear Caribbean waters mesmerized us for hours at a time. Later in our trip we enjoyed hiking in the rain forest mountains on the east side of the main land. The lush green foliage and cool mountain air provided a perfect setting to enjoy the view of the valley below. Both the location and ability to

experience and enjoy was not ours. It was all a gift.

The green pastures and quiet waters were not designed or created by man. Their origin is from God. The creation that we are given to experience and enjoy is a gift. It is a gift to be able to breathe the cool mountain air and have the strength to walk the hiking paths. It is a privilege to swim in cool, clear waters and feel the warmth of the sun on your back. It is a divine present to experience a taste of heaven on this planet. Leisure and all that it entails is a gift.

### Completely Satisfying

Most of the time our pursuit of relaxation and rest has been successful, but there have been times when we were left disappointed. On one occasion Debby and I rented a canoe in the south Florida everglades. We were looking forward to exploring some of the small tributaries coming into the larger body of water. Dressed in swimsuits on a hot, muggy day we began to paddle up this one stream densely lined with moss-covered trees. For a time it was an interesting journey. At one point, as the creek narrowed, we found ourselves attacked by a large swarm of man-eating mosquitoes. You have never seen a canoe move so quickly. We exhausted every bit of ability and power to escape the ambush. Our desire for leisure had been frustrated. We were left bitten and hurting. There was nothing fulfilling about the event designed for pleasure.

The psalmist speaks about leisure that is satisfying and complete: "I shall lack nothing...." He restores my soul.

We cannot control the weather, the airline that loses our luggage or the roaches that stay with us in our hotel room. Sometimes we get way too much sun or find we have been poisoned by the chef. Things happen that frustrate our perfect holiday. We return exhausted and tired, not refreshed.

David speaks about a holiday that restores the soul. This is the rest that comes from God. It is good to be in a position that demands a break. One of the benefits of working is the privilege to stop and leave it for a time. Divine leisure not only provides physical, but spiritual rest. This is what we see in the gospels. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). There is no refreshment like that which Christ gives. He gave of himself so that we would have peace and rest now, and in the future eternal leisure.

### *-Reflection-*

When do you find that some form of a break is most needed?

What constitutes an acceptable vacation?

Is it odd to think of leisure in the context of the spiritual, the Scriptures?

Do you ever pray about leisure?