



## When Relief becomes a Refuge

The Lord Jesus was often wearied because His life was characterized by serving. On one recorded occasion He sought to find some rest for His tired body. He therefore said to His also wearied disciples, '*Come apart and rest awhile*' (Mark 6:31). The Lord knew that his disciples, as well as Himself, would benefit from a time of rest, a time of relief in which His energies would be renewed. He sought a time of 'recreation'; literally, the experience of being 'renewed.'

Life can also wear *us* out. And when it does we seek some form of relief by which we can be rejuvenated. We desire to be 're-created' so that we can be more fruitful as we return to a pressure filled world. God in His kindness has gifted us with various forms of 'relief.'

Such activities of recreation, and thus of relief, can take on various forms. For example, I appreciate the mental and physical relief in the recreational activity of long distance running. I therefore try to run several days a week. This helps me in my mental and physical equilibrium. Others find walking, hiking, cycling, reading, motor-biking, golfing (which for me also usually provides plenty of opportunity for hiking in the woods!!), eating, going to a Spa, napping, travelling, camping, shopping, etc. as wonderful means for relief. Such activities can be a great source of refreshment for our bodies and for our souls.

Further, there are other forms of legitimate relief. One of those is medication. We can be grateful for the various medications that give us relief from pain, sleeplessness and other stresses of living in a fallen body. Medication can often be a wonderful provision by the Lord for 're-creation.' Just ask anyone who has suffered from chronic pain or from the occasional jet-lag.

We should thank God for such provisions of relief and we should make the most of them for our good and for God's glory. But because we are fallen creatures, such forms of relief can sinfully morph into an idolatrous refuge. The purpose of this article is to briefly address such a tendency while also providing an antidote.

The Scriptures make it very clear that God alone is to be our Refuge (see for example Psalm 46). When all other 'providential props' fail to sustain us, the Lord is our only, our certain and our final hope.

But unfortunately sometimes we over emphasise a good 'activity of relief' and it becomes the object of our refuge. And when this occurs then what has been merely a gift has become an idol. That which was intended to be constructive becomes controlling. When this occurs then our relief has idolatrously become our refuge. And the results, as with all forms of idolatry, can be devastatingly destructive.

How do you know when you have crossed that line from innocent relief to idolatrous refuge? Many books could and have been written dealing with this issue, but for our purposes I want to propose three questions that will serve as tests as to whether our activity in which we find relief has in fact become our refuge.

### **Is your activity the source of your security?**

In other words, can you live without it? I suppose that this is not always easy to detect yet a sure sign is that your chosen means of relief becomes the rallying point for your life.

Idolatry is fundamentally about wrongly seeking satisfaction and security. But the Lord is the only One who can meet those needs. So when some activity in which we find relief from the pressures of life becomes our 'all in all' then we are guilty of setting up idols in our heart. For some, alcohol is a purveyor of security while for others sporting prowess provides such satisfaction. But whatever shape our relief takes, if it so dominates our thinking that we feel vulnerable without it then we have crossed the line into idolatry. In fact what I am describing is actually the marks of *addiction*.

The apostle Paul had learned that regardless of his situation in life His security was in the Lord and therefore he was content (Phil 4:11). That is, Paul was secure because His refuge was the Lord.

### **Has your activity become your priority?**

Perhaps I could rephrase the question: "Does your form of 'relief' interfere with your God-given responsibilities?"

When our chosen means of relief takes on such a priority that we neglect to fulfil our responsibilities as a spouse, or as a parent, or as a child, or as an employee, or as a student, or as a church member then we know that we have crossed the line into the forbidden territory of idolatry. We have trespassed into a forbidden refuge.

For instance, you might find great relief in carpentry or in tinkering around your workshop to the point that you neglect to spend time with your spouse and children. Perhaps you find that sleep is a great form of relief from life's pressures and pretty soon your life is obsessed with getting more and more 'shut-eye.' You therefore become increasingly detached from friends and family. You may even find yourself more frequently sleeping-in and either being late for work or not going in at all. Clearly in such a case your relief has become your refuge. Sadly what often attends such behaviour is a frequency of dependence upon sleep aides and addictions can follow.

Let me illustrate this principle positively by the example of Jesus in Mark 6. Though He was wearied and sought relief it is to be noted that when the crowds came to Him the next day He had compassion on them; He abandoned His 'relief' and resumed His ministry. Why? Because He was the Father's appointed Shepherd and pleasing His Refuge was more important than pursuing the pleasures of temporary relief (See Mark 6:30-44).

Countless examples could be used but we need to ask ourselves honestly as to whether our 'activity of relief' has become an addictive refuge.

### **Is your activity essential to your identity?**

Believers are to find their identity in Christ. And when we do, then in spite of the presence of pressures, we will find our security in Him and our service to Him will be our priority. We will still engage in activities in which we find relief from the stresses and strains of life yet our identity will not be tied to them.

For instance, if you find relief in cycling and by participating in races then you will not fall to pieces emotionally when you don't perform well. Why? Because ultimately you know that you are loved by God in Christ and that is the greatest source of your contentment. This can be applied to any number of forms of 'relief.' The point to be grasped is that when we rest in our identity in Christ then we can enjoy the various 'activities of relief' even more because we are free to do so. He loves us and that, in the end, is all that really matters. So enjoy your 'relief' knowing that with or without it the love of God for you does not change.

### **The Antidote**

So, how do you and I prevent this morphing of the good into idolatry? The answer is actually quite simple, *intentionally pursue God as your Refuge*. Spend time in His Word; become a person of prayer; arm yourself with His promises; remind yourself of your mission which is to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt 6:33); prioritize corporate worship. These and other

means will go a long way towards strengthening your enjoyment of the relief while at the same time equipping you to find God alone as your refuge. In other words, work on finding God as your security, priority and identity. Enjoy your temporal relief while resting in your timeless Refuge; the Refuge found in Christ.

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