

## Choosing Rest by the Light of God's Word

### A Bible Study for the book **Choosing Rest**

Which comes first? A Bible study connected to a book or the book itself? Usually the book, but in this particular case, I wrote and led a Bible study for **Choosing Rest** when the book itself was only an outline and a prayer. The great gift to me during the months of writing the book was the privilege of learning from the 15 very honest women who attended that study. They sharpened my ideas by challenging my thoughts and conclusions and they helped me to see things I had overlooked. Most of all they confirmed what my heart knew intuitively. We are all by nature restless people. The manifestations of that restlessness may differ from life to life, but the heart of it all is the same. What Saint Augustine said is as true about all of us as my friend Maggie's words were about me.

As **Choosing Rest** shaped up, I wanted thoughtful questions at the end of each chapter (as a matter of fact, so did my editor!) My desire was that these questions slow the reader down. After all, isn't that part of what rest is all about? Hopefully those questions help to move the material in the book from the category of "interesting ideas" to something that our hearts must grapple with.

At the same time, those questions don't satisfy a core conviction and passion of mine. From thirty-three years of studying the Bible for myself and from the delightful privilege of teaching the Bible for almost that same length of time, I know personally and through the stories of other women that everyone of us is most deeply changed when God speaks directly to our own hearts through His multi-faceted, beautiful Word. Direct personal contact with the Scriptures brings healing, insight, redirection, comfort, a stinging rebuke, an experience of being tenderly loved. God's Word, as my husband would put it, is not just information, but communication. The One who inhabits eternity speaks in a profound and personal way as His Spirit talks the Scriptures to our hearts.

Therefore, my desire, beyond the hope that women will benefit from **Choosing Rest**, is the desire that women learn rest for themselves, straight from the pages of Scripture. There is no verse like the verse you "find" for yourself. My prayer for you is that you enter into this study with a keen desire to let God communicate to you. Remember the passage from Hebrews 4:11? We are commanded to be diligent to enter rest and then reassured in the next breath that the Word of God will give us both life and discernment so that rest can truly be ours. So let's begin.

### An Introduction

1. As we begin our study, we want to do a brief overview of what the Scriptures say about the subject of rest. Write out each of the following verses or short passages. This is definitely not an exercise in penmanship. By taking the time to write, you will slow down enough to notice the words and ideas in each verse. (In your translation of the Bible, some of these verses may not include the word rest, but the concept is still there.)

Psalm 37:3-7

Psalm 95:10, 11

Psalm 116:7

Isaiah 28:12-13

Isaiah 30:15-18

Isaiah 32:17, 18

Jeremiah 6:16

Lamentations 5:5

Matthew 11:28-30

2. What most impressed you from the verses you have just written out?
3. How would you define rest from these Scriptures?
4. What warnings about missing rest particularly got your attention?

5. As you think about these Scriptures and the issues of your own life, what is it about rest that most draws your soul?

6. Finish this statement in a way that expresses the rest you long for. *If my heart were truly at rest.....*

## Chapter One: A Garden, A Longing, A Gate

What is rest anyway? In the introduction to this study we looked at Scriptures that speak of rest and we examined our own lives to see what our hearts really know about this subject. Now we want to take a more in-depth look at the picture of rest that God paints in the Bible. The Bible begins its conversation about rest with a special day of rest. The Bible says that on that day God *shabath*, i.e., rested. (Genesis 2:2). That Hebrew verb forms the base for our English word *Sabbath*.

As Christians exploring the subject of rest we often intermingle and even confuse the concepts behind the words *Sabbath* and *rest*. Are they the same thing? Is rest only about a particular day of the week? Is it important for Christians to "keep the Sabbath" as some denominations believe they must?

This subject is one that intrigues, confuses and separates Christians from each other. Obviously we will not arrive at an ultimate or definitive answer through our study this week. We have another goal. Living in a world that only has one speed - F-A-S-T - we want to take time to slow our hearts down and to listen to God. He lives out of rest in the midst of all He is and does; and since time began He has offered us the opportunity to live there with Him.

1. Read Genesis 2:1-3. Write out five observations about rest (or the seventh day) that you can make from these verses.

What do you think it means for God to rest?

What connection do you see between resting and holiness? (In his book, **The Sabbath**, the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel says that before God called for holiness from man or for a *place* of holiness, i.e., a tabernacle, He created holiness in time. Perhaps his insight will help you to ponder this question.)

2. Read Exodus 12:14-16. What were God's instructions about rest as He explained how the Passover was to be observed?

3. Read Exodus 16:1-30. This passage tells part of the story of how God fed His people during their years of desert living. What do you learn about Sabbath or rest from these verses?
  
4. Exodus 20:8-11 is one of the Ten Commandments. What does God require of His people? Why would keeping a day of rest be on par with the issues the nine other commandments address? (Exodus 31:12-17 will give you more insight.)
  
5. From the order of things in the Scriptures, we can see that the reality of resting existed before the commandment to observe a day of rest. What observations can you make from this truth?
  
6. Rest and Sabbath are not the same thing in Scripture, even though the terms are often used interchangeably. One of the words for rest has other connotations. Turn to Psalm 95. What rest did God deny to His disobedient people? (Read Numbers 14:26-35 for more background information.)
  
7. How was arriving in the Promised Land meant to be a picture of rest? The same Hebrew word for rest used in Psalm 95 is also used in Ruth 3:1. What further insights come to you as you consider these passages together?

8. Even if they entered the Promised Land, rest would not be a guarantee. What warning about a life without rest did Moses give God's people? See Deuteronomy 28:58-67.
  
9. Now move to the New Testament. What do you learn about the Sabbath in Luke 6:1-10?
  
10. Finally, turn to Hebrews 3:7-4:11. What is required of us if we are to enter God's rest?

From this passage is there a difference in Old Testament Sabbath and the rest offered to believers in Christ? What do you think it is?

What does it mean to rest from your own work (Hebrews 4:10)? (It might help to refer back to pages 22-24 in your book. What have been your strategies to make a rest for yourself? Some of our strategies can look fairly religious, but they are still our own work and they still wear us out.)

What does it mean to make every effort to enter God's rest (Hebrews 4:11)?

11. Now take time to stop and put together the different ideas you have seen in the Scriptures about rest and Sabbath. You may also incorporate the definition of rest given in chapter one of **Choosing Rest**. (We learned there that to rest is to stop, to celebrate, to allow to suffer lack and to find a true home for your heart.)

At this point in the study what is your understanding of rest?

Why do you think our learning to rest is important to the heart of God?

What would it mean for you personally to live out of a heart at rest?

12. This lesson has raised a number of issues and thoughts. What is most on your own mind at this point? Take your thoughts and bundle them up in a prayer to God. Write out your prayer in the space below.



3. If we can't really put our hope in people, where can we put it? 1 Peter 1:13, Romans 15:13

***The pressures we feel***

4. What can you glean from 2 Corinthians 4:7-18 that will help you carry the incredible pressures of life without turning away from relationships?

***The loneliness that plagues us***

5. What can we do when our lives seems really isolated, lonely and without purpose?  
Psalm 139

***The forgiveness we need to learn***

6. What do we need to consider when other people are causing us great pain? Choose either Psalm 43 or Psalm 57 and meditate on the psalmist's perspective.

7. So often our focus is on how the other person needs to change. Read through Titus 2 to discover the kind of character God is calling *you* to cultivate.



12. Now read the parable in Matthew 18:21-35. What burden did the first slave put on himself? (see v. 26)

13. How did this self-imposed burden affect his attitude toward the second slave?

14. Do you think your lack of being able/willing to forgive may speak of your own lack of receiving forgiveness? Explain your answer.

What does James 2:13 contribute to your thoughts about this question?

15. Now look back at Matthew 18:18-20. Who or what is bound up inside your own heart by your lack of forgiveness?

What do you think it means for those things to be bound in heaven as well?



## Chapter Three: The Land of Shadows

For many of us, an underlying motif of disquiet runs through our souls. How can our souls find rest when they are troubling about the very meaning of life? As Christians, we know the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus is absolutely true, but things here on this planet can still seem so hollow at the core. If true rest exists at all, it must have an answer for the angst that often seems to overshadow our joys and disturb our quiet. One of the most freeing encounters we can have is to see that in His word God deals honestly with the emptiness and shadows we feel. He shows us how to receive each moment, and He gives us an answer that is bigger than this life.

1. Read Ecclesiastes 1. In this chapter the preacher sets the stage for the subject he wants to discuss with us. What is his primary message?

Has the teacher's experience of futility ever been yours? Describe your own struggle with this issue that troubled the writer of Ecclesiastes.

2. Everywhere the teacher turned he saw the same emptiness. Look now at specific verses where he continues to explore this theme; paraphrase his words or explain how you yourself have experienced a feeling similar to his.

2:11

2:18, 19

3:11

3:19

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4:1, 2

4:8

5:10

6:12

9:11

3. In spite of the intensity of what he sees and feels, the teacher does not abandon us to futility. If we were to read the entire book, we would see that he has scattered wisdom among the shadows. His wise counsel is just as true as his experience of the shadows. Read through these verses and make notes on his advice to us.

5:18, 19

7:12, 19

8:5, 6

8:12

11:4, 6

12:13, 14

4. True soul rest means we face reality. Ultimately the shadowy feelings of life cannot be ignored or covered up. What strikes you as most helpful in the teacher's advice?

5. Ecclesiastes calls us to live as responsible people who fear and obey God, even in the midst of the angst we feel. Knowing that one day we will give an account to Him is meant to change the way we live today. Be personal and honest, how can Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14 help you to deal with the shadows in your own soul?

What happens for many of us, however, is that even as we attempt to live well, our hearts still ache. These longings, longings we sometimes don't even have words for, have a profound way of unsettling our hearts. Life feels empty at the core even though we have chosen to believe in God and His Son Jesus and even though we deeply believe that one day we will give an account to Him for how we have spent our lives (2 Corinthians 5:10). We need to turn to the New Testament to discover a richer answer to our restless emptiness.

6. How does Christ see His relationship with us? Let His words give us the answer to this question.

John 8:31

John 15:15

John 20:17

7. The Old Testament writers and believers rarely referred to God as Father. (Isaiah 63:16 and Isaiah 64:8 are the two exceptions.) Perhaps you did not know this, because we so easily call God *Father* or *Abba*. Until Jesus came to this earth, Father as a name for God was only dimly known. This reality makes Jesus' statement about His mission in John 17:6 all the more significant. Now let these verses speak to you

Romans 8:15, 35-39

1 John 3:1

8. The deepest reality about ourselves is that we are the beloved of God. Meditate on the following verses.

Isaiah 62:4

Jeremiah 31:3

John 15:9

9. At this point in your life, which way of describing God's love for you best helps to scatter the shadows that invade your soul? How does it help? Be honest as you answer.

10. Now take a few minutes to recollect on all we have covered in this lesson. It seems that we need to keep two truths in our field of vision if our hearts are to find rest in the midst of the shadows. One is an accurate sense of stewardship. We are called to live our lives for God's approval, God's delight. The second is a sense of relationship. We are loved by God Himself, and called to intimate connection with this One who loves us so completely. So much of our restlessness arises from trying to find somebody's approval or somebody's love. No matter how successful we are, that restlessness persists because no person on this earth can fill up those longings; we all know deep down that this world always fails us, always falls apart. As you sit quietly and think about your own longings, what things have you seen from God's Word this week that can help clear away the shadows and open the door to rest?

## Chapter Four: The Grumble Grinds On

Perhaps the shadows of life do not bother you at all. But as you take an honest look at yourself, you see something else that keeps you from having a heart that is at rest. You see a soul filled with grumbling. You rehearse old losses and regrets. When you compare your life to the life of the next person, you see your limitations, and their possibilities. You can't get over the things you cannot change or the things you do not have.

We all seem born with some sort of naïve expectation that for us at least life should run smoothly. Because it often doesn't, the simplest things provoke waves of discontent within us. Things shouldn't break, people should keep their promises, jobs shouldn't be too hard, we ought to get the breaks that other people get, if not preferential treatment. We cannot live in heart rest when the grumbling grinds on within our souls.

The answer, as my grandmother so succinctly put it, is that it takes a lot of thankfulness. But how can we learn to be thankful when the reasons we have for grumbling are still present? This week we want to explore what it means to live as satisfied people in an often unsatisfactory world.

1. As a way of beginning, let's identify the issues we deal with. Use the definitions in your book as well as a dictionary to define the following words.

Greed

Envy

Covetousness

What differences do you see between these three words?

Which of these heart orientations most pulls at you as you face your own discontentment?

2. What is your earliest memory of experiencing one of these feelings? What do you learn about your own heart from calling that memory to mind?



6. Now look in Psalm 16 for choices David made that helped to govern and determine his perspective. Look for how he saw life, how he saw God and for what he chose to believe and value.
  
7. Take a few minutes now and compare your own choices with those David has made. What similarities and differences do you see between your choices and those David made?
  
8. Now let David's words instruct your heart. How does your perspective on the life you've been given need to change?
  
9. The apostle Paul saw his life through this same lens of God's goodness. In Philippians 4:11 he tells us that he learned contentment. It did not come naturally to him (see his own testimony Romans 7:7-9). **Choosing Rest** explores three arenas in which Paul had the opportunity to learn to live out of a full heart. Look at the three choices Paul made and write out an application for your own life and circumstances.

**Philippians 1:** *Paul learned that no matter how difficult his circumstances were they were an opportunity for Jesus to be showcased through his life. (Philippians 1: 12, 20, 21)*

My response to Paul's choice:

**Philippians 2:** *Paul learned that even when his best efforts in his relationships seemed to produce no results, that what he did was still an act of worship to God. (Philippians 2:17)*

My response to Paul's choice:

**Philippians 3:** *Paul learned that his best opportunity for getting to know Jesus Christ more personally came through the losses he suffered. (Philippians 3:7, 8)*

My response to Paul's choice:

10. We can live with a half-empty heart or we can try to shut our hearts down so they don't even know what it is they long for. Or..... we can make the faith choice that it does indeed *take a lot of thankfulness* to grow a full heart. The end result, if we choose thankfulness, is that we will be able to proclaim just as Moses did, that nobody has had a life like we've had. We will have seen for ourselves the faithful, loyal love of our Sovereign God. If it starts with just one heart, can it start with yours? If you are willing, write out a prayer to God expressing your thanksgiving to Him for the life and circumstances you have been given.

My Prayer:

The following Scriptures are resource passages for times when life overwhelms you or chips away at your joy. Proverbs 30:7-9; Luke 12:13-21, Romans 8:35-39; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, 1Timothy 6:6-19; and Hebrews 13:5. These verses can teach your soul the rest of contentment.

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## Chapter Five: The Grip of Fear

**Soul Turbulence.** Situations in each of our lives seem to insist that we cannot rest. At least not now. Rest might be for another time, a time when issues and relationships and the future are finally settled. But nobody could be expected to have a soul at rest in the middle of the sort of things we are going through. Or perhaps your experience doesn't feel like turbulence at all. The fear you live with is a chronic, low grade anxiety.

If we are going to learn to keep our hearts with all diligence, we will come face to face with the worry that seeks to invade our heart. Use this week to face the issue of your own particular brand of worry. God's desire for you is a heart at peace in the midst of it all.

1. **Choosing Rest** refers to a story of Israel's struggle with fear recorded in Isaiah 30. It is a great chapter to be personally familiar with. Read Isaiah 30:1-8. Put in your own words the sin that God was accusing His people of.
  
2. Look at Isaiah 30:9-11. What was the people's response to the warning Isaiah brought them?
  
3. In the verses that follow (vs. 12-14) God explains where this choice to trust Egypt would lead them. What does He say?
  
4. In 30:15 God offers His people the answer to their fear. In the NIV, four words are given to us. Repentance. Rest. Quietness. Trust. Take a few minutes now and let your soul ponder each of these words as you think about a situation in your own life that sends you pell-mell to worry or to devising your own solutions. What would it look like

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for you to repent, to rest, to be quiet, to trust in the particular area of your own life that so easily troubles your heart? Write your thoughts in the space below.

5. In verses 15b-17 we see a people as stubborn as we often are. Worry is hard to give up. We tend to have our own solutions; and from our point of view they look faster and more reliable than God's. How did the Israelites plan to solve their problem and what was God's response to their plan?

Can you think of a situation (past or present) in your own life that mirrors what's going on in these verses?

6. God's heart for His worry-driven-stubborn-find-your-own-solution people is recorded in 30:18-26. Which of His promises particularly speaks to you?

7. Jesus was also deeply concerned about our proclivity to worry. Like cars out of alignment, we veer toward worry or fear unless we constantly steady our hearts. He exposed His disciples to storms at sea, multitudes to feed with no provision in sight, demon possessed people, the hatred of the Jewish establishment, life without a steady job and income. Ultimately He left this earth and took from them the assurance of his physical presence that they had enjoyed for three years. But again and again He reassured them. Don't be afraid. The Sermon on the Mount is the charter for the new life that Christ brings. In Matthew 5-7, Jesus describes for us

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how to live as a person deeply connected to God and lovingly connected to others. In these pivotal three chapters He makes an extended statement about giving up worry. Jesus knows what's in our hearts; He knows our default system is wired for worry. He desires to override that natural tendency as He works in us. Read Matthew 6:25-34 and make a list of every reason Jesus gives for why we can give up a life of worry.

*Reasons I can give up worry:*

*More reasons I can give up worry (Keep looking for more)::*

8. Now pick a fear that you are presently confronting in your own life. Something that gnaws at you, that drives you to find your own solution, that provokes you to anger as you attempt to keep the worry from materializing into reality. What words from Isaiah or Jesus are personally meant for your heart today?

## Chapter Six: Listening To My Tears

Can we live of rest when our lives overflow with tears? How broad is the bandwidth of emotions that we can experience within the rest of God? Is there a place of rest for us when our grief is still raw?

1. Does God have room for people who cannot see beyond their pain? Or is He "politely impatient" for us to quickly get spiritual about our anguish? Read Psalm 88. Does this psalm come to any resolution, any place of hope?

Why do you think the Spirit of God would have included within the Bible a psalm that seems to end against a black wall of despair and pain?

At this particular time, how do you respond to this psalm?

2. Write out Psalm 56:8.

What does God keep track of? What does this image mean to you?



8. The healing of our grief reaches out to bless the lives of others. Think about how many people have been comforted by the comfort David received when he lost his child. His faith has given peace to many grieving parents (see 2 Samuel 12:21- 23).

God will be faithful with you as well. The rest of heart you learn as you take your tears to God will flow out to bless and comfort others.

Look up Psalm 84:6. No one knows with certainty what the Valley of Bacca is. It may refer to a literal desert oasis with balsam trees, or it may be a figurative place of sorrow, spiritual difficulty and weeping. Note two things from this verse. First they *pass through*; second, *they make it a place of springs*. What insights do you receive from these phrases that can help your heart to be at rest no matter how immense your grief?

## Chapter Seven: Left in the Darkness

One of the poems in Madeleine L'Engle's book *The Weather of the Heart* uses her title in the poem:

Therefore I find it inexpressibly queer  
That with my own soul I am out of tune,  
That I have not stumbled on the art  
Of forecasting the weather of the heart.  
(From "To A Long Loved Love:3")

Although this poem speaks of her love for her husband, the truth of what she writes extends to far more than romantic or married love. We have a hard time with our hearts, they are unpredictable at times, inscrutable at others, and unchangeable when we desperately wish they could just change.

We may realize that truth most acutely when we have a prolonged experience of what many Christians call the "dark night of the soul." Some darkness we understand. We see the thread that leads back to grief or shame or a life-long struggle with depression.

But the dark night of the soul has origins that are far murkier. We can't definitely diagnose the cause, or lay out the cure, or predict the length of time for recovery. God seems inaccessible, the universe is lifeless or frightening and we are becalmed in a sea of isolation.

The purpose of this lesson is not to tell you how to get out of the darkness, much less to give you tips on how to help a friend get out. Instead, we want to take a look at truths we can call to mind in the midst of the darkness, even if they are truths we cannot feel.

When God opened the muted mouth of Zacharias, John the Baptizer's father, this old man uttered an amazing prophecy about the coming Messiah. His prophecy ends with these words:

To give to His people the knowledge of salvation  
By the forgiveness of their sins,  
Because of the tender mercy of our God  
With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,  
To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,  
To guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1:77-79

God's pledge is to shine on those who sit in darkness, for His mercies are tender. In this lesson we want to reflect on the tender mercies of our God. His mercy has substance and reality. The weather of our heart is changeable, but His faithfulness reaches to the skies.

1. Forsakenness takes one to the edge of an abyss. Jesus Himself understands. Read Matthew 27:46 and then Psalm 22. Psalm 22 is one of the Messianic psalms. Written by King David one thousand years before the birth of Jesus, it depicts an event that is strikingly similar to the experience of being crucified. Christians believe that this psalm gives us Jesus' personal testimony about the crucifixion, just as Isaiah 53 gives us

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God the Father's perspective on the death of Jesus. From the testimony given in Psalm 22 what pierces your own heart?

2. Some darkness we experience is the result of our sin. It is important to examine our hearts and lives before the Lord when our lives seem dark. Read 1 John 1:5-10. If your life seems lightless, is there a sin you need to deal with? If so, are you willing to repent of that sin and forsake it? If God is convicting you of a specific sin, will you write out a prayer of confession and repentance?

3. At the same time, sometimes darkness overtakes us when we are trusting in and walking with God. Read Isaiah 50:10, 11. How do you know that this one who is in darkness is also upright in God's eyes?

4. What is Isaiah's advice to those who walk in this sort of darkness?



flung open. If that ultimate darkness ended in the best of all hopes, then your darkness will one day open a door to hope. Look up Hosea 2:14, 15 and write out these verses.

Sit quietly with the promise found in them.

*Do you have a prayer you need to write out for yourself or for someone you love who "sits in darkness and has no light"?*

## Chapter Eight: Forging a Place of Rest

Life began in a garden on planet earth, and one day history will culminate as God creates a new heaven and a new earth and gives us once again a garden. This new garden will be the centerpiece of the New Jerusalem. At two points in between, two other gardens have shaped the whole story of history. The Garden of Gethsemane and the Garden of the Resurrection are the bridge between that lost first garden and the new one we are headed to as believers in Jesus Christ. In a very real way, our heart's journey to rest will take us into each of these four gardens. The purpose of this chapter is to give you time and space to be present (in an imaginative sense) in each of the four gardens. Picture a bench in each garden where you can sit and watch the story of that garden unfold. Allow your own heart to enter into the real experience of each garden.

1. But first we need to be honest.

Do you really want to learn rest of heart? Or are you afraid of it? Why?

Have you let yourself live with the illusion that you can learn rest inside your heart without having to alter the busyness of your life?

2. Now if you are willing, let's sit for a while in the garden at the beginning of time. Read Genesis 2:8-25, 3:8a. Look around, what is the loveliest thing about this garden? What does it make you long for? What else do you notice? What does this garden teach you about God, about yourself?



As we come to the end of our study, we face the choice we always face at the end of a Bible study. We can close our workbook, place it on a shelf and hope that sometime in the future the things we have considered will find their own way to seep into our lives. Or we can take the time now to reflect on how *God's Word* has searched out our hearts and given us new wisdom. We can move from knowing new information to asking *God* to shape our lives so that they correspond to His beauty and His truth.

8. As you have worked your way through this material on rest what restlessness within your own soul has been exposed?

9. What would it mean for you to enter into rest in that very area of your life?

10. Living is hard. Inevitably things will arise that will throw your heart and life into a state that is far from rest. What truths from *God* do you personally want to remember so that your soul can return to rest when the turbulence erupts?

11. Rest is not just an emotional or spiritual concept. It also involves our bodies and our minds. Do you plan times for true soul nourishing rest into your life, or do you alternate between a frenetic pace of busyness and wiped-out exhaustion where you are literally "good for nothing"?

12. What would constitute true rest for you that involved your whole being?

13. Will you plan to enjoy that rest in the next week? Write out your plan.

14. What would it mean to begin to incorporate rest into your own life? Write out one or two goals for the next six months and ask God to help you bring them into being.