



Working from a Place of Rest

Jesus and the key to sustaining ministry

Tony Horsfall



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Foreword

‘How are you?’

‘Fine’ used to be the standard response to that question. These days, ‘busy’ seems to be the socially approved reply. We respect busy people and we want people to know that we are busy. Bumper stickers proclaim, ‘Jesus is coming – look busy.’ Christians proudly sing, ‘We will give ourselves no rest.’

My work involves supporting missionaries and church leaders. The problems I come across most frequently are having too much to do, burn-out and exhaustion. The needs are so great, and there are too few workers. I have asked mission personnel ministering in war zones to tell me the main cause of their stress, expecting the answer to be related to war. Instead, ‘heavy workload’ has been reported as the key cause of stress.

I can relate to people who feel busy. I am blessed by having a child to care for. I receive urgent emails about difficult situations around the world. I have teaching to prepare, resources to write, deadlines to meet, people to see, meetings to attend and much more. It is not surprising that I rarely manage to finish reading a book. This book is the exception. I finished it within three days. Much more importantly, it has changed my thinking and my behaviour.

Tony Horsfall has brought principles about rest home to me in a new way, and has given practical suggestions which are helping me to put into practice what I believe. Tony is already the author I recommend most often as I teach and try to help others. This book brings new insights into what we mean by rest, and why and how to achieve it.

How liberating it is to realise that Jesus rested, said 'no' to demands and allowed needs to go unmet! This book can help us discern what God wants us to say 'yes' to, and when to say 'no'; it can help us learn to build margin into our lives so that we work from a place of rest.

How are you? Busy? If so, and especially if you do not have time to read books, then this is the book for you.

Dr Debbie Hawker, clinical psychologist

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Introduction

This book was first published in 2010, which seems a long time ago. So much has happened since then in my own life, and in the world in which we live. The message of *Working from a Place of Rest* has been well received in many parts of the world, for which I am truly thankful to God. Now it is republished and updated, although the essential message remains the same.

Back in 2010, I had just had my 60th birthday and the ensuing decade was perhaps the most fruitful of all my years of ministry. Doors of opportunity opened for me in many parts of the world, and with many different churches and mission organisations. Singapore became my second home, I made frequent visits to Africa, I led countless retreats here in the UK and elsewhere, and wrote other books. I was at full capacity and often overstretched, but I enjoyed every moment of it. Most importantly, I sought to live out the principles I share here, and although that is not always easy, I found they worked.

Then life changed dramatically as my wife Evelyn had a recurrence of breast cancer, and eventually passed away in 2020. I had a narrow escape myself from death, being in intensive care with Covid, but I have wonderfully recovered. I recently remarried (to Jilly) and made a major transition, moving from the north of England to live in the south, and to begin life again. Now in my early 70s, I am still fit and active, but operating at a different pace, with writing my main ministry expression along with some retreat work and a smattering of mentoring.

The world has changed dramatically too. We are now well into the digital era, with advances in technology enlarging our capacity to communicate and work in ways we could not have envisaged, but

intensifying the pace of life, increasing our busyness and making us more distracted than ever. The worldwide pandemic of 2020–22 was a watershed when we were introduced to the possibilities of Zoom and working from home, but has since left us reeling from the impact of lockdowns on local church life and mission endeavour. As things return to some kind of normality, many leaders are exhausted.

The first major lockdown here in the UK in March–May 2020 was accompanied by beautiful spring weather, and for some not impacted directly by the disease or the accompanying restrictions, provided a welcome break from the normal pressures of life and an opportunity to reassess. It felt good to have so much free time and space, even though there was nowhere to go. People caught a glimpse of a better way to live. This coincided here with the publication of John Mark Comer's great book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, which was devoured eagerly by those now furloughed from work. But has it made a difference?

I saw at the time a post on social media which said, 'I have just quickly read *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*.' It struck me then that the word 'quickly' probably meant the person had missed the point, but in a fast-paced world, even in a pandemic lockdown, that's still what we do. We rush through a book about slowing down! Our habitual haste keeps us on the surface of life and nothing really changes. We read a book, and think we have got the message, but we haven't really, or maybe not permanently, because the message was not pondered, absorbed and applied.

Comer helps us understand how contemporary life squeezes us into the mould of hurry and busyness, but says the answer is to follow the example of Jesus, who lived an unhurried life. His schedule was often full to the brim, but he rarely seems to be in a hurry. Rather, we see him rooted in the present moment and connected to God. 'What does it mean to follow Jesus?' he asks. 'It's very simple. It means you live the way Jesus lived. You take his life and teaching as your template, your model, your pattern.'¹

In *Working from a Place of Rest* we are watching Jesus at work as described in John 4 (his encounter with the Samaritan woman) and seeking to learn from his example how to live and work in a way that is sustainable. Verse 6 seems to be the crux of the matter: ‘Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.’ Here we see something staggering in its implications – *Jesus was doing nothing*. He was having a rest, taking a break, giving himself a breather. Sitting there on the edge of the well, he was pausing and giving himself permission to stop and simply to be.

Then we notice that *everything that happens in this story happens because Jesus was doing nothing*. The fact that he is resting, taking some time out, is what gives him the opportunity to seemingly ‘waste’ time with the Samaritan woman who comes to the well while he is sitting there. Because of that life-giving conversation, not only is her life changed but the whole Samaritan town experiences revival. None of this is premeditated or planned. It is a purely spontaneous event, dependent on the fact that Jesus is doing nothing.

What is more, this means *we can learn to work and minister as Jesus did*, from a place of rest. Christian ministry need not be a matter of striving to make things happen or of straining to achieve our goals through the sweat of our brow. We can learn to work together with God just as Jesus did, for this was no idle moment; rather, it was a moment of communion, of sensing what the Father was doing and of responding accordingly. We can learn to co-labour with God, to collaborate with his Spirit and work in a way that is both efficient and effective. The work is not ours; it is his. If we slow down and take time to listen, he will guide us so that we can share in what he is doing. We can learn to live, to work and to minister to others from a place of resting in God.

We will work our way slowly through John 4, reflecting around the five headings you will find in this book. I have road-tested the material many times in seminars and retreats, and there has always been

a good response. People seem to recognise this as something they already knew deep down inside but perhaps did not dare articulate. I continue to read around the subject to gain a broader understanding, and I am continually reflecting on my own experience in the light of what I am sharing here, to see if it really does work. I am sure it does. I offer my thoughts to you with the prayer that they may liberate you into a healthier and more fruitful way of serving God.

So come and sit by the well for a while. Take some time out to reflect on how you are living and working. Watch Jesus and see how he does it. Listen to what the Spirit may be saying to you deep within, at the centre of your being; and maybe, just maybe, God will give you some insights that will change your life and sustain your ministry over the long haul.

**It's helpful to think
of life as a journey**



1

Jesus on a journey

The context of the story we are looking at in John 4:1–43 is found in Jesus' decision to leave Judea and return to Galilee. It appears that, in this early part of his public ministry, he is being particularly effective and that many new disciples are being baptised. News of this has reached the Pharisees and, aware of a potential backlash from these religious conservatives, Jesus makes a strategic decision to return to his homeland in the north. The time will come when he clashes head-on with these powerful religious figures, but this is not the time for confrontation. Rather, he chooses to withdraw to the quieter shores of Galilee, away from the spotlight, to where his fledgling group of disciples can be nurtured without too much negative attention.

So we find Jesus on the road again, as we so often see him in the gospels. Walking with his disciples, crisscrossing the countryside from place to place, provided him with many natural opportunities for developing friendship with them, for informal teaching and for sharing life together. I'm sure he enjoyed these journeys and the camaraderie that grew between them as they travelled.

This particular journey was problematic for any devout and conscientious Jew, however. The easiest and quickest route was to pass through Samaria, but that might mean having to make contact with people whom they despised. The Samaritans were descended from Jews who had not been deported during the time of the Assyrian exile, but had intermarried with foreigners and adopted a syncretistic form of worship. They were considered by devout Jews to be a mixed race and religiously impure. The hostility was mutual and Jewish travellers

were not always welcomed in Samaritan villages. Consequently, most Jewish travellers chose to take a longer route, which meant crossing the River Jordan in order to bypass Samaria, and only crossing back when they were safely beyond Samaritan presence.

What is surprising on this journey is that Jesus deliberately chooses to travel through Samaria. 'Now he *had to* go through Samaria,' writes John (4:4, italics mine), using a word that suggests a strong sense of necessity. We shall return to the significance of this later, simply noting at this point that his decision would have caused consternation and apprehension among his disciples. But they trust his judgement, and the journey begins. Probably early in the morning, just as the sun rises, they take to the road, hoping to make as much progress as possible while the day is cool. By midday they have reached the Samaritan village of Sychar and stop to rest by the well. After some discussion, the disciples head off into the village to buy food while Jesus remains at the well.

This, then, is the background to the journey that Jesus is making in John 4. However, we know that John is the most intuitive of the gospel writers, and every word he uses seems to be filled with deeper significance. I think we are justified, therefore, in seeing beyond the physical journey that Jesus was making into the spiritual journey in which he was also engaged – the journey that brought him to earth, would take him to the cross, and would climax eventually in his resurrection and his triumphant return to heaven itself.

Theologian Anselm Grun speaks of Jesus as the 'divine traveller'. 'He comes down from heaven to travel with us human beings and time and again to be our guest,' he writes.² It reminds us of the journey of incarnation with which John begins his gospel. 'The Word became flesh,' he says, 'and made his dwelling among us' (1:14). This theme is a constant backdrop to the events that John records and the mystery that the opponents of Jesus could not understand – who he was and where he was from. Jesus himself, however, was never in doubt about his origin, his mission and his eventual destination.

He was aware that he had come down from heaven to bring light into the world (John 3:13, 19) and to bear witness to the truth (18:37). He was conscious that he had been sent by God (8:42) to do his will (6:38), and not to condemn the world but to save it (3:17). This would mean laying down his life, which is why he declared himself to be the bread of life. 'For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven,' he said, 'and gives life to the world' (6:33). Thus the journey would inevitably lead to suffering and to the cross. He had only a short time to accomplish the Father's will (7:33) before the path of obedience would lead him heavenwards again (13:1, 3). Thus we see him preparing his disciples for his departure with the heartbreaking words, 'I am going away' (see 8:21; 14:28).

The bigger journey that Jesus was making is best summed up in his own words to the disciples in the upper room: 'I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father' (16:28). This is the journey that Jesus made for our salvation, and it is helpful to ponder its sacrificial nature as we glimpse him sitting by the well, pausing for a brief respite on the way. Henri Nouwen has aptly called it 'the descending way of Jesus', a downward direction that he chose over and over again as he followed the Father's will: 'God has descended to us human beings to become a human being with us; and once among us, descended to the total dereliction of one condemned to death.'³

Such a journey stands in sharp contrast to the approach of most of us. We desire to be 'upwardly mobile', to climb the ladder of success, get on in the world, and find recognition and fame. Even Christian ministry can be seen in these terms – moving from a small church to a larger one, working our way to the top of the organisation, creating a name for ourselves, growing in influence and reputation, building a platform. Not many want to bury themselves in the hard places of the world where there is little outward success and few know or even care what we do. Yet we are called to have the same attitude of mind that Jesus had, which the apostle Paul so wonderfully describes for us in Philippians 2:5–11.

This passage seems to have been an early Christian hymn, perhaps the first Christmas carol, and it vividly portrays the true nature of the journey that brought Jesus to the well at Sychar that day. Whether or not it was composed by Paul himself is unclear, but it sums up accurately his own understanding of the downward way of Jesus. We can see it in verses 6–8 as a journey of seven descending steps.

- Step 1, ‘Who, being in very nature God...’: The journey begins in heaven where, as God the Son, Jesus shares equality with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Here he is worshipped and adored, sharing the glory of heaven and possessing all the attributes of God, such as omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence.
- Step 2, ‘did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing...’: The journey gets underway as he willingly divests himself of his heavenly glory, choosing to lay aside some of his divine prerogatives and privileges. Theologians are divided as to the extent of the self-emptying that took place, but clearly it involved a significant and costly letting go of what was his by right.
- Step 3, ‘taking the very nature of a servant...’: Here we see how Jesus steps into the role that the Father has assigned for him as the true servant of the Lord, predicted by the prophets, such as Isaiah in the Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). He willingly adopts the disposition of a servant, choosing the Father’s will before his own and entering our world ‘not... to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45).
- Step 4, ‘being made in human likeness’: Now we reach the deepest mystery of the incarnation and the virgin birth – how it is that God could become a man. What we do know is that the divine life is ‘contracted to a span’ (to use Charles Wesley’s telling phrase) in the womb of Mary, so that when the child is born he is both fully human and divine, able to bear the name Immanuel, meaning ‘God with us’.

- Step 5, 'And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself...': Having become one of us, the Son of God is now subject to all the laws of human growth and development. The omnipotent one becomes a helpless baby, dependent on others for survival. The omniscient one must learn how to talk, how to count, how to write. The omnipresent one must learn to walk and is limited in time and space, travelling on foot from place to place like the rest of humankind. He is a Jew like other Jews, known and recognised by his name (Jesus), his place of birth (of Nazareth), and his father's occupation (the carpenter's son). This is the point at which we meet him at Jacob's well.
- Step 6, 'by becoming obedient to death...': Hidden away in the backwater that was Nazareth for most of his life, Jesus eventually begins his public ministry, but always with a single aim in mind – to do the Father's will. Obedience is at the heart of his servanthood, and there are no limits to his compliance. He knows that the journey will take him to the cross, so when the time comes he sets his face towards Jerusalem with a steely determination that frightens those around him (Mark 10:32–34). No one will take his life from him; he will lay it down of his own volition, because this is the charge given to him by the Father (John 10:17–18).
- Step 7, 'even death on a cross!': There are many ways to die but the path of obedience takes Jesus to a shameful and agonising death, in which he experiences the rejection, hatred and hostility of his enemies, as well as the wrath of God, as he embraces to himself the just punishment for the sins of the whole world. The journey will take him to the grave, but this lowest point will be the triumphant turning point. Having faithfully dealt with sin and conquered Satan, he can now return victoriously to heaven, his journey over: 'Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (vv. 9–11).

As we consider the journey Jesus made, we can only respond with love and gratitude that he was willing to go to such lengths to save us. Like the shepherd who goes out over the mountains in the dark of night to find the one sheep that is missing, he gladly set out on this most amazing journey of all, that he might find each one of us and bring us back to the Father.

As we watch him sitting by the well, having a well-deserved rest, we see beyond the immediate strain of the journey from Judea to Galilee. We gaze upon one who has left the glories of heaven and, in a few short years, will be on his way to a despised and lonely death at Calvary. And our hearts are filled with adoration, for we know that he walks this path of obedience for our sakes, so that we may have eternal life.



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Exhaustion, burn-out, tiredness, even breakdown... sadly, such conditions are all too common these days, not least among those involved in some kind of Christian ministry, whether full-time, part-time or voluntary. In striving to do our utmost for God, we can easily forget that there were many times when Jesus himself was willing to rest, to do nothing except wait for the Spirit's prompting, so that he demonstrated the vital principle of 'working from a place of rest'.

Drawing on extensive experience of training and mentoring across the world, **Tony Horsfall** reflects on the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman to draw out practical guidance for sustainable Christian life and work.

This book can help us discern what God wants us to say 'yes' to, and when to say 'no'; it can help us learn to build margin into our lives so that we work from a place of rest. How are you? Busy? If so, and especially if you do not have time to read books, then this is the book for you.

From the foreword by Dr Debbie Hawker



People around the world have been inspired and refreshed by **Tony Horsfall's** teaching and mentoring. As well as working as an international freelance trainer and retreat leader, he has written a number of other books for BRF, including *Deep Calls to Deep*, *Rhythms of Grace* and *Mentoring for Spiritual Growth*. He also contributes to BRF's *New Daylight* Bible reading notes.

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