

Rest for the weary

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[0 : 00] Morning, everyone. There's a whole load of chocolate here. I'm going to move this. I know my eyes will be drawn to it.

I had a suggestion this week that we are the most tired generation in history. What do you think about that? Some surveys that I saw, particularly amongst millennials and Gen Z, that's those in their 20s and 30s, I think, isn't it? The report that many of them have experienced symptoms of burnout or stress.

And I suppose the question is, well, the question that got me thinking really was why is that? Why this generation? Is it the unstable global situation? Is it the pressures of living in an online world that tends to disconnect us rather than bring us together?

Is it that this generation have to think much more about their identity than previous generations? or is it just the kind of financial stresses, the fact that you leave university with a huge debt and the job market is so much more competitive now?

[1 : 30] But alongside all that, I think it's strange because it's fair to say that we live in an age that promotes rest more than any other. Workplaces talk about well-being all the time.

And sometimes they even do something about it. We sleep on mattresses that are designed by scientists. We have apps for meditation.

We have white noise. We have birdsong. We have wellness routines that we can find readily available online. And yet burnout and exhaustion seems to be on the rise.

We're starting a short series today in the book of Matthew looking at particular episodes in the gospel, not the whole thing. And Malachi, how'd you get on with that?

That ended with a sense of longing. Did you feel that? I certainly did. God's people were back in Jerusalem. The temple had been rebuilt. But things weren't right.

[2 : 33] Your hearts were really cold. The promises felt unfinished. And then after 400 years, 400 years of silence when God didn't speak, John the Baptist, who's referenced actually in Malachi chapter 3, he beckons the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth.

We're starting in chapter 11 because today's well-known verses have been life-changing to millions of people over nearly 2,000 years.

And I'm sure they're precious to many of you here today. Because they get right to the heart of what Christianity is all about.

And they show us that true rest is found in Jesus. True rest is found in Jesus. So to help us understand this this morning, we're going to look at three main ideas from this passage.

We're going to look at our need for deep rest, first of all. Then the invitation to deep rest. And then our route to that rest. So our need, the invitation, and then basically how we get it.

[3 : 46] Firstly, I think it's worth thinking through the kind of rest that Jesus is describing here. If you look at verse 28, he says, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

And then in 29, you will find rest for your souls. You see, Jesus knows our needs and he knows our need for physical rest.

We see this throughout the Bible. God rested on the seventh day after completing his creation. He set the good order, the pattern for rest that sustains us.

And Jesus, after a day of teaching the crowds in chapter 8 in the book of Matthew, remember, he slept on the boat through the storm until he was awoken.

In Psalm 23, Jesus makes his disciples lie down in green pastures. You see, physical rest is good for us.

[4 : 49] It benefits us, it restores us, it blesses us, and it reminds us of our limits too. But Jesus here, I think, seems to be talking about something deeper, something deeper than physical rest.

He calls it rest for our souls. It's a deep peace. It's a sense of security and safety that remains in place despite life's challenges.

It's sometimes referred to as the word shalom. I don't know if you've come across that in the Bible before. Sort of wholeness, completeness, balance. Betsy, my youngest daughter, when we just mentioned it at breakfast this morning, said it's a bit like a bed for your soul.

I thought, that's pretty good, isn't it? First thing in the morning. And Jesus uses the idea of burdens to show that he understands what it is that we carry around with us that prevents us from finding the kind of rest that he is describing.

You see, Jesus is really aware of the burdens that the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees, imposed at that time. He's encountered their judgment already. When he called Matthew, the writer of this book, he was a despised tax collector to be a disciple.

[6:12] He was condemned for that. And just after this invitation, he is going to have the Pharisees on his back again for the way that he breaks the Sabbath laws in their eyes.

So Jesus, he looks out on these ordinary Jews who bear this load and his heart just goes out to them. He totally gets where they're at.

You see, their exhaustion was the burden of endless regulations and a duty to fulfill the law and to prove their acceptance before God, to earn their righteousness, which they could never do.

It was just too demanding. Jesus accuses the Pharisees directly of this later on in his ministry. If you're open on Matthew, just jump ahead to chapter 23, verse 2.

Chapter 23 and verse 2. He says, the teachers of the law. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and they put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

[7:26] See, Jesus saw the way the Pharisees imposed burdens on the people. He placed them under the strain of expectation and therefore guilt, all the while ignoring their own law-breaking hearts and attitudes.

And for us today, we may not have the same set of regulations and restrictive laws placed on our backs, but the culture around us does impose a similar set of burdens.

And while some of our burdens come from these external pressures, situations that we find ourselves in that are just beyond our control that cause us to worry, we also have burdens that come from our own internal, what I'm going to call voice of discontent.

The voice of discontent. That's the inward sense that we just don't quite make the grade. For some, that might be the pressure from parents who might not say the words, you're not good enough, but it's perhaps implied in passing comments, maybe over many years, which leads us to chasing a lifetime of approval.

Or maybe it's the guilt we have as a parent, the way that we brought up our children, mistakes we've made. Either way, the burden of inadequacy can build on our shoulders.

[8:57] For others, it's the feeling that I need to prove myself through my career. You see, I was overlooked for that last promotion, so I've got to step it up, I've got to show more commitment, I've got to work longer hours, I've got to sacrifice more time, and before you know it, the quality of your work becomes a measure of your value, and a burden of insecurity builds up on your shoulders.

For some, I don't know if you noticed this, there's a desire to be out of the stage of life that you're in. So when I'm married, then life will be great. When the kids are a bit older and they're not just hanging around me all the time, I don't have to watch them all the time, then I'll be free.

When I'm retired, wow, that's just a blank canvas, right? And before we know it, the burden of discontent builds on our shoulders.

And you might be here thinking, really? I'm young, life is good, circumstances have fallen into place for me, and without wanting to depress you, as time goes on, as time goes on, those burdens do creep in because you get a fear of what you might lose.

And as your successes become greater, they sometimes get replaced with worry about losing them, whether that's financial, whether that's just losing loved ones. And we fight for what we have, and then suddenly, the burden of anxiety and control builds on our shoulders.

[10:30] Some of you know that film, Chariots of Fire, I think it always gets wheeled out in sermons, doesn't it? Most of the focus in that film is on Eric Liddell, who's a Christian, and he was a Christian athlete who said, when I run, I feel God's pleasure.

It's like he was burdenless. But sometimes, I think, overlooked in that film is a chap called Harold Abrahams, who was his rival, and what was driving him to be the best at the 100 meters? This is what he said, I'll raise my eyes, I'll look down the corridor with 10 lonely seconds to justify my existence.

I think he was being really open and honest about something that perhaps we all face a burden with, but perhaps are reluctant to admit to it. That burden about whether we've achieved enough, whether we've done enough.

You see, unrest is a great characteristic of the world. And not always, and I really want to emphasize this, not always, but sometimes it comes from a heart that looks too much on ourselves or others around us in terms of comparisons, our circumstances, and not to God.

[11 : 42] And that wasn't part of his original design for us. We were designed to be at peace with God, and in turn with ourselves. But sin just wrecked that ideal, people.

Which is why these words of reconciliation are so welcome. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. Is that you?

What are those burdens that press down on you like you're wearing a rucksack full of rocks? Or if that's too strong, then that voice of discontent that just niggles away at you and keeps you from true rest?

Jesus is amazing at diagnosing our hearts. But once he's done that, his invitation is astonishing. You see, he could have just said, come on now, pick it up a bit as he looks out.

Try a bit harder. And if we go back to seeing the hearts of those people in Malachi, he could have been excused for just saying, I'm done. I'm done with you lot.

[12 : 54] But what does he say? Come to me. Sorry? What are the conditions? There aren't any. No, no, no. What do I need to do to prepare?

Nothing. I've got to do my bit. I've got to sort out some of these issues that I've got, some of these burdens. No, just hand them over.

I'll take your burdens and I'll give you my rest. But when you come to Christ like this, it's like a doctor that sees your circumstances, sees what you're going through, recognises the stress you're under and legitimises a period of prolonged rest.

You see, this invitation is completely unique. Other religions say that if you want to find true rest in God, you need to earn it. You need to improve yourself, you need to keep the rules, you need to empty your mind, you need to fill your mind, you need to stick to these structures and Jesus just says, come to me.

How can he say that? How can he say that? How can he offer that? What are his credentials? It's because of who he is. Let's read verse 27.

[14 : 13] All things have been committed to me by my father. No one knows the son except the father and no one knows the father except the son and those to whom the son chooses to reveal him.

That's the reason. And it gets to the heart of our faith. Jesus makes this exclusive claim here. The only way we can get to know God the father, to stand before him, to be right before him, to enjoy him, is through Jesus the son.

He holds the keys that makes that possible. And this verse just gives us a glimpse into the close, loving, fulfilled relationship of one of the great theological mysteries that God the father and God the son have lived from eternity past to eternity future in perfect harmony.

And what is even more astonishing here is that we are invited into that relationship too if we come to Christ whose offer is broad and wide.

And Jesus knows that he can make this offer, not just because of who he is, but because of what he's about to do. In less than about two years, I think, from this moment in history.

[15 : 41] When he goes to the cross, he'll be fulfilling all of the demands of the law that he saw people burdened by, all of the demands. He'll be paying for all of the times when we've put other things and other people before God and carried unnecessary burdens as a result.

To use the theme of today, he'll be forsaking his own rest for the rest that he offers here. You see, when Jesus went to the cross, did he go with deep rest in his heart?

See, he didn't retaliate, did he? But he was not at peace. The night before, in Gethsemane, my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

That's not somebody that's at peace. as he prayed, Father, if it's possible, may this cup, this situation, be taken from me. On the cross, his sweat like drops of blood, when he calls out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

You see, Jesus took on our restlessness to be able to say to us, come unto me, all you who labor and are weary, and I will give you rest.

[17 : 06] You see, the offer is legitimate. It's from a trustworthy source. He can provide the rest for our souls that we're searching for.

And once we come to him, as many of you have here this morning, we get a glimpse into the heart of God. Do you notice that? Nowhere else, I think I'm right in saying, in the whole Bible, do we find Jesus reveal his heart in this way.

You see, he does describe himself in different ways in the Gospels. He says, for example, that he's the good shepherd, that he is the light of the world. But the words gentle and humble, they're different, aren't they?

They show us his heart. And these words show us how he deals with us as we come to him. He hears us as we speak to him.

He guides us gently as we learn from him. He forgives us as we confess to him. He's got all power. He's got all the power given to him by his father.

[18 : 12] But he doesn't use that divine status to kind of browbeat those under his authority like the Pharisees. Instead, he just humbly invites us all into relationship with him.

And as we come to him, deep rest can be found in him as we live with him, as we walk with him, as we rest with him.

Jesus uses this image of a yoke to show how this works. It didn't actually occur to me until this week that Jesus would have been very familiar with yokes.

He was a carpenter, wasn't he? So he probably made quite a few of them. It's this wooden collar that runs over a pair of cattle, which enables them jointly to carry great weights.

It ensures they move in the same direction, share the burden. And I think it was an exercise in training sometimes. So a more experienced ox led a junior along the way.

[19 : 20] Can't tell I'm not a farmer. Jesus says that as you come to him for rest in salvation, you become yoked to him.

You become connected to him. You become a follower of him. A disciple is the biblical word. But verse 30, his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

He'll take the weight. He'll carry the load. He will walk with you. He'll be eternally. You see, this sounds really strange today, doesn't it?

In a culture that values independence, autonomy, I'll do it my way, these days we don't talk about learning and living in the same way.

The primary purpose, it seems today, of teachers is to just get us through our exams, just to get what we need. It wasn't always that way. When I did my A-levels, which is actually a few decades ago now, I have to reflect on, we used to go round to my English teacher's house, not on my own, as a group, for extra lessons.

[20 : 31] I'm not sure if that's because we were behind or what, but we did. And that was entirely normal. I don't know if that features in Katie's safeguarding training later on this month. But historically, it was even more immersive.

Jewish rabbis and I think Greek philosophers too, they would do life with their students. So you became a follower, you ate meals together, you left home to be trained, you were educated in the teacher's home.

Jesus says, come to me, I'll free you from the burden of your sin, I'll commit myself to you forever, and I'll walk with you, I'll guide you, I'll teach you.

Have you done that? I also think there's something here for those of us that have accepted the invitation. We have come to him and experienced that deep peace that only Jesus brings.

We can testify to his gentle and humble character as he takes our burdens on himself. But I think at times, because of our circumstances and some of them very weighty and hard, we sometimes doubt that we're yoked to him.

[21 : 51] And some of life's troubles we hold on to as if we were flying solo, as if we're bearing that load ourselves.

If that's you this morning, then just try to remember this truth, that you can continue to bring your burdens to him in prayer. it's not a one-off thing.

So he'll be with you through his spirit when you go into that tricky work meeting tomorrow, even if you don't sense it. He'll be with you when you face your battle with loneliness this week.

He'll be with you when you have that worrying medical appointment that's just niggling in your mind. He'll be with you as you step out and share Jesus with your neighbour.

See, I'm not saying you look like this, but try to remember this picture. Yeah? He's next to you.

[22 : 48] He's willing to share the load. He's cheering you on. Hand it all to him. He can take it. And then lastly, our route to rest.

How do we get it? verse 25. At that time, Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you've hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. What's the barrier we have to overcome to do this? Do you notice that Jesus doesn't impose anything?

Any? But I think we do. I think it's our pride. I don't think Jesus is saying that the gospel is not for clever people.

The invitation is for all to come to him. It's just that sometimes it can remain hidden to those that are wise in their own eyes.

[23 : 55] Those that have got a pride in their intellect, a pride in their wealth, a pride in their status, a pride in their goodness, a pride in their own morality.

That usually prevents us from coming. Instead, Jesus praises God that this offer is seen by those who become like little children.

children. What does he mean? Two things, I think, just to finish. Number one, I think we have to recognize that we need help. When we used to go for family walks and the girls were younger and I probably underestimated the distance, what they tended to do was give up halfway around.

They didn't move, but they just looked up and said one word, carry. Nothing else. They had no shame.

It got a bit too much when Lucy tried it once. What would most adults do in that situation?

[25 : 05] You know, when you're feeling a bit faint, you don't want to tell people, it's fine, you know, we can carry on, I'm good, just a quick sip of water, then I'll be fine. You see, we have to recognize the burdens we're carrying and we have to swallow our pride and come to him.

And then secondly, we have to trust the giver of the invitation for who he says he is. See, children are experts at this.

They just expect your love. They know they're going to receive it. You see, I love kids, but at times, let's be honest, they can be really annoying.

Sometimes they can be grisly, they can get in the way of your plans, they wreck your conversations you're having, they make irritating noises that they find hilarious.

But your frustration to them is completely oblivious. when they just smile at you and just say, ball, play?

[26 : 13] We could learn a lot from them, couldn't we? Sometimes people don't come to Christ because they don't think he will accept them. They've done something in their life that haunts them, makes them feel like no one would be interested in them, least of all Jesus.

But listen to his words. He sees the burdened, he came for the burdened, he is gentle and humble in heart. He says elsewhere in John's Gospel, whoever comes to me, whoever comes to me, I will never drive away.

You see, being a Christian isn't always easy. Jesus does tell his followers later that they too will have to take up their cross in life, whatever that looks like.

There's going to be trials to endure. But the rest offered in the Gospel far outweighs the cross we bear because it puts everything into this eternal perspective and it provides this deep peace and acceptance with God and a freedom, a freedom for our inbuilt tendencies to discontentment.

I'm just going to finish with two verses, 28 to 30, but read in a different Bible translation. Listen to these words. Are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion?

[27 : 41] Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me.

Watch how I do it. I like this phrase. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.

Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. Amen. I'm going to say a prayer to close and this is a prayer that I found actually about this particular passage.

It's not my own prayer but let's pray it together. Lord Jesus we thank you for this offer of rest that goes way deeper than a good night's sleep as helpful as that is.

Let your presence unburden our minds soothe our hearts and change anxious pacing into peaceful waiting. Draw us from frantic striving into the rest of trusting you.

[28 : 49] deliver us from the lie that productivity equals worth that striving means success. Instead let us come to you for salvation restoration joy and true rest.

Amen. We're going to sing a song before we go into communion and this song kind of picks up on the surprise at the offer. the generosity of the invitation and the freedom found in gaining the rest that Christ offers.

And can it be. Amen.