

His Rest

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[0 : 0 0] going to have God's words read and then explained to us by Andy before Lizzie comes up to read. Let me pray. Lord, incline our hearts to your word and not to selfish gain.

May we not be thinking about or distracted by other things, but help us to pay attention to you. And we ask it in your name. Amen.

The reading today is from the book of Matthew and you'll find it in chapter 11, verses 25 to 30. And that will be on page 984 of the Bibles on your seats. Matthew chapter 11, verse 25.

At that time, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. And no one knows the Son except the Father. And no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Thanks, Lizzie. Do keep that passage open. My name is Andy, part of the staff team here. Phil has prayed, so we'll get going. So may I say happy new year?

[1 : 5 7] It's great to see you at the start of 2025. As Phil said, we're in the middle of a mini-series of starting the new year with Jesus.

And the theme of our passage this morning is rest. So at the start of the new year, how many of us feel rested this morning? How many of us feel rested most mornings? I guess hopefully you've got a bit of a break over the Christmas holidays, and then the alarm clock gets set again to that awful time in the morning. Teenagers have to get up before 10am for school. And even if we said, yes, I feel rested now, we might not say yes next Sunday, if I asked you. And unrest seems to be one great characteristic of the world, isn't it? The Oxford word of the year for 2024 was brain rot. I don't know if it's passed you by, I don't know. Which means the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material considered to be trivial or unchallenging. We are restless people. And we fill our minds with lots of things, distractions.

Our lives are filled with hurts and regrets and guilt and all those distractions. And sometimes we try and tune it out with things that are beneath us, just to fill the void. Music, television, scrolling.

But none of that cures the restlessness that we have as a nation, as a world, as people. Well, the great news for us at the start of 2025 is that Jesus offers us this rest.

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, I will give you rest. These are some of the most famous words of the Lord Jesus, known in the prayer book as the comfortable words. And Jesus is not just talking about physical rest, not just mental rest. He's talking about a more important rest, a deeper rest.

[4 : 23] He's talking about spiritual rest. Verse 29, rest for your soul. By soul, Jesus means our core being, the source of our thoughts and feelings. And this is the rest that our world is crying out for, but at the same time doesn't realise it needs. The psychologist, Carl Jung, said, people will do anything, no matter how absurd, to avoid facing their own souls.

So it's not just brain rot, but soul rot our world struggles with. Do anything to distract from thinking about the big things in life, the deeper things.

And so these are great words for us at the start of a new year. A new year we can start with Jesus and finish with Jesus, learning from him and finding our rest in him. As the 4th century bishop, St. Augustine, once prayed, O Lord, you have formed us for yourself and our souls are restless until they find their rest in you. So two simple things for us this morning. The first thing on the handout or on the screen, come to Jesus. Come to Jesus. Verse 28, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden. And I will give you rest. Who exactly is Jesus addressing here? Jesus says, come to me, all. All. Not just people from a particular ethnic or class background. Not just the religious or good.

Come to me, all. The arms of the Lord Jesus are open wide to anyone and everyone. And it's an invitation, verse 28 to all who labor and are heavy laden. Well, what kind of labor is this? What kind of heavy laden?

Is it the labor and weariness that comes from a full day's work or looking after children in the holidays? Or the weariness of our bodies breaking? Or being heavy laden with jobs to do around the house?

[6 : 52] Or the overwhelming burden of the teenager whose turn it is to load the dishwasher? Or the child heavy laden with having to clear up their toys? Jesus doesn't actually say. He's left it quite general what this weariness and this burden and labor is about. But if we read Matthew's gospel from beginning, if we had done that, we'd see that Jesus is speaking to a group of people, a crowd weighed down by many things, who labor in many things. Fundamentally, they are heavy laden with sin. The burden of sin upon other people is the reason why Jesus was born. The reason why we celebrate Christmas.

With the angel declaring right at the start, Jesus' mission to Joseph, chapter 1, verse 21, she will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Jesus was born into a nation that was laboring under the weight of sin. And this too is the world which we see around us, isn't it? Sin in its many forms and outworkings.

2024 saw a lot of that. War, violence, greed, and no doubt more to come in 2025. In the car, when we have the radio on and the news comes on, I quickly turn it down.

So the kids don't hear about things they're not ready to hear about. That's the world we live in, surrounded by sin. And then there's the sin in our own lives.

[8 : 43] That mean that we are heavy laden, the battles that we're fighting. Sometimes winning, sometimes losing. Published in the 17th century, the Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan remains one of the most important works of literature ever.

Wikipedia told me that, so it must be true. And in it, the main character, Christian, is on a pilgrimage to the heavenly city and he carries around a heavy backpack.

He calls his burden. And it's the picture of the heavy burden we carry around with us. Of sin and guilt and shame wherever we go.

And perhaps some of us are here acutely aware of that. Heavy laden with guilt and shame. And flowing from the burden of sin, we're weary under the shadow of death.

Jesus is speaking to a crowd who know, all too aware of their own mortality. Historians tell us that in those days water was scarce, food was scarce, work was scarce.

[9 : 57] No sewage system to speak of. No soap. Other kinds of modern hygiene. And medical practice generally did more harm than good. No building regulations.

So risk of fire was extreme. Population density, very high. Average life expectancy was between 20 and 25. Mainly because of massive infant mortality rates.

If you made it to 25, you had a reasonably good chance of reaching old age. On the other hand, one third of children died before the age of six.

The rate of female infanticide was horrific at 20%. Jesus came to a nation where the presence and threat of death would have felt frighteningly close.

A reality seen in the hordes of desperate people coming to Jesus to be healed. And it's into such a world that Matthew speaks, saying that Jesus has come to fulfil what the prophet Isaiah said in chapter 4.

[11 : 09] The people living in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. Well, thankfully, medicine has gotten better since the first century.

But as we're all so painfully aware, it can't halt the march of death. I remember a doctor who used to be part of the congregation here, who told me once, pretty frankly, that all his work ended in failure.

Because eventually all his patients would die. We are individuals, a nation and world, weary under the shadow of death.

And so no matter what it looks like for ourselves, what we look like on the outside this morning, or each Sunday as we come to church, or each and every day, we come weary and heavy laden just by living in this broken world.

Heavy laden with sin, sorrow, suffering, anxiety for the year ahead, remorse and guilt. And all of this amidst the failure of leaders.

[12 : 21] Jesus is speaking to people whose religious leaders have failed them. They were supposed to point people to God's forgiveness, but they hadn't. Just before, in chapter 9, when Jesus looked at the crowd, he saw people harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

And as we saw in Mark's gospel, instead they added to God's words, these religious leaders, their own traditions and laws. Which Jesus describes in chapter 23 as, they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear.

They lay them on people's shoulders, and they themselves are not willing to move them with a finger. And so this crowd, we can imagine Jesus with this crowd.

They're laboring. They're heavy laden because they're trying to prove themselves to God and to others. And they're leaving crushed, not encouraged. And again, whilst there are wonderful godly leaders in the church today, there are plenty who aren't.

And we hear of leaders who have added burdens to people, abused people. It's why the archbishop had to step down. Not calling people to repentance and faith, and pointing people to God's forgiveness, but teaching a false gospel.

[13 : 43] Leaving people crushed by guilt. Trying to prove themselves to God. And it's into all that. That is all the background. Of Jesus giving this wonderful invitation in verse 28.

Come to me. All who labor and are heavy laden, I will give you rest. A rest expanding in verse 29. Rest for your souls.

Now, scientists tell us that it's not so much the amount of sleep we physically need, but the depth of it, the REM sleep that we need.

If you don't get that deep REM sleep, then we go through life in a fog. We are not alert. Perhaps you're all too aware of that truth.

We need deep sleep. And Jesus says there is a spiritual REM that we need. A deep calm that we need.

[14 : 45] A soul rest. Now, referring to a physical, spiritual, relational joy of living in God's world, in relationship with the creator of the universe as our father.

As we come to the Lord Jesus, we find ourselves enjoying that soul rest that we were made for. Soul rest from laboring and trying to please God in the wrong way.

Trying to earn our way by doing good things. Like the religious leaders put on the people back then. And soul rest from the burden of sin and shame.

In the Pilgrim's Progress, the main character, Christian, loses his backpack of burden when he gets to the cross as he comes to Jesus.

John Bunyan wrote this. Just as Christian came up to the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back and began to tumble and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the tomb where it fell in and I saw it no more.

[15 : 57] It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? It's a wonderful picture. It's a wonderful picture. It's a wonderful picture. It's a wonderful picture. It's a wonderful picture. And we're going to see you. And we're going to see you. And then soul rest from the shadow of death.

Because Jesus proclaims everlasting life. An eternal rest for those who come to him. The one who can bring us through death to his new creation kingdom to come.

The bishop J.C. Ryle said this on these verses. There is rest in Christ, rest of conscience and rest of heart.

Rest built on pardon of all sin. Rest flowing from peace with God. May I ask quite plainly, do you experience that rest?

Have you come to the Lord Jesus for that rest for yourselves? And Jesus is very particular about where we come to for this soul rest.

[17 : 00] And we can't buy it. There's no pill that provides it. Nor is the rest simply found in coming to church or doing religious stuff. Jesus doesn't say be religious.

Jesus doesn't say come to church. He doesn't say come to your senses. He says come to me. I will give you rest.

Take my yoke. Learn from me. I am gentle. My yoke is easy. My burden is light. Perhaps there is some here who haven't, who come to church but haven't yet found rest for the soul.

In that we haven't come to Jesus. Well the first step is to find this rest is to realise just how weary and burdened we are.

And then to humble ourselves. As Jesus says earlier, like little children. Totally reliant on the Lord Jesus to take that burden from us. And to give us eternal soul rest.

[18 : 05] This is an invitation at the start of the year to keep coming to Jesus. Heavy laden with sin, weary under the shadow of death and find eternal rest for the soul.

Well what does this rest look like in practice? Well a soul at rest is not a mind at rest. Because secondly we are to learn from Jesus.

Come to Jesus. Learn from Jesus. Look down at verse 29. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart.

And you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Coming to Jesus means going back to school.

Going back to college, uni. Learn from me, says Jesus. This is the invitation to be a disciple of Jesus. To listen carefully to what he teaches.

[19 : 05] And doing what he says in order to live rightly. Living with Jesus both as our saviour and as our Lord. And why should we enrol in the school of Jesus?

Well he gives us two reasons. Very briefly. He is gentle and lowly. Verse 29 again. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart.

It's quite striking that in the reading we had just before this bit. That Jesus said that all things have been handed to him by God. Last week in this series we focused on Jesus' greatness.

He is the one who upholds the universe. And yet here we get his description of his own heart. Gentle and lowly.

Gentle meaning meek. Unassuming, modest. Lowly in heart meaning humble. Totally accessible. And as we've seen in Hebrews. Jesus is not trigger happy.

[20 : 10] He's not harsh. He's not reactionary. He's the most understanding person in the universe. He is the sympathetic high priest. In heaven that we can approach.

In other words, he's not like other leaders. He's not someone who might just order us to do things without lifting a finger to help. He approaches us gently.

With a humble heart. He gets alongside us in our pain. He empathises with our condition. The one who gives out grace to all those who approach his throne.

He is gentle and lowly. And his burden is light. In verse 29, Jesus says, take my yoke upon you. And then verse 30, my yoke is easy. And my burden is light.

We find rest for our souls by taking up his yoke. A yoke, we'll probably know, is a wooden beam put across two animals in those days to carry a load or pull a plough, for example, in the farm.

[21 : 18] And Jesus says to me, if you come to me, you're still going to have a yoke. You're still going to have a burden. Well, now the invitation from Jesus that, you know, it sounds too good to resist.

Well, now perhaps sounding too good to be true. We could see this is the bait and switch approach from the Lord Jesus. And it's often this yoke and burden that holds people back from coming to Jesus in the first place.

Because coming to Jesus means identifying with him, being yoked with him, sharing in some of the shame he experienced. It means some suffering alongside the joy of knowing him as we follow him.

But it's an easy yoke. It's a light burden. Jesus is saying when we come to him, we swap a crushing burden of sin and failure and death for a light one, an easy one of shame.

We swap the unbearable yoke of religious performance for the easy yoke of learning from Jesus. If we're Christians this morning, isn't this teaching wonderful to remind ourselves?

[22 : 43] That if we stick with Jesus, Matthew says, we will find true rest in our restless world around us. If we learn from him, accept his teaching, Jesus says you will find true rest for your soul.

And whilst we see around us the world drifting from Jesus, we can take our lead from Jesus in Matthew 11 to not being disciples, to not stop being disciples and to not stop making disciples this year.

Yes, the teaching is unpopular. A rejection will follow just as it did when Jesus walked the earth. It's tough.

But if we will come to him and listen to him, then we will have that eternal soul rest for which we were designed. That spiritual refreshment that the world cannot see, but would blow its mind.

Well then, as we close, if you are like me, you need a daily reminder from Jesus to come to him. To take his yoke upon you and learn from him.

[23 : 58] And as the busyness of the term for many starts this week, or may have already started for you, I don't know. It will be easy to get caught up in life.

And forget to keep coming to Jesus and to keep learning from him. Whether that's daily ourselves or together at church or growth group.

It's too easy to neglect our soul. To get soul rot. It's too easy to forget that we don't have to bear life's burden ourselves.

Jesus wants us to come to him. To take his yoke upon us. That he bears our burden and pulls alongside us. In the pains and the tribulations of 2025.

And even this morning, if you haven't done so yet, Jesus invites us to come in from the darkness. Of laboring under the weight of sin and proving ourselves, or trying to.

[25 : 03] To come in from the shadow of death. And to come to Jesus and the light of knowing him forever. And to keep coming to Jesus.

To keep learning from him. And experiencing his glorious rest. Let's pray together. Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden.

I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. And learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart. And you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy.

And my burden is light. Heavenly Father, we praise you for this great invitation to come to Jesus. To come to him as we labour and are heavy laden.

And we thank you for the rest that he gives us. That soul rest. The eternal rest. Please help us to strive. To enter that rest in the future.

[26 : 06] And to experience it here now. As we learn from the Lord Jesus. And sit at his feet. Please help us Father to do that all the more.

This year. Amen.