

Rest for Our Souls

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[0 : 00] Good morning. I'm embarrassed. When you get to 63, birthdays don't really matter. My brother gave me a very funny card this morning that reflected that, for which I was grateful.

I wasn't born in Edinburgh, but I was bred in Edinburgh. Age seven, the family I was part of moved to Scotland. We lived in Morningside. I grew up in Morningside, went to Harriot's, went to Edinburgh University, worked as a solicitor in Edinburgh for nine years.

Then in 1993, which does seem an age ago, we moved as a family to North London, where I was privileged to be a pastor for quite a long time.

Sadly, I've now lived more of my life in England than Scotland. I kind of regret that, because coming back here, I feel at home. And yet, when we moved to London, we thought we'd only be there three years, and then we'd be back up this way.

But the Lord had other ideas, and we're actually grateful that we've been privileged to serve the Lord Jesus in London. But look, you don't want to know about me, and I don't like talking about me.

[1 : 08] I do like talking about the Lord Jesus. So would you have your Bible open with me, please, at Matthew chapter 11. And particularly, we're going to look at verses 28 to 30.

Course 101 in an American university is the introductory level of learning. And the words of Jesus we're going to look at this morning could be decided as Christianity or Discipleship 101.

Because here, our Lord Jesus teaches us the basics of a true being, a true Christian. The basics from which, if we're believers in the Lord Jesus, we never, ever graduate.

You may have heard of the famous golfer, Jack Nicklaus. He used to go to a golf professional every year and said, Teach me as if I'd never held a golf club.

And to other golfers, this great world champion golfer, as it were, he said, never be too proud to take a lesson. And to us this morning, our Lord Jesus says, Look, here is what it means to be one of my disciples.

[2 : 26] Here is how you start being a disciple. And here is how you continue being a disciple. So it's to us this morning, the Lord Jesus says these famous words.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.

For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

But none of us this morning would disagree that we need rest. It's part of how God made us. So after a long day, my body needs the rest of sleep.

At the end of a working week, I value the rest of a day off. As a holiday approaches, I look forward to that opportunity for both physical and mental rest.

[3 : 26] But there is another kind of rest. A kind of rest we each need. And actually, we were created to enjoy. It's what our Lord Jesus calls here, rest for our souls.

You've got a soul. I've got a soul. It's the real us, the real you, that unseen part that makes me, me, and you, you.

That part, the Bible says, that sets you and I apart from the animals. The part of us, the Bible says, is eternal. So what is rest of soul?

Rest for our souls, according to the Bible. It is the rest of a right relationship with God. The relationship we were created to enjoy. The relationship lost by the fall.

There was an early Christian teacher called Augustine. You may have heard this quote. And he said to God, you have made us for yourself. And our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

[4 : 36] So here's the question. How can you and I live with this rest of soul that we were created to enjoy? And that's what our Lord Jesus wants us to know in these verses.

My favourite man from history is a bloke called Charles Spurgeon. And he once said, this text is often preached from, but never too often.

Since the sorrows with which it deals always abound. And the remedy is always effective. So I'm going to be very simple this morning.

Because in this verse, we have a command to obey, a promise to trust, and a rest to enjoy. Will you follow with me?

First of all then, a command to obey. Will you note actually that it is a command? Sometimes these words are described as an invitation.

[5 : 39] And they are an invitation, but they're more than an invitation. Because this word come in the Bible is a command given with authority.

It's the same word that Jesus used when he called his first disciples. Do you remember that? He said, come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people.

Now why did those disciples drop everything and follow Jesus? Well, it was because he spoke with authority. The very authority of Almighty God.

And you and I perhaps weaken these words when we reduce them to a mere invitation. Invitation. Because when we hear the word invitation, we think of it as a kind of, I can take it or I can leave it. But like the choice with the children. But actually, the Lord Jesus wants us to know this is a command we reject at our peril.

[6 : 39] And now, I'm sure we've all been to weddings. Two of our daughters have got married. And we sent out invitations. And those invitations were not commands, were they?

But people were free to accept our invitation to enjoy the wedding or reject it. But Jesus spoke of a wedding. He told a parable about a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

He sent his servants to those invited to tell them to come. But they refused to obey. And said the Lord Jesus, the king was enraged.

And rightly so, because he was the king. And he sent his soldiers to punish those who refused his invitation, his command to come.

Now, why notice this? Well, to refuse to obey the inviting command of our Lord Jesus is actually an aspect of sin.

[7 : 43] It's to rebel against God. It's to refuse to treat the Lord Jesus as he ought to be treated, as God who is to obey, who commands us to do things.

Why? Well, because he knows what's best for us. And as Jesus says these words to us, he gives this command to us. He's saying, look, this is best for you.

Because everything I tell you to do, it is best for you. So let's just examine this command. Notice it's very simple.

Come. Is there any more simple word in our language? There is a danger of making anything in life more complex than it ought to be.

Come. It's a command a little child is able to understand. It's that simple. Notice it's personal.

[8 : 43] Jesus calls us to himself. Come to me. He says, come into a relationship with me. It's so easy to lose sight of the personal relational nature of the message of the Bible.

Christianity, friends, is not a relationship with a set of rules or with a moral code or with a set of doctrines. No, it's a relationship with the living, risen, knowable Lord Jesus who says, come to me. And he drives none away. One of his favourite words is, come. And notice it's universal. Come to me, all you.

When Jesus spoke, Matthew tells us he was speaking both to the crowd and to his disciples, to insiders, and those who were then outsiders, not yet disciples.

And this morning, I don't know most of you, but his command is for all of us. Whatever our age, status, background, colour, bank balance, state of mind, intellectual ability.

[9 : 57] When I was a kid, like the children here, we were taught a little ditty about the word come. C stands for children, though they're young and small.

O stands for older folk. Jesus calls them all. M stands for middle-aged. They to Christ must bow. E stands for everyone.

Come to Jesus now. And it's a universal command because it's a necessary command. Look what Jesus says.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. To be weary and burdened is not an unusual state.

It's actually the natural state of every human being in this fallen world. Before the fall, humanity knew nothing of being weary and burdened.

[10:58] But God wasn't lying in Genesis 3 when after the fall, he said that humanity would have to live a life of painful toil, symbolised by thorns and thistles.

Being weary and burdened. It comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. You know that. It can be physical, mental, emotional, relational, spiritual.

And the types of weariness and burdensomeness, they tend to arrive in a confused bundle of all those kind of things. All forms of weariness are a consequence of living in a fallen world.

Now with what kind of weariness is Jesus dealing here? Well, the context and the reference to rest of souls suggests that his first focus is our spiritual weariness.

The weariness brought about by our sinfulness, which cuts us off from God. The weariness experienced because of that chaos and disharmony sin brings in our experience and in our society.

[12:10] The weariness of despair. At the prospect of, well, will things ever change? And then there's that spiritual anxiety about the past.

About the present. About the future. Including perhaps what will happen to us when we die. Friends, we mustn't limit the scope of this command by the Lord Jesus.

But we must never forget that every experience of being weary and burdened is connected in one way or another with the reality of living in a world out of harmony with our creator.

That's what makes his command necessary. You need it. I need it. But please notice, and this is so important, that this is a gracious and warm command.

You see, some of us may worry. A command? I don't like the idea of commands. No, listen. The commands of Jesus are gracious. Is there a warmer word than the word come?

[13:21] It's a word of welcome. My parents used to live in Collington Road in a block of retired people's flats called Perdrick's Now. And it had an entry phone system. So you had to press the entry phone if you wanted to come up.

And, you know, every time I ever pressed that entry phone system and said, Hi, Mum. Hi, Dad. It's Johnny here. Come up, son. That was always the word. Come up. Come on up.

The word come, it was a kind of, we want you in our house. We want to welcome you. To then see Mum or Dad at the front door at the end of their long corridor. And they're opening the door and it's like, we're glad to see you.

That's the idea here. Yes, it's a command, but it's gracious. It's a command none of us deserve. As rebels against God, rest for our souls is not our right.

But the Lord Jesus, the eternal Son of God, calls weary, burdened, messed up people like me to come to him.

[14:21] And it's a command that's meant to cheer us up. I love that story in the Gospels about blind Bartimaeus. You've read that story? He's the blind man.

And as Jesus enters Jericho, he shouts out, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. And the crowd are going, shh, shh, don't bother him. He won't be interested in you. He keeps shouting. And Jesus says, tell him to come to me.

And do you know what the crowds say? They say, cheer up. On your feet, he's calling you. You still with me?

This command's simple, personal, universal, necessary, gracious, warm, and it's present tense and ongoing.

You see, the sense of the word come is come and keep on coming. Again and again and again and again. It's a command for right now.

[15:21] It's a command for this afternoon, for this evening, for tomorrow, for the day after that, and the days after that until we die.

It's a command from which those who come to Jesus never graduate. It is Discipleship 101. And it's moving.

What do I mean? This command moves us from one place to another place. Literally, the word come means come hither. So it calls for movement.

Come, says the Lord Jesus, from where you are at the moment, come to me and then travel with me. So it's actually a word that tells us about repentance. Coming to Jesus means stopping going

the direction I have been going, which by nature is away from God, away from the Lord Jesus. And instead turning round towards him, putting the direction of our lives in his hands. It can also be thought of in terms of faith.

[16:32] Because coming to Jesus means moving away from trusting in me and instead trusting only in the Lord Jesus as the one who knows what's best for me.

So look down to verse 29. Jesus uses a picture. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. It's an image from historical agriculture.

A yoke was a bit of wood placed on an oxen. It put the ox under the direction and control of the farmer. And Jesus calls us to the rest of active submission.

So, these two verses, a command to obey, but secondly, a promise to trust.

Look again at the words. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

[17:32] Like the command, the promise is personal. Come to me, and I will give you rest. You see, as we come to Jesus, he doesn't say, oh, go away and do this, and then you'll have rest.

Or go to that person, then you'll have rest. No, he says, you get this rest from me. In fact, this rest is found in me, says the Lord Jesus.

And the promise is certain. I will give you rest. There's no ifs, no buts, no maybes. There's no early closing.

There's no, well, I'll give you rest if you come at this time in the week, but not on this time of the week. It's not like the car wash I sometimes take my car to. Where, you know, you can get the £10 or the £12 or the £50.

And it's like, well, how much you pay is the quality you'll get. No, no, no. Says the Lord Jesus, as often as you come to me, that often I will give you rest.

[18:30] And the promise, like the command, is gracious. Friends, rest of soul is a gift.

Rest of soul isn't something I deserve. In fact, the Bible says, I deserve the eternal restlessness of hell.

Where to quote our Lord Jesus, there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. But rest is the gift of the Lord Jesus because of his cross.

Jesus, who didn't deserve it, took upon himself the restless torment and pain of hell that I deserve.

In order that as I come to him, I might receive from him as a gift rest for my soul.

Which is why his promise is unique. It is on the basis of his finished work on that cross that Jesus is the risen Lord of rest.

[19:42] He died bearing the burden of my sin. He rose then to be the risen Lord who can alone give the rest of forgiveness, of justification, of reconciliation to all who will come to him.

And it's only Jesus, therefore, on the basis of his work on the cross, who can bring us to know God as our Father. And the rest and security that comes from being one of God's dearly loved children. His work on the cross is the basis of all the rest he gives. Because it restores all who come to him to the position we are created to enjoy.

And look, no one else can give this rest. Because no one else has it to give us. It can't be manufactured.

You can't find a book that will give it you in Waterstones. It's not mass produced. It cannot be self produced. But how foolish that all too often I seek rest apart from Jesus.

[20:52] In fact, I think that's one of my repeated failures in life. I desire rest. And yet I seek it in the wrong place. And would you notice that this is a rest religion can't give us?

So that's the context of these verses. That's why we read the verses around it. There was a big difference between what Jesus taught and what the religious leaders of the day taught.

So we read that incident in which the Pharisees, the religious leaders, they were criticising the disciples of Jesus about what they did on the Sabbath, the day of rest. But these Pharisees, they knew no rest.

They were worried. They were anxious about keeping the rules. Theirs was a life without any rest because they could never be sure that they kept the rules enough for God to be pleased with them. In contrast, the disciples were learning to experience the rest of being with Jesus, having come to him as he called them.

[22:01] So we read about this man with the shriveled hand. And he provides a picture of life without Jesus, a picture of the life of the Pharisees.

They were living shriveled lives. Just as Jesus restored that man's hand, so he's able to restore all who come to him into a right relationship with our creator, giving us rest for our souls.

And so his promise, like the command, is present tense and ongoing, just as the command is for now and tomorrow, the next day, and so on, for every experience of weariness and every time we feel burdened.

And it is a promise to be trusted. My wife and I, we've been married for 35 years. And we have an ongoing disagreement.

It's very trivial, so it's not endangering our marriage. But here's the disagreement, all right? You're listening. We could maybe vote for this. I'd love you to prove me right.

[23 : 08] Is it salt and pepper or pepper and salt? Which is the right way around? I won't ask you to vote, because I'll probably lose.

The reality is, it doesn't matter, does it? Salt and pepper, pepper and salt, they go together. That's the point. This command to come and this promise to rest, they go together.

Obedience and faith in the Bible, faith and obedience, they're partners. They're never in conflict. They're like two sides of the same coin.

Every act of obedience is an act of faith, of trust in Jesus. Every promise of Jesus calls for our obedience as we trust him to do what he says he'll do.

So that old chorus, trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey. Jesus could have said this the other way around.

[24 : 11] He could have said, I will give you rest for your souls if you will come to me. Do you see the idea? The command and promise go together. And only as you and I trust and obey, obey and trust, will we enjoy the rest Jesus gives.

But you may be saying, come on Johnny, what's this rest look like? Well let's look as we draw to a close at this rest to enjoy. What is this rest of soul?

Well it does start with being the rest of faith. I don't know what you think is the biggest battle of your life.

But the longer I go on as a Christian, I think the biggest battle of my life is abandoning all confidence in Johnny and increasingly put in my trust in the Lord Jesus.

In what he has done, in what he is doing and what he will do. It's only as I come to him and keep on coming to him, abandoning trust in me and saying, Lord Jesus, my confidence is only in you.

[25 : 27] It's only then I have rest. It's the rest of faith. And it is rest for soul. So please don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying here.

The promise is not rest of body. Now our bodies need rest. Daily sleep is pretty important. Every night when I lie down in bed, it's good to say, God, as I lie down to sleep, it's a reminder that I'm human and you're not.

You don't sleep. I need sleep. You watch over me while I'm asleep. I'm not in control as I sleep.

Lord, I entrust myself to you again. That's a good way to go to bed every night, by the way. We also were made to need weekly rest.

The Sabbath principle is inbuilt. We're created needing one day off in seven. But day by day, we may receive rest of soul, however busy we are, and whatever trials we may be facing.

The rest of soul is the inner rest which allows us to say, it's well with my soul. It's the rest of soul that refreshes us, that renews us, that gives us strength, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

[26 : 41] And it is the rest of submission. So Jesus uses this image of a yoke. Just think about that image.

In the relationship between a farmer and an oxen, who's in control? Well, it's the farmer, isn't it? Now, we may think that sounds a bit harsh.

Jesus says, take my yoke upon you. But we look at what Jesus says. He describes himself as gentle and humble in heart. And he says that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

It's only by the Holy Spirit that we can understand this. The yoke of the Lord Jesus, submitting ourselves to him, is actually the yoke of true freedom.

It's a bit like the freedom of a train on its train tracks. A train off its tracks. Oh, dear, that's a horrible thing, isn't it? That's our lives without the rest Jesus gives.

[27 : 46] But as we come to Jesus and say, Lord Jesus, I want to place myself in your hands. I want to take your yoke upon me, because I know you're gentle and humble in heart.

We're then like a train on the tracks. That's living as God made us to live. So much of the strain and stress comes from trying to be in control, and rest for our souls comes as we submit to the gracious rule of Jesus, to his care, his wisdom, his timing, his providential overruling of all things.

Perfect submission, an old hymn says. Perfect, all is at rest. Perfect submission, all is at rest.

I am my saviour. I'm happy and blessed. Which means it is the rest of activity. Activity. This is not the rest of lying in a hammock on a sun-kissed beach.

And I have to tell you, that's never appealed to me. No, it's the rest that comes as we actively follow Jesus. So think of the Lord Jesus. If anyone knew rest for his soul, it was Jesus.

[28 : 58] And yet, what did he tell his disciples? He said that his food was to do the will of his father, who sent him. So work is good. It's a gift from God.

It's part of being made in his image. And when you become a disciple of Jesus, we rest from our work and discover there's rest in work. You see, when it comes to salvation, Jesus gives us rest from our own work.

We come to him recognising we cannot save ourselves. We rely only on his work on the cross for us. We rest from our work and rely on his. But as we come to him, we then discover rest in work.

As we pursue the good works, we discover he has planned in advance for us to do, in which we experience the rest of learning.

Look what Jesus says. He says, and learn from me. On my whiteboard in my office that I had until a couple of years ago, I had four letters. E-D-A-S.

[30 : 05] Every day is a school day. It's because the young woman who was my kind of PA, I'm a technoclate. So I'd often go and say, Becky, will you come and help me do this or that or whatever?

And every time she came to my room on those occasions, she'd say, Johnny, every day is a school day. I learned a huge amount from her. Isn't that true? And look, that's what it means to be a disciple.

We're learners. And we come to Jesus and we come to Jesus. We discover every day is a school day and he's the best of teachers, the wisest of teachers, the most patient of teachers, the most consistent of teachers, because he only ever calls us to do what he did.

And we therefore experience the rest of relationship. I love being with my wife. If you said to me, Johnny, on your day off, what would you like to do most?

I would say I'd like to go for a walk with my wife, because I find that as I walk with my wife, we talk together, we enjoy each other's company. Do you know that's what Jesus is saying here?

[31 : 15] He said to those first disciples, come to me and walk with me. And as Jesus says, come to me for this rest, he's saying, just come and walk through life with me.

When you get up every morning, come to me and say, Lord Jesus, today may I walk with you? And he'll always say yes, because he walks with me and he talks with me a long life's narrow way.

And finally, it's the rest of hope. Jesus isn't saying here that there'll come a day in our lives when we don't experience being weary and burdened in some way.

That's not what he's promising. Being weary and burdened will in various ways be our experience until the new creation, which our Lord Jesus will bring when he returns.

every present experience of rest for our souls is like a little foretaste of the perfect rest of the new creation, because in the new creation, we'll never be weary, we'll never be burdened.

[32 : 24] That will be gone forever. And it's hard to imagine. As the Messiah, our Lord Jesus, puts us right with God now, and he promises us a new world in which everything wrong with the world will be put right.

You've listened very patiently. What does Jesus say to each of us individually this morning? He does say, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul. If you don't go to him, you won't find it.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Is this simple? Absolutely. Absolutely. Is it important? More important than anything else that we'll ever hear. Necessary for every single one of us in this room and for every person who's walking the streets of Edinburgh at the moment.

[33 : 53] The simple question, what will you do? It's a bit like we were doing with the children. There is a choice.

We either say, yes, Lord Jesus, I come to you. Not to say yes to him is actually say no to him.

It's to actually say, oh, Lord Jesus, I can do life without you. And the Bible says, there is nothing more foolish than to stay at a distance from Jesus.

Let's bow our heads and let's pray. Lord Jesus Christ, we come to you not just as a figure from history, but as the risen Lord and Saviour whom even this morning says to each one of us, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Lord Jesus, you know us intimately. You know our circumstances. You know our experiences and even our present experience of being weary and burdened.

[35 : 32] Lord Jesus, if we've never come, would you help us right now to come to you that we might experience for the first time the rest of a right relationship with you and with your Father as you take away our sins and become the Lord and Saviour who walks through life with us.

Lord Jesus, if we've come to you already, may our life, Lord Jesus, please be a life of continually coming to you, of daily recognizing we can't do life without you.

We can't face life without you. We thank you that every day you say, come, and every time we come you welcome us and you give us the rest of soul we need to live in this dark and fallen world. Lord Jesus, thank you that you are gentle and humble in heart. Search us, O God, and know our hearts.

Test us and know our anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in us and lead us in the way everlasting for your namesake.

[37 : 16] Amen. Amen.