

Pilgrim's Rest when we are weary and heavy laden
Matthew 11:28-30
05/17/26

Prayer:

You are the Rock of Ages. What was secure for our ancestors is secure for us now and will remain secure until the end of time. Your unbreakable promises are like an anchor to our souls, they bind us to yourself and allow us to rest no matter how fierce the storm. Help us hear from you today and to respond to the invitation you give. Your will be done.

What do you think of when you think of rest? What is restful for you? For most of us, rest is found within an activity or a circumstance. A 2016 survey on rest revealed the top activities and circumstances that most people consider restful.

- Reading
- Being in the natural environment
- Being on their own (some "me" time)
- Listening to music
- Doing nothing in particular (I'd include here no pressures or requirements. Unplug)

It's a good list. And if the survey is correct, most of us find some level of rest in some of these things. But this list does not relate to everyone. There is a group of people who experience rest from a totally different source.

Scripture teaches that no matter what their culture or country, Christians are only temporary residents. They are aliens and strangers wherever they may be. This world is not their home which means they look at it from a pilgrim's perspective.

Over the last few weeks we've explored where the pilgrim's hope is anchored and where their peace is found. Today we will consider how a pilgrim's rest is received. While items in the survey can add to a pilgrim's rest, none of them are the source of it.

Matthew 11:28-30 is a unique passage. It is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus tells us what He is like at the very core of His being and the kind of rest His presence brings. Look at these words.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus is speaking to a Galilean crowd who has rejected His teaching. He told them that His message is hidden from the wise and the learned but is revealed to little children. The wise and the learned don't think they need any help. They have it all figured out. But little children are willing to receive the help they need.

Let's walk through this again and see what we can find.

“Come to me.” This is an invitation from the Lord Jesus to anyone who is worn out and carrying a heavy load. Nothing is excluded. These words apply to any physical circumstance or emotional concern we may ever have. And what is the invitation to? It is an invitation to receive rest.

Think of this. Jesus the King speaks to those who have rejected Him and offers them invitation rather than condemnation. He is truly gentle and humble of heart. N.T. Wright wrote:

He is encouraging us to believe that he isn’t going to stand over us like a policeman, isn’t going to be cross with us like an angry schoolteacher. And the welcome he offers, for all who abandon themselves to his mercy, is the welcome God offers through him. This is the invitation which pulls back the curtain and lets us see who ‘the father’ really is—and encourages us to come into his loving, welcoming presence.ⁱ

“Come to me” shows the very heart of God and His attitude toward you and me no matter what we might have done.

Here we see that pilgrims do not *find* rest in a circumstance or *achieve* it in an activity. Pilgrims *receive* true rest from the only one who can offer it.

Jesus offers to give rest to anyone humble enough to see their need and pick up His yoke. Unlike the kind of rest found in the survey, this rest goes beyond mere circumstance or activity. This rest refreshes our souls.

If we are going to understand the nature of the rest Jesus gives, we need to first understand two other words He uses—yoke and soul.

Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

When most of us in the West think of a farmer’s yoke we think of something like this.



It is a wooden frame used to combine the strength of two animals so they can pull a load together. This image leads us to think of how Jesus’ yoke connects us to Him and how He now helps us carry any load and do any job.

It is a beautiful and accurate picture. Hold on to it because it is true but add to it another image that deepens our understanding.

There is also a smaller single yoke that people use to help them carry a load (sometimes called a carry stick).



It could be a carved piece of wood that fit over the shoulders, or it might just be a straight stick. The ends of the yoke extend beyond the shoulders and are attached to a heavy load on both sides.

When the wood is carved to fit a person's shoulders it makes the load easier to bear. But a one-size-fits-all stick will chafe and begin to hurt, especially if it is overloaded.

Metaphorically speaking, a double yoke binds you to someone else. It could be God, a foreign god or a person. A single yoke binds you to a task. It could be something you chose to pick up or something you were forced to pick up, which is the "yoke of slavery." Both Old and New Testaments combine these common images to speak of one's union with another and a task one needs to do. (Num 25:3, 5 ESV; 2 Cor 6:14; Jer 27:2-8).

The yoke became a symbol for obedience to God's law, which early on was considered a joyful obligation. However, by Jesus' day the Pharisees had added extra requirements which made for a very heavy yoke (Acts 15:10; Gal 5:1). What the people needed was a new yoke that could actually lighten the load.

Jesus was considered a rabbi so when He invited people to carry His yoke, He was inviting them to follow God's law the way that He did. And it is no accident that the very next story is about Jesus confronting the burdensome requirements added to the sabbath law, concluding that the sabbath was made to benefit humans, not the other way around.

"Take my yoke upon you *and learn from me.*" Jesus' invitation is one to discipleship. Become my disciple and learn how to live the way God intended. My yoke is easy. It is good. It is kind. It is comfortable. It is tailor-made for you and so fits you perfectly.

And the burden on either end of the yoke is the real burden God intends for you to carry. It is the one you were made for. It feels light because it brings you life and refreshes every part of who you are.

When compared to the heavy burdens required by the Scribes and Pharisees, it could be said that Jesus' load is lighter.ⁱⁱ But in another way His load is actually more demanding.

He said that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven our righteousness will need to exceed that of the Pharisees (Mt 5:20). They require you not to murder but Jesus tells us not to be angry with our brother. They say don't commit adultery but Jesus tells us not to lust in our hearts. The list goes on but the point is clear. The Pharisees required external conformity

to rules. Jesus requires internal conformity to God's character. He requires inner transformation.

Put together the double and single yoke—working in union with another while you carry a load. Jesus' yoke is light because we are joined in union with Him. His work becomes our work. He is the One who transforms us from the inside out as we receive the help of the one who is gentle and humble in heart (2 Cor. 10:1).

Michael Green said, this "is the yoke of love, not of duty. It is the response of the liberated, not the duty of the obligated. And that makes all the difference."ⁱⁱⁱ This is the yoke of freedom.

The *Didache* was a church instruction manual compiled between 70 and 120 AD. It calls Christ's commandments "the yoke of the law" but recognizes how this obligation comes from one who is gentle and humble of heart. Listen to this one excerpt. "For if you are able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you shall be perfect [mature or complete]; but if you are not able, do that which you are able."^{iv}

If you can't do something perfectly, do what you can do! Act on what you know. It is not about perfection (am I doing everything "right"). It is about direction (am I growing toward the goal God intends for my life?).

This is the way to deeper rest. A rest that can only be found in a partnership with Jesus. In union with Him He enables us to carry the load in a way that is joy-filled and possible because we were made for it and it was made for us.

So, understanding what Jesus means by yoke helps us better understand the kind of rest He brings. We can take this a little deeper by understanding what He means by soul.

I grew up seeing the soul through a Greek lens. I thought of it as the eternal spirit that lives inside the body. When the body dies, the soul leaves the body. Maybe you see it that way too. As a devout Jew steeped in Hebrew Scriptures Jesus would have had a different understanding of soul.^v

For Him the word soul was a way to refer to every element of one's life and every part of one's being. When we receive rest for our souls it means that every part of who we are receives what it needs and is refreshed. Taking a nap can give rest to a weary body and taking a hike in nature can give rest to a weary mind. But what kind of rest refreshes every part of our being?

Think of what that means. When you lay down to sleep your mind is not worried. When you enter that difficult conversation, your stomach is not tight with tension. This kind of rest is not found in an activity or a circumstance. It is found in a person. It is not something we fight to achieve; it is someone we trust and receive.

In the second chapter of Genesis, we see God's good creation functioning as He intended it. The humans were obeying God's command to care for the garden. They were working the ground, caring for the animals and living in right relationship with each other and with God. They were busy fulfilling their obligations. They were carrying their yoke.

Even though they were physically active, mentally focused and relationally engaged, their souls were at rest. They were in God's presence and experiencing the fulness God intended for them.^{vi}

In the same way, the rest Jesus offers is not a release from all activity or obligations. But because of who He is, when we take up His yoke and enter union with Him, He makes the load light and gives us rest.

Instead of rest we could also use the word 'relief.' Take up my yoke. Become my disciple. Enter union with me, and you will find relief for your souls. Compared to any religion or worldview, discipleship to Jesus is restful relief. (cf Matthew 6:25-34).

Saint Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." A pilgrim's rest is not found in an activity or a circumstance. It is found in a person. It is not something we fight to achieve; it is someone we trust and receive.

The depth of the rest we receive is proportional to our trust in Christ which means it is something into which we grow. So we can add to the words of the *Didache* here. "For if you are able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you shall be perfect; but if you are not able, do that which you are able" and continue to grow. It is direction, not perfection that matters.

Understanding yoke and soul get us part of the way but we can't stop here. There is another layer to the rest Jesus offers that we don't often think about but we need to acknowledge. To understand it requires us to go back to the very beginning.

The first chapter of Genesis ends each of the first six days of creation with this phrase: "And there was evening, and there was morning—the _____ day." The seventh day concludes with these words. "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done."

Did you catch the difference? The seventh day, the day of God's rest, did not end. It continues to this day. The first six days of creation are finished so we now live in the seventh day, the day of God's rest. Genesis 2 says humans experienced that rest with Him but they lost it when they rebelled and were sent out of the Garden.

Rest for our souls is received when we live in the presence of the one who made us.

Adam and Eve lived in rest until they rebelled and were sent out of God's presence and into the wilderness. Contrary to what you might expect, God did not abandon them. He followed them into their wilderness and told Moses, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex 3:14)

But even though God was with them they did not combine the message they received with faith and so they never entered into God's rest (Psalm 95:11, Hebrews 3:11). Here is how the writer of Hebrews compares their opportunity with ours.

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands [because we are still in that seventh day of creation], let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ² For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. ³ Now we who have believed enter that rest...(Heb 4:1-3).

Like them, we are in a harsh wilderness created by our own sin. And like them, the Lord is giving us an opportunity to experience the rest God promised.

I think this is one reason God commands that we take a sabbath day. One day of every seven is devoted to rest so that we might remember what is true for us and what is true about us. This life is not about us or what we are able to achieve. We live in a good creation in the presence of a loving God. Because He is with us every part of us can rest, even in our weary wilderness.

Sure, we have responsibilities and obligations, but carrying anxiety, worry or undue pressure is not ours to do. Jesus said, "don't worry about what you are going to eat or drink or wear. Your Father knows you need all these things so don't worry about today or tomorrow. You seek first God's kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:31-34).

Jesus also said, "I will be with you always. I will send my Spirit to live in you" (Mt 28:20; John 14:7). God's presence is what provides us His rest. We have that presence. We have His rest. Or it may be more accurate to say we have access to that rest and the opportunity to grow in our experience of it.

"Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." The reason Jesus can offer us His yoke is because He has already carried ours.

Think of Jesus carrying His cross. Many paintings show him dragging both the vertical and horizontal beams down the street. But He likely carried only the patibulum, the 100 pound, roughhewn, cross beam. Imagine Him carrying it over His shoulders with the ends stretching out on either side.

With this image in mind it is not hard to also imagine large baskets hanging from both sides of the cross beam, baskets containing all the heavy sin of the world. Sin that includes yours and mine. That horizontal beam is our yoke, the one you and I were supposed to carry. Because Jesus took your yoke of suffering, curse and sin, you can receive His yoke of restful relief.

Jesus was rejected so we could be accepted. He was laid bare so we could be covered. He took our burden so we could receive His rest. He carried our yoke so we could carry His.

Come to me all who are weary and burdened. Do you hear the words of Jesus? Is He speaking to you today? Have you come to the place where you can no longer carry the load? Are you willing to be like a little child and ask for His help?

If so, then I encourage you to respond to His invitation. Learn from Him the freedom God intended for you as you live under His gentle and humble care.

Some here may need to take up His yoke for the first time. You know who you are. If that is you, let Jesus know you want to do that. Thank him for carrying your sin to the cross and let Him know you want to learn from Him what this life is all about. But don't leave it there. Also tell a Christian you respect and ask them what your next step could be and if you don't have someone you can tell, Brently or I would be honored to hear your story and help you find the next step you can take.

Others here today took up Christ's yoke years ago but may have unintentionally been adding things to that yoke. You have been increasing the burden and so need to learn from Him again about what His yoke actually includes. Who will you ask for their help? Where can you go to learn?

Finally, there are some who have faithfully carried Christ's yoke and enjoyed His rest for years. God has blessed you in many ways. To you I ask, who are you encouraging and helping today? How can you share what you know about Christ's yoke with someone else who needs to hear it.

In a nutshell it could be said that the rest Jesus gives is a rest from the self-justifying life. We have nothing more to prove to God or to others or to ourselves. Our value and worth are already set by Christ and do not depend on what others say or think or on our own works or effort.

We are still active. We remain engaged. We plant. We water, but the results of our lives, our careers, our families or any part of our lives are not ours to worry about. We plant and water but it is our gentle, humble, loving God who causes the growth and we trust Him to do so.

"For if you are able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you shall be perfect (mature or complete); but if you are not able, do that which you are able" and continue to grow more deeply into His rest.

Prayer

We join King David in saying, "My soul finds rest in God alone" (Ps 62:1). Because your Spirit lives within us your presence never leaves us so we can be at rest in the middle of any circumstance. So rather than run from the things that worry us, we run to you. We surrender to you and receive the rest you offer.

The need for rest is most keenly felt when we face trying circumstances. If life didn't get hard we'd rely more on ourselves than on you. So, in an unexpected way, help us to receive the hard moments as a gift that draws us more closely to you. Show us how you are present with us even there, and help us experience your rest.

Lord, you say if we are weary and burdened we should come to you and receive rest. You say if we thirst we should come to you and drink living water. If we are weak we should come to you and find strength. If we are afraid we should come to you and receive courage.

We hear your invitation and come to you, our gentle, humble and loving, Lord Jesus Christ

ⁱ Wright, T. (2004). *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (p. 137). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

ⁱⁱ Jesus said that the leaders "tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger" (Matt. 23:4).

ⁱⁱⁱ Green, M. (2001). *The message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven* (p. 143). InterVarsity Press.

^{iv} Lightfoot, J. B., & Harmer, J. R. (1891). *The Apostolic Fathers* (pp. 231–232). Macmillan and Co.

^v In Hebrew, which is the language of the Old Testament, soul is the word *nephesh*. It literally means "throat." This little pipeline is rather important. A couple times a day food passes through it. More often than that it is a conduit of liquid and about 15 times each minute it brings in oxygen and expels carbon dioxide.

If even one of these functions is stopped the body will die. This opened the way for *nephesh* to encompass and include the entire person. So, when King David declares, "O God you are my God. Earnestly I seek you. My *nephesh* thirsts for you, my body longs for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water," he's not just saying his throat is thirsty. He proclaims that his entire being thirsts for God like his throat does when in the desert.

^{vi} Notice that their activity was during the seventh day, the day God rested. It is the day that never ended and is continuing even today. Our rebellion cast us out of the garden which is the place of this rest.