

The Holiness of God: You Will Find Rest
By Jason Huff
April 24, 2022
Psalm 62:5-8; Isaiah 40:28-31; Matthew 11:28-30

Our final Scripture reading today is Matthew 11:28-30. Listen now to God's holy, perfect, and abiding Word. "[Jesus said,] "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.""

I'm tired. I can't think of the last time my brain has been this tired. I think being tired is part of the American condition. A third of American adults don't get enough sleep; that number goes up to 60% of college students and 75% of high school students. We are chronically sleep-deprived. It's gotten worse in the past five years due to the relatively new phenomenon of binge-watching. You start a series at 9:00pm and suddenly it's 3:00am six episodes later and you've lost any hope of getting a full night's sleep.

But today I want to talk about something different. It's a subject that's been on my mind over the last couple of weeks for reasons that will become clear as I go on. You see, there are reasons for our lack of rest that have everything to do with our sleep patterns and habits, how much caffeine we consume, the stress patterns of our job, the things we normally expect. Those are the things we all know about.

But there are other reasons why we do not have rest. Last week at Easter, we talked about the peace that Christ gives us with God; that when we become fully-formed disciples of Christ, when we give our lives over to Him, when we commit to being a part of a body of believers who are Christ's body in our world today, we find peace with the Father. That's truly wonderful to have – to know we are safe and secure in the Father's arms for all eternity.

But peace and rest are not quite the same thing. They're related, but not entirely the same. And our rest – our kind of temporary situation in the midst of the world – is much more easily shaken than our peace. I want to explore why this is the case and talk about where we can find rest in the midst of our unique situation – the people of God called to live and work and raise families and do all sorts of things in a place that is ultimately not our home.

When we come to grips with the holiness of God and our lack of holiness, when we pursue that path of holiness to the foot of the cross and the sacrifice of Jesus, when we find that God has implanted His righteousness in us and is making us holy by the power of His Holy Spirit, it's a great thing. It's better than great – it's miraculous, wonderful. But when we seek to be holy, when we seek to be God's people in this world, we will come up against opposition.

Most people ignore the holiness of God; wise Christians understand and properly fear the holiness of God and come to terms with Jesus knowing He alone solves the issue of holiness. But God has spiritual enemies as well, those who hate God's holiness, who are determined to wreck havoc with God's ways as often as possible. And God's spiritual enemies who fight against God will also fight against God's adopted children – that's us.

The main spiritual enemy of God is Satan, which means “the accuser.” From the beginning, Satan has set up schemes by which he can then accuse people of failing to follow God properly. Adam, our representative, failed when Satan took the form of the serpent to test him. Job went through his trials due to Satan’s attempt to get him to deny God. We see the same thing when Jesus goes out into the wilderness to fast and pray – Satan tempts Him at His weakest moment. But where Adam failed, Jesus repeatedly foils the devil’s schemes and passes the test.

Satan is a spiritual being, but he is not God’s equal. He is a fallen angel that led a rebellion against God, wanting to usurp God’s authority. That foolish plan led to Satan’s banishment with his followers. Those creatures, which we call demons, have our worst interests at heart. They already stand condemned, but with their limited power they wage war against God and God’s Kingdom and God’s plan. Satan cannot be everywhere at once like God can be. He is merely the leader of our enemies; when we refer to the schemes of the devil, they’re mostly carried out by demons. They play a role in how events in our world play out. However, there are far more angels than demons. With God’s might, they don’t stand a chance.

I lay this groundwork for us to realize why our spiritual rest is so important and why it can be hard to come by. The devil has already lost his battle against God. Jesus’ coming means his doom is assured. But in the meantime, before God puts an end to all unrighteousness, the enemy will attempt to bring about their will rather than God’s will. There are a few tricks they try on Christians – they first attempt to tempt us and then discredit our testimony. If they can’t do that, they work to defame us, to discourage us, to disenfranchise us from our local community of faith, and when all else fails, to disrupt our rest, both physical and spiritual, to fill us with dread and worry. All of those are “de” and “dis” words – they never build up, only tear down.

This shouldn’t surprise us because the Bible warns us about it. 1 Peter 5:8-9 says, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” Ephesians 4:26-27 says, “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” In multiple parables, Jesus speaks of the devil as one who sows bad seed to destroy God’s harvest and one who steals the good seed so it might not take root. He is a threat – not one that can steal our salvation, but one who can steal our joy, our message, and our rest.

God’s people in Scripture dealt with this exhaustion from the enemy. David was on the run for years from King Saul, even though they both knew David was his legitimate successor chosen by God. It wore him out. When David committed a sin against the Lord and was given a choice of what the repercussions would be, he chose a plague rather than to go on the run again. Many of David’s psalms are his pleadings with God to give him rest from his enemies.

Later in Israel’s history, the prophet Elijah becomes a marked man after a massive victory over the prophets of Baal. Condemned to death, Elijah fled into the wilderness where he told God in his exhaustion, “Take my life.” What did God do? He sends Elijah an angel who ministers to him, who makes him a couple of meals between naps because, as the angel said, “This journey is too much for you.” Later, God would pass by Elijah, reassuring Elijah that there was still a remnant of faithful Israelites left. God gave him rest when he was in desperate need.

Whether or not we believe in spiritual warfare makes no difference; it happens all around us whether we acknowledge it or not. The more aware we are of it, the more we can do to be prepared for it and recognize the attacks when they come.

Most of you here locally know that I work part-time for the church and part time for Compassion Pregnancy Center, where we provide free ultrasounds to mothers facing an unexpected pregnancy, and we provide resources for those moms, dads, and children up to two years of age. We have a support program that provides for moms through pre-school! We do all of it to help women understand that there are real choices available to them and to help them avoid the guilt and heartbreak of abortion. Our ministries are expanding, and all for the purpose not only for saving the lives of the unborn but helping their families to know Christ too.

Each year, we have a fundraising banquet in April. Over a third of our budget for the year comes from the banquet – and since we are 100% funded by donations, our donors are incredibly important. Each year, the banquet connects us to faithful friends and new potential donors. But what we've seen every year is just how much spiritual warfare is going on.

Every year, our executive director Sue has had to deal with a family crisis during banquet season. This year, she dealt with the loss of her mother-in-law on Palm Sunday. During this banquet season, I was diagnosed with a one centimeter kidney stone that they'll have to do surgery to break up...so I'll miss service a few weeks from now due to that. My mother also went back into the hospital with kidney stone issues. While I'm not at liberty to discuss every situation, I can tell you that other staff members at Compassion deal with honest-to-goodness spiritual warfare around the time of the banquet that cannot be explained any other way. It's too on-the-nose to be anything else.

And one of the biggest things it drains us of is our rest. Having the banquet fall the week after Easter, putting in a full work week for the center the last two weeks while having all our Holy Week stuff...wow, it's draining. And it's intense. Even after the banquet, I couldn't sleep well because I felt all the tension still in me from it.

But there are other signs that we are not alone in our spiritual warfare battle. Something amazing happened to both my boss Sue and myself yesterday. Our theme verse for this year's banquet was from Isaiah 40, one of the verses read this morning. Our theme for the banquet was "Renewed Strength." Our visual for the evening was a giant eagle, reminding us that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles.

So yesterday, when I was setting up our tables at The Mirage Banquet Hall, out in the lobby by myself, a gigantic bird flew over the entryway and landed on the flat roof where cars drive in and drop off passengers before they park. It had the largest wingspan I've ever seen. Now at first I didn't tell anybody, because while I was amazed to see a single bird like this by itself right on 18 Mile Road, I also didn't want to be disillusioned. What if it was just a hawk? What if it was a buzzard instead? We occasionally get buzzards our house, it didn't look like one of those, but I didn't want it not to be an eagle. So I didn't mention it.

Late that night, we finish the banquet, and all that's left are the four of us who were on the banquet committee talking. We're under that overhang, and I keep looking up. Finally I mention it to the rest of them. Don't know exactly what I saw, could have been a vulture, who knows, but I think I saw an eagle land on The Mirage today. Sue looked at me and laughed. And she said, "When I was getting ready today, I looked in a mirror, and I saw out in our backyard the biggest bird I've ever seen. I'm pretty sure that it was an eagle."

Now I can tell you this – The Mirage is on Garfield in the heart of Clinton Township. My boss lives way out in Casco. We saw the same thing miles and miles away from each other, both of us when were probably the most tired out we could be before pulling this banquet off. You can think I'm loony, but I've seen plenty of signs over the years that show me that God is in control and that He lets His people know that in the middle of it all, He is with them. We can find our rest in Him.

You don't have to be spearheading a major initiative for God's Kingdom to come under spiritual attack. Any faithful Christian living for the Kingdom and actively seeking to help people know Christ will come on the radar. I believe we've been under plenty of spiritual warfare at CrossWay. We've dealt with surprising and unforeseen illnesses that have been debilitating and dangerous. We've seen the enemy attempt to wear us down by moving us place to place. We've faced financial challenges. I know that, if you're like me, sometimes like right now you're just weary of it all. The Christian life can be difficult and wearying.

And yet, what we know is that Christ offers us His rest. God gave His rest to Elijah; He gave it to Israel when they were following Him; through Christ, He gives it to all of us who live as disciples. In the midst of painful trials, temptations, and discouragements that wear us down, we need the rest that Christ promises us. That's why I want to look at the verbs in our passage today. For all those who are burdened, Jesus gives these commands – 1) come to me, 2) take my yoke upon you and 3) learn from me. That's how we'll find rest. We'll finish today looking at these three commands.

First, maybe the simplest one, is come to me. This is the point at which we so often fail, and thus fail to find rest. Come to Jesus. While we might think this is a call to salvation, and it is, it's also to more than that. So often, even as believers, ten years, thirty years, fifty years, we forget to come to Jesus. We think we can do it on our own. We earn the money; we pay the bills; we think we can work it all out. The greatest tragedies in the Bible happen when otherwise godly people think they have to lend God a hand.

Even if we do find solutions "on our own," we'll not find rest. We'll find ourselves on that hamster wheel, on that treadmill of modern life, and we'll wind up exhausted and doing it over again day after day. The worries will not stop because we have no place to put them, and those worries are what destroy our rest. If we don't come to Jesus, there's no place for the worries to go. And if we are believers, forgetting to come to Jesus means the enemy has us right where he wants us – away from the source of our rest. We must come to Jesus. Lay down the stubborn pride, lay down the willful independent spirit, lay down the lie of worldly achievements and accomplishments and come to Jesus. Turn to Him; pray; set aside time to do the things He desires. And you'll find rest.

2) Take my yoke upon you. Now this one seems so much harder, doesn't it? Jesus' yoke sounds incredibly difficult to carry. Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, he must take up his cross daily and follow me." It sounds impossible IF the cross and the yoke are the same thing. But they aren't. To carry our cross daily is to die to our old selves daily. If we are willing to die to the old self, the Adam self, the sinful self, the "do whatever you want that pleases or pleasures you" self, if that's the cross disciples bear, then the new yoke is easy. The burden is not difficult for those living in the Holy Spirit. Jesus says His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Why? Because once we have determined we are going to live for Christ and not ourselves, we find rest. We find refreshment. When those hard times come, we won't be overly burdened because we are not pursuing the things the world pursues.

The world's burden says we must get everything right; we are only as good as our last success; we must worry because we are to blame when things go astray. The world condemns us for every misstep and burdens us with weights we can't carry. But when Jesus is in control of our lives, when Jesus gives us our marching orders, we can rest easier.

Sometimes it's easier being a foot soldier rather than a general. A general stays up late nights and has difficulty sleeping because his orders risk the lives of thousands of men; it really does depend on him. A foot soldier may be nervous before the battle, but all he must do is follow orders. Jesus is our general, and He won the war on the cross; there is nothing to fear. We can rest easy when we remember the world is not on our shoulders. Once we stop being our own generals, we can find rest, for Jesus always has our best interests at heart.

Finally, Jesus says, learn from Him, and we will find rest for our souls. This is ironic, but many people who come to Jesus (the first step) don't want to learn from Him, and thus miss out on the deep rest Jesus has for us. Many want the peace of knowing they have salvation; many want the healing power of Jesus or the abundant life they've heard Jesus offers. But they don't realize that the greatest depths of rest, the greatest depths of healing, the greatest abundance of Christ, lies in learning from Him.

Between 2021 and now, Bible reading in America dropped 11%. Before the pandemic, 14% of Americans read the Bible daily. That's down to 10%. Less than 40% of Americans open the Bible more than once a year. A lot of it has to do with the disruption of our patterns in church-going, but it's more than that. We aren't sitting at the feet of Jesus and learning from Him by being in our Bibles. When we read Scripture, we learn what God has done for us; we learn God's ways; we learn His care and love and pursuit of us. When we turn to His Word, we will find rest there that the enemy cannot take away.

Friends, if you are suffering and want to know the rest of God – not just physical rest (though some of us need that!) but the spiritual rest of God – it's there for us. We just need to come to Him. When we devoted ourselves to Christ, the so-called prince of this world placed a target on our backs. We have to deal with spiritual warfare. But that's not impossible because it doesn't require us to be particularly strong or powerful or noteworthy in any way. It requires us to place our faith and trust in God and to persevere in prayer to Him, turning to Him, learning from Him, leaning on Him, relying on Him, holding closely to Him. He will be our strength; He will be our power; and in Him, no matter what darts and arrows are slung at us, we will find rest.