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**Sunday 9 July 2023 to Sunday 16 July 2023**

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Sunday 9 July 2023

**Rest**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).***

Read Matthew 11:16–19,25–30

In Papua New Guinea, the women would carry unbelievable loads on their backs in a *bilum* (pronounced ‘billum’). A bilum is what we would call a string bag. They would load up vegetables from their garden, maybe some firewood on top, and perhaps even a baby on top of that. Imagine the relief when, finally, they could unburden themselves of the load. Now they could have rest.

On a church frontage near where I lived is a wrought iron cross, and on that cross hangs a bilum. What a great illustration – burdens loaded onto the cross so there could be rest.

We know what it is to be weary and burdened. Lots of things are like a huge weight, pushing us down. Jesus offers rest. Come, he says, come to me, and I will give you rest.

In these verses, Jesus is especially referring to the burden of having to perform, meet standards and do all the right things to ensure God’s approval. And that is a burden that easily weighs down. Jesus is the ‘friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (verse 19). That was an accusation thrown at him, but it was also accurate. He comes to relieve the burden and give rest.

A Melanesian Pidgin term that applies well here is the phrase for peace: *bel isi*. ‘Bel’ is your stomach, where we feel things. We talk about having butterflies in our stomachs. We feel sick in the stomach when we are worried. And ‘isi’ means easy, relaxed, calm, at ease, at rest. Jesus encourages his hearers to not allow the burden of expectation to overwhelm them but to come to him, trust him and learn from him. He will give rest. Jesus will bring calm. He will ease anxious hearts.

And the new burden he gives is easy, and it is light. In Romans 13:8, the Apostle Paul tells us, ‘Be under obligation to no-one – the only obligation you have is to love one another’. There is rest for you when you relax in the gracious, accepting arms of Jesus and simply love. I sure need that, and I’m sure you do, too.

***Jesus, it wears me out constantly trying to please you and feeling as though I’m not doing enough. Give me rest. Ease my burdens. I leave them at your cross. It is enough. Amen.***

*Pastor Jim is a retired pastor living on Brisbane Northside. He served in Papua New Guinea and as School Pastor in a number of schools and congregations with schools. He is married to Ruth and has three children and seven grandchildren and loves them all unconditionally. He loves to share the Gospel as simply and clearly as he can.*

Monday 10 July 2023

**Connections**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).***

Read John 15:1–11

‘A chip off the old block!’

‘Just like his old man!’

That’s what we might say when we see a child who looks, acts and even walks like one of their parents. If you are a parent, have you ever heard your little one playing and pretending to talk on the phone and, alarmingly, heard yourself? It’s a bit scary, isn’t it? Your child is emulating and reflecting you.

It’s actually a natural thing. You have been a constant in your child’s life. You have been with them since their birth, even before. Who would you expect to have the most influence on them? You. Your child is connected to you, and you are connected to them – intimately. You would expect that what you are and the way you are would rub off on them. That is a connection that is very hard to sever.

Jesus uses an image that people of his time would easily understand. He is the vine, and the branches are intimately connected to him. The more connected they are, the more likely they will reflect him – to bear fruit. And when people see good fruit-bearing, they recognise what a good vine it must be.

How is your connection? When people see you, do they automatically see the One to whom you are connected? The good thing is that the Father is the gardener (verse 1), and, as such, he works at making the connection strong. He doesn’t just let it be, whatever its state. He works at it because when good fruit results, the Father receives glory (verse 8), and the possibility of others getting connected becomes real.

You can ensure that the connection with your child remains strong the more you invest in them. God invests in you. He is persistent. A severed connection pains him. In Isaiah 49:15,16, we are reminded that even if it were possible for a mother to forget her child, God can never forget us because he has our names engraved on the palms of his hands.

***Jesus, keep drawing me closer to you. Amen.***

Tuesday 11 July 2023

**Choosing disciples**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last (John 15:16b).***

Read John 15:12–27

The usual thing in Jesus’ day was for would-be students to seek out a rabbi, but in Jesus’ case, he chose his students. And he chose them for a purpose – to make a difference in the world. There’s an interesting thing in the original Greek text here. Jesus says, ‘I chose you’. It is possible to translate what follows in two ways: 1) in order that you might bear fruit or 2) with the result that you might bear fruit. Both are true. The disciples are chosen to bear fruit. And because Jesus chose them, fruit-bearing will follow.

Yesterday’s devotion talked about being connected. When we are connected to Jesus (the Vine), fruit-bearing happens. It’s the nature of the connection. One of the fruits that follow is love. How will people know who Jesus’ disciples are? By the love that flows out of being chosen (John 13:35).

These words are, first of all, specifically for Jesus’ called disciples but then can also apply to us. A student would choose a rabbi because they had certain qualities the student thought would best fit their need. Jesus chooses disciples simply because that’s what he decides to do. But there is empowerment in that choice. An enabling. Fruit emanates. That means you. If everything depended on our choosing, we could never be sure whether we had been sincere enough, genuine enough or committed enough. But when we know that Jesus does the choosing, and accompanying that choosing is the outcome of fruit-bearing, that is something we can be sure of – and excited about. He chooses you. Yes, you. And the fruit will follow.

If you ever feel inadequate, like you just don’t have what it takes, know that there is One who is most adequate. And he chooses you to be his disciple.

***Thank you, Jesus, for choosing me and enabling me to bear fruit. Help me to keep looking away from myself and my shortcomings and hold on to you. Amen.***

Wednesday 12 July 2023

**Ever-present – everywhere present**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***But I tell you the truth: it is good that I am going away. Unless I go away the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7).***

Read John 16:1–15

There are times when we especially need to sense the presence of Jesus with us. When things look dark and seem to be going against us, and we feel like God is distant, we long to sense his presence with us in a tangible way. If only Jesus was here – actually here – like he was back then when his disciples could see, touch, hear and time with him, what a difference that would make!

The thing is that ‘back then’, Jesus was physically confined to one place. He couldn’t be present everywhere at the same time. He was located, which would be the case as long as he was on this earth in that physical form. But to go away – any going away is sad for those left behind – and to promise an ongoing, everywhere presence means not sadness but joy. The Counsellor, the Helper, sometimes called the Advocate, will be ever-present everywhere. The Spirit of Jesus will be with you wherever you are, whatever happens in your life. You will never be abandoned; Jesus is with you by his Spirit.

When Jesus left this earth, those first disciples would have felt sad and maybe confused for a while. But it wasn’t long before they sensed the Spirit active among them, which emboldened them. At Pentecost, the presence of Jesus spread like wildfire to ‘every nation under heaven’ (Acts 2:5). And over the centuries since, until this Spirit comes, also to you.

Do you hear the comfort in Jesus’ words? Do you feel reassured? That’s Jesus’ intention. When he says, ‘But I tell you the truth’ (verse 7), he emphasises what he is about to say. You can underline this, highlight it, put it in bold type, and be sure of it: ‘The Helper will come, so while I leave you physically, it’s actually better I do’. It adds meaning to Jesus’ last recorded words, ‘I am with you always’ (Matthew 28:20).

***Jesus, we know you are with us because the Counsellor is here. Help us trust your promise. Amen.***

Thursday 13 July 2023

**Grief turned to joy**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy (John 16:20).***

Read John 16:16–33

When someone we love leaves us – whether that means going away so that contact is restricted or death – we are left feeling empty. We think of all the times we spent together, and now there is a void. It’s as though everything has collapsed, and we are left with this indescribable grief. Some of you know what that is like.

Jesus tells his disciples things that are hard for them to grasp. He tells them he will be going away, and they will feel sad. He could be referring to a number of things, but I suspect he is referring to his upcoming death. For them, it will be that the exhilarating last three years will now seem just like a dream. They will weep and mourn – mostly for themselves and their loss, which we all tend to do when we lose someone. But their sadness will turn to joy. He compares it to a mother giving birth. Pain gives way to joy. Jesus alludes to his resurrection when the disciples’ emotions will be turned upside down. What was an emptiness will become a fullness. Jesus could also be referring to his eventual leaving this earth and the coming of the Spirit. Either way, the end game is joy.

While Jesus’ words have specific meanings for specific events, it’s appropriate for us to understand these words for a grieving situation we might find ourselves in. It tells us about Jesus. He is true, he is constant, he cares, and he provides. Whatever the nature of our grief, he doesn’t leave us to just wallow in it. Grief can turn to joy because he is in our grief. And with Jesus, there is always newness and ever-presence.

Psalm 30:5b reminds us: ‘Weeping may remain for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.’

***It’s hard to see joy when grief casts its shadow on me. Help me, Lord Jesus, to trust your promise that you are always with me, and when you are with me, there is always a new day. Amen.***

Friday 14 July 2023

**Glory through you**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***And glory has come to me through them (John 17:10b).***

Read John 17:1–11

What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘glory’? Bright lights, majesty, honour or praise? It’s probably not a word we use much these days, although we do talk about something being glorious, like a beautiful sunset. Is it possible that Jesus might receive glory through you? When I was in Madang, Papua New Guinea, young people sang a song with the line, ‘I can see in you the glory of my King’. Really? Pretty hard to imagine, don’t you think?

In John 17, we have a lengthy and somewhat complex prayer that Jesus prays. The word ‘glory’ appears over and over. And he describes an intimate connection between himself and the Father, shared by himself with his followers. Jesus and his Father are one. He prays that his followers (believers) will also be one – one with him and each other – and so reflect that intimate connection he and the Father have. And as the Father’s glory is shown in the Son, so he prays that the glory of the Son will be shown in all who believe.

Complex, isn’t it? Jesus looks ahead and sees that he will soon fulfil the purpose for which he came. He will die, and in his dying, he will draw all people to himself. In his death, he will be glorified. So how does glory come from Jesus to his followers and so to us? It is passed on from Father to Son to disciples. It is part of being intimately connected. It is in receiving what Jesus passed on and being reflectors of all that. As Jesus shows the heart of the Father, his followers show the heart of the Son. Initially, ‘being one’ suggests that same intimate connection. It’s a bit like a dance where the movement of the dancers is so beautifully choreographed that it is difficult to distinguish one dancer from the other. They are as one.

You and I can reflect God’s glory because the light shining in and through us is the light of Jesus. That might not sound like a picture of you, and it won’t if you just look at your own abilities and strengths. But the glory isn’t yours. It belongs to Jesus and comes from him to you.

***Jesus, shine your light on me so that your glory can be seen all around me. Amen.***

Saturday 15 July 2023

**Caring for the land**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly (Psalm 65:9a).***

Read Psalm 65:9–13

If anyone should be at the forefront of environmental protection, it should be those who believe that the land is ultimately God’s. This reading echoes the thought of Psalm 24:1: ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.’ The land is God’s. Our land, Australia, is his, and he first gave our Indigenous people the task of being its caretakers and now to those of us who are non-Indigenous to also care for it. But the abundant, natural care for the land comes from God.

I don’t know if it still happens, but churches used to hold a Harvest Thanksgiving service each year, where the sanctuary would often overflow with produce from the land that people had brought as an act of thanksgiving. In more recent times, in urban areas, some churches asked people to bring whatever would be a good representation of their work: perhaps a laptop, a musical instrument, a briefcase or an office chair – whatever it was that contributed to them being able to make a living. It’s a good thing. A good thing to acknowledge that God is the great provider, and he crowns the year with his bounty (verse 11).

Caring for the land means acknowledging that land is a gift. Here in Australia, we experience both bountiful years and years of scarcity. We know what it is like when things flourish and how it is when there is drought, flood and fire. Sometimes we can take good things for granted, and perhaps sometimes, when things are grim, we are forced to put a greater value on the gift we have.

This psalm is simply a thank-you song. It begins with the words, ‘Praise awaits you, O God’ (verse 1). When I see how God cares, enriches, provides, drenches, softens, crowns, clothes and covers, what is left for me but to praise? We can add: because God's gift is so precious, we will care for this gift.

***Thank you, gracious God, for your care for our land. By your Spirit, give each of us the will to care as custodians of what belongs to you. Amen.***

Sunday 16 July 2023

**Whoever has ears, let them hear**

by Maria Rudolph

***Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables (Matthew 13:2,3a).***

Read Matthew 13:1–9,18–23

Wiring up the pastor with a microphone and checking the sound levels on the lectern are commonplace Sunday morning activities. Some churches even have a hearing aid channel area. After all, we want to ensure everyone can hear what is spoken! Not long ago, we had to rely on the pastor to project their voice to carry the unamplified words to people’s ears.

At least most of our preaching and teaching takes place indoors. Think about Jesus during his ministry. While he also taught inside synagogues, his teachings mostly took place outdoors. Catching his words while walking alongside him on the road is okay. But think about the crowd while Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount.

In today’s reading, a large crowd is gathered on the shore, while Jesus is bobbing up and down in a boat. Take a moment to consider the scene. Waves gently rolling in, the wind in your ears, the sound of the mumbling crowd around you, maybe someone coughing, and a seagull screeching occasionally. And there is Jesus, out in the boat, teaching. How many of his words would be audible to you? Would you be straining to hear him, hanging on to his lip movements to help you make out the sounds? Every word he says matters. You don’t want to miss any.

Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of heaven – about God. The words of Jesus are life and truth! Your ears prick up at the parable – you want to have the kind of soil that produces a hundredfold return from the seed of God’s word. Jesus says, ‘Whoever has ears, let them hear’. And that’s all without amplification. It is much, much easier for us with our fancy sound systems and microphones to make Bible teachers and preachers audible. But does better hearing mean better understanding? How blessed are we to have so much help to hear God’s word? We have the gift of audibility: the Holy Spirit gives the gift of understanding. Be bold and ask the Holy Spirit to open the ears of your heart to a renewed understanding of God’s word today – for good soil conditions for the seed of God’s word to fall and that it will bear much fruit to the glory of God.

***Holy Spirit, open my heart to gain new understanding as I hear God’s word. Help me not squander the many opportunities I have to listen to and ponder teaching and preaching on the Bible and instead inspire and grow me each day so these seeds fall on fertile soil, germinate, grow and bear much fruit to your glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***