

Hebrews 3:7-4:11

The Purpose of Rest

A Sermon by

[Dr. Bob Berger](#)

Associate Pastor, Highlands PCA, LaFayette, GA

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Theme: The observance of a weekly Sabbath rest for the purpose of worship remains a joyful New Testament duty.

Word Count: 4911

Pastor Tom and his wife, Linda, are out of town this week on a much-deserved vacation to celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary. Please remember to be praying for them.

Our focus today as we dig deep into God's Word is going to be on understanding the purpose of a Sabbath-rest. I am going to read a rather long text from Hebrews. Pastor Tom has led us through this before, but as I read it again, I want you to pay particular attention to the time-stamps on two words: "Today" and "Rest". Consider these themes carefully now as I read:

Hebrews 3:7–4:11 (ESV)

⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,

⁹where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.

¹⁰Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’

¹¹As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ ”

¹²Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

¹³But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

¹⁴For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

¹⁵As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

¹⁶For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?

¹⁷And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?

¹⁸And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?

¹⁹So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

¹Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

²For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

³For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’ ” although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.

⁴For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.”

⁵And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.”

⁶Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience,

⁷again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.

⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,

¹⁰for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be unto God!

There is much debate in certain circles about the precise meaning and duty of observing a Sabbath rest. In some churches, particularly in Baptist thinking, this idea is labeled as an Old Testament restriction that has nothing to do with the freedom we have in the New Testament. Yet even in the PCA and other Reformed circles there is substantial debate on this topic.

Perhaps it is surprising then to hear the voice of an atheist, a person who hated Christianity, (I am thinking of the French Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire {1694-1778}) make this observation:

“Destroy Sunday and you will destroy Christianity.”¹

My purpose today in preaching on this topic is not to be your conscience. That is the Holy Spirit’s job. Rather my purpose today is to answer the question of whether the observance of a weekly sabbath remains a requirement for New Testament believers.

There are certainly other things that can and should be said about the Sabbath. For instance, if we examined Isaiah 58:13-14, we might delve into the question of “what is your delight?” and what delighting in the Lord’s Day looks like. Or if we focused on Mark 2:23-28 where Jesus said *the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*, we might learn a thing or two about how to stay away from a pharisaical approach to sabbath-keeping.

But the constraints upon our time together are real this morning, so we must

¹ Quoted by Karen Burton Mains in her book, *Making Sunday Special*.

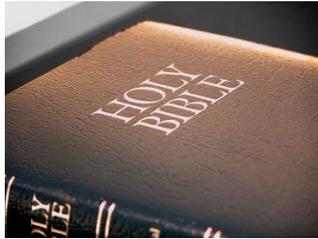
limit ourselves to one question **today**, namely, **Is the observance of a weekly sabbath rest still a valid requirement for New Testament believers?**

Let me make one thing perfectly clear about this sermon, however: I am NOT trying to be nominated by you as the **Sheriff of the Sabbath**.



Rather, I believe the vast majority of those listening to my voice truly desire with all your heart to molded and shaped by the Word of God. You know that the **Bible** is our only infallible source for what

we are to believe and how we are to act. You want God's Word to conform you and transform you.



Sometimes, however, certain sections of the Bible get neglected for a variety of reasons. My job, as a teaching elder, is to present the Word of God to you clearly. Your job (if my instruction is accurate) is to adjust your behavior to be in line with God's Word. But neither one of these twin responsibilities will happen unless all of us keep our eyes **fixed on Jesus**, the author and finisher of our faith.

So, what does the Bible tell us about the idea of a Sabbath rest? Logically, we must start with the creation account. Allow me to test your Bible knowledge if you know the name of the book of the Bible

where this verse is found: “**And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.**”

(Show of hands?) That’s right...**Genesis...chapter two...verse two.**

If so many of us know that reference, it is almost humorous to read in Hebrews 4:4 that the writer of Hebrews refers to this well-known passage as...

Hebrews 4:4 (ESV)

4For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.”

Hebrews then is unmistakably grounding what it wants to teach us about Sabbath rest in the creation account recorded in Genesis 2.

Now the sabbath model to rest is among those things which God established for mankind at the very beginning of the world. Theologians call this a **creation ordinance**. There are other creation ordinances, for instance:

- 1. The institution of labor (Gen 2:15).**
- 2. The institution of marriage (Gen 2:24).**
- 3. As well as the institution of every 7-day sabbath rest.**

All these creation ordinances are relevant for all men everywhere and in every age. They were established at creation and are relevant whether a person is a Christian or not, just as marriage and work are valid for both believers and unbelievers.

When we ask what we should be doing on the Sabbath, the 4th Commandment in the 10 Commandments gives us some helpful answers. Perhaps you know that the 4th Commandment is given in two places in the OT with slightly different wording, but if you put those two places together the 4th Commandment instructs us to REST so that we can WORSHIP on this day.

Listen first to Exodus 20:8-11...

Exodus 20:8–11 (ESV)

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

⁹Six days you shall labor, and do all your work,

¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.

¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Note the emphasis here is upon REST – not doing any work, and the reason given is because God Himself rested after He created the world.

The second time the 4th Commandment is given is found in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 5:12–15 (ESV)

¹²“ Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.

¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

¹⁴but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

¹⁵You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Again, the command to rest is given, but this time the emphasis is upon God's work of redemption from Egypt. We REST, therefore, so that we can WORSHIP the God who delivered us.

That is the Old Testament context for the Sabbath commandment. When we look at Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath, we find that he resisted a pharisaical interpretation of it, but He never disobeyed the Sabbath commandment. In point of fact, Jesus declared that He was indeed the Lord of the Sabbath. (Cf. Mark 2:28)

Since Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, it was His prerogative to guard against the distortions and perversions of this day which the Pharisees surrounded it with. But it is also His gift to guide us into how this day is a blessing to us both now and into eternity.

Yet with this introduction, let us now return to Hebrews 3-4 to answer the question of whether there is proof here that we are commanded to rest so that we can worship, and whether that obligation still exists in 2019?

I'd like to remind you of the overarching theme of the Book of Hebrews. We are told stories about the OT believers in the wilderness, because the NT author is painting the picture that we are likewise a congregation in the wilderness. Sure, we are not in a literal wilderness, but our journey through life, waiting for Jesus to come back, may be compared to that wilderness wandering of ancient Israel.

That's why the writer of Hebrews uses this long quote from Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3:7.

Psalm 95 was written by David. It is an exhortation not to harden our hearts in the way we respond to God. David makes mention of the bad example of the Israelites during their 40 years in the

wilderness. The Book of Numbers tells us time and time again of the numerous actions of the Israelites in rebelling against God and grumbling about His mercies.

Which is why God became angry with that generation of people who came out of Egypt. Consequently, God declared on oath in His righteous anger that they would never enter His rest.

We saw that oath fulfilled in the OT when the bodies of all the adults over 20 years of age (except Joshua and Caleb) fell in the wilderness. One scholar has estimated that there were nearly 90 death per day among the Israelites.²

Who were these people who were prevented from entering God's rest? Our text tells us in Hebrews 3:16-19 that it was those who disobeyed. Those who did not hold on to their faith.

² Simon J. Kistemaker, *Hebrews NTC*, p. 97.

Thus, the writer of Hebrews goes on to exhort all of us. We, too, must be careful that we do not allow an evil, unbelieving heart to keep us out of God's rest.

It is true that the Jews viewed the Promised Land as a place where God would give them rest³, but Hebrews 3 also teaches us that more than this geographical reference was meant by this term "rest".

We see that proof when we remember that King David composed Psalm 95 with his warning about "today" while David himself was dwelling in the Promised Land. Yet David says to the people of his day: **"TODAY if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts..."** But Hebrews 3:13 makes it crystal clear that it is still TODAY right now...

³ Joshua 22:4 (ESV)

⁴And now the Lord your God has given rest to your brothers, as he promised them. Therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan.

Hebrews 3:13 (ESV)

¹³But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

So, the point we need to grasp is that for David, or the writer of Hebrews or for you or for me, the time stamps of TODAY and REST do NOT have the same reference. Today is right now, this present moment, but the promise of God’s REST is still somehow future.

That is why the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to continue steadfast in our faith in chapter 4...

Hebrews 4:1 (ESV)

¹Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

Next, however, at vs. 4 of chapter 4, the author adds to Psalm 95 an additional quote from Genesis 2:2. This is the only

place, by the way, where Genesis 2:2 is quoted in the NT.

Hebrews 4:4–5 (ESV)

⁴For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.”

⁵And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.”

This quote from Genesis 2 has the effect of bringing the Sabbath institution into view. (In Exodus 20:11 and Exodus 31:17 the Sabbath commandment is grounded in both places in the rest of God that took place in Gen. 2:2.) Now what the writer says in vs. 3 and vs. 6 helps us get at what the character of that rest is.

The Jews wandering in the wilderness generation failed to enter this rest because of their unbelief. But believers, on the other hand, may be certain of entering it.

Hebrews 4:6 (ESV)

6Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience,

So the writer establishes two points here:

- 1. Some are to enter God's rest.**
- 2. But disobedience will bar entrance into that rest.**

In vs. 7, we are reminded that God has indeed set a certain day, calling it TODAY, when He exhorts us not to be disobedient, but to have faith in Christ that we might enter God's eternal rest.

Meanwhile, vs. 8 specifically tells us that the Promised Land was NOT the fulfillment of the rest that Psalm 95 refers to...

Hebrews 4:8 (ESV)

⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.

Brothers and sisters hear me well: The rest was future for Joshua. The rest was future for David, and the rest is also future for you and me. Look at this wonderful promise of Hebrews 4:9...

Hebrews 4:9 (ESV)

⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,

Now over time there have been many Sabbaths, but in the future there shall be the enjoyment and keeping of a Sabbath-rest: one perfect and eternal. All throughout this passage when the writer uses the word “rest” (Heb 4:8) it is the Greek, “*catapausis*,” in Hebrew, it is the word, “*Noah*”; rest from weariness, as the ark rested on Ararat after its tossing to and fro; and as Israel, under Joshua, enjoyed at last rest from war in Canaan. But the “rest” in this Heb 4:9 passage is the nobler and

more exalted (*Hebrew*) “*Sabbath*” rest; (Greek = sabbatismos) literally, “cessation”: rest from *work when finished* (Heb 4:4), as God rested (Rev 16:17).

The two ideas of “rest” combined, give the perfect view of the heavenly Sabbath. Rest from weariness, sorrow, and sin; and rest in the completion of God’s new creation (Rev 21:5). The whole renovated creation shall share in it; nothing will be there to break the Sabbath of eternity; and the Triune God shall rejoice in the work of His hands (Zep 3:17). Moses, the representative of the law, could not lead Israel into Canaan: the law leads us to Christ, and there its office ceases, as that of Moses on the borders of Canaan: it is Jesus, the antitype of Joshua, who leads us into the heavenly rest.

This verse establishes the obligation of the Sabbath for right now; for the type continues until the antitype supersedes it: so legal sacrifices continued till the great antitypical Sacrifice superseded it, As then the antitypical heavenly Sabbath-rest will

not be till Christ, our Gospel Joshua, comes, to usher us into it, the typical earthly Sabbath must continue till then. The Jews call the future heavenly rest “the day which is all Sabbath.”⁴

Do you get the point?

If we have not yet entered into the final Sabbath rest then it follows that our present day Sabbath observing is still a relevant sign of what is yet to come.

Nobody would hurry to watch the “trailer” to a movie that they had already seen. However, if you haven’t yet seen the movie, the trailer is of great interest to you. That’s the way it is with the Sabbath rest. The full scale rest is still future – that’s what makes the seven day “trailer” so important for us to observe.

⁴ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). [*Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*](#) (Vol. 2, p. 449). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Do not include the section in blue if
time is short:

Very quickly, I would like to deal with an objection that may come to your mind. Some may recall two NT passages which seem to indicate we are not to make a fuss over sabbath observance. I'm thinking of Colossians 2:16 and Romans 14:5.

Colossians 2:16 (ESV)

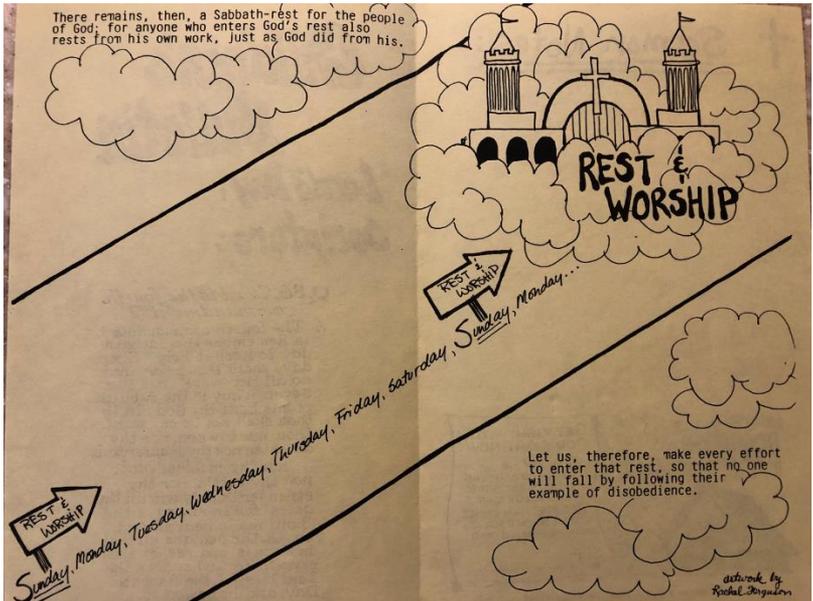
¹⁶Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

What we need to understand here is that the reference to “a Sabbath” (literally, the word is plural “sabbaths”) as is found in conjunction with the phrase “religious festival or new moon” is referring to a multitude of sabbath days in the OT. (For proof texts see Hosea 2:11 and Ezekiel 45:17.) You'll remember that there were many “sabbath” or “holy days” in connection with the various feasts of the 7th

year sabbath and the year of Jubilee. These sabbaths were part of the ceremonial law which passed away with the coming of Christ. However, the weekly sabbath, is what is in view in Hebrews 4, as proved by the writer quoting Genesis 2.

So here's the point: We don't keep all the "sabbaths" that the OT Jews did. But we do keep the weekly sabbath because it is grounded in the creation order.

Let me try to show you a picture of what the role of the weekly Sabbath should have in our lives.



When we encounter a road sign that says, Chattanooga 20 miles or Chattanooga 10 miles, the sign is not the city itself. Rather the sign is an important road marker. It says, you are going the right way, keep on keeping on. You are on the right track and you are almost there. That's the

way the weekly Lord's Day is supposed to function in our lives.

Now I want to hurry along to some application questions, but before I do, I must deal with an objection some of you may have heard.

Does Hebrews 3-4 really suggest that the rest typified by the OT weekly Sabbath is still relevant for us today? I am answering that question YES, but in order to be intellectually honest, I should tell you that no less than a man named JOHN CALVIN would differ with me.

Whoa, Dr. Bobby! Are you really going to go up against John Calvin? Aren't your arms a little too short to box with such a great man? Well, it is true that my arms are short, but it's also true that at least in this passage, I am going to dare to box.

Time does not permit me to give a full explanation of what has been called the "Continental" view of the Sabbath vs. the "Puritan" view – and it is the Puritan view

John Calvin understood the “rest” referred to in Hebrews 4:10⁵ to be a cessation from sinning; a resting from the dead works of the law by which men try to accomplish their salvation.⁶

⁵ See Calvin’s NT Commentary on this verse as well as his remarks in his Institutes Book 2:8:28ff (page 394, in Volume 1. See footnote on p. 400 about the severe legalism that existed in his day about Sunday.

⁶ This view is also in Simon Kistemaker’s Hebrews Commentary and the Heidelberg Catechism, Q 103.

- 103.** Q. What does God require in the fourth commandment?
- A. First,
that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained ¹
and that, especially on the day of rest,
I diligently attend the church of God ²
to hear God's Word, ³
to use the sacraments, ⁴
to call publicly upon the LORD, ⁵
and to give Christian offerings for the poor. ⁶
Second,
that all the days of my life
I rest from my evil works,
let the LORD work in me through his Holy Spirit,
and so begin in this life
the eternal Sabbath. ⁷

However, let's see if this fits with what the text says in Hebrews 4:9-10...

Hebrews 4:9–10 (ESV)

⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,

¹⁰for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Calvin says this resting from "his own work" means the believer putting to death his sinful desires. But I prefer to follow the lead of Dr. Richard Gaffin of Westminster Seminary, in saying that this view simply doesn't fit in this verse.

In vs. 10, the writer is drawing a parallel between our works and God's works. Now I believe the clear implication of vs. 10 is that those works are ALL POSITIVE or GOOD.

God's works are obviously positive. God rested from His work of creation. Calvin would say the believer's works were

negative – we rest from sinning. But I would affirm that it fits the context better to see even the believer’s works as viewed positively – that is, the believer rests from his good labor on this earth.

I find support for this view in the Fourth Commandment. In the Ten Commandments; the 4th does not simply tell us to stop sinning. The Jews weren’t supposed to sin on Tuesday and they weren’t supposed to sin on the Sabbath – so what would be so special about a Sabbath day of rest from sin?

No, what the 4th Commandment required was a change of activity; namely, to REST from our NORMAL works and recreations SO THAT we could focus specifically on the WORK of WORSHIPPING God.

We ought to remember that the consummation rest God desired for Adam to enter into as a creation ordinance was present BEFORE sin ever entered the world.

Calvin's view, I'm afraid, considers negative what is meant to be viewed as positive. The believer's works should be regarded in a good sense as they are in Rev. 14:13 for instance.

Revelation 14:13 (ESV)

¹³And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

The only conclusion we can legitimately draw from Hebrews 4 is that this "rest" has a "not yet" reality for the people of God. The weekly Sabbath observance has a "not yet" character to it. It points forward to a "rest" which is not yet ours. Therefore, the privilege and obligation of keeping the Sabbath is still with us. We must conclude that a Christian concept of the Sabbath demands a keeping of the Sabbath.

So, what does all this mean for us today? Please hear me, because I'm not trying to rain on your parade, rather I am trying to bless you.

If the Sabbath commandment is still valid, as I hope, I have demonstrated, then we all have a duty to make this a DAY OF REST so that we can make it a DAY OF WORSHIP.

What would that duty look like? Let me encourage you to ask yourselves three questions about how you spend your time on Sunday around the topics of: **Worship, Necessity, Mercy slide**

Worship:

- **How do you set this whole day aside for worship, both public and private?**
- **Is church attendance more important than sleeping in or fishing?**
- **Are you able to put off a lot of other good things so that you can focus**

**clearly on the very best thing of all –
giving glory to God?**

Necessity:

- **There are certain people who have to work on Sunday. The preacher, the policeman, and the doctor.**
- **But is Sunday the only day you have to pick up that gallon of milk from Walmart? Maybe there is a reason why God has blessed Chick-fil-let to be the No. 1 restaurant in America, even though they close on Sunday.⁷**
- **Even though state blue laws are becoming a thing of the past, are you doing your part to help your neighbor rest?**

⁷ <https://www.wvltv.com/article/news/chick-fil-a-is-the-number-one-fast-food-restaurant-in-america/289-571248221>

Mercy:

- **Are you giving rest to others, especially if you are in a position of strength or leadership?**
- **Have you thought about using this day to visit someone in a nursing home?**
- **If you are a husband and your wife usually does the dishes, have you thought about giving her a break on this day?**

Friends, this has been a long sermon and you've been very patient. I only ask for your patience for one more thought, which is the most important of all.

I want you to see Jesus this morning. I want you to see Jesus because He is indeed the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the One who is worthy of our worship.

When Jesus hung on that cross and died the death that we deserved, he declared with a loud cry of victory: "It is finished!" Jesus has now rested in his work

for us. Jesus now resides in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father, and through His finished work, He has accomplished the securing of a place for us in heaven.

How can you be sure that you have that place with Jesus secured for you? If we are to learn from the failure of the OT Jews in the wilderness, we must remember that we need one thing and one thing alone, and that is FAITH.

Faith in Jesus that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Faith in Jesus that says I will worship Him as the Lord of the Sabbath by being mindful of how I spend this day worshipping Him.

Faith in Jesus that says, after I've tried my own way and find myself exhausted, now it is time to heed the voice of the One who said:

Matthew 11:28–30 (ESV)

²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Benediction:

2 Corinthians 13:14 (ESV)

¹⁴The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.