

# Her Longing Eyes Are Blest

Zechariah 9:9-12 | Psalm 145:8-15 | Romans 7:15-25a | Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

## MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

<sup>16</sup> *‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,* <sup>17</sup> *“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”* <sup>18</sup> *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”;* <sup>19</sup> *the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’* [<sup>20</sup> *Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.* <sup>21</sup> *‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.* <sup>22</sup> *But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.* <sup>23</sup> *And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.* <sup>24</sup> *But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.’]* <sup>25</sup> *At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;* <sup>26</sup> *yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.* <sup>27</sup> *All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.* <sup>28</sup> *‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* <sup>29</sup> *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.* <sup>30</sup> *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1961, Joseph Heller, a former bombardier in the US Army Air Forces, published a novel exploring what can only be described as the absurd bureaucratic quirks of the American military, quirks that produce impossible situations. The first in the novel is that of the mental evaluations of pilots. And as someone who flies a lot, I think we can all agree it is preferable to have pilots who are mentally sound. But in this case, because it is a war and the combat missions are, effectively, suicide missions, it creates a paradox. A pilot hoping to be found mentally incompetent to fly, and so escaping deadly combat on the one hand, proves he *is* mentally competent to fly because that is a rational desire. Whereas those who are too eager to fly into deadly combat, on the other hand, might have a few screws loose up in the brain. This situation raises interesting philosophical and theological questions, to be sure, but the paradox remains. Doc Daneeka, the character in the novel describing this dilemma, calls it the name by which we all know both this phenomenon and this novel: Catch-22.

A catch-22 is defined as “a dilemma or difficult circumstance from which there is no escape because of mutually conflicting or dependent conditions.”<sup>1</sup> It’s being stuck in an impossible situation, proverbially being between a rock and a hard place. And it is a situation in which we often find ourselves: competing expectations put pressure on us to behave in impossibly contradictory ways, especially when it comes to the that place of tension in which we all live, that gap between what society wants and what the Christian faith demands. We heard Paul

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<sup>1</sup> “Catch-22” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), accessed via *Oxford Reference*. See: [oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20111003190616741](https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20111003190616741).

wrestling through it in that Romans reading. And we find Jesus, in our Matthew reading, likewise addressing it.<sup>2</sup> And as we look more closely at the Gospel reading, I think we will learn that the only way out of the dilemma, out of the catch-22, is to simply make a decision to choose Christ. Let's take a look.

### 1. WEARY

As the reading begins, we find Christ contemplating his own catch-22. He's looking for a metaphor to describe this generation, and he lands on indecisive, confused, children—children who cannot figure out what they want. They put on music, hoping for a dance, but Jesus would not comply. They wailed, and Jesus refused weeping.<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus doubles down on the metaphor. He notes that John came in abstinence and they concluded he has a demon. Jesus came eating and drinking and they called him a glutton and drunkard.<sup>4</sup> Nothing satisfies them. The conditions they desire are impossible. And if it were anyone but Jesus, the frustration would likely be unbearable.

Normally, I am very slow to read us into the passage as Jesus, but he later invites the comparison. So, I wonder, does this sound familiar? Abstinence is not enough, but neither is plenty. You can neither give in nor give up. On the one hand, there is restraint and self-discipline expected, yet on the other hand there is freedom and joy. This is what it means to be a Christian, a person of faith in this world. There are expectations from both sides—a desire to live in a way that is obedient and holy and so requires sacrifice and work. Yet, there is also a hope of happiness even in this life, satisfaction, relaxation, some enjoyment. And yet these things can be pitted against one another, leaving us stranded in the middle, back and forth, constantly bouncing between two extremes, never at peace.

So, how does Jesus handle this? What does he say in response to these impossible and contradictory demands?

### 2. REPENTANCE

He says woe. This second part is what the lectionary, in its cowardly way, omits. Let me read verses 20-24, listening to Jesus' response.

Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I say "full Gospel reading," as we will look at verses 20-24 of Matthew 11.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 11:17.

<sup>4</sup> Matt 11:18-19.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 11:20-24.

Torn between a call to heed and a societal or social pressure to ignore the call of Christ's prophetic voice, the people of these three cities—Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum—were given a reason to believe in Jesus. They were given a reason to push through the dilemma and simply make a decision. Witness to his mightiest deeds, his most miraculous signs and wonders, they nevertheless refused him. And in particular they refused his call to repentance. Whether it was because they were too entrenched in their ways as religious legalists, too set in their traditions and practices to pay attention to the radical nature of Christ's exhortation to repentance, or whether it was because they were pagans or non-religious types who were simply too comfortable in their lives and ways to follow Christ's call, is irrelevant. They were given an option to follow Jesus Christ, to repent and turn away from their sins, their evil and rebellious ways against God, to become faithful disciples. No matter how it felt, whether it felt like an impossible choice between a joyless and obedient life of repentance or continuing to struggle in their ignorant unbelief, it was not a catch-22. Repentance *was* the right choice. But why? Why is that clearly the right choice?

### 3. REST

It is the right choice because it brings rest. *Rest*. This brings us to the last section. The theme here, repeated twice in the last three verses, is *rest*. It is a promise, made by Jesus, of finding respite in, and from, this mortal life. It is an important promise for we who toil here in life, who are tired, or hurting, or broken, feeling pressed in or enslaved or imprisoned by sin, caught between a hopeless life of relying only on ourselves and a difficult life of faith. For those who feel caught in impossible situations, or who simply feel defeated by life, we find here a promise of finding rest.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this rest is a profound contrast to those cities we just considered. They were burdened by their pride, by their sin, by futility. They had no hope and, here, Jesus gives thanks that these so-called wise are kept in the dark. Rather, rest is given to the children—in the sense of those who are humbly dependent, those who have repented—the children to whom the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven are revealed by Jesus. Children who, at the beginning of the passage were indecisive, now having Christ revealed to them. In other words, there is a rest that we cannot achieve, a rest at which we cannot arrive on our own. We need Christ Jesus. In God's Kingdom there is no room for the self-righteous, self-absorbed, or self-reliant. There is room only for those who depend on Christ Jesus. Because Jesus determines to reveal himself to some—as he may very well be doing here today—and the response is to come to him in humility and repentance. Those who do, he says, will find rest in him.

How? How can Jesus, you might be wondering, effect such rest? Well, he will do so by sharing the load. Consider those last two verses: Jesus shares the burden. The image he uses is one of a yoke, of large farm animals—like oxen—pulling something heavy, perhaps a plough through a field. The animals wear a yoke, a wooden crosspiece that binds them together, balances out the force of the pulling, and reduces the load on each. Jesus says to come to him and he will bear

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<sup>6</sup> Jesus is, I think, referencing a major theme from throughout the Bible. Six days God worked, and on the seventh he rested. In Egypt, God's people were burdened with the hard work of labour, but in the Promised Land, they found rest. Even in the slavery of the Exile, the hope in the midst of absence of God was the rest to be found in him. Throughout the Old Testament, work and hardship and difficulty come, and the faithful look forward to, in the end, finding peace.

the burden, he will take care of his people. But, interestingly, he doesn't bear it alone. He does not promise that we will be free of the burdens of this life. It is not a free pass or a holiday. It is still a yoke. There is work still to be done, hardship to endure. One must come to Jesus in humility, but this does not mean life is simple and easy from that moment on. Indeed, Jesus is always clear about this. Following him means taking up a cross. It means following his example in sacrifice. This life will continue to be difficult. And yes, it also means dying.<sup>7</sup> In this life, there is no freedom, no rest, from sin and suffering and ultimately death. And yet, Jesus speaks of it in hopeful terms. *"You will find rest for your souls,"* he says.<sup>8</sup> This life will not be easy, yet our souls will ultimately find rest in him. Because Jesus died on a cross and rose again, defeating sin and death once and for all, he alone can offer reprieve, relief, rest. So, come to him. In one of the most profound mysteries of all, Jesus chooses to whom he will reveal the kingdom, and yet we have a choice to either bear the burden alone, or to come to Jesus, the only one who *can* bear it. We have a choice in how we live this life. We cannot please everyone, but we can turn to Christ Jesus. Will you, will I, will we come to Jesus in humble dependence, in repentance of our sins, and live in a way that reflects his sacrifice? You see, these ideas—dependence on Christ alone and yet following him in his way, these are the two sides of the gospel. These two ideas are tied together. They are no catch-22, but an opportunity to live in Christ, and so gain his rest in our otherwise anxious world. That is, it may seem like a difficult decision, even an impossible one, to follow Christ Jesus at great cost. But it is also how you will finally be able to sleep at night.

## CONCLUSION

As I conclude, I remind you, the weary repentant find rest in Christ. Weary we all are. Exhausted and defeated. Yet, as we turn to Christ, be assured of his promised rest. One of the most vivid pictures of this idea, not for the individual but for the whole church, is painted in the fifth verse of one of my favourite hymns:

'Mid	toil	and	tribulation,
and	tumult	of	her war,
she	waits	the	consummation
of	peace	for	evermore;
till	with	the	vision
her	longing	eyes	are
and	the	great	church
shall be the church at rest. <sup>9</sup>			victorious

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, thank you for compelling us to follow your Son, whose death and resurrection means we can have rest. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

<sup>7</sup> This is the inherent notion captures in Jesus' words in Matt 16:24-26.

<sup>8</sup> Matt 11:29.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel John Stone, "The Church's One Foundation," 1866.