

My mother had a saying that was interchangeable depending on her audience. She would say if she was speaking of herself: “No rest for the *weary*.” If she was speaking to me or my brother when we moaned because of the chores she had just assigned us, she would say: “No rest for the *wicked*.” Mmmm? It was pointless to lodge a complaint about her choice of words or file a grievance. There were no equal rights in our house.

When I was a boy, I also thought: “Wouldn’t it be great to live in a perfect world?” Wouldn’t it be great to live in a world where there were no chores, no worries, no unfairness that we deal with every single day? Wouldn’t it be great getting all my chores done and doing whatever I wanted to do at the same time? Wouldn’t that be just perfect? I’m thinking...

- In a perfect world people who are 64 would feel as good as they did when they were 19.
- In a perfect world we could eat as many Christmas cookies as we like and not worry about gaining weight.
- In a perfect world we would get a big tax refund check, even if we didn’t overpay last year’s taxes.
- In a perfect world there would be no need to fear bad health, wars, natural disasters, or even death.
- In a perfect world there would be no poverty, no pain, no hurt, and no broken relationships.

To a greater or lesser degree we all long for a world where we would be free of all the imperfections and troubles that this world has. In fact, the human race has been striving to create a perfect world for generations. Truthfully we have done very well with science and technology that makes life easier, with all the appliances that make food preparation a breeze compared to grandma who spent her whole day in the kitchen peeling, stirring, roasting, kneading, baking, and then washing dishes by hand. We have come a long way in the world as far as eliminating disease with improved surgical methods, immunizations, and new research. Wonderful things have been achieved, but this still is not a perfect world. We know that all too well, not only on the world scene but in our everyday lives we can find plenty of room for improvement.

And so we come to the prophecy of Isaiah in the 11th chapter. Isaiah’s message is the good news that there is a better world coming, in fact more than just better—a perfect world. Isaiah begins with his prophetic announcement that the Messiah is coming: “*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD*” (Isaiah 11:1-2).

After talking about how this “shoot from the stump of Jesse” will bring judgment and punishment, Isaiah proceeds to describe a truly wonderful picture: “*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. They will*

neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:6-9).

To be honest, a lamb is normally lunch for a lion. Likewise, a goat is a snack for a leopard. Animals that don't normally get along eat together (not one another) and *rest* side by side in peace. And what is more *“a little child will lead them.”* Animals that we would hardly describe as suitable pets for a small child—wolves, leopards, lions and snakes are play mates for a little child. (Grammy Jayne would have a conniption!) But this is a perfect picture of a perfect world. There is no fear and no anxiety. The helpless and the innocent live in safety and have no dread of the ferocious and powerful. In poetic language Isaiah writes the best way that human words can describe the perfect peace that the coming Messiah will bring. *“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them” (Isaiah 11:6).*

These words are Isaiah's way of conveying a peace that we only dream about. It's the peace the angels proclaimed at the first Christmas when they said, *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).* This is the perfect world where God rules and where all the imperfections of the present world are past history.

Most of us are tempted to say: “Nice poetry, Isaiah! Beautiful thoughts, but let's get real. It's a far cry from the real world.” Before you dismiss this whole scene painted by Isaiah's poetry of a kingdom of pacified wolves and lions, and children caring for normally wild and dangerous animals, as unrealistic and irrational remember the context in which these words are spoken.

The world that Isaiah is describing is not one ruled by prime ministers, presidents, representatives, senators or rough and tough generals. It's a world ruled by a little child. *“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”* Also remember that Jesse was the father of King David, the forefather of Jesus. This is the kingdom of the long-awaited Messiah. It is a world ruled by a little child, born in very humble circumstances in an out of the way town in a country no one had ever heard of. This child is called the Prince of Peace. He came to bring peacefulness and reconciliation.

It is easy to debunk Isaiah's promises of peace and a perfect world. But this shoot from the stump of Jesse brings something that far surpasses anything that we can create with our intelligence, technology, business or commerce. It results in something far greater than the smartest and most diplomatic people in the United Nations can broker. In Christ all things have been made new. We have *“the peace of God, which passes all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).* Because of what Jesus has done for us we have Christ's peace and perfection that will only become a visible reality when Christ comes again. When he comes the second time we shall be living in a perfect world that is best symbolized by a little child playing among wild and dangerous animals. I love the verse that comes a little later in Isaiah's prophecy that says of the Lord, *“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusts in thee.” (26:3).*

Let's look at Isaiah's vision in this way. We shudder at the thought of a little child playing near a nest of poisonous snakes or worse, a child picking up and playing with a snake. Our natural inclination would be

to snatch a child away from poisonous snakes for fear of sudden death. But the prophet is telling us that these snakes are harmless. Their power to kill has been removed. Isaiah is telling us that death has had its power to harm us removed. *The Messiah brings peace and rest.* In his kingdom there will be no need to fear.

We are all aware of what causes the lack of peace in our world. We know too well the root cause of the wickedness of this world. SIN. Often we think of sin as the actions of individuals, and that is true. Sin is the straining or breaking of relationships. We are well aware how our own selfishness and jealousy puts a strain on our relationships with one another. We are aware of the fact that we aren't the husband or wife we ought to be, the father or the mother, the son or daughter, the employee, the neighbor, the friend, the Christian, or the church member we ought to be. When we are less than we ought to be, it comes from sin. That goes for our relationship with God too.

Sin is the breakdown of our friendship with God. We aren't what we ought to be. We are people who are loved and adopted by God through faith, yet we can't seem to help ourselves. We live our lives as if God hasn't done a thing for us. There seems to be a continuous need to restore our broken relationships and there is plenty of room for improvement.

This is where "rest" comes in. Jesus came to call people who didn't have peace, imperfect people who live in an imperfect world. And he comes calling us again today. The Messiah's words in Matthew 11 have an appeal to all of the imperfect and worn out people of the world: "*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*" (vs. 28-29). There is a legend that Jesus, in the carpenter shop in Nazareth, made the best yokes in all of Galilee. Every yoke was tailor-made to fit each oxen. In Matthew 11 Jesus is saying, "Yoke yourself with me, for my task for you is shared and made easy, *and you will find rest for your souls.*"

If I wanted to go to Oakland and I got on the parkway headed toward the airport I would need to change the direction I was going. We too need to change the direction we are going and join with the One who can change us. Worship and prayer are preliminary steps to "taking the yoke of Jesus upon us." They're a move in the right direction, for sure, looking to God for strength and help and forgiveness. But there's more. We must seek out what God is telling us in Scripture and do what God urges us to do through the prompting of the Holy Spirit—that same Spirit that Isaiah proclaimed would *rest* on the Messiah—the *Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD.*

In other words, if we want to find *true rest*, it will mean making changes in the way we live. If you have been hard to get along with at home, then change your behavior. If you have been slack in your church attendance, don't just say "sorry about that God," do something about it. Remember: God will keep in perfect peace, those whose minds are stayed on him!

As long as we live in this imperfect world, this is our daily routine. Daily we sin; so daily we need to seek God's peace. Daily we must "yoke" ourselves to Jesus to experience the rest that comes from knowing

him and the forgiveness he gives. Daily we can trust in the promise God made through his prophet Isaiah. Over 700 years before Christ, he painted a fantastic picture of the lion and the lamb resting together and a little child playing among them.

It's a picture of the peace and rest only God can give. Amen. (Thanks to Pastor Vince Gerhardy for sermon ideas)