

“Rest for Your Soul”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—October 15, 2023

“My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.” (Psalm 84:2)

“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29)

Examples of devotion. As we know, the Word contains powerful testimonies of people not unlike you and me, who find themselves in deep need for the Lord. One is David, the Psalmist, who wrote the following words while he was oppressed by King Saul, fleeing for his life:

My soul thirsts for You;
My flesh longs for You
In a dry and thirsty land
Where there is no water.
So I have looked for You in the sanctuary,
To see Your power and Your glory. (Psalm 63:1-2)

“My soul thirsts for You.” I wonder how often we have reached that stage. It’s when the chips are way down and life seems to be dealing too many unfair blows. I picture parents experiencing a health crisis for their child, or the forlorn feeling when a key relationship seems irrevocably broken, or someone in a state of extreme overwhelm. Each of us could likely, given a few moments, remember those times in our lives. It could even be right now. We resonate with the words of the Psalmist because it’s then that we too desperately need the Lord—we yearn for a sense of His loving providential care.

A second story comes in the form of Peter, one of the Lord’s disciples, who seems to particularly exemplify the dynamics of faith. At the time he was watching the Lord deliver a particularly strident message to a skeptical crowd. Predictably it says, “many...went back and walked with Him no more” (John 6:66). They’d heard enough and were done. But the Lord used that context masterfully. He turned to His twelve disciples and issued a direct challenge to them: “Do you also want to go away?” It was Peter who responded with words of clear faith and conviction: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

I wonder how many people we know in today’s skeptical world where religion is often not seen as needed or particularly useful, who turn away. Yet we are invited to respond as Peter did, we who may have come to know deep down that life is better with the Lord in it. Is it true for you, that you at some point crossed that bridge of faith such that Peter’s question is your question? Sometimes, at least for me, it comes almost like a wakeup call, when I’m trying to do things on my own, so to speak, and it doesn’t work out so well. And I’m reminded, as so many of us are, that it is simply not possible for me to succeed without the Lord’s help. We can’t do it without Him. “Lord, to whom shall we go? ...We have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:68-69).

A third story comes in the context of much brighter times of life—the blessings and treasured moments. We call to mind the response of Mary at the annunciation, when the angel informed her that she would be the mother of Jesus. Most of us can recite her words by heart:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.” (Luke 1:47-48)

Sometimes we feel blessed, even to the level of our souls—filled with gratitude to the Lord for His goodness and mercy. It comes, does it not, when we feel loved and able to love close family members, when majorly stressful situations resolve themselves, when births happen, when we have those moments of looking back and seeing the gently steering hand of providence leading us to this point in life, which is indeed very good.

A life connected to the Lord. Our theme for today is a life connected to the Lord. That is what all three of these people, and all the people in the examples we’ve considered, reflect. There is a soul longing—a deep human need—for the Lord in our lives. We can, of course, choose to deny it, to attempt life without the Lord in it. But most of us can attest to the fact that it isn’t the best way to live. And even for those of us who would consider ourselves faithful, who are regularly engaged in going to worship or who have long since made the commitment to a spiritual path, don’t we also need reminders from time to time that life is really, deeply, much better when we feel connected to the Lord?

An unmistakable theme from the readings we heard from the Lord’s Word is the soul. “My soul longs, yes even faints for the courts of the Lord” (Psalm 84:1). “Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden...and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28,29). “My soul magnifies the Lord...” (Luke 1:47). “You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). We also heard about the soul being the real “us”—as one teaching puts it, “a person’s inner self acting in the world by means of the body and imparting life to the body” (*Arcana Caelestia* 6054).

What is amazing about these statements is that they are not just testimonies, examples of what we should strive for in our own lives. Rather they contain specific *directives* for us; they describe for us not only the end state but the path to get there—the path to a deeper devotion to the Lord. Let’s look at some of those steps we can take—one for each of the quotes we just heard about the soul.

“My soul longs...” Psalm 84 presents an amazing image of life in the presence of the Lord. We encounter the beautiful image of a nest, with a swallow laying her young right before the altars of the Lord. Carrying that message home, the psalm concludes: “Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will still be praising You” (84:4).

We learn from the Heavenly Doctrines that a nest is a symbol for a way of living (*Apocalypse Explained* 411:23). There’s a choice involved—*choosing* to live in the presence of the Lord. We make our home near Him. That could mean going to church to literally be near His altars. It means praying regularly. It means recognizing that the Lord is the One from whom all blessings and goodness flow. It means considering the Lord’s

perspectives and hopes for our lives, generally and in the moments when key choices are made.

One other teaching can give depth to this choice. Following the theme of the young hatched in that nest before the Lord's altars we learn of children raised in heaven, and all children really, who are "under the Lord's auspices" (*Conjugal Love* 411, *Heaven and Hell* 277:4). Auspices is an interesting word which means care and watchful safeguarding. We picture this tender oversight by the Lord—His protection and guidance as they grow. And the key ingredient that allows for it is innocence—the willingness to be led.

So with us, it is this willingness to be led that connects our lives, consciously and pervasively to the Lord. Listen to this choice as it exists in the ideal, as something we can all strive for:

Every day they are taught of the Lord what to do and to speak...; for evils being removed they are continually under the Lord's auspices, and in enlightenment. They are led and taught...by influx... And when they act from this influx, they appear to act from themselves, but nevertheless they acknowledge in heart that it is from the Lord. (*Apocalypse Explained* 825:3)

The fundamental choice to live in the presence of the Lord—to place ourselves under His auspices or loving care. Such can be our state, at least in growing measure, by the simple choice to include the Lord consciously in our lives.

"Take My yoke upon you." Next comes one of the most beautiful invitations from the Lord in the Word: "Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). As we know, that saying of the Lord references a yoke. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me." But it's not a difficult task, for the Lord is careful to add, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light." This, we hear, is what it takes to "find rest for our souls" (Matthew 11:28-30).

At play here is the abiding truth that we are wise to go with the Lord's plan for our lives. We are reminded that the Lord's ways, His yoke or burden that He lays on us. These are His commandments, which may at times seem arduous and a heavy ask. But flip it around and consider what the Lord is saying. He wants our lives to work! He wants us to find rest for our souls. No conflict, little stress, protection from guilt or the fear of being discovered or exposed in some way. A favorite saying of mind is that people can find out the hard way or the easy way that the Lord's way works! Forgiveness really does restore broken relationships. Giving of our time and energy to be a source of blessing in the lives of others, no matter how small the action, does indeed fold back on us in positive ways. Living within the confines of the Ten Commandments frees us and finds us living lives of true purpose. Treating other people the way we want to be treated leads to mutually beneficial relationships founded on integrity and trust.

All these things are the Lord's yoke—the burden of obedience that He places before us (see *Heaven and Hell* 359, 533). Not in a demanding or austere way, but with love, gently and kindly inviting us to see what leads to the kind of experience that we want in the deepest parts of our souls.

“My soul magnifies the Lord.” Let’s return to Mary and her words of praise, for in them we find a third directive, or invitation, in how to more consciously live a life connected to the Lord. She said, in response to one of the most profound blessings a human being can experience, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Again, there’s a choice at play. There’s a fundamental submission to the Lord in terms of His will for her life. There’s also a deep acknowledgment that this blessing is purely and only the Lord’s doing.

Along these lines, we learn that “blessing” the Lord, which is what Mary was doing, “means the acknowledgment, glorification, and thanksgiving, that all good and truth, and from this heaven and eternal happiness, are for those who receive” them from the Lord (*Apocalypse Explained* 344).

But what does that mean for our choices? The calling is to thank the Lord for the good things that happen. Not only do we submit to His ways, His yoke, but whenever good things happen as a result, when the seas part in a way we thought impossible, when a new life is born into this world, when we let it sink in how awesome it is to have the people we have in our lives, are we willing to let our souls magnify the Lord? Gratitude takes determined effort, until it becomes a habit, which finds us praising the Lord every single day for some good thing that we know, in our very souls, He caused.

“With all your soul.” We come, finally, to the first great commandment, which is a fitting way to conclude our message for today. We know the directive: to love the Lord with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength—with all we’ve got. It’s not an accident that there are three parts to this commitment. “With all our heart” is the love—the openness of heart to let the Lord in. Jumping to the end, with all your strength, that has to do with putting our love into action—doing the things that love dictates to demonstrate our devotion to the Lord.

I want to rest, however, on the second part of it: “with all your soul.” Soul here has to do with the understanding part of our minds (*Arcana Caelestia* 2930). There’s a longing to learn—in this case about the Lord (*Apocalypse Explained* 386:19).

In the New Church we’re offered a beautiful picture of the Lord. We know that He is a loving God, an all-powerful Creator and Provider, who is understandable and approachable. He is intimately aware of our thoughts and the directions of our life, and He’s working in so many ways to shape our lives so that good things will result—not only in this life, but to eternity in heaven. That’s the kind of care He has for every single person that He has created. Isn’t that the kind of God we all want to believe in?

There’s a beautiful teaching which gives a poignant image along these lines. It’s talking about a man—a husband and father as it turns out—who discovers for the first time a true and beautiful concept about the Lord. It says:

If he saw a picture of one Divine person with rays of heavenly light around his head, with the label: ‘This is our God, at once Creator, Redeemer and Regenerator, and so Savior.’ Would not a wise man kiss such a picture and take it home in his pocket, so that his own mind, and those of his wife, children and household, might take pleasure in looking at it? (*True Christian Religion* 296)

Everything we've considered today is about consciously and consistently choosing to live a life connected to the Lord. The invitation is to pay attention on the deepest levels of our being, our souls, to our heartfelt longings. We want life to work out. We want peace, contentment between us and those in our lives, purpose and meaning, the ending of strife. We want to be inspired by a vision much larger than ourselves. We want the stream of providence to guide us to all that is good. All these things can be ours to the extent that make our nest before His altars, and take up His yoke, and remember to magnify Him. For then we truly will have "rest for our souls." **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Psalm 84:2-4; Luke 1:46-49; Matthew 11:28-30; *Arcana Caelestia* 2930; *Apocalypse Explained* 386:19.

Psalm 84:2-4

My soul longs, yes, even faints
For the courts of the LORD;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
Even the sparrow has found a home,
And the swallow a nest for herself,
Where she may lay her young—
Even Your altars, O LORD of hosts,
My King and my God.
Blessed are those who dwell in Your house;
They will still be praising You. *Selah*

Luke 1:46-49

And Mary said:
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is His name."

Deuteronomy 6

⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

⁶ "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."

Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Arcana Caelestia 2930

'If it is with your soul' means if on account of an affection for truth coming from the heart.... When the expression 'with all the heart and with all the soul' is used, with all the will and with all the understanding is meant. This is what is meant by 'heart and soul' in Moses, 'You shall love Jehovah your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.' Deut. 6:5.

Apocalypse Explained 386:19

'To satisfy the longing soul, and to fill with good the hungry soul,' applies to those who long for truths and goodness, 'the longing soul' meaning those who long for truths, and 'the hungry soul' those who long for goodness.