

His Burden Is Light

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Good morning. I am humbled to stand where prophets, apostles, General Authorities, university presidents, important scholars, and world leaders have stood. As a student at BYU thirty years ago, I attended the devotionals and forums quite faithfully. I loved taking a break once a week to listen to remarkable individuals share their insights on a myriad of topics. I enjoyed listening and learning without any worry that I might be tested on what I was hearing. It was education at its best.

I am what I used to refer to as the dark horse in the devotional lineup. A dark horse is a completely unknown quantity with no name recognition whatsoever. You are probably like one of my students who looked at the list of speakers for the semester and asked, “Why are you on the list?”

My response to her was, “I don’t know! I’ve been asking myself the same question!” But whatever the reason, I am here, and I hope that something I share this morning will move you to open your hearts to the whisperings of the Holy Ghost and that you will be encouraged in your efforts to follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Invitation

One of my favorite scriptures is found in Matthew 11. It is Christ’s universal invitation that speaks to each of us personally:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
[Matthew 11:28–30]

I love this passage because in a few short verses Christ lays before us the path to eternal life. The overtones and undertones of these verses resonate with truth. First, the very fact that this is an invitation to “come,” to “take,” and to “learn” indicates an acknowledgment of and a respect for our agency. This respect for agency causes me to think of our premortal life, when we fought in our Father’s army to

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preserve and maintain the condition of agency in this life. It seems right that Christ, who is the linchpin in our Father’s plan of happiness, would acknowledge that it is our choice to come unto Him or not.

I also appreciate the simple promise of rest that is given. Having labored under sin and its heavy weight of guilt and separation from God, I am grateful for the rest and reconciliation Christ promises to those who come unto Him.

I find great meaning in the word *yoke*. It evokes so many important things about Christ’s path. A yoke is a wooden bar or frame by which two draft animals are joined at the neck for the purpose of working together to pull a heavy load. A yoke is also a frame fitted to a person’s shoulders to carry a load in two equal portions. Whether we envision a double or a single yoke, the Savior is part of this image. We are either teamed with Him, side by side, or we are carrying His yoke. Yokes imply burdens or heavy loads; thus by taking His yoke upon us we are also taking upon us the load to which it is attached.

The sequence of first taking and then learning indicates that this isn’t an armchair exercise of the intellect. It is experiential. Only by experiencing Christ’s path for ourselves can we learn of Him at the level necessary to prove ourselves and to receive His gift.

I love that Christ doesn’t keep His learning objective hidden. He tells us quite plainly what we will be learning: “For I am meek and lowly in heart.” This statement picks up and echoes the recurring theme that Christ taught His disciples when He said, “I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (John 5:30). Christ’s path is a path of meekness and submission. We must learn to submit our wills to the Father’s. If we follow Christ’s path to the end, we won’t just find rest, but we will “find rest unto [our] souls.” This phrase echoes the numerous promises of eternal life that are found in the scriptures and that are given to all who choose to receive it.

I confess that the last verse—“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”—has been wonderfully problematic for me, since I have experienced tribulation somewhat regularly along Christ’s path of discipleship. You probably aren’t like me, but I have been known to mutter under my breath, “I wonder if I can sue for false advertising. How is this easy and light?” Of course that is only when I am feeling a bit ornery. I fully believe that there is no deception in Christ, so I know He meant what He said. I just haven’t fully understood it.

As I have pondered this phrase and tried to reconcile it with all of my experiences, I have come to see it in a new way. It seems that the previous verse holds the key. What if Christ’s yoke is the Father’s will? Plain. Simple. Easy. And what if we consider light as a noun instead of as an adjective? We don’t often think of light as a burden; however, remember the scriptures that teach that where much is given much is required? Receiving light brings duty and responsibility. Some scriptural synonyms for light are truth, glory, and love.

When I read verse 30 in this way, it takes on a whole new meaning for me: “For my yoke is the Father’s will, and my burden is light, truth, glory, and love.”

Understanding this passage in this way has helped me more fully understand that when we yoke ourselves to Christ, we commit to do all things our Father commands us to do. When we *remain* yoked to Christ in times of prosperity and joy and in times of tribulation and suffering, we learn of Him and become like Him. We learn to divest ourselves of selfishness and replace it with selflessness—to obey as He obeyed and to love as He loved. By so doing we keep our second estate.

The Example

So how do we take Christ’s yoke upon us? It is simple: we follow Him and strive to emulate Him. His perfect obedience to God’s commandments, both universal and personal,

illustrates not only a perfect love for our Father but also a perfect submission of His will to the Father's. Christ's example of submission is so perfect that we sometimes miss the truth that Christ actually had His own will. We see Christ's will, however, when He obeyed the Father's personal commandment to Him to bring about the Atonement. We see it in these words Christ prayed: "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). Here we clearly see Christ's will, which is separate from the Father's. We also clearly see His perfect and complete submission, for He accepted His burden and suffered in Gethsemane, during the illegal Sanhedrin trial, in Pilate's palace, and at Golgotha. He sacrificed His life even when the Father withdrew His Spirit and left Him alone.

There is another important lesson to be learned about tribulation from Luke's account of the Savior's submission in the Garden of Gethsemane. After Christ had committed himself to God's will to bring about the Atonement, we read the following: "And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him" (Luke 22:43).

I believe Christ's complete yielding allowed the Father to send this heavenly support. The purpose of such help was to strengthen Christ in carrying the burden placed upon Him by the Father, not to lift it from His shoulders. God's will for Christ was that He love and suffer and sacrifice and atone. The Father didn't remove this burden, nor did the angel. Christ carried this burden, the weight of which caused suffering we cannot understand. Luke explained, "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

Purposes of Tribulation

Well, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but tribulation and suffering are part of

the path of discipleship. Of course you have already figured this out. Prosperity and joy are also part of the path to balance the tribulation and suffering. Now, I am not suggesting that prosperity and joy and tribulation and suffering come in equal proportions. My experience suggests that the former far outweigh the latter; however, tribulation and suffering are part of the path.

How we respond to our life conditions, whether in prosperity or tribulation, is what matters in mortality. Remember that life on earth is a proving ground, a trial. Our pattern of choices determines the degree of promised glory that we are willing to receive from our loving Father. Christ's path teaches us how to receive *all* of our heavenly parents' glory by teaching us how to be obedient in *all* things They command us to do here.

Here is what I have learned so far from my periods of tribulation and suffering. I have learned these things as I have learned to willingly submit my will to the Father's. When I have chosen to harden my heart, my tribulation hasn't sanctified me. For me, learning to submit in all things is a process. I am learning line upon line, precept upon precept, which is why tribulation ebbs and flows throughout our lives. I have learned three things I would like to share:

1. Experiencing tribulation reveals remnants of the natural man within me, and submitting my will cleanses and refines my soul of these remnants.
2. Experiencing tribulation reveals an essential dimension of God's burden of light, truth, and love, and submitting my will expands my capacity to receive the gifts of faith, hope, and charity.
3. Experiencing tribulation is a necessary condition under which we must prove ourselves faithful and obedient to God's will. We must prove ourselves in *all* things in order to receive *all* our heavenly parents' glory.

Making Room for God

A poem titled “Indwelling” by Thomas Edward Brown beautifully expresses our need to put off the natural man and eliminate selfishness so that we can put on the cloak of selflessness:

*If thou couldst empty all thyself of self,
Like to a shell dishabited,
Then might He find thee on the Ocean shelf,
And say—“This is not dead,”—
And fill thee with Himself instead.*

*But thou art all replete with very **thou**,
And hast such shrewd activity,
That, when He comes, He says—“This is enow
Unto itself—“Twere better let it be:
It is so small and full, there is no room for Me.”*
[*Old John and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), 151; emphasis in original]

When we obey God’s commandments and diligently try to follow the doctrines of Christ, we put off large portions of the natural man; however, remnants still remain. These remnants are the parts of ourselves that are centered on self rather than being centered on others. Eliminating these remnants that are deeply embedded in our souls is not an easy task. Sometimes we don’t even know certain aspects of the natural man still exist within us. Tribulation has a way of bringing to light the remnants of the natural man that still reside within us. Unlike the God in Thomas Brown’s poem, who seems content to let us be small and full of self, our loving Father offers us tribulation to poke and prod us to empty ourselves of self so that we might be filled with His light instead.

I would like to share with you a few personal experiences that have taught me these things. I do so to illustrate in a concrete way that these principles are true and not just some theoretical or scriptural abstractions. By choosing my own experiences, I am taking a risk.

I run the risk of you mistakenly thinking that I am putting myself forward as an example to follow. I am not. Christ is our example. I also run the risk of you mistakenly thinking that I am suggesting my tribulations are somehow unique and greater than anyone else’s. I am not. I believe that everyone experiences tribulation and that these tribulations are individually tailored to fit each person’s circumstances and needs, strengths and weaknesses. We are told that we “must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham” (D&C 101:4), but that doesn’t mean we will be commanded to sacrifice our only son. I believe it means that we will all be tried as Abraham was—pushed beyond our limits in order to expand these limits. I acknowledge that the conditions that cause you tribulation and suffering will be different from those that cause me tribulation; however, if we follow Christ’s path of meekness and submission, then our sanctification will be the same.

So I share my own experiences because they are what I know best, and sometimes the lessons we learn from suffering aren’t easy to discern from the outside. In sharing my own experiences, I also bear testimony of the reality of God’s promise to lead us by the hand and give us answers to our prayers (see D&C 112:10). I testify that the joy and happiness we receive in this life and in the next from walking Christ’s path are far greater than we can imagine. I am grateful for God’s guidance and love, and I acknowledge it in all its forms.

Experiencing Tribulation

In the early fall of 2000 my wife and I were prompted to pursue the adoption of a child from India. We already had two biological daughters and an adopted son, but we followed that prompting, and four and a half years later we were offered a three-month-old baby named Chetna, whose name means “awakening” or “bright intelligence.”

Chetna had a rough start in life, spending six of her first twelve weeks in the hospital.

But she was a fighter and survived to three months of age, which qualified her to be placed for adoption. At the time of our matching she had no known major disabilities. Among the many papers and forms we had to fill out during the adoption process was a three- to four-page form listing the conditions we were willing to assume in our adopted child. The list ranged from “perfectly normal” to “very severe disabilities.” We had indicated “not accept” to all but a few of the mild disabilities. We were not Mother Teresa. We were approaching our forties and already had three kids. We weren’t looking for a challenge.

As we considered the possibility of adopting Chetna, we pored over the two-inch thick medical file we had been sent. We consulted with our pediatrician. We studied it out in our minds, we prayed, and we decided to adopt Chetna. Then we went to the Provo Temple seeking confirmation of our decision. It came clearly and peacefully: “Yes, this is your child.” We were overjoyed that we had found her at last. We called our social worker and told her our decision.

Four weeks later we were told that Chetna’s primary caregiver at the orphanage in Calcutta was concerned that she wasn’t responding to sound like she should. We were asked if her hearing could be tested again. We gave permission, and we received a call a few days later telling us that Chetna was profoundly deaf in her right ear and severely deaf in her left. Our social worker quickly assured us that we could reconsider our decision—that we hadn’t agreed to this. What she didn’t know was that since we had listed our answers on that form years earlier, we had changed. Among the many changes was that we had received a witness from the Holy Ghost in God’s temple. We knew that adopting Chetna was part of God’s personal plan for us. So without hesitation we told her, “There is no change in our decision. We accept this condition.”

Six weeks after that we learned that Chetna was blind. This time the news came by letter instead of by phone. In the letter we were again told that we could reconsider our decision. When my then twelve-year-old daughter Elizabeth read this line, she asked what it meant. When I explained it to her, she said, with some fervor and indignation, “Well, we aren’t going to do that!”

She was right. We wrote back and said, “There is no change in our decision. We accept this condition.”

Later that night, after the kids were in bed, my wife and I held hands across our kitchen table and, with some fear and trepidation in our hearts, wondered aloud how we were going to do this. A deaf *and* blind child? We felt overwhelmed, but we put our trust in the Lord and moved forward.

When I learned that Chetna was blind, I was afraid. Blindness touched upon a deep-seated personal fear of mine. Gratefully there wasn’t just fear in my heart—but there was also faith. I believed Christ had given sight to the blind in New Testament times, and I believed He could do so today.

I started to pray daily and fast weekly that Chetna would be given her sight. I did this for five months. At first these prayers and my fasting were grounded in my own fears of blindness. Gradually they progressed to being grounded in my inability to parent a child with blindness and then to a concern for her life condition. Finally they became firmly grounded in the acknowledgment that God’s will be done, regardless of the outcome.

There was a point between the third and fourth stages of my progression that I allowed doubt and anger into my life. Essentially, I let go of God’s hand. During this period my prayers weren’t prayers at all; they were demands couched in the trappings of prayer. I treated God like a short-order cook at a roadside café who had gotten my order wrong.

Finally, after three weeks of walking in the light of my own sparks instead of in God's light (see Isaiah 50:11), I paused long enough for the Spirit to penetrate my mind with a single question: "Don't you trust me to take care of Chetna until she is in your care, to provide for her what I know she needs?" That quiet question brought me up short, and I came to myself (see Luke 15:17). My response to the Spirit's question moved me toward complete submission. It had taken nearly five months, but I was finally able to say with all my heart and without conditions or hidden reservations, "Thy will be done."

Joy and Peace

Fast-forward eleven years, for I have neither the time nor the capacity to tell you a hundredth part of our journey with Chetna, of its summits and valleys; however, I can tell you that people are drawn to her light. God's light and love shine through her eyes. She can see. It is a gift from God, who knew what we didn't.

When we brought Chetna home from the orphanage in Calcutta, we didn't know she wouldn't be able to move her fingers, hands, and arms to sign as a way of communicating, that she wouldn't be able to swallow sufficiently well to gain weight and thrive, that she wouldn't walk or talk, and that the only muscle groups she would be able to control at will are those that control her smile. In short, we didn't know that she would have quadriplegic cerebral palsy. We didn't know any of these things. All of these conditions would be revealed to us over time. But God knew, and in His infinite kindness He gave Chetna her sight and her smile so that she might have one avenue of communication with her world.

Now, many might think that Chetna's smile is the smile of someone mentally deficient, that she is unaware of her circumstances and therefore incapable of true and meaningful choice. They would be wrong. Chetna is whole in mind and soul. It is her body that is afflicted.

She chooses her responses to her conditions and tribulation just as freely as you and I choose ours. Through her pattern of choices Chetna has become my greatest teacher of how to bear my burdens with greater grace and patience. She teaches me how to suffer long, to be kind, to bear all things, and to endure all things (see Moroni 7:45). Thus, when she smiles, the light she is carrying emanates from her soul. She reassures me that God is real and that all is well because we have His love.

Stay the Course

The purpose of our tribulation is not to experience crushing, hopeless despair. The fruit of our suffering can be a bright hope. Remaining steadfast in Christ through our afflictions and adversity increases our capacity to see our promised end more clearly. Like a powerful spotlight that shines more brightly in complete darkness, our suffering reveals Christ to us. We see His promise of salvation, resurrection, and eternal life more clearly in our mind's eye, and we look forward with a bright hope to that perfect day, seeing it afar off but knowing that it lies ahead (see Hebrews 11:13).

Do I believe I am finished? No—just ask anyone who knows me. I am not a finished product; I have "miles to go before I sleep" (Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" [1923]). Will my path again become steep and rocky and painful? Certainly, but I do not fear what lies ahead. I know in whom I have trusted. He has shown me how to carry on when darkness surrounds me.

And what about you? What will you do when you experience tribulation? If it is tribulation that comes from putting off Christ's yoke and leaving His path, then I encourage you to repent and return. But what if it is tribulation you experience along Christ's path? What will you do when you come to your Gethsemane? For Gethsemane moments are bound to come to those who take Christ's yoke upon them and follow His path of discipleship.

I encourage you to choose a battle cry of commitment. There are many to choose from:

Choose you this day whom ye will serve; . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. [Joshua 24:15]

Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. [Hebrews 10:35]

Shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, . . . and on, on to the victory! [D&C 128:22]

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. [Proverbs 3:5–6]

I testify that if we will repent, our chastenings will cleanse our souls of sin. If we submit with meekness to God's will, our afflictions will refine us and expand our capacity to receive and carry more light and truth and love. So stay the course! I encourage you not as a bystander on the sidelines watching you run, nor as a finisher who has completed the race, but as a fellow runner who is running the race with you.

Remember this promise from the Lord as you experience tribulation and suffering; it applies to all who submit to God's will:

But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. [Isaiah 40:31]

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.