

“Embraced, Encouraged, Empowered”

Matthew 11:28-30 ¹

Mary Poplin, a professor at Claremont Graduate University in California, grew up as a Methodist, but wandered into other kinds of spiritual experience as years went by, including Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and even telepathic efforts to bend spoons.

When she joined the Claremont faculty, a visiting professor gently encouraged her back toward Christian faith, saying, “If you ever want to do anything more with your spiritual life, I’d like to help you.” When this professor left, Mary had a disturbing dream. Here’s how she described it:

“In this dream I was in a long line of people suspended in the air. The line seemed eternal on both ends, and Jesus was greeting us in line.

“When I looked at Jesus, I knew immediately who He was. I fell down at His feet and started weeping, and the only way I can describe the feeling I had in the dream is that I could sense every cell in my body, and I felt total shame in every cell. Then Jesus grabbed my shoulders, and I felt total peace, like I had never felt in my life. I woke up, and I was crying.

“The next morning, I called my friend, who had actually never told me that he was a follower of Jesus. I told him, ‘I think I need to talk to you about my spiritual life.’

“We met for dinner, and he asked me, ‘Why do you think you need to talk about your spiritual life?’ And I just blurted out words I had not previously considered: ‘I have some black thing in my chest, and I don’t know what it is. What do I do?’”

“He suggested that I read Psalms and Proverbs, and, since Jesus was in my dream, he suggested that I read the New Testament. That was in November. In January, my mother wanted to visit North Carolina and the little Methodist church in which she had grown up.

“The pastor didn’t give an altar call. He gave an invitation to Communion, saying, ‘You don’t have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe that Jesus lived, that He died for your sins, and you have to want Him in your life.’

“As soon as he said those words, I was so moved that I thought, ‘Even if a tornado rips through this building, I’m going up there to take communion.’ As I knelt at the rail, I cried out in my heart to God, **‘Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get me!’**

“As I said those words and received communion, I suddenly felt free. I felt as though tons of weight had been lifted off me. And I began to have an insatiable desire to read the Bible.

“Romans 1 says that God is obvious to everyone, and that the minds of people who deny Him become darkened. Though they think themselves wise, they’re actually foolish. That was me. But the Scriptures began to heal my mind, so I could actually think again.”²

Sheila Walsh used to be the co-host of *The 700 Club*. Here’s part of her story:

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 18, 2018.

² “The Dick Staub Interview: Mary Poplin Calls Claremont Her ‘Calcutta,’” *ChristianityToday.com*, 12.10.03.

“In 1992 my life hit the wall. One morning I was sitting on national television with my nice suit and my inflatable hairdo, and that same night I was in the locked ward of a psychiatric hospital. It was the kindest thing God could have done for me.

“The very first day in the hospital, the psychiatrist asked me, ‘Who are you?’

“I’m the co-host of *The 700 Club*.’

“That’s not what I meant,’ he said.

“Well, I’m a writer. I’m a singer.’

“That’s not what I meant. Who are you?’

“I don’t have a clue,’ I said, and he replied, ‘Now that’s right, and that’s why you’re here.’

“I measured myself by what other people thought of me, and that was slowly killing me. Before I entered the hospital, some of *The 700 Club* staff said to me, ‘Don’t do this. You will never regain any kind of influence. If people know you were in a mental institution your life is over.’

“I said, ‘You know what? It’s over anyway. So I can’t think about that.’

“I really thought I had lost everything. My house. My salary. My job. Everything. *But I found my life.* I discovered at the lowest moment of my life that everything that was true about me, God already knew.

“After I’d been there about three weeks, I remember asking the doctor if I could go to a church service. Two nurses went with me, and I sat at the back of this little Episcopal church in Washington, D.C. God spoke to me through a priest I’d never met before, hymns I’d never sung before, passages I don’t remember reading before. But the words of that old hymn described me perfectly: ‘Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling.’

“Jesus knew the worst there was about me, and He still loved me. **What a relief it is to face the very worst about yourself and at the very same moment to be embraced by God.** It’s so liberating to reach the end of yourself³ . . . because it’s there, and only there, that we come to the beginning of God.

And that’s the one thing I hope you remember from this message, about Mary’s story, and about Sheila’s story—that God, your Heavenly Father, is waiting, at this very moment, to embrace you. Let me say that again: **God, your Heavenly Father, is waiting, at this very moment, to embrace you.**

Only Matthew chose to write down the transforming words that are our focus this morning: **“Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”** (Matthew 11:28-30).

Oh, how we need these words, this promise, this embrace! As you sit here this morning, you may be in turmoil because of uncaring boss. You may be in a marriage with an uncaring or an unfaithful spouse. You may be grieving a wayward child or grandchild. You may have lost a friend or a loved one in a tragic or needless death. You may be dealing with constant and intractable pain and physical suffering. It’s quite probable that many of us in this room almost

³ Sheila Walsh, “Staying Alive,” *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2002). See also www.sheilawalsh.com.

didn't come this morning . . . and yet we did. We came because we need a hug, an embrace, a word of encouragement, a reason to keep on keeping on.

So here we are, and Jesus says to us, "*Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" What did He mean? What does He mean? The statements seem contradictory, at least at first.

In order to understand, we need to remember that Jesus spent most of His life as a carpenter. Jesus learned His craft from His earthly father, Joseph, and then, after Joseph's apparent death, He ran the shop Himself for years before beginning His public ministry.

There's a scene in *The Passion of the Christ* in which Jesus is finishing a table, taking pains to see that everything about the table is elegantly crafted. Beyond the movie, there's an ancient report that plows made by Jesus were still in use nearly a hundred years later.⁴

Reflecting on that ancient story, William Barclay noted that "There is a legend that Jesus made the best ox-yokes in all Galilee, and that from all over the country men came to Him to buy the best yokes that skill could make. In those days, as now, shops had their signs above the door; and it has been suggested that the sign above the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth may well have been: 'My yokes fit well.'"⁵

So when Jesus said that His yoke was "easy," He wasn't talking about drinking lemonade in the shade. He meant that the yokes He crafts—both then and now—fit exquisitely well. Dr. Paul Brand, a renowned surgeon, had some experience with making ox yokes while he served as a missionary in India. Here's how he described the process:

"If I put a flat, uncarved piece of wood on an ox's neck and use it to pull a cart, very quickly pressure sores will break out on that animal's neck, and he will be useless. A good yoke must be formed to the shape of an ox's neck. It should cover a large area of skin to distribute the stresses widely. It should also be smooth, rounded, and polished with no sharp edges, so that no one point will endure unduly high stress. If I succeed in my workshop, the yoke I make will fit snugly around the ox's neck and cause him no discomfort. He can haul heavy loads every day for years, and his skin will remain perfectly healthy, with no pressure sores.

"Jesus offers each of us a well-fitted yoke, of custom design. He does not call us to the kind of rest that means inactivity or laziness—that would lead to spiritual atrophy. Instead, he promises a burden designed to fit my frame, my individual needs, strengths, and God-given capabilities. I come to Him weary and heavy-laden. He removes those crushing burdens that would destroy any human being and replaces them with a yoke of appropriate stress designed specifically for me."⁶

That's what Jesus meant by "easy"; but what did He mean by "my burden is light"? As Dr. Brand suggested, I think Jesus meant that there really are "burdens"—tasks, responsibilities, and opportunities—assigned to us by God. God has work uniquely intended for each of us to do to help bring in the Kingdom of Heaven. We get to help!

⁴ www.pfm.org/Content/ContentGroups/BreakPoint/BreakPoint_Commentaries/20041/April/The_God_of_Wooden_Plows.htm

⁵ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, revised edition, "The Gospel of Matthew," volume 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), p. 17.

⁶ Paul Brand, with Philip Yancey, *Leadership*, vol. 4, no. 3.

At the same time, our culture has a hard time understanding the word, “light.” Usually we can’t even spell it correctly, spelling it “lite” instead of “light.” Worse than the misspelling, though, is the misunderstanding to which the misspelling leads. Advertisers use “lite” to designate things that are less than what they imitate, implying that in these cases, “less is more.” That’s not at all what Jesus is saying here.

Jesus is not talking about a salvation or about a life purpose that *imitates* something. Jesus is essentially saying that “What I have to offer is the Real Deal, and you cannot get it anywhere else or in any other way. You have to get it from Me.”

In these familiar verses, Jesus offers soul rest, but not necessarily body rest. Jesus says to us, “Your burdens are killing you because they’re leading you away from me, not toward me. Let me teach you what life is really all about. Let me give you something to do that’s worth doing; something that’s uniquely crafted for who you are, and that will not only meet the needs of others, but will shape your character and your world for the New Creation” (cp. Ephesians 2:10).

The idea here is that “the burden” Jesus gives us is not a curse. It’s not something to be endured. Our work, our vocation, is a blessing. It’s a gift from God. Our work is the part we play in helping God govern and transform the world. You may remember that this was the central point in our recent “Work as Worship” retreat.

But even if we understand this, we still sometimes labor under the impression that our work is only special when we are called on to say or to do something we regard as “special.” We attach significance to the extraordinary things, not to the common, everyday activities of our lives.

Jesus reminds us that everything we do or say is spiritually significant. And for most of us, the Christian life is lived out in familiar surroundings and with familiar people. We live out our faith in all of the ordinary places and in doing all of the ordinary things that make up the ordinary fabric of our lives.

Many prayers are silently spoken while we rush to and from classes and meetings and appointments; while we teach in schools, wait in traffic, stand by kitchen sinks, ride on the Metro, and strain to remain calm amid the mounting pressures of an average day. God is frequently found acting in ordinary events, which, for the persons involved, take on a far deeper meaning than we had expected.

And that’s how faith is most clearly demonstrated: in our ability to do the little things, the small acts, the ordinary duties . . . working in a factory or an office or a home, typing letters, filling orders, repairing things. **Ordinary things become special when they grow out of our obedience to Jesus and when we offer them as service given in His name.**

Well, there’s one more aspect to “yoke” that we need to remember before we’re done. The prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, noted that the service God desires has to do with “*setting the oppressed free, tearing off every yoke*” (Isaiah 58:6).

Jesus announced His mission to His neighbors in Nazareth in exactly those terms: “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2).

One of the themes of our Lenten study has to do with living a “compassionate life,” and such living includes doing the work of justice, of doing battle against any yoke that oppresses us

or our neighbors. It is unfortunately very easy to live an overtly faithful and religious life while being completely unaware of evil and oppression around us and of our complicity in it.

Many German Christians faithfully attended worship even as they aided and abetted the slaughter of millions of their neighbors. And in both the Cape Coast and Elmina slave castles in Ghana, through which untold numbers of captured Africans were herded on their way to these shores, the slavers built their churches directly over the horrible dungeons, and they loudly sang their hymns over the despairing cries of the doomed.

Every now and then I see a cartoon about two turtles. The first turtle says, “Sometimes I think I’m going to ask God why He allows poverty, famine, slavery, and injustice when He could do something about it.”

The other turtle answers, “I’m not going to ask that.”

“Why not?”

“I’m afraid God might ask me the same question.”⁷

My friends, God’s invitation is first to receive God’s embrace and God’s encouragement. After that, God’s invitation is to partnership in setting captives free—in whatever shape Sin’s oppression takes in our time.

When that embrace, that encouragement, and that empowerment became real in Albert Schweitzer’s life, he gave up a meteoric career as a classical organist, became a physician, and moved to Africa to set up what became the famous hospital of Lambaréné in modern-day Gabon. And here’s what Schweitzer learned about “easy yokes” and “light burdens” through that journey:

[Jesus] comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as in ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.⁸

My friend, do you want to know Jesus, to really know Him? His invitation still stands good today: “*Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*”

Amen, and Amen.

⁷ From Peter John Kreeft, <http://christian-quotes.ochristian.com/Peter-Kreeft-Quotes/>.

⁸ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd. ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1954), p. 401.