



Come unto me

Matthew 11.<sup>28-30</sup>

## Introduction

---

In our devotional on Luke 2:4-20, we briefly touched upon the Savior's sincere, warm, and hopeful invitation found in Matthew 11:28-30. Like Isaiah 40:1-11, the subject of an earlier devotional, Matthew 11:28-30 is put beautifully to music in Handel's Messiah.

The Savior's invitation to "Come unto me..." might elicit a number of questions. In this homily, we will consider three:

1. Who, and what kind of person is doing the inviting?
2. Who, and what kind of person is being invited?
3. What benefits accrue by accepting the invitation?

## Who and what kind of being is doing the inviting

---

Many years ago, I sat in a civic auditorium listening to a performance of Handel's Messiah. As we arrived at these words, "I am meek and lowly in heart," I began to weep. I wept at the wonder-filled revelation that these simple words initiated. I wept in utter surprise at the Being whom I encountered that evening. Oh, what a magnificent and unexpected Being presented Himself to me!

In thinking back on my own surprise, I have, since, thought of the similar surprise that must have met John, the Revelator, when he, privileged to stand in the divine throne room of God, looked upon the Redeemer. Remember that while in the throne room, John saw a book in the hand of God. He perceived that its contents were very important. He wanted to read the book's contents. However, after "no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon," the revelator "wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book."<sup>1</sup>

John was comforted by the encouragement that he "behold the Lion of the tribe of Juda," who "hath prevailed to open the book."<sup>2</sup> We can almost see John turn his head in anticipation of looking upon the promised wonder; of beholding the "King of beasts," charging confidently forward in a display of awesome and intimidating power.

John must have been shocked and confused—I know that no matter how many times I read it, I am—when, in turning to see the awe-inspiring sight of a lion bounding forward to take possession of what is rightfully his, he is greeted by the unexpected sight of a lamb that has been slain.<sup>3</sup> Why, this almost offends one's senses. It is downright scandalous! Nearly blasphemous! How can this be?

In his surprise, did he on that occasion, as I did in that auditorium, ask questions such as: "What kind of power is this?" "What does this mean for how Jesus expresses and manifests his power?" "What does this tell me about the true nature of divine power?" "What does it really mean to be a God?" "Is God really a meek and lowly being?" What does *that* mean, anyway?

In addition to the surprise I encountered at the revelation of Jesus' "meekness" and "lowliness, there were other surprising insights. For example, I saw and felt in that auditorium that the Savior's "meekness" and "lowliness" is not simply something that he "puts on" for those times when he interacts with humans. It is not merely a projection, presented for the benefit of others. It is not something he does, it is something he IS. These words, "meek" and "lowly," tell us something about who he is, what he is internally, how he feels about himself. They reflect his own internal and divine self-perception. When he looks in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Revelation 5.<sup>3-4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 5.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 5.<sup>6</sup>

mirror, he sees a “meek” and “lowly” being looking back at him!

I did then, and still do today find it difficult to put into words the things I saw and felt in that hushed and darkened auditorium. The difficulty is two-fold: theological and definitional. Let’s begin by having a look at the first.

*The theological difficulty*

The theological difficulty is, first and foremost, due to the magnificence of *any* revelation of Divinity. How does one “describe” the infinite, the “Other” (the Holy) when one is limited by “language” as finite in its expressions and scope as ours? And how does one give expression to this Other when the revelation of Him is so utterly contrary to all conditioned expectations?

Notwithstanding this difficulty, we must try. We will attempt to comprehend, however inadequately, the incredible and unexpected self-revelation that is to be found in Jesus’ surprising confession: “I am meek and lowly in heart.” Make no mistake, ours is an inquiry after God and His fundamental character. This is theology in its purest sense.

We mention here that the Greek words translated as meek and lowly, with their Hebrew counterparts, are never used of God (Yahweh) in the Old Testament. In fact, we can find no ancient god, at least none that I am aware of, who is spoken of as being “meek” and “lowly.” So it is of particular interest that God, the Son, should use such words to describe himself in the New Testament. We must not imagine that Jesus is identifying attributes that he possessed only during his brief mortal life, and then put aside as an eternal, glorified being. This was another insight I had that night in the auditorium. I encountered a God who was in that very moment “meek and lowly.”

So, we must maintain in the strongest terms that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. What he was during his earthly ministry is what he was and is and will be in eternity. If he was meek and lowly during his earthly ministry, it is because meekness and lowliness is part of his divine character. It is part of who and what he IS. This is how we can experience him Now! Today!

The Hymnist’s contention that “once all things he meekly bore, but he now will bear no

more,”<sup>4</sup> may not be sound doctrine and miss a principle aspect of Atonement and Divinity. His willingness to meekly bear all things in mortality was not a temporary shift in character, but a revelation of an eternal and unending disposition.

This is wondrous enough. But there are further implications to be found in Jesus’ invitational self-revelation. It is one of the New Testament’s most serious assertions that during his earthly mission Jesus was presenting a “new” revelation of Deity; a revelation, an unveiling of God, *the Father*. This new, more “accurate” unveiling of the true God, Heavenly Father, was purer and truer than any other offered in or by any previous dispensation (or dispensing) of truth. Therefore, by virtue of Jesus being “the express image of his [Father’s] person,” Jesus’ invitation, with its imbedded self-revelation, contains a revelation concerning the character of Heavenly Father. What Jesus was and is and will be is a reflection of what his Father was, is, and will be.

God, the Father, and God, the Son, are in equal and perfect measure “meek and lowly in heart.” What a wonder all of this is! How it shapes how we approach and relate with them! May this revelation give us the courage to accept Jesus’ almost too generous invitation to “Come unto me... for I am meek and lowly in heart.”

#### *The definitional difficulty*

With the assertion that “meekness and lowliness” is an eternal, constant, and internal attribute of deity, we arrive at our second difficulty—definitional. What do these words mean? What do these attributes entail?

There is, it seems to me, a significant and unfortunate modern LDS misperception concerning meekness or humility. We have a tendency to “domesticate” the idea of meekness or humility nearly out of recognition. We have simplified the idea of humility, and turned it into a desired “goal,” “a pleasant and positive attribute” that we achieve through practiced inner discipline. It is “teach-ability,” we maintain over and over.

This feels more than a bit too comfortable and convenient—suited, especially to the unprecedented comfort and convenience of modern western life. Its simplicity does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon as reflected in scripture. Nor does it do justice to

---

<sup>4</sup> LDS Hymn #196, “Jesus, Once of Humble Birth”

the attribute as it exists in Deity. Meekness, lowliness, or humility, I suggest, is not so much something pleasant that the individual desires and labors to acquire, as it is something that comes as the result of external forces—forces often insistent and painful.

Now, some, calling to mind Alma’s seeming disparaging remarks concerning those who are “compelled to be humble,”<sup>5</sup> might object to the notion that humility is something that external forces “impose” or “create” in us. Now is not the time to investigate this in depth. We will only here mention that even in Alma’s brief discussion on humility, it is something created by outside forces. In this case, Alma identifies “the word” as that external force that produces humility in the hearer.

*Meek and lowly in heart—definitional*

We will look first at the vocabulary that Matthew utilized to capture what he heard Jesus say about himself.<sup>6</sup> In identifying Jesus as “meek,” Matthew uses the Greek word, *praús*. *Praús* indicates that which is “gentle and pleasant;” that which is “mild,” “friendly,” “soothing,” “allaying,” “calming.” It is the opposite of “rough” or “hard,” “violent,” or “angry,” “aggressive” and “intimidating.” The adverb, *praōs*, “is often used for the quiet and friendly composure which does not become embittered or angry at what is unpleasant... This is an active attitude and deliberate acceptance, not just a passive submission.”<sup>7</sup> *Praús* is, in fact, linguistically related to the word “freund,” or “friend.”

Matthew uses the word, *praús*, two other times; once in the beatitudes,<sup>8</sup> and again, when Jesus enters Jerusalem at the time of his “triumphal entry.”<sup>9</sup> The former passage does not do much to advance our understanding of “meekness.” However, the latter, it seems, does. This passage describes Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, as planned ahead of time, “sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.” Jesus entered the city in this fashion, we are told, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, ‘Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, *meek*, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.’”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Alma 32.<sup>14</sup> ff.

<sup>6</sup> Remember, Matthew’s Gospel is written in Greek, but Jesus spoke Aramaic and/or Hebrew during his ministry. Therefore, the words that Matthew puts in Jesus’ mouth are actually the result of translation.

<sup>7</sup> See *TDOT*, Vol. VI, p. 645

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 21.<sup>1-11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 21.<sup>4-5</sup>

Here, Jesus' "meekness" is manifested by his entering into the city without pretense or impressive displays of power and intimidation.

The Greek word translated as "lowly" in Matthew 11:29 is *tapeinós*. It means "lowly," "mean," "insignificant," "weak," "poor," "bowed down," "oppressed," "held down." "With respect to the spiritual and moral state of man *tapeinó*j means 'lowly,' 'servile,' often with other terms which show that *tapeinó*j is used disparagingly."<sup>11</sup> The verb means "to make small or little," "to humiliate," "to weaken," "to exploit," "oppress," "humble," and "put down."

Before we consider what these words are trying to tell us about the Son and the Father, we want to have a look at one final "definitional" consideration. In the Septuagint, these two Greek words, *práús* and *tapeinó*, are frequent translations of the Hebrew words  $\psi\phi\phi\nu\phi\alpha$  (*ʾānā*) and  $\omega\phi\nu\phi$  (*ʾānāw*). This word group includes meanings such as "to be wretched," "to cringe," "to be hunched up," "to be bowed," "to become weak," "to be oppressed," "to be afflicted," "to be humiliated," "to be poor or needy," "to be beggarly." It contains the idea of being "'bent' under what is overhanging or what happens."<sup>12</sup> It is an utterly negative word group describing a most undesirable state.

"The words associated with the root 'ānā II belong to a negatively charged domain of knowledge and experiences. It is impossible to identify a neutral basic meaning.... The nouns and adjectives refer to situations inimical to human life. The basic experience appears to be 'affliction' in its various forms. Synonyms depict it as 'hardship, torment, pain, despair.... The adjectives always describe people in 'oppressed, constrained, fatal' situations.... Thus the semantic content of our lexical group reflects fear and a sense of impending death; it is set against the experience of security, happiness, strength, and superiority."<sup>13</sup>

The significant idea for me is that this word group indicates, for the most part, an "involuntary" inner disturbance, inner pain, or inner weakness that is most often caused by external forces. There is an "oppressiveness" about "meekness" or "lowliness." Humility is

---

<sup>11</sup> *TDOT*, Vol. VIII, p. 2

<sup>12</sup> See *TDOT*, Vol. VIII, p. 6

<sup>13</sup> *TDOT*, Vol. XI, p. 234-235

not pleasant. Humility is brought on by hurt, and something of that same hurt remains in the humility. It is no accident that “humble” and “humiliation” sound similar. They come from the same root word group.<sup>14</sup> To be humble is to experience “humiliation.”

*I am meek and lowly in heart—theological*

In light of this less traditional, less domesticated, less comfortable, and less controlled view of “meekness” and “lowliness” we might, at the least, feel some disorientation in Jesus’ strangely bold and unexpected pronouncement. He is presenting us with a most unusual and utterly surprising God. At a more extreme level of disorientation, we might be inclined to reject outright the idea that God experiences any such inner disturbance—whether originating from internal or external pressures. He is, after all, God. He is perfect. How could such things exist in deity?

I would remind the reader that this inclination to deny, or, in the extreme, to reject the existence of this type of “meekness” or “humility” in Jesus, or Father, is not unusual. Those who rejected Jesus during his earthly ministry, I would suggest, did so precisely out of an inability to comprehend a God who is vulnerable to hurt and pain.

“Who could possibly believe what we now hear!<sup>a</sup>

Upon *whom* has the strength<sup>b</sup> of YHWH been found?<sup>c</sup>

He shoots up like a sapling<sup>d</sup> before us,

takes root in parched earth.

He has no appeal,<sup>e</sup>

does not impress.<sup>f</sup>

Though we look upon him,

we simply find nothing praiseworthy about him.

He is a worthless fellow,<sup>g</sup>

dismissed by everyone,<sup>h</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> We can further discern the negative nature of “meekness” when we consider the origins of the English word, “meek.” “Meek,” surprisingly, and somewhat offensively, comes from German *meuk*, ‘soft,’ ‘pliant,’ with a secondary meaning of ‘excrement,’ ‘dung.’ English ‘muck,’ (related to Danish *møg* and Old Norse *mjúkr*) comes from the same source as “meek” and means, again, dung. English, ‘submissive,’ goes back to this same German *meuk*.

a man mentally unstable through sin,<sup>i</sup>  
familiar with defilement,<sup>j</sup>  
and, as a man too ashamed to look others in the eye,<sup>k</sup> he is thought contemptible.  
He is simply not worth our consideration.”<sup>15</sup>

Though not inclined to *reject*, Enoch seems to be in a quandary, tempted to *deny* the possibility of God’s inner hurt and pain. God just can’t hurt; he cannot experience “humiliation,” Enoch seems to argue.

“And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?

And Enoch said unto the Lord: *How is it that thou canst weep*, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?

And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; and thy curtains are stretched out still; and yet thou art there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever;

And thou hast taken Zion to thine own bosom, from all thy creations, from all eternity to all eternity; and naught but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end; *how is it thou canst weep?*”<sup>16</sup>

Enoch eventually joined God in his hurt and pain.

“Enoch... had bitterness of soul, and wept over his brethren, and said unto the heavens: I will refuse to be comforted...”<sup>17</sup>

Enoch, in fact, refused to be comforted until he “saw the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; and his soul rejoiced, saying: The Righteous is lifted up, and the

---

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 53.1-3; author’s translation

<sup>16</sup> Moses 7.28-31

<sup>17</sup> Moses 7.44



Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world....”<sup>18</sup>

As we consider how to apply this less domesticated view of humility to him who is “the greatest of all,”<sup>19</sup> we, again, ask, “What, exactly is encompassed in these divine attributes of meekness and lowliness? In identifying himself as “meek and lowly in heart,” what does Jesus want us to understand about him and, by virtue of his oneness with Father, what does he hope we will learn about Father?

First, Jesus is a “soothing,” a “calming,” or a “friendly” influence in our lives. To understand him in this way, and, even more importantly, to experience him in this way is very pleasant and comforting. When he finds in us, as he surely will, that which is “unpleasant,” he remains our friend. He remains “accepting” of us. All of this is right and good and true. It is, for sure, consistent with how I have experienced him.

In speaking of his “soothing,” “calming,” and “friendly” influence in our lives, we have described his “meekness” *only in terms of how we experience or feel him*; how he “projects” himself to us. We have already suggested that this attribute of meekness is more than a projection. It is internal to Jesus’ being, and is part of his self-image. In entering the city upon an ass, he did not project “impressiveness” or “intimidation” because he simply does not think of himself in that way. He finds no reason in and of himself for others to view him as impressive or intimidating. He feels himself to be something other than this. There is a sincere modesty about this being who we call God, the Son.

It is this very sincere and inner modesty, this self-perception, this lack of self-importance, this absence of self-righteousness that calms and puts at ease those who, taking him up on his invitation to come unto him, encounter and experience his presence.

Throughout his life, Jesus reveals himself to be a being, like his Father, who experiences oppressive hurt and humiliating pain—that is to say, they possess the type of un-domesticated, imposed humility about which we are talking. As just one example, we might consider a passage that speaks of Jesus “taking upon himself” “the pains and the sicknesses of his people,” “death,” “infirmities,” and “the sins of his people.”<sup>20</sup> Here we see Jesus

---

<sup>18</sup> Moses 7.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>19</sup> DC 19.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See Alma 7.<sup>11-13</sup>

“oppressed,” or “humbled.” It is easy to imagine that this experience of imposed hurt and pain might change who he is and how he thinks of himself.

This “taking upon himself” is good as far as it goes. If it were only that, we would still bow in humble reverence. But it seems to me that it does not go far enough. He does more than “take upon himself”— as if bearing an admittedly heavy load— pain, sickness, affliction, infirmity, sin, and death. He takes such things INTO himself. He gives them entrance into his own soul. Jesus was, and is, and will be “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”<sup>21</sup>

We can approach him as the meek and lowly being that he is, not only because he knows and understands our frailties; not only because he experienced them briefly while mortal (yet without personal sin); but because he has made our frailties his. More than “bearing” them, he has taken ownership of them. He can, truly and inwardly, speak of our infirmities as “his infirmities,” of our afflictions as “his afflictions,” of our pains as “his pains,” of our sins as “his sins.” Even more astounding, “He [Father] hath made him [Jesus] to be sin for us, who knew no sin.” Amazing: “He was *made* sin.”<sup>22</sup>

So completely has he become one with (think at-one-ment) the sinner that when the sinner approaches him, he can’t do otherwise than receive him, for “I too,” he feels and says, “am a sinner.”

You see, his final mortal act of suffering and dying on the cross was his final mortal revelation of what it means to be have power; what, indeed, it means to be a God; what it means to be meek and lowly in heart. What it means to be humble.

Oh, it is almost too much to see! Too much to grasp! Too much to speak! Too much! Yes,

“I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,  
*Confused* at the grace that so fully he proffers me.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 53.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>22</sup> 2 Corinthians 5.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>23</sup> LDS hymn, “I Stand All Amazed,” #193

Who and what kind of person is being invited?

---

Jesus invites “all ye that labour and are heavy laden.” Perhaps it need not be said, but we will say it anyway: Jesus speaks by way of invitation to those who “labor and are heavy laden.” He is not issuing a decree, making a demand, or establishing a commandment. In *inviting* those who “labour,” Jesus is not *demanding* hard work, as if he were to say, with a wag of the finger, “Only those of you who work very, very hard to come to me will be accepted of me and given rest.”

So, who *is* invited? What are the “qualifications” for coming to him? Put simply, they are invited who are exhausted and burdened. The Greek word translated as “labor,” *kopiáō*, has as its predominant sense, “to be weary,” “to worn out,” “to be exhausted,” “to take a beating.”—mentally and/or physically. The seriousness of the challenge represented by the word can be seen, for example, in the Psalmist’s lament,

“I am *weary*<sup>24</sup> with [exhausted by] my groaning;  
all the night make I my bed to swim;  
I water my couch with my tears.  
Mine eye is consumed because of grief;  
it waxeth old because of all mine enemies.”<sup>25</sup>

And, again, when the Psalmist is threatened with death and hell.

“Save me, O God;  
for the waters are come in unto my soul.  
I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no standing:  
I am come into deep waters,  
where the floods overflow me.

---

<sup>24</sup> *kopiáō*

<sup>25</sup> Psalm 6.<sup>6</sup>

I am *weary*<sup>26</sup> of [worn out by] my crying:  
my throat is dried:  
mine eyes fail  
while I wait for my God.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to those exhausted by vain efforts to achieve some end, Jesus invites those who are “heavy laden,” *phortízō*. These are those who, like a “freighter” sailing the seas, are “loaded down,” “burdened with a massive load.” Oh, what good news this is. We are not to avoid Jesus, ashamed that all our efforts have only produced exhaustion. He happily invites us to come to him though we carry the heavy burden of failure.

“If any man sin,” promises the disciple of love, “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.”<sup>28</sup> It is, in fact, these “moments of sin,” these occasions of wearying failure that Jesus lives for. He waits for us to hopefully acknowledge and trustingly yield these moments to him!

Oh, what glad tidings we hear! One does not have to be “great and noble,” or “independently capable and strong” in order to come to him—and be received by him.

“There is no king saved by the multitude of an host:  
a mighty man is not delivered by much strength.  
An horse is a vain thing for safety:  
neither shall he deliver any by his great strength.  
Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him,  
upon them that hope in his mercy...”<sup>29</sup>

“He delighteth not in the strength of the horse:  
he taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man.

---

<sup>26</sup> *kopíāō*

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 69.<sup>1-3</sup>

<sup>28</sup> 1 John 2.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Psalm 33.<sup>16-18</sup>

The LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him,  
in those that hope in his mercy.<sup>30</sup>

I hope you will forgive the rather lengthy quotations, but the great Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, captures the hope, the promise, and the comfort of the Savior's invitation as well as anyone I have ever read.

“But what is it, then, to labor and be burdened; why does he not explain it more specifically so that one can know exactly what he means; why is he so sparing of words? O you of petty mind, he is so sparing of words in order not to be petty; you of narrow heart, he is so sparing of words in order not to be narrow-hearted. Precisely this is love (because love is for all), lest there be one single person who may become anxious by brooding over whether he, too, is included among those invited.”<sup>31</sup>

“Come here, all, all, all of you; with him is rest. And he makes no difficulty; he does only one thing: he opens his arms. He will not first ask you, you suffering one—alas, as righteous people do even when they are willing to help: You are not yourself to blame for your trouble, are you? You have nothing to reproach yourself for, have you?”<sup>32</sup>

“He assumes that those who labor and are burdened feel the burden to be ever so heavy, feel the labor to be heavy, and are now standing there irresolute and sighing, one person looking in all directions for help, another with downcast eyes because he discerned no comfort, a third staring upward as if it might still come from heaven—but all of them searching.... He, the inviter, knows that precisely this is part of true suffering, to go off by oneself and brood in quiet hopelessness, without the courage to confide in anyone, to say nothing of daring with bold confidence to hope for help.”<sup>33</sup>

“However tired and weary you are of the labor, or of the long, long, and yet up until now

---

<sup>30</sup> Psalms 147.<sup>10-11</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Practice in Christianity*, p. 14

<sup>32</sup> *Practice in Christianity*, p. 19

<sup>33</sup> *Practice in Christianity*, p. 20-21

futile going for help and rescue, even if it seems as if you could not succeed in taking one more step, could not keep on one moment longer without collapsing—oh, just one step more and here is rest!—“Come here!” Alas, but if there is someone so wretched that he cannot come, oh, a sigh is enough; that you sigh for him is also to come here.”<sup>34</sup>

What benefits accrue to accepting the invitation?

---

Two benefits accompany acceptance of Jesus’ sincere invitation: rest and a yoke. We will look at these in turn.

#### *Rest*

Wearied and discouraged as we are, we look for somewhere safe; somewhere where we can rest.

“My heart is sore pained within me:  
and the terrors of death are fallen upon me.  
Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me,  
and horror hath overwhelmed me.  
And I said, ‘Oh that I had wings like a dove!  
for then would I fly away, and *be at rest*.  
Lo, then would I wander far off,  
and remain in the wilderness.  
I would hasten my escape  
from the windy storm and tempest.’”<sup>35</sup>

We learn two things about the rest into which Jesus invites us to enter. First, it is a God-given rest. Second, it penetrates deeply into our souls.

In promising that he will “give you rest,” Jesus promises more than temporary respite. *Anapauō* not only means “to give someone rest,” or “give relief from,” but “to cause to

---

<sup>34</sup> *Practice in Christianity*, p. 22

<sup>35</sup> Psalm 55.<sup>4-8</sup>

cease,” “to refresh.” The rest or relief is not temporary. Whether we think of ourselves as leaving Jesus after a rest in order to face the storm again, or think of ourselves as going out with him to face the storm, we go out “refreshed,” “reinvigorated.”

Additional challenges are likely. This is no promise that life will be carefree. But there is a “refreshing” that enters and permeates the soul, whatever the outward challenges, failures, and disappointments. Isaiah’s encouraging promise comes to mind.

“Hast thou not known?  
hast thou not heard,  
that the everlasting God, the LORD,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth,  
fainteth not, neither is weary?  
there is no searching of his understanding.  
He giveth power to the faint;  
and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.  
Even the youths shall faint and be weary,  
and the young men shall utterly fall:  
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.”<sup>36</sup>

Yes, there is something in Christ that finds its way into our souls. There is a rest for the weary. There is rest for the sinner. But the rest brings “power,” “renewed and increased strength,” a “mounting up,” and increased ability not only to do, but to do well.

#### *Yoke*

There has been much discussion concerning this yoke. The discussion has been dominated by two interpretations. First, and most commonly, many have proposed that the yoke is a metaphor for Jesus’ “law,” with his associated halakha (religious practices). This yoke is

---

<sup>36</sup> Isaiah 40.<sup>28-31</sup>

“easy,” in comparison with the burdensome yoke of the Law of Moses, with its associated rabbinic halakha. It is true that there are other New Testament passages in which “yoke” is utilized as a metaphor for the Law of Moses with its burdens.<sup>37</sup> It is also true that throughout the Gospels Jesus is portrayed at being at odds with the elders’ strict and burdensome applications of the Law of Moses. That said, there is nothing in the immediate surroundings of Jesus’ invitation that would present a strong case for this interpretation. It seems somewhat forced and rather too restricted.

The second interpretation of the yoke is to see it as a metaphor for the promise of divine help. Each individual, so the interpretation goes, bears a yoke on their shoulders. It is one half of a two person yoke. Jesus volunteers to step into the other yoke position and help pull the load. This seems to fit the context of Jesus’ offer of help and comfort. While highly imaginative, this interpretation seems forced and too restrictive as well. A “yoke” is not, by definition, necessarily a “double yoke.” There is nothing in the word used here to indicate that Jesus has a double yoke in mind.

The Greek word that is used here, *zugós*, indicates a horizontal “bar.” It can be the bar that acts as the farm implement, a “yoke.” The word also indicates the horizontal bar that holds the pans of a measuring scale. “In both senses it occurs mostly in ethical or religious contexts.”<sup>38</sup>

We have seen that the “yoke,” is used in a couple of instances for the Law of Moses. The most common scriptural use of the yoke as a metaphor, however, is in relation to “rule,” “power,” or “control” (often, but not always, of the oppressive variety).<sup>39</sup>

In blessing Esau, for example, Isaac promises him that he will throw off the “yoke,” i.e., the “rule” or “control” or “dominance” of his younger brother, Jacob.<sup>40</sup> Because of Israel’s too frequent rebellions, Yahweh threatens the nation with the “yoke” of their enemies.<sup>41</sup> Israel’s rebellion is likened to their throwing off Yahweh’s “yoke,” his “rule.”<sup>42</sup> With the death of Solomon, Rehoboam, his son, threatens to place a heavier “yoke,” a more “heavy-handed

---

<sup>37</sup> See especially Acts 15.<sup>10</sup> and Galatians 5.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *TDOT*, Vol. II. P. 896

<sup>39</sup> The “yoke” mentioned in these passages is not always a translation of the Greek, *zugós*.

<sup>40</sup> Genesis 27.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Deuteronomy 28.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Jeremiah 5.<sup>5</sup>



rule,” upon the norther tribes.<sup>43</sup> Yahweh repeatedly acts, or promises to act in ways that will break the “yoke,” i.e., “the rule” of Israel’s foreign neighbors.<sup>44</sup> In a “duel” of prophets—Jeremiah against Hananiah—Jeremiah announces that all nations are to yield to the “yoke,” the “rule” of Babylon,<sup>45</sup> while Hananiah falsely predicts that Judah will be successful in throwing off the “yoke,” or the “rule,” of Babylon.<sup>46</sup>

From the foregoing, it does not seem unreasonable to consider the “yoke” that Jesus invites individuals to take upon themselves as a metaphor for “control” or “rule.”

Now, Jesus calls the yoke that individuals are to take “my yoke.” There are two ways to read this, the first one general, the second more specific. First, we could think of the yoke as a general acceptance of Jesus’ rule in our life. It is the act of giving him control over every aspect of our life. In doing so, we accept his tutelage and learn of him.

Viewed more specifically, “my yoke” could be the very yoke that Jesus bears. It is an invitation to be ruled or controlled by the same principles, desires, and motivations that rule and control him. We could probably name quite a number of principles, desires, and motivations that rule and control him. Certainly, if we were in the Gospel of John, we would count Jesus’ commitment to be ruled by the will of his Father as perhaps his strongest controlling desire and motive. But perhaps it is best to look to the immediate context for a more manageable interpretation.

In extending his invitation, Jesus tells us just one thing about himself: he is “meek” and “lowly.” As we come to him, and then relate with him, this is what will stand out to us; this is what we will learn of, from, and about him. Jesus is ruled and controlled by a “meek” and “lowly” soul. Having learned by our own experience with him; having been treated with meekness and lowliness, we will know how to treat and serve others with meekness and lowliness.

Finally, as we take upon ourselves his yoke—are controlled, as he is controlled, by a meek and lowly disposition—the previous weariness at carrying a heavy load, will be replaced by a

---

<sup>43</sup> See 1 Kings 12

<sup>44</sup> See Leviticus 26.<sup>13</sup>; Isaiah 9.<sup>4</sup>, 10.<sup>27</sup>, 14.<sup>25</sup> (Assyria); Ezekiel 30.<sup>18</sup> (Egypt)

<sup>45</sup> Jeremiah 27.<sup>8-12</sup>; 28.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Jeremiah 28.<sup>2-4</sup>

strength to bear a load that portends something far more promising, and something far lighter to bear than we could ever have imagined. Having learned from his meekness and lowliness, and the rest that it brought into our life, we now are privileged to do and be the same in the lives of those around us. We are privileged to be controlled by the same meek and lowly impulses that give rest to others. Truly we become “perfect” or “merciful, as [our] Father is merciful.”<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

---

Imbedded in Jesus’ cherished and generous invitation to come unto him is a self-revelation concerning one of the most fundamental aspects of his character: he was and is and ever will be a meek and lowly being. This self-revelation also represents a revelation that the attribute of meekness and lowliness also resides at the very center of Father’s Being, and, indeed, His self-image. Meekness and lowliness control and rule them in all that they do and feel for others. They do not act in intimidating ways, and see no reason why others, even flawed others, should feel intimidated them. Rather, they invite us to look upon them in their meekness and lowliness and learn from their character.

Together, Father and Son are vulnerable to hurt and pain and humiliation. This may come, in part, due to their commitment to remain attached, connected, unified, at-one with very flawed beings. Father and Son take the flaws into themselves, and experience, internally and personally, the hurt and humiliation that accompany them.

By coming to Jesus, experiencing his willingness to make himself vulnerable through association with us, learning of his commitment to us, and feeling our worth to him, we enter into rest. We are encouraged, refreshed, and strengthened. Having learned and experienced all of this, we become controlled by the same principle of meekness and lowliness. We seek to bless every flawed person we encounter. In so doing, we find an easy efficacy to our desires and efforts to help others enter into the same rest of the Lord into which we have entered.

We end with the words of Paul, who seems, in this passage, to capture the meaning and

---

<sup>47</sup> See and compare Matthew 5.<sup>48</sup> and Luke 6.<sup>36</sup>

significance of Jesus' sincere invitation to come and follow him, with its revelation of Divinity.

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>48</sup>

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

---

<sup>a</sup> The KJV's "Who hath believed our report?" might be read as a kind of criticism or surprise at the unbelief exhibited. This, it seems to me, is an incorrect reading of tone. It seems, rather, that Isaiah is speaking more to the wondrous and even scandalous nature of his message. First, the individual about whom Isaiah writes is nothing like what those who see him think he ought to be, yet he claims the power of God. Secondly, the effective scapegoat mechanism they employ to deal with their sins is actually, in itself, sin.

<sup>b</sup> This is literally "the arm of the Lord." But this phrase often means, as I have translated here, "the strength of the Lord."

<sup>c</sup> This line further reflects the shock that the people feel at what they are seeing. Are they really supposed to believe that God, in his strength, is working in and through the individual with whom they are faced? As we proceed, we might begin to understand their sense of wonder. The individual really isn't what one would expect from one sent by God.

<sup>d</sup> The translator finds himself in a bit of a quandary here. He knows and wants to reflect Biblical Hebrew's poetic parallelism. With "root" appearing in the next poetic line parallel with  $\theta'vO\psi$ , it seems that "sucker" or some such word is called for. I have, with some hesitancy, obliged here and tried to be true to the structural parallelism. We should note, however, that august translators responsible for the LXX didn't

---

<sup>48</sup> Philippians 2.<sup>3-11</sup>

---

worry themselves over poetic parallelism's demands. They, quite naturally, translated Hebrew  $\theta'vO\upsilon\eta$  into Greek  $\text{paidi}\zeta\text{on}$ , 'a young child.'

At the same time that we want to be true to poetic devices, we want to make sure we send the message. What we have here is a complaint against the servant. As a root drawing water from dry earth or a sapling diverting resources to itself and away from the rest of the plant (or as a child sucking nourishment from its mother), the servant looks like a drain on the system. He is young and inexperienced. He doesn't seem to offer much, but does draw strength away. All of this is consistent with the group complaint about the servant: he simply doesn't impress and seems to have little to offer.

<sup>e</sup> He has no  $\rho\alpha\omicron\tau$ , *to'ar*. This word can, perhaps, refer to actual physical appearance. Perhaps Abigail, Potiphar's wife, and Rachel, all of whom are said to have an appealing *to'ar*, have a pretty face or a great figure. However, in light of passages such as Judges 8:18 and 1 Chron. 17:17, the word may describe the "bearing" or "impression" another makes upon an observer. Judges 8:18 refers to young men who look regal. They have a royal air about them. In Chron. 17:17 it isn't David's physical appearance that is at issue but his bearing. He will be given "gravitas." The word seems, then, to signify the impact or impression that another has upon another's perception. Do they for any reason—physical or emotional—impress us, or leave us unimpressed. In our present passage, we are not concerned with physical appearance but the impression the servant has made upon his "viewership."

<sup>f</sup> He has no  $\rho\phi\delta\phi\eta$ , *hadar*. LXX uses *do/ca*.

<sup>g</sup> Hebrew  $\eta\zeta\text{B}$ , *bzh*.

<sup>h</sup> Perhaps because of the way the KJV translated this verse, the Christian interpretation sometimes reads it to indicate something that was done to the Messiah, Jesus, by the Jews—i.e., they rejected, tortured and crucified him. He will get to that, but here Isaiah seems rather to be describing the impression that Jesus made upon the Jews and the reason that they rejected the idea that he might be Messiah, an agent of God's salvation.

<sup>i</sup> Hebrew  $\beta\omicron\text{:}\kappa\alpha\mu$ , *mak'ob*, from the root  $\beta\eta\kappa$ , *k'b*. It is often translated as "pain," "sorrow," "suffering," "affliction," "sickness," something along those lines. That's all very fine. I find, however, a use such as that found in 2 Kings 3:19 very telling. There Elisha promises the Israelites that they will be victorious over their Moabite enemies. As part of their victory they will "smite every fenced city, and every choice city, and shall fell every good tree, and stop all wells of water, and *mar* every good piece of land with stones" (KJV). The word translated "mar" as in "mar every good piece of land with stones" is our *k'b*. We simply do not speak of "paining" the land or "afflicting" the field.

There must be in this word some subtler nuance. In 2 Kings 3.<sup>19</sup>, the natural use of "fenced city," "good tree," "wells," and "[farm] land" is arrested. A well, existing only for the water it produces, no longer produces water. A field, intended to yield nourishment, is inhibited in its purposes by stones. So a "pained," "suffering," or "sick" man is a man who cannot function as he was meant to function. He is damaged goods. The servant's incapacity to perform the intended vocation that Isaiah claims for him seems to be at the heart of the thought in this verse.

In the majority of the passages in which *mak'ob* is utilized in reference to humans, the emphasis seems to fall upon mental pain, distress, or instability, most often associated with sin and wickedness. The servant's incapacity, then, is thought to be due to a mental instability brought on by sin.

If we think of Jesus and his rejection by the religious authorities of his day, we might explain these feelings toward him in at least two ways. First, he might be considered mentally unstable through sin because of his challenges to the priesthood. We often hear this. If someone challenges their priesthood leader, immediately the institution begins to look for some sin to explain it—for surely the challenge cannot be legitimate. There is little doubt that Jesus' priesthood leaders felt this way about him. The very fact that he questions them indicates in their minds that he is a sinner. Secondly, he may be considered unstable through sin because of the company he keeps. He simply gets along too well with sinners. "It takes one to know one" applies here. To be so sympathetic toward the sinner, suggests that the sympathizer is, himself, a sinner.

---

<sup>j</sup> The word here, ψιλφξ, is usually understood to come from the root ηλξ, *hllh*. It means ‘sickness.’ Given how intimately disease is associated with sin, we could just leave it at that. However, we might also emend only slightly and understand our word to come from the root λλξ, *hll*. This word means ‘to be defiled,’ ‘polluted,’ ‘profaned.’ The emendation seems possible not only on lexical grounds, but also on contextual grounds, especially given what proceeded and what follows.

<sup>k</sup> Literally “as one who conceals the face from us.” This phrase is used for the shame as well as the quarantine into which the leper is forced. We could translate, “as one who has leprosy.” Given that leprosy is thought of as being indicative of personal sin, the individual feels shame at his or her defilement and the disgust with which God and society look upon them. There are Jewish traditions that associate this chapter with the Messiah and speak of “the leper Messiah.”

In the Babylonian Talmud, for example, we read, “The Messiah—what is his name?... The Rabbis say, The Leper Scholar, as it is said, *surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God and afflicted...*” (Sanhedrin 98b)

<sup>l</sup> The traditional reading, “We esteemed him not,” seems too tame. We might be tempted to understand that they didn’t “esteem him highly.” But, as should be clear from what has gone before, they held a much lower opinion of the servant than this.