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 Matthew 11:28-30  
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## “COME TO ME...AND I WILL REST YOU”

Have you ever felt as though you have so many pressures, so many tasks to perform and deadlines to meet, that the waters of responsibility in your life are rising so steadily you can barely keep your head above water? I have felt that way a lot recently. Over the holidays our eldest daughter was accepted to her first-choice college to begin next fall, and I was joyful. But I also know that I have college payments for five children in rapid succession facing me, starting now. I have been managing teams of people in both the U.S. and Europe. My days begin early in the morning on conference calls with London, compressing a full day into a couple of hours, and then my full day here in the U.S. begins. I was in London a few months ago, working 14-hour days, almost exclusively on personnel issues that were the most difficult I have ever faced. I was worn to the bone. The pressure was mounting for me, the waters rising. Upon my return from London, the waters were literally flowing down the walls of my home. We discovered with the first rainstorm of the year that we had a massive hole in our roof, and the water started streaming down the drywall in our living room. To repair it is \$10,000, which I can ill afford at this time.

Sometimes life is just like this: everywhere you look, the water is rising, and you struggle just to keep your head above the flow. In the midst of the rising waters it is easy to take your eyes off of Jesus Christ and flail around in an effort to save yourself. Our question for today is this: When life is overwhelming, how can we survive? Our answer to this will be direct from the mouth of Jesus Christ himself. He will give us a biblical vision for how we can not only survive, but thrive and succeed through it all in him. This vision is found in the famous passage in Matthew 11:28-30.

### “Come to Me ... and I will rest you”

One of the first things Jesus would probably say to us when we are under water is this, recorded in Matthew 11:28:

**“Come to Me all the ones laboring and having been burdened, and I will rest you” (Matt 11:28 )<sup>1</sup>**

This passage is so very important in the development of a crucial theme found throughout the entire Bible—the theme of rest, the concept of Sabbath. When God completed his creation in Genesis 2, he rested. That was the seventh day, and there was no end to that seventh day for God. There was no “and there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.” Instead, God’s seventh day is a perpetual day of rest in his completed work of creation. It is the eternal rest of God, and that rest is his gift to his children. The fourth commandment reminds us to keep the Sabbath day holy, because it was a day of rest in God. But throughout the history of Israel, recorded on the pages of Scripture, the Sabbath day became the ultimate day of rules, the day

of convoluted definitions of “work” to ensure “rest.” Much time was spent trying to determine what constituted work on that day. For example, tying a knot with both hands was considered work, but the rabbis determined that if you tied a knot with only one hand, it was not work. Of course, this raises the question: Which requires more work effort, tying a knot with two hands or one?

It took a startling word from Jesus Christ himself, given here at the end of Matthew 11, to clarify the theme of rest, and give us specifics on how to enter God’s rest in intimacy with Jesus Christ every day of our lives, not just on the Sabbath. We know this is the theme Matthew wanted to clarify for us, because the first eight verses of chapter 12, directly following our story here, conclude with Jesus saying, “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath,” meaning he is the Lord of Rest. St. Augustine once said, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” How true. In fact, if I were to use only one word to describe humanity, it would be the word “restless.” So, let’s study word-by-word what our Lord Jesus Christ has to say to a restless humanity.

His first word is simply, “Come.” This is Jesus’ beckoning call, his hand extended in open invitation to his listeners. It’s interesting how on Sunday mornings we always sing songs of invitation to Jesus, telling him how much we need and want him to come into our lives. He feels the same way: He wants us to come to him and find in him the answer to our every need. But the real emphasis of this opening phrase is in the next two words, “Come to Me.” From the very beginning of this great statement on where to find rest, Jesus speaks not of a formula for finding rest. He speaks not of carving out a specific day of rest in the week. He doesn’t tell us to quit our jobs and become hermits. He immediately offers himself as the alternative. “Come to Me.” He will not give us a special spiritual gift of rest. He personally intends to *rest us himself from within us*. He speaks immediately about a depth of relationship with him which, when it is there, translates into profound rest for us. Jesus is hereby calling with great compassion those who are laboring, are weary and tired, those who feel the waters rising and are gasping for breath.

The text says literally, “Come to Me, all the ones laboring and having been burdened.” The key here is to underscore Jesus’ great compassion by seeing how he was calling to *all* who were working hard or were burdened. This is not a selection process, but a universal call. No one is excluded; to no one is this rest unavailable. He implores the ones presently working hard—and the grammar here implies a state of weariness for those who have long been burdened. Is that how you feel today? Have you been long burdened with a besetting sin that you feel you cannot be free of? Have you been long burdened with financial struggles, with

bills like the ones facing Jim and Della in the famous story by O. Henry, *The Gift of the Magi*, when the author wrote the classic phrase, “Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are”? Have you been long burdened with an illness that won’t go away? Have you been long burdened with a secret guilt that is killing you like a cancer? Are you weary today?

I think we are perhaps all weary in one form or another, from one cause or many causes. So what would Jesus say to us? His response was not to come down hard on the burdened and weary in his day, nor to pound his fist in our direction today, but to graciously and compassionately offer himself as the ultimate secret of rest: “And I will rest you.” Admittedly, this is different from the typical rendering, “and I will give you rest,” but it is actually more accurate grammatically. This is not some gift he gives, but rather, he himself rests us. Jesus himself is the ultimate secret of our rest!

The active voice of this verb is the key: *He wants us to trade our anxiety for his activity*. He wants to step in with his power for our weakness, his bottomless wisdom for our cluelessness, his work through us, rather than our work for him. The emphatic “I” here is the answer Jesus is offering. He offers not just a gift of rest from God for a season, not just a divine vacation, not just a momentary Roloids of rest to quell our heartburn. He humbly offers all of who he is right where we need him, to become our life and work through us, that we might find perpetual rest indeed.

One of my two key mentors, Major Ian Thomas, discovered this as a young convert to Christ during the years when he was between 12 and 19 years old. He committed his life to Christ at the age of 12. By 15 was preaching in the open air in London to all who would listen about the joys of knowing Christ. In college he became a key leader in the InterVarsity fellowship on his campus, a young evangelical zealot who was always present at any evangelistic event. He said that his daytimer was always completely filled with Christian activities of all sorts. But by the age of 19, on one November night at about midnight, he cried, literally, in his room before God, “Lord Jesus, I know I am converted. I know I love you. I know I want to be a witness for you. But I am exhausted, and I don’t know where to go from here.” Then, at that time, he says that through the Scriptures God spoke to him very clearly a message he had never heard from human lips: “I have been waiting for seven years to live through you the life you have been trying to live for me.”<sup>2</sup> That was the beginning of internal rest for this man who has since traveled the world, preaching about that internal rest of Christ living in us and living through us the life only he alone could ever live: the life of Christ incarnated in us in the twentieth century as it was incarnated in the physical life of a carpenter from Nazareth two thousand years ago.

The ultimate secret of rest is Jesus Christ himself, actively living and working in and through us. But how does this really work?

### The Secret of Rest: Being In His Yoke With Jesus Christ

Jesus moves in verse 29 to present a concrete image in our minds of specifically what this rest will look like: He commands us to “Take My yoke.” The heart of how this rest practically works

itself out is in understanding this “yoke.” Let’s study verse 29 in detail to see how this unfolds.

**“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, because I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:29)**

The verse begins with the phrase, “Take My yoke upon you.” The verb here is in the imperative mood. Notice how Jesus is not just making a suggestion, offering an alternative lifestyle, asking, “Would you consider?” He is commanding all of us to “Take my yoke.” But what is the yoke he is commanding us to take?

There are five outstanding features of his yoke—and by “yoke” I mean the five- to six-foot long carved piece of wood with two neck braces underneath to harness two oxen together, a lead ox and a follower ox. First, his yoke is a place of *listening*. With Jesus’ head right next to our head, with our ear placed only a few inches from his mouth, it becomes immediately apparent that we are meant to *listen* to him in the yoke. It is as if the entire yoke itself is an assistive listening device, that our ear may be trained to hear him. This is exactly what God wants for us, as God himself specifically said to the three disciples after the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:5, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased: listen to him!” This is the first thing God wants from us—that we should walk in his yoke with Jesus Christ and learn to listen to him, like Mary, who chose to listen, as opposed to Martha’s frantic running around.

The second thing about his yoke is that it is a place of intimacy. It is a yoke for two only, Jesus Christ and you. It is not a three- or four- or five-person mega-yoke. It is the classic yoke made for two, and only two—Jesus Christ and you. In that yoke there is a possession, an intimacy, where you and Jesus Christ converse in quiet tones all throughout the day. He speaks and you listen, by the Spirit. You pray, and he listens, with the Spirit as the perfect interpreter. No one else can hear in the yoke except you two. His yoke is a place of deepest intimacy where secrets are shared and kept.

Thirdly, his yoke is a place of *Lordship*. Jesus said, “Take My yoke.” It is *his* yoke, not ours. There is only one leader in his yoke, only one follower. We struggle in the yoke when we forget this. This is Jesus Christ’s yoke offered to us, and he is the lead ox in that yoke. We are just little calves who do not know the way, and we waste so much time in our lives craning our heads against the yoke, listening to a thousand outside voices, hoping to hear words of approval from somewhere, trying to find the grass that is greener, looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places. His yoke is a place of Lordship, and he alone leads the way in his yoke. This is a law like the law of gravity: it is true whether we like it or not. This is the reality of his yoke. And it is a fine thing once we come to understand it, because it takes away our burden of having to figure everything out for ourselves. Our job is just to follow.

The fourth thing about this yoke may be the most important. His yoke is the *only place we are satisfied*. His yoke is the yoke of satisfaction. If you get only one thing out of the teaching today, get this: All of life has been designed around this fact, that we as human beings can only find true and deep satisfaction in the yoke of Jesus Christ. Here we find the intimacy with God for which we

were created. Here we find the only Person who is with us 24 and 7 throughout our entire lives, no matter what. A spouse is not like that, a parent is not like that, and a child is not like that. No other relationship is one of constant faithfulness like our relationship with Jesus Christ. Our relational needs that are so enormous can find satisfaction only in relationship with him, in his yoke. As men, we look for satisfaction in achievement at work, in leaving a legacy, in making our mark, but all of that is here today and gone tomorrow. As women, we look for satisfaction in our human relationships, but our husbands constantly fall short and our children grow up and leave us as empty nesters. All other human pursuits and relationships lead in some way to emptiness. Our satisfaction comes only in Jesus, in his yoke.

I had to reflect on this when I dropped off my eldest daughter at a six-month Bible study program in northern England last September, the first of my children to “fly the coop.” I wrote a story about our last few hours together, and I want to share with you what I wrote about the moment of departure:

At exactly 6:25, I dismissed my friend to go back to the car and get the GPS system all warmed up while I said good-bye to Paden. When we were alone, I took this incredible young woman into my arms and hugged her while I prayed for her. I prayed that she would have the joy of walking with Jesus Christ into the beginning of her adventure with him on their own, the two of them together. It was a day I had been preparing for all her life, because while I will always wish to be with her for the rest of her days, I know that that privilege is only reserved for the One who gave His life for her and has placed His life in her. He alone will be with her every moment of every hour she spends on this earth, so I have spent eighteen years pointing her to him, because the Lord is the One who holds our hand. After we prayed, we walked together to the front entrance. I halted about twenty feet away from the door, knowing the moment had come. I held her one last time, told her I loved her, said good-bye, and watched her turn and walk toward the doorway to her grand journey. She turned just before the door, said good-bye again, and went further up and further in, toward Him and their journey together.

My daughter Paden was walking on alone with him, in his yoke made just for her. That is a special place, the only place she will find satisfaction, the place I want her to be for the rest of her life.

The fifth and final thing about the yoke is that it is a place of *learning*. Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me...” This is clearly a call to let him disciple us, that we might learn from him and be yoked with him; learning how to agreeably go where he goes, learning how to let him do in and through us what he wants. The point of this new yoke is to learn from him, to be constantly listening to him in his word, to submit our own plans and desires, in order to let him work with us, in us and through us exactly the way he wants to, to produce the fruit he wants to grow in us. In the end, we are to leave all arrogance behind and walk through all of life as “learners,” with ears attuned to the Spirit and hearts yielded entirely to his working in and through us at all times in all ways, in his yoke.

Why should we learn from Jesus Christ in his yoke? Because he is “meek and humble in heart.” What a curious phrase. We would expect him to say, “Learn from Me, because I am the High King of Heaven,” or “Learn from Me, because I am the former CEO of Consolidated Carpenters of Nazareth,” or some other resume-speak like seminar teachers today might use. Far from this, Jesus bids us to “Learn from Me, because I am meek and humble in heart.” Why did he say that?

That question is key for understanding this momentous passage. Let’s look at the word “meek” and see what it means. The term for “meek” in verse 29 is cross-referenced to the Beatitudes, in Matthew 5:5. The best definition of this I have ever seen is the one given by Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his study of “Blessed are the meek” in Matthew 5:5:

Then let me go further; the man who is meek is not even sensitive about himself. He is not always watching himself and his own interests. He is not always on the defensive. We all know about this, do we not? Is it not one of the greatest curses in life as a result of the fall—this sensitivity about self? We spend the whole of our lives watching ourselves. But when a man becomes meek he has finished with all that; he no longer worries about himself and what other people say. To be truly meek means we no longer protect ourselves, because we see there is nothing worth defending. So we are not on the defensive; all that is gone. The man who is truly meek never pities himself, he is never sorry for himself... To be meek, in other words, means that you have finished with yourself altogether, and you come to see you have no rights or deserts at all. You come to realize that nobody can harm you. John Bunyan puts it perfectly. “He that is down need fear no fall.” When a man truly sees himself, he knows nobody can say anything about him that is too bad. You need not worry about what men say or do; you know you deserve it all and more. Once again, therefore, I would define meekness like this. The man who is truly meek is the one who is amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do. That, it seems to me, is its essential quality.<sup>3</sup>

What Jesus wants us to learn from him is that this whole thing, this life we live, is not about me, it’s all about him, our Lord of life, who is our life. This is what Jesus learned in the long hours in the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth, hammering out, nailing, whittling and sanding his yokes. He was learning meekness: that even his life was not about him so much as it was about his Father’s divine plan. Jesus learned to keep his eyes off himself and squarely on his Father. He learned meekness in the humble carpenter’s shop. He stands ready to teach us his meekness.

In the end, taking his yoke upon ourselves means that only one Person’s attitude about what we say, do or think really matters—the Leader to whom we are yoked. All the swirls of public opinion, all the words of parents, wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, teachers, friends, bosses, etc., take their proper place in the background as our ears are right next to the One to whom we are yoked, while we humbly follow him, and him alone, where he is going. Only here shall you find “rest for your souls.”

This is the logical ending phrase to what Jesus is saying in verse 29, “and you will find rest for your souls.” The verb here is “you

will find.” The note of certain surety in this promise must have been a breath of fresh air for Jesus’ original hearers. My mentor, Major Ian Thomas, has a perfect paraphrase for this certainty in Jesus’ yoke. It is as if our Lord says to us, “You can’t, I never said you could. I can, I always said I would.” “Faithful is He who calls us, who also will do it” (1 Thess 5:24). He will do it, and as he does it, we will find rest for our souls. This is the truth, the secret of rest.

## Our Lord’s Custom-made Yoke Individually Prepared For Us

“For My yoke fits well and My burden is light” (Matt 11:30)

Verse 30 is short but very sweet. It begins with the phrase “For My yoke fits well.” The translation “easy” is fine, but a better translation here is “well-fitting, or fits well.” This is a concept with which Jesus as a carpenter and wood worker in ancient Palestine would have been intimately familiar.

William Barclay has a wonderful historical note on this, from the second volume of his book, *The Gospel of Matthew*, which I will quote at length:

In Palestine, ox-yokes were made of wood; the ox was brought, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted, so that it would fit well, and not gall the neck of the patient beast. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox. 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.” It may well be that Jesus is here using a picture from the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth where he had worked throughout the silent years.<sup>4</sup>

What a fascinating image this yoke is, and what a great departure from the yoke of people-pleasing, which rubs our necks raw and weighs us down into exhaustion. Jesus introduces here the custom-made, individualized yoke of a living relationship with Christ, through the Spirit. Think about this in terms of your own life. His yoke is thoroughly individualized, it fits well, and it represents a custom-made relationship of life through the Spirit in intimate oneness with Jesus Christ. This is where the burden is light: it is a joyous relationship of love, a perfect fit. It is the place of satisfaction.

Jesus concludes this great statement on rest with the words “and My burden is light.” This is the continued picture of him leading the way, him carrying the bulk of the weight, him guiding us by his voice alone, him living out through his Spirit in us the life he wants to tailor-make for us. What a contrast: the great burden of my life lived for God, in my own effort, according to my own ideas, for my own glory; and his life lived out through me, in his power, according to his vision for me, based on his

knowledge in making me, for his own glory, resulting in my personal freedom and satisfaction! Jesus’ point is this: He’ll carry the freight, so we’ll enjoy the freedom. His yoke fits well, and his burden is indeed light.

*Life in His yoke: it is a miracle of paradox that the wise restraint of His yoke is the only place on this planet we will find personal freedom and satisfaction.*

This all became crystal clear for me on Friday, December 17th, at the Shakespeare Pub in London, just a few yards from Victoria Station. That morning I had given a presentation to our team in London entitled, “What a Difference a Year Makes,” outlining for the team all the success of 2004: we grew 60%, our production increased by over fivefold, we took a business that lost 1.8M Euro the year before to a healthy 480K Euro profit—a profit swing of over 2.2M Euro. It was one of the most enjoyable business presentations I have ever been privileged to give, and my Lord gets 100% of the glory. But at the team lunch afterward at the pub, I mentioned that I had just passed my eighth day of being away from my wife and kids, and I was missing them something fierce and ready to get home. One of my sales people, a young French woman of 24, said, “I have never heard a husband speak about his wife that way in my life. Tell me how you two met, when you got married—everything.” Well, Blythe and I met at a Bible study, and so I started sharing about how Jesus Christ brought us together. Then another one of my men, someone I had shared the Lord with previously, began to pump me with questions: Did my family believe this? Had I always been a Christian? Do I think Jesus Christ is the only way? For a priceless thirty minutes or so I had the privilege of bearing witness to my Lord Jesus Christ, who means the world to me. That thirty minutes was more satisfying to me than all the business successes of the past year combined. It was more important to me to have the privilege of telling anyone about Jesus Christ, because he alone satisfies us. And our place of satisfaction is his yoke, hand-designed to perfectly fit each one of us, where he rests us himself. Amen and amen!

1. Alfred Marshall, *Greek-English New Testament, The Nestle Greek Text with a Literal English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 45.

2. Comments and testimony from Major W. Ian Thomas, from personal interviews and personal correspondence.

3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Daily Study Bible; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:17.

4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:69.