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Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

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THE REALISM OF THE YOKE IN SCRIPTURE

A. MCD. REDWOOD

God created man in His own image. Adam and Eve were given a Garden-Home of exquisite and unsullied beauty for their enjoyment and sustenance.

When Sin entered, the Lord God sent them out to till the ground from whence the guilty pair were taken (Gen. 3:23). He taught them to plow the virgin earth and sow the seed. But He added the solemn words: 'Henceforth cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil and . . . in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread until thou return unto the ground'.

One of the earliest evidences of the Fall, therefore, is the yoke; and in all subsequent history of the Old Testament it becomes the symbol of Israel's bondage to some foreign oppressor due to the nation's tragic failure; their servitude in Egypt being the first example. When in due time God miraculously brought about their release from degrading bondage, He constantly had to remind them of that historic event: 'I am the Lord your God which brought you forth . . . and have broken the bands of your yoke, and made you to go upright' (Lev. 26:13). Even in later history He often had to warn them of the consequences of rebellion against His word: 'Thou shalt serve thine enemies . . . and he shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee' (Deut. 28:48; cf. Jer. 28). It is easy to see, therefore, how 'under the yoke' became a figure of common speech in subsequent history, expressive of some kind of slavery.

Turning to the New Testament, we find in general the yoke lifted to the high level of a beautiful and expressive symbol, rich in spiritual values. There are exceptions, of course, and they are no less important in values of a much lower order, which also call for study.

But to begin with the highest: It was Christ Himself who gave that gracious invitation, '*Come unto Me all ye who are being wearied and are burdened under life's load . . . take My yoke upon you and learn of Me . . . and ye shall find rest unto your souls*' (Matt. 11:28 ff.) Like some rare and brilliant, heavenly gem, it reflects the yearning heart of God for the fellowship of those who heed His call, and learn the joys of His love and service in their daily lives.

1. First, it reflects the Ideal of a *Surrendered Life*. When the call of Christ to '*Come . . . Take . . . Learn . . . Find*' is obeyed in simple faith, life comes to have a new meaning. It is filled with a new sense of peace, joy, liberty and glad surrender to Another—the Lord of Glory! Such a surrender to anyone else would be altogether different. No soul is truly 'whole' in the spiritual sense until there has been this self-yielding to the claims of Christ as Lord over *all*, our spirit, soul and body.

Observe, this is not a forced surrender. The Lord addresses us as rational beings, endowed with will, mind, and heart, capable of making intelligent choice—for, after all, man was 'made in the image of God' originally, the product of the handiwork and will and mind of God Himself. He now speaks to us in the 'still small voice' of Perfect Love, and amidst the sanctities of the soul, He whispers, 'Come unto Me!' The moment we obey, the bondage of self-pleasing is exchanged for the joyous liberty of the Spirit-controlled life, bearing us onward to the glory of sharing with Him the imperishable fruits of His cross. Henceforth, 'the path of the righteous is like the light of Dawn, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day!' (Prov. 4:18).

2. '*Take My Yoke*': It follows that *His* yoke becomes also the symbol and sacrament of *Service*, labour, endurance, whatever the sphere in which life is spent for and with Him. Out East the yoked oxen plough under a blazing sun, often in hard and stony soil. Constantly they need to be urged on, even as they strain

at the yoke uncomplainingly. Ploughing, sowing, reaping—all demands unremitting service.

The same holds true in all life and service for Christ, but with higher and more glorious prospects, reaching out to eternity. Often the famous Churchillian war-slogan, 'blood and sweat and tears', is proved afresh in personal experience of this service. But in the light of the prospects of the future glory, His 'take' is humbly answered in the surrender of our own life—

*'Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord to THEE'!*

But we do not have to go to lands of heathen darkness to learn and practice the lessons of the yoke. We learn first the lessons of Christ's yoke in doing the common tasks of life, in whatever sphere, in an 'uncommon' spirit and motive. 'I am among you *as he that serveth*', was the Lord's rebuke as the disciples wrangled about position and prestige (Lk. 22:24 f.). Similarly the great apostle: 'we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as *your servants* for Jesus sake' (2 Cor. 4:5). Such is the true spirit of all successful service. Having 'qualified' in this school, the Master's call may then be, '*Go . . . preach*' (Mk. 16:15), in the home-fields or in lands afar. Having thus 'qualified' in the stern school of experience, Paul could challenge his youthful disciple, Archippus: 'Take heed to the service which thou hast received *in the Lord*, that thou fulfil it' (Col. 4:17, R.V.).

3. The Yoke also implies *Society*, partnership, fellowship. The Lord sent out His disciples *in pairs* into the towns and villages He wished to reach. In God's economy fellowship is heaven's law for the harvest fields of earth.

This fellowship begins firstly, in the personal consciousness of the LORD's fellowship in all life. The true servant will always want to be perfectly sure on that score. Matthew Henry suggests that Christ's yoke is a double yoke, and we are, as it were, going to plough with Him: As much as to say, 'I want you to pull with Me (reverently speaking), and then you will learn to make a straighter furrow; let us do this together'. Whilst He is truly our Master and Lord, it is the gracious offer of 'partnership' with God; as

Mark puts it, 'The Lord *working with them*, and confirming the word' (ch. 16:20). Hence He shares, in His own way, in the trials and triumphs, in the defeats and joys of service.

There is, of course, the equally essential experience of being yoked with other fellow-labourers in the service of God. In his letter to the Philippian church Paul refers to his '*true yoke fellow*' (4:3, R.V.), and other 'fellow-labourers'. The reality of fellowship runs through the whole epistle, coupled with *joy* its counterpart!* Experience teaches that the solitary worker should be the exception, not the rule. Even in the realm of prayer how good and enjoyable to be linked with others! The Lord's promise is to the '*two* who agree on earth as touching anything'. There is also the example of Epaphras, 'a servant of Christ Jesus, always *striving*' (lit. '*agonizing*') in his prayers for fellowsaints (Col. 4:12, 13).

4. The next word of the Master's introduces us to His own School of *Sanctified Discipleship*: '*Learn of Me . . .*' A disciple is a follower, a 'copiest' in the best and highest sense. Our Ideal is none other than the Master Himself. Note His own words: 'If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, so ought ye also to wash one another's feet, for *I have given you an Example*' (Jn. 13:14). Peter writes in similar language in seeking to exhort those who are suffering for their witness and work for God: 'Hereunto were ye called; because Christ also suffered, leaving you *an example*, that ye should follow in His steps' (1 Pet. 2:21, 22). If the yoke spells discipleship, discipleship implies *discipline*, and that again is part of 'the cross'. 'Whosoever doth not bear his cross and come after Me, cannot be My disciple' (Lk. 14:27, 33). Matthew adds the words, '*Let him deny himself*' (16:24); the 'himself' is the whole point of the appeal. And when in the secret of our own consciousness we begin to deny the self-life in any form it may surprise us to find how much self has hindered fruit and blessing in our service for God.

* The word joy, or rejoice, occurs sixteen times. The 'fellowship' words, compounded from the preposition *sun* ('with') are: 'Fellow-partakers' (*sugkoinōnos*),—1:7; 4:14. 'Fellow-athletes' (*sumathleō*)—1:27; 4:3. 'Fellow-spirits' (*sumpsuchos*)—2:2. 'Fellow-rejoicers' (*sugchairo*)—2:17, 18. 'Fellow-workers' (*sumergos*)—2:25; 4:3. 'Fellow-soldiers' (*sustratiōtēs*)—2:25. 'Fellow-helpers' (*sullambanō*)—4:3. 'Fellow-yokebearers' (*suzugos*)—4:3.

'In every incident of the Passion Christ, the great Cross-bearer of the universe, cries in our ears, "*Learn of Me*", "*Follow Me*"; live boldly, dangerously, completely, without fastidiousness. Accept the mud and the slime, the heat and the misery, the odious rebuff and the stinging rebuke. Be silent before your accusers. Endure hardness and dare for My sake and the Gospel. Do not refuse to drink with Me the cup of seeming failure, which is often more bitter than the cup of death—the agony of mockery which precedes the agony of the Cross'. 'When we remember the judgment hall and the blindfolded Christ Who endured such contradiction of sinners, against Himself, we shall not grow weary nor faint at rebuke and contumely'.*

5. Christ's gracious call begins and ends with the promise of REST—'I will give you rest . . . ye shall find *rest*'. The soul is satisfied; filled with peace even as the Master's ever was. There is liberty from the bondage of fear even amidst distractions; there is inward calm though wrestling with thronging duties. Not, be it noted, rest *from* service, but *in* service. The burdens no longer chafe, however, nor fret the soul to shreds, for labour is different now and God is in control, with strength sufficient for every task and crisis. Even that valiant warrior, king David, had to learn the lesson: 'commit thy way unto the Lord . . . *rest* (or, "be still") in the Lord, *wait* patiently for Him; *fret not* thyself' (Ps. 37, see R.V. and marg.). Note, it is '*in the LORD*'; He is our 'environment'. 'He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty': There is nothing new or old in this 'modern' century that can qualify that very up-to-date truth! It is true in the life experience of many a Christian, serving Christ at home or in far off lands.

In all this, what an example Christ Himself has set us! He ministered with an intensity unparalleled. The crowds thronged Him often. Always He felt intensely their varied needs, physical and spiritual. Yet He moved in patient concern and unruffled peace, which in itself was a benediction. Why? Because He ever lived within the 'environment' of constant communion with the Father! The poet's words are still true:

* Dr S. M. Zwemer: *The Glory of the Cross*.

Thou sweet beloved will of God,
 My anchor ground, my fortress hill,
 My spirit's silent fair abode,
 In Thee I hide me and am still.

* * * *

But the theme would be lacking in certain essential features if we left it at this point. It might give the impression that the 'Yoke' had lost, more or less, *all* its darker significance in the New Testament. This is not so, however, for the New Testament also has something to teach us regarding the very real existence of the 'Yoke of Bondage' even today. There are two aspects which, though differing in certain points, have a single origin, viz., the failure to apprehend and practice the *fundamentals* of New Testament doctrine and ethics.

(a) First, there is the warning for the *individual* Christian as given by Paul in 2 Cor. 6:14-18. In precise and piquant phrase he lays down the 'categorical imperative' for the believer who has professed conversion in reality: '*Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers*'. That is, seeing you have truly accepted Christ's yoke in the actual experience of your conversion, make it clear that you have forever repudiated the world's yoke.

He then sets out the five-fold antitheses which separate the two categories, challenging us to give our verdict as to *how* they can be reconciled in heart-experience and daily life:

How can there exist any—

FELLOWSHIP	between	RIGHTEOUSNESS	—	UNRIGHTEOUSNESS
INTIMACY	„	LIGHT	—	DARKNESS
HARMONY	„	CHRIST	—	BELLIAL
SHARING	„	BELIEVER	—	INFIDEL
AGREEMENT	„	TEMPLE OF GOD	—	IDOLS

Each heart must give its answer—*there is but one!*

(b) There is also the *Yoke of Ritualism and Legalism*, as Paul describes in Gal. 5:1-12; cf. ch. 4:8 ff. The previous chapters must be read in order to understand clearly the meaning of the apostle's strong appeal to throw off the yoke of bondage which the false teachers, inside and outside the church, would impose

upon it. They would re-introduce the ceremonial and ritual of Judaism in certain forms as being essential. But the apostle will have none of it. Any rite or ceremonial or observance interposed between the sinner and Christ for salvation, becomes a yoke which the New Testament utterly repudiates. No less does it repudiate any other type of yoke, doctrinal or ceremonial, for which there is no apostolic authority within the pages of the New Testament (cf. Acts 15:1, 5, 7-11).

The 400th anniversary this year of the great Protestant Reformation should stir our memories and thoughts afresh to the unspeakable price paid by the brave martyrs of the 16th century, Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, and many others, who gave their lives at the stake rather than continue under the Roman yoke. Vast numbers of godly men and women were similarly held in that bondage, but gained eventually the release they longed for, and for which so high a price had been paid. They were brought into the light of the saving Gospel of Justification by Faith in Christ, which, in turn, was due to the new translation of the Bible into plain English, by the great William Tyndale, so that all could read for themselves the Word of God.* But the menace of this Yoke is again to the fore, and signs of its growing power are unmistakable.

'They overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death' (Rev. 12:11).

* For any who are interested in this particular aspect of the subject, we are glad to commend two books, both published within the past three years. They are both highly interesting and instructive. *Masters of the English Reformation*, by Marcus L. Loane, Principal, Moore Theological College, Sydney. *The One Hundred Texts*, by T. C. Hammond, M.A., Trinity College, Dublin. Both obtainable in the U.K.

God is able to make all abound toward you, that ye may abound.
(2 Cor. 9 : 8)

All grace—redeeming grace, pardoning grace, sustaining grace, comforting grace, grace of every class and kind! All grace abounding—the word has the fullness of the seas in it. Wave upon wave of grace, with all the profundities and immensities and sufficiencies of the ocean behind them—spirituality harnessed to service. All grace abounding toward you—all the air for each individual bird; all the sea for each individual fish!—F. W. BOREHAM.