

REST

Not many people use words like “weary” and “burdened” in their everyday conversations these days. But what about a word like “stress?” I’ll bet you can’t find a popular magazine without at least one article about stress - how to cope with it, manage it, survive it. We can stress about our stress, which often leads us to another frequently used word in our society – “depression.” Anti-depressant medications are one of the most often prescribed drugs in the United States right now. Depression is all too common. How about “anxiety,” “hopelessness” and feeling just plain “down?” Have you gone home recently and decided to just “veg” on the couch because you were exhausted from your day, or do you often wish you didn’t have to get up in the morning?



"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle 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

When Jesus was speaking the words in Matthew 11:28-30, was he speaking to us? Of course He was. We all need rest. There is no one living, so at peace with God, himself and others that they are not “heavy laden and overburdened” at times. For many, this is the case most of the time. We all need rest... How do we find it?

- What does weary and burdened look like in your life?

How do we find rest?

The book of Hebrews states that the work of a Christian is to enter into God’s rest. (Hebrews 4:1-9) For many of us this seems an impossible contradiction. How do we enter or find God’s rest? Do we stumble across it or strive for it? Is it something we must create or manufacture for ourselves?

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden and overburdened, and I will cause you to rest – I will ease and relieve and refresh your souls."

Rest...ease and relief and refreshment of our souls.

Wow, are we ready for some of that? Jesus wants to

“give” it to us. In fact, the Amplified Bible indicates that the direct outcome of coming to Jesus is REST! Jesus says He will cause the rest - we don’t manufacture it ourselves. As we receive His gift, we rest.



Come to me...

How important is it to understand what Jesus meant when He said, "Come to me?" We need to "come" to Jesus, and allow Him to direct our lives. Our choices and decisions in the past have been based primarily on our logic, feelings and circumstances. As a result we have experienced the pain and destruction of many landmines. Jesus now wants to direct us around and through the landmines. Missing landmines will definitely cause rest in my life, how about yours? But how do I "come" to Jesus?

Imagine Main Street. It runs north and south. You are walking north on one side of the street. You have a destination, and a plan to reach that destination. You walk this way frequently. You are familiar and comfortable with the route, at least for the most part. Occasionally though, you hit a landmine. Then, you feel lots of pain. Hopefully you are able to pick yourself up, bandage the wounds and move on. Today, you are walking north, determined to reach that planned destination. At the same time, Jesus is walking south on the other side of the street; He is traveling in the opposite direction. You hear the words, "Come to me." What will you do?

If you continue to walk north, will you be able to respond to Jesus, or will you simply pass Him by? The first thing you need to do is STOP. Stop walking north. Stop what you are doing, and stop handling the "walk" your way. Now, TURN. Who is this that just said, "come?" When you recognize Jesus, you recognize the relationship you have with Him. He is your Savior! He is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and He has come to give you an abundant life! (John 10:10) This relationship is important to you! What are you going to do? Your next step is to cross the street and join Jesus. Now that you are there, what happens next?

Jesus is heading south, so you need to go His direction. Wait a minute? You had your plans. You were going in the opposite direction. What are you going to do now? Do you choose to change directions, to follow Jesus and now go His direction? To truly "come" to Jesus we need to complete the entire process, including changing our destination, direction, plans and way of handling things. You see, the verse says, "Come to me."

Jesus knows the "right" direction...

Let me ask you another question. Will Jesus ever cross the street and go our direction? It is true that Jesus love for us is such that He will go to great lengths to get our attention. When we are lost in sin and destruction, He will "meet us where we are at" and offer us His gift of salvation. But, is that the same as crossing the street and going our direction? When He is going south, is Jesus going the right direction? Does He know He's going the right direction? Does His direction work? The answer to all of the questions is unmistakably "YES!" Then, why would He change direction? He won't. However, have you ever done as I have and said, "This is what I want to do Lord, will you please bless me as I go my direction?" Will He come across the street and attach Himself to my plans? No. Will He force His plans on me? No. That is not what the verse says. It says we come to Him. We change direction. He doesn't have to change direction – His way works! We change our way of thinking and doing, and follow His way. He will lead us around every landmine as we go in His direction!

How do we change direction?

God takes only volunteers, NO draftees. We choose to change direction! This happens through repentance and through commitment, turning from our way and determining to cross the street and follow Him. He leads us to hope, peace and rest. This is really the entry into Boot Camp because at this point we decide if we will be a soldier of Jesus Christ or if we will remain a civilian.

The direction Jesus is taking us in is always towards an awesome destination! I have often had my own destination in mind. Abandoning that destination has not always been easy. I have wanted to do things like continue my education in another state, teach a Sunday school class in my home church, or purchase a newer car. What's the matter with those things? Nothing. Our destinations may be perfectly fine, "Godly" directions. They are good activities. But, they are still OUR destinations; they are still our plans.

My change of direction...

At one time I had a great desire to pursue my education at a graduate school in Oregon. I had been accepted at a solid Christian University, my family was supportive and willing to move from Iowa to Oregon. It was truly a "Godly" destination. Excitedly, I started down a path towards that destination. Then, I was challenged to consider what Jesus was saying to me in this verse. Jesus knows what He has planned for us. We need to ask Him, and know that sometimes He doesn't give us the whole answer - He leads us there. Jesus sees the entire path, and the destination in one glance. I could see very good reasons for moving, and the immediate future seemed bright. But what was after? Was my path a dead end? Was there a huge boulder in the way on the path, even bigger than the ones I was facing in Iowa? Could it be the totally wrong direction, leading to a destination that was less than what God really wanted for me? Was I leaving to avoid the boulders in the path I was on, or was God really changing the direction for me? Before I left Iowa I decided to yoke up to Jesus and let Him determine the direction I was going. I never left Iowa. Instead, Jesus has lead me in another direction and the journey has been amazing. When you find yourself going in a direction you have decided upon yourself, you need to ask yourself, "Am I about to make a "Godly" decision, or is what am I about to do truly "God directed?" Learning the difference has made a tremendous difference in my life.

- Is the direction you are going in life one of your own choosing?
- Are you continuing to go north, while Jesus goes south, or are you willing to change your direction?
- When have you wanted Jesus to bless your plans or direction in the past?
- How do you change direction in your life?

The yoke of Jesus...

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...

What is a yoke? Jesus was speaking in biblical times in an agricultural society. Those He was speaking to could easily relate to His example. However, it's a bit harder for us. You see a yoke is

a wooden harness that was used to hook two oxen together and then attach a heavy plow. They would take an older, stronger and wiser ox and put him on one side of the yoke. Then, they took a younger, weaker and less experience ox and hooked him up, or yoked him up on the other side. The older ox would then teach the younger one. Together they would pull the plow. When Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." He is giving us clear instructions.

Do you ever feel as though you are pulling a plow through life? How heavy is the load? The weight of that burden can be crushing at times. What are the burdens you are carrying? Emotional, physical or mental burdens – whatever you are carrying across a field is a killer. "Take my yoke upon you..." Jesus is telling you something here. He is on one side of the yoke. Like the ox, He is the stronger and wiser one, and He wants you to yoke up or hook up to Him! When you do, Jesus is on one side of the yoke and you are on the other side. Who will carry the majority of the weight? Jesus will! Whose choice is it to hook up to Jesus? Yours. When you do, who will determine the direction you will go? He will.

What would it be like if you teamed up, or yoked up with Christ and allowed Him to pull? He is going to do almost all the pulling and your weight will be relieved. Being yoked with Jesus yields rest! You are walking in step with Jesus in your choices and decisions, and have truly given Him control of your life. As a result, you reap the benefits as Jesus will "...ease and relieve and refresh your souls."

- What are the burdens you have been carrying?
- What will it be like when you "yoke up" or "team up" with Jesus?
- Why haven't you "yoked up" with Jesus in the past?
- Whose choice is it to take His yoke? Have you made that choice?

Power and Direction

When you are yoked up with Jesus you are going to benefit from His power! In your daily life, you yoke up to Jesus and go through your day together. You find the peace and contentment that being in His yoke embodies. Suddenly, you realize that Jesus is going in a direction you really didn't bargain for. He is now asking you to do something or say something with Him you don't like. So you unhook and plow ahead, again in your own direction. What happens to the weight you are carrying? How heavy does your load become again? You see yoking up to Jesus involves two principles. First, doing what Jesus wants. Second, doing it His way. Going His direction requires both changing our direction and abandoning our own way of doing things. We need to ask ourselves, "Whose way am I going to do things?"

I have needed to apply this scripture to my life in so many instances and circumstances it's beyond counting. Why? Because in the past I was set on "my way!" I can readily find examples in the way I handle my relationships with my spouse and children. When I am yoked up to Jesus, He carries the weight of any worry, confusion or even anger I may feel towards them.

Gentle and humble...

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. (Amplified Bible)

He guides me in what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. Yoked up to Jesus I see a greater ease and gentleness in my words and behavior towards my husband and children. But, how often have I chosen to unhook? Sometimes, Jesus has asked me to say something or do something that didn't seem fair to me. He has wanted me to respond in love and forgiveness, when I felt hurt and bitterness. It is those times, I have unhooked. Choosing instead, to do it "my way." Then... the heavy weight came back. Praise God for forgiveness! When I have unhooked I can always hook back up through repentance.

Learn...

Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." (emphasis mine) Why is learning so important? Basically, because there is so much about the ways of God that we do not know! Without the yoke of Jesus we are living in and wandering through a landmine field everyday. God gives us the best example in His Word.

Cloud by day... Fire by night...

Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." (emphasis mine) Why is learning so important? Basically, because there is so much about the ways of God that we do not know! Without the yoke of Jesus we are living in and wandering through a landmine field everyday. God gives us the best example in His Word. In the book of Exodus, chapters 13-18 we read about the journey of Israelites, the people of God, as they left Egypt and traveled to the promised land. Realize the Hebrew people did not wander aimlessly through the desert hoping to stumble upon their destination. God miraculously led them every day.

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

-Exodus 13:21-22

The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night were always before the Hebrews. When God wanted to move His people He moved the pillar of cloud or fire. There were times the pillar would stay in one place for long periods, and the people remained in that spot awaiting God's direction. Remaining with the cloud and fire was crucial to their survival in the desert.

Now let's consider something else. How hot is the desert during the day? How cold does the desert get at night? How did God protect His people while they were in the desert? Do you see that the cloud provided the people with shade during the day, protection from the heat and glare of the sun? Then at night the pillar of fire would provide both heat and light. God used the cloud and the fire to both direct and protect His people!

Independence, self-reliance and a palm tree...

God's people were loved and cared for on their desert journey, even if they did not always think so. Let's say I am an Israelite. I am really tired of the desert. I'm tired of God directing my life and I'm not happy with His ways of providing for me. Pride, independence and anger rise up in me. Then one day I find a palm tree. There's my answer! I decide to stay under it. I like this idea because I won't have to go the way the cloud goes. I will again determine my own direction. I will make my own decisions. Sounds pretty good so far? But, let's ask some questions. How much shade is a palm tree? A palm tree gives very little shade. The leaves are high above the ground and more sparse than dense. How far am I able to go away from the palm tree? Not far, probably just around the tree as I follow the shade. When God's pillar of cloud moves on and my fellow Israelites depart, what else might happen to me...?

Lion Bait...

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. -1 Peter 5:8

Have you ever watched a National Geographic special on lions? It is fascinating to learn how a lion hunts. A lion stalks its prey. He follows behind a herd of animals watching intently. He is patiently waiting. You see a lion will never jump into the strength of a herd to attack. If he did, he would be trampled. Instead the lion waits for a single victim. A lion attacks the straggler. He stalks the young, the old, the sick and weak. The lion stalks any animal that is not with the herd. You know, the one that has found a palm tree and rejected God's pillar of direction and protection. When we are willing to seek God through His Word and with our headsets, we are under His pillar of cloud and fire. In 1 Peter 5:8 God is warning His kids about this lion. He knows that when we turn away from both the direction and the protection He offers us we are vulnerable to attack.

Satan is the lion. So what does he want us to do? I believe Satan is the greatest supporter of independent, self-reliant and self-directed thinking within our society. He tries to convince us and persuade us to do things "our way." He knows that if he can convince us to choose a "palm tree" in our life we are defenseless. In Boot Camp anyone determined to stay under his or her own palm tree is called "Lion Bait!"

- Why is learning so important?
- What do you learn from Jesus by being "yoked up" to Him?
- What does it look like in your life when you are sitting under a palm tree, instead of staying with God's cloud of protection, provision and direction? In what areas of your life are you "lion bait?"
- What does Satan want you to do?

The value of the "herd"...

God has another lesson to be learned within 1 Peter 5:8. It is a lesson about the value of the "herd". I'm not familiar with the animals a lion hunts as prey. I always use antelope, but I'm not sure if that is an animal on the same continent as lions, so you can imagine any animal you want. I'll just use antelope. First, if you were an antelope you would live with a herd of antelope, right? But you are a Christian, so...who is in your herd? Other Christians, right? Now, where do we find other Christians? The obvious answer is in church, bible studies, youth groups etc. We come together as Christians just as antelope come together in their herd. But, then what happens. Is there any perfect Christian? No, Christians are all people aren't they. Is there any perfect pastor? We often spend more time thinking about the faults of our pastor than about the reason God has us in our church. Is there any perfect church? Given time, we can find fault with any church. Christians are a little like antelope; they are not very bright. Yet if Satan were to jump into the midst of a herd of Christians, what would happen? He would get trampled! We, as Christians, need to stay in the strength of the herd. Out in the desert, sitting under a "palm tree" of independence and self-reliance we are "lion bait."

Steve and I have been lion bait in the past. Angry at our fellow Christians, judgmental of their attitudes and behaviors, or upset at the treatment we received from a pastor, we have withdrawn from fellowship opportunities. We have refused to participate in the vision of our local congregation; we have even left church and refused to attend services for as long as two years. Those were times in my life when the enemy attacked my mind, will and emotions and I was tremendously hurt, sometimes even mauled. Finally, Steve and I sought God about the church we would make our church family. Plugging into a local church, supporting its pastor and the vision God has given him has given us both God's direction and His protection. "Yoked to Jesus" and "under God's cloud of protection" is the most secure place we can be.

- Have you ever separated from the "herd" of your fellow Christians?
- What was the result of insisting of your "own way" rather than God's direction?

Our inheritance in the Kingdom of God...

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

Jesus wants us to see the difference between our independent, self-determined way of handling things and choosing to stay "hooked up" or "under His pillar." He wants us to see the tug of war that is happening in our lives. His love, His protection and His provision are ours. They are our inheritance in the kingdom of God. He is truly gentle and humble. At the same time we tap into His undefeated strength with our choice to do things His way. Jesus continually shows me this.

...and you will find rest – relief, ease and refreshment and recreation and blessed quiet for your souls.

Wow, are we ready for some of that! Finding this place of rest is really the only task that Christians need to strive after. (Hebrews 4:9-11) Out of this will flow: all witnessing of the Good News of Jesus Christ; all ministry to the lost, poor and sick; all praise and worship. All this will flow when we are in a place of rest. Too many times in the past I have missed this place of rest because I have stayed under a palm tree and insisted on my right to independence and self-direction. When I am yoked to Jesus, I experience the rest He speaks of here.

This image of Jesus and me yoked together moving through life gives me a clear picture of how I want to live. It also provides me with something to help determine what might be causing the stress and strain in my life. Knowing that with Jesus the weight will be relieved, I can ask myself, "What happens when I unhook from Jesus' yoke?"

The weight comes back...

Walking along beside Jesus is great when His decision appeals to me, but what about when He asks me to do or say something I don't like? Often I simply unhook from Jesus and go my own direction. What happens then. The weight comes back on me. The moment I feel the weight I need to ask myself another question, "Have I unhooked?" Quickly, through repentance, I'll want to hook back up to Jesus.

- What happens when you unhook from Jesus' yoke?
- Have you unhooked?
- How awesome is the "rest" Jesus wants to give you? What does your task become?

My yoke is easy and my burden is light...

How have we viewed Jesus in the past? It is a lie of Satan that says Jesus' way is hard. We are still trying to make our choices about what we do on our own, without hooking up with Jesus in that personal relationship that He is offering. We are carrying our yoke of independence. So often in the past we have believed that by following Jesus we must follow a list of do's and don'ts that take away our freedom and give us a burden of guilt if we fail to follow the rules. Then, because we want to follow Jesus without understanding Him clearly, we add a yoke of legalism. In that way we are carrying two yokes. That weight is overwhelming!

- How have you tried to carry two yokes, Jesus' and yours?

Jesus wants us to set our own yoke down. He wants us to take up His yoke and allow Him to determine our direction and decisions and He will carry the weight. Praise God for the rest that this brings us into!