

Running Hard, but on Empty 2023
 Psalm 69:1-03, 13-14, 32-33 Matthew 11:16-17, 25-30

Psalm 69:1-3, 13-14, 32-33 (New Revised Standard Version)

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.

I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me. With your faithful help rescue me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters. Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds.

Matthew 11:16-17, 25-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."

In my early 20's, some of me friends and I liked to arrange
 whitewater rafting trips in VA, MD or PA each Spring.
 One time a number of folks came along who had never rafted before,
 and five of them happened to end up in a 6-man raft with me.

Before we got underway, I went over the basics of river rafting,
 and then gave more specific instructions just before a series
 of treacherous stair-step rapids called, "The Big Nasty".
 I explained that they needed to keep paddling hard and non-stop,
 even while our raft was being slammed and spun by the rapids,
 so that there would be enough forward momentum
 for me to steer us through to the right slots.

And once we were in that series of sudden drops and heavy rapids,
 at times the back of the raft would completely submerge,
 so to reassure that novice and nervous crew I would shout,
"We're OK, just keep paddling, I'm still with you."

When we're caught in the harsh and stressful circumstances of life,
 we need more than gushy & fuzzy religious sentimentality,
 or an optimistic outlook that blindly ignores reality.
 We need and want far more than just words of hopeful encouragement.

We all know what it is to feel weary from life's burdens & troubles,
 to face trials and disappointments, the crush of hard times,
 life's rough and impossible situations where we see no hope,

and so we may wonder and ask where is God in all of this?

Sometimes amid our troubles & distress, our suffering & uncertainty,
we can feel abandoned, anxious, confused, frightened & overwhelmed,
and even wonder **how can a good & loving God allow this to happen.**

It's not unusual for someone to come and speak with me during
such a time of despair, tragic loss, devastation or trouble.

Generally we'll talk at length about what they are going through,
and explain how difficult, disappointing & discouraging it all is.

After that I'll suggest that we pray and read through Psalm 69,
which is a psalm of lament, one that follows a specific format.

A psalm of lament always begins with complaint and some griping
about an unfair, terrible and crushing circumstance of disaster,
how difficult it all is and how abandoned by God they feel,
and have got nothing good or strong to hold onto, vs. 1-2,

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.

Surely all of us can identify with troubles up to our neck,
with no foothold, and sinking under an overwhelming flood,
with only tough choices that look impossible and hopeless.

From there, every psalm of lament moves to the critical word, "but",
followed by a faith-declaration of assurance, trust and hope,
because of who God is, his steadfast faithfulness, power & mercy,
who hears & responds to our cries of struggle and need, vs. 13 & 33

But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me with your faithful help. Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive.

All four Gospels make it clear and obvious
that most of the religious authorities were opposed to Jesus,
and each of the Gospels describe and unfolding and growing
rejection of Jesus and his teachings about God's grace,
that builds up chapter by chapter toward his crucifixion & death.

In the section of Matthew's Gospel that we read today,
Jesus explains and describes what he is experiencing, vs. 16-17,
But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

In his prayer, Jesus explains that the poor, outcasts and oppressed,
they see and receive what the scribes and Pharisees have rejected,
a message of hope that we all need to hear and trust, vs. 28-30,
"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."

The specific context when Jesus spoke those words was just before

the religious authorities objected when he healed on the Sabbath.
Bible scholars refer to it as a statement of proclamation,
that's intended to help introduce, connect & interpret
the two conflict stories that follow in chapter 12.

The Pharisees followed what they called, **the yoke of the Law**,
stringent religious rituals & traditions they consider necessary
in order to be accepted, to be received and pleasing to the Lord,
harsh legalistic ways that placed a burden on the people.

In sharp contrast, Jesus offered, **the yoke of God's grace**,
"come to me", and receive the healing and hope of God's love.
Jesus is specifically referring to the demands of rigid religion,
calls to those weary under that heavy burden of religious Law,
"come to me", for **rest** from such imposed legalistic religion,
and in this case, **rest** refers to the healing & hope of grace.

That gracious invitation and promise was intended to encourage
everyone who is weary from life's rough struggles and burdens,
offering rest for when it's all too much or we've lost our way.

A yoke is very practical tool crafted for carrying heavy burdens,
by making heavy loads seem lighter and easier to move,
by redirecting energy and strength for maximum output.

The Greek word for **easy** also translates well-suited or a good fit,
meaning that **our yoke in Christ** is custom made to fit each of us.

Our yoke fully equips us to handle life's heaviest burdens,
and fitted to match the best of our gifts, strengths & abilities.

Sometimes, a weak/inexperienced ox was matched with a stronger ox
and the yoke was engineered to match that uneven pair of animals.
The yoke was made to accommodate, drawing the best from each.

The point is, Christ is in **the yoke of God's grace** with us,
and present with us amid our life's difficulties and burdens.

And he has the heavy end, carrying the burden for us and with us,
so it's never our strength alone, but always Jesus with us,
and never about us tackling or fixing problems on our own.

The rest that Jesus is promising to the weary and heavily burdened
is not about us working harder to develop a better solution,
and it's not just hanging in there and waiting
for trouble and suffering to pass eventually.

It's not ignoring the storm that is swirling all around us,
or denying that we are frightened or that things really hurt,
or as if our troubles and struggles don't really matter.
It's way much more than just the power of positive thinking!

Real rest is God's promise, presence and power to be with us always
that gives us **a true and confident assurance** of relief and hope.

It's not a promise of a comfortable, complacent, or effortless easy life,

but it's the soul's rest **by** living in confident hope and trust,
by walking and working in balance and in wholeness **with Christ**,
who calls us to a life-perspective of gratitude, trust & hope,
that shifts our focus away from the trivial & less important.

Today we are challenged to consider our work and goals in this world.
I have mentioned to you before about Nelson, my friend in Africa
a student who shared his room with me at the seminary in Accra,
who taught me about my materialistic arrogance & foolishness.

We become close enough and friends good enough that one time
I asked him how he felt about the Lord God providing so much for me,
and yet he had to just get by and struggle on so very little.

I pointed out that there was so much he needed and yet did without.
"I have so much, more than I need, and God gives you so very little.
Shouldn't we both be provided with the same 'daily bread',
if our Heavenly father, truly loves us both the same?"

And his wise and gentle answer was,
that I was confusing material possessions with God's blessings.
He continued by explaining,
"Norm, that immense material wealth and prosperity you speak of
all of those many things aren't a blessing, they are a burden.
You are cursed and burdened, and you don't even know it.

Your watch runs your life, telling you what to do and when to do it.
In your world, you need a car, many clothes, and too many things.
You need so much stuff, just to live and by in your world.

Consider your meals with us. You can't even eat the same food we eat,
and if you do, your stomach turns and rebels, you get sick.
Also, you need far more quality and quantity than we do,
so is your greater need really such a blessing?

I was sorry for you and I grieved for you that night we all gathered,
when you could not join in and enjoy our feast of fufu with red-sauce
because when you tried to eat it, it made you sick.
You could not really share in our joyful celebration,
and you think that is a blessing?

You are captive, imprisoned by your materialism, by your many things,
and that is a curse, that is a heavy burden that you have to carry,
which you don't even recognize as a yoke around your neck.

You think our Heavenly Father has slighted me,
because I am given so many less things in this world than you?
Haven't you yet learned the measure of life, of true worth and value?
Don't you know that the measure of God's love & blessings
is not in the material things or the stuff of this world?

God's blessings are that we are given life and given God's love.
I live, I am loved – I have enough, I am infinitely blessed!"
Nelson's wisdom and insight forever changed by life and perspective.

We all know what it is to feel weary from life's burdens & struggles.
And no, we did not choose to live in these times or our situation,
but we can trust that God choose for us to live in this world,
and by God's intention to deal with these circumstances.

As my friend Nelson would assure us, our hope and certainty today,
as we grapple with our changing world and our situations of struggle,
**is that the Lord God is not surprised, at a loss or defeated,
but is still accomplishing according to his good purpose.**

Our call is to stay focused on Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture,
rely on God's promises and truth, his abiding presence among us.
**We can trust the message of God's faithful assurance,
"You'll be OK. Just keep paddling. I'm still with you."**

**And so we are called to faithfully live out our Christian life
in whatever environment, whatever circumstance or context
God has chosen to place us, for us to live and to serve,**
because whatever is going on with us, God loves us and is with us,
and God is up to something, blessing us way past our expectations.

Now I still don't know what the future holds for us or for our church,
but I do know who holds that future, for God is still sovereign,
**and you can trust me on this, it will end and be resolved
precisely and exactly where, when and how God intends.**

It's also important, to hold tight onto these 3 unchanging truths:

1st. We are not alone and we have not been abandoned,
for right now Jesus is equipping us for whatever comes our way.

2nd Jesus invites us to share his yoke and remains with us.
So it's not about our strength, effort or wisdom alone,
but Jesus is carrying our burden with us and for us.

3rd To be the church, means that we are yoked together as family,
to provide mutual support, to comfort one another,
as we seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

This world & culture's yoke is the heavy burden of endless striving,
while the yoke of Jesus, is learning to find rest for our soul.

**It is the Christian life lived joyfully to glorify & honor God
rather than buying into the destructive lies of our culture.**

Jesus says, "come to me, and I will give you rest."
The message of Jesus Christ about grace, it's really that simple.

It isn't a **promise** of comfortable, complacent, effortless easy life,
but it's the soul's rest by living within confident hope and trust.
It's walking and working in balance and in wholeness with Christ.

Today let us cultivate a deeper sense of gratitude and wonder,
by living in contentment with wherever God has brought us,
by looking for the blessing of what God is doing in our lives.

Consider this paraphrase of Matthew 11:28-30 from *The Message*.

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burning out? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.