

## **Dealing with Life's Burdens**

A man sat in the office of a psychiatrist and poured out his heart. "I'm lonely", he said. "I find it hard to get up in the morning. There is no joy in my life. I have few friends. I feel my life is at a dead end and I don't know where to turn. I try to do things for people but they don't appreciate me. I feel sad all the time. There is no joy, no purpose, nothing can make me happy". He appeared to be at the end of his rope. After listening to him for some time the doctor told him he had an idea. He proposed the patient take some medications that might be helpful in lifting his spirits. He then talked about various coping mechanisms the man might adopt. After all, there was not such thing as "hopeless". "I am going to suggest one extra thing." he said. "You sound as though you are spending too much time alone, mulling over your problems. You need to get out. There is a circus in town. One of the best acts is the performance of a certain clown. I have seen many clowns in my life, but this one is the best. He makes everyone laugh. Take a night off work and go and see the circus. I guarantee you will laugh too." The man looked up with sorrowful eyes and said to the doctor with an air of resignation, "I don't see how that will help me. I am that clown".

### *Contradictions*

Life is full of contradictions. What we see on the outside is often at odds with the reality. People put on brave faces and cover up what they are going through, what they are feeling inside. Life in the affluent, technological West should be easy and carefree. We have every device, every toy, and life expectancy is climbing. Never in human history have we been so well poised to conquer disease, improve our quality of life and build on strong emotional foundations. The irony is that levels of personal stress continue to climb and the story related above is compounded by the fact that psychiatrists are among the nation's most likely professional group to commit suicide. Like the clown, when we "know it all", when we have heard (and used) all the set answers, when we manage to hide our true feelings from others, there is almost nowhere else to turn.

A sign on a colleague's desk read: "I'm going to have a nervous breakdown. I have worked for it. I deserve it. No one is going to deprive me of it". This does not sound like a society that has everything going for it. There comes a time when we realize what we have is inadequate to meet life's greatest challenges, that we do not have all the answers. At such a crossroad, we can give up or look for solutions. The Bible says that the only one who can truly satisfy is Christ; he is the only one who can change a life and give sound hope for the future.

### *Carrying burdens*

I once sat in a market place in Cochabamba, the third largest city in Bolivia. I was in the midst of an introductory Spanish language training course; it was felt by my employers that the best way for me to learn the language was go be placed in a Spanish-speaking environment. "Sink or swim". So off I went, to a school run by the Maryknoll Fathers.

Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and it showed. Most of the public infrastructure was out of date, the average life expectancy for males was just over 45 years, the Government was unstable (there had been more governments than years of independence) and the country was a known supplier of drugs for the North American market. Rabid dogs walked around the streets of slums (I was in the neighbourhood one morning when I came across a group of angry men beating a mangy dog to death because a girl had died of rabies). A fellow-student contacted amoebic dysentery and bubonic plague was a problem in parts of the county.

As I sat in the market and took in the sights, sounds and smells I noticed a line of men carry sacks of wheat. A truck had arrived from the countryside and the sacks were being transported for milling. Each of the stocky Aymara men grabbed the corner of a huge sack, hoisted it onto his shoulders and walked down the street, his back almost parallel with the road. I felt sorry for the labourers, for whom this was about as good as it got. Life did not offer much more. Their faces were grimy, they grunted beneath the loads, they had wads of coca leaves in the mouths and as I watched them it occurred to me that this was the way it had been for centuries. Life was a long labour and then they died, to be replaced by younger men (teenagers, more likely) starting the same downward spiral of hard work, low pay, struggles to keep a family housed and fed, followed by intermittent sickness and ultimately death. I felt sorry for them. In this modern world human existence does not have to be like this. But there was nothing I could do. I was not able to take their burdens and relieve them of their loads.

### *Coming to Jesus with our burdens*

My mind went back to Jesus' days, when labourers and slaves served their masters in the same way. Wherever Jesus went he saw people struggling beneath heavy loads. Only those with enough capital to own oxen did not have to do all of the carrying for themselves. One day as he watched tired peasants carrying loads he said to them, "Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart. And you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29).

Jesus saw another dimension to their problems. Beneath the physical packs they struggled with emotional and spiritual burdens that no one was able to lift. It seemed they were destined to suffer, and ultimately die and be buried by family and friends, almost forgotten as the hard struggle continued. To make matters worse they were burdened in many other ways by society. Living as they did under a cruel Roman occupation they carried burdens of racial hate, underclass status, frustrations, excessive taxation and obligations associated with providing for the needs of their oppressive overlords. Their spiritual leaders added additional layers of religious legalism, designed to keep ordinary people in check while they maintained their rights and privileges as part of the ruling elite. There were literally hundreds of rules and regulations to keep.

Temple officials and teachers of the law kept track of rules and regulations, monitoring peoples' compliance, always looking out for new loopholes for themselves while making the onus on the common people weightier. As Jesus stood and spoke these words they would have resonated with many of his listeners. He called them "tired". They were certainly tired. He spoke of "rest". They desperately needed rest. No wonder Jesus was popular with ordinary folks. He understood where they were coming from. He articulated exactly what they were feeling.

There are millions of people today who need to hear the same words from Jesus. They are not necessarily struggling beneath physical loads, but they are constantly burdened. Their "loads" may be worry, financial fears, a sense of personal failure, frustrations at work, problems coping at home, marriage and family break-up, loneliness, peer pressures, guilty consciences and hurts stemming from peoples' attitudes. It seems no one cares, no one understands. Everyone has his or her own problems to deal with, with little or no time left over to think about others. To make matters worse, there are spiritual problems. The Bible talks about the burden of sin (Psalm 38:4, 6). Spiritual problems need spiritual answers. The only durable answers come from God.

### *Coping with problems, pressures and stresses*

We all face pressures and problems. They can be character-building, or they can destroy us. Some people make every effort to get away, but they go in the wrong direction. Like the British family who were so concerned about the possibility of nuclear fall-out and social problems for their children growing up in Europe that they looked at the map to find somewhere in the world that was the furthest they could go to get away from every threat. They sold their home and emigrated, arriving in the Falkland Islands just a few weeks before Argentinian President Leopoldo Galtieri ordered his armed forces to storm the islands and incorporate them in the nation's sovereign territory, sparking a bitter war that left death and destruction in its wake. Some escape!

How do we cope with problems, pressures and stresses? Few of us find sympathy in the workplace. We try the escape of high tech entertainment, but often emerge depressed and bored. Young people (and their parents) experiment with a wide range of chemicals and drugs, to no avail. Others try education, looking for answers in learning but all too often losing hope because of the emptiness of so-called rationalism. A knock on the door reveals the presence of a religious salesman offering hope and answers through one of the cults. Occult involvement, witchcraft, New Age groups are growing and becoming "respectable", but do not contain the answer. A newspaper advertisement offers a get-away to a sunny beach resort and suggests couples take advantage of the opportunity to sort out their issues. The package is called a "Marriage Saver Weekend".

We turn to our political, business, education and religious leaders, but they are also searching for answers. As a result, most opinion polls show trust in leaders to be in low single per centage terms, barely on the chart. Where can we turn?

Who is listening? Who can explain the loneliness, depression, disappointment, boredom, discouragement, mental and emotional tiredness that make so many people just want to give up, and define solutions? Life appears to be a continuous struggle.

Even Christians sometimes fall into this trap. An old hymn started with the following words, "I've wrestled on toward heaven, through storm and wind and tide". Is this the answer? A life-long wrestle? Continuously striving? Surely this is not the answer Jesus came to offer. This is no panacea.

### *Committing our way to Christ – he has "been there"*

When Jesus called the weary to come to him for rest he was actually calling them to follow him. The Bible says that he was tested in every area in which we are tested in life. There is no temptation we encounter, that he did not face in some form (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15). Jesus was a teenager and experienced changes every young man goes through. He was a young man in a world where young men competed to show their virility. He was often tempted, but he did not sin. He saw social injustice and was touched by racial and economic prejudice. Even though he was God he knew what it felt like to be hungry, tired, lonely, rejected, thirsty, betrayed and to feel emotional and physical pain. He wept at the grave of a friend who died. He was often misunderstood and his motives impugned by his opponents. But he overcame it all. Jesus was not deterministic. He did not believe defeat and failure were inevitable. He taught that it is possible to break the moulds into which people try to pour us, and to start all over again.

When we learn to trust him, we find the key to great spiritual and emotional release. Psalm 37:1-7. The passage tells us not to "fret", to burn out as a result of what we are going through. Instead, it urges us to delight in him. It is just like pouring our feelings, negativity, anxiety, and anger into God. The word "commit" contains the notion of rolling. We are to roll our burdens onto the Lord's shoulders. Then we are to relax and trust him. Psalm 55:22. He has promised to "sustain" us'. He will not allow us to be moved. "I will give you rest". Christ offers us refreshment and renewal. That does not mean inactivity, but the ability to rest in the middle of the most trying and confusing circumstances. Jesus was not talking about escaping from problems, but holding up in the midst of them. Psalm 43:5. When we learn to trust God like this, we experience change and God's peace and direction.

### *An illustration from everyday life*

To illustrate his point Jesus drew his listeners' attention to a team of oxen pulling a cart. Those who could afford to do so had at least two oxen. Typically, one would be young and strong, but relatively inexperienced. The other would be older, but more experienced and disciplined. Together, they had strength and experience. The best part of the team was effective partnership. Our inexperience and Christ's lordship can forge an effective partnership. What we need to do is take his yoke on our shoulders. The irony in Jesus' call is that submission leads to freedom.

If we follow the way Jesus Christ leads, doing things his way, listening to his advice, we find that we are not struggling alone; he helps us. When we don't know where to go, all we need to do is ask, beside he is there, right beside us. When the going gets too heavy, we can let go and he will shoulder the burden. The Bible says that we should cast all our cares on him, because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

The other key element of Jesus' statement is that we should learn from him. Older oxen taught their younger team mates. There are basically two attitudes we can adopt. If we are teachable, we will learn. If we are stubborn and unteachable, insisting on our own way, rebelling against God's dealings in our lives and the circumstances he allows, we will be frustrated and inadvertently increase the load. He wants to teach us. He said that he was "meek and lowly of heart". If we have this attitude, this spirit, we will be sure to learn. The Holy Spirit will come along side of us (that is what "paraklete", the New Testament word often translated "Comforter" literally means) and show us how and where to go. He will not necessarily change our circumstances, but we will be able to see them in a new context. He may also send other experienced "oxen" (fellow-Christians) alongside to help us (cf Galatians 6:2).

He is gentle. He does not pressure us, demand, judge or place unrealistic expectations on our lives. The weight he places on our shoulders is sufficient; not so easy we think we can do it in our own strength; not so much that we crumble beneath the weight. The paradox is that the more we yield, the more we find ourselves.

The invitation of Christ has a major appeal. It is as relevant to sophisticated modern man as it was to Jesus' original audience. Only he has the power to transform the human heart, but when he does so it is unmistakable and miraculous.