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Matthew 11

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Verse 1

MATT. 11

MESSENGERS FROM JOHN THE BAPTIST; REBUKING CITIES THAT REJECTED HIM; AND THE GREAT INVITATION

And it came to pass when Jesus had finished commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and preach in their cities. (Matthew 11:1)

Concerning the month's separation of Jesus and his disciples, see under Matthew 10:42.

Verse 2

Now when John heard in the prison the works of the Christ, he sent by his disciples, and said unto him, Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?

John had grown uncertain as to whether Christ was indeed the Messiah or not. The uncertainty probably arose from the following circumstances: (1) John had been cast into prison, and Christ had made no move to free him; (2) John was suffering cruel and unjust persecution and probably foresaw his approaching martyrdom; (3) Jesus' identity as the Messiah was not being proclaimed at that time with the dogmatic certainty which

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John doubtless expected; (4) the reasons for Christ's reticence about his Messiahship could not have been clear to John. In fact, people would be somewhat in the dark about this, even today, had it not been for Luke's concise statement of the strait in which Jesus found himself at that moment. "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:50). The philosopher John Locke traced the narrowness of the path our Lord had to travel. It was his purpose to die for the sins of the world; but his purpose would have been thwarted if he had been put to death for sedition. The popular misconception that the Messiah would supplant the Romans made it very difficult to walk the fine line between convincing all people of good will, on the one hand, that he was actually the Messiah, while, on the other hand, at the same time dispelling any thought that he would take the secular government away from the Romans. That Jesus was indeed hard pressed or "straitened" to find the true ground between those two parallel courses is evident. In this frame of reference, it is easy to see why Christ would openly declare himself the Messiah while conversing with the woman at the well of Samaria (John 4:26), whose word was worthless in court because she was a Samaritan, and upon other occasions fail back upon more noncommittal expressions such as "thou sayest."

The deputation from John, therefore, precipitated a very delicate situation. It was absolutely necessary that John be confirmed in his conviction that Jesus was the Messiah, but not by any declaration that would result in Jesus' being hailed into court as a seditionist. Dummelow summed up Christ's skilled handling of the question in these words,

> By a reference to Isaiah 61:1, he declared plainly enough, and yet not too plainly, that he was the Messiah. He worked a number of miracles in their presence in proof of his Messianic claims (Luke 7:21), and finally sent them back to John with a message in which he expressly mentioned his miracles, and promised a blessing to those who should attach themselves to him. The spectacle of Christ's miracles must have been particularly impressive to the disciples of John, who performed no miracles (John 10:41)[1]

It should be noted that in times of personal misfortune, suffering, hardship, or persecution, one's faith is inclined to waver; and those things which seemed so positive and certain under more favorable circumstances and in brighter days tend to be dimmed and obscured. Any sufferer who struggles with life's tribulations and feels that his prayers have not been answered can find deep: and sympathetic thoughts for John and his doubts. Note too that John took the wise course by presenting his difficulties and uncertainties directly to the Lord. If he had inquired of the Pharisees, or others, he could have found no alleviation of his distress. Take it up with Jesus. That is always best, and in fact is the only way to solve problems and doubts. Note again that Jesus said, "Go show John AGAIN ..." (Matthew 11:4, KJV). This teaches that even the best men and the most faithful disciples need to be told "again and again" the wonderful things of Christ and his kingdom.

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- Spurgeon's Verse Expositions

Tell me the story slowly, That I may take it in. That wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin; Tell me the story often, For I forget so soon: The early dew of morning Has passed away at noon.[2]

- Hymn: "Tell Me the Old, Old Story"

[1] J. R. Dummelow, One Volume Commentary (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), p. 664.

[2] Kate Hankey, Hymn No. 227, "Tell Me the Old, Old Story" (Chicago: Great Songs Press, 1960).

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Verse 4

And Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and tell John the things which ye hear and see.

The King James Version has "Go and show John AGAIN ..." The word "again" does not occur in later versions, but the thought is surely included of RE-TEACHING John who was the first publicly to recognize and identify the Messiah. This is a constant and unvarying need in all ages for the church to keep stressing over and over again the great facts of the gospel. The Great Commission stresses teaching the taught, as does Paul's readiness to preach the gospel to members of the church in Rome (Romans 1:16).

Verse 5

The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

The miracles Jesus mentioned to John's messengers were precisely those which Isaiah identified with the advent of the Messiah (Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1). This was Christ's unique way of letting John know that he was indeed the Christ without phrasing it in terms that would have secular overtones.

Verse 6

And blessed is he, whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in me.

This earnest plea from Jesus' very heart and soul is a moving and powerful request that John would not take
ıse at our Lord's inability openly to declare himself at that time, nor at differences such as marked their
udes toward fasting. The absence of any further inquiries from John shows that John understood.

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Verse 7

And as these went on their way, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to behold? a reed shaken with the wind?

Jesus immediately launched into a dissertation on John and his ministry that revealed the very highest estimate of both. His praise of John the Baptist is unequaled by his praise of any other. "The reed shaken in the wind" suggested something of little importance, trivial, a minor curiosity. John was not that. It also suggests a man of weak and vacillating purpose. To speak such a thing in the context would both stimulate the popular admiration of John and, when the words were repeated to John, would more firmly establish his resistance against being blown about by changing winds of opinion. It was Jesus' way of saying, "John will stand firm. He is no reed bowing in whatever direction the wind blows."

Verse 8

But what went ye out to see? a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft raiment are in king's houses.

The comparison suggested a sycophant; and John certainly was not that. His rough garment of camel's hair put him in a different world. The implication would give greater strength to John and would tactfully remind him that he was no fawning flatterer of Herod who would change his witness of Christ in order to curry favor. The aptness of this reference to "soft raiment" is notable. Nearly 2,000 years after Jesus spoke those words, it is still true that the clothing that brings the highest price and is held as the most desirable is nearly always marked by its "softness"! This infinite perfection of all that Jesus said under any and all circumstances has often been noted. See more under Matthew 5:13. There is a quality of permanence and aptitude that marked all of our Lord's utterances.

Verse 9

But wherefore went ye out? to see a prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.

John was the last and greatest of the prophets, foretelling: (1) the near approach of the kingdom of God, (2) that Jesus would take away the sin of the world, and (3) that the Jewish nation would be destroyed for rejecting him (see under Matthew 3:10). He was more than a prophet in that he did not merely foretell the Messiah but presented him to the people and identified him. He was greatest also in his proximity to Christ, which is the final, ultimate test of greatness.

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verse 10

This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, Who shall prepare the way before thee.

Christ's selection of this prophecy from Malachi 3:1 and application of it to John proves two things: (1) that John the Baptist is that first messenger mentioned in that passage, and (2) that Jesus Christ is the Lord, "the messenger of the covenant" who even then had suddenly come to his temple.

Verse 11

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist: yet he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

This is but a continuation of the Saviour's logic in the preceding verse. Just as John was the greatest of the prophets because of his proximity to Christ, the apostles, and indeed all Christians, are greater than John because they are even closer, being "in him" as a result of the new birth. Since Christ is Lord, this statement concerning John became the fulfillment of the prophecy that John would "be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:15). The statement proves that: (1) John was not in the kingdom of Christ, and (2) the kingdom had not then been set up, else John would have been in it. The least in God's kingdom are greater than John because (1) their sins are forgiven, whereas those of John were merely rolled forward to the cross, and (2) they enjoy full fellowship with Christ in his kingdom.

Verse 12

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by force.

Admitted to be one of the difficult passages of the New Testament, this verse in all probability was accurately understood and expounded by McGarvey who wrote:

> Jesus here pictures the kingdom of heaven as a besieged city. The city is shut up, but the enemies which surround it storm its walls and try to force an entrance ... The gates of Christ's kingdom were not opened until the day of Pentecost (Acts 2); but men, hearing it was about to be opened, sought to enter it prematurely, not by the gates which God would open, ... but by such breaches as they themselves sought to make in its walls.[3]

Instances of such violence are: (1) Some tried to make him king by force (John 6:15). (2) the mother of James and John sought to obtain secular appointments for her sons in the kingdom (Matthew 20:21). (3) Some supposed the kingdom would appear immediately (Luke 19:11). (4) The apostles quarreled over who should be the greatest (Luke 22:24-30). (5) The apostles themselves seemed anxious for it to be done "at this time" (Acts 1:6). hermore, they envisioned a restoration of rule to Israel! McGarvey further wrote:

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> The people were full of preconceived ideas with regard to the kingdom, and each one sought to hasten and enjoy its pleasures as one who impatiently seizes upon a bud and seeks with his fingers

to force it to bloom. The context shows that even John the Baptist was then seeking to force the kingdom.[4]

This view does not rule out the possibility discussed above that there was an element of genuine doubt in John's mind. It is also of interest to note that some of the Ante-Nicenes referred this "violence" to the zeal men should have in striving after the kingdom, thus construing the words in a favorable sense; but without doubt, McGarvey's exegesis of this passage appears more safe and perceptive of the Saviour's true meaning.

[3] J. W. McGarvey, The Fourfold Gospel (Cincinnati, Ohio: The Standard Publishing Company), p. 283.

[4] Ibid., p. 284.

Verse 13

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

This signifies the end of all previous dispensations in John the Baptist, the notable person upon whom the hinges of God's economy began to open into the New Covenant. His proximity to Christ made him greater than Abraham, Moses, David, or any other of the great Old Testament worthies, revealing that the true test of greatness is proximity to Jesus.

Verse 14

And if ye are willing to receive it, this is Elijah, that is to come.

Basing their confident expectation of the return of Elijah before the advent of the Messiah upon Malachi 4:5,6, the Jews of Christ's day expected a literal return of the natural Elijah and had even tried to shake the faith of the apostles in Jesus' Messiahship because, in their view, Elijah had not yet come. Elijah did actually return and met with Christ on the mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:3); but in this passage, Christ revealed that the true intention of the prophecy was not a literal return of Elijah, but his spiritual return in the person of John the Baptist.

The Pharisees should have been able to see this for themselves, for these reasons: (1) The birth of John the Baptist was announced in the temple to Zacharias, one of the priests, in his regular course of duty, a fact which the Pharisees certainly knew. (2) This annunciation was made by an angel who quoted, almost verbatim, the remarkable words of Malachi's prophecy, applying them, even before he was born, to John the Baptist. (3) John's raiment of camel's hair and the leather thong was designed to identify him with Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8 and under Matthew 3:4). (4) The annunciator also said, "He shall go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). Elijah actually came, therefore, in both ways: (1) literally on the mount of Transfiguration, and (2) ˙tually in the person of John the Baptist. This did not prevent the Pharisees, however, from trying to subvert .ord's apostles by the allegation of their own biased views on the subject (Matthew 17:10). The scribes had one thing going for them in this attempted subversion in that John himself had said that he was not "that Elijah" (John 1:21). John's statement, however, in answer to their question, was given in the literal sense in which they

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asked it. He was not, in truth, that Elijah who had been translated. That the scribes' objections on such grounds had some weight with the apostles is evident in the pains Jesus took to answer it and remove it.

Verse 15

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

This means that those who desire to know the truth may find sufficient knowledge in the words of Christ, that spiritual things are discerned by those who are spiritual. The Pharisees did possess ears, but not such ears as were disposed to hear any of the noble truths pertaining to the kingdom of heaven.

Verse 16

But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the market-places, who call unto their fellows.

Christ loved little children and made them models of kingdom virtues (Matthew 18:1-6) and flatly declared that unto such "belongs the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:14). But here, Jesus used unruly and misbehaving children as a simile for the obdurate and unreasonable generation which rejected him and his kingdom. Such groups of spoiled and undisciplined children may still be observed playing in the marketplaces of the East.

Verse 17

And say, We piped unto you, and ye did not dance; we wailed, and ye did not mourn.

Translating this simile into the vernacular, it is just this: "Some wanted to play `wedding' and others said, `No! that's too happy.' Then they said, `Let's play funeral,' and the others said, `No! that's too sad?" The thought in this place suggests the proverb from colonial days in America, "You're damned if you do, and damned if you don't?" Jesus then proceeded to show that, in himself and John the Baptist, that generation had rejected both poles of righteous conduct without any reason whatever.

Verse 18

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a demon. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold, a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! And wisdom ...tified by her works.

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...n was an ascetic, living in the wilderness on the roughest of fare. Christ was sociable, even attending weddings, and eating with publicans and sinners. That unreasonable generation rejected both. John they

accused of having a demon; and Christ they vilified as a "glutton and winebibber." There was clearly no place in that society for any type of manifestation of God's righteousness, no matter what direction it took.

The following criticisms were directed against Christ: (1) He was called a glutton. (2) He was called a winebibber. (3) They said he cast out demons by the prince of demons (Matthew 9:34). (4) They called him Beelzebul (Matthew 10:25). (5) They called him a sinner (John 9:24). (6) They said he had a demon (John 7:20). (7) They said he was a Samaritan (John 8:48). (8) They charged him with violating the sabbath (Matthew 12:2). (9) They referred to him as a "deceiver" (Matthew 27:63). (10) They accused him of friendship with publicans and sinners (Luke 15:2). In that last calumny, they overreached themselves, because what they intended as a slander is in fact the glory of our Lord, namely, that he is a friend of publicans and sinners.

And wisdom is justified by her works ... means that both John and Jesus were doing the will of God.

Verse 20

Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not.

The New Testament records only a few of the mighty works done in Capernaum and only one at Bethsaida-Julius, where the five thousand were fed. The wonder of why those cities did not repent remains and can be explained only upon the basis that the majority of mankind are not disposed to repentance, even if the Christ himself should be their instructor, if the disciples should be their preachers, and if the leading citizens should have their sick healed and their dead raised, as was true of Capernaum where Jairus' daughter was raised and the servant of the centurion was cured.

Verse 21

Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon which were done in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

All three of these cities, situated within three or four miles of each other, were prosperous and populous in that day; and at least two of the Lord's apostles, Peter and Andrew, came from Bethsaida (John 1:44). Capernaum was the residence of Jesus and is called "his own city" (Matthew 9:1). Chorazin is nowhere else mentioned in the New Testament. McGarvey wrote that "When the time came for evangelizing the Gentiles, Tyre and Sidon accepted the gospel, and verified the words of the text" (Acts 21:3-6; 27:3).

Verse 22

' say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you.

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Again we have an example of our Lord's designation of the final judgment as "THE DAY"! The amazing thing in this place is the relatively lighter punishment projected for Tyre and Sidon as compared with the cities Jesus upbraided. Christ plainly declared that Tyre and Sidon would enjoy a more "endurable" status. This, to be sure, is

far from saying that their state should be described as "desirable"! Yet the so-called "degrees of punishment" hint at a mystery of which we have no sure knowledge. Concerning these things, L. S. White, pioneer minister of great ability, was accustomed to say, "God is too wise to make a mistake and too good to do wrong." (On "the day" of judgment, see under Matthew 12:41.)

Verse 23

And thou, Capernaum, shalt thou be exalted unto heaven? thou shalt go down unto Hades: for if the mighty works had been done in Sodom which were done in thee, it would have remained until this day.

See notes on Matthew 11:22, above. This indicates that if Christ, instead of an angel, had visited Sodom, the people would have repented, and the city would have been spared. How favored, then, must be considered those men who have the privilege of knowing Christ and his saving gospel! Conversely, how reprehensible shall they be held who reject his word! A more terrible punishment awaits those who sin against the light. Let men lay it to heart. The gospel will either bless or curse those who hear it. Paul wrote, "For we are a sweet savor of Christ unto God, in them that are saved, and in them that perish; to the one, a savor from death unto death, to the other, a savor from life unto life" (2 Corinthians 2:15,16). Note too another reference to "the day" of judgment. See on Matthew 12:41ff.

Exalted unto heaven ... refers to the prosperity and general favor in which Capernaum reposed. This appears from the fact that her debasement is not to be in Gehenna, but in Hades, indicating a loss of her position and destruction of her beauty. The literal fulfillment of the Saviour's prophecy can be attested by any traveler who has stumbled over doubtful rubble and sought among ruins to find even the site of that unfortunate city that rejected the Christ. Moreover, an even more awful fate than her physical destruction awaits her citizens in the day of judgment, as may be seen by a glance at the following verse.

Verse 24

But I say unto you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.

The mystery of why more was not done for Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon, and other wicked cities of the remote past, should be contemplated with the deepest reverence for the wisdom and righteousness of God. It is not given men to know the "why" concerning many of the "deep things of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10).

Verse 25

At that season Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou didst hide e things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes.

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Jesus, in this prayer, addressed God as "Father," and called him "Lord." This is in marked contrast to some today who speak in their prayers to God, addressing the Eternal as "You"! Christians should give honor to whom it is

due (Romans 13:7); and such a palsy-walsy approach to God appears, in the eyes of this expositor, as falling short of that admonition. The Britannica's World Language Edition of Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary lists "thou" and similar terms as obsolete, "except as an address to deity." Originally, such words as "thou" had a connotation of intimacy or even contempt, but long usage has exactly reversed the position and meaning of "thou" and "you." A similar crossover in which words exchanged meanings is seen in "ghost" and "spirit," each meaning exactly what the other did in 1611! Confusion naturally exists in such a situation, at least in some degree; but it cannot be denied that popular usage still favors what has become the more formal "thou" as an address to deity. See under Matthew 14:26.

The basis of rejoicing that the Father had revealed his wisdom to "babes" is found in the apostles' lack of sophistication, pride, and intellectual arrogance. They were not worldly wise, wedded to preconceived notions, or doctrinaire. The advantage of this, from Christ's point of view, was noted by McGarvey:

> The wise and prudent were so wedded to tradition and false theories that the truth would not have been so safe in their keeping, as in that of men fresh from the masses of the people.[5]

Also from McGarvey,

> It is certain that the chief corrupters of the truth in every age have sprung from the former class of men; and that (2) the fact that the gospel was originally established in the earth by the labors of the poor and illiterate in the face of bitter opposition from the rich and powerful, is an overwhelming argument in its favor.[6]

However, it should be rejected that the Lord's apostles were lacking in truly intellectual gifts. They were, it is true, unspoiled by the philosophy and vain deceit of men, but they were diamonds in the rough, peculiarly fitted to receive without bias and to communicate without adulteration the pure truth of the gospel of salvation. Also, being men of the outdoors, they were especially able and accurate eyewitnesses of such things as the miracles.

[5] J. W. McGarvey, Commentary on Matthew (Delight, Arkansas: The Gospel Light Publishing Company), p. 101.

[6] Ibid., p. 102.

Verse 26

Yea, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in thy sight.

This shows the oneness between Christ and the Father and also indicates the propriety of including expressions in prayers, besides requests and thanks.

Verse 27

Ads Free**ıings have been delivered unto me of my Father; and no one knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any know the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him.**

There is positively no other way to know God except through Christ (John 14:6). Man's only hope of eternal life lies in a knowledge of God, and this is possible only through Jesus Christ. In a practical sense, this means that the New Testament is the only source of accurate knowledge of God in matters pertaining to salvation; for, of all the books on earth, there is not another source, save only the New Testament, of the teachings of Christ. The positive, unqualified uniqueness of the New Testament is more and more apparent with the passing of each generation.

Verse 28

Come unto me, all ye that labor 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 in heart: and ye shalt find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

THE GREAT INVITATION

Again we have in this place, and in Matthew 11:27 preceding, words from Christ which demand that we hail him as God Incarnate, or a fool. That only he knows the Father, that he will give all the weary rest, that only those may know God to whom Christ reveals him - these are all statements that cannot be reconciled with ordinary man. Christ was more than a man, and every line of the New Testament emphasizes this transcendent fact.

These last three verses of Matthew 11 are called the Great Invitation. Those invited are "all ye that labor and are heavy laden." Christ's teaching has a special appeal for the poor, the downtrodden, the despised, rejected, and suffering of earth; but it is incorrect to assume that only these are invited. Rather, all people are invited to fly unto Jesus for peace and redemption; and, in one sense or another, at one time or another, by some means or another, every soul ever born into this world is "weary," "heavy laden," and troubled by the common sorrows and calamities to which flesh is heir. In this larger view of the unmitigated sorrow in which all men dwell, the Great Invitation excludes no one. The common burden of sin, sickness, death, doubt, disillusionment, and sorrow is an invariable heritage of every man coming into the world. Reasons why men should come to Christ are: (1) for the rest he will give, (2) for the rest they will find, and (3) because Christ is meek and lowly in heart, thus fully qualified to provide sympathy, love, understanding, and whatever else may be required to alleviate human distress and to provide eternal life.

The means of accomplishing all this is the "yoke" of Christ. What is that? Men are naturally leery of yokes; and Christ adds that his yoke is easy and his burden light. Christ's metaphor here is best understood by those who have journeyed to those lands where yokes are still found upon men's shoulders. In Pusan, this writer once saw a Korean Papa-San struggling up an inclined road with an incredibly large burden of hay. The progression of that haystack up that road appeared absolutely impossible, until investigation revealed the secret. The worker was using an "A-frame," padded, and fitted across his shoulders. The long sides of the "A" came down almost to the ground, and the cross member formed the span across his shoulders. The hay was ingeniously rigged on the frame. By placing his shoulders in the proper place, by stooping down and bending his knees, the worker could
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he whole load by straightening up. He would then stagger a few steps forward; and, when exhausted, he ld flex his knees, stoop slightly, and rest the entire load on the ground. After resting a moment he would proceed, and in that manner moved the whole load half a mile! Now that "A-frame" itself was a burden, but it was the burden that enabled him to carry an immensely greater burden which would have been impossible without the "A-frame." In exactly the same manner, Christ's burden, his "yoke," is the burden that makes all other burdens

bearable. Under the yoke of Christ, men can withstand all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. They can carry whatever burdens of sorrow, misfortune, disease, or mortality that may come upon them - burdens which, if undertaken without his "yoke," would surely crush the unfortunate attempting to carry his burden alone.

It only remains to inquire, "How may men take Christ's yoke upon them?" This is done, as he said, by those who "learn" of him. This refers to hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized, and walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. People take Christ's yoke upon them by obeying the gospel and taking up their full duties and obligations in the church which is Christ's body. That such is surely a burden or "yoke," none may deny; but it is a burden which makes all other burdens light.

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