

Galatians 6:1-10

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn back to Galatians chapter 6 for a few moments, and we're going to reflect particularly on verse 2 and on verse 5.

And they seem to be contradictory statements, but let's leave that just for the moment. If any of you ever read a book by an American author called Tim O'Brien, a book called *The Things They Carried*.

It's a selection of short stories brilliantly written about the Vietnam War. It's about a fictional group of soldiers in the American 23rd Infantry Division, the things they carried.

Well, what were the things that they carried? Well, O'Brien gives us a list. He put it like this. The things they carried were largely determined by necessity.

Among the necessities or near necessities were can openers, pocket knives, wrist watches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, sweeties as we would say, cigarettes, salt, lighters, matches, sewing kits, rations, two or three canteens of water.

[1 : 30] And together, those items weighed between 15 and 20 pounds. Those were the things that they carried. To that, he could have added, but he didn't actually add that, a three-pound entrenching tool, a three-pound machete, and their weapons, including eight grenades.

So the average weight carried by an infantryman in hot and humid Vietnam was 85 pounds. Plus, they took it in turns to carry a 30-pound radio set between them.

But then, O'Brien adds to all that by saying they carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing.

These were the intangibles. But the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity. And then a little later on, he adds, some of them carried shameful memories.

The things they carried. So what am I driving at by talking about this at the beginning of a sermon this evening?

[2 : 47] Well, simply this. If soldiers carry burdens, so too do Christian soldiers. And perhaps you're very conscious of the burden that you carried with you into church this evening.

And even as you sit here, with God's word opened, you can feel it pressing upon you. Not on your shoulders, but on your mind and upon your heart.

And it's heavy. What's in your pack today? Have you come this evening troubled and perplexed?

A load on your mind, a weight on your heart. Are you troubled, as David was in the psalm that we sang, of the memories of things that he had done wrong when he was a young man?

The sins and the faults of youth, as he put it. Are you crushed under today's burdens? Or are you worried about future possibilities?

[4 : 01] And maybe, perhaps there is, a communal burden now upon the congregation in the circumstances that you currently find yourselves in.

And maybe there's an additional burden. It's the burden of feeling guilty that you feel burdened.

Now, life's common burdens include the burden of suffering, the burden of frailty, the burden of grief and disappointment, the burden of Christian immaturity, the burden of a guilty conscience.

And it's a very well-known hymn, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. Writer Joseph Scriven asks, *Are you weak, or are we weak?*

He includes himself. *Are we weak and heavy laden, lumbered, cumbered, with a load of care? And surely our answer tonight, if we're honest, is yes.*

[5 : 09] *I am cumbered, I am lumbered, with a load of care. In one way or another, I'm burdened, and I'm troubled. So, what's to be done about it?*

What's to be done about it? Paul helps us. Galatians chapter 6 helps us. Verse 2 helps us, and verse 5 helps us as well. So, let's take verse 5 first.

Verse 5, what do we read there? For each one should carry their own load. Well, as you started to listen to me talking about carrying burdens and loads, whether it's the burden of the past, the weight of the present, the anticipation of the future, the last thing you wanted me to say, wasn't it? You carry your own load. That's not what you wanted to hear. But that's what Paul says to the Galatian Christians, who are equally burdened and oppressed and struggling. Each one of you says, carry your own burdens. Carry your own load, as the NIV puts it. [6 : 22] So, let me say right at the beginning, this does not apply to every burden that you're carrying. It doesn't apply to every burden you're carrying.

Indeed, perhaps it doesn't apply to most of the burdens that you're carrying. But it does apply to some. We are undoubtedly responsible to carry some loads ourselves.

Each one should carry their own load. What's Paul driving at? Well, first of all, let me say, although there's a seeming contradiction with verse 2, which tells us carry each other's burdens, there is in fact no contradiction.

In verse 5, Paul talks about bearing our own load, carrying our own load, and in verse 2, carrying each other's burdens. And the translators have got two different words in there because Paul uses two different words.

What he talks about as a load is not the same as what he talks about as a burden. We carry our own loads. We bear one another's burdens. The word load that Paul uses there in verse 5 is the word that was used to describe a Roman soldier's pack.

[7 : 51] The personal kit each serviceman was expected to carry and not burden his fellow soldiers with. A burden is quite different as we'll come to see that later on.

In the British Army, it's an offence to lose your personal kit. And it's even more serious if it becomes such a nuisance to you that you decide it's inconvenient and you throw it away.

In the Roman army of Paul's day, dumping your kit was a capital offence. You would be beaten to death by your fellow soldiers for doing that.

So verse 5, each one should carry their own load, does not refer to an oppressive weight that is too large for one person to carry.

It refers to the normal load, the normal responsibilities, the normal duties that we as soldiers of Jesus Christ must accept, must shoulder, and must bear.

[9 : 10] In the final reckoning, you can't carry my load, but I can't carry yours. We each stand before God as individuals.

I can't duck my personal responsibility to God, and you cannot duck yours. So taking verse 5 with verse 4, it teaches us not to harshly judge how other people cope.

Verse 4 says, each should test their own actions, and they can take pride in themselves alone without comparing themselves to someone else. We're to test our own work, and we're to be ready to stand over it.

That's the first thing we learn, that we've got a responsibility. It's our responsibility. We have to shoulder it. And God calls us to account with regard to that.

But the second thing we learn here is that we must bear one another's burdens. We must bear one another's burdens. Verse 2, carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.

[10 : 28] Carry each other's burdens. This is a command. Paul's standing in now for the commanding officer, and he's giving his orders, and he's saying to the Christians in Galatia, you can't live your life only thinking about carrying your own load, because other people, as well as the load, their own responsibility, they're carrying a lot of other baggage as well.

And we don't live as islands each to ourselves. We've got to get under one another's burdens. Share them. So it's a command.

It's an imperative. It's something that we absolutely must do. Well, actually, it's not Paul's command. It's Christ's command. And it's Christ's command contained in John chapter 13 and verse 34, a new command I give to you.

Jesus said, Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. See the connection. Carry each other's burden, says Paul, and in this way, you will fulfill the law, the new command of Jesus Christ.

And those words of Jesus so impressed his followers, you say, particularly John, that John echoes it more than one occasion.

[11:52] He records it in John's gospel, in his gospel, and he echoes it on more than one occasion in his letters. So 1 John 3, verse 23, John brings this out as a core Christian value.

He says, and this is his command. This is his command. Now, you know, it's not as though Jesus only told us to do one thing. He had a lot of commands for us, a lot of instructions. But he's saying, when you sum them all up, when you get to the very heart of the whole matter, it's loving one another.

It's being there for one another. It's bearing one another's burdens. And taking our place in bearing the communal load.

As I say that, what comes to mind is a clip that I saw, a YouTube clip, not that long ago. And it was of a Mennonite community in North America. And they'd just built a new building.

[12:56] I'm not sure if it was a barn or a church, whatever it was. And they built it in one place. And that church had to be carried, completed, to another place.

And you see all these, I was going to say, little men, because they look little men compared to that building. And they're all getting their shoulders under it. And you can see them moving, the whole building, taking their part in, bearing the load of that communal place of worship.

Well, it's not the building that we're going to have to lift and carry. Couldn't do that with this building. Not with Aberdeen Granite, anyway. But we are going to get, or you're going to have to get under the load, under the burden, the Bon Accord Church as a fellowship of living men and women and young people.

So John writes, and this is his command that we should believe in the name of his son Jesus and love one another, even as he gave us commandment. Well, imagine yourself there with John in the upper room and the other disciples.

And you hear Jesus say this, this is my new commandment, that you love one another. And you know what you'd think immediately? Well, what's new about that? That's but an echo of what has been written time after time after time in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Old Testament.

[14:27] There's nothing new about that. There's nothing new about the commandment. What was new about it is how you do it.

A new commandment I give to you, love one another. And then Jesus qualifies it, as I have loved you, so you must love one another. The command is longstanding.

What's new about it is Jesus shows us how to do it. Do it as I do it, he's saying. Well, there's a series of sermons in itself.

The newness of the commandment is the example that Jesus sets. So, how do we love one another? How do we share and bear one another's oppressive burdens?

And the answer is, as Jesus did. As Jesus did. And of course, he did it with huge self-sacrifice and cost to himself.

[15:43] Someone very fancifully, but I think it's very striking. I think it was the late Alec Motier in one of his commentaries, imagined that in the days before Jesus' public ministry, that there might have been a sign swinging over the door of the Nazareth carpenter's shop.

And on the sign, there was advertising. It said, Joseph and son, our yokes fit well. Our yokes fit well. See, a well-fitting yoke was important. Each yoke was tailor-made to a specific ox or donkey. If it wasn't tailor-made, if it was just the generic bit of equipment, you wouldn't get the best out of that animal's plowing or pulling or whatever it was that they were doing.

A properly shaped yoke helped the animal to bear his load. So when in his public ministry, Jesus sees people bowed down under oppressive burdens, he was deeply concerned that no one was helping them to bear their burdens.

Indeed, the religious leaders were busy adding to their burdens. There were the commandments of God. Burden enough. But then they were adding all sorts of other rules and regulations that they'd concocted out of their heads but imagined that they'd found in God's word.

[17:18] And so it was that Jesus' famous invitation goes out. 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. And Jesus lightens for us the burden of living a life pleasing to God by bearing our bigger load of guilt and failure.

failure. He takes that on himself and he carries that to his cross. And not only is he put to death upon the cross but our guilt is nailed to the cross and our failures are nailed to the cross and our

failures in all three tenses, past, present and future.

They've gone. He's put them to death. They've been eradicated. And he wants us to feel the lightning of our load.

I don't know when you last read Pilgrim's Progress if you've ever read Pilgrim's Progress. If you haven't, get a copy and read it. Indispensable Christian reading.

[18 : 46] Whatever else you've read, put it down. Whatever else you're reading put it down, get a copy of Pilgrim's Progress and read it. Fantastic. And here's poor old Christian, the pilgrim.

And he's got a huge burden on his back. He's not really sure what his burden is at first. But it comes clear to him what it is. It's his guilt and his failure and his relationship with God.

And eventually, through all sorts of ups and downs and difficult ways and through bogs and marshes and narrow roads, he finds his way to the foot of the cross.

And there at the foot of the cross, as he looks at the cross, as he sees Jesus dying for him there, something very wonderful happens. The straps that hold the burden to his back suddenly fail.

And that burden falls from his back. And it tumbles down the hillside. And where does it end up? In a grave. In a grave.

[19 : 54] That's what Jesus does. He takes that big burden of guilt and failure. He wants us to give it to him. In fact, he doesn't even want that transaction so much as for us to look at him in faith and recognize him.

We don't need to know all the ins and the outs of what he was doing on the cross. It takes a life to begin to explore that. But he wants us to see there him lightening our burden, taking our guilt, taking our failure and getting rid of it and burying it in the tomb.

So that in the transaction is that in its place he gives us a yoke that is an instrument of work that is productive, that is useful, and it's light and it's easy.

And we're called to follow Jesus' example by doing for others to some extent. We can never match what he did, of course, but by doing for others what he has done for us by helping people to throw off those man-made encumbrances and burdens and to bear with those that cannot or perhaps even ought not to be taken away.

And this is what throughout history church leaders have called the communion of the saints, that we're all in it together and we share one another's burdens.

[21 : 26] We accept each other as brothers and sisters and we help one another deal with worry and fear and temptation and doubt and sorrow.

And this is what we pledge ourselves to do when we affirm in the words of the Apostles' Creed. Do you ever use the Apostles' Creed in Bon Accord in services? It's good to do it and certainly good to read it.

When you read the Apostles' Creed and you say it from the heart, you affirm this fundamental principle, I believe, I believe in the communion of the saints.

I believe in the solidarity of the people of God. I believe that the burden that my brother and my sister has is my burden to help them to share it and to lighten the load.

So that's the second thing. We must bear our own burdens, our own loads, our own loads. We must bear one another's burdens. So we haven't got rid of a problem.

[22 : 33] We've added more to it. We've got our own loads and now we've got one another's burdens. Please. It's too much.

It's too much. Well, finally, there's good news for both burden bearers and burden sharers. Paul's command reflecting Jesus' new commandment sounds like good news for burden bearers.

But then what about the burden sharers? Isn't Jesus saying, hey, you've got your own loads and now I'm adding to that the burdens of those around you.

Here are some more. clearly we need some very specialized heavy lifting gear if we're to deal with this load of loads. And where does it come from?

Well, look at the text once more. If bearing one another's burdens fulfills the law of Christ, surely that must mean that at some level Christ himself bears the burdens that we corporately carry.

[23 : 49] How does he do it? How does he do it? Well, have you heard of the poem Footprints? I don't know about you, but millions of copies must have been hung up in millions of bathrooms all over the world.

I don't know why it goes into people's bathrooms, but that's usually where you find it, isn't it? And you see a lovely picture of a sandy beach and there's a line of footprints receding into the distance

and overprinted of these words.

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noted footprints in the sand.

Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times only one. I noticed that during those periods of my life when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints.

So I said to the Lord, you promised me, Lord, that you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life, there has only been one set of footprints in the sand.

[24 : 57] Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me? The Lord replied, those times when you see only one set of footprints, my child, are the times that I carried you.

Well, footprints in the sand. Sentimental slush or authentic Christian truth?

I've heard it criticized, denounced, pulled apart. I think I did my share of it in earlier days.

But I've come to accept it as a perfectly valid expression of important Bible teaching. The idea of being carried by God is found right throughout the Bible.

You go back to Deuteronomy chapter 1, Moses asks the people, how did you make it through the desert? He's doing a review. A debrief, if you like, before they move into the promised land.

[26 : 11] How did you make out? How did you get through the desert? How did you overcome your enemies? How was it that you were always fed? How was it your clothes never wore out?

And you're still wearing, 40 years later, the shoes, well, not quite, but still wearing the shoes that were handed on to you by the generation that perished in the wilderness. And of course, it's a rhetorical question and he doesn't expect them to answer because he gives the answer.

And the answer is this, the Lord your God carried you. The Lord your God carried you. The Lord your God carried you as a father carries his son.

Or a mother, her daughter, for that matter. all the way until you reach this place. There's so many places where we want to put emphasis.

You want to re-read it and put the emphasis in different places each time you do read it. The Lord your God carried you as a father carries his son.

[27 : 21] I met somebody this morning. They've just had a baby in their family and mum was going down to the creche to make sure she was okay because mum had been up in the service and obviously she hadn't been sent for so the assumption was that she was okay.

Well she was okay and she got to the creche. I don't know what kind of a creche you've got in this church. It must be exceedingly boring because the child fell fast asleep immediately and slept right through creche.

And down to coffee this morning a group of us rang chatting away normal voice baby slept through it all. Dad was carrying it. Serenity the peace the tranquility Dad was carrying mum was carrying somebody was carrying and we as Christians the Lord your God has carried you.

As a father carries his son all the way all see that's where footsteps is wrong. that's where footsteps is wrong.

There never was two line of footprints. There only ever was one carried you the whole way until you reach this place.

[28 : 38] And that's not the conclusion of that is not he's putting you down now and leaving you to make your own journey on your own way it's not that at all. Then Isaiah 46 and verses verses 1 to 4 listen to me writes Isaiah speaking on behalf of God listen to me you who have been born by me from before your birth carried from the womb even to your own age I am he and to grey hairs yes I've got them I will carry you I have made you I will bear you I will carry you I will rescue you.

you see God carries our burdens and bears our burdens not by taking them off our shoulders but by carrying us by carrying us and so in Isaiah 53 we read that the suffering servant has borne our griefs carried our sorrows bore the sin of many and that of course takes us wherever we've already been tonight but it takes us back to the cross and there God's grace lifted my greatest burden the burden of my guilt and shame that stems from my rebellion and disobedience and the logic of the gospel is this if God bears my heaviest load will he not also bear my relatively lighter ones as well or strengthen me to be able to carry them and the answer is yes of course he will the old sentimental song is absolutely right days are filled with sorrow and care hearts are lonely and drear but burdens are lifted at Calvary

Jesus is very near now does this all mean I will feel my burden grow lighter I will feel myself being lifted and carried and I think the honest answer is probably not probably not this isn't about how we feel Elizabeth and I when we hit our 25th wedding anniversary good few years ago now we're heading for the 50th but our 25th anniversary we got a tremendous treat from our kids we were taken I was told to be home by half past four dressed casually and ask no questions and get in the car so being a dutiful father I'd bade my children and driven off down into the countryside of Sussex and into a field and there was a balloon and they'd bought a balloon trip for us and we went up in the balloon and it was fantastic it was really most enjoyable thing not done it since and I don't know why because it really was so good probably because it was so expensive but it took all three of them to club together to pay for it but it really was fantastic now

I had a camera hanging around my neck and as that balloon lifted Elizabeth and lifted me and lifted our pilot and therefore lifted my burden my camera did I feel the weight of the camera any the less no no they didn't take us beyond the pull of gravity thankfully I still felt that burden but I was being lifted we were being lifted we were being transported we were 7,000 feet at one point and at another point we literally could pick the leaves off the top of a tree it was a fantastic experience and we went gently with the breeze and because we were going the same speed as the breeze we didn't feel the breeze what a lot of parables there are in that the way God helps us but that old camera still was just as heavy around my neck and so it is when God lifts us and carries us we still feel the burdens we still feel what is oppressing us but we know that he's lifting us and he's lifting us individually and as families and as a church family and he's taking us from where we are now to where he wants us to be so it's unlikely we will actually feel the difference of being carried by God hence the perplexity that lies behind the footprints poem but better by far than trusting in my feelings is to be convinced of the authority of God's word assuring me that he will do all the heavy lifting and when I as an individual know that that helps me to get my shoulder under my brother or sister's burdens and so work out in action

Christ's law of love may he bless his word to us tonight I think we appropriately sing his mercy is more