He who bore the atoning yoke has asked us to “take my yoke upon you and learn of me.” Indeed, the taking of Jesus’ yoke upon us is what constitutes serious discipleship.

How grateful I am that we may rejoice in God’s great gift of immortality, unearned and universally given to mankind through the Resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). However, God’s greatest gift—eternal life—will be given only to a comparative few: those who respond to Jesus’ invitation, “Come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). The great gift of the Resurrection, therefore, will be “added upon” by the exaltation inherent in eternal life, which is contingent upon the degree of our discipleship. Thus, it is Jesus’ invitation to discipleship that I would like to discuss.

When Jesus took upon Himself the heavy, atoning yoke in order to redeem all mankind by paying the agonizing price for our sins, He thereby experienced what He Himself termed the “fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God” (D&C 76:107). The phrase itself makes the soul tremble. Jesus also volunteered to take upon Himself additional agony in order that He might experience and thus know certain things “according to the flesh,” namely human sicknesses and infirmities and human griefs, including those not associated with sin (see Alma 7:11–12). Therefore, as a result of His great Atonement, Jesus was filled with unique empathy and with perfect mercy.

In turn, He who bore the atoning yoke has asked us to “take my yoke upon you, and learn of me” (Matt. 11:29). So the taking of Jesus’ yoke upon us constitutes serious discipleship. There is no greater calling, no greater challenge, and no greater source of joy—both proximate joy and ultimate joy—that which is found in the process of discipleship. This process brings its own joys and reassurances. We must not, however, expect the world to understand or to value our discipleship; they will not. In a way, they may admire us from afar, but they will be puzzled about the priorities resulting from our devotion.

Shouldering the yoke of discipleship greatly enhances both our adoration and knowledge of Jesus, because then we experience, firsthand, through our parallel but smaller-scaled experiences, a small but instructive portion of what the Savior experienced. In this precious process, the more we do what Jesus did—allow our wills to be “swallowed up in the will of the Father”—the more we will learn of Jesus (Mosiah 15:7). This emulation directly enhances our adoration of Jesus.

Simultaneously, in this same process, the more we become like Jesus, the more we come to know Him. There may even be, more than we now know, some literalness in His assertion, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these [page 13] my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40). We lack deep understanding of the implications of that remark of Jesus. As with so many things, He is telling us more than we are now prepared to receive.

The Prophet Joseph Smith, writing redemptively to his rebellious brother, said to William, “God requires the will of his creatures, to be swallowed up in his will.” The Prophet Joseph then pled with William to make “one tremendous effort … [to] overcome [his] passions, and please God” (The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, comp. Dean C. Jessee [1984], 115). Alas, William didn’t do it, just as some of us fail to overcome our passions and thereby fail to please God. We are too busy pleasing ourselves.

In contrast, meek Enoch reached a point in his discipleship, wrote Paul, when he received a testimony that he pleased God (see Heb. 11:5). Ponder that. One can come to that point where one knows that he or she pleases God.

Knowledge Alone Cannot Save Us

One mistake we can make during this mortal experience is to value knowledge apart from the other qualities to be developed in submissive discipleship. Knowledge—discovery, its preservation, its perpetuation—is very important. Yet, being knowledgeable while leaving undeveloped the virtues [page 14] of love, mercy, meekness, and patience is not enough for full discipleship. Mere intellectual assent to a truth deprives us of the relevant, personal experiences that come from applying what we profess to believe. There were probably orientation briefings in the premortal world about how this mortal life would unfold for us, but the real experience is another thing!
Thus, while knowledge is clearly very important, standing alone it cannot save us. I worry sometimes that we get so busy discussing the doctrines in various Church classes that talking about them almost becomes a substitute for applying them. One cannot improve upon the sobering words of King Benjamin, who said, “Now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10). Such is still the test. Deeds, not words—and becoming, not describing—are dominant in true discipleship.

Of necessity, of course, we are to teach and learn the doctrines. We would be spiritually stranded without them and, likewise, without the saving and exalting gospel ordinances, because “in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.”

“And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh” (D&C 84:20–21).

So it is that discipleship requires all of us to translate doctrines, covenants, ordinances, and teachings into improved personal behavior. Otherwise we may be doctrinally rich but end up developmentally poor.

The celestial attributes, such as love, patience, mercy, meekness, and submissiveness, embody what we are to become. They are not just a litany of qualities to be recited. Awareness of them—even articulate awareness—without their application will not do. Moreover, these same attributes cannot be developed in the abstract. The relevant experiences are required, even when you and I would try to avoid them. Moreover, in an ultimate sense our individual developmental schedules reflect God’s timetable, not ours, for God will not withhold from us certain growing experiences that He, in His infinite wisdom, allows us to undergo for our eternal benefit. His timetable, if followed, prepares us incrementally for the journey of discipleship and for going home.

Any serious disciple yearns to go home to Heavenly Father and to be welcomed there by Jesus. But the Prophet Joseph Smith declared we cannot go where They are unless we become more like Them in the principles and attributes and character They possess (see Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith [1976], 216).

Of the many restored truths, God has surely given us enough and to spare. Soberingly, however, we have been told that “unto whom much is given much is required” (D&C 82:3). I hope we feel the cutting edge of the word required. It is used instead of the milder expected. Neither does the Lord say, “It would be nice if …” The word is required, bringing us back again to the need for submissiveness in discipleship.

The Burden of the Natural Man

The gospel’s rich and true doctrines combine to constitute a call to a new and more abundant life, but this is a lengthy process. It requires much time, experiencing the relevant learning experiences, the keeping of covenants, and the receiving of the essential ordinances—all in order to spur us along the discipleship path of personal progression. In the journey of discipleship, we lose our old selves. The natural man and the natural woman are “put off,” and then we find ourselves become more saintly (see Mosiah 3:19). One sees such saintliness all about him in the Church—quiet, good women and men, not particularly concerned with status, who are becoming saintly. This is what should be happening in the lives of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Yet, walking and overcoming by faith are not easy. For one thing, the dimension of time constantly constrains our perspective. Likewise, the world steadily tempts us. No wonder we are given instructive words from Jesus about the narrowness and the straightness of the only path available to return home: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). He also said in that same verse, “No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” Jesus has laid down strict conditions.

We live in a world in which, happily, many others regard themselves as Christians. Some live rich and marvelous lives. But there are some who style themselves as Christians who admire but do not worship Jesus. Some regard Him as a great teacher but not as the Great Redeemer. Yes, Jesus is the generous Lord of the expansive universe, but He is also Lord of the narrow path! Some people forget His latter Lordship.

The ravines on both sides of that narrow path are deep and dangerous. Moreover, until put off, the shifting, heavy, unsettling burden of the natural man tilts us and sways us. It is dangerous.

Nor does the natural man or the natural woman go away quietly or easily. Hence the most grinding form of calisthenics we will ever know involves the individual isometrics required to put off the natural man. Time and again, the new self is pitted against the stubborn old self. Sometimes, just when at last we think the job is done, the old self reminds us that he or she has not fully departed yet.

A vital, personal question for each of us, therefore, is, Are we steadily becoming what gospel doctrines are designed to help us become? Or are we merely rich inheritors of an immense treasure trove of truth but poor investors in the process of personal development so essential to discipleship?

Significantly, when the Lord God described His
purposes by saying, “This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). He uses the word work, even though His is a “marvelous work.” For us, becoming like His Son, or “even as [Jesus is],” certainly is work! (3 Ne. 27:27). Of necessity, this process requires the cross of discipleship to be taken up daily—not occasionally or seasonally.

Sometimes, as we commence taking up the cross, we ignore or neglect the first part of Jesus’ instruction. He said, “Deny [yourselves], and take up [your] cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). This self-denial is especially challenging in a world filled with so many sensual and secular stimuli. In our time, greed and lust, though they have always been friends, have never formed quite the cartel they have formed now. It is global; it is so profitable.

Denying oneself has never been popular as a lifestyle, and it is clearly not today. Self-denial is portrayed by many as too puritanical and too ascetic. Scoffers have acquired powerful pulpits from which they bray their message, which constantly puts down discipleship and encourages the natural man to think highly of himself and to please himself.

What is it that we are to deny ourselves? The ascendancy of any appetites or actions which produce not only the seven deadly sins but all the others. Happily, self-denial, when we practice it, brings great relief. It represents emancipation from all the “morning after” feelings, whether caused by adultery or gluttony. Being concerned with tomorrow, true disciples are very careful about today! Self-denial also includes not letting our hearts become too set on any trivial or worldly thing. Then we can learn the great lessons about the relationship of righteousness to the powers and the joys of heaven.

The fundamental fact is that if we do not deny ourselves, we are diverted. Even if not wholly consumed with the things of the world, we are still diverted sufficiently to make serious discipleship impossible. As a consequence, all the gifts and talents God has given us are not put meekly on the altar to serve others and to please God. Instead, we withhold to please ourselves. Diversion, therefore, is not necessarily gross transgression, but it is a genuine deprivation, especially if we consider what we might have become and what more we might have done to bless and to help others.

Ironically, the natural man, who is so very selfish in so many ordinary ways, is strangely unselfish in that he reaches for too few of the things that bring real joy. He settles for a mess of pottage instead of eternal joy.

By denying the desires of the natural man to the degree that they exist in each of us, we avoid this diversion, making it easier for us to take up the cross of discipleship. Of course, when it occurs in our lives, emancipation from various forms of bondage brings no celebrating parades, nor does it make the evening news. But it is big news because we “come off conqueror” (D&C 10:5).

So it is that discipleship, far from being ascetic, is to choose joy over pleasure. It is to opt for the things of eternity over the trendy and appealing things of the moment. Eventually, we become readied for the final moment of consecration, when, gladly and completely, we let our wills be swallowed up in the will of the Father. Jesus did this in Gethsemane, where he said, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). What was God’s will? That Jesus complete the Atonement. Even so, Jesus prayed, “Take away this cup from me” (Mark 14:36); and still later he cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Yet Jesus yielded.

**The Great Pivot**

Is it possible to develop discipleship when one has no initial, inner desires for discipleship? Can we plant inner desires in someone against his or her will? External exhortation of such individuals won’t usually produce much change. For most of us, however, even when the inner desire is there, it requires periodic sharpening by outward circumstances to quicken any existing inner desires and to get us to act upon them. It was so with Abraham. Abraham desired a better life: more happiness and the blessings of the holy priesthood (see Abr. 1:1–2). Outward circumstances were a spur to Abraham’s yearnings, but clearly he had firm and basic desires of discipleship.

It’s different in the case of prodigals. Turning away from the world and toward God, toward home, requires of them to make what I call the Great Pivot. This Great Pivot begins slowly and tentatively when the mind perceives what is in comparison with what might be. This represents the first tentative steps in the process of beginning to develop “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). Regarding the varying degrees of progress we have made in our personal development, what if our individual lack of inner, spiritual symmetry were somehow visibly reflected in our outward physiology? How odd, swollen, and misshapen or anemically underdeveloped some of us would appear! All intellect and no heart! Earnest and eager, but without a trace of empathy! Egoistic with not a single sinew of mercy! Or perhaps fixated on pleasing self with little concern for neighbors.

Of course, our actual degree of inward, spiritual symmetry is somewhat hidden—at least until we get to
know each other and to experience each other! So, the lingering question should not be, How many imperfections do I have? but rather, Is my discipleship sufficiently serious that I am working patiently and steadily to overcome my weaknesses, perhaps even changing some of them into strengths? (see Ether 12:27).

If, however, discipleship becomes a daily duty, it genuinely helps us in developing our spiritual symmetry and character. We then have much less concern, for instance, with things of the moment. The banter in the cafeteria with peers or at the office round table with colleagues would so reflect, and, likewise, family discussions around the dinner table. We would also be much less concerned with our public image and with what “they” think, being, instead, much more concerned with having Jesus’ image in our countenance. The one-upmanship we typically see connected with intellectual prowess and other forms of prowess is opposite to what discipleship calls for. Jesus’ aim is to lift us up, not to put people down.

Given all you and I yet lack in our spiritual symmetry and character formation, no wonder God must use so intensively the little time available to develop each of us in this brief second estate. One’s life, therefore, is brevity compared to eternity—like being dropped off by a parent for a day at school. But what a day!

For the serious disciple, the resulting urgency means there can be few extended reveries and recesses and certainly no sabbaticals—all this in order to hasten God’s relentless remodeling of each of us. Reveries and special moments may come, but they are not extended. Soon the drumroll of events, even difficulties, resumes. There is so much to get done in the brief time we have in this mortal classroom.

Comparing what we are with what we have the power to become should give us great spiritual hope. Think of it this way: There are some very serene, blue lakes on this planet situated in cavities which once were red, belching volcanos. Likewise, there are beautiful, green, tropical mountains formed from ancient, hot extrusions. The parallel transformation of humans is much more remarkable than all of that—much more beautiful and much more everlasting!

So it is, amid the vastness of His creations, God’s personal shaping influence is felt in the details of our lives—not only in the details of the galaxies and molecules but, much more importantly, in the details of our own lives. Somehow God is providing these individual tutorials for us while at the same time He is overseeing cosmic funerals and births, for as one earth passes away so another is born (see Moses 1:38). It is marvelous that He would attend to us so personally in the midst of those cosmic duties.

Are we willing, however, to be significantly remodeled even by His loving hands? Enoch was. He marveled over God’s vast creations and fervently exclaimed, “Yet thou art there” (Moses 7:30). God is ever “there!” Significantly, Enoch also exclaimed over three attributes of God’s character, declaring that God is just, merciful, and kind forever. You and I count on those attributes of God every day. And the fact that God uses those qualities to bless us should stir us to develop them in ourselves to operate in behalf of others.

**Becoming Alive in Christ**

God is very serious about the joy of His children! Why should we be surprised? God desires us to become more like Him so we can go home to Him. He is a perfect Father!

Where would we be, in fact, without God’s long-suffering? Given the divine sorrow each of us has caused our God and our Savior, what a divine comfort to know that “he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42). No more reassuring and important words could be said to any of us.

What ineffable love! What stunning patience! How wrenching it would otherwise be to be resurrected and forever wincing over having displeased Him. Oh, [page 18] the marvel of His divine mercy and His plan of happiness!

One day, if we remain faithful, we will, as the man or the woman of Christ, know that we, too, please God. Discipleship’s enlarged capacity to serve will bring enlarged joys. No wonder we read lamentations from the Lord about those who do not accept His invitation to discipleship. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matt. 23:37).

Or, from the Book of Mormon, “O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you!” (Morm. 6:17). These lamentations measure the deep love Jesus has for us and underscore the importance of our accepting His invitation to discipleship.

Even so, Jesus prayed for us and for all of His followers not to be taken out of the world but that we might be kept from evil (see John 17:15). We stay in the classroom until school is out because there appears to be “no other way.”
It is left to each of us to balance contentment regarding what God has allotted to us in life with some divine discontent resulting from what we are in comparison to what we have the power to become. Discipleship creates this balance on the straight and narrow path.

Discipleship turns on our spiritual sensitivities. It increases the “aliveness” in each of us. These sensitivities are enhanced, not diminished, with discipleship. It’s part of what the scriptures call becoming “alive in Christ because of our faith” (2 Ne. 25:25; see also Rom. 6:11; 1 Cor. 15:22). In contrast, there’s a dullness and a sameness about sin.

With discipleship we learn to act for ourselves rather than merely letting ourselves be “acted upon” by circumstances (see 2 Ne. 2:13). One of the dangers we face in discipleship is drifting. This can occur when we become “weary and faint in [our] minds,” to use Paul’s phrase (Heb. 12:3). This is one of the tragedies of failing to be serious disciples; not that we become necessarily wicked, but rather that those who drift merely exist and are not truly alive in Christ.

Paul warns those of us on the path of discipleship to be diligent, “lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you” (Heb. 12:15). Travel on the straight and narrow path occurs in company with other disciples, imperfect as we all are. Side by side, as we all are, means that there are ways in which we can become offended or even embittered. Given the imperfections of all of us in the Church, offenses will come and disappointments will occur. How we handle these is crucial. We must be quick to prune any personal sprig of bitterness so that our wills can be truly swallowed up in the will of the Father as we put off the natural man and the natural woman. Jealousy, resentment, and self-pity can all keep us from becoming alive in Christ.

**Defining Moments**

We sometimes speak of defining moments. Long ago in May 1945 there was such a moment for me on the island of Okinawa at age eighteen. There was certainly no heroism on my part but rather a blessing for me and others during the shelling of our position by Japanese artillery. After repeated shellings which overshot our position, the enemy artillery finally zeroed in. They should have then fired for effect, but there was a divine response to at least one frightened, selfish prayer. The shelling halted. The prayer was accompanied by my pledge of a lifetime of service—a pledge which, though imperfectly, I’ve tried to keep. With this blessing and pledge, I was nudged toward discipleship without realizing what service would be required. I had been blessed, and I knew that God knew that I knew. I remembered the pledge after the war when my overseas savings gladly went to finance a mission. This mission, of course, was yet another step in the direction of discipleship.

Many subsequent and subtle moments have been at least as important to me as that defining moment in Okinawa. Unlike the roar and crash of artillery followed by a delivering silence, these smaller moments involve the Lord’s periodic whisperings to my mind. Over the years, these whisperings have guided me and reassured me. They give me, from time to time, in the words of the Prophet Joseph, sudden strokes of ideas and occasionally the pure flow of intelligence (see Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 151). These moments are as real for me as what happened on Okinawa. These are inward things, often taking the form of a directing phrase. I have found that the Lord gives more instructions than explanations.

Our spiritual experiences are personal and spiritual. Often they are not sharable. Some may be, but it takes inspiration to know when to share them. President Marion G. Romney, who often combined wit and wisdom, said, “We’d have more spiritual experiences if we didn’t talk so much about them.”

Be assured that God is in the details and in the subtleties of the defining and preparatory moments of discipleship. He will reassure you. He will remind you. Sometimes, if you’re like me, He will brace or reprove you in a highly personal process not understood or appreciated by those outside the context.

In the revelations, the Lord speaks of how the voice of His spirit will be felt in our minds. He also says that if we read His words—meaning the scriptures—we will know Who it is who’s speaking to us! We’ve all had the experience of going over a scripture many times without having it register. Then, all of a sudden, we’re ready to receive it! We hear the voice of the Lord through His words.

So it is in the process of discipleship. There are more meaningful moments than we use profitably, just as in terms of service there are more opportunities around us than we now use. God is ever ready; if only we were always ready.

President Brigham Young taught, “There is not a single condition of life … [and] not one hour’s experience but what it is beneficial to all those who make it their study,
and aim to improve upon the experience they gain” (in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:292). I hope we realize that. We may fritter away our time, but life is always drenched with more opportunities for discipleship than we use. Therefore, all the minutes and hours and moments can be, at least incrementally, defining moments.

God is in the details of our lives. He knows us perfectly, just as Jesus knew the woman of Samaria whom He quizzed as to her belief in the Messiah. She said, “I know that Messias cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things” (John 4:25). And Jesus said, “I that speak unto thee am he” (John 4:26). She went back to her village all excited and said she’d found the Messiah, and then, significantly, she said to the villagers, “He told me all that ever I did” (John 4:39).

God knows us perfectly. He loves us perfectly. His only begotten son, Jesus, has invited us to “come, follow me.” In a real and majestic sense, each of us has been called to serve in His holy discipleship. May we all renew our desires and efforts to do so.