

Silent Reflections

30 June 2026



Bear one another's burdens

The inspiration for these reflections began initially from reading the books by Charles Williams, one of the Inklings alongside C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, in particular his *Descent into Hell*.

For a brief introduction to Charles Williams, I have taken the following notes from Dr. Sørina Higgins whose academic work focuses on Charles Williams and magic in modern drama. She wrote of Charles Williams:

For the last six years of his life, he was a member of the Inklings, whose qualifications, according to C.S. Lewis, were "a tendency to write, and Christianity". His unusual combination of Christianity and the occult finds expression in a bizarre, exciting mix of the everyday and the supernatural in his writing...His signature doctrine, co-inherence, is also an odd blend of the natural and the supernatural. Co-inherence is the idea that Christ's risen life inhabits believers so that they share the divine interrelationship of the Trinity and live as members of one another...Williams' own order, the Companions of the Co-inherence, voluntarily carried spiritual, emotional, or medical burdens for each other and anyone else—living, dead, or unborn—by Substitution or Exchange...

My thoughts were stimulated, particularly, by this passage from *Descent into Hell*, which in keeping with all his writing, as with Lewis and Tolkien, is concerned with the struggle between good and evil, with good triumphing in the end.

One of his characters in the book, Peter Stanhope, a playwright, is counselling a young woman, who is always afraid:

*For what can be simpler than for you to think to yourself that since I am there to be troubled instead of you, therefore you needn't be troubled? And what can be easier than for me to carry a little while a burden that isn't mine? ...Haven't you heard it said that we ought to bear one another's burdens? ...I know, said Stanhope. It means listening sympathetically, and thinking unselfishly, and being anxious about, and so on. Well I don't say a word against all that; no doubt it helps. But I think when Christ or St Paul, or whoever said **bear**...he meant something much more like carrying a parcel instead of someone else. To bear a burden is precisely to carry it instead of. If you're still carrying yours, I'm not carrying it for you – however sympathetic I may be...*

And if I could, she said. If I could...Would I push my burden on to anybody else?

If you want to disobey and refuse the laws that are common to us all, if you want to live in pride and division and anger, you can. But if you will be part of the best of us, and live and laugh and be ashamed with us, then you must be content to be helped. You must give your burden up to someone else, and you must carry someone else's burden...When you are alone, he said, remember that I am afraid instead of you, and that I have taken over every kind of worry, and go on. Remember it is mine. If you do not see it, well; if you do, you will not be afraid.

We perhaps would not want to go as far as Charles Williams' idea of carrying another's burden, although such an occurrence is relayed by C.S. Lewis in his *A Grief Observed*:

Peter Bide comes to the hospital and Lewis asks if this man who has some reputation for possessing a healing gift would place his hands upon Joy and pray that she be healed. Peter Bide does this. And lays his hand upon Lewis who prays that he will get the pain that Joy is suffering. The pain is ferocious. And of course Joy is expected to die within a day or two. She doesn't. In fact, she starts to get better. Within a few months, X-rays show that her pelvis has grown back. The bone has regenerated. Doctors cannot explain it.

Joy's cancer does eventually return and she dies, but she does have this reprieve and it appears that Lewis does literally carry her pain for that time.

Susan Hill in her book, *In the Springtime of the Year*, explores the grief of a young widow. She pushes help away except for the sensitive support of his younger brother. Eventually after many months, Ruth goes to see Potter, the man who was the first to find her husband after the accident and the one who waited with his body and carried him in his arms. They share their experiences of that day, and afterwards:

Without any warning, the tears rose up and broke out of her, and Potter sat on his chair, saying nothing, and yet being a comfort to her, taking some of her grief on to himself. She wept as she had never wept before in front of any human being and it was a good thing to do, it was of more value than all the months of solitary mourning. It brought something else to an end.

Looking to the Bible for references to bearing burdens, we find examples in the Old and New Testaments:

In **Exodus 18** we read:

Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.

In **Matthew 23: 1-4** Jesus admonishes those who lay burdens on the shoulders of others while being filled with pride themselves and not being willing to help others who are being crushed:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses's seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

The most direct reference we have comes in **Galatians 6:2-5**. The paraphrase from *The Message* reads:

Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived. Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.



In **Matthew 27:26**, there is a very powerful example of someone bearing another's burden, this time for Jesus, although it is not voluntarily given:

*As they went out, they came upon a man from **Cyrene** named **Simon**; they compelled this man to carry his cross.*

Reflect on who was the vulnerable one here, the one who needed support.

William C. Placher (*Narratives of a Vulnerable God*)

Trust in such a God can give human beings the strength to risk following on the path of compassion and vulnerability, to think what it means to live lives whose first priority is love.

More commonly, we do not expect to take someone else's pain into our own bodies but bearing burdens for each other necessitates a tender love and empathy for others and we have many examples of God's compassion and exhortations to be compassionate, both in the Old and New Testament:

Lamentations 3: 32-33

Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

Hosea 11: 8

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender."

Matthew 9: 36

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Luke 7: 13-15

When the Lord saw her, he was moved with compassion for her and said to her, "Do not cry." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stopped. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Hebrews 10: 32-34

But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.

We would perhaps agree with **Henri Nouwen** in his book *Bread for the Journey* that, more usually:



To console does not mean to take away the pain but rather to be there and say, 'You are not alone, I am with you. Together we can carry the burden.'

William Johnston (*The Inner Eye of Love*)

In East and West and in all the great religions, we find men and women who are in love without restriction and who look upon the world with eyes of love and compassion. Most of them are little known or talked about. Yet as long as such people walk the earth we can have unshakeable confidence in the future.

Eddie Askew (Many Voices, One Voice)

*I see Your hands,
not white and manicured,
but scarred and scratched and competent,
reach out –
not always to remove the weight I carry,
but to shift its balance, ease it,
make it bearable.
Lord, if this is where You want me,
I'm content.
No, not quite true. I wish it were.
All I can say, in honesty, is this:
If this is where I'm meant to be,
I'll stay. And try.
Just let me feel Your hands.
And, Lord, for all who hurt today –
hurt more than me –
I ask for strength and that flicker of light,
the warmth, that says You're there.*

Henri Nouwen reminds us that:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human...Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it...We have to trust in God's healing power. Trust that if we are living as the beloved and have compassion for people, many will be healed, whether or not we notice it at the time.

This popular hymn by Richard Gillard reminds us that bearing each other's burdens requires service, empathy, companionship, being alongside, of being Christ to each other on the road.

*Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.*

*We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.*

*I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the nighttime of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.*

*I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow,
till we've seen this journey through.*

*When we sing to God in heaven,
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.*

*Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.*

Isaiah 53:4-5

Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

Points to Ponder:

- If any words or images have caused you to pause, go back and ask the Spirit to help you understand why, and what, if anything, needs to be done about it?
- What experience have you had of being supported at a difficult time? Of someone sharing your burden? Did anything help? If so, what was it?
- Have you been able to come alongside someone else when they needed a helping hand? What was easy/difficult about it? If your help was rejected, how did that feel? What did you do then?
- How easy do you find it to ask for help? Why is that?
- Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs on mission, and in Acts, we read of Peter and John accompanying each other to the temple to pray. Paul and Barnabas, and then Paul and Saul, were commissioned together by the Early Church. Who has God given to you as a partner, to share joys and burdens; sometimes for a lifetime, sometimes for part of your journey? Give thanks for your companions on the road.