

*The Cross: A Burden
or a Blessing?*

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INTRODUCTION

“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

“Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24).

“My mouth shall shew forth thy righteousness and thy salvation all the day; for I know not the numbers thereof” (Psalm 71:15).

What does it mean to take up my cross?

Good and evil come upon all people — godly and ungodly. Being sick is not a cross. Being confined to a wheelchair is not a cross. Living with an alcoholic or enduring a bad marriage is not a cross. Experiencing persecution is simply identification with Christ, but it is not a cross.

My cross is not people, nor is it suffering. It is not what people are doing to me. My cross is not losing my reputation — if I don't build a

reputation then I don't have to worry about losing it. It is not that I am hated for Christ's sake, because every Christian who identifies with Christ will be hated.

Taking up my cross means finally getting rid of *myself*. That's all it is! I take up my cross by accepting the fact that Jesus Christ was judged for all my sins and that there is no condemnation. This is called "righteous judgment" in John 7:24. It is the righteousness of God that David cried out about every day, in Psalm 71:15.

Through this message I want you to see that taking up your cross is not a burden that you must bear. Rather, it is the beginning of liberation in the midst of your circumstances.

Chapter One
WALKING IN LOWLINESS
AND MEEKNESS

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Ephesians 4:1-7).

Lowliness is *tapeinophrosune* in the Greek text. It means to think toward someone in grace. I am to think in grace toward every other person just as God, through grace, thinks toward me.

Meekness means to be absolutely submitted to God’s plan, no matter who He uses to rub me

the wrong way. I accept what Jesus Christ brings into my life because His plan is perfect (Psalm 18:30), and He does all things perfectly (Deuteronomy 32:4).

Longsuffering is *hupomeno*, meaning that I am to accept whatever happens in my life as being for my sake, so that the grace of God may redound to His glory (2 Corinthians 4:15).

Finally, *forbearing* (*makrothumia*) indicates that these qualities are to be revealed no matter what a person says or does to me. In other words, I take my analysis of Truth into action; I go from believing to receiving a gift of grace to handle the situation. I reveal poise with peace in the dynamics of faith rest. That covers just about everything.

Beseached to Action

By using *beseech* (*parakaleo*), Paul is exhorting Christians to go from analysis to action, from theology to spirituality, from Christian faith to the Christian walk, from believing to experiencing, from knowing to receiving. *Worthy* is *axios*, an adverb that speaks of bringing our behavior into line with what we believe. We are to walk worthy of our calling, God's divine summons on our lives.

Let's picture what is being communicated in these verses. The Lord Jesus Christ teaches every Christian that the only way to live is to be a responder to the divine provision of grace as it is given to every man. *Beseech* simply means we are being *urged* to put this provision into action in our experience.

God did not initiate sin, nor did He initiate evil; but He responded to our personal sins by dying on the cross. This was the divine response to human sin — the provision for the sins of every member of the human race.

Isaiah 1:5-6 reveals that, "the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment."

How did God respond to these facts about our humanity? By dying in our place. The entire nation was declared desolate (Isaiah 1:7), yet His response was to die for them who had been devoured and "overthrown by strangers."

In the same way, Christians must initiate to the world with a divine response to Jesus Christ's mandate in Matthew 16:24: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and

take up his cross, and follow me." *Take up* is the key word in this passage. It does not say that we are to take up Christ's cross. We are to take up our own personal cross.

Chapter Two

WHAT WE TAKE UP IN CIRCUMSTANCES

Is it a person's cross to be confined to a wheelchair because of unfortunate circumstances? No, it is not. Nor is it a mother's cross to lose her baby. Deafness and blindness do not represent the cross to those who must endure such conditions. An accident on the highway is not a cross.

The fiery furnace was not the cross for the three Hebrew boys, in Daniel 3:23-27. They revealed that they had taken up their cross when they said, "It's OK if you slay us." Being placed in the lions' den wasn't the cross for Daniel; his cross was revealed when he went to sleep in the midst of eleven thousand hungry lions that should have consumed him in thirty seconds.

Fanny Crosby's cross wasn't her blindness, but it was the eight thousand hymns she wrote, one of which was "Blessed Assurance."

George Mathison, a well-known Scottish preacher, was told that he was going blind. He thought it over and wrote this song:

“Oh, love that will not let me go

Oh, light that followeth me all the way.

I will not grow up in darkness

Because of what the Lord Jesus Christ has to say.”

Was George Mathison’s blindness his cross? No. Once he became blind, he took up a ministry of love.

Our cross is what we take up in our circumstances. Losing everything we have is not our cross, but, rather, taking up the attitude of Job — “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD ” (Job 1:21).

Taking Up the Cross Toward Others

When someone hurts me by sending hate mail, that is not my cross. But when I respond by getting on my knees and secretly praying for that person, then I am taking up my cross. The cross means suffering on behalf of someone who doesn’t deserve it. In Matthew 5:38-41, Jesus told His disciples, “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain."

What people do to us is not our cross; it is what we do with God toward them. This is taking up our cross and denying ourselves. "Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them" (Psalm 119:165). Great peace is the result of taking up our cross, even when people have tried to offend us.

After Jesus Christ met Saul, who became Paul, on the road to Damascus, the Lord told Ananias that Paul was a "chosen vessel" to share the gospel with the Gentiles. "I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16). Many would come to hate Paul for his conversion. The Jews and the devout women would hate him and he would be driven out of villages and towns.

But how Paul prayed for his enemies, and what he thought of them revealed that he had taken up his cross. "For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are Israelites;

to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises" (Romans 9:3-4). Paul would rather have gone to hell in place of his brethren so that they could go free. That was taking up his cross.

Taking Up Praise in Trials

Our cross isn't our suffering; it's what we *do* with our suffering. Our cross isn't the trial of our faith; it's how much we take up praise during the trial. We respond with all lowliness of mind, thinking toward others in the mind of grace and giving them what they do not deserve.

As the Spirit of God produces the fruit of meekness, we can say, "Lord Jesus, thy will be done, and in everything I will give thanks. I am Yours today and You are mine. Thank you." This is taking up our cross. No matter what unexpected thing happens to us, we rejoice because Jesus Christ is in us. He takes control of our emotions. His mind becomes our mind through the impartation of His life because of our grace response.

As the mobs rushed upon the martyrs of old to kill them, the martyrs prayed for the very ones who were burning them at the stake. Tak-

ing up their cross was not the act of martyrdom, but it was when they prayed forgiveness for their persecutors.

Acts 7:59-60 records what happened to Stephen as he was being stoned, "... calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Victorious, Stephen was immediately ushered into the presence of God.

Chapter Three
ONE BODY, ONE SPIRIT,
ONE LORD

Everyone has been given grace, according to the measure of the gift of Christ, in Ephesians 4:7. Now, each of us is asked to give grace for grace because we have received the fulness thereof (John 1:16). In any situation, we have the option of a human response, an adamic response, or a grace response.

All born-again Christians, no matter where they go to church, are members of one body. They have one Holy Spirit even as they are called in one hope of their calling. Every believer has one Lord and one faith, and, by one baptism, has come into the one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). There is one Father who is above all, through all, and in all.

Then why are there problems among believers when there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one Father? We should

have the same mind and the same love because we have the same mandate and the same Bible. We shouldn't be causing trouble for each other; there's no reason to get angry at each other.

The Responses of Prayer and Confession

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16).

I am to confess my faults. This doesn't mean I get up in the pulpit and start confessing my problems. It means that when I know I am wrong, I don't hide in self-denial. I may be led to take someone aside and say, “I've had a bad spirit toward you, please forgive me. I reacted. It wasn't your fault, it was my fault.” This is confessing our faults one to another.

I don't have to react when someone doesn't treat me right. I get on my knees and pray for him because he is going through something. This person is usually very kind, but today he is having a tough time and I am to pray for him.

“Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God" (Romans 15:5-7).

Think of the individual who was an alcoholic: Christ received him. Think of the drug addict, the lesbian, or the homosexual; Christ received each of them for the glory of God. The self-righteous Pharisee and the arrogant, religious gossip believed and Christ received them, too. I am to receive others just as I was received by Christ.

"Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently," (1 Peter 1:22). No matter what someone does to me, I am to have a heart that is pure with God's love.

"And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints" (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13). In the Greek, this verse tells us to love one another from our hearts where Christ is formed.

"I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou

observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality” (1 Timothy 5:21). In honor, I prefer another above myself. I fix a high value on others because of a high esteem that shows no partiality.

Esteeming Others

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

This doesn't mean that I think more of you and less of myself. In the original language, this verse tells me to esteem you above my right to react to you. I am to esteem you higher than my right to take your believer-priesthood from you by attacking you. I am willing to be the least in the situation. I love you and honor the freedom of who you are in Christ, so I don't say anything to hurt you. I respond to God instead of reacting to you.

“And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another,”

(1 Corinthians 4:6).

“Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door” (James 5:9).

These verses teach us that we are to bear one another’s burdens. There are times when I have to be careful while I am in the pulpit. I know some things going on in people’s lives that others don’t know about. Those thoughts come to mind when I start looking at faces in the congregation. To these people, certain issues are very important and very difficult, and I try to bear their burdens early in the morning in prayer. I try to think of what they are going through. I try to identify with people in the love of God through the compassion of Christ. Also, I pray for my enemies every morning, knowing that, if it were not for the grace of God, I would be God’s enemy because of my old sin nature.

The Holy Spirit wants us to understand that we’re not to reserve anger nor hold a grudge, because a root of bitterness will spring up (Hebrews 12:15). That root results in sins of the tongue, causing many to be defiled. We must guard our hearts so we will not fail the grace of God toward each other.

The Power of Identification

“For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Corinthians 12:24-26).

“Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep,” (Romans 12:15).

These Scriptures express great principles of body life. We rejoice when people are honored, and weep with those who suffer. No one can do this in the flesh. Only the believer who condescends and takes up his cross can do it. As he takes up his cross, he is filled with the Spirit. He becomes one with those who are rejoicing and with those who are weeping. That believer becomes one with others' needs, heartaches, failures, frailties, and weaknesses, and he is now in a position to pray, to help, and to bless others.

Chapter Four
DENYING OURSELVES

“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

The phrase “if any man would follow me” is a third-class condition in the Greek, meaning he may or may not follow Jesus Christ; it’s up to his free volition to follow Him. Anyone can make a decision to follow Christ, but it is impossible to do so unless he takes up his cross. Beyond that, a man must deny himself. This isn’t speaking of asceticism; He isn’t teaching self-effacement for religious concepts. The Lord is teaching something far, far deeper. If anyone would follow Christ, he must deny himself and take up his cross. Then he will be free to follow.

We must not be entangled with our rights. We cannot be involved in a lifestyle of natural preference. We cannot be distracted into debat-

ing our cases. We must not chose a geographical location for its comfort and convenience or because someone we like is there. A husband or a wife should not argue in favor of the self life. We must deny ourselves.

Resolving Long-term Problems

To deny ourselves is to accept the absolute elimination of hundreds of unresolved problems in the old sin nature. Our emotions cannot be educated. These problems never change and they won't disappear. Just as God is as precious as He has always been, so our old sin nature is just as bad as it has always been.

To deny myself means to allow the Cross of Christ to resolve all the conflicts that are derived from my genetics and generational curses. Some try to justify a child's negative behavior by saying, "His father has been that way since he was 5 or 6 years old." This makes no sense when we understand that the Christian's life starts with the Cross, and his victory comes from taking it up and letting it become personal.

I was saved when I believed in the Cross and all it accomplished, but I am delivered by taking up *my* cross. If I don't take up what I believe, then I cannot be delivered.

Pastors have become casualties and pastors' wives have become burdens to their husbands all because they have sought for a way out of a personal cross. They magnify something else such as being a good father or good mother when taking up their cross would make them what they should be in any area of their lives.

I deny myself by refusing to make a case for myself and defending what I do. I deny myself by refusing to react and compare. I can't do this on my own; that would be making a fair show in the flesh (Galatians 6:12). Christ did it all for me. Denying myself and taking up my cross is simply recognizing and realizing what Jesus Christ did for me two thousand years ago. This brings glory to God and God alone. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world," (Galatians 6:14).

Come to the Resurrection Side

We will experience tests to see whether or not we have taken up our cross. A dead man cannot take up anything, so in order to take up our cross we must come to the resurrection side of life. "Neither yield ye your members as in-

struments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Romans 6:13-14). I have never witnessed a marriage that had a problem with separation when one partner denied himself, took up his cross and followed Jesus.

Have you ever had the opportunity to counsel people living in their Adam natures? It's a hopeless, helpless job. Someone will say, "He did this and he didn't do that" It goes on and on. It gets so confusing and wears you out.

A conflict in Adam cannot be resolved in the flesh. There's only one way to deal with Adam's condition: Death. Jesus died for my condition in Adam. The Father judged all of our sins on His Son. Christ became sin so that sin would not have to be imputed to me. More than that, He gave us overcoming power through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Conflicts do not have to be resolved; they were crucified and buried with Jesus. Still, Satan does all he can to wear out the saints by trying to involve us in conflicts that were resolved two thousand years ago in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

What once looked like an impossible burden has become my greatest source of blessing. Taking up my cross is accepting the fact that Jesus Christ was judged for all my sins. There is therefore now no condemnation for me. He became sin, so my sin is not charged to my account. Positionally, I am free, and I can derive my life from the authority of my position in Him.

At last, the effects of genetic curses have been eliminated from my life. It doesn't matter who did what in my family history, regardless of how far back these curses go. No matter when or how or where these things entered the picture, I am free from the past.

In taking up my cross, I accept the fact that my personal problems have been resolved by my personal death with Christ. These problems are out of my life because I believe that I was personally buried with Him. Not only have I

been liberated from all the unresolved effects of my past, but I am also free from the entire history of Adam and what he passed on to me through the Fall.

I believe that I died with Christ two thousand years ago. I believe I was buried with Him two thousand years ago. But most importantly, I believe that I have been resurrected with Him. I am seated above, and I have received a brand new image in Christ. "Old things are passed away; behold, *all* things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17*b*).