

Taking up the Cross

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DURING his earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus taught men and women what true Christianity was all about. He never did conceal the fact that it would prove a costly business. It would mean sacrifice and even the endurance of suffering. On more than one occasion he said that if someone wanted to be his disciple he would have to 'take up his cross daily' (Lk 9:23 cf 14:27; Matt 10:38;16:24; Mk 8:34; 10:21).

This saying obviously alluded to the fact that, in those days, criminals led out to die were compelled to carry the cross, or cross-beam, to which, of course, they were later nailed (cf Lk 23:26). The people to whom our Lord spoke would have understood at once the awful significance of these words. Being a Christian could well cost a man his very life!

Now while the literal sense cannot be altogether denied, there are reasons for believing that these words were meant to be understood figuratively and therefore with a somewhat wider application. After all, the Lord Jesus was addressing his disciples generally at this point. According to tradition, only Simon Peter, Andrew, and possibly Bartholomew were put to death in this way, and history clearly shows that only a very few Christians (comparatively speaking) were subjected to crucifixion.

What happened to a condemned man when he was led out to crucifixion may help us understand this phrase, but it cannot mean that every disciple has to take up a literal cross. If that is what it does mean, what is the significance of the word 'daily'? Should not the words 'follow me' be given a literal and physical sense too?

Surely, the phrase describes a condition of Christian discipleship - a condition which still has

to be fulfilled. It has to be interpreted figuratively and spiritually. The Lord Jesus calls each one of us to 'take up his cross'. What does he mean by this?

First of all, when a man took up his cross he did so because he no longer had plans of his own. In fact, he was entirely subject to the will of another. This is undoubtedly the case with true Christians. Grace has brought our wills into subjection to God's. As a result, we believe and repent (Jn 6:40; Acts 17:30) and, thereafter, we no longer live to do our own will: we live to do 'the will of God' (Mk 3:35 cf. Eph 6:6; 1 Jn 2:17).

Secondly, the man with a cross on his shoulder was giving up everything. Stumbling along the well-trodden road, he was prepared to release all claim to himself and give up his very life. Similarly, Christians are required to surrender themselves to God. Paul writes that we are to present our 'bodies (i.e. our whole persons) a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God' (Rom 12:1 cf 6:13, 19). The idea is that of self-dedication to God. We should be wholly devoted to God: entirely at his disposal, willing to bear whatever he appoints, and determined to promote his eternal glory. The apostle is an example to us here, confessing, as he does, the one true God, 'whose I am, and whom I serve' (Acts 27:23).

Thirdly, the cross-bearer knew that he had come to the end of the life which formerly he had lived. As far as he was concerned, he was now finished with this world and also with the practice of sin. Surrounding objects had lost their power over him; they had ceased to influence him. This is how the Bible describes Christians. They are represented as those who have been 'crucified...unto the world' (Gal 6:14) and, in consequence, they are taught to reckon themselves 'dead indeed unto sin' but 'alive

unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 6:11). In a day when many professing Christians appear so 'worldly', it cannot be emphasised too much that true Christians should be identified by the fact that they no longer live as once they did. 'In time past ye walked according to the course of this world..' (Eph 2:2).

Fourthly, the man who carried a cross was facing in only one direction. Whatever happened, he was not free to turn to the right nor to the left. He certainly could not turn around and think of going back. Is not this the case with Christian men and women? Our sights set on God in Christ, we have to keep to the way which has been appointed for us. 'The righteous shall hold on his way' (Job 17:9). 'We are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul' (Heb 10:39). There are indeed apostates, hypocrites, and false converts, who at first show real promise but who later withdraw and fall away (Matt 13:5,6, 20,21; Jn 6:66; 2 Pet 2:21,22; 1 Jn 2:19); but true faith will carry men through all difficulties and trials to the certain enjoyment of God's heavenly kingdom. 'They go from strength to strength; everyone of them in Zion appeareth before God' (Ps 84:7).

Fifthly, taking up a cross meant walking a lonely path. Others might well line the route, watching the progress of the condemned man, but in no way could they be prevailed upon to share his experience. Even so, Christians are very much alone in this world. The grace of God has made us 'to differ' (1 Cor 4:7); and, no sooner do we begin to tread 'the narrow way', than we realize the truth of what Scripture teaches, that 'few there be that find it' (Matt 7:14). Others may be impressed by Christian believers, as Gamaliel was (Acts 5:34-39); and be under conviction, as Felix was (Acts 24:25); and be almost converted, as Agrippa was (Acts 26:28); and yet - for all this - be unwilling to believe and to identify with the Lord's people. Christians must be prepared to walk alone in this world. Near the end of his life, the

apostle Paul wrote: 'No man stood with me, but all men forsook me' (2 Tim 4:17).

Sixthly, to feel the burden of a heavy wooden cross was to face tremendous suffering and sorrow. Not to mention the cruel hostility, the reproach and the shame, there was, at the last, the prolonged and intense agony of death by crucifixion. This is certainly a strong hint as to what Christians may expect in this world. We deceive ourselves if we think the Christian life is 'fun' from start to finish. Our way to heaven is like that of the Israelites to Canaan, which was through a 'great and terrible wilderness' (Deut 8:15). 'We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22 cf Rev 1:9; 7:14). Why do we so quickly complain? Why do we so readily entertain thoughts of giving up? The way of the Christian is the way of the cross. We have it from the lips of our Saviour: 'In the world ye shall have tribulation' (Jn 16:33).

Seventhly, and lastly, the man under the cross was living each moment in the light of eternity. An ill-spent life was behind him; an unseen God was above him; and a vast eternity was before him. Was it any wonder that there was seriousness about him, most evident in his general behaviour and in the way he spoke? Others might be intoxicated with the vanities of this world and foolishly fritter away their remaining time - but not this man. He knew he had no time to waste. It had to be used to the best advantage. How true this should be of professing Christians! We are told to set before us 'the things which are not seen', 'the things which are eternal' (2 Cor 4:17), 'redeeming the time (i.e. buying up the rare opportunities left to us to do what is good) because the days are evil' (Eph 5:16).

Christ requires of all who would be saved absolute commitment. He tells us that the path of duty is hard and rough, beset with many strong temptations, but - and this is the all-important point - it ends at the gate of his everlasting kingdom. It was a sweet thought of Rutherford's: 'Christ and his

cross are not separable in this life; howbeit Christ and his cross part at heaven's door, for there is no house-room for crosses in heaven'.

If we are wise, we will listen to Christ, following him in faith and obedience until the days of our

pilgrimage are over. Then we shall find that pain and grief are past, and heaven itself is won!

Take up thy cross the Saviour said,
If thou wouldst my disciple be;
Deny thyself, the world forsake,
And humbly follow after me.

Take up thy cross, then in his strength,
And calmly every danger brave;
'Twill guide thee to a better home,
And lead to victory o'er the grave.

Take up thy cross, and follow Christ,
Nor think till death to lay it down;
For only he who bears the cross
May hope to wear the glorious crown.