



“Carrying your Cross”

- Matthew 27:32-44

by Pastor Tim Dodson
at JF Believers church
in Menomonie, Wisconsin
on April 1st, 2018

Matthew 27:32-44 *Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross. 33 And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, that is to say, Place of a Skull, 34 they gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But*

when He had tasted it, He would not drink. 35 Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet: "They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots." 36 Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. 37 And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 38 Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. 39 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, 42 "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. 43 "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" 44 Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.

For 50 years, a man by the name of Author Blessitt has physically...*step by step*...carried a big wooden cross around the world in every nation. He has walked so far that the Guinness World Record has him down as the longest walk/pilgrimage. Over 42,279 miles (68,041 km) in 324 countries, island groups & territories. 84.5 million steps. Is this what Jesus meant when He said in Matthew 16:24-25 “*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it?*”

Certainly many people have participated in similar activities as Mr. Blessitt, which, while no doubt well intended, largely appear to trivialize the words that Jesus said, not to mention the actual event where this Simon literally and actually carried the cross of Christ to the place of His execution. Simon didn’t have his wife driving a car along with him, carrying food, water, and supplies for the journey as Mr. Blessitt does. No, this was the real thing. This was not a “testimony.” This was a life changing event. One that would shake Simon to his core, and I doubt that he was ever the same again.

Matthew 10:38-39 says “...*he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.*” Luke 14:27 even speaks of our bearing our own cross. Right before that statement in Matthew 16, Jesus had stated that all those who wanted to follow Him desiring to be His disciple had to “*hate mother, brother, sister, father and even themselves.*” Wow. I think that Jesus was always able to easily clear a room—His teachings were often so demanding, costly and bold. They still are, and He still does.

Certainly Jesus didn’t mean we are to hate our family in the vernacular understanding of how we think of the word today. Yet it was a clear and provocative “shot across the bow” in our grasp of just what a commitment to following Christ means above everyone and everything else. Jesus was saying, “Every relationship you will ever have, and every love you ever experience in this life, will be affected by your decision to follow me.”

Yet when Jesus spoke those words, His crucifixion was still yet distant. I wonder what the disciples would've thought about Jesus' words—about picking up their cross? Because this was before Jesus' death, so the pieces of the puzzle weren't all in place for them yet; the cross was just a raw, humiliating form of punishment instituted by the Roman government, nothing more.

For Jesus, being a disciple wasn't about church attendance nor was such acquired from some class we participate in. It is rather about a love that compels one to step *out* of the church and *into* the world on mission, experiencing life, seeing the miraculous, being tested, failing and starting over again—until this new way of life becomes as natural as putting on our pants in the morning.

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

The truth is, discipleship...*real discipleship*, is found only in this crucial metaphor. We “**desire Jesus, deny ourselves, pick up the cross, and follow Him.**” A cross is heavy, often difficult to carry, and certainly influences our life movement and activities, not to mention whatever else we attempt to carry at the same time. There is no way to carry that cross and still operate in this world like everyone else. In fact, to embrace it, I have to let go of everything else. To slide the cross over our shoulders, we have to drop everything in our hands. **Everything.**

It seems we must remind ourselves often that what happened on the cross was actually a real event. That there was an actual crucifixion and someone died. It was more than just a *story*! In the same way, the call to the cross for us and the mandate to follow Christ is not some esoterical statement floating in the air; it's a real and physical call to follow—with our minds, our hearts and our bodies. There is certainly a directive and an expectation in His words. But He never asked of us what He failed to do Himself. Remember, He said “*come and follow me...*” He led the way to the cross...

Simon in our text lived in the city of Cyrene which was in North Africa in the area of present day Libya. At that time, there were many Jews in Cyrene. Over the centuries, hardship and warfare had caused the spread of Hebrews all over the world and eventually the population of Jews in Cyrene numbered in the tens of thousands.

I believe that when Simon got up that morning, he had no idea how the day would play out. Not only did Simon not **expect** such an event, I would gather that he also honestly didn't **want** it when it came! The truth is, Simon would have never carried that cross if he hadn't been “compelled” to do so. He could not say no. But the very thing he did not want to do in his flesh is no doubt his greatest pride and cherished memory now even into eternity.

Often, we who count ourselves disciples can easily relate to this story. Because it seems that more often than us **finding the cross**, the cross in fact **found us**. God had a divine appointment with Simon that day. He often makes Divine Appointments with us. Like Simon, these may involve tasks we would prefer not to do. But, like Simon, these often lead to some of life's greatest blessings.

We do not know exactly how long the walk was nor what Jesus and Simon said or did not say to each other that day on the way to Golgotha. How I would love to know what transpired between them! But it was in fact not for me, but rather for Simon, and Simon alone. That's the way those “divine appointments” tend to play out. Those “moments” with God that change our lives...conversations and events that alter the course of our destiny. You see, real meaning is found in Jesus. Jesus is the answer to our search for purpose. We do know that Simon saw how perfect love and grace responded to cruelty and injustice. Someone who could have literally sucked the air out of that square mile and killed everyone in their tracks, instead He continued to beat the hearts of the ones who were beating Him.

But whatever happened that day seems to have altered Simon's world. We do not have details, but Mark's account of this story mentions his children Rufus and Alexander, and seems to do so in such a way that insinuates that Mark knew them personally and that his readers would all be familiar with them. It seems that Simon's children went on to follow daddy who apparently followed Jesus beyond that hill that day. Paul, at the end of Romans spoke also saying "*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.*" See, when one has a real life altering meeting with Jesus, everything changes. Our marriages, our parenting, our priorities, our spending of time and money, our living, *even our dying*. Simon it seems didn't just carry the cross up that hill for Jesus that day. It seems that he even died there *with Him*.

When Simon was so compelled that day to carry the cross, Jesus was already dying. He had been beaten, mocked and scourged with what was affectively a cat of nine tails with bits of glass and bone on the ends to exert maximum damage. The whole grueling process had left him weakened from exhaustion, hunger, brutal torture, almost unbearable pain and the continual loss of blood. Scourging was such a brutal form of torture that it left the back torn to ribbons. Often the rib cage was exposed and victims died as a result.

THIS is what Jesus is offering us? Not a very good sales pitch huh?

Many of us have heard the phrase "die to self" so often that we have been inoculated against its impact. It has become a religious phrase...*Christian ease*. But what Jesus is asking of us is not a "flip of the switch." It's not merely a mental ascent...a "decision" made in a moment and then we are issued our "dead to self" scout badge. There is no Novocain or pain meds to ease the transition. No...in reality, dying to self is a slow and often painful *process*. It seems to take...*well*, almost exactly a lifetime. At times our flesh can fight to stay alive...for the will to live can be so strong at times.

What is the answer? How do we walk to the cross with Jesus and die with Him? Well, firstly we need to believe and respond to the truth that what is *best* is "on the other side." Now, don't let me lose you here. I'm not talking about physical cessation of life and the passing into eternity. I am speaking of dying to ME in THIS life. My plans, dreams, aspirations. My wants. My desires. Me. And exchanging such for a better path. Will it be easier on the other side? More comfortable? More fleshly pleasurable? Longer in years? Not necessarily. Not on any of it.

Many are familiar with Jim Elliot's famous quote: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." And he was eventually murdered in the Amazon by tribal natives. The great missionary C.T. Studd once said something that has become very near and dear to this church and its objectives. He said "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop, within a yard of hell." And he did. Studd, who gave his life to ministry, left behind a successful career as a cricket player, eventually left his sick wife stateside while he went to Africa, had several heart attacks in the field, his wife finally died without him, and he then eventually died in the mission field himself. Do you wonder if he had a chance to speak today that there might be regrets on his part? That he would in fact take it all back? I think not. For Studd once said "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him."

Jeremiah 29:11 says "*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.*"

Ps 31:19 "*Oh, how great is Your goodness, Which You have laid up for those who fear You, Which You have prepared for those who trust in You In the presence of the sons of men!*"

Ever since the fall in the garden man has fought against God. Psalms 14:3 starkly tell us that “*There is none who does good, No, not one.*” We often battle daily for the control of our lives and only at our departure to physical death will we admit we failed. This is why for many of us there is the state of constant struggle. We have large periods absent of peace and near constant state of uncertainty in our “footing.”

For Simon, *the last thing on his mind that day was meeting Jesus.* And he certainly had no thought of carrying his cross or any cross whatsoever. He was merely part of the large crowd...just as we all are today. If he had arrived five minutes earlier or five minutes later, he would have missed the death march of Jesus and his destiny would be forever altered accordingly. Simon never intended to have anything to do with any of this. *But God had other plans.* What seemed like a chance encounter turned out to be a divine appointment.

It was well known that Roman soldiers could commandeer civilians and force them to carry their bags for a mile. So when the text says that they “forced” Simon to carry the cross, it means he didn’t volunteer. They grabbed him out of the crowd.

Did they know he was from Cyrene? *No, probably not.* Did they ask him nicely? *No, probably not.* Did they threaten him? *We don’t know, but very possibly they did.* Did he have a choice? *No, he didn’t. The soldiers weren’t in a bargaining mood that day.*

In the space of a mere moment Simon went from being in a place where he was master and “living the dream” of self sovereignty, to being in a place where he had no control whatsoever. Suddenly in the midst of the commotion, the shouts, with some cheering, others jeering, some weeping, this man Simon, just a guy from Cyrene, was thrust to the front line ... chosen by God...compelled to join the greatest drama in human history.

But how did Simon become a believer? We find an enticing hint in one fact that only Luke mentions. He says that Simon was compelled to carry the cross **behind** Jesus (Luke 23:26). Simon had to *follow Jesus to the cross.* Surely this fact was meant to linger in our minds. He could not help but wonder...to ask in his own heart: Who is this man? What has he done? Why am I following him?

Simon stands today as a symbol for every believer. He shows us what Christ meant when he said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” This is what a Christian is. He is a Christ-follower. This is what a Christian does. He takes up his cross and follows him. If Simon could speak out from death and time, I think he would say, “I found my cross. Have you found yours?”

Simon of Cyrene bore, The Cross of Jesus-nothing more
His name is never heard again, Nor honored by historic pen
Nor on the pedestal of fame, His image courts the loud acclaim
Simon of Cyrene bore, The Cross Of Jesus, nothing more,

And yet, when all our work is done, And golden beams the western sun
Upon a life of wealth and fame, A thousand echoes ring our name
Perhaps our hearts will humbly pray, "Good Master, let my record say
Upon the page Divine, he bore, The cross of Jesus, nothing more."

We all have choices to make. Are you willing to pick it up and follow Him? He makes no promises of how it will all turn out except for this: 1Co 2:9 But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

His call will not cease. His plans for you will not change. Ps 33:11 “...*the LORD’s plans stand firm forever; his intentions can never be shaken.*” God “*chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...*” And He chose Simon...a simple nobody from Cyrene... **What about you?**