

“A Cross and Your Choice”

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ... And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” Jesus taught his disciples about a Messiah who would suffer for the sake of others. Echoing the Scriptures as found in the prophet Isaiah Jesus was redefining the role of the Savior of Israel.

“The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue,  
to know the word that sustains the weary.  
He wakens me morning by morning,  
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.  
The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears,  
and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.  
I offered my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;  
I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting” (Isaiah 50:4-6 NIV).

*I. Confession of Faith: Christ Crucified.*

Whenever you try to redefine a role you meet opposition. Peter voiced it. He could accept Jesus as the messiah (he had confessed so), but he could not accept a suffering messiah. Aren't we all a little like Peter? Can we accept a suffering servant as our Messiah? Such belief is foolishness to our cultured despisers, a stumbling block to Jews, a sign of weakness to Muslims. Suffering and death: aren't those things to be avoided? It's really not nice; crucifixion, His blood, all that stuff. Jesus, my friend, tell them the truth, but can't you be a little more subtle or nuanced or open-ended? Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a British poet, critic, and philosopher, was once out with a friend, riding near his home in England's Lake District. He was wearing his customary shabby clothes. Seeing some people approaching, Coleridge suggested that he pass himself off as his friend's servant. "No," said his companion. "I am proud of you as a friend, but would be ashamed of you as a servant."

Jesus' admonition to Peter makes a similar point: “Get behind me Satan ! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,” he said. Even when the Lord of the universe behaves precisely as we would *not* have expected or wanted, it is at our own peril that we be ashamed or embarrassed over knowing, following, and serving him. Jesus knew the human heart. We always want the easy way out. Yet rarely does the easy way bring great value. Jesus' way of saving us, was to save us from *our own sin* at the cost of *His own blood*. Not nice, but good, really good. And so our confession of Jesus as the Christ must be a confession of Christ crucified.

In this season of Lent, we continue on our journey of faith. To be born is never enough, as God tells Abram and Sarai when they journeyed out of Ur to land they knew not. In the process, as pilgrims, God transformed them into Abraham and Sarah. To be located in a community of happenstance is never sufficient, as Paul reminds the Roman congregation (see Romans 4:13-25). Even to be labeled with wonderful sounding titles, as Peter did with Jesus, is insufficient, if we do not understand where those appellations are taking us. We are pilgrims on the journey of faith, with Abraham and the disciples next to us, and Jesus walking out in front...

*II. Journey of Faith: Deny Yourself*

Jesus said "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." He said, deny our selves, take up a cross, and follow him. Most of us gloss over the first two and then say, "See, Jesus, I'm following you." Now Jesus is not talking about an unhealthy self-loathing, but a denial of our greatest ambitions in life, in favor of his.

Denying one self has little appeal for most people – that is usually shown by our checkbooks and our date books. Our temptation is to give our time and effort to the goals of this world; to all the things that will gain us recognition and acclaim. When we have become successful in the world's eyes, we seek to bring God into our lives by honoring him with our accomplishments. We think, "Now that I have been successful in business, or sports, or politics, or Christian ministry, I want to give God the glory." But God will have none of it. God is not interested in receiving secondhand glory from our activities. God is glorified when His activity flows through our lives.

Everywhere we turn the attitudes of this world entice us to adopt the goals of self-aggrandizement and invest in things temporal. At each turn, Jesus quietly says, "Deny yourself." The great temptation is to affirm ourselves while we follow Jesus. Later in Mark's gospel it tells of James and John asking Jesus for the two most prominent positions when he came into his kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). James and John wanted to follow Jesus, but in a way that would not impede their personal ambitions. Like them we often say, "Lord, I do want to follow you and be pleasing to you, but let me do it on my terms." We want to follow Jesus while keeping our lives unruffled and undisturbed, safe and secure.

Most of us who seek to follow Jesus must spend a lifetime denying ourselves. We must resist the temptation to pursue our vaunted goals and then asking God to bless them. For most of us the challenge is to join the activity of God as he reveals it to us. So, just when we think we can wrap our mind and will around this thing of self-denial, Jesus adds another challenge: take up our cross.

### *III. Journey of Faith: Take Up your Cross*

Your cross is God's will for you; no matter the cost or your desires. Taking up this cross is a choice; it is not beyond our control. You may have health problems, or a difficult child, or financial stresses, but these things are not your "cross to bear." The circumstances we may face, or the consequences of our own actions are not the cross we take up. No, the cross that Jesus challenges us to take up is a voluntary participation in Christ's sufferings as he carries out his redemptive purposes.

There is a price to be paid for living the Christian life -- dedication is required of those who would follow in Jesus' footsteps. Dallas Willard writes, "A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in the manner of Christ when put to the test, without appropriate exercise in godly living." Willard goes on to say, "No one ever says, 'If you want to be a great athlete, go vault 18 feet, run the mile under four minutes,' or 'If you want to be a great musician, play the Beethoven violin concerto.' Instead, we advise the young artist or athlete to enter a certain kind of overall life, one involving deep relationships with qualified people as well as rigorously scheduled time, diet and activity for the mind and body."<sup>1</sup>

So it is with the Christian life: if we would follow Jesus we must take up our cross, we must be willing to suffer with and for him if that is our calling. Paul said that he rejoiced in his sufferings that brought others to Christ and into Christian maturity (Col. 1:24). Each of us has a cross, not the same as another's, but ours to take up as He bids. In reality, we can never follow Jesus unless we take up our cross. There are aspects of God's transforming work that cannot be done save through suffering. Just as Christ had to suffer in order to bring salvation, there will be hardships that we will

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<sup>1</sup>Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (HarperSanFrancisco,1988), 4-5, 8.

have to endure in order for God to bring about our transformation and to offer salvation to those around us.

Jesus talked to his disciples after the Transfiguration and they knew who he was – God’s own Son. We will never be able to endure the suffering of the cross unless we too are first convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Once you have settled your relationship with Christ, He will introduce you to your cross.

“Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,  
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore I have set my face like flint,  
and I know I will not be put to shame” (Isaiah 50:7 NIV).

Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem where He did take up His cross and effected our salvation. Are you ready to follow Him? If we wait for a relationship with God that never requires inconvenience or suffering, then we cannot follow the suffering servant messiah; we cannot use Christ as our model. God’s will for each one of us is to deny our impulses and desires, *to follow His*.

When we take up the cross he offers, then we can follow.