

814 *What is the way of the cross?*

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

One of the courses I teach deals with the Passion or the death of Christ. I must tell you that I never get weary of studying about Jesus my Lord. The trials of Jesus, his scourging, and his crucifixion are difficult to think about; but there are some things in the way of the cross worth considering. Josephus speaks of a rebellion in 6-7 AD, when Judas of Galilee (Acts 5:37) led 2,000 Galileans in a revolt against Rome. The Roman army stopped this rebellion and crucified 1,760 Israelites on crosses spaced 30 feet apart on a ten-mile stretch of road. They meant to make an impression. You see, long before Jesus died on the cross, he understood how ugly and terrible crucifixion is. Jesus did not tell us to take up a hangman's rope, an electric chair, or even a lethal injection. He told us to take up our cross. The way of the cross is not easy or pleasant. You see, the cross had only one purpose, to bring about a painful and agonizing death. What can we learn from Jesus in his choice of the cross?

Understanding what the cross meant for Jesus helps us to understand what taking up our cross means for us. First, the way of the cross is the way of forgiveness. After the Jews falsely accused him, illegally tried him, cruelly mocked him, and exchanged him for a known murderer; after the Romans had mercilessly scourged him, spat on him, mocked him, crushed a crown of thorns on His head, drove spikes through his hands and feet, and lifted him up on the cross to suffocate, here are the Lord's first words from Luke 23:33-36: And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

For Jesus, the cross meant having a spirit of forgiveness when He had been treated shamelessly wrong. Everything they did to him was unjust. In spite of all the harshness and hatred, Jesus responded with forgiveness. He could easily have gotten bitter, but he did not. He could easily have struck out at others, but he did not. Peter marveled at Jesus' attitude. He said this in 1 Peter 2:21-24, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." The example of Jesus ought to help us be more patient with others who sin against us.

Bitterness is an awful thing; it is a disease of the soul. It poisons everything around it. Bitterness destroys as many Christian workers as immorality. People can't let go of some insult or offense and stay in constant anger and resentment. The way of the cross is a way of reconciling and redemption. It uses love and forgiveness to restore relationships. The cross teaches us to make friends and to keep friends. It opens the door for people to come together. Is there a little seed of resentment in your heart? Has someone offended you, treated you unjustly, or violated your pride? Following Jesus and taking up your cross is not merely serving the Lord; it is also taking up the practice of forgiving and making friends.

Second, the way of the cross is a way of reaching out. Jesus was crucified between two thieves. For a while, both of them mocked and ridiculed him. The Bible says in Mark 15:31-32: So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He

saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. Can you not imagine how it must have felt to Jesus when the other two men being crucified with him insulted and mocked him? It's not bad enough that he had to take the place of Barabbas. Now these other two thieves were against him and putting him down.

But this is not the end of the story; something else happened. The Bible says in Luke 23:39-43: One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." The thief that once railed at him now made peace with Jesus and humbly asked to be remembered. Jesus did more than that; he gave him a promise of Paradise.

Taking up a cross means that we warmly receive into our lives those very people whom we may have found at another time offensive or difficult. It may mean offering love in response to a sharp elbow in the ribs. It means putting an arm around a person just after we are insulted. That's what Jesus did, and that is what we too should do. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-41, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." The way of the cross is in treating others not as they deserve but in the way you wish to be treated.

The apostle Paul by inspiration wrote in Romans 5:6-8, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Christ did not bear the cross for us because we were so good that we deserved it. He died for us out of love. He saw us for what we were—weak, ungodly sinners. He knew that we could not save ourselves. We could put on righteousness on our own. We had to have his help, his blood to cleanse us from sin. And out of love, he was willing to die for us.

Third the way of the cross is the way of loneliness. Jesus could not hand this task over to anyone else. He had to bear his cross alone. The Bible says in Mark 15:33-34: And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God did not simply give His Son Jesus to atone for our sins. God forsook him for a time. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God laid on Jesus the sins of us all. He counted Jesus as sin and punished Jesus in our place. Jesus alone took the punishment that we deserved. He did so, so that we could be right with the Father.

God made his judgment on sin known to the world by punishing Christ in an awful way. He watched His only begotten Son be totally mistreated. Jesus abandoned his head to a crown of thorns, his body to the scourging, his hands and feet to the nails, and his side to the spear. He allowed every vile mockery to be said about him. They laughed at him and spit in his face. Christ did nothing, and the Father

didn't stop it. Christ was rejected, abandoned, forsaken and condemned by His Father, even though he himself never sinned. He didn't suffer for his own sin; he suffered for yours and mine. Jesus bore his cross alone. No one else could do it for him. No one else was so pure and holy. The righteous bore the sins of the unrighteous.

It wasn't until Jesus died that his loneliness ended. Jesus that day went to Paradise to be with the Father. They buried his body, and on the third day he arose from the dead, never to die again. But once he died, all the suffering was over. He would be forever with the Father. We too must die to ourselves if God is to give us new life. We must choose God over the world, choose righteousness over the crowd, and choose piety over the popular. We may lose the world, but we gain the joy of living forever in the presence of the God who loves us.

Fourth, the way of the cross is the way of finishing. In John 19:28-30 the Bible says: After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Jesus finished what he started on the cross; He remained there until he died. He didn't quit or give up.

In John 12:23-26 Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him." Our natural inclination is to find a way to glory that goes around the cross. We want an easy way, but the way to God is through the cross. God wants his people to bear the cross, to finish the task, and never to quit.

Fifth, the way of the cross is the way of surrender. In Luke 23:46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. Jesus' victory came not through accomplishing his own will but in surrendering to the will of the Father. You remember his surrender in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed in Luke 22:42, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Jesus could yield his spirit to his Father in death without regret or hesitation, because he had yielded to his will in life. It is only by surrendering our wills to God that we can fulfill our purpose in Christ.

You might also remember how Peter wanted to fight the soldiers with a sword. Then Jesus said to him in Matthew 26:52-54, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" Jesus knew that he must surrender, must be mistreated, and must die on the cross. Once He submitted to the will of the Father, he found peace. In Christ, the real victory we seek is not for ourselves but for the Lord and for his gospel. Our greatest desire ought to be for His will to be done on earth.

God makes a victory out of what appears to be a defeat. We may appear to surrender to the world in defeat only to see the gospel advance. Paul wrote from prison in Philippians 1:12-14, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." At a later time this inspired apostle said in 2 Timothy 2:8-9, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" Surrender to God isn't defeat, it is victory no matter what happens today. This is why we must follow the Lord.

Doug Greenway of the Booneville church of Christ said, "No matter how long we live, we're going to be dead very much longer." You see, this life is not all there is. The way of the cross doesn't just take today into account. It sees beyond this life. No matter how difficult it may be to take up our cross in this life, eternity is so much longer! The Bible says in Hebrews 12:1-2, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus despised the shame and the pain of the cross, but he could see joy and victory ahead of him. He knew that he would rise from the dead and be vindicated. He also saw the joy of those who believed in him. He could look into the future and see that people would become obedient to His will and take up their own crosses and follow him. He could see sinners become saints. He could see the change in people's lives because of his willingness to bear the cross. He could see all the souls in heaven.

Have you taken up your cross? Have you become a Christian? Are you prepared to surrender your will to the Father? Are you willing to stay with your faith even in the loneliest times? Are you willing to forgive even those who oppose you? Will you take up your cross today? The way that you do that is to be crucified with Christ. That takes faith and the willingness to give up sin. The change in relationship, however, takes place when you are baptized. Romans 6:3-7 says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin." I hope that you today will unite with Christ in his death and resurrection, that you might be free from sin and have newness of life.

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