

You Cannot Carry Your Own Cross



David Wilkerson May 1, 1979

It's very true that Jesus said to His disciples, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me." But Jesus could not carry His cross - and neither can you! Jesus fell under the load of His cross, weary, exhausted, and unable to carry it another step. John said, "And he bearing his cross went forth into a place...called Golgotha" (John 19:17). The Bible doesn't tell us how far Jesus carried His cross. We do know they compelled Simon, the Cyrene, to pick it up and carry it to the place of crucifixion (Matthew 27:32).

Jesus did take up His cross and was led by His tormentors like a lamb to be slain. But He could not carry it for long. The truth is, Jesus was too weak and frail to carry His cross. It was laid on another's shoulder. He had reached the end of His endurance. He was a physically broken and wounded man. There is only so much one person can take. There is a breaking point. Why did they compel Simon to pick up that cross? Was Jesus lying on those cobblestone streets like a lifeless man, with the cross lying over him like dead weight? Did they kick Him, try to prop Him up, and attempt to force Him a step further? But did He just lie there, with not enough strength to move an inch? His cross had become too heavy to bear.

What does this mean to us? Would our Lord make us do something He could not do? Did He not say, "...whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple? (Luke 14:27). A cross is a cross, be it wooden or spiritual. It is not enough to say, "His cross was different - our cross is spiritual."

Personally, it gives me great hope to know that Jesus could not take up His own cross. It encourages me to know that I am not the only one burdened down to the ground at times, unable to go on in my own strength. If we are going to identify with His crucifixion, we must also identify with the steps that led to the cross. We must face, once and for all, the truth that no human being can carry his own cross.

Don't look for some hidden interpretation; Jesus knew exactly what He was saying when He called us to "take up our cross and follow Him." He remembers His own cross. He remembers that another had to carry it for Him. Why then would He ask us to shoulder a cross He knows will soon crush us to the ground? He knows we can't carry it all the way, in our own strength. He knows all about the agony, the helplessness, the burden that crosses create.

There is a truth hidden here that we must uncover. It is a truth so powerful and edifying, it could change the way we look at all our troubles and hurts. And even though it almost sounds sacrilegious to suggest Jesus did not carry His own cross, that is the truth. What it means to us today is that Jesus, who is touched by the feelings of our infirmities, must experience for Himself what it is like to be weak, discouraged and unable to go on without help. He was in all points tempted just as we are. The temptation is not in failing, not in laying down the cross because of weakness; the real temptation is in trying to pick up that cross and carry it on in our own strength. God could have supernaturally lifted that cross and magically levitated it all the way to Calvary. Then, too, He could have taken the weight out of the cross and made it featherlike. But He did not. The crucifixion scene was not a series of blunders, and though Christ died at the hands of sinners, the entire plan was borne in the heart of God from the foundation of the world. God put Simon there, ready to play his part in the plan of redemption. God was not caught by surprise when His Son could no longer carry the cross and thus fulfill prophecy. God knew Jesus would take up His cross, follow toward Golgotha, then lay it down.

Your Cross Is Meant to Bring You Down

God knows also that not one of His children can carry the cross they take up when following Christ. We so much want to be good disciples; we so much want to deny ourselves and take the cross upon ourselves; we seem to forget that same cross will one day bring us to the end of our human strength and endurance. Would Jesus purposely ask us to take up a cross that He knows will sap all our human energies and leave us lying helpless - even to the point of giving up? Absolutely yes! Jesus forewarns us, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). So He asks us to take up our cross, struggle on with it, until we learn that lesson. Not until our cross pushes us down into the dust do we learn the lesson that it is not by our might or power or strength, but by His power. That is what the Bible means when it says His strength is made perfect in our weakness. It has never meant that God's way is a little better than ours or that His strength is a bit superior. It means that God's way is the only way; His strength the only hope.

Jesus looks upon this world, filled with confused children going about trying to establish their own righteousness, trying to please Him in their own way, and He calls for crosses. The cross is meant to break us, to drain us of all human effort. We know we are stronger than Simon who will come at our breaking point and take over the burden, but He cannot take over until we give up, until we come to that point where we cry, "God, I can't go another step. I'm exhausted! I'm broken! My strength is gone! I feel dead! Help!"

Jesus was crucified "through weakness" (2 Corinthians 13:4). It is when we become totally weak and self-abased that we witness we are made strong, by faith in the Lord. Our spirit is willing to carry our own cross, but the flesh is weak. Paul could glory in his cross, taking pleasure in how weak it made him. He said, "I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong...For he said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9,10).

Paul was not weak and strong at the same time. He grew weak because of troubles and distresses. But when he was cast down to the ground by his cross, he did not despair. It was out of that weakness he became strong. Paul rejoiced in this process of being made weak because it was the secret to his power with Christ. "Most gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

What is your cross? It is any burden or pressure that threatens to break you down. My junkie friends call theirs "a monkey on the back." That is not a sacrilegious reference to the cross. It simply defines their image of a burden that crushes them to the ground. I have often heard husbands and wives referring to their marriage as a "a cross to bear." Others see their cross as an unfulfilling job, an illness, a state of loneliness or divorce. I have heard all kinds of definitions of what the cross is supposed to represent. I have even heard homosexuals refer to their habit as a heavy cross. Since Jesus did describe the details of the cross we are to take up, I suggest it is anything that will hasten a crisis in our spiritual lives. For example, loneliness can be a cross if it becomes a burden too heavy to bear and it finally brings us to the end of ourselves. It is then that we can allow the Lord to reach down to us and lift us out of our pity and self-destructiveness. Loneliness is a good thing if it makes us weak enough to want only His strength.

"I'm Not Doing Enough for God"

My cross is peculiar but not unfamiliar to many others. I am constantly burdened by a sense of "not ever doing enough." This cross usually becomes the heaviest right after I've written a best-selling book; after preaching to thousands; after launching a feeding program for starving children; after counseling with hundreds of troubled couples. I stop for a few weeks, take inventory of my life and ministry, and something in me gets restless. I get depressed and confess to my wife and friends, "I don't feel like I'm doing anything for God. I'm not as fulfilled as I should be. Sometimes I feel so useless."

So often I get that "unfinished" feeling. I feel I am wasting too much time doing insignificant things. It's hard to relax when a voice inside condemns you for not "burning out for Jesus." I think of all the things I promise myself I will do; the projects I'll finish; the growth in God I'll achieve - and much of it never gets done. I accuse myself of being lazy. Others seem to be so disciplined and motivated, and I picture them in my mind as all passing me by, leaving me behind in the dust. But God will ask me to keep taking up that cross daily, until it finally gets the best of me. Evidently that's a part of my life that is not yet under His control. One day, I'll fall down in despair and cry, "Lord, I just don't care anymore. Let the world pass me by. Let my dreams all fade. Let me be nothing but an obedient disciple. I don't want to compete with myself or others anymore. No more ego goals. Take over, Lord, and lift my load." That is when our Lord will step in and whisper, "Now David, let Me carry your load."

Spiritual Crosses

Sometimes spiritual pride can be a cross. You take on a heavy load when you begin to testify about the great things God is doing in your life. God gives you a broken and contrite spirit. Others come to you for help and receive blessings. You are used in wonderful ways in encouraging people all around you. It begins to dawn on you, "Wow! I've had such great joy. God has made me so tender and loving. I'm finally learning how to overcome my temptations and I'm growing so much in the Lord. I feel like I'm about to break through into a life of spiritual glory and power. At last, I've reached a place of trust and peace. I don't ever want to go back to what I was."

A week later you are groveling in the dust; your spiritual balloon busted, and everything seems to have drained out of you. All you can say is, "What happened? I haven't sinned against God; I haven't doubted. The joy just disappeared. I don't seem to have anything in me now to give to others. I'm dry and empty. Why couldn't I have kept the beautiful feelings?"

You Will Never "Arrive"

Hear me, friend - God will never permit you to feel like you have arrived. That's the trouble with too many Christians today. Way back, they received a great blessing from the Lord. God did a wonderful work in their lives. The Holy Spirit came upon them and redid their lives, through and through. It was glorious and they started telling the world about their awakening. And it's been downhill every since. They have been riding out that one great experience, and in the process, they became self-satisfied and complacent. Take heed when you think you stand, lest you fall. Finally that once-blessed Christian ends up feeling weak and empty. After trying unsuccessfully to invent and recreate the blessings, he gives up in despair. He cries out, "I'm spiritually dead. I'm losing ground with God. I feel like a phony. I can't seem to get back to where I was in the Lord."

Your love for Jesus can put you on your knees, but your cross will put you on your face - on the ground in the dust. God meets you in your prostrate condition and whispers, "I have chosen the weak things of the world; the foolish things; the broken things; the things that are nothing - that no flesh should glory in His presence."

The Cross Teaches Us How to Deny Self

You will have to carry your cross until you learn to deny. Deny what? The one thing that constantly hinders God's work in our lives - self. Look again at what Jesus said, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." We are misinterpreting this message if we emphasize self-denial, that is, the rejection of material or unlawful things. Jesus was not calling upon us to learn self-discipline before we take up our cross. It is far more severe than that. Jesus is asking that we deny ourselves. This means to deny your own ability to carry any cross in your own strength. In other words, "Don't take up your cross until you are ready to reject any and every thought on becoming a holy disciple as a result of your own effort."

There are millions of professing Christians who boast about their self-denial. They don't drink or smoke or curse or fornicate - they are examples of tremendous self-discipline. But not in a hundred years would they admit it was accomplished by anything else than their own willpower. In fact, they are quick to add statements like the following: "I can quit any time I want. The devil can't trick me. I know what's right and I try to do it. I keep all the commandments. I'm a clean, moral person. I don't lie or cheat and I am faithful to my marriage vows." They are practicing self-denial, but they have never denied self. In some ways, we are all like that. We experience "spurts" of holiness, accompanied by feelings of purity. Good works usually produce good feelings. but God will not allow us to think our good works and clean habits can save us. That is why we need a cross.

I believe Jesus is actually saying to us, "Before you take up your cross, be ready to face a moment of truth. Be ready to experience a crisis by which you will learn to deny your self-will, your self-righteousness, your self-sufficiency, your self-authority. You can rise up and follow Me as a true disciple only when you can freely admit you can do nothing in your own strength - you cannot overcome sin through your own willpower - your temptations cannot be overcome by your self-efforts alone - you cannot work things out by your own intellect.

Jesus Never Forces a Cross on Us

He said, "Let Him take up his cross." Never once does our Lord say, "Stoop down and let Me lay a cross on you." Jesus is not in the drafting business; His army is all volunteer. Not all Christians carry crosses. You can be a believer without carrying a cross, but you cannot be a disciple. I see so many believers rejecting the way of the cross. They have opted for the good life with its prosperity, its material gain, its popularity and success. I'm sure many of them will make heaven - they will have saved their skins, but they will not have learned Christ. Having rejected the suffering and sorrow of the cross, they will not have the capacity to know and enjoy Him in eternity, as will all the cross-bearing saints who have entered into the fellowship of His suffering.

Those who suffer will reign together. I am not glorifying the suffering and pain - only the results they produce. Like Paul, we should look at the trials and hurts we are now experiencing and rejoice in the knowledge we are going down the only path that leads to ultimate victory and maturity. No longer, then, do we look at our burdens and troubles as accidents and penalties but as a cross that is offered to teach us submission to God's way of doing things. If you are hurting right now, you are in the process of healing. If you are down, crushed under the burden of a heavy load, get ready! God is about to show Himself strong on your behalf. You are at the point of revelation. At any time now, your Simon will appear because God does use people to perform His will. Someone is going to be compelled by the Holy Spirit to come into your path of suffering, reach out to you, and help lift your burden. Your Cross Is a Sign of His Love

Dear friend-don't think of your trial as judgment from God. Don't go about condemning yourself as though you have brought down upon you some dreaded penalty for failure. Stop thinking, "God is making me pay for my sin." Why can't you see that what you are going through is a result of His love? Are you being chastened? Do you feel like you are being dragged down? Are you in pain? Suffering? Good! That is the evidence of His love toward you. Submit! Take up your cross! Be prepared to go down even more! Get ready to reach your crisis! Get ready to reach the end of yourself! Be prepared to give up! Be prepared to hit bottom!

Please understand you are in Christ's own school of discipleship. Rejoice that you are going to become weak in order to experience His overpowering strength in you.

He laid His cross down; why won't you? For Him, a Simon appears. For us, a Savior appears. We get up and go on. It's still our cross - but now it's on His shoulders.

"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:9,10).

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