

THE VALUE OF THE CROSS

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Have you ever said to God, "Lord, come get me, I'm through, I'm giving up"? Yes, we've all said that. I believe all of us have grown weary and lost heart at times.

Perhaps you have heard the story about the pastor with six kids who was experiencing personal trauma. One day his wife went to the grocery store taking all the kids. While she was gone he was "having it out with God" ...sitting at the kitchen table and crying. Finally he fell face down on the floor, beat his fists, and cried out, "God! Come and take me home." About that time his wife appeared in the doorway with both arms full of groceries and the kids hanging on her skirt. Hearing his desperate plea to God she said, "Get up from there, you coward! You're not leaving me here by myself with all these kids!"

Many of us can identify with our pastor, can't we? But, during times of such discouragement, if we understand that Jesus is after something, that there is a reason for our present experience, that there is a purpose for what we are going through, then it gives us hope and enables us to persevere.

You see, God wants us to grow up in Him... "unto the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ." (Eph. 4:13). When Jesus went to the cross, He had full understanding. He knew why He was dying. But often we go through things that we don't understand (our crosses) and without that understanding we can lose our way.

WHAT IS THE CROSS?

It is important that we understand just what the cross is. For us in today's world, the cross often comes in the form of financial stress, broken relationships with those we love, emotional/mental struggles and/or physical hardships. Our cross may include constant physical pain, depression, loss of a loved one, unjust suffering due to lies and slander, being cheated by another, and so on. It is important to realize that our crosses are not the result of our own sin though they may well be the result of another's sin.

In short, the cross is unavoidable suffering in this life. As time passes, the effect of this suffering (cross) separates us from the world and its immense pulling power. "...because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin." (1 Pet 4:1 NIV). Thus, the cross is God's surgical instrument which severs the power of the world and sin from His church.

WHY THE CROSS?

The beautiful 23rd Psalm says,

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me
beside quiet water, he restores my soul. He guides me
in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

So far so good, right? But wait a minute. Read on...

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."
(Ps 23:4). Or, (my translation) "When I think I'm going to
die..."

You see, He leads us into the valley, too, does He not?

Why does the Lord lead us through the "valley of the shadow of death"? Is there a New Testament name for this beautiful, poetic phrase "Valley of the shadow of death"? Yes, it is called the "cross." To give a New Testament paraphrase to that verse, "Even though I walk up Calvary's hill to the cross...."

Remember, because Jesus did a perfect work on the cross, there is nothing you or I can add to Christ's completed work on the cross. There is nothing we can take away from it. It is complete. It is finished. The Apostle Paul tells us that we were crucified with Christ on the cross 2000 years ago. We died with Him.

Then why do we need to go to the cross? Christ bore the cross to fulfill the law and to pay the supreme price for our sin. But though He paid the price for our sins, we must bear our cross to separate us from our sin. That's why we need the cross in our lives.

Looking at Figure 1, let's ask a question, "What does the cross mean to these various people?" First, we see Character A, that young man is John Q. Christian. He's bearing his cross on the way to Calvary. That's also us, for we, too, are bearing our cross.

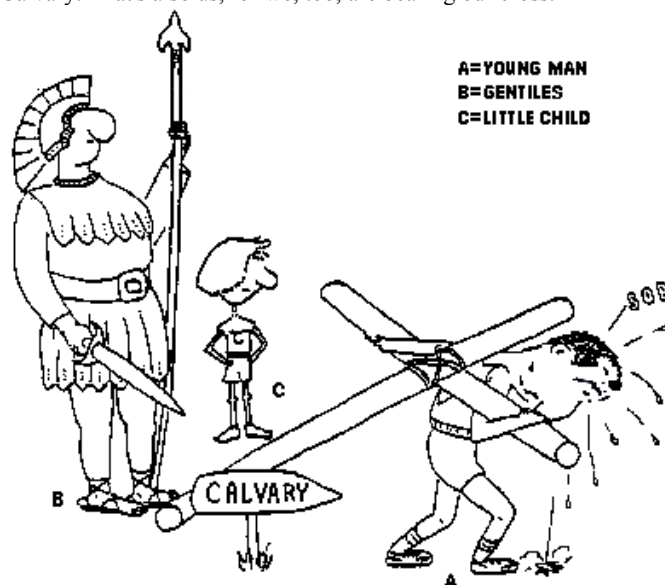


Figure 1

John Q. knows there is a small extra hole in the ground alongside Jesus' cross. That hole is to hold his cross. He's on his way, trudging up the hill, sadly bearing his cross. He's weeping as he bears that cross because it's so hard.

You see, John Q. Christian knows he must bear his cross because of what Jesus said about bearing the cross. "Then Jesus said to his disciples...those following Him, "If anyone would come after me, he must..." (1) "deny himself," (2) "take up his cross," and (3) "follow Me." (Matt 16:24).

SELF-DENIAL

First, we are called to self-denial. Self-denial is clearly portrayed by Jesus' prayer in the garden, "Father, not my will, but thy will be done." (Matt 26:39). All too often we pray, "Father, not Thy will, but my will be done."

Self-denial means literally setting aside one's own desires, one's own will, one's own purposes and one's own ambitions. It means instead we are called to take up God's directions, God's purposes and God's desires. It also means that part of this learning process is to take up the unpleasant experiences that we all must undergo in order to set our own will and desires aside.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author

and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Heb 12:1-3 NIV).

A number of years ago, in my training in the U. S. Marines, one day it was announced, "We're going on a 20 mile hike. Prepare your pack." I began putting several things in my pack that I thought I might need. I might need this...I might need that...oh, yes, I may need this, too. Then I had the unpleasant experience of carrying that heavy pack for 20 miles. The next time a hike was announced, let me assure you I didn't take my keys or any pocket change, I didn't even take my wallet! I didn't take anything that wasn't absolutely essential! Spiritually, the same principle applies. We are called on to put aside everything that hinders--every weight, every sin, every pull of the world. Yes, even when what "hinders" may be something "self" loves, we are called to discard it!

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME

Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." The Apostle Peter said that we are to follow in Christ's steps. (1 Pet 2:21). If we follow Christ's steps, they invariably lead from the cheering crowds and the glory of great popularity, through conflict and strife, to the Garden of Gethsemane. There we find a large pool of tears mingled with His blood and footprints...leading on to Calvary. That's our call if we aspire to grow into spiritual fatherhood. We are compelled upward and onward to the hill of Calvary.

Now, let's look at Character B in Figure 1. He is the biblical "Greek" or "Roman" or "Gentile." In our day, he's the outsider, the non-Christian. He looks at the cross and says, "That is foolishness. Those people are crazy!" (Ref. 1 Cor. 1:18). To him the cross is something to ridicule. He doesn't understand it and he rejects it. Why? Because the Scripture says, "...the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor 2:14 KJV). So here we see the natural man, the unbeliever, the Gentile, looking on without the ability to comprehend that's why he calls it foolishness.

Character C in Figure 1 is the spiritual little child. How does he view Calvary? He is standing there looking on and he sees all the pain, sorrow and agony. What is his first response? "I rebuke you, devil!" The young child in Christ does not possess the understanding that the cross is God's means of stripping off the world and the sin that so easily besets us. The dear young child will call the saints together, he'll pray, fast and do everything he can to try to avoid picking up his cross. Why? Because he hasn't grown enough in spiritual maturity and understanding to comprehend the principle of the cross.

Now consider Figure 1 as Jesus sees it. Jesus looks on and says, "This is the way to bear your burden, your cross. This is the only way to grow up unto the fullness of the measure of my stature. I know it's painful, my dear child, I too have felt that awesome weight. I know you don't fully understand, but this is the only way you will ever be delivered from the sins of this life and the pull of the world which so powerfully intrudes into your life. The cloud of witnesses and the host of angels are cheering for you. Do not grow weary. I will be waiting at the top of the hill to say, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant!'"

WHAT WE LOSE AT THE CROSS

Let's look now at some of the Scriptural "weights" or "hindrances" as Hebrews Chapter twelve calls them that we leave behind. Remember the rich young ruler who was attached to his wealth and couldn't give it up? The list can be quite long, considering our various personalities. Jesus said that even

such things as mothers, fathers, lands, and homes may easily become hindrances if we are inordinately attached to them.

Of course, the "hinderance" can also be just plain sin in our life. I don't think this needs much elaboration. Suffice to say, you will never experience real freedom or joy until that besetting sin is taken to the cross.

A hindrance may even be something that Jesus means for good such as a ministry. Or it could be a God-given talent or a spiritual gift. Am I saying that even what God gives us has to go to the cross? Yes, usually it does. For example, we often hear of people who were accomplished musicians in the world, yet when they came to Christ the Lord would not even permit them to touch their instruments or sing for some period of time. Then one day, possibly two, five or ten years later, the Holy Spirit said, "You can begin your music again now." What has happened? That gift has been to the cross. It has died to natural or human expectations. And when the Lord directs that person to begin again, it is heavenly music because there is a different Lord directing the performance.

How does the crucifixion of these things occur? As we progress in our walk to maturity, circumstances will arise that force us to make personal choices. At those times we should say, "Yes, Lord, I am going to go on with you. Yes, Lord, I'm going to go to Calvary. Yes, Lord, I'm going to allow this circumstance to strip me of whatever doesn't please you. I'm going to allow you to crucify this displeasing thing in my life."

It may be days, weeks, months, or even years before this hindrance actually dies to us. Who determines how long this death process takes? We do. Because the longer I try to keep it alive, to keep it going, the longer it's going to be there as a hindrance. And the longer my hindrance and sin lives, the slower my growth into maturity.

How do you know when the hinderance is dead and gone? Well, how do you know when a person is dead? It's simple. If you stick a corpse with a pin it doesn't flinch because there are no feelings. So if God has been leading us to Calvary over a certain thing in our life, how do we know when it's dead? We know it's dead when the possibility of its resurrection can be dangled tantalizingly in front of us and we nonchalantly ignore it. It's then truly dead to us, because it no longer has any pull on us. Can we look at it and honestly say, "It no longer counts. I don't care if I ever see it, touch it, or feel it again"? If such a statement is made with true sincerity that comes from the depth of the human spirit, then it's dead.

That's the time when we, like Paul, can look back from the post-cross experience and say, "Oh, what a feeling of joy! Hallelujah!" That weight no longer has a hold on our lives. We are now free. No longer will there be tears of sorrow over that thing. The tears now are tears of joy because we are free at last.

PAUL'S PERSPECTIVE TOWARD HIS CROSS

The Apostle Paul, certainly one of the most spiritual of fathers, said, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Gal 6:14 NIV). The way Paul talks, bearing his cross was a severing point or a threshold, a bridge that he crossed and burned. The world became the past for Paul.

If Paul looked at Figure 1, he would say, "...God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me and I to the world." (Gal 6:14 KJV).

Note that Paul calls the cross "glory." Paul, how could you look at such an unpleasant or even tragic experience and call it "glory"? Paul responds, "It's simply a matter of perspective." To the one who is looking at the cross before the Calvary experience, there is much sorrow and many tears. (Figure 2). He cries, "Woe is me, I am undone!"



Figure 2

But for the one who is on the other side of the cross, he looks back and says, "Oh! What freedom! Hallelujah!" And he's jumping up and down in joy!

So you see, it is a matter of perspective. If Paul can look at it and call it "glory," that's because he's looking back at the past events of his own life and saying, "the world is crucified to me." But to those of us who may still have the pull of the world clinging tenaciously to us, struggling on our way up Calvary's hill, it can be a very sorrowful, painful and agonizing experience in every respect.

In the midst of all this pain, suffering and misunderstanding, we sometimes ask ourselves, why should we continue? Answer: Because the cross brings total freedom from the "weight and the sin that so easily besets us." Look at the illustration in Figure 3. On the left of the cross is the pre-cross realm of experience. It extends right up to the cross. In this realm the power of sin and the power of the world exist. But both these powers end at the cross. The liberating realm of God's power begins at the cross!

For the soul who is struggling to be obedient, to bear his cross, to take it all the way to the point of laying his life on the altar for Christ, the power of sin is very, very real. But once he breaks over into that "death" experience, the power of the resurrection becomes his and the world of sin has no more dominion. Jesus said, "All authority, in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matt 28:18 NIV). That statement was made after He died on the cross.

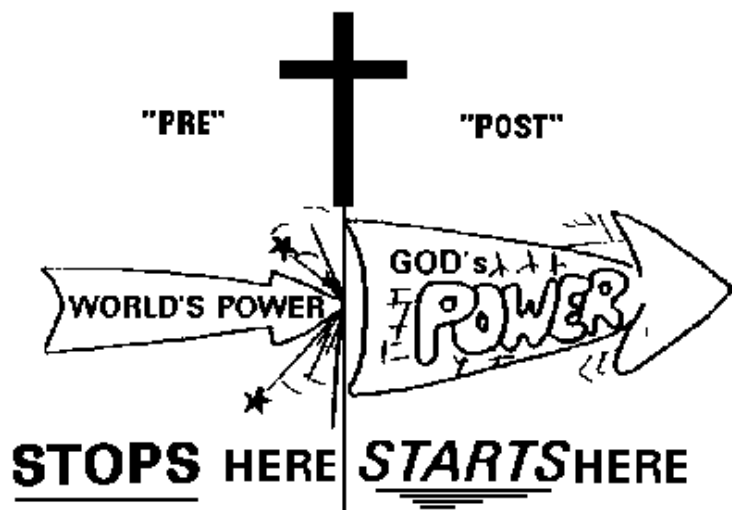


Figure 3

So death by the cross is to us a power receiving experience as well as a freedom giving experience. With the cross comes a new realm and a new dimension of God's power. That's why mature believers can say, "We glory in the cross...because what we now have is so much more than what we left behind. There are no longer chains dragging from our feet as we walk in the steps of Christ Jesus. Those chains were left at the cross! The world is crucified to us." What did Paul say? "May I never boast except in

the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

To give us further understanding about how real this realm was to Paul, he said in Philippians,

"What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." (Phil 3:8-11 NIV).

That statement is obviously made from the perspective of the post-cross experience, is it not? Paul goes on to make this point,

"...Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Phil 3:12-14 NIV).

All who are spiritually mature take such a view of the things of life.

I believe that any Christian at any time has the option of saying, "Lord, I'm going to stay right here--this is a nice green valley, my children are all in school here, I've planted roses in the front yard...this is enough for me." Though I believe that such an attitude grieves the heart of Jesus, He will let us stay where we are. It has nothing to do with salvation, we are still saved. But we are not going to grow anymore. Such a person has reached what I call "terminal maturity."

However, if we want that surpassing joy and power that was demonstrated so abundantly in the life of the Apostle Paul, we dare not turn away from our crosses. Hopefully we will say, "Lord, I'm fearful, but I'm going to keep on keepin' on! I'm following You. I'm going to grow up unto the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ."

Most of the teachings on the cross emphasized the death part of it. But there is also life at the cross. And it's a supernatural life. Once we allow the Lord Jesus to crucify something in our lives and let it remain dead, there's such an abundant life on the other side of that Calvary that the all surpassing joy is ours.

Let's now examine this Scripture: "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin." (1 Pet 4:1 NIV). I believe Peter was saying: "For him who has deeply suffered, physically, mentally or emotionally, for him who has had his flesh crucified, then to that person sin no longer has power over him." Can you see the liberation that can take place as we allow Jesus to take us up Golgotha's hill?

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20 KJV).

Here Paul is proclaiming the personal liberty that comes as a result of having been crucified with Christ. This is how crucifixion of the flesh benefits us as individuals.

THE CROSS AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

But let me ask one more question that concerns not the individual but the corporate body of Christ. With regard to the ultimate purpose of our crucifixion, to what end are we being crucified with Christ? The answer is found in II Corinthians, "For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lived by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you." (II Cor 13:4 NIV)

Remember, one of the attributes of the spiritually mature is the absence of self-serving. Who did Jesus serve? He served His father and He served His followers. Who do the spiritually mature serve? They serve the Father and, at the same time, serve the needs of others. Likewise, as we mature through our cross experiences, we too will live by God's power to serve Him and others. "For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you." (II Cor 13:4 NIV).

Paul goes on to describe the cross life.

"...We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not

abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed... For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you...Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary; what is unseen is eternal." (II Cor 4:7-18 NIV).

We now see the real benefits of the cross, not only to us personally, but to the body of Christ corporately. The more we grow in Christ, the more spiritually mature we become, the more we embrace the cross and allow it to do its perfect work in our lives, then the more of His everlasting peace, power and joy we will experience and the more we will gladly serve others for His glory.

Lord, let it be so!

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