

What Does It Mean To Take Up The Cross?

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*“And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.”—
Matthew 10:38*

Six times in the gospels, our Savior instructs His followers regarding the cross. The epistles likewise have numerous mentions of the cross of Christ. However, for those who understand how paganism has crept into mainstream Christianity, the cross may be a subject that is left out of our studies. But with so much instruction on this one topic, it is well worth understanding its daily significance for us.

To begin, it is necessary to consider the common usage of crosses. The second commandment forbids the use of any physical representation of something used in the worship of God. It prohibits anything that tries to represent divinity in a physical way, such as pictures or statues. The crucifix (an image of Jesus on the cross) certainly fits into this category. Even though the stated intent is for use as a remembrance of the crucifixion, God commands us not to use any image or likeness in our worship of Him.

An Ancient Pagan Symbol

The cross has been used as a religious symbol since long before the crucifixion of Jesus. It originated in the Babylonian mystery religions, where it was a symbol of the god, Tammuz. In his book *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop summarizes the universality of the cross by saying that “there is hardly a pagan tribe where the cross has not been found.” The cross did not even become associated with nominal Christianity until the time of Constantine, centuries after the crucifixion. And while the Scriptures refer to the cross metaphorically, the true church never made use of it in a physical way.

In addition to the pagan origin, the question is still unresolved exactly what Jesus died on. The Greek word translated as “cross” is *stauros*, meaning a stake or upright pole. It may have had a cross-beam on it, or it may have simply been a long piece of wood, thick enough to bear the weight of a human body. Adding to the mystery are four scriptures asserting that Jesus was hung on a tree (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; I Peter 2:24), and the Greek indicates a green, living tree rather than a *stauros* of dead wood. Because of this, one possibility is that the *stauros* of Jesus was just the crossbeam, which was attached to a living tree.

But the traditions of nominal Christianity have memorialized the pagan cross. To add insult to injury, so-called Christians venerate the *means* of death of the Messiah through their physical representations, rather than commemorating His death as He commanded, through the observance of the Passover (see I Corinthians 11:24-25). Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus Christ despised the shame of the cross in order to become our Savior, yet nominal Christianity both memorializes that shame in an image and turns it into a good-luck charm.

In studying Christ’s instructions for taking up or bearing our *stauros*, it is clear that He did not intend for us to have anything to do with a physical crucifix, any more than He intended for us literally to pluck out an eye or cut off a hand to avoid sin (see Matthew 5:29-30). Rather, the use of the cross stands for a much larger concept that cannot—and should not—be crammed into a mere icon.

A Metaphor for Our Walk

The Jews living under Roman dominion were all too familiar with crucifixions. When they saw a man carrying a *stauros*, it could only mean that his time on earth was essentially finished; they knew that man was as good as dead. So when Jesus told His followers to take up their crosses, they also were to account themselves as already being dead. What life remained was given over to the control of another, symbolizing complete surrender, while pointing to the encumbered life of a disciple.

Jesus' various statements about the cross show us the practical applications of this metaphor. The contexts make it clear what it means for us to live surrendered lives in, but not of, this world. Notice Matthew 10:34-39:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to "set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law"; and "a man's enemies will be those of his own household." He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And 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. (Emphasis added throughout.)

Here, Jesus explains that there is a cost to following Him and that it will cause separation from those closest to us. When we reckon ourselves as dead and completely surrendered to the One who is giving us a new and superior life, our decision creates division, putting us at odds with family and friends who have not yet been called. They will continue worshipping in the way that seems best to them, while our surrendering to God constrains us, instead, to worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

If we are to be worthy of Christ, our love for Him must be greater than our love for our parents and children. If God requires something of us that does not make sense to them, we must remember that we have already died and that eternal life comes with a cost. In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." When we accept Christ as our Savior, we, too, are symbolically crucified with Him, which means our lives now must conform to His.

For Matthew 10:39, various paraphrases render it as "he who clings to his life" or "whoever tries to gain his own life." In other words, we cannot serve two masters. We will either pursue life on our own terms and lose out on eternity, or we will give up our claim on our lives and trust whatever God does with them. The life God wants for us is incomparably richer than anything this world has, but if our focus is only on our current circumstances, that priceless life will not mean much to us.

Unable to Commit

I Kings 18 recounts the showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, in which the prophet asked the people of Israel how long they would falter between two opinions. They knew there were benefits to worshipping the God who had delivered them from Egypt, but they were also attracted to Baal-worship. The people would not commit to follow one or the other, opting instead for an unholy mixture of beliefs, leading to the adoption of rank paganism.

This principle is especially relevant for us in the end time. In the letter to the final church in Revelation, Christ's charge is that the Laodiceans are neither cold nor hot. They claim to love Him, but their lifestyle reveals their worldly infatuations. They do not reject God completely, nor commit to Him wholeheartedly—because of the great price. They are still clinging to their lives, because surrendering completely and bearing their crosses are too costly. Yet, trying to have it both ways, they are losing out on eternal life. They are unwilling to lose their lives for His sake, and are thus unworthy of the life of Christ.

Luke 9:23-25 gives ample material for understanding Jesus' meaning:

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?"

Though a different occasion, He mentions again the choice between clinging to our former lives, or letting go and entrusting our new lives to His care. He points out that all the riches of the world mean nothing without a spiritual life—a life that will not be held captive by the grave. We might have some years of glorious living in a physical sense, but inevitably, the same event happens to us all.

Jesus emphasizes the tremendous waste of squandering the opportunity for eternal life in exchange for a little more fun or comfort today. Then He reminds His followers that He will be coming again to reward people for the choices they made—whether they valued Him and sought Him, or were ashamed of Him and sought the dead things of this world.

A Heavy Cost

One other instruction appears here: the command to deny oneself. He is not advocating asceticism but allowing God to set the terms of one's life. It is about renouncing one's own life in favor of the life that Christ is offering—one far better but more costly.

To follow after Him, we must willingly reject—even disown—any aspect of life that is not in subjection to Him. This involves putting to death the works of the flesh and purging the love of the world, including the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (I John 2:15-17). We must hold at bay all those things embedded deep in our human nature that prevent our being worthy of Him.

We must realize that to carry a *stauros* is not a brisk walk with a little stick softly resting on one shoulder. The stake, or the crossbeam, was a thick and heavy piece of wood. It weighed down the bearer and hindered normal mobility.

Similarly, some aspects of our calling and conversion burden us and make it impossible to walk as others do—and that is by design. Becoming a follower of Christ has never meant having an easy life. It has tremendous benefits and blessings, but it also has its burdens because of the nature that remains inside us, weighing us down as it fights for dominance. This is why in Galatians 5:24 Paul says that "Those who belong to Christ have crucified their old nature with all that it loved and lusted for" (Phillips' Translation).

The fact that we must take up our cross daily means that we must lift that crossbeam every morning and crucify our carnal nature up until we go to sleep. Then the next morning we rise and shoulder afresh those things we have to bear, crucifying the flesh again. This routine begins at baptism, but it does not end until our final breath.

A Carnal Perspective

I John 5:3 says that God's commands are not burdensome, yet the carnality that remains within us considers them to be so. Many believers have had to face the dilemma of being offered a better-paying job if they were willing to break the fourth commandment and work on the Sabbath, or the ninth commandment by misrepresenting ourselves. Similarly, they could have more money by breaking the eighth commandment and robbing God of His tithe. If we are accustomed to getting our way, then these behavioral limits will seem burdensome, but only because we still lack the perspective of the divine Lawgiver.

Jesus said that His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:30). In Christ, we still have burdens, but they are far easier to bear when He is providing the strength. As we become aligned with His standard of conduct, the burdens become less about the conflict within ourselves because of what we feel God will not let us do and more about the conflict we will encounter from the world as God's way of life offends them. There can be external conflict but internal peace because we are in alignment with God.

But until we are of the same mind as the Lawgiver, our carnality will tirelessly pressure us to ease our burdens by playing fast and loose with God's instructions. That is part of the cross we have to bear until our perfecting. God's law is not the problem—it is the carnal mind feeling vexed that makes our obligations feel heavy.

No Greater Power

The cross of Christ can mean two different things: It can be a symbol of what the crucifixion produced (forgiveness, etc.), or it can represent Christ's own example of self-denial and losing His life for a greater purpose—a symbol of great personal cost.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:18, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Consider, though, that many who claim to be Christian today do not consider the idea of forgiveness through crucifixion to be foolishness. They glory in what the cross produced. What is foolishness to them is His example of complete surrender, which we are to imitate. As a result, nominal Christianity has become tolerant of sin, increasingly human-centered, and less inclined to actions that might involve discomfort or inconvenience. Even conservative denominations will not follow Christ with regard to the seventh-day Sabbath. They appreciate what the cross of Christ produced, but balk at the cost to follow in His footsteps. Observing the fourth commandment as Jesus and the apostles did seems foolish to them!

But for those who are being saved, that message and example of total surrender—of carrying whatever is placed upon us until we die—is the power of God. Consider the power unleashed when Jesus surrendered completely: The Most High God not only raised Him back to life, but He has put all things under Him. There is no greater power.

This was Paul's solution for the division in Corinth—the example of the Creator being willing to die. Following that example of self-sacrifice is what could have allowed the Corinthians to be reconciled to each other. The carnal mind says that surrender is folly, because it creates a vulnerability or the possibility of loss. But the same carnal mind is blind to the vital reality that God is on His throne, overseeing the outcome—gladly using His power on our behalf if we will but trust Him with our lives.

The message of the cross is not merely about forgiveness of sins. It is also about our response to God after we have been forgiven. If we are to be worthy of the Creator who humbled Himself to die a shameful death, our response must likewise be one of self-denial, complete surrender, and reckoning ourselves as already dead to this present, evil age so that we might live for Him.