

Are You Bearing Your Cross?

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Forerunner, "Ready Answer," March 1998

Jesus had to be crucified for our sins. Crucifixion, not uncommon in New Testament times, was a horrible execution reserved for slaves and hardened criminals. Roman conquerors kept their subjects in line by openly exhibiting this most gruesome and most feared execution. Nobody in his right mind would ever volunteer for such an end!

Or would he?

When you counseled for baptism, you probably said you were! Did you understand what you were committing to? Are you prepared to be crucified? Are you bearing your cross?

Jesus voluntarily gave His life for us on the stake. He never shied away from challenging—indeed, *demanding*—His followers do the same! Matthew 16:21-24 is one of these occasions. When Christ announces that He Himself would have to be sacrificed and resurrected, Peter rebukes Him for such a thought. Jesus chastises Peter for his comments, saying that Satan had inspired his words! Then Jesus adds in verse 24, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and *take up his cross*, and follow Me."

Luke 9:23 reads that we must take up our cross daily. It is an ongoing act! During pre-baptism counseling, ministers often read Luke 14:25-33, commonly called the "counting the cost passage." Christ teaches us here that when we decide to be His disciples, we are making a covenant with God to carry our own cross. If we are *not* bearing our cross daily, we are *not* a disciple of Christ (verse 27). Tied with this is Paul's statement in Philippians 3:10 that part of knowing God is "being conformed to [Christ's] death."

We need to understand what it means to "bear your cross"!

The practice of crucifixion ended centuries ago. How then can we bear our cross? Let's look at *four* ways we are crucified with Christ.

Sacrificing the Self

The most common Greek word for "sacrifice" is *thusia*, meaning the act or the victim of sacrifice, literally or figuratively. It refers to the act of offering—to destruction or surrender—something precious for the sake of something else. The same word can refer to the offering itself.

Jesus set the standard in explaining what "bear your cross" means. His crucifixion was foreordained *before* the foundation of the world (I Peter 1:20). The Father and the Word planned and agreed to every step of the process in careful detail. No one forced Jesus to lay down His life; it was totally His own choice (John 10:17-18). He knew long before it happened that He had a date set with the executioner! What pressure and stress He endured as the last few hours neared! No wonder He sweated drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44)!

After Adam and Eve's sin, God hints broadly at His coming sacrifice for man (Genesis 3:15). Adam and his sons are instructed in performing sacrifices, types of Christ's sacrifice, which explains God's displeasure with Cain's wrong approach and attitude while sacrificing (Genesis 4:3-5). From this time, sacrifice becomes a common theme among God's people, as they sacrificed valuable, clean animals from their herds or flocks (II Samuel 24:24). A sacrifice has to cost the offerer something, or it would not be a sacrifice!

In Jesus' case, His sacrifice cost Him dearly! He sacrificed everything for us (Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 9:26)—His life, title, rank, privileges, comforts, security, and power. In some translations of Philippians 2:7, the margin reads that He "emptied Himself." He obeyed to the point of death, "*even* the death of the cross" (verse 8). His offering set the pace and raised the standard.

In any discipline, good students imitate their teacher and walk in his steps (I John 2:6). Thus, Paul says we are to be *living* sacrifices (Romans 12:1), another way of saying "bear your cross" moment by moment, day by day. This is why Jesus, in Luke 9:23, precedes his comment about a disciple taking up his cross with "let him deny himself." Paul himself said he was being poured out as a drink offering in God's service (Philippians 2:17). Up to its last minute, his whole life after his calling was a living sacrifice.

Ways to Sacrifice Ourselves

These days, "rights" are on everyone's lips. Society urges us to demand our rights in any given situation. Certainly, there is a time and place to claim a right, but more often we should be willing to "deny ourselves" and let someone else indulge in his "rights." This takes a willingness to "carry our cross," to sacrifice, to relinquish, to forgo our rights.

If we want to become a more effective sacrifice, we would greatly benefit by studying and meditating on this topic. It is so extensive that a whole series of articles could be written on "sacrificing the self." We can give up our lives inch by inch perhaps even more effectively than all at once. For example, some claim to be willing to die for Christ, but are not prepared to sacrifice a parking spot so the more elderly can park closer to the door. Are we willing to be a cheerful giver in all kinds of situations, even when no one notices? Nobody but God, that is!

We often think about sacrificing in the big ways and omit our day-by-day opportunities. Who sacrifices or serves the most in the home? Who is most willing to be inconvenienced—and serves cheerfully? Great is his or her reward. Do we practice this idea moment by moment in the privacy of our homes, as an example to our children?

The best opportunities to sacrifice our time and money come when it is a burden to do so! Think about that! These opportunities are never convenient, nor do they set appointments. They just pop up, and we may have to sacrifice something important to fulfill them. As one writer said, too often the problem with living sacrifices is that they have a habit of crawling off the altar at the last second, just when they are needed!

Many of us have already sacrificed a close family because of our "strange" beliefs. Some have given up choice jobs over the Sabbath and Feast of Tabernacles. We have all "sacrificed" money that could have gone for vacations or retirement investments in order to obey God's tithing laws. At least that is what a financial planner would say!

Sacrificing entails giving up something we want or need for the common good. It is a sacrifice to keep our mouths shut when we feel like giving someone a piece of our mind. Are we willing to make these kinds of sacrifices—or do we indulge our human nature?

It is a sacrifice to defeat temptations of all kinds, when our nature cries out for instant gratification, be it for alcohol, illicit sex, materialism, too much food, "saving face," gossip, etc. The apostle Peter reminds us that, when we really understand what godly suffering is all about, we will lose interest in sin—and will cease from it, no longer pursuing our former lusts (I Peter 4:1-3).

Paul perhaps says it most eloquently in Galatians 2:20:

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, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Are we willing to give up the "self" and all its rights, if need be? Can we dare say with Paul, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"? Incredible! But that is our goal.

Later in the same book he adds: "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). Are we really willing to give up what the world has to offer us? Are we willing to give up the world's values, entertainment, approbation and esteem? To many, it is a sacrifice, but we cannot simultaneously befriend this world's values and God (I John 2:15; James 4:4).

Suffice it to say, that "bearing our cross" deals with willingly sacrificing ourselves, our wants, desires and needs, for others and the things of God. It is being willing to lose our lives for His sake (Luke 9:24).

Suffering Shame for Jesus

A crucifixion involves incredible shame. It was a hardened criminal's execution, conducted in the most shameful way: with the victim naked on the stake. The Bible refers to the "shame" of the cross, and how Jesus endured it for us (Hebrews 6:6; 12:2). Though we deserved that cruel and shameful criminal's death, Jesus stepped in for us, not ashamed to identify with His sinful brothers (Hebrews 2:11).

After that, do we dare feel shame at being identified with Him, His cause, His way, His life? We sometimes do, perhaps without even knowing it! Do we dance an embarrassed two-step around questions coworkers may ask us about the Feast, or Days of Unleavened Bread or the Sabbath? Are we ashamed to admit we are devoted Christians?

Look long and hard at this. Jesus says that after all He has done for us, if we are ashamed of Him, He will be ashamed of us before His holy angels (Luke 9:26). Paul writes that He considers it an honor to be counted worthy of suffering shame for our Savior. He certainly was not ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16). We may be hard on Peter for denying His Master, yet we may do the same in spirit, when we try to hide that we are Jesus' followers.

In the coming years, persecutors will no doubt try to make God's people ashamed of being out of the mainstream. They may affix literal labels and signs to our clothing and houses, much as the Jews

endured in Nazi Germany. We may be reviled, spit upon, hissed at, laughed at, ridiculed and mocked for our beliefs. Who knows how soon this could happen? Jesus certainly endured sneering and ridicule for us while suffering on the stake.

How will we react when we must suffer shame for Him? Will we feel it is more than we can bear and deny our Lord? Or will we bear the shame with grateful dignity that God has counted us worthy of representing our great Savior who bore our shame for us on a lonely hill called Calvary?

God has forewarned us about these things—even given us examples of how to react. When the early New Testament church began, the apostles were frequently threatened and beaten in efforts to stop their preaching. Notice what Luke records for us after one such occurrence: "So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

Our turn may come soon. God give us the grace and power to uphold His holy name when it comes!

Persecution and Martyrdom

Ultimately, Jesus' crucifixion is about His persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the Jews and Romans as representatives of all mankind. God has often tested and tried His people in the furnace of persecution and martyrdom. Sometimes, it was no doubt as a witness to others of His people's conviction about their beliefs and their God. These were the men and women of God's spiritual hall of fame "of whom," Paul says, "the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:38).

"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (II Timothy 3:12). Have some of us been lulled into a sense of false security, thinking that we will not suffer persecution in these end times? Do we think God has promised to protect us 100% of the time from any persecution or martyrdom?

Just because God apparently promises some a place of safety for the last few years before Christ's return does not mean we will not have to endure heavy persecution before He removes us there! In fact, Jesus forewarns that we may have miniature flights, in a sense, prior to the main one—fleeing from city to city in pursuit of peace and safety. The context is just before the return of Christ:

And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel *before* the Son of Man comes.
(Matthew 10:22-23)

It is likely that God will allow some of us to die because of who we are and what we believe—before those who are "worthy to escape" flee to a place of safety. Whether or not that happens, we should be willing to die for God and mentally prepared for it. Jesus soberly teaches His disciples—including us—that "whoever loses his life for My sake will save it" (Luke 9:24).

We have had it very easy until now. The kind of peaceful assembly most of us have enjoyed is unparalleled in most of human history. Much of the time, God's people had to worship in secret. "They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented" (Hebrews 11:37).

It was dangerous to claim to be a true follower of Christ for most of the last two thousand years. In the apostles' day, our brethren were crucified alive and their bodies used as human torches for Nero's garden parties! Historians recount how lions tore Christians apart while a perverted Roman crowd cheered. Some accounts describe our brethren as calmly singing hymns of praise as the lions charged. Even Paul says he "fought with beasts at Ephesus" (I Corinthians 15:32). During the Crusades and the Inquisition, many of our spiritual forefathers also gave their all for their beliefs.

Our turn may be coming. Be praying for the strength and conviction not to deny our Lord if our turn comes, as well as for the ability to jump for joy and be "exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

Of course, we need to be aware of not giving our persecutors any just cause to bring charges against us. If we suffer from our own sins, crimes or stupidity, then we had it coming to us. But if men say "all kinds of evil things against you falsely for [Christ's] sake," then that is a different matter.

So carrying our cross daily also means being willing to suffer persecution and die for Christ.

Why Go Through All This?

Why should we carry our cross and all it means and implies? It sounds painful, risky, shameful and certainly means being willing to give up our lives. What is in it for us? Peter asks the same question of Jesus, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" (Matthew 19:27).

In Jesus' case, because He was perfectly willing to give up everything and be crucified for us, what happened? Paul answers in Philippians 2:9-11:

Therefore God has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Before honor is humility. Before blessings, we must often be willing to sacrifice. Once God sees that we will give our lives, He gives us eternal life. When we humble ourselves, He elevates us in His time and His way. Jesus assures his disciples that those who have willingly given "houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29).

Of course, whether we live or die, we should do all to and for the glory of God. He, in His grace and generosity, has promised that He will share His glory, His power, His eternal life, His riches and honor forever and ever with all those who are willing to carry their cross for His name's sake!

Imagine being an heir of God! Actually, we cannot imagine it! If a person were told he was named as an heir in a billionaire's will, he would be ecstatic! Yet when we read of being heirs of God, some of us yawn! God have mercy on us for not valuing more highly the promises given to the faithful! Notice just a few such scriptures given for our encouragement:

» The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this

present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:16-18)

» . . . and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? (Romans 9:23-24)

» Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, he also will deny us. (II Timothy 2:10-12)

So never forget the instruction of our Savior: Willingly share in His suffering, and He will willingly share His glory with us. Willingly conform to His death, and He will grant us eternal life. Willingly take up the cross daily, and follow Him, and great will be our reward. Having been conformed to His suffering and death, we will truly be His brothers. And we will rule with Him and be co-heirs with Him in His Father's Kingdom.