

## Take up your Cross

More than once, Jesus impressed on his disciples the need to take up their cross, and follow him. Whoever did not do so was not worthy of him (Matt 10:38, 16:24).

Luke links this requirement to Jesus' instruction about money and possessions (Luke 14:25-33). If our last chapter seemed daunting, then following this instruction to the letter seems harder still. People who carried a cross in Jesus' day did so for one reason only; they were on their way to their death on it. We do not need to dwell on the agonies of crucifixion, but briefly, it was apparently designed to be a slow death as well as a most painful one. Jesus' death after only six hours surprised Pilate (Mark 15:44).

One of the fruits of the Spirit is joy (Gal 5:22). However, this does not mean that believers filled with the Spirit are promised a life of sunbathing. Rather the joy seems to come despite trials, even within trials, some of which can be daunting and even life-threatening (1 Peter 1:6-8). We can see this in what happened to Jesus; as soon as he was filled with the Spirit, he was sent into the desert, where he was with the wild beasts, had no food for forty days and nights, and was tempted by Satan (Mark 1:10-12).

Believers need to learn to copy the attitude of Jesus, "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 (Heb 12:2)." Joy is a fruit of the spirit. But continual pleasure here and now is not guaranteed. If it happens, that is a bonus; but we need to be ready to wait for it until the next life. Knowing that heaven is coming, believers can endure troubles on earth on their way to it.

The passage continues, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (v3)." Sadly, we see from the gospels that the people who oppose Christians are likely to include close relatives. Jesus said anyone who loved father or mother, or son or daughter more than him, was not worthy of him (Matt 10:37). Luke has it even stronger, reporting that Jesus told his followers to hate their close family, adding wife, brothers and sisters to Matthew's list (Luke 9:26-27).

The sinful person in opposition can even be myself - Jesus said anyone who would follow him must deny himself and hate his own life, and take up his cross and follow him (Matt 16:24). We do well to recognise that a large part of us does not want to follow Jesus at all at this point, nor indeed at many other points either. That fifth column opposition has to be taken out. What is more, this crucifying of self is not merely a once and for all decision. Followers of Jesus are to take up their cross daily (Luke 9:23). Believers who do decide to put the flesh to death, to use Paul's phrase (Gal 5:24, AV), discover that the wretched thing wont stay dead, but that they have to go through the agonies of killing it every day.

Something rebels inside us at this point. Who is this man who tells me to raise people from death against all nature, which my mind tells me I can't begin to do, and who also tells me to crucify myself every day, which I find I can't do successfully because my 'flesh' keeps on rising back up from the dead each time? Is there no easier way?

It seems not. To be fair, Jesus never promised an easy passage; he advised those who wanted to follow him to weigh the cost carefully first. Self preservation is not the way; those who attempt to save their life will lose it (Mark 8:35). People should not set out on building a tower unless they have the finances to complete it. A king with an army of ten thousand should not lightly take on another with twenty thousand (Luke 14:28-32). And as if answering the unspoken request for an easier way, Jesus went on to say that salt which is not salty is useless (Luke 14:34). In other words, we cannot be Christian without being Christian. Being Christian means following Christ, cross and all. The disciple is to be like his or her Lord.

Once again, then, our role is not to subtract from the words of Christ, but to consider ways of carrying them out today as they stand.

First of all, an analogy. Many Christians, if they are honest, enjoy the peace and stillness of the harbour. They would like best to be like sailing boats which rest quietly at anchor, every stitch of

canvas rolled neatly in place, all ropes neatly coiled, decks spotlessly washed and dried by the sun. Oh for a life without problems and stress!

But God seems to have other ideas. Although there may be times in the harbour, sailing boats were made to sail. Once launched, the proper course is for the sails to be set, anchor to be weighed, and for the boat to leave harbour for the open sea.

Out in the open, new factors come into play, like waves, tide, and submerged rocks. As God blows with his wind, the Holy Spirit, the boat makes progress in its chosen path. If the boat is sailing properly and the navigator knows his job and stays awake, waves can be negotiated, and rocks and tide avoided.

We note that a sailing boat cannot make progress without the opposition of the wind. It is the very fact of the wind blowing against the boat which makes progress possible. So even though dead calm may seem to have its attractions, in that the peace and stillness that go with it are a good chance to relax, all sailors would agree that wind is a desirable asset for a sailing boat.

But the very wind which allows the boat to progress also stirs up the waves. The more wind, the greater the waves, and the more the boat is buffeted. It seems to be like that in the Christian life. The more a believer comes into tune with God's will, and starts moving in the direction that God has chosen for him, the more the opposition mounts and increases, like the heaving sea (Isa 57:20).

Even the best boats ship water, and require bailing or pumping out. The strain placed on the timbers by heavy seas will eventually lead to the need for repair. While it was possible to keep everything shipshape in harbour, life on the open sea can be far more demanding, and the ropes and decks are not often in apple pie order. In fact, stress seems to be a good word to describe life on a sailing boat in action.

All this has its application. Believers need to grasp that difficulty in the Christian life is the norm. The more we are filled with the Holy Spirit, the more the difficulties will multiply. This was true for Jesus, as can be readily grasped from the gospels. As time went by, the opposition increased, until he was finally killed. His followers experienced pressure too; a few weeks later, they were rejoicing that they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace because of the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41). Further on in the New Testament, we are told that all who want to be godly followers of Jesus Christ will be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12).

It is now time to perceive another feature of the passages in the gospels we quoted earlier, namely that it is the believer's choice to take up his cross. While it is a requirement of being a disciple, it does not happen automatically. Jesus urges people to take up their cross; he does not compel them to do so. This means that the believer has to make a decision for himself, that he will take up his cross.

This attitude was at work in Paul and Barnabas at Philippi. They were in the centre of God's will; they had been guided where to go in a dream, had spread the good news, and had cast out a demon in the name of Jesus. In all this they were carrying out gospel instructions, as we have seen (Acts 16:9-10, 16-18). Afterwards, they were attacked verbally and physically, and treated as dangerous criminals, requiring places in a high security jail (v19-24).

They clearly expected this kind of treatment as the norm, since the next thing that happened after this ordeal was that they were heard singing hymns and praising God at midnight (v25). It seems that they were not the least bit thrown by the violent attacks upon them. This was surely only possible because they had chosen to take up the cross, and so unexpected pain was no surprise.

So just as a true sailor is pleased by the wind blowing strongly, and the thump of the boat into the waves, believers need to learn to rejoice whatever happens (1 Thess 5:18). Merlin Carothers learned this truth. He encouraged believers to praise God even in the most painful circumstances, indeed even to praise God for the painful situations themselves. He once described praise as the ladder to climb up through the black clouds of depression (See eg. Merlin R. Carothers, *Power in Praise*, Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1972).

An attitude of praise in all things is only possible for someone who trusts God to be working his purpose out in his own way, however bad things may look, and who has accepted that his part in God's purposes involves taking up the cross.

Dave had been a believer for many years. There came a period in his life when difficulties multiplied for him at the very time when he thought his walk with God had become closer than before. He felt overwhelmed by the number and weight of his problems. One day he realised that his career, his job, his marriage, his family and his finances were all under threat of destruction at once.

When he grasped the scale of his difficulties, he decided the only thing he could do was to give all of these areas up to God, and say that God could remove them all if he wanted to. That was a good start. Then he remembered to use his gift of speaking in tongues, which he had neglected to do recently, under the weight of his worries. Paul writes that this practice builds up the believer (1 Cor 14:4). Dave found this was true - even when the agony seemed overwhelming, praying in tongues allowed him to praise God in his heart.

Then he reflected on the business of taking up his cross, and realised that his present lot was not to be thought of as God failing to hear his prayers for relief (Ps 16:6f). Rather, he came to see his situation as an invitation to choose to take up the cross in a new and more meaningful way.

His final attitude was that if God chose to rescue him, well and good, but if he chose to let everything crash in ruins around him, as looked likely, he would regard that too as fine. Whether he also managed to praise God in and for the situation I did not discover, nor do I know what the outcome was. But the steps he took in rebuilding his confidence in God from a low ebb are instructive.

Let us imagine that Dave did manage to maintain his trust in God completely. A person with such an attitude cannot be affected by evil. He cannot be subdued by fear. The saying "every man has his price" breaks down in the face of a person who has laid down his life for God and refuses to pick it up again. He cannot be bought. His price is "above rubies", since he is truly part of the Bride of Christ (Prov 31:10).

I remember once hearing an explanation of some kinds of depression. Imagine yourself involved in trench warfare. If one enemy is firing at you, then you can fire back with relative ease. If a second opens up on your position, then the situation becomes much harder, but you may just be able to fire rounds at both targets, swinging the gun from side to side and back again. However, if a third enemy starts firing at you as well, then you get your head down. In other words, people with too many problems to handle at once tend to give up on all of them, and become depressed.

This may be thought of as a natural approach to problems. We have been presenting a Christian approach, which has a different ending to the story. The believer who has taken up his cross has another attitude. While not welcoming the enemy fire, he knows all things are in God's hands, including his life, so he keeps firing away even if six or eight enemy positions are gunning for him, and death seems inevitable. So it was that Paul, after all the battering and abuse he had received, was able to lead the jailor to belief in Jesus in the early hours of the morning, rather than being taken up with nursing his own wounds (Acts 16:27-34). He had learned to do all things through Christ, who strengthened him (Phil 4:13). Love never gives up (1 Cor 13:7).

There are rewards that come from this kind of attitude towards God, as we saw with Ignatius and C.T. Studd. As Jesus said, a seed that remains alone gets nowhere, but if it falls into the ground and dies, it bears a rich harvest (John 12:24). Although believers who take this teaching seriously have no guarantee that they will live to see the harvest, they do have the certainty that it will follow. In the matter of taking up the cross especially, Christians are to live by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

This teaching may be highly demanding, but we have come to see that it can be understood as an aspect of faith in God, and as such, is essential. We are not left to struggle on our own, however; in the next section of the book, we will see how God helps us in our weakness.