

Taking up the Cross

We come each week to memorialize our absent Master in taking a piece of bread, and drinking sip of wine. Simple things, yet profound in their significance as they portray for us the body given, and the blood poured out in a sacrificial death for the forgiveness of our sins, and the furtherance of the Divine Purpose. 1 Peter chapter 2 exhorts us to see in Christ an example for daily living:

“for even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21).

Our New Testament reading for the day contains Messiah’s own exhortation to follow him, and it is this passage that we shall go in the search for instruction, comfort and guidance. Luke chapter nine, and verse twenty three reads:

“And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me ...” (Lu. 9:23).

Notice that there are three stages referred to, for those who wish to come after Christ:

1. Let him deny himself
2. Take up his cross daily
3. Follow the Lord Jesus

We shall consider each aspect in turn.

DENYING SELF

The very first thing to be observed is the spirit of self-denial. In the service of Christ, there is no scope for self-service, putting “number one” first. All must be to the praise of our Father, and the Son of His love – to deny one’s own self is paramount. The denial of self involves the denial of the wiles of our own nature, with all of its affections and lusts. “all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 Jno.2:16-17). The lusts of our own natures must be denied and suppressed, even as the Apostle exhorted:

“put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14).

Notice the point here: “make not provision for the flesh”. Though we experience the desires and the lusts thereof, we must seek to overcome them: and we must certainly not purposefully make provision for them to be fulfilled. Again:

“...if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Rom. 8:13).

Here, the situation is put very bluntly: if we follow the dictates of our own lusts we “shall die”. We must “mortify (put to death) the deeds of the body,” to find life. But even the most spiritually minded among us will still find themselves succumbing to the flesh from time to time. If it was so in the case of Paul the Apostle (see Rom. 7), it is certainly so for ourselves. How then can we find life? Salvation is not of ourselves, as it is written: “by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). And in this is great comfort. Absolute and total obedience is something which is beyond our power to accomplish, and so the fact that salvation is not of ourselves, but by God’s Grace is a source of great comfort.

The context of this passage in Romans chapter 8, is to do with the development of a carnal mind, or a spiritual mind:

“to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6).

A carnal mind is a mind dominated by carnal thoughts. And conversely, a spiritual mind is a mind dominated by spiritual thoughts. We can develop a spiritual mind by denying ourselves, and seeking after the ways of the living God. To seek first His Kingdom and His Righteousness above all else. This is what will judge us at the last: not whether or not we trip and stumble along the way of life, but whether we have sought to fill our minds with the things of the Spirit: then we shall have life and peace.

DENYING CHRIST

Another aspect of denial which we must not pass by without mention, is the denial of Christ. This is the opposite of denying self. The inspired narrative records the experiences of Simon Peter, a man great in faith – or so he thought at the time:

“Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended” (Mat. 26:33).

There might be times when we feel as invincible as Peter: we will never leave the path of life, we will never deny our Master, or be offended by an association with him. But the reality is that we are no better than Peter, and probably a lot worse. Jesus replied to him:

“Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice” (Mat. 26:34).

The consequence of denying the Lord in word or deed is expressed thus:

“... he that denieth me before men shall be denied before the angels of God” (Lu. 12:9).

Peter, of course, repented, and whilst in a moment of weakness he denied association with Christ, he spent the rest of his life declaring him, and preaching the gospel of salvation. His denials came when asked about his association with the Lord by those he came into contact with - and interestingly, in his epistle, he wrote:

“... sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be *ready always to give an answer* to every man *that asketh you* a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear ...” (1 Pet. 3:15).

So it was that from being afraid and unprepared, Peter became a messenger of Christ, proclaiming the Gospel, and exhorting others to “be ready” to do that which he had failed to do. The exhortation here is obvious: we must not deny our Master by failing to preach our relationship with him, and instead, we must always be ready to confess and give an answer to those who ask us.

TAKING UP THE CROSS DAILY

This aspect is something that is often misunderstood. When people experience a particular difficulty in their lives that requires patience to deal with it, they often say, “we all have our cross to bear”. However, when we consider it in more detail, we find that “the cross” here, is something more than the general difficulties that come in life: it is something we must do as part of our service to Christ. That this is so is evident when we remember that taking up the cross is specifically something that we must do when following Christ.

The Master tells us that we must take up our cross “daily”. Accordingly, the Apostle said: “I die daily” (1 Cor. 15:31). Again, he refers to the putting to death of carnal desires:

“... I am *crucified with Christ*: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me ...” (Gal. 2:20)

And again:

“they that are Christ’s *have crucified the flesh* with the affections and lusts” (Gal. 5:24).

But how is it that we crucify the flesh? In our association with Christ through submitting to Baptism, it is said that:

“we are *buried with him* by baptism into death ...” (Rom. 6:4)

And again:

“if we have been planted together *in the likeness of his death*, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection” (Rom. 6:5).

So, when we go down into the waters of Baptism, we symbolically undergo a burial, and we resolve to put to death the ways of the flesh – crucifying the flesh with Christ. But our resolve to crucify the flesh is not something that happened once, when we were baptized some time ago: it is something that must be ongoing: “I die *daily*,” said the apostle. Again, the Master exhorts us to “take up [our] cross *daily* ...”. This is a feature which also comes out in Romans chapter 6, in the marginal rendering. In verse 3, we read: “know ye not that so many of us were baptized into Jesus Christ

were baptized into his death?” Here, the word “were” is given an alternative rendering in the margin, of “are”. The difference is this: our baptism is not simply something that took place some time ago, which we can consider as something we did in the past – it is an ongoing process. We continue to live out the spirit of our baptism in our daily lives, dying daily, taking up the cross daily.

In Matthew chapter 11, the Master speaks of the burden which we must bear as part of our service to him. But here, the burden is described as “light” when compared with laboring under the burden of sin:

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and *my burden is light*” (Mat. 11:28-30).

The burden we must bear is the cross of Christ, and although it might bring us into difficult circumstances, we must remember the great “eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). Compared with this, our present difficulties appear in their proper context, as “light affliction”, to become but a fading memory when living in the blessings of the age to come.

FOLLOW ME

Returning to the example of Simon Peter, we read that on a particular occasion, he stood as an adversary (satan) to the Lord. Jesus was describing to his disciples how that he must be “killed, and be raised again the third day” (Mat. 16:21). Peter responded by rebuking Christ:

“Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee” (Mat. 16:22).

Here, Peter took upon himself the role of instructing the Son of the Highest! So the Master put him in his proper place:

“but he turned and said unto Peter, *Get thee behind me*, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (Mat. 16:23).

Notice the words of Christ: “get thee *behind* me”. Our position as disciples is that of following Christ: behind him. And it is in this context that Christ spoke of how the disciples must “take up his cross and follow me”. Rather than to deny the need of Christ’s sufferings and crucifixion, we need to embrace it, and associate ourselves with it, by taking up our cross, and following Him.

Luke chapter 23 introduces us to another Simon, who quite literally carried the cross of Christ, and followed him. Having been scourged, and harshly treated, the Master could not physically carry his cross alone to the place of crucifixion. So, a certain Simon of Cyrene was taken to help him:

“as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, *that he might bear it after Jesus*” (Luke 23:26).

The sense here is not that Jesus put the cross down, and then Simon took it up, and carry it instead. Rather, that Simon carried the cross with Christ: he took up the back end, so to speak, and carried it following Jesus who led the way at the front. Simon thus literally associated himself with the crucifixion of Christ, following him, and bearing the cross after, or behind, him.

This helps us to resolve a difficulty that some find in the words of Paul to the Galatians. Firstly we read:

“bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

Then we read a few verses later:

“ever man shall bear his own burden” (verse 5).

The difficulty is that if we are bearing our brother’s burden instead of him, how is it that he is said to be bearing his own burden? The answer is in the example of Christ. Simon helped to bare Christ’s burden, just as we must help to bear one another’s burden. Not that we can take that burden away, and carry it instead of our brother, but that rather, we can share it, and help each other bare our cross as we walk in the steps of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We began by citing the words of Peter concerning the example of our Lord Jesus Christ:

“ ... Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, *that ye should follow his steps*: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled reviled not again; when he suffered he threatened not; but committed himself to him who judgeth righteously ...” (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

The steps of Christ lead us through the difficulties which beset us as we labour under the infirmities of a mortal life. They take us through the sufferings which involve crucifying the flesh to the glory which shall follow. So, we are exhorted to:

“look unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who, for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

Before the crown of glory, came the crown of thorns. To live a life following the Lord Jesus Christ, is to live a life of crucifying the flesh daily. Crucifixion was the most painful and cruel death imaginable: even so to crucify the flesh is not pleasant – it is painful. But we are not alone in bearing the burden. We saw above, that we are to put on the yoke of Christ (Mat. 11:30). A yoke is something that was born not by

one animal alone, but together in pairs. We are not alone in our bearing of the cross of Christ: he is there to help us, and our brethren and sisters help us also – and we to them. All of these thoughts come together in the emblems that we partake of week by week. We think of the suffering savior, and what he has done for us, in laying down his life for his friends. Even so, we lay down our lives in service to him, coming after him, denying ourselves, taking up our cross daily, and following him in all his ways.

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