

**The Burden of the Cross**  
**Luke 23.26**  
**Good Friday Message, First Baptist Covington**  
**Rev. Adam Crews presiding, Robert Franklin, preacher**

The text for today's message is not unfamiliar to those who have attended services such as these. I have heard it highlighted on numerous occasions and it seems to me that preachers tend to make either too much of this verse or too little. I share the objective of Goldilocks in the tale of the three bears: I wish to attempt to get it "just right." If the passage is new to you, I want you to know that the gospels of Matthew and Mark also agree on this particular scene from Jesus' last hours. I read from the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke, verse 26.

Luke 23:26 (NKJV)

<sup>26</sup> Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear *it* after Jesus.

The "they" in this passage is most certainly the execution squad assigned to escort Jesus from Roman Pilate's judgment seat in Jerusalem to the hill outside the city called, "the place of the skull." It was this "they," meaning the execution squad, that took hold of a man coming from the country, a man who was not a native of Jerusalem, a man who travelled from northern Africa, from the region now called "Libya" to be in the holy city for the Passover celebration, "they" took hold of this man called Simon and laid upon him the cross of Jesus Christ.

Today I thought it appropriate to carefully consider the burden of the cross. It seems to these eyes and ears that we have done much of late to explore the physical suffering of Jesus, which by all accounts was of extreme measure, and have done little in the past few generations to remember the historic burden represented by the crucifixion tree. Let us remedy this oversight together as much as we may this Good Friday.

There are two cross bearers in this passage, the first is, of course, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the second is this man, Simon of Cyrene. In order to maintain the integrity of the text I propose we look at the cross bearers in the order they are presented to us.

The four gospel accounts agree Jesus suffered mightily at the hands of his captors in the hours leading up to his bloody trek to crucifixion hill. It is no wonder that this man who is believed to be both fully God and fully man could not bear the physical weight of cross beam that he was sentenced to bear. Yes this timber would be the same plank of wood that would receive the nails piercing Jesus' hands. Designed specifically to bear the weight of slow, public torture this horrible splinter was not a small trifle. It is commonly understood that men, being justly condemned for heinous crimes but not tortured immediately before sentencing, would stumble under the weight of their own crosses. You see the burden was not just that of the mass of the tree. The burden was intensified by the public declaration, "I am condemned."

We now have a phrase for similarly judged convicts today. You may have heard it. A prisoner headed for the execution chamber may have declared ahead of him, "Dead man walking." In the privacy of our jails, in the loneliness of solitary hallways, in the sterile environment of the death chamber this declaration is almost too much to support. Imagine with me, if you would, this same shout going out across the whole city. Imagine the shame of walking past home after home, business after business hearing the shouts, "Dead man walking" again and again. Crucifixions were public events. The jeers and the cries and chaos of ignorance must have been deafening. Such was the environment for this man Jesus.

As if this were not enough, there is even more for us to consider. Only the extraordinarily sheltered were unaware of the immense pain, the completely naked shame, the slow, plodding, thud of death's angel coming to harvest those poor, pitiable people condemned to die in a manner that was so repulsive to the "civilized" that it could only be inflicted on "non-Roman" citizens. The torment of the mind surely must have served to sharpen the aching weight of carrying one's own instrument of death. To step-by-step consider that this load upon the shoulder would soon be the instrument of hours, perhaps even days, of lunatic inducing agony escapes simple description.

I remember reading of a WWII soldier who had his lower legs blown off by a battlefield blast. This man saw his comrade-in-arms suffering nearby and in imminent danger of being dispatched by the enemy. Instead of helplessly waiting

for the medic, he dragged his broken body to his friend. Upon reaching his friend he maneuvered the man onto his own back and using only his upper body reached the safety of a nearby foxhole. There is no question that this fellow was made of steel. Upon reaching the hospital in Great Britain, however, an entirely different sort of man was found. The man had to receive penicillin injections on a regular basis in order to protect him from infection setting into his surgical sites. The charge nurse reported that he would whimper audibly every time she even came near and often would beg her not to give him the penicillin shot because he could not stand the pain. The surprise pain of the battlefield made the man a hero, but the *anticipated* pain of the hospital made him a coward. Such was the psychological torment of those condemned to die by crucifixion. The entire death march was weighted down by the inescapable knowledge of the pain soon to come.

For Jesus Christ, neither the physical nor the psychological pain overcame the spiritual reality of the burden of the cross. So great was the distress in the anticipation of God's will that the scriptures record the following in the hours leading to the crucifixion:

Luke 22:41–42, 44 (NKJV)

<sup>41</sup> And He [Jesus] was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and prayed, <sup>42</sup> saying, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done..." <sup>44</sup> And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Paul later writes to the church in Corinth about the spiritual reality of these same hours saying,

2 Corinthians 5:21 (NKJV)

<sup>21</sup> For He [God] made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us...

O what an enormous burden! O what a bitter weight! It is beyond our ability to conceive!

Since ancient times, Christians have seen the parallel between Jesus and Abraham's son, Isaac, since both men carried their own sacrificial wood. While I believe the parallel should not be overlooked, it cannot serve as the full

explanation. Isaac's burden was one he was able to bear. Isaac's burden was a task he performed in obedient *ignorance*.

The wood Jesus carried was something far more. How could one person, even the person of God become the declaration of Adam and Eve's rebellion? How could one person be the filth washed away by the great flood? How could the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah be laid on just one? How could Jesus become the treachery of Jacob's sons? How could the fully obedient Son of God become the disobedience of the wandering nation Israel? How could Jesus be the murder and adultery of King David? Would this God-man be made into the nation splitting pride of Rehoboam? How could the Word through whom and in whom creation was made become the worshipper of hand-fashioned stone or gold idols? Was it really to be that the Truth would be transformed into every untruth uttered by the lips of men? Would it be possible for the Good Shepherd to be discovered fleeing with the eleven who promised to stay by his side to the death?

This Jesus, authority over every unclean and evil spirit became home to all the filth the enemy of the soul was able to convince the human race to expend freedom upon: every child molested, every daughter sold into slavery, every son bludgeoned in anger, every spouse betrayed, every fraud inflicted, every parent abandoned, every rape, every suicide, yes *every* sin. He carried it all. So complete was this work, it became possible for Peter in his letter to the church, to say Jesus

1 Peter 2:24 (NKJV)

<sup>24</sup> ...Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree...

More than physical pain, more than mental torment, sin was the true burden of Jesus' cross. The mass of my sin joined the mass of your sin and that of your neighbor, friend, and enemy pressed down upon him like the gravity of a collapsing star. The whole world vicariously tossed its self-induced decay on the cross of Jesus like flowers made of lead. Thus we find in John's letter to the church the confession,

1 John 2:2 (NLT)

<sup>2</sup> He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.

Could it be any wonder, could it be any surprise that such a great burden was too much to carry? According to the gospel as told by John, Jesus carried his own

cross...Matthew, Mark and Luke let us know he didn't carry it all the way. Somewhere along the way Simon of Cyrene, coming from the country, was forced to carry the wood.

We don't know anything about Simon. We do know that the part of the world by which he is identified was a center of culture. Cyrene was a capital city; it housed a celebrated medical school; it boasted a classical academy that produced influential philosophers. Cyrene was the place from where the geographer Eratosthenes correctly calculated the circumference of the earth more than 200 years BEFORE the birth of Jesus. Cyrene was a *wealthy* city, rich in grain, wool, olive oil and spices.

Simon, however, was just passing by. There is no justification for his being pressed into carrying the cross. All we know is that he did it.

At the place I normally teach the people are used to me figuratively pulling out what is called "Bob's Brackets" whenever I need some latitude for imagination and opinion. Some may think what I am about to say as needing "Bob's Brackets." I don't think this is so. I *will* admit that since it is now fully Spring, the ice cannot be any thinner. I am going to step out none-the-less.

It seems to me that Simon became the first man to be what we now call a Christian. Follow me now, I think we will find firm ground in just a moment: According to Matthew Jesus said,

Matthew 16:24–25 (NKJV)

<sup>24</sup> ..."If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

And according to Mark Jesus said,

Mark 8:34–35 (NKJV)

<sup>34</sup> ..."Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

And according to Luke Jesus said,

<sup>23</sup> ...“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. <sup>24</sup> For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. Luke 9:23–24 (NKJV)

And according to John, Jesus said,

<sup>25</sup> He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also... John 12:25–26 (NKJV)

Did you catch the agreement between these witnesses to the gospel? Loss of life and following Jesus are *required* to qualify. Simon fulfills these requirements; can we see this clearly?

As far as we know, and we have absolutely no evidence otherwise, Simon was not condemned for a capital crime. The sentence of death had not been pronounced upon *his* name. Still, we are told once again, *in agreement*, Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus’ cross. While the weight of the beam may have been substantial, it was the loss of Simon’s life that was the *true* burden.

The historian Plutarch tells us, “Each criminal as part of his punishment carries his cross on his back.” The cross Simon carried was not assigned *to him*. The cross Simon carried was not supposed to be Simon’s public proclamation of guilt. Regardless of what was supposed to be when Simon took up the weight of cross he also took up the weight of being counted a condemned criminal.

What about the twelve, you may say? Weren’t they “Christian”? Hadn’t they followed Jesus for years? Didn’t they give up land and family and treasure to be part of his inner circle? Hadn’t they witnessed Jesus heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, cast the demon out, feed the thousands, walk on water? Didn’t Jesus give them authority? Weren’t they the carriers of his teaching? Wasn’t it the disciples who shared the last meal and had their feet washed by Jesus? Didn’t Jesus change their designation from “slaves” to “friends”? Yes, brothers and sisters, all these things and more are true. I humbly submit that the disciples had yet to complete the journey they started.

When it was time for someone to step up and take up the cross, where was “manly” Andrew? Yes, he is often spoke of as the first “missionary” but in this hour of trial he is nowhere to be found.

Where was Bartholomew?

Where was James bar Alphaeus?

We know Judas was not there. He ended his life in unrepentant shame.

Where was Matthew, the man who left the wealth and power of collecting taxes to wander the hillsides of Israel with the man who “had no place to lay his head”?

Where was Thomas, the twin, a man who would not believe with being able to see?

Where was Phillip, the man to whom Jesus said, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father”? [John 14.9]

Where was Simon Zealot? Is his passion for overturning the status quo lost amongst the crowd?

Where was James, one half of the “Sons of Thunder”?

Where was Peter, the man who loudly and proudly proclaimed *he would follow Jesus even unto death*?

We believe John may have been there with Jesus on the way to crucifixion hill. What prevented this one “whom Jesus loved” to push Simon aside saying, “I am his disciple; this cross is for me to bear for my Lord!”

Were any of the twelve to be found? No! They were all missing, lost in the midst of their confusion and doubts and fears or in Judas’s case, dead.

We *do have* Simon. Could there be a more beautiful or more powerful picture of Reality in the spiritual realm than Simon's carrying of the cross? Simon, a man not condemned by the government, proclaimed himself condemned by carrying the cross. Simon becomes the perfect embodiment of the Christian in that moment he is torn from the crowd and placed in the footsteps of Jesus.

When Simon lost authority over his own will, having subjected it to the orders of the Roman guard, he illustrated what it means for us to deny ourselves. If Simon had remained self-determined we would not know of him. If Simon did what *Simon* wanted to do, he would have gone about the business that brought him to Jerusalem in the first place. Simon surrendered his self-will to a higher authority. Those of us wishing to call ourselves "Christian" must do likewise.

When Simon took upon himself the condemnation of Christ by bearing the cross, he fulfilled Jesus' second command. In fact he did so with a kind of clarity that cannot be overstated. Jesus, convicted and sentenced to die even though he was without sin, was followed by a man complete in sin's nature. The cross Jesus carried could only belong to him if he claimed it, which Jesus did. The very same tree now given to Simon to bear rightly belonged not to Jesus, but to Simon. It would be *Simon's* sin that would be Jesus' burden. Even though to us it seemed a random act of violence for Simon to be forced, it was actually an act of truth absolute. The cross was actually *Simon's cross*. In this same manner to this day, the cross of Christ becomes our cross. We must take hold of this truth and hold tightly to this burden of grace.

Simon completes the fulfillment of Jesus' requirement by simply doing as he was told. He did not take the cross and run away. Simon did not take the cross refuse to go along the way. Simon followed Jesus. The chroniclers of the crucifixion do not let us know exactly when Simon's burden became Jesus' again. We are left to assume that all the way to Calvary's hill Simon followed Jesus, bearing the burden of the cross. All the way to the time when the wood, placed now on the dirty ground, would receive the nails through the hands which so tenderly blessed the heads of children, which gently rubbed the eyelids of the blind man, which so recently broke bread with his closest friends.

This is the true burden of the cross, the true call of Christianity. It is powerful!

History tells us no more of Simon of Cyrene, but we do know the following:

In Acts 2 and verse 10 people from Cyrene were among those blessed with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 11 and verse 19 men of Cyrene travelled to Antioch to preach the Lord Jesus to the Greeks of that city. In Acts 13 and verse 1 that Lucius of Cyrene was among the prophets and teachers serving the church in Antioch.

I have pressed the point as far as I dare. Prayerfully I did not go too far. May I now lay a challenge at the feet of those gathered here? May I beg of you to make this Good Friday the last of the “days of Remembrance” and the first in the days of obedience?

It is easy to set aside time to mourn and to remember. In God’s grace he allows us to eventually abandon mourning and to forget the past. It is a *burden* to obey; it is *the* burden of the cross. The Lord allows us no other way. The burden of the cross is now our burden. The denial of self, the public proclamation of being a condemned criminal and the footsteps of Jesus is the weight we are commanded to carry. Who can do such a thing?: Those who are called out of the crowd and pressed into service. Jesus said,

<sup>28</sup> Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light.” Matthew 11:28–30 (NKJV)

On the mount of crucifixion,  
Fountains opened deep and wide,  
Through the floodgates of God’s mercy,  
Flowed a vast and gracious tide,  
Grace and love like mighty rivers,  
Flowed incessant from above,  
Heaven’s peace and perfect justice,  
Kissed a guilty world in love.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Water, M. (2000). *The new encyclopedia of Christian quotations* (90). Alresford, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishers Ltd.