

Bearing the Cross

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 23, Easter is just two weeks away and I always love Easter. It's the day that we focus on the Christian celebration on the empty tomb.

! It's especially a great day in the life of Pickens First Baptist Church. It's going to be a great day and I encourage you to pray. And I encourage you to invite folks.

And I encourage you to expect God to do great things. In our midst, I see over and over again in Scripture a correlation when people come in faith expecting God to move in a mighty way.

He does it. We just looked last week, week four, when four friends picked up a paralytic and took him to see Jesus. They had expectations that Jesus would change the man's life.

And it says that he healed them because he saw their faith. And so I'm telling you, I believe we need to pray and ask God to do mighty things beyond our expectations and then expect great things.

[1 : 05] And just watch and see what happens. It's going to be a great day. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And we need to grasp that. And we need to live in response to that.

And that needs to affect us each and every day. And Easter, or really the resurrection celebration, helps us to do that.

However, I really believe that in order to understand the victory of the empty tomb, you need to understand the cross of Christ. You need to understand what Jesus endured and why he endured it for us to be able to have new life in Christ.

I want us to look this morning briefly at a man who is mentioned in three of the gospels, yet is seldom talked about. He's found in Luke chapter 23, beginning in verse 26.

And it says this, As they led him away, speaking of Jesus, leading him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene who was coming in from the country and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

[2 : 18] And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. When one was to be crucified, part of the agony in the Roman process was having to carry his own cross.

We're not absolutely sure, but most likely what Jesus carried and then Simon carried was the horizontal crossbar of the cross.

As often depicted, the whole cross is often depicted, but in reality, usually it was the horizontal bar that was strapped to their arms and shoulders.

The patibulum is the horizontal crossbar of the cross. It weighed about 75 to 125 pounds. Now, Jesus was a carpenter by trade.

He was about 33 years, which is not far from prime. Physical prime, I guess. He could have normally handled that, I believe, without a real problem.

[3 : 30] However, we must realize what he had been through. John chapter 19, verse 1 tells us that he was flogged. Flogging was not intended for execution.

It was sometimes used instead of execution. Pilate attempted to have Jesus released after he was scourged or flogged.

The purpose of a flogging was not to kill a man, but to brutally, painfully humiliate the man forever, for the rest of his life anyway.

From the marks that would be upon his body and from the limp that he may walk with. The purpose was to be demeaning and to be belittling of someone who messed with the Roman government.

Now, it was such a degree that Roman citizens were not to be flogged, which made for some interesting conversation when Paul was being persecuted later.

[4 : 39] But when they would flog a man, they would use a flagellum. A flagellum was a, the British call it a cat of nine tails. It was a whip that had several strands on it, usually up to nine strands.

And each one of those strands tied into that leather would either be lead balls or glass or pieces of bone. And the thought was that if you whip someone on the back, those strands were made to dig in to the flesh.

And so once it dug in, they'd rip it. And the hope was that it would cut the skin as it was brought down with the proper force.

One historian that lived in the first century stated that people were amazed to see the depths of the wounds that such a flogging would cause.

The lacerations were, and I quote, End of quote.

[5 : 58] They'd bind a man to a post or they'd stretch him out over a frame. And they'd beat him from his neck to his knees and mark him as best they could.

Now I want to make one clarification that a lot of preachers have messed up on, including this one. That I've often been told that they were limited to 40 lashes when they hit a man.

And the reality is that's a Jewish limitation. And it's found in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verse 3. And the reason why they limited those lashes was because the flogging was not intended to kill somebody.

It was intended to make them wish they was dead. And they had watched to see how many it would take to kill a man, and they didn't want to do that.

So they limited it to 40, and I was always told that you got your best counter, buddy, and hopefully a good friend, to stand there with you and count and tell you when you got to 39 and stop.

[7 : 08] Because if you went over, you got the same treatment. But the reality is that was a Jewish law. Romans didn't care about Jewish laws.

Romans would beat somebody as long as they wanted to. Because they had come against the Roman government. It's understandable why Jesus could not carry a 100-pound railroad tie, the equivalent to, on his shoulders for very long.

And when he could no longer, a man named Simon was shocked to be a part of the execution parade of Jesus.

He was from Cyrene in North Africa. Today that would be part of Libya. And all the Synoptic Gospels, that's Matthew, Mark, and Luke, mention this man.

And the question I want to answer this morning is why? Why did they bring him up again and again?

[8 : 16] I'll tell you why. Because the cross changed Simon's life. Simon was apparently a Jew from Cyrene.

And there was a large group of Jews in a synagogue at the time in that area. They're mentioned a few times in the book of Acts. And Mark, who wrote primarily aimed at believers in Rome, mentioned that Simon, in Mark 15, verse 21, is the father of Alexander and Rufus.

The gospel of Mark was written 40 years after the death of Christ, or at least 30. Why would he include the name of Simon's son?

I'll tell you why. Because the church, the first audience that Mark wrote to, knew who they were. In Romans chapter 16, verse 13, Paul writes about Rufus.

And he writes about Rufus' mother. And he says that Rufus' mother was like a mother to him.

[9 : 37] To me, it sounds like the whole house got saved. He was leading his family to Jerusalem for the Passover. But when he came, he met Jesus.

And Jesus changes everything. Christ changed his life that day and changed his household forever. And I believe he's mentioned because of the difference that the event made on his life and the difference that his life made on the kingdom.

But I also believe it's mentioned because of the difference it can make in us. Because the cross will change our lives as well.

I believe what we see here is a physical example of a spiritual truth that should mark every one of our lives. Simon was willing to bear the weight of the cross of Christ.

[10 : 47] And if you stand up today for Christ in the world in which we live, you may be criticized. If you stand up for the cause of Christ in the world in which we live, you may be misunderstood.

You at least at times will be unappreciated for taking such a stand. And if you're not willing to feel the weight of the cross, if you're not willing to live a life of sacrifice for God, if we're not willing to deny ourselves and follow him, then in reality we're not truly following God.

Simon was willing to do that. And it forever changed his life. His example is one that rattles personal cages. At the turn of the 19th century, in the Church of England, there was a pastor named Charles Simeon.

In the midst of that, there was a great church renewal going on in that denomination. And amid criticism, he preached the word without reservation.

Early in his ministry, this passage that we study today changed his life. And he wrote about it and he said this. He said, One day when I was an object of much contempt and derision in the university, I strolled forth, buffeted and afflicted, taking my little Greek New Testament in my hand. [12:22] I prayed that God would comfort me with some cordial from his word. And opening it, the first text which caught my eye was this. They found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name.

They compelled him to bear his cross. Simon, you know, is the same name as Simeon. It was the very word that I needed.

What a privilege to have the cross laid on me to bear it with Jesus. It was enough. I could leap. I could sing for joy. Lay it on me, Lord, I cried. And henceforth, I bound persecution as a wreath of glory round my brow.

End of quote. And you can tell when I'm talking and when he's talking. I'll probably don't have to tell you when I end the quote. It's a burden of every Christian to take up the cross and follow Christ.

[13:25] Christ said in Luke chapter 9, verse 23, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

What does that mean? Well, the first thing that means is to say no. Just because we want to do it does not mean that we need to do it.

Just because we want to say it don't mean that we need to say it. Just because we think on it don't mean we need to be thinking on it.

Just because we want to do something, say something, think on something does not mean we need to do it. We are people who are born in sin.

Because of that, we are prone to sin. Not only that, but we've committed sin. As a matter of fact, we kind of lean into sin.

[14:33] We don't stand upright many times. And one of our greatest enemies sometimes is the flesh that is within us. That leads us in ways that we don't need to go.

And we need to say no. No to ourselves. Not only to our comforts, not only to our cares, we need to say no to the carnal nature that rises up within us and leads us to say things that are not pleasing to the Lord.

And leads us to do things that are not pleasing to the Lord. And it leads us to thank things that are not pleasing to the Lord. And that set us back. All of those things set us back.

And it's hard to hear no. There was a drug prevention campaign when I was a kid. Nancy Reagan was the first lady and in a fight against drugs, they came up with the Just Say No campaign.

Just say no to drugs. When you was watching television, commercial would come on that you couldn't fast forward through.

[15:49] You had to endure. They'd crack an egg, throw it in a frying pan, and say, this is your brain. This is your brain on drugs.

And anybody that's about my age was marked by the fact that if you take drugs, you'll turn into a fried egg. Okay. About that time, new song, Christian group, came out with a song called Say Yes to Jesus.

And the lyric said, how can you say no until you say yes? Say yes to Jesus. My friend, we can't say yes to Jesus until we say no to ourselves.

We've got to deny ourselves. The second thing we have to do is take up his cause. He said take up his cross daily.

The Roman cross was a symbol of shame and guilt and suffering and rejection. It's a horrible way to die. People didn't wear gold crosses on their necklines in those days.

[16:58] That would have been like somebody wearing an electric chair around their neck now. I mean, you just wouldn't do it. It'd be odd. It'd be strange. When it says take up his cross daily, it speaks of living boldly in our Christian faith, not living like the world, being surrendered to Christ.

It means willing to suffer ridicule when it comes. It means willing to suffer a lack of popularity. It means willing to sacrifice your wants for his.

You know what that means? That means you may not be invited to the same functions as you have been. And if you are, when you're living for Christ, you may not feel as comfortable in those functions as you have been. You may have to walk away at times.

You may have to speak up at times. You may have to stand strong at times. It's the Romans 12, one and two lifestyle.

The Apostle Paul said in Romans 12, verse one, I appeal to you, therefore brothers, by the mercies of God. And let me just stop there. Because the things that I'm talking about, we are unable to do in our own ability.

[18:14] And you may think, I'm preaching, some of that stuff you're saying, I can't do. I know, I know, you're right, you can't do it. But I am thankful that when one surrenders his or her life to the Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledges the sin that they've committed in the past, ask Christ to forgive them of their sins, and commit their life to follow Christ, something transformational happens that it's hard for us to grasp.

And that is the Holy Spirit of God comes to indwell within us. And when the Holy Spirit comes to indwell within us, he gives us the strength and the power and the correction and the direction that we need in order to live a life that's pleasing to the Lord.

Now, I will tell you that our human nature, our flesh, our carnal, whatever you want to call it, the us in us fights against the Holy Spirit so often.

And the reality is we do things, as Paul said, the things I want to do is not what I do and the things I don't want to do is what I do. Yes, that is the struggle that we face. But if you're not fighting that battle, it's because you're losing that battle.

You're not paying attention to it. But in reality, if you're a child of God today, the Holy Spirit of God has come within you and empowered you to rise above the things that come in the way of you being everything that you can be for the Lord Jesus.

[19:39] And that only comes, thank God, by the mercies of God. That's the only hope we got is in his mercy. It's not in our ability. It wasn't that we woke up one day and realized, hey, I think I need something besides the Lord.

I need something besides me. I need the Lord. No, no, I'm sorry. The Holy Spirit of God laid a conviction upon us of the need of God, made us aware of our need of God.

And then we surrender our lives to follow God. And when we do that, by the mercies of God, the same mercy that sent Christ to the cross is the same mercy that empowers us with the Spirit of God.

So I want to be clear this morning that what I'm about to say, we're not able to do on our own. But if you're a child of God today, and if you're not, you can be. Because today's the day of salvation.

And he'll meet you where you are. And he'll change your life when you surrender to him. If you have done that, I want you to know by the mercies of God, we can present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

[20:47] Holy and acceptable to God. That is true worship. That's true worship. I love corporate worship.

You know what makes it better? When we've done what we need to do to have spiritual worship. When we've surrendered to the Lord, and when we're following the Lord, being led by the Spirit of God, worship is that much better in the midst of it.

And because of what he does for us, I want you to notice what verse 2 says. It says, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God.

People ask me all the time, how in the world do I know what the will of God is? I'll tell you how you know. Don't conform to this world. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

Take in the word of God. Seek the Lord in prayer. Be faithful to follow him. Be faithful in worship. Be faithful to do exactly what he tells you to do.

[22:02] Don't second guess the Holy Spirit of God. Just follow his will and his way. And what he'll show you is the will of God for your life, what's good and what's acceptable and what's perfect.

Few, if any of us, will ever be asked to die for the cross cause of Christ. But all of us who are Christians are commanded to live for him.

The preacher didn't say that. The Lord said that. We're to take up our cross daily. And the last thing is to follow Christ.

At the very beginning of the Gospels, we see men walk away from everything they knew to follow the Lord. James and John walked away from a business they would have inherited. Peter walked away from his livelihood. Matthew was a Roman commissioned tax collector that left his booth to follow Christ.

[23 : 06] And scripture gives us no indication that Jesus ever stopped and pleaded for any of these men to come after him. It don't say anything about him coming back the second time.

It don't say anything about him coming back the third time. It don't say anything about that. As a matter of fact, I happen to believe that Jesus never lost his stride. He just said, follow me. And Matthew looked at all his tax stuff and went, hey, I'm going to do that.

And closed the books and left the booth. They all left what they were doing. They left what they were up to. They left what their plans were to follow what Christ had for them.

And scripture says again and again, Mark especially, that they left immediately to do that. You know, sometimes, I'll just say it all the time, delayed obedience is disobedience.

When God speaks, you answer. Now let's get back to the text. Because Simon picked up the burden of Christ.

[24 : 20] And then I want you to notice what it says. It says that he carried the cross behind Christ. From the time he picked up the cross, he was following Jesus.

That's exactly what we're to do as well. Christ denied himself. He took up his cross and he followed the plan of God so that we could deny ourselves, take up our cross for his causes and follow him.

I believe our job as we approach the celebration of the resurrection of the Lord is to take up the matters of God, to bear his cross and to follow Christ in all that we do.

With every head bowed and every eye closed, I want to ask you something this morning. I want to ask you if you've ever come to know the Lord Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior.

have you ever surrendered your life to him? As I mentioned earlier to ask him to forgive you and to come into your life and to change you and then to surrender your will to his will.

[25 : 41] It's a personal thing. It does not come through a transaction of a church membership. It does not come through some physical process. It comes instead by a personal surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And anything that takes place beyond that spiritually is no good because it's missing the key thing and that is the personal surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you've never done that, I want to encourage you as soon as we stand to sing, you come and say, Pastor, I need to give my life to Christ. I need to nail down my salvation.

Pastor, I'm not sure. Whatever your circumstances, you share that. Maybe you have done that, but you've never followed that up publicly with baptism. The reality is by the commission of Christ and by his example, he shows us that the first step of obedience in our salvation is to follow that up with baptism.

Baptism is a way for us to honor the Lord by obeying him, but it's also a wonderful testimony that I see every time impact lives of those around them much more than they ever know.

[26 : 55] And I really don't believe we will see this side of eternity, the whole extent of that. Maybe you're here this morning and God's leading you to Pickens First Baptist Church. You feel like this is the place where you are to serve.

This is the place where you are to join. You invest in us, we invest in you, we grow together for the Lord Jesus Christ. And if you sense that, feel that, by the Holy Spirit of God, I encourage you to come.

I'd love to guide you in what that means. For the rest of us, maybe we just, maybe we just need to deny ourselves. Maybe this morning we just need to take up our cross and to follow Christ.

If there's an area of your life that's suffering because you failed to do that, why don't you lay that before the Lord today? You can do that where you'll stand in just a moment. You can do that at this altar. I'll be happy to pray for you.

Whatever God would have you to do, I just want you to do exactly what He tells you to do. Nothing more or nothing less. I don't have a clue what God's telling you. I just know what He wanted me to share.

[28 : 01] And so I encourage you to be obedient and follow Him as He speaks to your heart. Lord Jesus, lead us right now. Help us to simply follow you and guide our every step. Give us a boldness beyond measure.

Lord, give us a strength that we don't have for our own. Give us a willingness to obey as only comes from the Holy Spirit of God. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.