

The Crosses We Carry

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

When Peter objected to Jesus talking about being killed, Jesus calls him "Satan" and "a stumbling-block." The point of the Messiah coming into the world was, according to the prophet Jeremiah, "To save us, to redeem us" (Jer 15:21). And we remember that Isaiah said that our Savior would be "pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" and that "by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

So Peter wasn't thinking this through. Maybe he thought that such suffering was not appropriate for the Son of God. And that was right! Except that the Son of God came into the world to do exactly that. To suffer and die for the sins of mankind. So Peter blurting out that "This shall never happen to you!" was nothing but the devil distracting Peter from the truth, and perhaps a feeble attempt for the devil to tempt Jesus once more not to do what he came to do. This is why Peter was a stumbling block, and this is why Jesus spoke to Satan who was just hiding behind Peter the same way he had once hid behind a snake in the Garden of Eden.

Following Jesus is not an easy thing. It is not a path to success or fame. It is a path of pain, of grief, of loss. God gives us crosses for different reasons. Sometimes they are there to correct behavior. Sometimes they are there to help us focus our attention where it belongs, on our God rather than our personal goals. Sometimes a cross is there to toughen us up for harder things yet to come. But the cross of Jesus is there for us all to see, for our salvation and for our comfort.

Peter's objection is something any one of us might have said. We don't like pain, we don't want to go through loss. We don't want to face grief. What we do want are other things: Ease, success, permission to be lazy-- that sort of thing. But God gives us work to do, ways to serve him. And we might say, I don't want to serve that way, or we might complain that so-and-so got this or that, why not me? And then the cross comes to teach me: He wants me to serve him in another way.

That's when I must look to his cross for forgiveness. In this matter of life as a Christian, our forgiving Savior knows what is best. He removes the burden of our guilt, but then he may lay down a burden of service. That service isn't how we get to heaven, of course. It's how we thank him for getting us there.

The cross that the Christian carries is a consequence of following Jesus, of being his disciple. People don't become disciples of Christ because they are carrying crosses and need help; we carry crosses because we are his disciples; and this is a necessary result of being his disciple, his Christian follower.

We don't like to hear that. The sinful flesh doesn't want any part of that. I want to be told that if I follow Jesus I will have success in business, that I will enjoy good health, that I will have a happy marriage. Or at least I want to hear that while some or many Christians will have crosses to carry, maybe I won't. Maybe I'll squeak through like without one, because God doesn't notice me, or because he doesn't think I need one. *This is running away from what God wants us to have!*

But Jesus shushes all these thoughts down by putting everything in the singular. Now, our new NIV translation makes use of the modern 21st-Century "they" and "themselves" in this passage, but let's be clear about what Jesus really says. And for the sake of clarity, we only need to say it two ways. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny *herself* and take up *her* cross and follow me." And equally so: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny *himself* and take up *his* cross and follow me." Don't for one moment think that God or the Son of God flunked grammar in school. One of the many lessons of the first three chapters of Genesis is that God gave language and all its grammatical parts to mankind in order to communicate his holy word to us. Jesus knows exactly what he is saying, and he says it to you, just as he says it to the person near you, and to me.

Not a single soul who follows Jesus will be able to hide cross-less in a crowd of cross-carriers and escape its weight and its pain. For the cross of Christ is heavy and it is painful. Luther teaches in the Large Catechism: "Where God's Word is preached, accepted, or believed, and

bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind. Let no one think we will have peace. We must sacrifice all we have on earth: possession, honor, house and farm, spouse and children, body and life.”^a

The trials that are the crosses we carry change. This year this one, next year a different one. Today this trial, tomorrow that one. Today I failed, but Christ forgives me. Tomorrow I pray he will help me stand! And it is the other Cross, the Cross of Christ, that is my help.

We have this reason to cry out in every hour of life: not for a life of ease without the cross, but for rescue and help in bearing the cross. Temptation of every sort is what Jesus our Lord has told us we will have in this life. And he is the one who has given help and rescue as we carry these burdens; that is what he promises in his Word and in his Sacraments.

We keep going to the Word of God to read about sin and grace, to be struck by the law and soothed by the gospel.

We keep coming to worship to be reminded of these things week upon week because we are weak, because we need to hear them.

We can keep the hymns in mind each day, every morning, to remind of Jesus’ love and righteousness.

We can keep returning to our Catechism to remember what we already know, to be assured that the pages have not been erased since we last opened them; that the wording is just the same now as when we first committed it to memory. And that, if there is a part we had a hard time memorizing, that God has also given us the gift of the bound book to be there when we reach for it.

Your forgiveness and your help in life—this is the cross of Christ your Savior and mine. And when he lays a cross upon your shoulder, and you heft that cross and sometimes struggle even to breathe or move under its terrible weight, then pray, and wait, and know that your Jesus loves us, and we will help you to carry this burden, for his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Amen.

^a Large Catechism, Third Petition § 65-66