

February 28, 2021

May the God of peace fill you with all joy in believing.

You are on a need to know basis, and you don't need to know. In this case, the disciples did need to know. Because Jesus knew he was going to die, the disciples needed to know too. They needed to know what was coming so they could be prepared, so they could understand. But there was more they needed to understand. Jesus was going to bear the cross, and the disciples were going to get one too.

When you became a Christian, did anyone warn you about the cross? No not that one, that is Christ's cross not yours. I mean the cross that you would have to bear for being a Christian. If you knew what the cross was all about, would you perhaps have gone the other way, perhaps and easier way? We don't start Bible Information Class by handing out a heavy splinter-filled cross that each person has to carry. But the Christian does have to carry a cross. It has been said, "No cross, no Christian." Jesus shows us that statement is true in the gospel lesson today. He shows us the necessity of the cross. Christ's cross certainly was necessary, but our cross is a necessary consequence of faith.

Peter and the other disciples continually struggled with a false understanding of the Christ. It wasn't that they didn't understand that Jesus was the Christ or the Messiah, because they did. Remember Peter so boldly and eloquently confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. But what they understood about what the Christ would do was entirely different. They were infected with the same type of thinking as the crowds after Jesus fed the five thousand. They viewed Jesus as someone who could restore the glory of Israel and give them free bread. They intended to make him king if they could, but Jesus, knew this was not the plan of salvation.

The fact that Peter answers Jesus' announcement of his coming suffering, death, and resurrection with a sidebar and a rebuke shows us that Peter held this kind of understanding too. Getting yourself killed is no way to be king over Israel. Peter could not believe what he was hearing. It was if he wanted to cry out, "This is not the plan. It can't be the plan!" No ruler begins his reign by being killed!

It seems that Jesus doesn't even let Peter finish what he has to say, when he interjects. "Get behind me, Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." This

might seem overly harsh, but it really isn't. Peter's words were no different than the enticements of Satan when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he would just bow down and worship him. This was an enticement to give up the cross. It is too painful, the cost is too high. Don't go to the cross, there is an easier way. Satan, through Peter was tempting Jesus to go after power and glory without the agony of the cross.

Jesus words are clear. "The Son of the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." There is no other way for the Christ. The whole reason he came into this world was to go to the cross. The Father's plan from eternity is that his Son must suffer for the sins of the world. This is the theology of the cross, that the cross is necessary for the Christ.

It is clear that this is God's plan because the Old Testament taught that he must. God promised in the Garden of Eden that the serpent would strike the Messiah's heel. Isaiah 53 details the weight and the splinters of the cross when it says, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." His body must be pierced. He must be crushed. He must be wounded, there is no other way!

The cross would be painful. He would lose his life. No enticement of Satan, no rationalization by Peter was going to deter him. He loves us too much. His rebuke of Peter was offered in love, because all these things must happen for the salvation of the world to be accomplished. The cross is not glorious. It is gloomy, it is grotesque, it is gory, but it is necessary if you and I are going to join Jesus in his Father's glory. Jesus' love for us would not let him veer to the right or to the left, but kept him on the path to the cross. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." This was all for you! Jesus did not take the easy way, because he was doing it for you.

What must the other disciples have thought? Peter, their spokesman was arguing with their Lord! What is the discussion about? Who is right? Peter's words were foolish and mistaken, and they also had the potential to lead the other disciples astray. So Jesus addresses them too. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Do you realize what Jesus is saying? Just like the cross was a "must" for Jesus so also it is a "must" for the Christian.

Understand the difference between Christ's cross and the Christian's cross. The cross of Christ earned our salvation. Only Christ's cross can do that. The Christian can offer him no help, the battle was his alone. His cross was not earned because he was sinless and did not deserve the

cross. The suffering of the Christian's cross comes because of his own sinfulness. Carrying this cross does not earn the Christian salvation. Salvation was accomplished by Christ alone.

What is this cross of which Jesus speaks? The essence of this cross which the Christian carries is self-denial. Self denial doesn't sound too hard, does it? It does when we consider that it is impossible for us to imagine a day that goes by that we perfectly love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. Why not? It is because self gets in the way. Our self objects to following God's will. It argues that I know better about how to run my life than God. Self wants God out of the way so that I can run my life my way, in my best interests. I don't want to make decisions that are best for my family or for my wife or for my church. I want to make decisions that are best for me! Self wants to play with this "adulterous and wicked generation," rather than follow God. Self wants to join those things and thus denying self becomes a difficult and painful cross.

Self loves to be pampered; to hear some flattery. The approval and praise of the world makes it harder to trust Christ and his Word, since I like hearing that I am better than most. Someone might argue, "I thought that crosses were painful things?" Crosses are painful. How painful isn't it to try to fight against self? When pain does come into our lives, self shrieks that if God were really God he would not let this come into my life. Therefore, in times of pain, self must be denied and trust in God renewed that he will make this pain work out for my good. When a spouse dies, self howls, "God how could you leave me alone like this!" Self tries to turn our eyes from Christ and his love for us.

Notice how Jesus fleshes out this self-denial in the next verses. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" Self certainly wants to save his life, he wants a full life in this world, the American dream! Self wants to gain the whole world and be fat and happy. Yet our eyes cannot be focused on two things at once. If we are focused on the world and the life it offers, we will lose Christ. At the gates of heaven we could offer all that we have obtained, but it will not be enough to save our soul. The generation in which the disciples lived was called adulterous, not because everyone was committing sexual sins, but because they were supposed to be married to Christ, but the object of their affection was the world. Is our generation any different? Maybe it is even worse. Shouldn't we ask the question of ourselves? To whom are we married?

How can we do it? How can we deny our own self? How can we carry such a heavy and splinter filled cross? Focus on Christ's cross and how he carried it for you. The Son of man carried his cross to Calvary. He was fastened to it and he hung from it. He spilled his blood on

it. His life was sapped away by it; all for you. He died for you, even though your own self too often rules the roost. He died for you, even though you keep having affairs with the world. He died for you. His cross was necessary to save you and he carried it. We bow low before his cross begging for forgiveness. We gaze upon it to see how great and how complete his love for us is in paying for our sins.

We will continue to struggle to deny self and follow Jesus, but not without forgiveness. We will continue to struggle, but not without joy in our own crosses, as painful as they may be. The cross is a dear and gracious gift of God because it keeps pointing us to and driving us back to the cross of Christ. If we had no cross to bear, what need would there be of Jesus and his cross? So the pain of our own cross keeps ever before our eyes the great redemption that Christ won for us.

There is no easy way out. The easy way out means that Christ will be ashamed of us. We carry our cross and follow behind Jesus: no cross, no Christian. It is also true: no cross, no crown. Jesus carried his necessary cross so that we can have the glory of eternal life through him. We carry our cross in faith in him, knowing that its weight and its pain will always keep our eyes focused on him. We want to be found faithful when Jesus returns so that he will give us the crown of life; first the cross, then the crown! Amen.