

# **THE DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST**

## **GOOD FRIDAY**

## **SIMON OF CYRENE COMPELLED TO BEAR CHRIST'S CROSS**

*“And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of  
Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the  
father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry His cross”.*

(Mark 15: 21)

We begin our series on the death of Jesus Christ with the history recorded in Mark 15, about Simon of Cyrene being forced to bear the cross of our Lord. Christ Himself once said that whoever wishes to follow Him must deny himself and take up his (own) cross, that is, accept the consequences and possible suffering of being a Christian.

In this passage we meet a literal cross-bearer, Simon of Cyrene. Only, it was not his own cross that he had to bear, but the Lord's. And he did not do it voluntarily but, as we read, he was compelled to do so.

Do you feel a little sorry for Simon of Cyrene because he was forced to perform what must have been to him an unsavoury task? Or does your heart go out more to Jesus, who is so weak that He cannot even bear His cross to the place of execution? Do you perhaps feel sorry for both; for these two poor, unfortunate souls, who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, as the world would say?

Well, I think we can say that Christ does not want us to feel sorry for Himself or for Simon of Cyrene. We have to watch out here for false emotions and superficial sentimentality. In the days of Lent, we need not seek to relive or replay Christ's suffering, travelling His road to Calvary, as the church of Rome does when the Pope bears a wooden cross along the ten points of the *Via Dolorosa*, the road of sorrows. That's not real cross-bearing, that's dramatization.

Christ does not want our tearful sympathy, He wants our sincere repentance. Therefore we must learn also from this Scripture passage what God reveals to us about our sins and our salvation.

These are the real questions. For this text is not an interesting fact, a little trivia, but it is pure Gospel, proclamation of salvation, and as such it contains a message for us, which we shall seek to understand together. Our theme, then, is: Simon of Cyrene is compelled to bear Christ's cross, and we need to discover what this event meant *for the Lord* in His suffering, and what it teaches *us* about our calling.

## **BEARING ONE'S OWN CROSS**

When they led Jesus out to crucify Him, He bore His cross. You can read this in John 19: 17, "So they took Jesus, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called. . . Golgotha." We should note this carefully: He began by bearing His own cross.

This was apparently the Roman custom. Condemned criminals were made to bear their own cross to the place of execution. It was an extra humiliation, just as in modern times – I think of events in the second world war – condemned people were sometimes forced to dig their own graves.

It is not clear exactly what is meant by this cross-bearing. Some explainers say that the criminal had to carry the entire cross, by bearing the upright beam on his shoulders, while he dragged the cross-beam behind him with a rope. Others say that only the cross-beam had to be carried and that the supporting beam was

already erected at the place of execution. In any case, this bearing of the cross was a heavy task, but for a healthy and strong person not necessarily an impossible burden. The other two convicted men most likely carried their crosses all the way to Golgotha, which was not far outside the city of Jerusalem.

Why do I mention this? Because the Lord indeed started out by carrying His own cross, but obviously He did not last long. He could not fulfill this task! The extreme anguish suffered at Gethsemane, the trials before the high priests, Herod, and Pilate during that long night, the flogging and other abuse, had all taken their toll on the Lord and so weakened Him that, on the way to Golgotha, He stumbled under the weight of his cross. There was, perhaps, the danger that He would pass out and even succumb before reaching Golgotha!

The soldiers were not merciful to the Lord, but they did not want to jeopardize the execution itself. Christ had to stay alive so that He would die *on the cross*, not before the crucifixion. Therefore, they had to take preventive measures.

Some explainers suggest that the *Jews* opposed Christ's bearing of His own cross, because He was a native Jew after all, and therefore someone else had to be found, a stranger such as Simon of Cyrene. But we do not read about such an outpouring of Jewish nationalism in our text, and the best explanation is the simplest one: Christ was unable to bear His cross. Being utterly exhausted, He stumbled under its sheer weight, and sank to the ground.

## **APPROPRIATE MEASURES?**

The soldiers, of course, had to take proper measures. They did not want to carry the cross themselves. Neither would they be able to convince any of the accompanying party of the Jews to do it. So they did what occupying forces most often do: simply grab an innocent bystander and force him to do the dirty work!

It says, "And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country. . . to carry His cross." Simon apparently was coming from the opposite direction, going into the city from the country, and the soldiers simply requisitioned him. We may assume that Simon tried to pass by this raucous band, not wanting to be involved, but they just grabbed him and forced him.

Explainers who suggest that Simon was picked because he showed some sympathy for Jesus or perhaps stepped in to help Jesus up are obviously wrong: the text very clearly states that Simon was compelled. He did not want to do it at all. He was just coming in from the country, minding his own business, and suddenly he found himself face to face with this execution squad, and the next thing he knew was that they put this cross on his back. He was no volunteer, but was forced by the Roman soldiers, probably at spear-point. Pick it up, or else!

We should therefore be careful not to place this man, Simon of Cyrene, on a pedestal, as some have done. He is then portrayed as the last person to show Christ some sympathy and to afford Him some relief, a real saint, as it were. Simon of Cyrene, according to this view, showed Christ love on the road to Calvary. And the

application is that we today must show the Lord Jesus even more love and support. But that is not the message of this text.

## **EXTRA HUMILIATION FOR CHRIST**

Since Simon was *forced* to lend this “service,” it did not really offer Christ any comfort. On the contrary, we can say that this is an extra humiliation for our Lord. When He must see how Simon is compelled to assist Him, He is made to feel even more helpless. No one comes forward to help Him voluntarily, and He is not able any more to demand that someone of his own choosing helps Him. Our Lord is in no position to get Simon “off the hook,” but must watch how Simon is forced to perform a very unappealing task on His behalf.

Don’t you think that this must have been very difficult for the Lord Jesus to accept? Here his last shred of self-respect and pride was torn away from Him. It was not His style to let others do the dirty work for Him. And I am not talking about foolish, human pride, but the proper respect for His holy office as Messiah. He did not come to have anyone suffer in His place, but He came to bear the burdens of others.

Our Lord was always so very much in charge of His own affairs. He always reached out to help others, and He did so with messianic dignity, authority and power. He commanded the wind and the sea to be calm, to save His disciples. He fed the multitudes by multiplying loaves and fishes. He raised up all who were weak and poor. He dared even to make His own requisitions. He simply took the donkey upon which He rode into Jerusalem, and calmly ordered that a guest room be prepared for Him and His disciples for the last Passover. He called unto Himself whomever He willed, and they came to Him, in submission to His sovereign will. All this was part of His glory and power as Messiah, as Son of David.

## **THE HELPLESS HELPER**

But now the great Helper has become utterly helpless. He who cared for others cannot even care for Himself. Don’t you think that Christ must have been sorely tempted here to summon the resources of His godly nature, to raise Himself, and to take up that cross and bear it proudly to the hill of Golgotha? Oh, to be able to say: leave this man alone, for I alone bear My cross.

But the Lord Jesus must let it happen. For it is part of His suffering, the total emptying of Himself, becoming devoid of all human strength and power, stumbling forward in utter weakness, not even able to bear His own cross! That is what this text shows us, so that we might know how far He went, how deeply He humbled Himself, how totally He emptied Himself, for the sake of our sins! Indeed, as the apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 2: 7: Christ *emptied* Himself. Note that word: emptied. He poured everything out, even the last vestiges of his own pride, for us.

Of course, in one way it was a relief that He did not have to bear that cross anymore. But it was at the same time a shame for Him that another must take up

His burden. Hear the taunts of the soldiers and the Jews: can't even carry your own cross, eh? Here, let this man take over for you!

## **A PASSERBY**

This man, Simon of Cyrene, is a mere passerby. Let us not say, an “innocent victim,” for no one is innocent. But he was certainly a man who was not at all directly involved in the issue but just happened to pass by. The centurion orders, “Hey, you there, come help this weakling.”

Many people would like to know who exactly this Simon of Cyrene was. We really do not know much about him. His name “Simon” indicates that perhaps he was a Jew or a proselyte to Judaism. He came from Cyrene, in Libya, where there was a large colony of displaced Jews. Many of these Jews from Cyrene visited Jerusalem regularly. They also made many proselytes who came to Jerusalem. The Cyrenians even had their own synagogue there. Some of them also owned land in and around Jerusalem. This possibly was the case with Simon, who may have been coming back from inspecting his land and returning to the city to prepare for the passover.

Various explainers suggest that the Cyrenians, being from North Africa, were black people. In Acts 6: 9 we read about people who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia who disputed with Stephen, the first martyr. The synagogue of the Freedmen, to which also the Cyrenians belonged, was perhaps composed of former (black) slaves who had been set free. These black proselytes were segregated in their own synagogue with many others from foreign places, and as is common with converts, were fanatic in their Judaism. Hence their fierce opposition to Stephen.

So Simon may have been a black man, a former slave, and this perhaps explains all the more why the Roman soldiers picked on him to carry Christ's cross. Surely such a man was in no position to protest!

## **A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST?**

There are commentators who think that Simon may have become a disciple of Christ. For it says in this verse that he was “the father of Alexander and Rufus.” This may mean that Simon himself was not known to the churches (Mark is said to have written his Gospel especially for the church at Rome), but that his sons were well-known Christians.

Alexander and Rufus. We do not know exactly which Alexander is meant (the name was not uncommon), but in the letter to the Romans the apostle Paul does extend greetings to a certain Rufus: “Greet Rufus, eminent in the Lord, also his mother and mine” (Romans 16: 13). It may very well be that Simon of Cyrene was the father of this Rufus, who later was a member of the church at Rome. Since only Rufus' mother is mentioned by Paul, Simon may then already have been dead, or he never became a Christian.

But these are all assumptions. We have few hard facts about Simon of Cyrene and don't know whether he became a Christian or not. He comes in out of the field, appears momentarily on the scene, and disappears again. All we can know for sure is that he had to be forced to carry the cross. It is quite probable, in fact, that he was greatly embarrassed, perhaps even offended that he was forced into duty, treated like a slave. It will not be easy for a man like Simon ever to confess this man Jesus as His Lord and Saviour. For, "who saw revealed in Him God's power and God's favour?" (Isaiah 53). Not Simon of Cyrene. All he saw was a bloodied criminal, staggering under the weight of his own cross.

Meanwhile, it is Jesus who is the most humiliated. He who had said: take up your cross, must hand over His cross to another. He who had warned His disciples for the cost and pain of following Him, must see Himself crushed under the weight of the cost and the burden of pain. At this point He cannot do anything, not even for Simon of Cyrene. For the weight of our sins and of the wrath of God, which pressed out of Him the bloody sweat already in the garden of Gethsemane, is here beginning to crush Him totally. We will never understand what it meant for Christ to hand over that burden of cross-bearing to another, even to Simon of Cyrene.

## **BEARING OUR OWN CROSS**

What further message comes out of this text to us in our time? We see Christ here in His suffering. We see Simon of Cyrene toiling under the Lord's cross. What does this mean for us?

We are not asked to do what Simon of Cyrene was compelled to do. No one today needs to bear Christ's cross to Golgotha, the place of the skull. Christ was crucified, dead, and buried, and on the third day He rose again from the dead. He does not need any help or assistance from us in the fulfilling of His ministry today.

We do not have to bear *His* cross. But now Christ's word about our bearing our *own* cross receives all the more depth and significance. Simon of Cyrene was an exception. The rule is that we must take up *our* cross cheerfully, and deny ourselves, and so follow Christ.

And the emphasis for us must lie on the word *cheerfully*, that is, we must carry our cross willingly and with joy. Simon of Cyrene was compelled by the Roman soldiers. His act was not voluntary. Therefore he did not do it cheerfully. He was glad when it was over and he could go home, about his own business. But that may not be the way we bear our cross!

## **THE GREAT CONTRAST**

Perhaps that is where the great contrast lies. No one compels us to take up our cross; that is, no outside, human power. But we know that Christ demands it of us and that the Holy Spirit works the willingness in us. To us comes the calling: take up your cross, and do so joyfully, cheerfully, willingly. If we are compelled, it is

by the sovereign grace and power of God! But in all this, the Lord seeks our joyous commitment, our sincere participation.

When we see Christ staggering under the weight of His cross, unable to bear it further, we are reminded of our own cross. And we know: cross-bearing is for us not a form of atonement for sins, for Christ has fully paid for all our sins. The Gospel attests to this clearly. Cross-bearing is for us not a segment of the road to Golgotha, for we do not have to travel that road. Cross-bearing is for us: accepting joyfully the consequences of being a Christian, even if this means publicly suffering for Christ's sake, public ridicule, shame, and persecution.

We will have to tell our children that being a Christian is not easy in this world filled with satanic evil and opposition. From all sides we are attacked, opposed, deceived, and ridiculed. We must make sacrifices which other people never make, set priorities which others never set, and live a lifestyle that is not understood by people around us.

And there may come a time when we, too, stumble under the weight of that cross and when we can no longer bear the load. Then we do not have to look around to find some passerby to help us. We cannot compel others to bear our cross for us. There is no Simon of Cyrene today who can be forced to bear our cross. Instead, we may look to our Lord Jesus Christ, Who today is seated in glory at the right hand of the Father and who by the power of His Spirit strengthens us in our cross-bearing.

Have you ever said to the Lord Jesus: it is so hard for me to bear my cross? Lord, I just cannot carry it any further? Have the demands and difficulties of being a Christian sometimes worn you down? We need not be afraid of admitting this. For would the Lord Jesus, who stumbled under the weight of His cross, not fully understand our predicament?

Oh yes, He gives us many helpers on the way. He grants us a place in His congregation, the communion of saints. We may bear the burdens together. He gives us God-fearing parents, Christian teachers, responsible office-bearers, and a supportive fellowship. We may bask in the warmth and the care of many fellow-Christians and be strengthened together at the table of communion. It is something that Christ did not experience in His trials. He was left all alone, except for the one unwilling man who bore His cross for Him. The help we receive in carrying our cross is something we do not deserve. He earned this for us by His suffering.

## **OUR ONLY HELPER**

But at bottom, only the Lord Jesus can help us to bear our own cross. This is truly the message which comes to us in this passage: I, your Lord and Saviour, who know by experience how difficult it is to be a cross-bearer, I will sustain you, support you, and help you to bear your cross. Christ is not compelled by anyone or anything to do so. He does it in His great love and sovereign grace, because He wants to.



That is our joy today. The very same man, whom we see in our text succumbing under the sheer weight of the cross, today has received all power in heaven and on earth, and He uses this power for our benefit. He says today: I am with you, every step of the way, and I will help you lift and bear that cross, so that you can persevere in your life as a Christian.

This promise comes to us already at our baptism. Children are not cross-bearers in themselves, but cross-bearers through Christ. They share in the riches of the covenant of grace. Christ says at every baptism – what a comfort also to parents, who must nurture and educate these children – I will strengthen you to bear your cross cheerfully. On that basis we live and work. We may always direct our children to the great Helper, the great cross-bearer, and say: our help is in the Name of the Lord!

And every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we may all see and hear it again: I, the Lord, am the One Who enables you to bear your cross. To Him we go for all help and strength. Yes, precisely when we use the sacraments, we may pray: grant us your grace that we may take up our cross cheerfully, deny ourselves and confess our Saviour. In the signs and seals of baptism and Lord’s Supper, we receive the added assurance that He will never forsake us. He is right there, whenever we should stumble, to lift us up.

He knows what it is to crumble under the burdens.

He knows also how to lift us up. Voluntarily and gladly He does it, compelled only by His grace and love. Time and again, our whole life through. Therefore the church confesses:

“LORD, though I walk ‘mid troubles sore,  
Thou wilt restore my faltering spirit,  
Though angry foes my soul alarm,  
Thy mighty arm will save and cheer it.” (Psalm 138: 4, *Book of Praise*).

And one day we shall see that multitude of cross-bearers, who in Christ’s strength alone crossed the finish line to stand around the throne, the saints, in countless myriads, of every tongue, redeemed to God,

“Through tribulation great they came  
*They bore the cross, despised the shame.*”

And their song is a simple song, yet a profound one:

“Worthy the Lamb for sinners slain. . .  
Thou has redeemed us by Thy blood,  
And made us kings and priests to God.” (Hymn 52: 1, 3, *Book of Praise*).