

RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP

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Heb. 12:2 – *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus ... who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame.*

WHAT IS THE CROSS?

Down through the centuries, the cross has come to mean many things to many different people. To some, in today's world, it is no more than a fetish or a charm, worn around the neck by religionists as well as those who do so because of superstition, along with a number of street gangsters and Hollywood stars who wear it with no thought of the Lord at all.

To others, it is an icon, mounted on the wall of a Church and is worshipped and prayed to. In some places, the cross is empty, two pieces of finished, polished, expensive wood representing the tree on which Jesus died for our sins. In other places, a statue or a simulation of Jesus, wearing a white, linen cloth, still hangs on the cross, the iron spikes still piercing His hands and His feet.

But none of those things is really representative of the cross. Nor is Jesus depicted in our Churches, on their crosses, as He really was at Calvary. We seem to be either saddened beyond belief at the cross as if Jesus was still there, dying; or we

celebrate, with shouts of "Halleluiah" because of the salvation granted us, as if the cross of Calvary was a joyous occasion. It is possible that either extreme is a bit overdone and it may be because we have never known what really occurred there, on that solemn day, nearly 2000 years ago.

THE CRUCIFIXION

We all know that the cross has to do with payment for the penalty of sin. From a strictly human point of view, all sin is not the same. Some sins seem to need only a rap on the knuckles, as punishment, similar to what the nuns did to us in Catholic school in the 1940's and 1950's; some sins are more serious and it seems that they should be atoned for by flogging or severe beating. Others, it would appear, require prison, a deprivation of certain rights, and an alienation from society – at least for a time. And the most severe transgressions, from our way of thinking, require the death sentence, or as it was in the days of Jesus, crucifixion – which, of course, was a death sentence;

an exceedingly cruel death sentence.

Crucifixion was the worst of all penalties; the ultimate consequence for the most egregious of crimes. Since Jesus died for all sins and all sinners, He had to suffer the worst of all penalties so that no sin would go left unpunished; so that there would be atonement for all sin. There was no other way for Jesus to be punished but by the means of crucifixion; it was predestined, because of our sin, that He would have to go the way of the cross.

The shame and indignation of being murdered in the nude was part of the very calculated ignominy that went with the sentence.

Those who were crucified were either strung up on the cross or nailed to it. They were stripped naked; no one wore a white linen cloth around their midsection. The shame and indignation of being murdered in the nude was part of the very calculated ignominy that went with the sentence.

The intense physical pain associated with being

stretched out on a T-shaped tree, and either tied or nailed so that there could be no limb movement at all, was savage and agonizing. And there they hung. Most screamed in severe, unbearable pain; many cursed; others wept unabashedly. **Only Jesus, however, was silent – like a lamb led to the slaughter.**

The cross was not beautiful. It was not smooth, planed, symmetrical or polished. It hurt ... terribly. It was the ultimate punishment for the ultimate crime. Most who were crucified took sixteen to twenty-four hours to die. It was agonizing; dolorous; pure torture.

When Jesus said, “*It is finished,*” those three words carried more weight than any three words ever uttered in the history of the world.

Jesus died in six hours. Why so quickly? It was because in six hours He had accomplished all that needed to be accomplished. The sins of the world, past, present and future were completely atoned for. That which the Father had sent Him to do, was done. There was no need for Him to suffer any longer. When Jesus said, “*It is finished,*” those three words carried more weight than any three words ever uttered in the history of the world. It, indeed, was finished.

OUR RESPONSE TO THE CROSS

To the true Christian, that which was accomplished at the cross lives on in his heart, an earnest reminder of why he has life, and has it more abundantly. When he understands what really happened at Calvary, his relationship with His Lord and Savior changes. He sees himself as a beggar, sitting beside the road. A man, dressed in a business suit, approaches and hands him a sandwich. He graciously accepts it and eats, voraciously. He was starving. He didn't deserve the sandwich, and if it hadn't been for the goodness, the generosity, and the graciousness of the businessman, he would still be starving. The true Christian knows that he doesn't deserve what Jesus did. If God, in His perfect wisdom, would not have already determined that He was going to make pure salvation available to “whoever will”, the true Christian would have no chance at eternal life. It is only the grace of God and the obedience and graciousness of Jesus, the Son of God, that allows this true Christian to feed his starving soul. He no longer is a beggar. He is saved by the grace of God.

The cross was anything but pretty; it was anything but joyous. There is no superstition associated with

the cross. Holding it, kissing it, or praying to it will not make you a better Christian nor will it ward off any evil that besets you. **What Jesus did at the cross already made you a better Christian. You need to only obey His commands to see it manifest itself in your life.** What Jesus did at the cross already warded off all the evil in the world. The devil was defeated, judged and sentenced. You need only to believe the word of God and obey His commands and it, too, will manifest itself in your life.

The true Christian embraces his cross. It is the path to spiritual victory, oneness with the Lord, conformity to the likeness of the Son of God. Jesus embraced the cross and endured the cross; and was obedient, even to death on the cross. We can be no less.

Heb. 12: 2 – *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Phil. 2: 5,7,8 – *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <he> made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant; he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*

The cross was a cruel instrument of torture and death, but it was the only

path that Jesus could take to accomplish the will of His Father, to pay the penalty for all sin for all mankind for all time. **But the most important thing that each of us needs to know about the cross is this: It is finished!**

JESUS' CROSS AND OUR CROSS

When Jesus died on the cross, what did He do for us – other than the obvious, the forgiveness of our sins? He lighted the path that we are to follow. As God, in the desert, led the Israelites with fire, so that they would not stray from the proper course, Jesus, too, has illumined the path that we are to travel (the cross that we must bear) by His obedience on the cross. Didn't He say that whatever was done to Him would also be done to us? If He suffered shame, will not we, too, have to suffer shame? Or will we run *from* the Lord instead of running *to* Him? If He suffered pain and discomfort, will we not also have to suffer pain and discomfort? If He was chastised (and He was because of *our* sin), then won't we have to be chastised, too?

A.W. Tozer says: "The offer of pardon on the part of God is conditioned upon intention to reform on the part of man." We must choose to be like Jesus. We must choose to

allow Jesus to change us into His likeness.

Can there be a more humiliating punishment than for an adult male to be whipped or flogged in public? Yet that is what Jesus experienced prior to His crucifixion. Public whipping breaks the spirit of a man. If there was any pride in a man who is flogged in public (and there likely was), there is no more. Even a bad man can be a hero to some, but a stripped-down whipping in full view of others, turns a big, bad hero into a timid mouse of a man. And, Jesus was chastised for our peace. Isaiah says: *The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth.* Isa. 53: 5,7.

A truly penitent man never forgets what he did to His Savior.

Jesus embraced that public flogging to bring us peace. And His peace was enough for Him to endure His torturers without opening His mouth. **Without His peace, a true Christian could not bear up under the revulsion he feels against himself because of his sin.** But Jesus, along with forgiveness, also gave us the gift of peace. Does that peace erase the remembrance of what Jesus did? No. It enhances it. A truly penitent man never

forgets what he did to His Savior. He accepts his forgiveness; he beseeches and allows God to heal him and restore him; but he never truly forgets. He can afford not to forget because Jesus also gave him His peace. That is love at its apex.

It was at the cross where Jesus forgave – to the ultimate degree. He forgave those who crucified Him. He forgave those who mocked Him. He forgave those who turned from Him because His teachings were too hard. He forgave the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Though He laid them out pretty straightforwardly, in many earlier confrontations, He now forgave them. Any of those who He forgave needed only to embrace the cross for His forgiveness to manifest itself in their lives. Most, however, did not. And most today have not, either. But ... they are still forgiven.

Each of us must carry our cross. And we must forgive, as Jesus forgave. We see signs of this magnificent, Godly attribute shining forth through many in the persecuted Church today. As they are being martyred, they forgive those who are taking their very lives. The wives and children of martyrs forgive the murderers even as they watch their fathers and husbands being tortured to death. Many in the persecuted Church, even after having been imprisoned and tortured, return to the scene

of the crime because their heart is to take the gospel to those who inflicted the torture upon them. And they know that in doing so, they are signing their own death sentences. They have embraced their cross as Jesus embraced His. They, by the grace of God, have been conformed to the likeness of Jesus. And what about us? Are we to be any different?

What many miss in Jesus' death on the cross is the extreme sorrow He suffered because of the multitudes that spurned Him. He came to bring salvation to the world and the world refused to accept Him; the world spit in His face. But Jesus' heart never stopped aching for those who turned away from Him, who vilified Him, and who planned and executed His death. He loved them; and so how could He not love us? We all put Him to death! Listen to Jesus' heart:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" Luke 13: 34

In carrying our cross, we, too, must have a heart for the lost. That doesn't come naturally; it comes by the grace of God. As we allow the Lord to strip us bare, just as He was stripped bare at Calvary, there, in our nakedness and shame before Him, He will crucify our

pride and fill that place in our hearts with a burden for souls.

It is our impenitent heart that will keep us from God. When our heart is surrendered to Him, the self will follow suit. But our heart houses our pride, our secret sins, our lust for life, our love for things more so than our love for God. It is our heart that must undergo a spiritual operation; and it is in carrying our cross that the operation will take place.

Tozer states: "Until a man has gotten into trouble with his heart, he is not likely to get out of trouble with God." As we carry our crosses, our hearts will be stripped bare by the Lord. We will then see what we are truly made of. It will not be pretty. But it will be necessary. But then, God will begin to work. As Tozer says, when our hearts trouble us, we're ready for God to work. Carry your cross, dear Christian friend. It is the sure way to radical discipleship and spiritual victory.

And again, we say with the joy and the power that comes from the Holy Spirit of God, Jesus has done the work; Jesus has shown us the way. Don't ever forget the most beautiful speech in all of creation. Jesus stated it, once for all: "*It is finished!*"

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