

## TAKE UP THY CROSS

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## SCRIPTURE: Matthew 16:22-29 (Inspired Version)

From that time forth Jesus began to show unto his disciples how that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and Scribes, and be killed; and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall not be done unto thee. But he turned and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offence unto me; for thou savourest not of the things which be of God, but those that be of men. Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. And now for a man to take up his cross, if to deny himself all ungodliness, and every worldly lust, and keep my commandments. Break not my commandments for it save your lives; for whosoever will save his life in this world, shall lose it in the world to come. And whosoever will lose his life in this world, for my sake, shall find it in the world to come. Therefore, forsake the world, and save your souls; for what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

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Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and  
 whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.

Every one of us has a cross. But few of us have learned to take up that cross, and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Master. Here in America at least, Christianity has become easy and popular. There is little religious persecution. There are still crosses to be borne, but for many of us "taking up the cross" has come to be merely a pretty euphemism for patiently putting up with such inconsequential things as a leaky faucet, a flat tire, or a long line of people before the ticket window of our favorite movie.

When Jesus said, "Take up thy cross, and follow me," taking up the cross meant serious business. People then were quite accustomed to seeing condemned criminals -- sometimes hundreds of them at a time after some violent Jewish political rebellion -- carrying crosses outside the city to the place of execution. Crucifixion was one of the most brutally painful forms of execution known to man. It meant a long continued torture from thirst, from blazing sun, from flies and insects, from painful wounds and lacerations made by the nails, from muscular cramping. Yes, taking up a cross in Jesus' day was a serious and painful business.

What does it mean to take up the cross? Taking up the cross is complete, total, full absolute, and perfect submission of man's will to the will of God. It means the death of the old, rebellious man devoted to sin, and the birth of a new and better and higher man, determined to serve and obey God whatever the cost. On the other hand, it does not mean destroying one's personality, or giving up one's will, or cowering before God like a whipped puppy dog. Jesus was always humble and submissive to the Father's will, but he never cowered or whimpered. One of the almost unbelievable things about his dramatic arrest, trial, and execution is that Jesus was at all times in complete command of the situation. He was submissive because he willed to be, but never because he was afraid, or beaten, or helpless. Even when he seemed to be completely and hopelessly under the power of evil, ruthless men, it was he who was the master of ceremonies; it was he who was the director and stage manager, as well as the principal actor in this drama. His self-abnegation consisted in a complete disregard of the consequences of doing right -- in an unqualified determination to do the right at whatever cost.

It was to bear the cross that Jesus came into the world. If men were to live, it was necessary that the power of death should be cancelled. Jesus voluntarily submitted to death, in order that he might rise above death, and by the power of his resurrection make the more abundant life available to all men. If he had not died, he could not have risen from the dead. If he had not risen, we and all the human race would have been forever without hope, forever dead in our sins, forever prisoners in Satan's dark realm of death. Jesus came to do the will of God; and when it appeared that God's purposes could be accomplished only by submitted to the death of the cross, he set his face steadfastly towards Jerusalem, where he knew that the death of the cross awaited him.

Jesus said, "Take up thy cross." His cross was not our cross. Only he could atone for human sin. Only he could bear that cross. Only you can bear your cross; only I can bear mine. Each one has a different cross, adapted to his nature and to God's purposes in him. In bearing the cross best suited to each according to God's purposes, some suffer sudden martyrdom. Others must bear the cross patiently day after day, or even year after year. But every man has some cross to bear -- the perfidy of friends, the ingratitude and rebellion of loved ones or children, the pain of frustration, bereavement, illness, invalidism, or long deferred hope. Some people take up their cross willingly, gladly, still in command of the situation, determined to fulfill God's purposes and his will, and to make of that cross an instrument of fulfillment and exaltation. Others take it up rebelliously, crying out in their grief and agony, "Why did this have to happen to me?" And sometimes we are so busy complaining about our own cross that we never notice the crosses borne by every one of our neighbors, some of which are much more difficult to be borne even though not so obvious to the sight of those who do not have to bear them.

To take up one's cross is to deny one's self all ungodliness, and every worldly lust, and to keep all God's commandments. Taking up the cross does not mean flagellation, or self-mutilation, or starvation, or sleeping on a bed of spikes, or wearing a hair shirt, or self-imposed poverty to the point of beggary, nor does it demand even celibacy. Taking up the cross does not mean inflicting upon one's self needless privation or suffering, but denying one's self of anything which would destroy his relationship with God, or endanger his complete self-fulfillment.

"Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." The surest way to lose one's life is to take undue care to preserve it. A life centered on self, on self-preservation, on self-gratification and self-indulgence, will sooner or later fall victim to the sins of gluttony, drunkenness, acquisitiveness and cupidity for money and wealth, and all manner of license and immorality. A life which is surrendered and dedicated to God, and centered in him to the forgetting of self, will be able to take all of the good things which God has provided -- food, drink, comfort, wealth, and joys of family life -- and use each blessing in its proper place. Such a God-centered life will be willing and eager to accept any privation or any suffering which cannot be helped, and which God sends in his wisdom for the purpose of refining our character or helping us to understand and sympathize with others. But the God-centered man will not deprive himself of God-given, God-sanctioned blessings in the mistaken notion that they are wrong; he will take those blessings and dedicate them to the fulfillment of God's best purposes in himself, in his fellow man, and in God's world.

He who takes up his cross and accepts its denial and suffering must do so for Jesus' sake, and then must follow Jesus. He should not seek suffering for its own sake, but should be prepared to welcome it and to use it when it comes as the natural inevitable and unavoidable result of following Jesus and obeying him. If we suffer in order that men might regard us as pious, in order that we may boast of our own righteousness, then all our self-denial, all our crossbearing, yes, and even all our martyrdom will be futile and unprofitable. But if we suffer for Jesus' sake, denying ourselves all ungodliness and every worldly lust, then our suffering will eventually bring complete self-fulfillment.

Take up your cross. You may find it heavy, brutal, cruel; yet submission without bitterness can make any cross an instrument of salvation and self-fulfillment.