

Understanding Christian Commitment 4

The Cross-Carrying Experience

The ultimately committed Christian is the one who is carrying their cross. Jesus, Himself, has said that if we want to follow Him then we have to deny ourselves, carry our cross to follow Him. If we do not deny ourselves and take up our cross we cannot be His disciples (Lk 14:26-27). We have spoken about self-denial and the power of Calvary to break the power of sin which keeps us bound to self. But self-denial is not an end in itself. There is no advantage in self-rejection of itself. We deny the demands and requirements of the self in order to carry our cross. If we are too attached to self we will not want to (nor be able to) carry a cross. Self is offended and demands centre stage. We carry a cross in the purposes of God not in the purposes of self. Self is not destroyed but relocated as a crossed-self. That is, a self generated by our cross and its engagement, not a self (image) generated by survival (significance) or endearment (wanting to be loved and admired). Cross gets all our attention and we minister out of the process and opportunity created by cross carrying.

A cross and a thorn in the flesh.

A cross is usually regarded as a negative experience. So people put on a brave face about something that they really believe is a bad thing. To them it is a religious way of experiencing evil. This is not a cross. A cross is something that is positive for our life. It may confront the self and lead to sacrifice, but it is really an offering of our self to God. A thorn in the flesh is something that Paul spoke of as negative and a nuisance (2Cor 12:7). It was a messenger from Satan sent to buffet Paul lest he become exalted beyond measure because of the abundance of revelations he had received. A thorn in the flesh was meant to depress and oppose experience, whereas a cross is meant to exalt and promote experience (as difficult as it may be).

Jesus Christ models cross-carrying.

The ONLY example of cross carrying that we have is Jesus Christ. This is a uniquely Christian behaviour. The cross, as a form of execution, has been redeemed from an instrument of evil and horror to be an instrument of salvation and holiness. This can only be done by the Grace of God.

As we examine the life of Christ, we can establish a Way of the Cross

The Way of the Cross (in 10 parts).

1. The Baptism. Jesus commences His ministry with His baptism. This is the time when He submits Himself to the processes of God. When John the Baptist protests that Jesus should be baptising him, Jesus responds 'that it is fitting to fulfil all righteousness' (Mtt 3:15). So the baptism proceeds. Jesus is submitting Himself to something: to what God wants to do, to a personal journey, to injustice and the ridicule of men, to execution. The Baptism is the commencement of that journey. We start with a baptism.

2. The Choice. Jesus becomes aware of the events that will unfold before Him. At some stage He has to choose to go that way. He has to choose to drink the Cup that His Father is offering Him. Jesus revisits this decision at Gethsemene (Mtt 26:39). Jesus speaks of His death at least three times, well before it happens (Lk 9:22; 9:44; 18:31-34). He sees in His spirit what He must choose for His flesh. Jesus chooses the Way of the Cross.

3. Jesus sets His face. In Lk 9:51 it says that when the time had come for Him to be lifted up, Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem. So Jesus commences, becomes aware, chooses and then has to resolve to perform the perceived Will of God. Jesus comes under

all kinds of pressure to avoid Calvary. This phrase 'set His face' brilliantly describes the posture of resolve. Jesus learns obedience by the things that He endures (suffers) (Heb 5:8).

4. Jesus ministers along the way. Jesus did not come primarily to minister to people's needs. He came to seek and to save that which is lost (Lk 19:10) and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). Jesus healed all those brought to Him (Mtt 14:35). So with His face set toward Jerusalem, Jesus only ministers to those He meets along the way already set out for Him. Jesus does not minister to everyone, only those He meets. His dedication is to make a sacrifice of Himself to God. The Way of the Cross creates its own ministry opportunities.

5. The internal trial (Gethsemene). At Gethsemene Jesus faces His demons (Satan specifically) again. Satan has left Jesus after the Temptations 'for a more opportune time' (Lk 4:13). Gethsemene is that opportune time. This is Satan's hour 'and the hour of darkness' (Lk 22:53). Satan comes roaring in (1Pet 5:8), opposing Jesus to His face as the Christ. Will He deliver up His soul unto death? Will He be made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God (2Cor 5:21)? Jesus sees in His spirit the deep spirit conflict. An angel appears to Him from heaven to strengthen Him (Lk 22:43). Jesus saw the conflict in His spirit, experienced agony in His soul and sweated like drops of blood in His body (Lk 22:44). But the battle is won in the spirit before it is revealed in the flesh.

6. The external trail (before Pilate). Given the internal trial Jesus now faces the consequences of His decision. Jesus now experiences the external threat to His body, the trying of His soul and the demonic attack on His spirit. All the powers of hell are thrown at Jesus Christ. He is arrested, treated as a criminal, whipped, mocked as a king (which He was), blindfolded and required to prophesy who struck Him, blasphemed, denied, betrayed, deserted, required to defend Himself by explaining Himself (which would only incriminate Him even more, in their eyes, as Messiah) and deserted by the legal system. No good thing happened to Jesus Christ. It was an assault on His body, soul and spirit designed to prevent Him sacrificing Himself for the sin of the world. Jesus could have pulled out saying 'I don't deserve this' (which was true) and 'Let people's blood be on their own heads' (which is a Biblical principle and precedent (2Sam 1:16; 1King 2:32; Ezek 33:4)). But Jesus endures it all as prophesised (Is 53, Lk 18:31).

7. The Nailing. Jesus carries His Cross. Ultimately His Cross carries Him. He offers Himself to God on His Cross. This is the fate of the cross carrier. We cannot nail ourselves to our cross. The nailing is not under our control. But we make ourselves available for it. Ultimately all our work simply becomes an offering to the Lord.

8. The Dying. Jesus finally yields up His spirit (soul and body) to the Father. He has made the sacrifice of Himself (Heb 9). Now it is up to God the Father and what He will do with this offering. As we know God, the Father, treated the Life (blood) of His Son as the ransom for the world (the many). Through the shedding of His blood there is the remission of sins and atonement for our souls. The ultimate act of dying is the ultimate sacrifice.

9. The Rising. However, Death could not hold Him down. On the third day Jesus Christ was raised from the dead by the power of God. This means that God can raise the dead, that He can also raise us from the dead (1Cor 6:14) and that there is life after death. God does the raising in His time and in His place. In these matters we await the timing of God. We cannot make it happen. In

particular, we cannot make it happen the way we want. The resurrection is the astounding hope that we have in Jesus Christ (Acts 17:30-34).

10. The Ascending. Jesus has not only risen from the dead, He has also ascended into heaven where He is seated at the right hand of God above every conceivable authority, power, intelligence and ability (Eph 1:20-23). From this position of total ascendancy, Jesus Christ is over all things and He will come again to judge the quick and the dead. We shall be with Him. 'He has made us kings and priests to our God and we shall reign (with Him) on the earth' (Rev 5:10).

The Way of the Cross is the Way to Glory.

Comments on Cross carrying.

The basic statement is: the disciple carries his own cross.

1. A cross is something that I carry for God.

2. A cross will be a demanding experience and require my full attention.

3. A cross will be a weight that pulls my constant concentration.

4. A cross will challenge any other attachment. This does not mean that those attachments are wrong (Lk 14:26-33). It just means that the cross I have chosen must get priority.

5. My cross is revealed to me in my spirit. I am shown it.

6. I believe that my cross comes to me from the Father heart of God for me.

7. I have to choose my cross. I am shown it (in my spirit) but I must choose it (in my soul). It is my responsibility to embrace what I am shown. The question arises as to whether I am shown it or I imagine it. Is the source of the idea in God or in me? The only way to resolve this is to start carrying my cross (as I see it) and so prove (test) the will of God (Rom 12:2). I am shown an image in my spirit but I can work on it in my soul, which is my responsibility, with my imagination. God's will is always able to be tested. It is something outside me and does not depend on me. If God's will depended on me then it would change, because I change. God's will is not confused; God does not change His mind (Rom 11:29). But I can become confused about God's will, particularly if I do not do it. I can create confusion in myself as a means of avoiding the task of obedience.

8. My cross becomes the source of my living. My Person is no longer my guide. There is such a thing as becoming a Person, which involves deciding who I am, what I want and where I am going. This is a soul creation which is usually spiked by spirit images of a non-God, culture-centred character. Person becomes an idol whose needs I serve. The original spirit image force is embellished in my imagination and I can love who (or what) I think I am. Alternatively, I can loathe what I have become or, at least, I can hate the way I see my self (or hate what I think I see). I serve (obey) the Person that I claim to be and fulfil its injunctions, admonitions and directions. My personality is my performance of the Person that I claim to be. As a certain Person, I perform in a certain way. I decide the Person I think I am. I can turn it on or turn it off as required. If this becomes difficult or even contradictory to my circumstances I can have problems. Sometimes I have a need to be the Person I have invented. But I can change. Freed from the power of sin, I need no longer be under the bondage of the Person I have been. But what Person do I become?

9. Cross demolishes Person. God smashes idols and the idol of Person is no exception. God will hit the idolatry of the cultivated Person and leave us without an image to fly with. What

takes its place is my cross requiring immediate and complete obedience. My cross fills the void of my own psyche rubble.

10. In fact, the cross-intending person can desire the de-construction or demolition of personal constructs as obstacles to the course of God in their life. The joy is to get to that place where we are not orchestrating ourselves but rather we are bound over to the weaving and stretching of the cross process. Let God do His work. May we be born again of the incorruptible Word of God (1Pet 2:23)! We may corrupt but the incorruptible Word of God does not corrupt. It is the Rock on which our life is founded and released. We can always return to the sanity and truth of the Word.

11. I become a cross-dominated person. What soul wounds do I now endure? The Holy Spirit starts demolishing defences, exposing guilts, erupting memories that we felt we had dealt with. But our dealings are all part of our own personal distortion. God prompts me to put off the old man (Person, image, self) which is growing corrupt because of deceptive lusts (misguided dreams, faded fantasies, dislocating ambitions) (Eph 4:22). When I have renewed the spirit driving my mind (Eph 4:23), then I can put on the new man which has been created already according to God in righteousness and true holiness (Eph 4:24). This suggests that the cross life is already created for us to walk in. It does not take years to create. What is created and given in our spirit is immediate. It may take time in our soul to realise this new life (person, image, self). This is the process of sanctification.

12. By obedience I produce the cross-self. The cross-self is the new image (character, person, 'new man') that is cross induced and inspired. Before the Cross of Calvary, Jesus was teacher, healer and carer. By means of carrying the Cross He becomes Saviour. Jesus does not make Himself Saviour; He is made Saviour by God. God takes the obedient sacrifice and He uses it for His purposes. May God be able to do something with my offering of myself to Him!