

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Bearing the Cross for Love

By Dan Trygg

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.” Luke 9:23,24

Luke 9:23 is a classic verse on discipleship. It is one of those statements uttered by the lips of Jesus which continues to resound and reverberate through history. It has not lost its challenge, or its relevance. It remains a fundamental principle of the Kingdom of God. In fact, as the Master's words clearly reveal, denying self and **bearing the cross is a universal challenge to every follower of Jesus Christ**. We cannot go down the path in pursuit of Jesus without soon coming face to face with a cross with our name on it. It is unavoidably, inescapably part and parcel of what it means to follow Jesus. The scope of this subject is hugely broad in its application. Here, however, I intend to focus briefly on how it relates to agapē in our interaction with one another in the Body.

What is the cross? The cross was a well-known, clearly understood word picture to the first people who heard Jesus' words. To us, however, this symbol has been romanticized, religified and spiritualized to the point where it is almost unrecognizable. **To the first hearers, the cross was the most awful and dreaded form of capital punishment that they knew. It provided a slow, painful, tortuous death-struggle in the most humiliating of circumstances.** The victim was stripped totally naked, attached to the cross beams and post by thongs and/or nails (the nails were designed to increase the torture) and suspended in public view for the purpose of humiliation (and as an example to other potential offenders of the horror of this kind of punishment). As the victim tired, and began to slump, the outstretched arms made it impossible to exhale, so he would be forced to pull and push himself to an upright position to be able to breathe. Eventually, as muscles cramped, and exhaustion overcame the poor wretch, these struggles to breathe became more periodic, but desperate, until finally asphyxiation won out over the victim's innate will to live. Anyone who has ever choked on anything knows the desperate feeling of gasping for air. Place that memory into this scenario and you can understand the evil tortuous design of this form of execution. It was not uncommon for people to last many hours, even to three or four days, in this hopeless death struggle, until all resources gave out and there was nothing but death. Of course, there were no bathroom breaks either. The inability to have any privacy, or to even have control of one's bodily functions just added to the humiliating exposure before the crowd, who would be quick to add this to their mockery. Meanwhile, in addition to the insects, birds, and even dogs, that would feed upon the defenseless unfortunate, onlookers and passersby would mock and jeer, ridicule and even throw things at those suspended from the cross. These defenseless people, condemned to death, stripped naked, received compassion only from family and friends. The rabble, and their enemies, however, saw no value in them, and preserved no respect or dignity. Instead, they made cruel sport of them as they suffered through their last hours.

Death by crucifixion was a horrible, long, drawn-out process. **There was nothing romantic, or spiritually desirable about it. It does, however, portray clearly the desperate struggle of the self-oriented life to preserve itself.** Stamping out sin and selfishness is not the result of a momentary decision. Selfishness dies hard, ...and in long, drawn-out, agonizing fits of desperation, it struggles to preserve itself. **The act of crucifixion is in the nailing to the cross. Actual death does not happen until much later, after much struggle for self-preservation.** This is the powerful aspect of this word picture that has been covered up and romanticized to near oblivion. Sin-oriented living dies hard. **To follow Jesus means that we must voluntarily give our self-life up to this agonizing death-process.**

Sound like fun? Eager to sign up? This image was not designed to generate eagerness. It was designed to illustrate what we are up against, and to get us to count the cost before we make commitments. Isn't there more than this morbid word picture? You bet there is! **The gospel story is a "good news" message, not morbidity.** There is, however, this "dark side of the cross" that we do not often think about. What is the good news in this passage? **The good news Jesus offers is that we can save our selves. Self preservation does not come as we would expect, however.** In fact, if we try to preserve our own lives, we will destroy them (Lk. 9:24). If we embrace the cross, and put our natural self-agenda aside in this world out of preference to Christ, we will preserve, heal, and make ourselves whole, as well as keep ourselves from self-destruction. **Only if we are willing to deny self, to actually give self over to death with Jesus, will we be able to be rescued from self-ruination.** Salvation of self comes only to those willing to accept death with Jesus. Victory comes only as we choose to live in the death-with-Jesus reality of bearing our cross, so that the life-of-Jesus reality can be experienced and seen in us (II Cor. 4:7-11).

The cross is different from the everyday trials and difficulties that everyone experiences. Often people confuse the two, and would make them the same. The essential difference between the cross and trials is that **the**

cross is suffering which results from obedience to Christ. Trials are involuntary. They just happen because we live in a fallen world. **The cross is voluntary.** It results from our choice to follow Jesus.

Not all suffering is the cross, even when we might *think* it is in "the line of duty".

Sometimes we experience suffering because we go about things the wrong way. We are not mature or skilled enough to avoid hurting others, or getting hurt ourselves. Our own short-sightedness, lack of compassion or lack of understanding gets us into situations where we are offensive to others, and we are rebuffed or even attacked. Sometimes our own selfishness is mixed with proper motives, and we end up creating a "holy mess", and get hurt in the process.

Sometimes we suffer because of over-involvement. It is not the cross, at all. We are suffering because we are trying to do more that God ever asked us to, and we are spreading ourselves too thin. We, and our loved ones, will pay a price of pain that is caused by a self-agenda, not by God's leading.

Sometimes we suffer when we should confront. There are times when we choose to shrink back from standing up against evil because of the fear and discomfort of confrontation. We are actually choosing to protect ourselves from the scary consequences of being ridiculed, rejected, or harassed, or having to deal with someone else's rage or tantrum, by just keeping our pain and thoughts to ourselves. Here is an example of where we may be trying to preserve ourselves (our immediate comfort), but in the process we are actually ruining our potential because we never stand up for who we are, or for what God is showing us.

Denying self to follow Jesus. There is a curious tension in this passage: On the one hand, Jesus tells us we must deny ourselves, i.e., to forget, or lose sight of, one's self and one's self-interests. On the other hand, the goal of this whole process, the "good news promise" of this passage, is that we can save, preserve, or heal our selves. **Self-preservation, or more accurately, self-actualization is the goal or end that both God and I have in common.** Jesus is saying that **if I pursue this on my own, I will mess myself up, and my potential will never be actualized.** If, on the other hand, I put aside my immediate self-interest and self-comfort to follow Jesus, ...voluntarily embrace what the cross represents, i.e., a painful and humiliating death-struggle of self before a watching world, ...in the end, I will emerge whole, sound and fulfilled. Jeremiah had written that the human heart is "more deceitful than all else, and desperately sick: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). The answer to this rhetorical question is found in the next verse: "I, Yahweh, search the heart, and examine the inner parts, to give to each person according to their ways and according to the fruit of their practices." In other words, **God knows what is best for us.** He searches us out in order to give us what will work for us, according to our own nature and according to the choices we have made up to this point in our lives. **We cannot trust ourselves to figure out our own self-development, but we can trust that God knows what to do to bring about health, fulfillment and fruitfulness in our lives.** Note that this is exactly the context of the verses immediately before and after these I have mentioned. We can't trust our reason, or our emotion, to lead us into life, but we can trust our God to do so. **Sometimes He will ask us to do things that seem or feel like they are only destructive, yet, when we trustfully do them, we find that life, growth, and health is there.**

It is important to remember that **it was the love (agapē) of God that led Jesus to the cross to suffer and die on our behalf, ...and, it is the cross that most clearly and dramatically communicates to us the reality and depth of God's love for us.** He came to His own, yet they rejected Him (Jn. 1:11). The nature of God's agapē is seen by the fact that He came and voluntarily gave of Himself in spite of the rejection and disinterest which characterized the people He had made (Rom. 5:6-10; I Jn. 4:9,10,19). The same will be true with us, as we follow in Christ's steps. As we seek to reach out in love to one another, we will oftentimes experience what feels like rejection, rebuff, misunderstanding, lack of appreciation from one another. At that moment, the old self-oriented life would like to blow up in anger, or retreat in self-pity to nurse our wounds. It is precisely at these kind of moments that **the cross looms in front of us, and we must choose: a self-directed life, or a God-directed life. God has made us to be like Him. That is what true self-actualization will be, i.e., that we will love as He loved us.**

Will we invest in short-term self-preservation, or put aside the immediate pain and humiliation in order to press on after Jesus in the hope of eventual self-actualization and growth for ourselves, ...and the hope that the "expecting-nothing-in-return"-offer-of-grace which we had intended will not be wasted because we do not see it being properly utilized? Remember, Jesus was "despised and rejected by men" (Isa. 53:3). He "came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (Jn. 1:11). Should we not expect to experience some of the same treatment, if we are to walk in His ways? **Do not lose heart at finding obstacles to love. Instead, press on after Jesus.** Keep giving and loving, as He did. There is life in His way.

Bearing the cross for love happens when we choose to sacrifice our own comfort and personal preference in order to benefit another person. We volunteer to give of ourselves, or are willing to turn away from self-comfort, or take a risk, or face humiliation in order to benefit the person we choose to love. We prefer their comfort and well-being above our own. **Agapē is willing to go much farther than most people are. The cross is our standard.**