

The Foot of the Cross

Bearing the Cross

By Octavius Winslow

"And He, *bearing His cross*, went forth to a place called Golgotha." John 19:17

There is no incident in our Lord's passion which, to a heart quickened with spiritual sensibility, is more replete with holy instruction, or more deeply, tenderly touching than this- *Christ bearing to Calvary the cross upon which He was to suffer*. It unveils such a profound abasement, and yet such a depth of love- it portrays a stoop of the Majesty of heaven to earth's lowest degradation- so marvelous, and yet, is the measurement of grace, so vast, the fact stands out, amid the many marvels of our Lord's death, one of the most touching and significant of all. To compel the criminal to bear the wood upon which he was to be impaled, was one of the severest elements of degradation in the Roman punishment of crucifixion. To this our Lord was subjected, "And He, bearing His cross, went forth." Little did they dream, as they bound the fatal wood upon His shoulder, by whose power that tree was made to grow, and from whom the beings who bore Him to the death drew their existence. So completely was Jesus bent upon saving sinners by the sacrifice of Himself, *He created the tree upon which He was to die*, and nurtured from infancy the men who were to nail Him to the accursed wood. Oh the depth of Jesus's love to sinners! Lord! the universe in its accumulation presents no love like Yours! Your love, eternal as Your being, saw from everlasting the cross of Calvary, and yet You did not falter in Your purpose, nor modify Your plan of saving lost sinners by the sacrifice of Yourself. You saved others, Yourself You would not save!

Our present subject, while it presents one of the most affecting portraits of our Lord, equally delineates what should be the portrait of His disciple bearing the cross after Jesus. We proceed to guide the reader's thoughts first, to the study of the Divine Original, and then, to the consideration of the human copy.

THE DIVINE ORIGINAL.

The burden borne by our Lord on this memorable occasion was the literal, actual cross upon which He was to agonize and die. What a touching proof have we here of His literal and actual humanity! The bearing of that cross upon His chafed shoulders, His weariness and fainting beneath its weight, proved Him to be (sin always excepted) very man of very man, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh.

Replete with consolation is this fact to the burdened believer. Perhaps Jesus has laid upon you some cross- it may be the shame and the loss of His own; your heart is sad, your spirits sink, you stagger and swoon beneath the burden. But study this touching incident in your Lord's life, and receive the instruction and accept the soothing it affords. Your Lord knew what it was to droop beneath the cross, and do you think that He has no regard, no compassion, no sympathy with you at this moment, as, weary, exhausted, and faint, you bear the load God has laid upon you, carry the cross Christ has imposed, toiling on in obedience, suffering, and service?

We have already adverted to the humiliating aspect which this fact in our Lord's history presents. It is too significant to pass superficially over. Every view of our Lord's humiliation is a view of His love. The greatest indignity, as we have remarked, in the death of the Roman malefactor, was to compel him to carry the gibbet to the place of execution. To this degradation did Jesus voluntarily subject Himself. "He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." *But why this degradation?* That He might illustrate the depth of His love, and teach His followers that in all the humiliation they pass through in confessing His name and bearing His cross, He enfolds them in the robe of His sympathy, and sustains them by the arm of His grace. If such the humiliation to which our Lord cheerfully submitted, and such the springs of sympathy which gush from His compassionate nature, who would shrink from the shame and the loss of bearing the cross after Jesus? What assuring words has He spoken! "Whoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father which is in heaven." But we pass to the more spiritual and gospel truth involved in the incident of Christ bearing His cross.

IT WAS THE SYMBOL OF A HEAVIER BURDEN THAT HE BORE- THE BURDEN OF HIS CHURCH'S SINS. But for sin there had been no cross. When our blessed Lord traveled to Calvary, weary and faint beneath the cross, there was a sorrow in His heart, a moral crucifixion of the soul, greater and severer far than this- the sorrow and the weight which the transfer of all His people's transgressions to Him, as their Substitute and Surety, involved. Listen to His touching language- "My soul is sorrowful, even unto death." What was the cause of that grief from which He would not escape? The bearing of sin! Nothing but sin supplies a solution of the mystery of His deep, unparalleled soul-sorrow. The sorrow had not been His by *experience*- had not the sin been His by *imputation*. Thus our Lord endured, not the punishment only, but the actual sins of His people. What injustice would there be in punishing the innocent for the guilty, had not the innocent party stood in the place of the guilty party. This our Lord did. Substitution is the great doctrine of the gospel- the substitution of the innocent for the guilty. "He was made sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." Behold then, beloved, your sins laid by transfer upon Jesus. The teaching of the Bible is not, as some suppose, that we lay our sins upon Christ- that were a difficult, an impossible act, but the teaching is, that *Jehovah* laid our sins upon Him. "The Lord [JEHOVAH] has laid upon Him the

iniquity of us all." The Father did this in His everlasting love, from all eternity. In the eternal purpose of the Triune God the sins of the elect were laid upon Jesus, and He undertook to bear and die for them. If God the Father had not laid our sins upon God the Son, no power of ours had ever prevailed to effect the task. In accomplishing our reconciliation, Christ acted for God on the one part, and for man on the other. And if God had not consented that His people's transgressions should all meet upon Christ, actually binding upon the sacrificial victim with His own hands the burden, there had been no reconciliation. Hence our salvation, with all the blessings that flow from it- Jehovah the Father laying upon Jehovah the Son His Church's sins.

And now your faith has to do with an accomplished fact, and not with an impossible task. It is to accept the truth that God Himself laid your sins upon the soul of Jesus, as Aaron the priest took all the transgressions of all the children of Israel and laid them upon the head of the goat, and then sent him away into the wilderness. "And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions and all their sins, putting them [the actual iniquities and transgressions] upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities into a land not inhabited." (Margin, a land of separation.) You have, perhaps, under an enlightened and spiritual sense of sin- distressed and despairing- for months endeavored to uplift the crushing weight and lay it upon Christ, and every effort has failed. Let me gently lead you to the foot of the Savior's cross. Behold in faith the sinless, spotless Lamb of God as having already borne that weight, as having suffered for those sins, as having died for those transgressions, and accept the precious truth that it was God's eternal love that laid them all on Jesus, and that nothing is left for you to do but to believe in Jesus, that He saves to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him.

Thus, as we have remarked, you have, in the momentous matter of your soul's salvation, to accept an attested fact, and not to propose a hopeless task. *Your soul-distress for sin, your spiritual consciousness of guilt, is to impel you, just as you are, to the cross, there to look and believe and be saved.* If you lose sight of the truth that God laid your sins upon Christ, you lose sight of the love of God towards you; and, losing sight of the love of God, you lose sight of the fountain from where flows all your springs of peace and joy and hope. The comfort which this view of Christ's bearing sin imparts, distances all measurement. If God has laid your sins upon the Son of His love, you may rest assured that He will never lay them a second time upon you; since, if Christ has borne them and atoned for them to Divine justice, they never again can be found. What, then, are you to take to Jesus? For what are you to repair to the foot of His cross? You are to take to Jesus the conviction of sin; the spiritual, enlightened confession of your guilt- that terrible and crushing burden that weighs you to the earth- you are to take to Him your sense of condemnation, your dread of death, your fearful apprehension of eternal wrath. Brought by the Holy Spirit to see and feel your

condemnation under the law, you are to repair to the cross and behold Jesus "made a curse for us," and *see your sins all laid upon Him, condemned in Him, pardoned through Him, and by Him cast into eternal oblivion.*

While all Christendom admits the fact that Christ died upon the cross, how widely different the interpretation of that fact? We accept the only scriptural and rational one which supplies a solution of the mystery, "Christ died for the ungodly." "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many." "Who His own self bear our sins in His own body on the tree." Can any truth be presented more forcibly, or in a light more luminous, than the doctrine which these touching words convey- the sacrificial nature of our Lord's death? Hold fast this essential doctrine of your faith- it is for your life. There is no present spiritual life, and there can be no future eternal life, apart from a humble, believing reception of the *atonement* Of the Son of God. God will not save the sinner at the expense of His honor, or exercise mercy at the sacrifice of justice. The atonement of the Son of God so harmonizes His perfections, as to render it easy, honorable, and illustrious on the part of God to embrace in His love, extend His mercy, and exercise His grace towards the greatest sinner. Were He to save the sinner on the basis of mercy without an equivalent to His moral government, it would be an outrage on justice, and a dishonor to holiness, and a violation of truth. But the atoning work of the Son of God- the God-man, Christ Jesus- meets the whole case- it honors the Holiest and it saves the vilest. "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved."

And how resplendent does the love of Jesus appear from beneath this dark cloud of His profound humiliation. The marvellous fact of His bearing His own cross can only be understood in the light of LOVE. It was, in fact, LOVE bearing the instrument of its own torture and death. The cross of Jesus is the symbol, the badge, the expression of Divine love. It is love's manner and escutcheon. Love died to save, confronting death in its most painful and degrading form. God the Father so loved that He gave His Son- God the Son so loved that He gave Himself- and God the Spirit so loves that He takes of the things of Jesus and shows them

to us. Love, and love only, supplies the solution of all that Jehovah has done from everlasting in the covenant of redemption. Behold, then, your Savior bearing His cross, trembling and fainting the place of suffering, and doubt not His love to you. Has He laid upon you a burden beneath whose pressure your tender spirit faints? His love bore a far heavier one for you; and will sustain you while you learn the lesson and reap the blessing of this discipline. *Would you know the heart of Jesus? Track His footsteps as, bearing His own cross for you, weary and mournful, He traveled to the sepulchral gloom of Golgotha.*

Many are THE BLESSINGS which flow from this touching incident of our Lord's passion. We mention a few. Confirming, as it does, the fact of our Lord's nature

as a man, it equally illustrates His human sympathy. Sinking from weariness, faint from exhaustion, and ready to succumb beneath the burden that you bear, let the thought of Christ's sympathy soothe and sustain you. No other being can sympathize with your present position- the mental depression, the bodily infirmity, the spiritual despondency- as Christ. His bearing the burden of His cross schooled Him for this identical path you now tread. It may be tortuous in its windings, cross-like in its shape, traced by tears, shaded by gloom, nevertheless the discipline of your Lord, when He went forth bearing His cross, has prepared Him for this your present path. Take your cross to the foot of His, and the spectacle of *His suffering love* will make your affliction light and momentary; and you shall declare with the Psalmist, "I had fainted unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

Few lessons gleaned from this incident in our Lord's life are more practical and precious to the believer than the assimilation into which it brings him with Christ. How frequently, in His conversations with His disciples, did the phrase occur- "taking the cross." For example- "He that takes not his cross, and follows not after Me, is not worthy of Me." "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." An illustration of this high, spiritual privilege of the disciple of Christ is touchingly presented in the instance of Simon the Cyrenean, of whom it is recorded, "him they compelled to bear His cross."

What is it to bear Christ's cross? It involves three ideas. The first is, the public confession of Christ crucified before the world. It is due to our Lord, if we are really His disciples, that the world should know it. There are many who are not Christ's true disciples, who yet presumptuously assume and wear His badge. And there are not a few who are His true disciples, but who are only secretly so. "Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly." But the religion of Jesus imposes an open, public, and avowed profession of His name and truth before men. Christ was not crucified in secret, but openly in the sight of heaven and earth; and His true disciples, not ashamed of Him and His cross, of His truth and of His people, but coming out of the world, separating themselves from its worldliness and its religion, are openly, manfully, and meekly to take up His cross and follow Him; not ashamed to own themselves the disciples of that Savior whose life was poverty, whose kingdom was not of this world, whose first apostles were fishermen, and whose death was that of a Roman slave upon the cross. Oh, then, if you love Jesus, confess Him where His person is despised, His gospel hated, His name reviled; and count it your highest distinction on earth, like Simon, . to "bear the cross after Jesus."

Another idea involved is, a willing and cheerful endurance of whatever sufferings, afflictions, and trials our Lord may see fit, in His infinite wisdom and love, to lay upon us in the profession of His name and the service of His kingdom and truth. The religion of Jesus involves the bearing of a cross. We should keep in mind the sentiment of Augustine, "My Love was crucified." All service, therefore, for Him whom our souls love imposes a cross, demands a self-denying spirit, the

abnegation of our own will, and the doing and the suffering of our Lord's. And oh, how pleasant a thing it is to make any sacrifice- if we dare dignify our poor service by such a term- for Him who sacrificed Himself for us! Love to Jesus- love enkindled at the altar of His own- will impart lowliness to the loftiest service, and dignity to the most common things done in His name.

The third idea is that of crucifixion of sin. "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh." "I am crucified with Christ." The sacrificial death of our Lord upon the cross not only obtained for us reconciliation with God, but it supplied a personal and effectual motive for the mortification of sin and the subjugation of the powers and passions of the soul to the supremacy of Jesus. And he who, by the power of the cross, thus crucifies sin, may appropriate to himself spiritually the language which Paul employed literally- "Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus." "I have in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." As Owen observes, "Nothing but the death of Christ for us, will be the death of sin in us." In bearing thus the cross of Jesus, the believer dies unto sin and lives unto holiness. It is a dying daily, or daily crucifixion. And never can the child of God look simply to the cross, beholding His sins all nailed there, without associating the crucifixion of Jesus for his sins with the crucifixion of his sins. In the solemn light of that cross he reads, "Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." "Who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God our Father."

Thus may we be found, like our Lord and Master, bearing the cross, though the path lead us to the solitude, the suffering, and the sorrow of Golgotha. It will not be that we bear this precious load alone, nor bear it long. Christ carries with us its heaviest end, and in a little while we shall lay it down for the "rest that remains for the people of God."

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