

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
April 13, 2025

## **The Weight of the Cross**

Luke 23:26-43

One moment he's just going about his business, on his way into town from the countryside. The next moment he's conscripted to serve in the procession to a public execution. That's how quickly his life and circumstances changed. We meet him in today's text from Luke. His name is Simon from Cyrene.

We don't know much about him. He may have been a Jew from the diaspora, and had arrived in Jerusalem to participate in Passover. He's not mentioned in any other scene in the Gospels, nor elsewhere in the New Testament. Cyrene was located in what is now Libya, so the 900-mile journey to Jerusalem would have taken several weeks. Whatever Simon's specific background, his path to the holy city ended up bringing him onto the path of the cross.

That path was brutal and bloody. In one sense, the execution was already underway. The crucifixion itself was simply the culmination of an agonizing journey of torture, shame, and humiliation. The Romans made sure that the condemned, and the crowds of bystanders, knew where all this was headed. They made you carry the cross-beam, while in front of you walked a herald carrying the "title," the written accusation against you. By the time this procession to Golgotha passed by Simon, Jesus couldn't drag his cross-beam any further. Someone else would have to bear this horrific burden. So the Romans took it and put it on Simon.

What a weight has suddenly been placed upon him. The physical weight of the cross-beam itself. The weight of fear and worry about what's going to happen next. The weight of emotional trauma at witnessing and experiencing this parade of violence. The weight of being publicly associated with this condemned man. The weight of being connected with this entire grizzly and shameful spectacle. Simon's body, heart, and mind are bent over under the weight of Jesus' execution.

We sing, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Assuming he carried the cross-beam all the way to the site of the crucifixion, and perhaps even remained there until the end, Simon could answer, "Yes, I was there."

"Were You There." There's a heaviness to that song, a kind of spiritual gravity that brings us off the periphery and closer to the events that occurred for our salvation. Not only Christ's death itself, but the way that led to this place called the Skull (v. 33). Remember that Jesus had repeatedly talked about the cross, not just as the destination of his life and ministry, but also as something to get up under in the here and now. Though it didn't materialize fully until the end, in one sense Jesus was always on the path of suffering and death.

And he called anyone who wanted to be his disciple to do the same: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). Though there's no evidence that Simon was a disciple, by bearing the cross he enacts

the role of a disciple. He becomes a picture of what it means to be a follower of our Lord. It's one thing to stand at a distance and gaze at a cross on top of a steeple or planted in the ground alongside the church entrance. But it's another thing to get pulled into the action of taking a cross and getting up under it for the sake of God's kingdom. If all you do is behold a cross, you end up being just a religious spectator, an anonymous face in the crowd. But when the call of Christ lays hold of you and places a cross-beam on your shoulders, you experience even more deeply what it means to go with Jesus into his rejection, shame, suffering, and death.

One of the hymns we're singing in today's service captures it well: "Must Jesus bear the cross alone, / And all the world go free? / No, there's a cross for everyone, / and there's a cross for me." That song is based on a poem by Thomas Shepherd (1165-1739). His original poem was tied to Simon of Cyrene. In fact, the original hymn reads, "Must Simon bear the cross alone, / And other saints be free? / Each saint of thine shall find his own / And there is one for me."

Clarence Jordan, author of the "Cotton Patch" version of the New Testament, was the founder of an interracial farm community in Americus, Georgia. He suffered greatly because of the stand he took and his initiatives to bring about racial equality in economic sectors. One day Jordan was getting a red-carpet tour of another minister's church. With great pride the minister pointed to the rich, imported pews and luxurious decorations. As they stepped outside, darkness was falling, and a spotlight shone on a huge cross atop the steeple. "That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars," the minister said with a satisfied smile. "You got cheated," said Jordan. "Times were when Christians could get them for free."

You can't identify yourself with a Savior who carries a cross and not expect to carry a cross yourself. True, in one respect, Jesus has carried the cross for us. He has borne our sins and died our death, accomplishing what we could not accomplish for ourselves. But if you truly believe that, and if you're truly following him, you'll be walking daily under the weight of your own cross. Not simply in the sense of bearing life's hardships, though that's certainly part of it, but most of all in the sense of yielding self-will to God's will and having the sacrificial, reconciling love of Jesus taking shape in your life.

Author Philip Yancey shares the following story from priest Henri Nouwen:

Nouwen tells the story of a family he knew in Paraguay. The father, a doctor, spoke out against the military regime there and its human rights abuses. Local police took their revenge on him by arresting his teenage son and torturing him to death. Enraged townsfolk wanted to turn the boy's funeral into a huge protest march, but the doctor chose another means of protest. At the funeral, the father displayed his son's body as he had found it in the jail—naked, scarred from electric shocks and cigarette burns, and beatings. All the villagers filed past the corpse, which lay not in a coffin but on the blood-soaked mattress from the prison. It was the strongest protest imaginable, for it put injustice on grotesque display.

Isn't that what God did at Calvary? ... The cross that held Jesus' body, naked and marked with scars, exposed all the violence and injustice of this world. At once, the cross revealed what kind of world we have and what kind of God we have: a world of gross unfairness, a God of sacrificial love.<sup>1</sup>

On that day in Jerusalem, Simon witnessed and experienced both of these, the injustices of this world and the sacrificial love of God. In fact, by taking Jesus' cross upon himself, Simon became a participant in the way of the Lord, the way of solidarity with human suffering. Simon became part of the story of God's merciful compassion for us and steadfast commitment to us.

Across the centuries, Christ's sorrowful journey to crucifixion has been captured by many artists. One of them was Titian, who depicted today's text in a painting called "Christ on the Way to Calvary." In this painting, we're given a close-up view of Christ stumbling under the weight of the cross. He props himself up on a stone embedded in the ground. As Christ struggles to pick himself up, he sees Simon, who has arrived to help in lifting the cross off his shoulders. None of the rest of crowd is in view, which helps focus our contemplation on Christ's physical struggle and his encounter with Simon. Simon himself is depicted as a very empathetic figure. He's not a detached stranger, just following the Romans' orders. Instead, Simon has a tender expression on his face. He comes across as humble and compassionate, touched in a deeply personal way by Christ's vulnerability and suffering.

What the artist was trying to achieve is part of our own Palm/Passion Sunday encounter with today's text. As we watch Jesus pass by, you and I aren't meant to be anonymous faces in the crowd, maintaining a safe emotional distance from what Jesus is enduring. Like Simon, we're each singled out for personal engagement and involvement in what Christ is going through for your salvation and my salvation. You and I are called to get up under the weight of what he's enduring, to experience again the gravity of the meaning of the cross.

The weight of the cross is upon us this day, in a way that crystallizes who we're called to be and what we're called to do every day. Pastor Lee Eclov captures it when he says:

There are weights that only Christians carry: the weight of Jesus' awful death, that he died for you and me; the weight of repentance practiced with burdensome regularity; the weight of carrying the gospel into a dark world; the weight of living holy lives when all the while our old nature complains and drags us backward; the weight of living in this dying world when we long for a better home; the weight of dying to self, of serving thanklessly.<sup>2</sup>

There is a heaviness to the Christian life. It's a kind of weight that comes with identifying ourselves with a Savior who goes all the way down into the darkness of our sin, and the darkness of death, in order to rescue us and bring us back up to light and life. This is the weight of the cross that you and I are summoned to bear.

But as we join ourselves to Jesus by faith and get up under this weight, we do so remembering something else he said: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). Jesus is referring to a wooden beam used to join together oxen or mules so they could work as a team. In this case, Jesus pictures himself as accompanying us in the yoke, but taking upon himself the full weight of the burden, as he eventually did on the cross. That's where he shouldered it all for us. As Mark Galli has summarized it, "Jesus indeed calls us to take up our cross (Mark 8:34), but the full weight of the cross-beamed yoke is born by him, the God who sorrows for our sins, the man who bears our griefs."<sup>3</sup>

Like the experience of Simon, may the Lord use this day to bring you near to him on his way to the cross, so that the weight of his sacrifice touches you and forms you more deeply. And may you get up under your own cross-beam, so that what Jesus has accomplished can take shape in your daily life as his follower.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 185-186.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Eclov, "Foresight." *Preaching Today*. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/february/forsight.html> (April 10, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Galli, "Why Dostoyevsky's Prostitute Can Teach Us About the Cross." *Christianity Today*. March 26, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2018/03/dostoyevsky-cross-crime-punishment/> (April 10, 2025).