

Our Cross to Bear

March 2021

Most of us are running around right now trying to get ready for the big day on Sunday when we celebrate Easter and the resurrection of our Lord; often, as we scurry to prepare, we barely have enough time to recognize the other equally important days of Holy Week. After all, there is nothing better than celebrating the budding green trees outside, getting dressed in colorful clothing, hunting for delicious chocolate eggs, and gathering around brunch tables surrounded by the most cherished people in our lives on Easter day. But, what about the other days leading up to Easter? We are asked to contemplate reverently the crucifixion and Jesus dying willfully on the cross to set us free from sin and death. Furthermore, we are to reflect on the fact that our God asks us to take up our own crosses, as heavy as they might be, or as inconvenient as they might seem, and follow Jesus into our own deaths before we can experience our own new life in Him. In other words, there is a cross to bear before Easter begins.

Just a little over a year ago, my wife, Sharon, and I were standing on the streets of Yangon, Myanmar, with other members of my Frontier Fellowship team. We were visiting various Christian organizations who were serving and helping the minority population of Christians in Myanmar. We heard encouraging reports of how much the Christian population was beginning to grow in Myanmar, but we also heard numerous tragic and sad stories about Christians and other minority groups being suffocated and attacked constantly under the cruel dictatorship of the Burma army. In fact, one of these Christian organizations, the Free Burma Rangers, did nothing else but rescue and aid villagers and regions of Myanmar that were being pillaged, raped, and often destroyed by Burmese military.



We never dreamed this conflict between the ruling military regime of Myanmar would escalate to the point it is today of an armed conflict between nearly the entire country, not just a few ethnic groups, and the military establishment itself and its few but powerful oligarchical cohorts. The military establishment has a name, The Tatmadaw. We learned that if you are not a member of The Tatmadaw or a close friend of it, you are an enemy. There is no grey area in these assessments. Furthermore, in the eyes of The Tatmadaw, to be Burmese is to be Buddhist. They are proud to call themselves religious nationalists. In the eyes of the Burmese Army, if you are not a Buddhist, you are a second-class citizen vulnerable to severe discrimination, persecution, and even death. For this reason, in 2017, in what has now been called a genocide, the Burmese army drove millions of Rohingya Muslims out of its country into neighboring Bangladesh. They view the Rohingya as a threat to national security. For this reason, many of the Christians in the Kachin, Shan, or Wa states are under constant harassment and violent persecution for simply wanting to worship Jesus as their Lord. Currently, my heart is breaking for the many innocent citizens of Myanmar who are suffering greatly in their striving for greater freedoms in their country. Please join Frontier Fellowship by praying for them.

What did Jesus mean when he said that we must take up our own cross and follow him daily? Jesus is quoted as saying, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." (Matthew 16:24a-25). In other words, we are to follow the way of Jesus – even when such a path might run contrary to our own passions, inclinations, desires, and wants. On the night he was betrayed and arrested, praying beforehand in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus cried out, "Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." (Luke 22:42) Jesus wrestled with God not wanting to go through with his own brutal death. However, Jesus remained obedient to the Father's will for his life, and for this reason he allowed himself to be arrested and was later crucified. But in doing so, he ultimately conquered death and was later resurrected and exalted as Lord over the entire universe. In doing so, he has become our inspiration to take up our own cross and follow God's will for our lives, knowing and trusting something is far better still in front of us.



Have we lost this sense of forbearance, self-control, and trusting obedience in our world today? Has Christian freedom become misunderstood by a growing number of people who insist they can do whatever they please, whenever they want, with no one telling them what to do? Jesus did not teach that kind of freedom. He taught that we are free to love our neighbors as ourselves, not do whatever we want, regardless of what impact those actions might have on our neighbor's wellbeing. The Bible goes so far as to say that we are to put the interests of others above our own. The Apostle Paul, in his letters to the Philippians, writes, "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too." (Philippians 2:3,4) Easter is as much about celebrating the Resurrection as it is remembering Jesus' command to take up our cross daily.

Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It was a high value for the Hebrew people as well. Proverbs 16:32 says, "Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city." Putting the interests of others above our own is not easy; yet it is the essence of God's love. We will draw closer to God and the reservoirs of his Spirit the more we pursue it. Serving others' interests above our own is the most critical ingredient to unity - whether that be applied to the health of our own souls, families, friends, communities, nation, or world. We will never be unified if we do not take up our individual crosses daily, serving our Lord and our neighbor's interests above our own selfish desires. For this reason, the Apostle Paul wrote the following to the people of Ephesus, "Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future." (Ephesians 4:3,4)

During our current pandemic, we have witnessed extraordinary acts of selflessness in putting the interests of others above our own. Many Italian priests in northern Italy last spring served the suffering victims of COVID-19 to the point of risking their own lives, and with some of them dying. Numerous doctors and nurses in China, India, Brazil, and the United States continued to serve their patients knowing they could be infected and die, as many unfortunately did. In that same spirit, we can never forget the firefighters on September 11, 2001, who bravely climbed the staircases of the burning Twin Towers in New York City knowing they could easily lose their lives serving the interests of others above their own. Taking up our own cross daily is not easy, but the Lord will be with us as we do so.



Freedom is something to be treasured dearly, and never abused. We are to have a deep respect for others who are different from ourselves. In fact, we are called to love them as much as we love ourselves. Today, if I need to wear a mask on my face to help others not become infected with a virus, I will do it gladly and willingly even if it might make me feel uncomfortable or somewhat restricted. If I need not to drink alcohol or dance with other Christians who do not allow those practices as a part of their own traditions, as I have encountered many times with Protestants in Mexico, I will not pursue them during a visit out of respect for their personal beliefs and needs. If someone insults me and says untrue things about me, I will not retaliate and seek revenge by doing the same back to them, as Jesus modeled and taught us to do. The Apostle Paul put it best when he wrote, "...you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weak conscience to stumble...when you sin against other believers by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong, you are sinning against Christ." (1 Corinthians 8:9,12)

We should never race too quickly to Easter. It is always prudent and wise for us to take our time during Holy Week. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and the messages they contain of obedience and trust, are just as important as the Resurrection remembered on Easter Day. Every one of us is in search of our true selves. But we will never discover who God made us to be if we remain self-occupied and self-serving. If we give our lives to the care and grace of our Lord, and serve others above ourselves, we will put to death our selfish ways, and discover who we were truly created to be – a child of God and an active member of the Body of Christ worldwide.

Hallelujah and Amen!