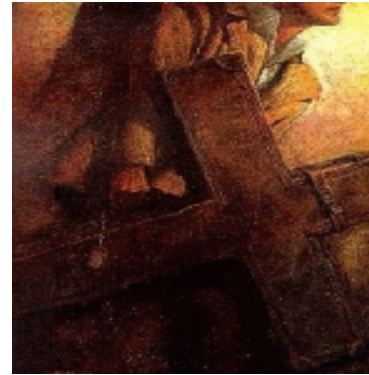


The Way of The Cross

The words Jesus spoke from the cross point to the cost of following Him.

Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

Tradition tells us that when Jesus was a teenager there was a rebellion near where He lived. The Roman army crushed the rebellion and crucified an Israelite every 10 meters along a road for the distance of 16 kilometers. The sight of some 1,760 people dead, or dying in agony on crosses spaced every 30 feet for 10 miles must have made an indelible impression on the mind of a teenager. Long before His death, the cross was for Jesus an ugly, hideous reality.



If Jesus were speaking to us today He might not say, "Take up your cross," but "Take up your electric chair," or "Take up your guillotine," or "Take up your gallows." Though none of these methods of execution comes close to the pain and disgrace connected with the Roman cross, using these modern terms would drive the message home to us with closer to the same effect of Jesus telling the people of His day, "Take up your cross."

When I studied this command, the Lord led me to meditate on what the cross would have meant for Jesus Himself so I could understand better more of its implications in my life.

THE WAY OF REDEMPTIVE FORGIVENESS

Jesus' first recorded words—after the Jews had falsely accused Him and put Him through the mockery of a trial; after they had exchanged Him for a known murderer; after the Romans had cruelly scourged Him, mocked Him, crushed a crown of thorns on His head, driven spikes through His wrists and ankles, and hung Him before a jeering crowd—were, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing**" ([Luke 23:34](#))

For Jesus the cross meant having a spirit of forgiveness when He had been treated wrongly. Everything the Jewish and Roman authorities had done to put Him on the cross was unjust. The crowds that had hailed Him as their liberator just days before now stood ridiculing Him. But Jesus responded with forgiveness.

I can recall Pastor Luis Diaz from the country of Honduras, once said, "Bitterness destroys more Christian workers than immorality."

During the exodus the Israelites came to a place in the desert where there was water. But thirsty as they were, they couldn't drink it: It was bitter. Following God's instructions, Moses threw a piece of wood into the water, and the water turned from bitter to sweet. I believe the wood symbolized the tree from which it came, and the tree in turn symbolized the cross ([Deut. 21:23](#); [Acts 5:30](#); [Galatians 3:13](#)). There is a tree in the experience of every believer that will turn bitter waters sweet. It is the cross of Jesus Christ, and it is the cross everyone who wishes to follow Jesus must take up.

This is the way of sacrifice, the way of redemptive forgiveness.

Is there a little seed of resentment in your heart? Has someone hurt you, offended you, treated you unjustly, violated your rights? If you want to follow Jesus, then you must take up your cross daily, and taking up your cross means forgiving. By so doing you will amazingly and mysteriously redeem both the act and the person who did it. You redeem the act by turning it from harmful to helpful. And you redeem the person by setting him free from his debt to you.

THE WAY OF EMBRACING

Jesus was crucified between two thieves. For a while, both mocked and ridiculed Him. But sometime during the ordeal, one thief's eyes were opened to see who Jesus really was. The other thief taunted Jesus: "Aren't you the Christ?"

"Save yourself and us!" But the first thief replied, "We are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he turned to Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus responded, "**I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise**" ([Luke 23:39–43](#))

Taking up the cross means that we warmly receive into our lives daily those very people whom we find most offensive, most difficult to live with, even those who are most boring. It means offering the right hand of fellowship in response to a sharp elbow in the ribs. It means putting a warm arm around the shoulder of someone just after he insults us.

Embracing means getting close enough to see the look in the eyes that betrays the automatic "Fine" everyone says when asked how he or she is doing. It means saying, "You're so important to me that I'm not going to go off and have fun without you." It means saying, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Taking up the cross means imitating the prodigal son's father who, when his disobedient and disrespectful son returned from squandering his inheritance and wallowing in immorality, "saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." When the son said, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son," the father turned immediately to his servants and said, "**Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him . . . Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found**" ([Luke 15:20–24](#)).

The way of embracing means taking the morally and spiritually weak and defenseless into our arms where we give them strength and protection.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.—Romans 5:6–8

THE WAY OF SEPARATION AND DEPENDENCE

Separation. For Jesus the cross meant separation from the one nearest and dearest to Him. There had been a time when Mary could press Him gently and lovingly to her breast. But at last the cross came between Mary and her Son. Neither could reach out to embrace the other.

James Fraser graduated from London University in 1906 with a degree in engineering. His parents had prayed that God would call at least one of their children into missionary service. Though James didn't know of their prayers, he felt the strange moving of the Holy Spirit in his heart to spend a year with the China Inland Mission training home in the midlands of England.

After that year he sailed for China. There he was greatly used by God among the Lisu people, learning their language, identifying with the culture, and bringing them the gospel. Thousands came to know Jesus through his witness.

Before he had boarded the ship for China, his mother had given him a note to read. "Today I am the happiest woman in England," he read after the ship had set sail. "I could not anoint His feet with my tears as did Mary. But I gave Him my son." Sometimes the separations aren't so peaceful. Sometimes taking up the cross means being rejected by our families. Jesus demands absolute possession of every moment.

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.—Luke 12:51–53

Dependence. The separation caused by taking up the cross can mean depending on others to manage the cares we leave behind. In all likelihood Mary, by the time of Christ's crucifixion, was a widow. She needed someone to look after her. So Jesus turned to John and said, "Here is your mother." From that time on," John wrote humbly without naming himself, "**this disciple took her into his home**" (**John 19:27**). Sometimes when we take up the cross the impact falls on our best friends. Our service puts extra pressures and responsibilities on them.

Paul knew this and wasn't ashamed to ask fellow believers to take some of his former responsibilities so he could take up his cross:

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me . . . It was good of you to share in my troubles.

Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.—Phil. 4:10; Phil 4:14–16

Then he explained that somehow their support constituted their sharing in his cross: **"I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable *sacrifice*, pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:8, emphasis mine).**

But Paul didn't stop there. He assured the Philippians that the burden placed on them because of his cross-bearing would never become too heavy: **"And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).**

It is not our business to worry about the implications for others of our commitment to Christ. It is Christ's business, for He is the Head of the body and looks after all its needs. This is not to say that we should be insensitive, careless, or thoughtless, flinging tasks on people willy-nilly. It is only to say that when taking up the cross requires leaving some of our old responsibilities to other people, we should not let that stand in the way of following Christ.

THE WAY OF LONELINESS

While Jesus was on the cross God made His judgment known to the world in an awful way: "From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land." And then, in the midst of that great darkness, "Jesus cried out in a loud voice, . . . 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:45–46).

The way of the cross for Jesus meant the cold darkness of God's judgment on sin. It meant an overpowering sense of rejection, abandonment, and condemnation when He who had never sinned became sin for us so that we might be made righteous in Him.

Sometimes the Lord, in His wisdom that seems to us foolishness, gives us the sense that we are entirely in the dark, wholly alone, abandoned by Him and by everyone around us.

After his triumphant victory over 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah the prophet lost his courage when Queen Jezebel threatened to kill him. He ran and hid and prayed that God would let him die. For 40 days he suffered the loneliness of the desert and, though visited by angels who met his physical needs, appears to have known nothing of the spiritually strengthening presence of God. It took a terrifying demonstration of God's power, followed by a still, small voice, to restore Elijah to any sense of fruitful communion with God. (See 1 Kings 19:1–18.)

I believe that Elijah, when threatened, forgot who had given him the power to do wonders in the past three years. He suddenly thought he had to handle the problems on his own. He gave up the battle and fled. And when he did, he fled from the voice of God.

I think God lets us do that every once in a while so that we will know that the power even for taking up the cross and following Him comes not from ourselves but from Him. He gives us a period of darkness, loneliness, emptiness. Our prayers go unanswered. We yearn for His voice but hear nothing. Finally we cry out, "**My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?**"

It wasn't until after Jesus had died that the separation ended. And then, after three days, God raised Him in glory. So it must be with us sometimes. We must die to ourselves and let Him give us new life. No matter what storms we have to weather first, if we wait, the whisper will finally come.

THE WAY OF THE DESERT

Hanging on the cross, short of blood and dehydrated, feeling the weight of the sins of the world, Jesus quietly, weakly said, "**I am thirsty**" (John 19:28).

There are times when taking up the cross means going thirsty. It means reading the Bible and getting nothing out of it, going to church and listening carefully but hearing nothing. Jesus' thirst on the cross was physical, but it was also a picture of spiritual thirst. Often we must carry the cross through the desert.

When Israel was preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses gathered the people together and said to them:

Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how *the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*—Deut. 8:1–3, *emphasis mine*

God led the Israelites through the desert so that they would learn to trust humbly in Him, to look to Him to provide all their needs, to believe that He could always do something new, something neither they nor their fathers had ever seen before, to take care of them. He broke their trust in themselves and their complacent assumptions about God. And then, after the desert, God brought them "**into a good land—a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills**" (Deut. 8:7).

If you are dry, feeling no sense of communion with God, wait patiently. Don't panic. Keep walking in faith, one step at a time, until you come to the end of your desert, even if it takes 40 years.

We go to our Father, knowing that He will "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13). "If anyone is thirsty," Jesus said, "let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37-38).

THE WAY OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

In response to Jesus' cry of thirst, the soldiers offered Him a sponge soaked in wine vinegar, but after tasting it He refused to drink. Instead He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

A few days before His death on the cross Jesus told the disciples:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be.—John 12:23-26, emphasis mine

Our natural inclination is to seek a way to glory that skirts the cross. But Paul knew that the two must go together: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10). We focus on knowing the power of His resurrection, but reject Paul's warning that that comes only by sharing in His sufferings. If there is no daily taking up of the cross, there is no daily resurrection and hence no daily power. God does not give us the option of enjoying only resurrection power without crucifixion weakness.

THE WAY OF SURRENDER

At the very moment of His death Jesus prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Just days before He had prayed something that amounted to the same thing: "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). And the Father took Him at His word.

E. Stanley Jones' book Victory through Surrender has helped me more than any other book but the Bible. In it Jones explains that only by surrendering our wills to God can we have victory in Christian service. We must relinquish control, must hold with an open hand all those relationships and activities and possessions God has graciously given us but that we are sorely tempted to cling to as substitutes for God Himself.

Even less to our liking, taking up the cross means surrendering, sometimes even to the enemies of God. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter tried to resist with a sword. Jesus quickly rebuked him:

Put your sword back in its place, . . . for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my

disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?—Matthew 26:52–54

Jesus knew that He must surrender to the evil of this world in order to overcome it.

When Joseph Ton was a pastor in Romania he was arrested by the secret police for publishing a sermon calling for the churches to refuse to submit to the Communist government's demand for control over their ministries. When an official told him he must renounce his sermon, he replied, "No, sir! I won't do that!"

The official, surprised that anyone would respond so forcefully to the secret police, said, "Aren't you aware that I can use force against you?"

"Sir, let me explain that to you," Ton said. "You see, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying . . . You know that my sermons are spread all over the country on tapes. When you kill me, I only sprinkle them with my blood. They will speak 10 times louder after that, because everybody will say, 'That preacher meant it because he sealed it with his blood.' So go on, sir, kill me. When you kill me, I win the supreme victory." The secret police released him, knowing his martyrdom would be far more of a problem than his sermon.

Ton is living testimony to the truth of Paul's words, written from prison:

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.—Phil. 1:12–14

As Christians, the real victory we seek in this world is not for ourselves, but for the gospel. Our greatest yearning should be for God's kingdom to expand and for His will to be done on earth. Often we must surrender *ourselves* to what the world views as defeat in order for the gospel to advance.

ARE YOU TAKING UP YOUR CROSS?

Are you willing to suffer the pain and humiliation of the cross? Will you forgive and embrace those who sin against you and see what they meant for harm as sent from God for good? Are you prepared to be separated from those you love, to be dependent on others, and to face the loneliness that sometimes comes with dedication to Christian service? Will you keep walking faithfully, one step at a time, through the desert of the soul, when it seems God has abandoned you? Have you committed yourself to accomplishing what God calls you to do? And are you prepared to surrender all to God and not to strike back at those who oppose you?

Are you taking up your cross and following Jesus?