

The Via Dolorosa

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[0:00] Let's read from God's Word in Luke chapter 23, Luke chapter 23, page 884, Luke 23, page 884.

And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

There followed him a great multitude of the people, and a woman who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them, Jesus said, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

For behold, the days are coming when they will say, Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed. Then they will begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us and to the hills, cover us.

But if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it's dry? Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence.

[1:25] May your Word be our rule, your Spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For the Christian, the path known as the Via Dolorosa holds special significance. The Via Dolorosa, or way of sufferings, leads from the ruins of the Antonia Fortress, the church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the city of Jerusalem.

It was the path Jesus took when, having been condemned by Pilate to death, he was taken to the hill called the Skull, or Golgotha, where he was crucified.

So the Via Dolorosa is a central site for the Christian pilgrimage of many. Who knows how much blood Jesus shed as he walked the 600 meters of the way of sufferings?

Who knows how many tears he shed and his grieving followers shed as they watched him suffering there? What makes the Via Dolorosa so special for us as Christians, I've walked it, I'm sure some of you have as well, what makes the Via Dolorosa so special for us as Christians is that we know that Jesus wasn't walking the way of sufferings on account of his own guilt, criminality, and sin, but for us.

[2:59] Every step he took on that way was bathed in love. His knowledge that unless he suffered and died on that cross, there could be no forgiveness and no eternal life for us.

We call it the Via Dolorosa, the way of sufferings, but it could just as easily be called the way of love, for from beginning to end, it is characterized by God's love for his lost world.

Now, I don't know how long it took for an exhausted Jesus to make his way from where he was condemned by Pilate, the Antonia Fortress, to where he was crucified, today's Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Perhaps it took him only a few minutes, perhaps it took a lot longer, but every step was a struggle for Jesus. He was a regular man. He wasn't a muscle-bound superstar, and he was exhausted, beaten, unbloodied by the torture of the Jewish and Roman soldiers.

In these verses in Luke 23, verses 26 through 31, we read of two incidents which happened on the Via Dolorosa that day, both of which have special significance for us as Christians, both of which we must reckon and deal with.

[4:16] First of all, bearing the cross, verse 26, and then bearing the judgment in verses 27 through 31. They're significant not just because they happen to our Lord and because everything about his life is interesting to us, but because they provide us with a stark contrast.

We must ask ourselves of which of the two we are willing to bear, the cross of Christ or the judgment of Christ. Unless we are willing to bear the cross of Christ, we shall endure the judgment of Christ.

And we bear the cross of Christ through the Jesus who hung upon the cross for us and our sins. So this morning, walk with me on this Via Dolorosa and choose either the cross of Christ or the judgment of Christ.

So first of all, in verse 26, bearing the cross, bearing the cross, we read, and as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene who was coming in from the country and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

As we saw last week, it should have been the Jewish terrorist Barabbas who was carrying his cross. But the religious leadership cried out for him to be released and Jesus to be condemned in his place.

[5:41] A fearful pilot crumbled under their pressure and sentenced Jesus to crucifixion. So he's led away. All the time, please remember, Jesus is allowing himself to be led away.

Jesus was the Christ. He was the Son of God. At any time, he could have called on the armies of heaven to rescue him and destroy his enemies. But because of his loving determination to sacrifice himself for us, he submitted to the murderous hatred of these Jewish leaders.

Generally, victims of crucifixion were forced to carry at least part of the cross to the place of their execution. It was not the whole cross, but only the horizontal beam upon which the victim's hands would be nailed and his torso supported, a piece they called the patibulum.

We suspect it was about as heavy as a bag of heavy cement. It may have been about 50 kilograms. Jesus, a carpenter in his early years, would have been used to carrying wood, but nothing this heavy.

And given that he was exhausted, given that he was bleeding, it just was simply too heavy for him. We don't know how far he managed to walk until he fell beneath its weight.

[7:04] The Roman soldiers, not known for their compassion, weren't willing for Jesus, weren't willing to wait for Jesus to recover his strength. They didn't give him an isotonic drink and a high-protein bar.

Rather, they grabbed an innocent bystander called Simon of Cyrene. Simon had come in from the country to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, and the Romans grabbed him, perhaps because they saw in him a big hefty man who they knew could carry the cross when Jesus couldn't.

Now, Cyrene was a Roman province far to the west of Judea. It's located in present-day Libya.

Since the third century BC, there had been a large Jewish colony in Cyrene.

So, here we have Simon, an African. We must remember, you know, that Christianity is not primarily a European religion, but one which was founded in the ancient Middle East and North Africa.

Arguably, this man, Simon of Cyrene, was the first African to follow Jesus. When people tell you that Christianity is a Western religion, remind them it was based in the ancient Middle East and in North Africa.

[8:26] Now, we don't know at this stage whether Simon was sympathetic to Jesus, but whether he was or not, he was snatched against his will by the Roman soldiers. He was forced to carry this heavy patibulum the rest of the way, and he's walking behind Jesus.

Simon of Cyrene, in a physical way none of us ever has, bore the cross of Christ. We don't know whether he resented bearing the cross of Christ or whether he did so because he was forced or because he was willing, but carry the cross, Simon did, all the way up the Via Dolorosa until they reached the place of execution.

And I wonder what's going through Simon of Cyrene's mind as he's carrying this 50 kilogram wooden cross beam. Perhaps nothing other than this. Man, this is really heavy. Perhaps, though, he was afraid, thinking that having carried the cross, the Romans would kill him also.

What we do know is that he was carrying it behind Jesus as Jesus walked in front of him. Perhaps Jesus was no longer capable of walking in a straight line. Maybe Jesus, so exhausted, he was stumbling, his eyes deeply bloodshot, and his body wracked with pain.

His shoulders were drooping and his steps were failing and Simon of Cyrene saw it all. Earlier on in his ministry, Jesus had said, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

[10:03] Simon of Cyrene was physically the first to go after Jesus. Willingly or otherwise, he took up Jesus' cross and he followed Jesus.

He was there to witness Jesus' execution. He saw what happened. He heard everything that was said. Now, in another gospel, Mark 15, 21, we learn a little bit more about Simon of Cyrene, this African Jew.

He had two sons, Alexander and Rufus. Later on in Romans chapter 16, verse 13, a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, which was written about 30 years after the crucifixion, we read Paul's greetings to the leaders of the various house churches in Rome, and he writes these words, greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, also his mother.

So, we suspect from this reference, Simon of Cyrene became a literal follower of Jesus. He became a Christian and at least one of his sons, Rufus, became a leader in the early Christian church.

So, we can conclude that what happened to Simon of Cyrene in Jerusalem that day changed his life forever. He and his family became followers of Jesus.

[11:36] He who had followed behind Jesus, carrying Jesus' cross, now followed behind Jesus, the cross he had carried, on which Jesus died, having saved him eternally.

We'll come back to that just in a moment. Now, I'm fairly certain if any of us here today had been in Jerusalem that day, we'd have willingly carried Jesus' cross for him.

Although it's noteworthy that none of Jesus' remaining eleven disciples volunteered for the task. But never should we think for one moment that our carrying of the cross of Jesus will save us.

Later on, Simon of Cyrene would realize this. It was not what he did for Jesus that day which saved him, it was what Jesus did for him.

Perhaps before Simon had reached Jerusalem, he'd never heard of Jesus, but now the Romans forced him to and as Simon watched and heard Jesus, he realized, as I said, that his carrying of the cross of Jesus did not save him.

[12:54] Jesus' death on the cross he had carried saved him. Simon may have carried the cross for Jesus, but Jesus died on the cross for Simon.

Simon may have carried the cross for Jesus, but Jesus died on the cross for Simon. Nevertheless, if we want to go after Christ, if we want to be his disciples, we must be willing to bear the cross.

Now, this isn't some vague reference to wearing a cross on a necklace or having a cross as a tattoo. It's a direct challenge. The cross is an instrument of torture and death.

To carry the cross means to be willing to give up everything, even our lives, for Jesus. It means to put Jesus first, to enthrone him as Lord of all our decisions, our families, our money, our time, our everything.

For many Christians in our world today, as you know, bearing the cross of Christ, being known as a Christian, is a death sentence. For us, not so much.

[14:03] But to what extent are you willing to carry the cross of Jesus? To what extent are you willing to bear the shame of being known as a Christian? I love a song written by the hymn writer Robin Mark.

Jesus, all for Jesus, all my ambitions, hopes, and plans, I surrender them unto his will.

We've all got ambitions and hopes and plans, especially those of us who are training or studying. Will you carry the cross of Jesus and surrender them to him, for him, to do with what he will, whatever that means?

Or in the face of teasing and mockery from your pals, will you drop the cross and follow them instead? Simon of Cyrene really, in my opinion, is an unspoken hero of the Bible.

Imagine his reception in heaven. Just imagine it with me. Imagine Simon of Cyrene when he got to heaven, staring into the glorious eyes of the Jesus for whom he had carried the cross.

[15:25] And as we ask Simon, was bearing the cross worth it, Simon? He now answers, now that I see Jesus, more than you can ever imagine.

But more importantly, I wonder what's in Jesus' eyes when he sees Simon of Cyrene. Love, surely, deep and eternal love and affection.

A gentle smile, perhaps, because these two share between them a unique and unrepeatable history. And yet, if we too will carry Jesus' cross, we can enter into Jesus' love and affection the way he did.

So, bearing the cross. Well, secondly, and more briefly, bearing the judgment, bearing the judgment. Verse 27 to 31.

All the way through Jesus' ministry, he attracted many female followers because he treated them differently from how everyone else in that society did. He treated them as equals with dignity, honor,

and respect.

[16 : 50] Unlike their male counterparts, these female disciples did not leave Jesus alone to face his torture and death. They followed him. They offered him whatever support they could.

They didn't have swords or shield. All they had were their weeping cries. And we read that a large multitude of people followed Jesus up the Via Dolorosa.

After all, he was very popular with the common people, and even now they're following him. But we read, many of the women were mourning and lamenting for Jesus.

Now, in Middle Eastern culture still today, public displays of emotion and grief are encouraged. I heard it once at the funeral of an Iranian baby.

The wailing of the grandmother drove a sword into the hearts of everyone present and brought home the reality of the pain and tragedy of this little boy's death.

[17 : 52] The mourning and lamenting made what was already an emotionally charged event even more painful. These women had remained loyal to their master and now they watched as the saviour they had loved was being degraded and tortured.

Their hope was dying with them and they had nothing left. But even in his exhaustion Jesus turns to these women who had followed him and he says to them daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me weep for yourselves weep for your children for the days are coming when they'll say blessed are the barren and the wombs that never borne the breasts that never nursed.

There's a lot going on here. Jesus knew that Jerusalem the city was sealing its fate by crucifying him. Jerusalem means literally city of peace but by their actions they turned it into the city of death. And when we talk about death we're talking yes about the death of Jesus but we're talking about its own death also as a city. It had sealed its judgment by rejecting Jesus.

Forty years after the crucifixion of our Lord a Jewish rebellion would lead to a Roman retaliation. The Romans sent a legion of their cracked troops into Judea.

[19 : 21] In AD 67 having destroyed the Jewish forces in a battle outside the city of Jerusalem they began to besiege Jerusalem itself. During the three years of its siege the inhabitants were denied food and water starvation and disease claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Reading the accounts of the siege by the Jewish historian Josephus it makes the most gruesome of reading. People were so hungry they became cannibals they ate their own dead.

Children were killed and eaten. When the Romans finally broke through they burned the city to the ground Josephus estimates that over a million Jews were killed.

The streets literally ran red with blood. Survivors were sold as slaves and sent over the whole Roman Empire. Never has a city been so utterly destroyed as Jerusalem was.

The extent of the destruction is still being uncovered today by archaeologists in Jerusalem. They very recently in the last six months found evidence of the extreme heat of the Roman fires of AD 70 with stones converted into calcium oxide something possible only at extremely high temperatures.

[20 : 56] The entire structure of Judaism the religion of the Jews was dismantled. The temple was raised to the ground. All that's left is the western or wailing wall.

With no temple the Jewish priesthood ceased to exist. There were no longer any high priests or chief priests. The order of Pharisees and Sadducees were abolished.

All those groups which had conspired against Jesus were utterly destroyed along with hundreds of thousands of common people. And Jesus had foreseen all this had he made his way up the Via Dolorosa.

If at all Jesus was sorrowful that day it was not for himself it was for what he saw would happen to the city of Jerusalem.

This had been the city of David the home of the temple in which God had dwelt for hundreds of years. This had been the city of the glory of God what the psalmist calls the joy of all the earth.

[22 : 01] The city of David man after God's own heart. How much it must have grieved Jesus to think of Jerusalem's ruin. Very few of these people who were present that day at Jesus' crucifixion would still be alive to see Jerusalem's destruction but their children would have been.

It was an indescribably painful fate and Jesus saw it all in his mind's eye. Jerusalem would be judged for what it had done to Jesus. Throughout the centuries God had sent them countless prophets all of whom they had killed.

He had now sent them his own beloved son and they're killing him also. Now they'll face a fate worse than death, the judgment of Almighty God upon them.

God chose the Romans as the tool of judgment against them and they showed the Jews no mercy. Simon of Cyrene bore the cross of Jesus.

Jerusalem bore the judgment of Jesus. Of the two I would categorically and without feet of contradiction say I would rather bear the cross of Jesus.

[23:17] I would rather bear the cross of Jesus and the judgment of Jesus. I would rather follow him and be his disciple whatever the cost may be in this life than reject him and face the eternal judgment of God.

Would you not also? But there is something with us we close, something far deeper going on in the Gospels than we think. We've considered two topics this morning.

Simon bearing the cross of Christ and bearing the judgment of Christ. Simon of Cyrene bore the cross of Jesus and Jerusalem because of its rejection of him bore!

Luke Luke of Jesus and Jesus! wants us to put these two things together. Simon of Cyrene may have carried the patibulum to place to crucifixion but it was Jesus who was nailed to the cross. It was Jesus who died on that patibulum. In years to come Jerusalem would bear the judgment of Christ because of its rejection of Jesus.

[24:31] And the question Luke's asking us is this why did Jesus die on the cross? He's always asking us this question why? Why did the Son of God submit to the murderous intentions of his enemies and what has any of this got to do with judgment?

It was because on the cross Simon bore Jesus was not dying for any sins he had committed he was dying for our sins.

On the cross Jesus was bearing the judgment of God on account of our sin and guilt all the ways in which we have rejected God all the ways in which we have turned away from God the judgment should have been ours but because of his infinite and immeasurable love for us Jesus bore the punishment on our behalf like Jerusalem he was destroyed and desolated on the cross like Jerusalem he was ruined not on account of his own guilt he the beloved son of God was cursed by God and forsaken by him on that patibulum carried by Simon of Cyrene he was cursed and forsaken not for his own sin but for ours the fate of Jerusalem became his and by his wounds we were set free from God's judgment against us the apostle

Paul will say there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus no condemnation because Jesus our Savior has already taken it for us on the cross and all the risen Christ desires of us today is that we believe and trust in him that what he did on the cross he was doing for us faith in him is what Christ demands of us bearing his cross is what Christ demands of us following him is what he commands of us the Via Dolorosa is a road which leads from the ruins of the Antonia fortress to the church of the holy sepulchre in Jerusalem it's thousands of miles away from where we are today in this crowd road church but we're all being challenged to join Jesus on the way of sorrows bearing the cross weeping with the daughters of the city and worshipping the

Lord Jesus Christ who though he walked in the way of weakness is now risen in strength and glory will you walk that way with me today let us pray Lord Jesus we can scarce believe that you who held the universe in your hand because of the torture and the pressure under which you were placed couldn't carry a wooden cross beam on your shoulders we thank you that you stooped down to make us great and that by your wounds we have been healed give us grace then to make this calculation and get it right in our heads that it's far more valuable to us to bear the cross today than it is to bear your judgment tomorrow we ask these things in Jesus name amen to do do!

[28:09] do do do! do