

Draw Near: Simon of Cyrene

Luke 23:26

INTRODUCTION

To us this day is a commemoration of The Last Supper, that day when Jesus and his disciples gathered in an upper room to eat their final meal together before all the tragic events that would happen later that night:

- The prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane
- The betrayal of Judas
- The denials of Peter
- The scam trials before Pilate and Herod
- The beatings and scourging
- The crown of thorns
- And, of course, the crucifixion

This meal was the traditional Passover meal described in great detail in the Exodus passage read earlier. On that day every Jew – no matter where they were located geographically – ate that meal. They did so to remember how God rescued them from Egypt. For the Jews, it was a special night and a special meal.

If you were a Jew who lived anywhere else in the world, your dream was to one day celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. You would scrape and save for years to make this dream come true. Year after year as you sat in your own home, in your own little village, you would say to your family, “Maybe next year we will eat the Passover in Jerusalem.”

On this night, one such family finally fulfilled their dream. They were pilgrims, whose hometown was a village in northern Africa called Cyrene. Cyrene was located in what is now eastern Libya. It was a Greek city, but it had a very large Jewish population. Three hundred years prior to the birth of Jesus more than 100,000 Jewish had been forced to settle there in an effort to squash a revolt against the reign of the Ptolomies.

So while Jesus and His disciples dined in an upper room, this family of pilgrims gathered in another room in another location to eat the same meal. There were four of them around that table. The father's name was Simon. He was there with his wife and his two sons, Rufus and Alexander. With grateful hearts, this family bowed their heads and prayed the Passover prayer:

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

It was a special night indeed. But in the morning everything changed. Unbeknownst to them ... while they were sleeping ...

- The temple guard converged on a small garden on the outskirts of the city and arrested Jesus
- They escorted him to the home of the high priest where he was interrogated by the religious leaders

- Jesus would face two more illegal trials that night, before Pilate finally washed his hands of the proceedings and pronounced the death sentence
- Then Jesus was whipped and beaten
- A crown of thorns was forced down on his head

When morning came, Jesus and all of the others who had been condemned to die were paraded down the street from their Roman prison cells to the place of execution on the outskirts of the city. Each of them was carrying the cross bar needed to complete the cross on which he would be crucified. The upright poles were already set.

Simon heard the noise and went out to the sidewalk to see what was happening. He had never seen anything like this. Crucifixions didn't happen in Cyrene. He watched as the deviant criminals snarled at the onlookers, swearing and cursing at the Roman soldiers who drove them forward. All, that is, except one.

The man they called Jesus was struggling. Because of all that he had endured overnight, Jesus was understandably exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally. The weight of that cross bar on his bleeding back was more than he could bear. Several times he stumbled and fell under its weight. Each time the soldiers would whip him again. It did no good. Jesus no longer had the strength to carry all that weight.

The Roman soldiers knew very well what to do under such circumstances. Palestine was an occupied country. All that a Roman officer had to do was to tap a Jew on the shoulder with the flat of his spear, and the one tapped had to carry out any task the soldier ordered, no matter how distasteful or menial it might be. Simon felt the tap.

Here's how Luke's gospel describes that moment:

As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. (Luke 23:26)

For years Simon had scraped and saved to attend this one Passover. For years he looked forward to the joy of eating the Passover with his family. And now this terrible indignity and shame fell on him, for he was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus. For all anyone else along the streets that day knew, he – Simon – was the criminal. The crowd jeered at him!

At the moment Simon must have bitterly resented it. He had to have been! He must have been filled with hate for these Romans and for this unknown criminal whose cross he was being forced to carry. It wasn't his cross. He wasn't guilty of anything.

Somewhere, though ... somewhere between the tap and the crucifixion ... something happened.

- It may have been his intention to drop that cross bar as quickly as he could when delivered to Golgotha.
- But evidently it did not turn out that way.

- Evidently he lingered on a bit ... because something about Jesus fascinated him.
- Evidently this moment changed his life forever.

Why do I say that? About 20 years after the events of this Maundy Thursday, a group of African Christians were worshipping and praying. Notice who was there:

Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simon (known as "the black man"), Lucius, Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul. One day as these men were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them." So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.

It appears that in those days after Calvary Simon not only became a Christian but also became a leader in the church in Antioch. And maybe he is due some regard for introducing the gospel to the Gentiles ... and thus to us because ...

As this missionary journey began Saul (Paul) and Barnabas would preach the gospel to the Jewish residents in the cities they visited. But they were not well received.

Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, "It was necessary that we first preach the word of God to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we will offer it to the Gentiles... When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers. (Acts 13:46-48)

At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul would write these words of greeting.

Greet Rufus, whom the Lord picked out to be his very own; and also his dear mother, who has been a mother to me. (Romans 16:13)

You will recall that Rufus was the name of Simon's son.

So what do we learn from this man we meet at the cross of Jesus. Two very important facts:

FACT #1: WE ARE ALL CALLED TO FOLLOW JESUS

When Simon was tapped to carry the cross, he did not take the lead. He followed.

As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. (Luke 23:26)

That's the proper place for every disciple. Jesus Himself made that clear:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

When we were kids, we used to play a game called "Follow the Leader." The rules were simple. Whatever the leader did, you had to do. Wherever the leader went you had to go. Even if you didn't really want to.

The Christian life is a constant act of following our leader, copying in thought, word and action all that Jesus does and did. Wherever he might lead.

The last place Simon wanted to go was to the place of crucifixion, but that's where Jesus was going. And he was leading.

#2: WE ARE CALLED TO CARRY THE BURDENS OF OTHERS

Galatians 6:2 reads:

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
(Galatians 6:2)

Bearing a burden for someone else is an entirely self-sacrificing, unselfish thing. You are generally doing something you have not been obligated to do. It takes your time and your effort, and it relieves the load entirely or almost entirely from someone else.

We have been raised to think like this outside of the church. My daddy taught me that whenever I see a woman carrying something it is considered gentlemanly for him to offer to carry it for her.

Even man to man. If a man sees a friend picking up boxes and carrying them from one place to another, if he is physically able, he will generally step up without a word and begin helping with that chore.

In matters of faith, the burdens aren't always as obvious and no soldiers are tapping us on the shoulder. But sometimes life gets hard, and we need to step up and step in.

APPLICATION

There is an old hymn that we used to sing when I was kid. If I had thought of it when I was planning this worship service, I might have included it. But I didn't. It goes like this:

Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for ev'ry one,
And there's a cross for me.

I discovered the author of this hymn, Thomas Shepherd, first published it in 1693. He was inspired to write by the story of Simon, the man from Cyrene. The original is slightly different:

Must Simon bear the cross alone,
While other saints be free?
No, each saint of thine shall find his own
And there is one for me.

Whene'er it falls unto my lot,
Let it not drive me from
My God, let me ne'er be forgot
'Till Thou hast lov'd me home.

We are not called to stand on the sidewalk and watch the parade go by. We are called to follow Jesus ... to draw near to the cross.

Amen.