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BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS

Carry It

Matthew 16:24

By John L. Wheeler

"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" (Matthew 16:24 ESV)

There is something astonishing about these words of Jesus, something easily overlooked because we have become so familiar with the cross. We read them knowing what happened at Calvary. We know about the nails, the crown of thorns, the mocking crowds, and the Savior suspended between heaven and earth. We know the cross became the instrument upon which the Son of God offered Himself for the sins of His people.

But the disciples did not know these things when Jesus spoke.

The crucifixion had not yet occurred. The disciples had never seen their Master carrying a cross. They had not stood beneath Calvary's darkness or heard His cry of abandonment. They had not watched Roman soldiers divide His garments or witnessed the piercing of His side.

And yet, before any of these things happened, Jesus told them to take up their crosses and follow Him.

Why a cross?

The disciples certainly knew what crucifixion meant. Rome had made sure of that. The cross was an instrument of execution, deliberately designed to inflict suffering, humiliation, and death. Condemned criminals were sometimes required to carry the wooden crossbeam through the streets toward the place of execution. It was a public announcement that the condemned man had surrendered every claim to govern his own destiny.

To take up a cross was to begin a journey from which there was ordinarily no return.

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But Jesus had not yet revealed to His disciples the precise manner of His own death.

Death could come in many forms. There had already been attempts to stone Jesus. John the Baptist had been beheaded, and James would later be executed with the sword (Acts 12:2). The disciples knew that men could be put to death in different ways. Yet Jesus did not say, “Take up your sword,” or “Prepare for the executioner's blade.” He spoke of a cross.

We may find nothing surprising about that choice because we already know how Jesus died. But we must remember that we are looking backward from Calvary. The disciples were looking forward into a future they did not understand. They knew what crucifixion meant, but they did not yet know that their Master would be crucified. And still, before they had witnessed His death, He commanded them to take up their crosses and follow Him.

Jesus had begun telling them that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, be killed, and be raised on the third day. Peter found even that announcement intolerable.

“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” (Matthew 16:22 ESV)

Jesus rebuked Peter, exposing the terrible difference between the things of God and the things of man.

Then, almost immediately, He spoke of the cross.

Consider the extraordinary timing. Peter had just rejected the thought of his Master's death, and Jesus answered by telling His followers that they, too, must be prepared to die.

Before the disciples had witnessed the Savior's cross, the Savior had placed a cross before His disciples.

He did not invite them to admire it. He did not command them merely to contemplate its significance. He told them to take it up.

Carry it.

There is something deeply personal in that command. Jesus did not say that His disciples must take up someone else's cross. Each must take up his own. The summons was individual, deliberate, and costly.

Nor was He speaking merely of the ordinary burdens of human existence. Illness, disappointment, financial hardship, and personal sorrow are real afflictions, but they are not necessarily the cross of discipleship. Such suffering belongs to life in a fallen world and is experienced by believers and unbelievers alike.

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The cross Jesus described was inseparable from following Him.

It meant surrendering the claim to live according to one's own will when that will stood against His. It meant accepting rejection rather than abandoning Him, enduring suffering rather than denying Him, and remaining faithful even when obedience might cost one's life.

Jesus did not promise His followers that discipleship would be comfortable. He told them that following Him might require everything.

And then He added those remarkable words:

"follow me."

The command was not simply to carry a cross. It was to carry it while following Christ.

That distinction changes everything.

The disciple does not seek suffering for its own sake. He does not earn salvation through sacrifice or imagine that his suffering can contribute anything to the redeeming work of Christ. There is only one atoning cross, and only one Savior who could bear the guilt of sinners.

Christ carried His cross to accomplish redemption. His disciples take up theirs because they belong to the Redeemer.

And there is something particularly moving about the fact that these words were spoken before Calvary.

When Jesus was crucified, John stood near the cross with the women who had followed the Lord. The Gospel records Jesus entrusting His mother to the care of the beloved disciple. Of the Twelve, John is the one explicitly identified as present there.

What must those earlier words have meant to him as he watched his Master die?

Scripture does not tell us whether John remembered that conversation at the foot of the cross. But surely the meaning of the command became immeasurably more profound after he had seen what his Lord endured.

The cross was no longer merely an instrument of Roman execution. It had become the place where the Lamb of God gave Himself for His people.

And still the command remained.

Take up his cross and follow me.

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The resurrection did not cancel that summons. It established the triumph of the One who had issued it. The risen Christ continued to call His disciples to faithful obedience, whatever the cost.

There is a temptation to make Christianity comfortable, to preserve the promises of Christ while setting aside the demands of discipleship. We may gladly speak of forgiveness, eternal life, and the hope of glory, yet hesitate when obedience threatens our ambitions, reputation, security, or cherished desires.

But the Lord who promises eternal life is the same Lord who commands self-denial.

He does not ask us to determine how little we may surrender and still follow Him. He calls us to follow Him without reservation.

And perhaps that is what makes Matthew 16:24 so arresting.

Jesus knew where He was going. He knew what awaited Him in Jerusalem. He knew the suffering, the humiliation, and the death that lay ahead.

The disciples did not.

Yet before He carried His own cross toward Calvary, He told them that following Him would require them to take up theirs.

The cross was never an unexpected addition to Christian discipleship. It was there in the invitation from the beginning.

And the command remains as personal today as it was when first spoken.

Deny yourself.

Take up your cross.

Follow Him.

Carry It.

Just a thought.

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