

Toward the Cross

The Fourth Week of Lent

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

A cross is a terrible thing. A horrific torture device created to maximize a victim’s suffering; it was nothing to be made light of or shrugged off—certainly nothing anyone would want.

It was in the context of talking about His own impending death that Jesus told his disciples that they would have to take up their crosses as a part of following Him. They must have been horrified. Those first disciples would have known that the only people who carried a cross were condemned criminals, stumbling down the road to their own execution. For the disciples, taking up a cross could only mean following Jesus to an excruciating death.

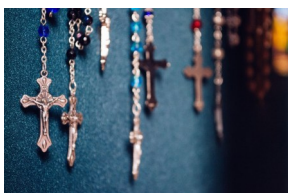
Over the centuries, crosses have been glorified, made beautiful in precious metals and encrusted with gems. The reality is that nothing more nor less than the blood of our Lord gave the cross its beauty, making it a symbol of salvation and redemption rather than death and condemnation.



From this side of the resurrection, we think of taking up our cross to follow Jesus as accepting hardships, renouncing self-serving sins, postponing certain pleasures, putting God’s agenda before our own. Difficult? Yes. Even painful at times. But with the beauty of hindsight, we know that taking up our cross to follow Jesus doesn’t usually lead to physical death.

That said, a cross always leads to some kind of death. Because Jesus doesn’t ask us to take up any old cross. He asks me to take up *my* cross. Not your cross, not even His cross. That means more than making hard decisions. The death that comes from taking up my cross means death of selfishness, death of pride, sometimes even death of dreams and plans. My cross is my pain, my grief, my sorrow. And taking up my cross means coming to terms with all those things in light of my discipleship and Jesus’ life and love. The only good news about carrying *my* cross is that Jesus shares the burden with me.

The other thing about taking up my cross to follow Jesus is that my cross falls in the shadow of His cross. And His cross didn’t only lead to death. His cross led to His resurrection, to our redemption. Yes, when Jesus invited us to join Him and take up our cross, that was an invitation to death. But it was also an invitation to life.



What does taking up your cross look like in your life today?

How can you allow Jesus to share that burden with you?

Exercise:

Matthew 16:21-27

1. Lift this exercise up to the Lord, asking Him to highlight what He wants you to notice.
2. Read the passage to the right, stopping at any words or phrases that catch your attention. Sit with the word or phrase, meditating on it and asking God to show you why this word or phrase caught your attention. After you've meditated on the thing that caught your attention, continue reading the passage, stopping at any other words or phrases that strike you, and discussing with the Lord what you've noticed.
3. Take a few moments to sit quietly before moving on to the next step.
4. Slowly read the passage a second time, again pausing when something catches your attention. This time ask God to show you what He wants you to know or do in light of the word or phrase that you've noticed. Wait to hear what the Lord may put into your heart or mind. (You may sense a strong impression or just what seems to be a fleeting thought. Don't dismiss anything.)
5. Take a few moments to sit quietly before moving on to the next step.
6. Slowly read the passage a third time, just letting God's Word soak into you.
7. Finally, sit quietly for a bit, and allow God to continue to work in you.

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.