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A DAD WHO BORE THE CROSS

Luke 23:26; Mark 15:21; Rom. 16:13

By

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Luke Lesson 108

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Hello! My name is Rufus. I'm one of the laborers in the cause of Christ in the church at Rome. I'm a good friend of the Apostle Paul. In fact, we're like brothers, you might say. He spent some time with my family when we lived in another part of the Empire, and my mother became like a second mother to Paul (Rom. 16:13). So I feel like he's a part of the family.

But I didn't come here to talk primarily about myself, but rather about my father. It was his godly life that influenced and motivated me to be faithful to the Lord. He's with the Lord now, but some of the lessons he learned in the school of faith are the foundation for my life, and I'd like to share them with you.

Dad's name was Simon (we are Jewish in spite of my Roman name) and he hailed from Cyrene, on the northern coast of Africa in what you know as Libya. He met the Lord Jesus in a most unusual and unexpected manner. Dad was a faithful man, looking and praying for God's promised Messiah to come and deliver His people from their sins. Before he left home for his pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover that year, he told us that he was pleading with God for a time of unusual blessing, a time when his prayers of many years would be answered. How little did he suspect just how God would in fact answer his prayers in a way that he didn't even recognize at the time!

In fact, Dad thought of it as an irritating, humiliating interruption to his day that messed up the very reason he traveled all that way to Jerusalem—to celebrate the Passover. Dad remembers complaining, "The one time in my life that I'm finally able to come to Jerusalem for the Passover. I spend all the time and money for this one great day—and then this happens!" But I'm getting ahead of my story.

Dad had gone up to Jerusalem for the Passover, along with tens of thousands of other pilgrims. This was in the day before telephones, computers, and advance reservations, you understand. So when Dad arrived, he couldn't find a room anywhere in the city.

He found lodging a short distance out in the countryside. That unforgettable morning he was walking into the city between 8 and 9 a.m. to participate in the day's activities at the temple. Just as he got to the city gate, he met a surging crowd coming out of the gate, which turned out to be led by a Roman execution squad, leading three condemned prisoners to be crucified.

Crucifixions were a common enough sight in our time, so Dad didn't pay much attention to what was happening. He just stepped to the side and waited for the crowd to pass, thinking, "Poor wretches, I wonder what they did to deserve this?" and "I'd better hurry and get to the temple or I'll miss some of the ceremonies I came all this way to see."

The Roman soldiers in our day got a sadistic kick out of making a condemned man carry his own cross to the site of his execution. It was just another way they rubbed in their superiority and dominance over the peoples they ruled. Just as the group passed by where Dad was, one of the prisoners, who obviously had already been badly beaten and abused, slumped to the ground under the load of his cross. The soldiers kicked him and cursed at him to get up, but it was obvious that this prisoner just didn't have the strength to go another step under the load of that heavy cross.

Before he knew what was happening, one of the soldiers shouted, "Hey, you!" He roughly grabbed Dad by the arm, dragged him toward the fallen prisoner, and barked, "You carry it for him!" The other soldiers laughed at Dad's misfortune. Dad was stunned and protested, "But if I touch that cross, I'll be defiled for the Passover." That made the soldiers roar even louder! The guy who had grabbed Dad snarled, "It wasn't a suggestion, buddy! It's a command!" So Dad picked up the despised implement of death, hoisted it to his back, and fell in line behind the bloodied back of the prisoner who turned out, of course, to be Jesus.

Since he was already involved and his celebration of the Passover was messed up anyway, Dad decided to stick around and witness the brutal proceedings. It was a day that marked him forever. As Dad saw the sky grow dark and felt the earth shake, as he watched the way in which Jesus bore His suffering, how He treated His persecutors, what He said to the penitent thief hanging beside Him, Dad knew that this was no ordinary man. Dad heard Jesus

cry out the words of Psalm 22:1, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Just before He died, Dad heard Him proclaim, "It is finished!" As Jesus breathed His last, Dad heard one of the centurions standing nearby exclaim, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" and Dad had the strange sense that he was right.

From that moment, Dad began to wonder if this Jesus could possibly have been the Messiah the prophet Isaiah (53:4-5) wrote about: "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell on Him, and by His scourging we are healed." Later, Dad learned that the thick veil in the temple had been torn in two from top to bottom at that very moment, symbolizing what Jesus our Messiah had done in opening the way for us into God's holy presence. Dad's remaining questions were cleared up fifty days later at the Feast of Pentecost, as he heard Peter and the other apostles proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. That day Dad, along with 3,000 others, put his faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus as his Messiah and Savior.

Dad's life and our lives, as his family, would never be the same after that day. Dad led us to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and we have devoted ourselves to serve Him. Later Dad shared with us some valuable lessons about salvation and service from his unusual experience that day, which I'd like to pass on to you. He taught us that ...

Salvation is God's doing and service means self-denial
and sharing in Jesus' suffering.

1. Salvation is God's doing in spite of our sin.

Dad came to see that nothing—especially not something as crucial as our salvation—ever happens to us by chance, even though it may seem that way to us. Salvation is God's doing, not our doing, and certainly is not left to coincidence. "Think of it," Dad used to muse aloud, "if I had slept in for a half-hour longer that morning or if I had gone into the city a half-hour earlier, I would have missed that encounter that forever marked my life!

But God was there, behind the scenes, guiding my footsteps toward that life-changing moment. Praise to His Sovereign Name!"

I noticed a book in your pastor's study (*L'Abri* [Tyndale House], p.53) in which the writer, Edith Schaeffer, observes,

The thing about real life is that important events don't announce themselves. Trumpets don't blow, drums don't beat to let you know you are going to meet the most important person you've ever met, or read the most important thing you are ever going to read, or have the most important conversation you are ever going to have, or spend the most important week you are ever going to spend. Usually something that is going to change your whole life is a memory before you can be impressed about it. You don't have a chance to get excited about that sort of thing ... ahead of time.

Since life is that way, isn't it great to know that all the days that were ordained for us were written in God's book before we were ever born (Ps. 139:16)? We didn't decide to choose Him before He chose us. In fact, He chose us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). Dad didn't decide to carry the cross that day. He had no plans or desire to go to Golgotha. He wanted to go to the temple. But he was chosen out of the crowd and conscripted to go to the cross. Later, Dad learned that Jesus had told His disciples, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit ..." (John 15:16). Dad used to reminisce and tell us, "Salvation is God's doing, not our doing."

Then he would add, "And God's salvation is in spite of our sin, not because we deserve it!" Dad knew that if he hadn't carried that cross that day, someone else would have. The execution was certain to be carried out. And yet Dad said that he always felt kind of responsible as he watched the soldiers drive those spikes through Jesus' hands into that beam that he had carried.

Later, Dad came to realize in a much deeper sense that his own sin really was responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. He came to this earth to give His life as a ransom for sinners. Each of us is guilty of enough sin to put the spotless Lamb of God on that cross. Salvation is totally because of God's unmerited favor. Later, because of Dad's experience, I came to realize that although I was

raised in a Christian home, I was a sinner who needed a Savior. I put my trust in Christ as my sin-bearer. But Dad not only learned something about salvation. He also learned something about serving Christ:

2. Service means denying ourselves in following Jesus and sharing in His suffering.

A. Service means denying ourselves in following Jesus.

After he became a Christian, Dad said that for him one of the most meaningful sayings of Jesus was, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Dad got an object lesson that day on the meaning of that verse that he never forgot. He passed it on to me.

Many people are confused about that verse. They think that their burdens and problems are their "cross" in life. They drearily sigh, "Well, I guess that's just the cross I have to bear." But that's not what Jesus was talking about.

The cross, you must realize, was not a source of irritation or even trouble; it was an instrument of death. To carry the cross meant that a man was on his way to die. When Jesus talked about denying myself and taking up my cross, He meant that I am to follow Him into death to myself. He wasn't necessarily talking about martyrdom, although that might be the result in some cases. He was talking about a continual, repeated denial of one's self on behalf of others as seen in His own example. It means saying no to my old self as the directive force in my life in order to say yes to the Lord Jesus as the new directive force in my life. James Stalker (*The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ* [Zondervan], pp. 81-82) expresses the idea well:

We tend to speak of trouble of any kind as a cross; and doubtless any kind of trouble may be borne bravely in the name of Christ. But, properly speaking, the cross of Christ is what is borne in the act of confessing Him or for the sake of His work. When anyone makes a stand for principle, because he is a Christian, and takes the consequences in the shape of scorn or loss, this is the cross of Christ. The pain you may feel in speaking to another in Christ's name, the sacrifice of comfort or time you may make in engaging in Christian work,

the self-denial you exercise in giving of your means that the cause of Christ may spread at home or abroad, the reproach you may have to bear by identifying yourself with militant causes or with despised persons, because you believe they are on Christ's side—in such conduct lies the cross of Christ.

Of course Dad didn't bear the cross voluntarily that first day. But he later came to learn that what he did that day by conscription he now could do willingly out of love for Jesus. He used to say that his trip to Calvary taught him three things about self-denial in Christian service:

First, Dad pointed out that *he went someplace he did not want to go*. Dad wanted to go to the temple to worship, but instead he ended up carrying a heavy cross to Golgotha to witness an execution. Instead of a joyful celebration, he was forced to watch a gruesome spectacle. Dad didn't want to go where they forced him to go. But he went anyway, and the end result was blessing for him and his family.

It's that way in serving Jesus. Sometimes He may want you to go someplace you really don't want to go. "Anyplace but there, Lord!" But when you deny yourself and follow Him in obedience, you and your family are tremendously blessed.

Second, Dad *did something he did not want to do*. The cross is an offensive thing to us Jews. It was a symbol of Roman oppression. Rome reserved crucifixion for its foreign subjects and for the worst of its criminals. Only rarely were Romans subjected to this humiliating, torturous form of death. Besides, Dad had his best clothes on and that cross was dirty and covered with blood from Jesus' scourged back. To have to carry on his shoulders this barbarous symbol of Roman oppression, and that on the day of the Passover, was repugnant to my father. And, it was extremely embarrassing! People along the way probably thought that Dad was the criminal on his way to execution. Yet carrying this despised cross was the means God used to draw him to salvation and blessing.

In serving Christ there are some things which have to be done at times that are very distasteful—bearing someone's burdens, washing dirty feet, cleaning up after someone else's mess, losing our reputation because of being identified with Jesus—that sort of

thing. But when we deny ourselves and take up that despised task out of obedience to our Savior, we will be blessed.

Third, Dad *followed someone he did not want to follow*. Dad wasn't interested in following that beaten, bloodied, condemned man who claimed to be the King of the Jews. He wanted to go his own way up to the temple where the Passover lamb was to be slain. But God wanted him to go to Golgotha where the true Passover Lamb was to be slain.

Sometimes in serving Jesus, it's a lot more popular to go with the religious crowd in their way of doing things. There's a popular "Jesus" out there. He's not bloody and despised and forsaken. He's healthy and wealthy. He exists to make you happy. But the Jesus Dad followed was the same one Paul later preached, the one who shames the wisdom of the wise: Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23). Even though carrying that cross was a shameful thing for my father that day, it became his glory. Dad knew what Paul meant when he wrote, "But may it never be that I should glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Dad learned that service means self-denial in following Jesus. Also, he learned that ...

B. Service means sharing in Jesus' suffering.

In carrying that cross, Dad felt very close to Jesus in His suffering. He had never seen Jesus before that moment. But as he picked up the cross, his eyes met Jesus' eyes for a brief instant, and Dad saw a look of gratitude and love that burned into his soul. As he trudged behind that Man of Sorrows, Dad later felt like he had a part, however small, in sharing in Christ's sufferings.

Isn't that what Paul meant when he said that we are children of God, and "if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him" (Rom. 8:17)? And isn't that what Paul meant when he wrote about doing his share to fill up "that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24)?

It's not that Christ's death was insufficient, of course. Rather, it's as if a great doctor labored and suffered to come up with a cure for cancer. He gave his very life to obtain that cure. But his cure

remains useless if kept in the laboratory. It takes others to go out into the world, to toil and sacrifice themselves to take the cure to those who need it. In one sense, those who take the cure to others may be said to be filling up or completing the suffering of the one who made the cure available (adapted from William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit* [Baker], pp. 80-81).

Christ's death is complete and sufficient. But any suffering we endure to take the message to others or to stand against the tide for the sake of the gospel is our sharing in His sufferings. While at the time it is never fun and always difficult, some day we will look back on such suffering for the cause of Christ with great joy. James Stalker (*The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ* [pp. 83-84]) says it eloquently:

But think of how blessed to Simon would appear years later the cross-bearing which was at the time so bitter! No doubt it became the romance of his life. And to this day who can help envying him for being allowed to give his strength to the fainting Savior and to remove the burden from that bleeding and smarting back? So for all of us there is a day coming when any service we have done to Christ will be the memory of which we will be most proud. It will not be the recollection of the prizes we have won, the pleasures we have enjoyed, the discomforts we have escaped, that will come back to us with delight as we review life from its close; but, if we have denied ourselves and have borne the cross for Christ's sake, the memory of that will be a pillow soft and satisfying for a dying head. In that day we shall wish that the minutes given to Christ's service had been years, and the cents dollars; and every cup of cold water and every word of sympathy and every act of self-denial will be so pleasant to remember that we shall wish they had been multiplied a thousand times.

Conclusion

That day at the cross, my Dad, Simon of Cyrene, learned that salvation is God's doing in spite of our sin. He also that service means self-denial in following Jesus and it means sharing in His suffering. Dad passed those lessons on to me, his son Rufus. I came to know God's sovereign grace in my life. The Apostle Paul made reference to this when he wrote, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the

Lord" [NIV] (Rom. 16:13). I served the Lord at the church in Rome, as did my mother, whom Paul considered as his own mother (Rom. 16:13).

Dads, if you want your families to know God's grace personally and experientially, then make sure that you model it by going to the cross and learning the lesson of salvation. Be "diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you" (2 Pet. 1:10). And, go to the cross and learn the lesson of service. Deny yourself in daily service to your family and others. Endure hardship to take the gospel to others. As you model these things, your children will see what I saw, a dad who bore the cross.

There's an intriguing postscript to the story of Rufus. Polycarp, Bishop of Symrna, a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote to the Philippian church in A.D. 135. He mentions, among others, a man named Rufus who had been martyred. If that is the Rufus of Mark 15:21 and Romans 16:13, then he really did learn the lessons in cross-bearing from his father, Simon of Cyrene.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss biblically: Does anything happen by chance or luck? What are the practical implications of this?
2. Does God make us do what we hate when we yield to serve Him? Where do personal desires fit in?
3. Does self-denial mean saying yes to everyone else's demands? Is it wrong to meet my own needs?
4. How does the meaning of cross-bearing run counter to current American Christian trends?

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