

Take Up Your Cross Daily

Luke 9:23

Jim Elliot is one of my spiritual heroes. On January 8, 1956, he and three other men were attacked and killed by the Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador. Elliot and a few others went to take the gospel to these primitive people. The story about their deaths captivated the nation because of a story in Life Magazine. Jim's wife, Elizabeth Elliot, wrote about the event in her book, *Through Gates of Splendor*. Although it was a tragedy, Jim was ready to die. In his journal, Jim Elliot wrote: "God, I pray Thee, light these idle sticks of my life that I may burn for Thee. Consume my life, my God for it is Thine. I seek not a long life but a full one like You, Lord Jesus."

Last week we saw that Jesus said that to be His follower, His disciple, we must deny ourselves. To deny yourself means to take yourself off of the throne of your life and put Jesus as Lord of your life. It means to say no to yourself so that you can say yes to Jesus. It means that Jesus lives and loves through you so that you think of others and their needs before your own.

Next, Jesus says we must take up our cross daily.

What does it mean to take up the cross?

For you to take up your cross doesn't mean you carry a cross in your pocket or wear one around your neck. It doesn't mean you carry around a large wooden cross down the road as some have done. Other people think their "cross to bear" is some kind of physical ailment or some constant problem they have. I've heard people complain about their ingrown toenail or migraine headache and say, "But I guess it's just my cross that I'll just have to bear."

I don't believe that Jesus is talking here about ingrown toenails or migraines. He is not talking about simply having to live with difficult people as if my spouse, my children, or my boss is the cross I must bear.

The real meaning of the cross is so simple it has often been missed. In Jesus' day everyone knew what it meant to carry a cross. Most of Jesus' disciples had seen hundreds or even thousands of men carry crosses. They had seen these men hung on those crosses and die. A person carrying a cross had only one destination: Death. It was always a one-way trip.

Jesus is talking about dying. Not just physical death, but death to self. **The disciple's cross demands death to self-will, self-interest, and self-seeking.** In the words of Jesus, it requires denying self (Luke 9:23). The "way of the cross" is the way of death to our own interests. As our Lord set aside His glory and prerogatives as God in order to come to earth and "bear His cross," so the disciple of Christ must do likewise (cf. Philippians 2:1-8).

Taking up the cross and going to death reminds me of a story in the Old Testament. In one man's life, God asked him to do the most difficult thing imaginable. Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless. God had promised them both that they would be the parents of a multitude. "*Your offspring will be as vast as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore,*" is how God put it. They would be the parents of a whole new race of people. But time was passing and they did not even have one child. It was very late in their lives.

But even though Sarah was full of wrinkles and Abraham an old man, God gave them a son. His name was Isaac. It meant laughter, because they thought it was hilarious that God would grant two such old people a child. Their hopes came alive, and now they believed God was able to do anything — even make them parents of a new nation of people.

But then one day, God asked Abraham to do something which he could not imagine. God asked Abraham to take his son — his only son — and offer him as a sacrifice on an altar of fire. It seemed completely unlike God and went against everything Abraham knew about him. His mind must have reeled with the thought of what God was asking him to do. But Abraham had learned one thing over his long years: to trust God no matter what. So off he went, with his son Isaac carrying the wood on his back on which he would be laid. Isaac knew they were going to worship the Lord and offer a sacrifice, but he had no idea the sacrifice was to be him.

When they came to the place, Abraham bound his son, laid him on the altar and raised the knife. All his dreams were about to die with Isaac. Every hope that had burned in his breast would go up in smoke. He would again be childless and there was little hope of being the father of a multitude now. But he was willing to do what God asked him to do, even when he could not understand it. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac from the dead if He needed to.

But as Abraham brought the knife down, God stopped him. God's intention was never to have Abraham kill his son, but to see if he was willing to sacrifice the thing that was closest to his heart. Was he willing to die to his dreams and cling to God alone. Abraham passed that test.

I have to wonder if I would pass the test. Sometimes I have a hard time handing over the minor loves of my life, let alone the things that are central and strike at my heart. God is not as interested in having me hand over these things as he is in my willingness to hand them over. These do not have to be bad things. They may be good things, but if they begin to take God's place, or distract me from loving him, then I must be willing to place them on the altar and lift the knife. It is a part of taking up my cross daily and living the crucified life.

The cross means that we must "put to death" the our old nature and its practices:

- 2 Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?
- 3 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?
- 4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.
- 5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,
- 6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.
- 7 For he who has died has been freed from sin.
- 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him,

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. (Col 3:5 NKJV)

And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Rom 8:10 NKJV)

One of my all-time favorite verses which I recite almost daily is Galatians 2:20. "***I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.***"

In other words, my Self was put to death when I identified with the death of Jesus but there is a real problem: Our self has more lives than a lucky cat. Crucified self keeps wanting to jump down from the cross and step up on the throne of your life. That's why Jesus said taking up your cross was a daily discipline. Actually, I have to quote and claim Galatians 2:20 several times a day and sometimes even several times an hour!

Because Christ is living in you, Jesus wants to express His personality in your life. He wants to fill you with His love, His patience, His forgiveness, His peace, His wisdom etc. That can only happen when Self is off the throne and dead. When you make this discovery, the Christian life becomes an exciting experience of surrendering to the life of Jesus within you rather than trying to imitate the life of Jesus.

The only way you can truly experience life is by dying to Self. A real disciple is a dead man walking. He has died to the charms of the world and to the lusts of the flesh.

A cartoon showed a woman talking to her pastor in his study. Evidently the pastor had asked her about her spiritual life. The cartoon has her saying, "*Well, I haven't actually DIED to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once.*" You have to do more than just feel faint. You have to make the decision to die completely to your old life, your plans and desires.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you sell must your house and become a missionary in the jungles of South America, although it might. It doesn't always mean that you must quit your job or sell your SUV, although it might.

It does mean that your heart is different. You have been changed. You have died to self and you live to God. Your goal is not to please yourself, but to please God. Your attitude and motives have turned around.

Being dead has its advantages. For instance, you can't really bother a dead person. Go down to the funeral home sometime and walk into a room where a body is lying in rest and try this. Wait until the room is empty and walk up to the corpse. Compliment him. "You look wonderful today!" He isn't moved by flattery or the praise of men. Try criticizing him. "That tie looks awful." Does it bother him? That's a good thing about being dead, compliments or criticism don't affect you. Try to bribe him. "Here's a hundred dollar bill, do you want it?" I bet he won't even glance at your money, much less take it. Try to tempt him. Pull out some illegal drugs, "Here do you want some?" Get the point? When you are dead to Self, then flattery, criticism, money and temptation have no appeal to you. That's what it means to take up your cross.

The one who has picked up a cross and headed out, has left all things behind. Nothing of the old life is important any more.

The first century historian, Josephus, was a Jew who wrote specifically of the history of the Jews; but within the parameters of his study, he was meticulous.

Josephus believed that Isaac was about twenty five years old at the time God gave Abraham instructions for this sacrifice.

If Josephus is right his was not a small boy, as is so often portrayed in Sunday School materials and taught to our own children. This was a strong, healthy young man with much of his life yet to come; marriage, children, pursuit of all the usual priorities of this earthly life. A young man like Isaac could easily have resisted his father had he been so inclined.; yet he willingly carried the wood.

Here is a quote from Josephus. It is what Josephus imagined Isaac's response would be to his father's announcement of what God had instructed him to do. According to this historian, Isaac said:

“I was not worthy to be born in the first place, if I would reject the plan and will of God and my own father, and not give myself up willing to both their pleasures. Even if this was the will of you alone, my father, it would be wrong to disobey.” And from there he went immediately up to the altar.

Isaac trusted his father and he trusted God. Not only did he go willingly, he carried the wood!

Jesus tells us to take up our cross daily. We must carry the wood, believer.

When Jesus said in Luke 9:23 “...and follow Me” He had a very specific place in mind. He only carried the cross to one place. The top of Golgotha.

Jesus calls us DAILY, to a different to that hill. It is the only path to eternal life; obedience to it is the only path to blessing.

Carry the wood. Pick it up daily and head for Golgotha. The Father's good pleasure in this kind of obedience is shown in resurrection power.

Isaac carried the wood. Jesus carried the wood.

And in both cases, FATHER AND SON WALKED ON TOGETHER.

Now, God did not ultimately require such a dear price from Abraham. He stopped Abraham from slaying his son, and provided a ram for the sacrifice; a type of the Christ to come, who would be God's own sacrifice to redeem mankind back to Himself.

But Abraham had passed the test of faith, and Isaac had certainly passed a test of obedience; obedience even to death.

When the Auca Indians killed Jim Elliott, it was not a tragedy, because Jim Elliott was already dead before he got to South America. He had lost his life in order to save it. He said, “He is no fool to give up that which he cannot keep in order to gain that which he can never lose.”