

THE CROSS AND THE COUNTERFEIT

By

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Basic to Christian faith is the doctrine of Christ, that every believer must deny his own will and accept the way of the cross. Following Jesus does not mean that one merely comes along behind Him, enjoying the fruits of His labors and the path made easy by the suffering Christ endured to clear the way. Rather it means that one is to labor as He labored, that one is to endure the same obstacles He met, and suffer hatred, ridicule, opposition and self-denial as He suffered.

Modern religion has come a long way since the challenge to deny self and take up the cross. A modern believer who may be despised for his or her faith and who is burdened often the point of tears, will never make it in the modern Christian hall of fame. They prefer a tanned, gold medal winner; not that pale fellow from the Gulag.

Today's evangelism doesn't offer a cross, but promises to remove it, and give the unregenerate what his heart craves. It is put together by experts in the field of human emotion who carefully structure and decorate the "gospel" to attract modern, affluent man and give him what he needs to satisfy his jaded and misdirected desires. Nation-wide TV programs include sensual, rhythmic music by sexually-appealing young men and women. The staging is prepared to give the viewer a vicarious thrill — not of God — but of exotic places and romantic associations. The message itself is also designed for itching ears, to promise relief from all the world's tribulations and responsibilities ("Expect a miracle"), a kind of magic formula that will immediately change Cinderella into the Queen. Answer the invitation to hear a popular Christian speaker, and usually you will hear a personal testimony about how he has found a life trouble-free, and how he knows the Lord is blessing him because the self is satisfied and he has no cross to bear.

In contrast to such elation over a care-free life-style, the Christians of the first century "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (Acts 5:41).

PURPOSE OF GOD. Faith in the Biblical sense is to believe God; to believe not only the person of God as He is, but to believe all that He proposes. It is to believe against one's own wishes, personal desires and natural inclinations. This is why there is a perfect contrast between walking by faith and walking by sight. Abraham went out, not knowing where God was leading. He took Isaac up the hill of Mariah to slay him by God's command; against reason, against love, against his family against his son and himself. But it was God's purpose he designed to do, and everything pertaining to self had to be denied. Whatever the consequences, however deep the pain and prolonged the suffering, Abraham would bear it, for he had faith in God. He had faith in the ultimate purpose of God to make Isaac the link through which the seed of Abraham would come to bless all the nations. Somehow, Abraham believed that after he had sacrificed Isaac, God would resurrect him from the dead and go on to fulfill the promise and His purpose (Heb. 11:19). But his in no way ameliorated the awful pain and repulsion of the act nor the possible consequences with regard to his wife and the rest of the community. The purpose of God was to take precedence over the feelings of Abraham. His success

worldly-wise might be fully wiped out in going through with this thing, but God's purpose would be accomplished.

This is where Biblical faith departs from modern evangelical faith. Biblical faith says "this will, not mine, shall be done." But modern faith says "I want all my burdens lifted, problems solved and pain removed. God, I want you to do it. My will be done." For example, a popular booklet is entitled "God Wants You Well" and proceeds to teach that God does not want anyone to suffer any physical pains or infirmities. Jesus bore all such on the cross, it says, and you are to approach God in faith that He will remove all these things that cause physical suffering.

Biblical faith says, "Here I am, God; Use me", but popular faith says, "Here is God, use Him." The modern evangelists says "Come to Jesus and He will show you how to get all you want out of life." But Jesus said to Paul, "Come, and I will show you how much you must suffer." Jesus still invites us to come and learn to share His burden and yoke. A burden and yoke (taking up the cross) is necessary for us if we are to fulfill the purpose of God. That purpose is to turn us fully to God, to transform us, to bring our thoughts into harmony with His, to bind us close to Him, to have us "will o do His will," until there is never a thought in our minds to desire anything or to do anything except that which is a reflection of Him in whose image we are created.

This is a lifelong process. Paul, even when an old man, said that he had not yet been "made perfect." The process was not complete in him, but he said "I press on," having the desire to suffer as did Jesus, because he knew this was the process by which he was to be made like Him (Phil 3:10-12).

GOD'S HELP. "Why doesn't God help me?" someone says. "I have prayed and prayed, but I am still having the same problem." The answer may be that God has helped and is helping. That's the reason for the problem. The very problem, the suffering, the inadequate feeling, all are part of the help God is giving. God is transforming lives (Rom 12:1-2) by renewing minds. This requires a painful process. One must have the old ideas torn from his mind by the roots. Sometimes it is a terrible ordeal that makes one think that God has abandoned him completely. The more he clings to the idea that Christian faith is supposed to relieve him of suffering and sanction his self-centered desires, the more violent the action must be and the more painful it becomes.

God's manner of helping is often rejected at the first sight of blood. Then it's off to the bookstore to find one of those handy little copies that gives the "key" to power with God, or "secret of success" in prayer. Note that the Bible says nothing of OUR having power with God, but much about God having power over us. The Bible says nothing of reaching a plane of "success" by prayer, but a great deal of attaining a place of humility in submission to God's will.

Faith in Christ means accepting His direction for life, so that life has meaning and purpose, without fear of ultimate failure. This means great joy in spite of handicaps, pain, poverty and temporal failures. Overcoming the world through a victorious faith does not mean that faith in Christ will eliminate all the discouraging, humiliating and agonizing experiences. Rather it means that faith enables us to live victoriously in and through such experiences.

THE JOY PROMISED. It is worth noting that the people we have known with the deepest joy and peace were the ones who also shared the deepest sorrow and endured the most suffering. Jesus promised tribulation and joy all in the same breath (John 16:33).

While joy is promised, it is promised in the midst of heartaches and difficulties. Conversion to Christ may often magnify these difficulties instead of relieving them. The joy that is promised is not based on physical pleasure (release from pain, illness, etc.), nor social success (relief from family conflicts and gaining prestige and acclaim). To promise relief from conflicts, pain and suffering as part of the salvation package is to preach a gospel different from that described in the Bible. The message to be preached is “repentance and remission of sins.” As long as anyone is concerned about physical health or human conflicts more than he is concerned about his own alienation from God because of his sin, he is not ready for salvation.

The joy, first of all, is in relief from sin. The first thing Jesus said to the man sick of palsy, hopelessly and helplessly suffering day in and day out, was not “Be healed,” but “Be forgiven.” There is not suffering so great as that of a heart fully aware of sin and guilt, and there is not joy greater than the full assurance that this sin is forgiven so that the heart is right with God. There is also joy in the very suffering itself when one realizes that it is part of his becoming Christ-like. So we are taught to “count it all joy” when the many temptations assail us, knowing that it develops patience and faith (James 1:2). Neither are we to think it unusual when severely persecuted, knowing that the “fiery trial” comes to prove us; therefore, Peter tells us that as partakers of Christ’s suffering, we are to rejoice that we may have the more joy when He comes (I Pet. 4:12–13).

Joy is open to the Christian through fellowship and service in the church, through sharing the blessings God gives and in the love that grows between the saints. But such joy does not take the place of suffering; rather it is intermingled with it.

Finally there is the joy in expectation of the final completion of God’s purpose. Jesus endured the cross “for the joy that was set before Him” (Heb. 12:2). Moses “chose to share ill treatment with the people of God, rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasure of Egypt; for he looked unto the recompense of reward” (Heb. 11:25–26).

Communists have always ridiculed the Christians’ hope of future reward, calling on them to abandon “pie in the sky” religion and rise up to claim the reward now. Many “testimony” speakers seem to have copied the Marxists in promising rewards NOW as a means of enticing the sinner to confess the faith. But we have not “hoped in this life only.” We do expect God’s purpose to be realized in giving us immortality — life furnished with all that is good, beautiful, happy and complete — and we rejoice in the “blessed hope.”

The world still lies under the curse of Genesis 3:17–19. By entering into covenant fellowship with God, we are set in complete and total opposition to the world, so that Christ calls us to “work out (our) salvation with fear and trembling” in the midst of this perverse generation (Phil. 2:12). As long as we press the claims of a holy Sovereign upon the rebels about us, there must be conflict and suffering. Nevertheless, our joy is complete, in that it rests on and derives from the relationship with God and not the world. So on the one hand (in the world) we have tribulation, but on the other, we rejoice in our state of redemption and hope of glory. The offer of Christ is peace in conflict and joy in suffering.

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

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