

Saturday Communion Service

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Preacher: Iain Macaskill

[0 : 00] The chapter we read together, Mark 15, and we'll read again at verse 21 on page 1023. So it's Mark 15 and reading again at verse 21.

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

I don't know if you've ever been in a situation where you've gone as a spectator and all of a sudden you become the spectacle. I remember an instant in my own experience shortly after my conversion and I just had started preaching and being in Edinburgh and desperately trying to find my way to Bucklew or St. Columbus, I've never been in Edinburgh.

And just couldn't find my way in the traffic. So with just a few minutes to go before the morning service, I saw the sign for Brunfield Evangelical Church. So we pulled up there and came in last minute, just a bit like last night, and sat down.

And just as one of the elders stood up and said, well, God has really answered our prayers today because Ian has just arrived. And I just went beetroot and I thought, you know, I don't even know these people.

[1 : 24] But fortunately there was another Ian who had just arrived. But, you know, sometimes we can go to some church, just want to be a spectator, and then we just feel the focus is on us.

Many of us had that experience in our conversion. Speaking personally, I could say that myself. Went just through an invite by someone at a time of communion, just like our own weekend here, and sitting up in the balcony, not wanting to be seen, just wanting to be a spectator of the event. And God really speaking to me, and focusing in on my situation, and just feeling, as some of us have often said, that I was the only person in the building, that God was speaking directly to me. And in many ways, we could say the same of Simon of Cyrene. He was the spectator of the crucifixion. He went as a spectator, and he became the spectacle.

So let's spend a little time looking at Simon. And let's also look at the concept of carrying a cross, because he was asked to carry the cross of Christ.

[2 : 38] And of course, Christ himself spoke often to his disciples about the need to carry our cross daily. If a person wants to follow me, says Jesus, he must pick up his cross daily and follow me.

Now, Cyrene was a Greek settlement located west of Alexandria, and directly south of Greece on the North African coast. It's about ten miles inland, probably Libya today.

And many Jews lived there because of the trade. You know, it was a trade center. And Simon, no doubt, was in Jerusalem because of the Passover.

The book of Acts tells us in chapter 6 that there was a synagogue in Cyrene. In fact, it was people from Cyrene in that region who began to argue with Stephen before he had his infamous speech to the Sanhedrin.

And of course, his ultimate stoning. So, Simon was certainly Jewish. Simon, indeed, was a Jewish name. Now, we must remember that when Jesus began his journey from the courtroom, the pavement, the Gabbatha towards Golgotha, the place of the skull, he had already been flogged and scourged.

[3 : 59] And so often we just read over that and we don't really pay much attention to it. Even tonight, we read there in verse 15, Pilate released Barabbas, he had Jesus flogged.

And it's just a sentence that we might pass over. He had Jesus flogged and scourged. Now, in those days, there were two kinds of flogging or scourging.

One was Roman and one was Jewish. And the Jewish one is described in detail for us in the book of Deuteronomy, where we're told that a person was not to be beaten more than 40 times.

And because the Jews were afraid to break God's law, they would strike their victims 39 times, just in case they had miscounted in the first place.

But in Roman scourging, there was no limit on the number of times someone could be flogged. And this is, of course, graphically displayed for us.

[5 : 03] For any of you who have seen Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, and many people have found it difficult to watch, but it did happen and it was horrible. And the Romans called a flogging the halfway death.

And before the scourging began, we know that the victim would be stripped of his clothing and he would bend over a low, thick stump or post. And at the base of that stump would be four metal rings.

And the wrists and the ankles of the victim were shackled to these metal rings. And Jesus then would have been stripped of his garments. He would have bent over the posts with wrists and ankles shackled into that position.

And we also know that the scourging or the flogging was done by a person called a lictor. And you might say he was a professional in this gruesome and torturous act.

And the instrument he used was a flagellum. It was a piece of wood, maybe 14 to 18 inches long, a circle in shape attached to it were leather thongs, and attached to the thongs would be bits of glass and bone and pieces of metal.

[6 : 20] So, we often speak of the awfulness of the cross. And it was awful. But you know, the flogging before the cross, before the crucifixion, was awful as well.

And so often, as I said, we just skip over it and we read over it and Jesus was flogged. But just for a moment tonight, let's imagine what that was like.

Strips of leather smashing against his back and his ribcage. And bits of bone and chain curling around his body causing him agony on the outside and hemorrhaging on the inside.

And time and time again, this flagellum crashed against his skin. Sometimes higher, sometimes lower. And a steady rhythm would develop. And no wonder the Romans called it the halfway death. And eventually the naked body would be reduced to strips of raw flesh causing inflamed, blistering, bleeding wounds.

[7 : 35] And it was not uncommon for a man to die at the stump. Those of you who have your NIV Bibles. And in the footnote it says, Roman floggings were so brutal that sometimes the victim died before the crucifixion.

And invariably the victim would pass out because of this cruelty and this pain and this agony. And the victim would be revived by splashing buckets of water on him.

And you might think, well that's good, but it would be salt water. And if you ever got salt into a small cut, you know the agony, but imagine your raw flesh covered in salt water.

And you see it was in that condition and it was that point that Jesus then became a victim of the Roman soldiers.

They treated him like a comic figure. And silently he stood before them. And then they began to humiliate him and degrade him and mock him in every way.

[8 : 46] And he stood naked before them. His body and his face a mass of swollen and bruised flesh.

And then sarcastically they put a crown of thorns on his head. And they mocked him by bowing before him. And they put a scarlet robe on him.

And they placed a reed in his hand representing the royal scepter. And they mocked him cruelly and bowing, as I said, down before him, hailing him as the king of the Jews. And Jesus just stood there silently before these cruel men.

Hearing their obscene and crude chants. Yet he opened not his mouth. So friends, on the eve of the communion of remembering the Lord's death, sometimes it's easy for us to forget that Jesus was tortured and brutalized and mistreated for an extended period before he was led to the place of execution.

And now as he was being led to Golgotha, the place of the skull, along the Via Della Rosa, the way of the cross, it was at that point and at this juncture that Matthew, Mark and John give us this interesting detail.

[10 : 12] We read what Mark says. And Matthew says, As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon, and they compelled him to carry his cross.

Luke said, As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.

So as Jesus was being paraded through the streets of Jerusalem to the execution site outside the city gate, a place where people were constantly coming and going, Jesus would have been expected to carry the cross, the cross beam of his cross on his own back.

And it would have been put on him and chained to him. And a board would have hung around his neck giving or proclaiming his crime.

And of course, this is the board that later on would be nailed upon the cross where everyone could see the crime. Jesus, of course, the crime was that he was the king of the Jews.

[11 : 27] So now Jesus, beaten and bruised and bleeding, staggering along the longest walk of his life, the Via Della Rosa, the way of sorrow, he stumbled.

And mercifully, someone was commanded to help him to carry the beam. And that someone was, of course, Simon of Cyrene.

And this Simon was destined to play an even greater part in the gospel story. The spectator now became the spectacle.

Simon is described for us here as the father of Rufus and Alexander. Paul tells us in his letter to the church in Rome, greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord and his mother who has become a mother to me. Rufus, Simon of Cyrene's son, was a Christian. He was an eminent Christian leader in the early church. Rufus' mother, Simon's wife, was like a mother to the Apostle Paul.

[12 : 43] And it's amazing to think that this is the fruit of someone who was picked randomly from the crowd to carry the cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus. Simon of Cyrene was transformed by what he saw and heard and experienced at Golgotha.

And in Acts 13 we see Simon or Simeon from Cyrene. Simeon is another name for Simon. Sending Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey. Could this be the same Simon again?

It's not difficult to imagine that Simon, although inadvertently just passing by and being made to carry the cross of Jesus, came through that experience and became a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And as I've alluded to already, that so often is the experience of so many who are now committed leaders and servers in the church of Jesus Christ. All of a sudden everything changes.

All of a sudden spectators become the focal point on proceedings as the gospel of Jesus Christ is being preached. His wife became like a mother to the Apostle Paul.

[13 : 59] So the spectator here becomes the spectacle. And what begins is something that's forced on Simon. He didn't choose to carry the cross.

It was just a prod from a Roman spear. You, yes you, you have to carry the cross. He came as a Jew.

He came many miles to the Passover. He might have had to scrape for years to get the money to come that great distance and to fulfill a lifetime ambition of partaking of the Passover in Jerusalem itself.

but something happened for Simon of Cyrene that day that he never ever bargained for. And friend, maybe that's going to be true of you or maybe that is true of you.

You can think of a chance meeting with a Christian or coming along to a Christianity explored or coming along to church or coming to an invitation and that was the connection, that was the link in the chain for you.

[15 : 12] And God only knows what he can do with you as he uses you as you then begin to carry your cross daily as you follow him.

You've been drawn by the power of the cross of Jesus Christ. And you've seen for yourself that if you want to follow Jesus you too have to take up your cross because that is the instruction for all of us tonight.

All of us who are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ we have to take up our cross daily and follow him. But you might ask the question but what does it mean or what is it to carry your cross or to take up your cross?

Well first of all it's to die to self. If you want to follow me says Jesus you have to give up your own desires.

And you know the disciples would have understood this terminology because they would have been used enough to seeing condemned prisoners just like Jesus was condemned here carrying their

cross through the streets of Jerusalem.

[16 : 37] and they knew when they saw a person carrying their cross beam they knew that that person was experiencing sorrow and suffering and the only thing in front of him was death.

So when Jesus says to his disciples you must take up your cross and follow me they knew what that meant and many of the disciples lost their lives they died for their faith.

So then tonight can you honestly say that you want to come after Jesus? That you want to follow him intimately? That you want to follow him devotedly?

Well if you do you have to die to what you want and you have to take up your cross and if you do he will give you the grace he will give you the strength he will give you the power but you must say yes I will take up my cross and many of you have discovered that that cross has been difficult and that cross has been painful and that cross has been heavy it has been a great burden for you and each one of you tonight has a cross to bear but friends when you see what Jesus endured for you what he suffered for you in that flogging and that scourging and that crucifixion and these nails and in these spits and in that mocking you know a lot of it long before he reached the crucifixion the challenge tonight is are you prepared to take up your cross to follow him because Jesus calls us tonight to turn away from any allegiance to self because

Christians no longer live for themselves but they live for Jesus and sometimes they die for Jesus yes Jesus died for us but he says you must you must now take up your cross it's a cross for a cross it's a call to come it's a call to come and die to die to the right to run my own life it's a willingness to follow him as a good shepherd and yes there will be dark valleys and there will be shadows of death but there will also be green pastures but there will also be anointing and goodness and mercy all the days of our lives as we make our way to the house prepared for us in Christianity Explored the question is asked what is a Christian and we're asked to read Mark 8 34 where Jesus says there if anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me for whoever wants to save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it and what good is it for a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul or what can a man give in exchange for his soul you see that's how precious you are to Jesus tonight you can pile up all the silver you can pile up all the gold you can pile up all the diamonds you can pile up all the treasures of this world but your soul is more precious to Jesus than all of that what can a man give in exchange for his soul what is it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul and if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and a sinful generation 21st century [20 : 46] Great Britain 21st century Scotland 21st century Aberdeen if you are ashamed of him then the son of man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his father's glory with the holy angels so are you with him or are you against him are you prepared to carry your cross or not you see months before Jesus' trial and crucifixion the disciples who walked with him and who endured that painful journey would remember these words if anyone wishes to come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me are you doing it am I doing it because by nature we focus on present circumstances in this instant culture of ours if something doesn't pay now we're not interested but this is a journey this is a lifetime commitment lift up your eyes from the present and look to the future look to the promises to those who finish the course they will receive a crown of righteousness but you know the choices that we make today tonight now are connected with what awaits us on the other side because we all have souls the part the heart that lives forever and Jesus is saying to us don't waste your souls don't waste your time on things that really aren't necessary because we must build our lives on the foundation that is

Jesus and there's a warning given by the apostle Paul that we can build on that foundation with straw and things that we burnt in the fire and we ourselves will be saved just as someone being plucked from the fire is what you're building worthwhile the foundation is good but is a building good are the pastimes good are the efforts good are the energy that you put into such things good lasting glorifying God and building up the church of Christ and yes the day today might look bleak and it might look black for Simon of Cyrene this day looked black he was a Jew he was tired he was under Roman rule he wasn't very hopeful for the future despite being in Jerusalem for the Passover but a prod from a Roman soldier spear changed everything changed his life changed his wife changed his children just like a prod from Jesus changed the life of Paul

Saul Saul how long will you kick against the goads you know some people think that Paul's conversion was instant but no Jesus had been prodding him and hounding him and showing him the truth concerning himself Paul was there Saul was there holding the jackets of the men with

stone Stephen he was there but all the time he's saying there's something about these people that's different and Saul of Tarsus was converted maybe tonight Jesus is prodding your conscience maybe you've been running but you know you can't hide the song says you're running to stand still but you can't stand still you need to take up your cross you need to take up your cross daily you need to move away from the days of just being a spectator in this church letting someone else do it and let someone else get in their hands dirty someone else coping with the nitty gritty of life of a family of a church of a burden you need to stop being a spectator and you need to stop being a spectator at the Lord's

Supper because tonight you've been exposed you know that God has spoken to you so come and sit and eat the Passover the Lord's Supper and you will remember that he did this for you come and get involved in the Lord's work come and serve the Lord Simon of Serena could have said as many of us have now said as for me and my family we will serve the Lord you will no longer be a spectator at the Lord's Supper but you'll be there with us with Christ because you have decided to take up your cross and to follow Jesus the Lord himself wants to see you committed the Lord himself wants to see you communing the Lord himself wants you to do this in remembrance of him this will be your act of remembrance remembering what he's done for you and remembering what he asked you to do for him in return take up your cross daily and follow him let us pray for right to get you listen to