

Reformation
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It is the cross . . . that reveals the most violent and mysterious outpouring of the wrath of God that we find anywhere in Scripture.

R. C. Sproul

I wish that our ministry—and mine especially—might be tied and tethered to the cross.

C. H. Spurgeon

Nothing provokes the devil like the cross.

C. H. Spurgeon

The saving power of the cross does not depend on faith being added to it; its saving power is such that faith flows from it.

James I. Packer

The cross of Christ will always be an offense to natural man.

John Blanchard

The righteous One upon the cross is the sinner's only point of contact with the saving power of God.

Lewis Sperry Chafer

The wonder of the cross is not the blood, but whose blood, and to what purpose.

Donald English

A Pastoral Letter on Cross-bearing

Thomas N. Smith

Dear Michael,

I have followed your reports of the situation in the church with the greatest interest and concern. Be assured that I have prayed for you daily and, often, many times in the day. You will also know that I have the greatest sympathy for you in this conflict. Some of your descriptions have been searing, and not a few have brought back painful memories from my own career. Only those who have undergone such things as you describe can ever, even remotely, understand the sense of personal humiliation and anxiety that come with these particular trials. I hope I can weep with those who weep.

Nevertheless, since you must not commit yourself, even for a moment, to sink into self-pity and despondency, I must quickly add to what I have already said: Rejoice!

These things have not reached you without first going through the clearinghouse of our sovereign Lord, and He has a wonderful purpose in all of them. Indeed, I may paraphrase Him as saying to the both of us: "What did you expect?" and quote Him as saying, "The servant is not above his Master. If the world hate you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you."

I remind you of these hard sayings because we are never in greater danger of forgetting or neglecting them than when we are in the state which you presently find yourself. We are never good judges of our true spiritual condition, and this is especially so when we are enduring stress and trial.

The fact is: This is what the New Testament is talking about when it speaks of bearing the Cross and suffering for the sake of Christ and His church. This can so easily escape you for a variety of reasons: You may see only the human face of your opposition and not the spiritual warfare behind it. Or, you may be deeply aware of your own sin and failings in the present conflict; indeed, the conflict may have brought these to the forefront as never before. Or, you are aware of the fact that you are meeting with opposition from Christians, even from those

who have until now encouraged and supported you. All of these things, and many more like them, may lead you to confuse the issues at hand. If you confuse the issues, you will end in personal confusion, and the end result of this will be despair and a determination (often made with a “clear head”) to quit, not only the personal ministry, but the Christian faith as well.

All of this leads me to spend the rest of this letter talking with you about the real meaning of “bearing the Cross.”

How foolishly and inevitably we romanticize and glamorize the sayings of Jesus! How well I remember as a young Christian doing just this with texts like Luke 9:23 and Galatians 6:14. It all seemed so full of adventure. But you may remember that it has been said (by Chesterton or Lewis?): “An adventure is something one wishes for while in an armchair, but which, when one is experiencing it, one wishes to be in an armchair.” This is true of the concept and the texts, all of them, which have to do with bearing the Cross and suffering for Christ and His church.

There can be no misunderstanding the connection between the sufferings which Jesus predicts for Himself in Luke 9:21-22 and His call to identification with these sufferings in the verses that follow. Jesus calls us to painful, even shameful, identification with Himself. In Bonhoeffer’s oft-repeated dictum, “When Christ calls a man to himself, he calls him to die.”

In describing this identification as “taking up the Cross,” Jesus sets the parameters of our cross-bearing within the appointment of God. His own rejection and crucifixion were seen by Him as the appointed “cup” or “hour” ordained for Him by His heavenly Father. So it is with us: Our lives with their attendant trials and sufferings are appointed by our heavenly Father. Do you, Michael, believe that God has placed you in your current situation? If so, then all the details of that placement are under the same leadership and lordship—all the boring details, the terrifying confrontations, the ill-taught

and unthinking opposition, the ungrateful and unappreciative hearers, all, in a word, that make your present circumstances worthy of the description, “the Cross of Christ.”

And it is for this very reason that what is fundamentally required of you in this situation are endurance and perseverance. Just as the Lord Jesus, “... when the days were approaching for His ascension, ... He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51), so you must take up your Cross *daily* and follow Him. The great temptation was for Jesus to avoid the cross until He came to it, and to come down from it while on it. Our temptation is the same, to “pity ourselves” and to shun the suffering and shame of the Cross. This is why the recurrent thought of resigning and leaving your charge is so attractive right now. Nor would I suggest that it is always a moral compromise to resign and leave. It may not be. But, to relocate out of a sense that your work is complete, or that it can never come to fulfillment, is one thing; to desert the work because of the shame and suffering incumbent in it is quite another.

Now, all that I have said to you until now is open to gross misunderstanding. I am not even *suggesting* that we are to *enjoy* these things. We are not masochists or fatalists! Even our blessed Lord was tempted to say, “Father, save Me from this hour,” and in the agonies of Gethsemane He actually prayed, “Let this cup pass from Me.” It is the pain of these things that characterize them as a “Cross.” It is the patient bearing of the pain, the courageous carrying of the shame, the resolute enduring of the difficulty *for Christ’s sake* that makes all of these things pleasing to God and profitable to us.

What we can do and, with the Spirit’s help, must do is to calmly rejoice in God’s purpose in them. And at least some elements of that purpose can be discerned from Scripture.

First, God is in these things conforming us to the image of Christ, that He might be exalted as Firstborn in a family of sufferers (Rom. 8:28-29; Phil. 3:10). It is not just our ongoing

conformity to Christ that is cause for our rejoicing, but His ultimate exaltation and glory. Together, they urge us, saying, "Rejoice!"

Second, God is pruning and chastening us as His servants and children through these things. Whatever the source of our troubles we may say of them as Joseph did of his brothers, "You meant it to me for evil, but God meant it for good." Meditate upon Psalm 119:67, 71, and 75 in light of these things. Such chastenings and prunings call us to worship, saying, "Rejoice!"

Third, God is making the deep resources of His comfort known to us in these afflictions, resources which are dug out only in suffering (2 Cor. 1:3-11). These afflictions, along with their attendant comforts, call to us, saying, "Rejoice!"

Fourth, God is being glorified through His answer to many prayers made by us and for us in the midst of these afflictions (2 Cor. 1:11; 4:15). Prayers are being offered for you; grace is being supplied to you. The result? "The giving of thanks [is] abound[ing] to the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:15). Does this not whisper to you, saying, "Rejoice!"

Fifth, in some mysterious manner, the workings of which are known only completely to God, the church of Jesus Christ is being perfected and matured by the sufferings of His people, and especially of the ministers of the Gospel (Col. 1:24-29). These sufferings which you are presently undergoing are being employed by the Head of the church to sanctify her "through the washing of water by the Word." It is this that must engage your thoughts during this time. We were never told that labor for the church would be easy. Indeed, because it is *labor*, in involves toil, wear and tear, tears, pain, anguish and many like things. But, these are not for nothing! They shall bear their own fruit in their own time to the glory of God. We live in a time when true reformation in the churches is a hard and thankless task (there has never been any other kind of time than this). Hard and thankless, but not fruitless! The

wonder of the glory is this: Our little trials and sufferings are contributing in some way to this great goal: the perfection of the church as the blood-bought people of God! Even the great apostle Paul calls to you and says, "Rejoice with me!" (Col. 1:24).

Finally, our present sufferings are working for us a reward of glory that shall be revealed when Jesus Himself is revealed (2Cor. 4:17-18). Look at the contrasts here, Michael. Our afflictions (whatever they may be) are "light" and "momentary," while the glory that awaits us is "eternal" and "weighty"! The hope of this eternal, weighty glory virtually shouts to you, saying, "Rejoice!"

I have said enough, and I hope that something I have said will bring encouragement and joy to you. I am one of the many who are praying for you. I send you my undying love in the Lord Jesus.

Warmly,
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