

## THE CROSS BEARER

Scriptures: Isaiah 53:1-12; Mark 15:16-32

I see you have many crosses in your church. There is a large one on the wall behind me. They are stitched on your banners, embossed on your hymnals; I hear that you even wear them as jewelry. Where I come from, the cross is an instrument of torture and death. It would be like wearing a noose around your neck. It's—how do you say?—creepy!

I would not have worn a cross, and I had not intended to carry one either. I happened to be in Jerusalem that week for the Passover. For Jews living in Cyrene on the north coast of Africa, it was a major trip—600 miles. I rarely celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem, but I came that year to see what you call a celebrity. Even in Cyrene we had heard about him. People said that he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, made the lame to walk, and even raised the dead. People whispered, “Could this be the Messiah”—the anointed one, the promised king who would bring God’s righteousness and peace to the world?

He did not have the background to be a king. He was born out of wedlock. His father was a carpenter. He grew up in a small town called Nazareth. It would be like your President of the United States coming from ... Potlatch.

But I came anyway with many others, hoping to see him, and on Sunday, when word spread that he was approaching the city, crowds gathered along the road. Some waved palm branches. Others spread their coats in front of him the way you would for a king. I expected to see a general on a white stallion leading an army. Instead I saw a peasant riding a jackass.

Later I remembered a Bible verse I had learned in Sabbath School. It came from the prophet Zechariah. It said, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.” So, I thought, he is fulfilling prophecy! Even in the way he enters the city, he fulfills the scriptures.

I must say I was more impressed by how he handled the money changers in the temple. When foreigners like myself come to Jerusalem, we must exchange our Roman coins for temple currency. The money changers do this for us ... for a fee—an outrageous fee that we have to pay because they are the only ones authorized to make the transaction. It was a monopoly controlled by the priests. Personally, I was glad to see him throw them out. But in the process he made some dangerous enemies.

During the week I listened to his teaching in the temple. He managed to offend just about everyone. When asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to the Romans, he said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” That satisfied no one. The Jews disliked the part about rendering to Caesar, and the Romans disliked the part about rendering to God. He especially offended the priests. He implied that our sacrifices meant nothing if we did not love one another. He made it sound like we Jews were the ones who needed cleansing, that we needed to be saved not from the Romans but from ourselves.

On Thursday, the day of Passover, I did not see him. I presume he ate the Passover with close friends in one of the city's many guest rooms.

Early Friday morning I was awakened by the noise of angry shouts coming from the courtyard outside the governor's palace. A mob was shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" I pulled on my robe and ran to see what was going on, and that's when I saw him. Jesus, is that you? I hardly recognized him. He was wearing a crown, but it was a crown of thorns pushed deep into his forehead. Trickle of blood ran down into his eyes and around his mouth. He was dressed in a purple robe, but under the robe he was naked, his bare arms and legs bearing the welt marks of a Roman lash. The Roman soldiers were laughing at him, spitting in his face saying, "Hail, king of the Jews." He did nothing. He said nothing. He just stood there.

His treatment by the Romans was bad enough, but he was also mocked by our own leaders, the chief priests and scribes. They hurled insults, saying, "So, you think you are the Messiah? Look at you. How can you save others, if you cannot save yourself?"

I wondered the same thing. This is the Messiah? This is the one God sent to save us? He was the most pathetic, ridiculous, despised, and helpless king I had ever seen.

While I watched they lashed a wooden beam to his shoulders and led him away to a place we called Golgotha. In English you would call it "Skull Hill." He was horrifying to look at, but I could not take my eyes off him. I followed as they led him away, and I was not far behind when he fell. Weakened by beatings, he collapsed under the weight of his own cross.

Suddenly, a Roman soldier grabbed my arm. "You," he said, "pick it up." I suspect he picked me because I looked like a foreigner. The Romans often used foreigners to do their dirty work. It stirred up less animosity among the locals.

I hoisted the cross beam on to my shoulder. It was heavy and awkward. The rough edges tore into my clothes and skin. I tried to hide my face so that no one would look at me, but people along the way stared at me like I was some kind of animal. I wanted to tell them, "This isn't my cross. I'm not the guilty one here. This is his cross," pointing to the stumbling figure in front of me.

As we walked I heard taunts, but they were not directed at me; they were aimed at him. Priests, standing along the road, shouted, "Where is your power now, you who call yourself the Son of God?" At street corners Roman soldiers bowed in mock respect. "Hail, king of the Jews!" They laughed as they said it, but it was nervous laughter, like the joke might be on them.

When we came to Golgotha, the soldiers pulled the beam off my back. One of them shoved Jesus to the ground and spread out his arms. The beam was placed under his shoulders, and his arms strapped to it with ropes. A soldier picked up a mallet and drove spikes through his wrists, right between the bones. Then he was hoisted with pulleys into the air and hung on a scaffold, like a picture on a wall. His legs flailed in the air until they too were fastened down with nails.

He hung there five hours, six hours—I don't remember. I should have left, but I couldn't. I just stared at him. Suddenly I remembered another verse I had learned in Sabbath school from the prophet Isaiah. It said,

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

I could understand how a Jew might despise a Roman and how a Roman might despise a Jew, but why did they both despise Jesus? What had he done?

The prophecy from Isaiah went on: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth." Why did he not protest? Why did he not plead his innocence? I learned later that even Pilate, the Roman governor, thought he was innocent. Isaiah says,

By a perversion of justice he was taken away. ... He was cut off from the land of the living. ... They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

He did not even carry a sword. Yet, Barabbas, a known terrorist, was released, and Jesus, an unarmed itinerant preacher, was crucified. "By a perversion of justice he was taken away." And his body would have been left to the dogs if some rich guy had not offered him a burial plot. "They made his tomb with the rich."

I had never understood that prophecy from Isaiah, but here it was unfolding before my eyes. Then I remembered the next part: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

What if he saved others by not saving himself? What if his body was broken for us, his blood was shed for us?

You know what is funny? I carried his cross that day, but in reality he carried mine. He carried all of our crosses. He was—how do you say it?—the fall guy. He accepted the consequences for all the wrong we have done to each other and to God. And that is why he has the right, the authority, and the compassion to forgive us.

I'm glad you have not forgotten the cross. I am glad you display it and even wear it. But the real cross was not made of silver or gold. The real cross was rough and ugly and full of splinters, the way some people are. The real cross was carried by a man who gave his life for others and who bids us to do the same.

- Ken Onstot  
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