

## MARK 8:31-38 FOR CHRIST'S SAKE?

“[Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’

“And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’”<sup>1</sup>

“**F**or Christ’s sake!” The jarring oath is heard far too frequently in this day. Though it adds nothing to the conversation, the recurrent and thoughtless oath is blurted out for emphasis. Its use may express exasperation, a sense of awe or simply serve as a tag line for intensity. Tragically, the words find their way too often into the conversation of believers. The reason I say “tragically” is that seldom are we speaking of our service to God when the phrase escapes our lips. Rather than speaking the language of Zion, we are speaking the language of this dying world. However, I hope with this message today to challenge us to think of what we do and why we do what we do on an ongoing basis. Are our choices truly for Christ’s sake? Or are we prone to do what we want, even in the congregation of the righteous?

I am not castigating anyone for coarse language, though the Bible does caution us against such speech. Christians are taught, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” [EPHESIANS 5:4]. Perhaps more disturbing than the knowledge that crude language is even heard among God’s people is the association of such speech with other unrighteous acts. The Apostle continues by warning, “You may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them” [EPHESIANS 5:5-7].

In that same missive, the Apostle warned against “corrupting talk,” or “foul language.” He wrote, “No foul language is to come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear”<sup>2</sup> [EPHESIANS 4:29]. These warnings from the Ephesian Letter are similar to the warning that was given to the Church in Colossae. “Make sure [that ungodliness and immorality are] all gone for good: bad temper, irritability, meanness, profanity, dirty talk”<sup>3</sup> [COLOSSIANS 3:8]. However, our speech as Christians is not the focus of the message. Our walk with the Master is the focus of the message.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> **The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Bible** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2009)

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 2005)

**IF WE WILL WALK WITH THE MASTER, WE WILL DENY OURSELVES—FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.**

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself.” Having just spoken of His Passion, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. Imagine that! The Master had just spoken of His sacrifice, and Peter—impetuous Peter—began to rebuke Him! However, Jesus turned and noting that the disciples were watching closely sharply rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” [**MARK 8:33**].

Do you not find it shocking that Peter would attempt to dress down the Master? Don't be too harsh on Peter; such actions may not be as unusual as we imagine. We do similar things, discounting the commands of Jesus when our desires take precedence over what He teaches. When we exalt ourselves, we do so at the expense of the revealed will of Jesus. In these cases, it is as though we were rebuking Him, telling Him that we are much better at controlling our lives than he is at directing how we should live. Consider a few examples of our callous acts.

Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” [**JOHN 13:34, 35**].

Shortly after saying this, Jesus commanded His disciples—consequently, including us who are believers in this generation—“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another” [**JOHN 15:12-17**].

What does Christian love look like? Love will reveal respect, esteem, consideration, compassion, gentleness, honesty—qualities that are often in short supply among the churches of our Lord. It will require that we incorporate into our lives the instructions Paul has provided. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” [**PHILIPPIANS 2:3, 4**].

Ask yourself if this is how contemporary congregations conduct themselves. Can we say that self-promotion and self-aggrandisement are absent among the faithful today? Do we actually look out for the welfare of others rather than looking out for our own benefit? Are we careful to consider the interest of others just as we consider our own interests? If these questions leave us uncomfortable, is it possible that we are tacitly telling Jesus that we know better than He does? Are our actions an attempt to rebuke to the One whom we call Master?

Other commands of the Master that cause me to wonder if we are trying to rebuke Him include His warnings against storing up treasures on earth. Jesus said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” [**MATTHEW 6:19-21**].

Akin to this command is that which warns against anxiety concerning our personal needs. Remember Jesus words, “I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on” [**MATTHEW 6:25**].

Our Lord continued by urging His disciples to put God first in all things when He said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” [MATTHEW 6:33]. An obedient disciple will put the welfare of God’s Kingdom first rather than seeking benefit for himself. To fail to place God’s Kingdom first is tacitly to rebuke the Master. In far too many instances we are guilty of failure to put His Kingdom first, I fear.

I cite but a couple of other passages that reveal that we Christians may be guilty of acting just as Peter acted. Jesus warned those who would follow Him not to exalt themselves. “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” [MATTHEW 23:12]. When we promote ourselves, we are rebuking the Master.

We are also taught to settle disputes between ourselves and fellow believers quickly. Jesus taught, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” [MATTHEW 18:15-17]. Apparently, He didn’t understand that it is better to ask others to join us in praying for the sins of our brothers and sisters, or that it is far better to simply get upset and walk away.

Related to this teaching is the instruction that we are to forgive those who offend us. This is taught in an exchange between Peter and the Master. “Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times’” [MATTHEW 18:21, 22]. Modern Christians seem to struggle to forgive once, and even that is done grudgingly.

Above all, we are to seek reconciliation, as taught in the Sermon on the Mount. “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” [MATTHEW 5:23, 24].

Jesus commanded us to be perfect [see MATTHEW 5:46-48] and to cultivate a servant’s heart [see MATTHEW 20:26-28]. He commanded that His house is to be known as a “House of Prayer” [see MATTHEW 21:13] and that those who follow Him are to “watch and pray that [they] may not enter into temptation” [see MATTHEW 26:41]. Jesus’ final command issued to all believers is known as the Great Commission—“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” [MATTHEW 28:19, 20]. For far too many of us, this Great Commission has become the great omission. Making disciples is hard work; we’re uncomfortable risking our otherwise tenuous relationships by speaking of our Faith.

My point in citing these various commands delivered by the Master is not to castigate the people of God, but to make a point—we have difficulty excluding the “self” from the equation whenever we are seeking to follow the Master. Nevertheless, if we will walk with the Master, He was quite clear in insisting that we will be required to deny ourselves. Denying one’s self is far more difficult than we imagine when we are only looking at the matter superficially. Living as a Christian is demanding; a primary requirement is that we deny ourselves, and that is more easily said than done. Our own desires push us to advance our own interests, even at the expense of righteousness and of building one another. Remember, the primary responsibility for Christians within the assembly of the Lord is to build one another, to encourage one another and to comfort one another [see 1 CORINTHIANS 14:3].

As I prepared the message, I made an interesting observation about Jesus' call for disciples to deny themselves; I had never seen this truth before, though the information was always in plain sight. The word that is translated "deny" is used eleven times in the New Testament; however, Jesus alone calls His people to deny themselves. No other writer calls for self-denial in such blunt language; Jesus alone used this particular word, and most frequently He used it to call disciples to turn from pursuing their own desires in order to fulfil His will for their lives.<sup>4</sup> The meaning is straightforward, indicating a disavowal or repudiation.<sup>5</sup> Louw and Nida make the point that in English the concept is "to say 'No' to oneself."<sup>6</sup>

How does one deny himself or herself? We answer that question by determining where our desires are contrary to the will of Christ the Lord, refusing to surrender to our own desires. In order to know what His will is, we will need to discover the will of God for our lives. It will require each of us to spend time working through the New Testament, paying special attention to the accounts of Jesus' life provided by the Evangelists. By the count of many, Jesus gave some fifty commands or directives to disciples. Learning those divine commands will provide the first step toward denying oneself. If I know the will of God, I will be closer to doing the will of God.

This count does not consider the remainder of the New Testament. In the remainder of the New Testament are found significant statements indicating God's expectation of His people. These statements do not contradict Jesus' commands; rather these statements complement what the Lord commands His people. For instance, permit me to point to a couple of statements concerning God's will for His people.

In the First Thessalonian Letter, Paul writes, "This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you" [**1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8**].

From this brief passage, it is apparent that the will of the Lord is holiness of life, especially as such holiness relates to sexual purity. This is but a focused application of Jesus' warning against looking lustfully at another person [see **MATTHEW 5:27-30**].

Our attitude in life is addressed in that same missive. Paul wrote the Thessalonian saints, "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" [**1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-18**].

This series of commands express in practical fashion much of the teaching of the Master. For instance, you will recall that Jesus on one occasion told a parable to illustrate the truth that people "ought always to pray and not lose heart" [see **LUKE 18:1-8**]. Each of the commands Paul issued has their origin in a teaching of Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> See **MATTHEW 16:24, 35, 75; LUKE 12:9**

<sup>5</sup> James Swanson, **Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)** (Logos Research Systems, Oak Harbor, WA 1997)

<sup>6</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains** (United Bible Societies, New York, NY 1996) 355

Cultivating a submissive attitude is God's will for His people. Peter addresses the subject this way: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" [1 PETER 2:13-17].

This is but a pointed application of Jesus' command to "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven" [see MATTHEW 5:13-16].

I will make but one further note of a statement Peter made concerning the will of God. What the Apostle to the Jews said was not definitive, but it is probative and addresses a potential situation Christians will face. Keep in mind that Peter was writing to Christians who were suffering because they were Christians. In light of this, Peter has written, "It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" [1 PETER 3:17]. Ouch! The very thought is foreign to much of contemporary life in the Dominion of Canada. However, this situation is still possible, and the suffering envisioned may be according to God's will.

Before he was finished with this letter, Peter also wrote, "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God" [1 PETER 4:1, 2]. He continues this thought, concluding with this admonition to those who are suffering, "Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" [1 PETER 4:19].

Jesus suffered separation from the Father because of our broken condition. Paul would say of Him, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21]. This summarises what Jesus meant when on the cross He cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" [LUKE 23:46].

This is more pertinent to us than we might imagine. I saw an interview of a man who was brother to two of the Coptic Christians who were beheaded recently by the Muslim terrorists in Libya. Among the statements that he made on radio was this, "ISIS gave us more than we asked when they didn't edit out the part where [the martyrs] declared their faith and called Jesus Christ. ISIS helped us strengthen our faith." That is powerful! That is such a stirring testimony from one who has paid a dear price to be called by the Name of the Son of God.

As the interview continued, this man was asked, "Would you get upset ... if we ask for forgiveness to those who killed your brothers?" His answer was humbling to each believer in the Lord Christ. "Today, I was having a chat with my mother, asking her what she would do if she saw one of the ISIS members on the street. She said this... She said she would invite him home because he helped us enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Later still, he expanded on this statement. "I asked [my mother, sixty years old and uneducated] 'What will you do if you see those ISIS members passing on the street and I told you that's the man who killed your son?' She said, 'I will ask for God to open his eyes and ask him in our house because he helped us enter the Kingdom of God!'" And then the man prayed, "Dear God, please open their eyes to be saved and to quit their ignorance and the wrong teachings they were taught! Amen." Dear people, we have been instructed by one who has earned an advanced degree in suffering according to the will of God. We dare not ignore the lesson that is delivered.

**IF WE WILL WALK WITH THE MASTER, WE WILL TAKE UP OUR CROSS—FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.** “If anyone would come after me, let him ... take up his cross.” To deny oneself is not to become an ascetic. Many people imagine that taking up our cross is tantamount to becoming an eremite or a flagellant. Vast segments of Christendom practise self-deprivation throughout the Lenten season as though such efforts will prepare them for the Easter observance. I suggest that taking up one's cross is far more than mere denial of self-pleasure—it is a lifestyle choice.

One of the powerful statements concerning dying to self is provided by Paul in his Letter to Galatian Christians. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” [GALATIANS 2:20]. Too often, the cross has been reduced to an ornament, a mere fixture to adorn the neck of individuals. Far too many of those wearing a cross are unaware of what that emblem signifies.

The disciples must have been shocked beyond comprehension when Jesus called them to take up their cross. You see, the cross was an ignoble instrument of death. A Roman citizen could not be crucified—the death was too ignominious, too defiling. Perhaps we are beginning to capture some of the horror of death by crucifixion as we witness brutal, unconscionable Muslims in Syria and Iraq crucify Christians, Kurds and even other hapless Muslims. Whenever a person was condemned to death in that ancient day, several truths were immediately apparent.

***A crucified man would carry the instrument of his own death on his back.*** Clinton Arnold writes, “Plutarch reports, ‘Every criminal condemned to death bears his own cross on his back’ (Plutarch, *Moralia* 554 A/B). Dionysius of Halicarnassus gives this account: ‘A Roman of some note had handed over a slave to his fellow slaves for them to execute. In order to make the punishment generally known, their master ordered them to drag the condemned man first through the forum and other public places and to scourge him while doing so.... The slaves who had been thus commanded stretched out both the man's arms and tied them down to a piece of wood which reached across breast and shoulders to his wrists. They chased him and lacerated his naked body with their lashes. Overcome by this cruel treatment, the convict not only uttered the most heartrending cries, but under the painful impact of the lashes he also made indecent movements’” (*Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, Roman Antiquities 7.69.1, 2).<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the horror of death by crucifixion was the thought held vividly in Jewish minds that one hanged on a tree was accursed of God. They derived this concept from Moses words, “If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance” [DEUTERONOMY 21:22, 23].

Years ago I was deeply moved as I listened to a sermon delivered by a southern preacher who was speaking on crucifixion. The points the preacher made in that sermon were indelibly impressed upon my mind.<sup>8</sup> ***A crucified man is never coming back***; he is dead to sins. Having picked up his cross and exiting the city, he knows that for him there is no future—the cross is his future. When the crucified man left the past, there was no possibility that he would ever return to what lay behind. Whenever a professing Christian ceases to live a godly life and goes back to the sordid life previously lived, we know without question that that one was never crucified.

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<sup>7</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, **Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke, Vol. 1** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2002) 256-257

<sup>8</sup> The preacher was Curtis Hutson, Pastor of Forrest Hills Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia. I am unable to reference the specific sermon, though the points were written down during the message.

*A crucified man can look in only one direction.* As a young Christian living in the southern United States I used to hear a song which avowed:

I've come too far to look back, again; there is nothing behind me  
All the treasures I used to love have all faded from view  
There's a new day ahead for me; my heartache is over  
I left it at Calvary where my new life began

I've come too far to look back; my feet have walked through the valley  
I've climbed mountains, crossed rivers, desert places I've known  
But I'm nearing the home shore; the redeemed are rejoicing  
Heaven's Angels are singing; I've come too far to look back

Look around, there's no happiness; there's no reason for living  
Life will give you a broken dream, filled with sorrow and tears  
Turn around, don't look back again; face the new day before you  
Place your heartache in Jesus' hand; He will mend broken dreams

I've come too far to look back; my feet have walked through the valley  
I've climbed mountains, crossed rivers, desert places I've known  
But I'm nearing the home shore; the redeemed are rejoicing  
Heaven's Angels are singing; I've come too far to look back

I'm nearing the home shore; the redeemed are rejoicing  
And Heaven's Angels are singing; I've come too far to look back  
Too far to look back<sup>9</sup>

The challenge for us is nothing less than a practical application of the Master's challenge: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God"[LUKE 9:62]. A crucified man does not look back longingly to what might have been nor what is past.

*A crucified man has empty hands.* When an individual is crucified, the arms are stretched out and the hands are emptied. The condemned individual can no longer grasp for the tawdry baubles of this perishing world. He is not clinging to what once attracted his attention. Though the allure of the things of this world may be as powerful as ever, there is no possibility that a crucified man will again grasp money or things or position or pleasure.

To those first readers it was apparent that *a crucified man has no will of his own*. The cross imposes its will on one who is crucified. Just so, when we have determined that we will live a crucified life, a life of sacrifice, we surrender our will to Him who alone is worthy of receiving our highest devotion. I have said before, and I shall say again, ***EITHER CHRIST IS LORD OF ALL, OR HE IS NOT LORD AT ALL.*** No individual can say he or she is living the crucified life if their will prevails over the will of Him who calls each of us to life.

I observe further than *a crucified man must die alone*. However much we may wish companionship in the act of dying, sacrifice is personal. The cross is a lonely instrument. Men, your wife cannot die with you. Your husband cannot die with you, ladies. Your parents cannot die with you, young saints. You must die alone.

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<sup>9</sup> The song is attributed to Nancy Harmon, copyright date is unknown

**IF WE WILL WALK WITH THE MASTER, WE WILL FOLLOW HIM—FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.** “If anyone would come after me, let him ... follow me.” Early in the history of the Faith, apocryphal collections of Jesus’ sayings was circulated among the churches. Much later, a single copy of one such collection was found among the Nag Hammadi manuscripts. These are not true sayings of Jesus, though some of these sayings were held in esteem among the church fathers. One of the sayings cited by such diverse individuals as Origen, Didymus the Blind and Pseudo-Ephraem the Syrian is known as **Logion 82**. That saying reads, “Jesus says, ‘The person who is near me is near the fire.’”<sup>10</sup> I am not suggesting this is Gospel; but I am saying quite plainly that the individual who will follow Jesus must know that it will cost him his life.

Jesus’ saying about the cost of discipleship must surely have been something that those walking with Him heard frequently. The saying is repeated and emphasised in the Gospels. For instance, Levi records Jesus as saying the same thing as our text [see **MATTHEW 16:24**]. Luke records the same saying, adding that taking up the cross must be a daily act [see **LUKE 9:23**]. Later, Jesus again stated this same truth to the disciples. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” [**MATTHEW 10:37-39**]. Surrounded by what Doctor Luke identifies as “great crowds,” Jesus spoke on another occasion, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” [**LUKE 14:26, 27**].

What a powerful picture is revealed of one of the last great battles. The Revelator wrote, “War arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short’” [**REVELATION 12:7-12**]!

I find great encouragement in the testimony concerning those who conquer the devil. These Tribulation saints will conquer the accuser of the brothers by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. Then, John appends this statement that reveals their power, “They loved not their lives even unto death!” Let saints rejoice! The trials will be real, and the cost will be high. Perhaps we do not pay such a dear cost at this time, but we are nevertheless under assault. Tragically, fellow believers often succumb to the pressures brought against them. Threats from employers, challenges from those whom they love and even disdain expressed by people with a measure of power in this world can frighten and traumatise Christians. Some, simply unwilling to experience discomfort are prepared to jettison any pretense of following Christ, perhaps imagining that they will be able to secretly worship from a distance.

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<sup>10</sup> Uwe-Karsten Plisch and Gesine Schenke Robinson, **The Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary** (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2008)



The battle is not always easy, nor the decisions clean. During the Decian persecution of the early churches (249-250 AD), so many believers renounced the Faith becoming *Lapsi*—"lapsed Christians"—that it seemed that the Faith would be extirpated. When asked if they were Christians, should one deny they were Christians they were freed after offering incense to the genius of the Caesar. If they confessed they were Christians, they were tortured in an attempt to compel them to renounce the Faith. Those who were released received *libelli* papers as evidence of imperial sacrifice. Those who had received a *libellus* were known as *Libellatici*.

When the Decian persecution ceased, many of the *Lapsi* returned to the churches seeking restoration; but their effort to return created a crisis. Those who had suffered and persevered, those who had lost so much and paid such a high price, were reluctant to receive the *Lapsi* back into the churches because they had denied Christ. A strict party, championed by Novatian, was zealous for the holiness of God; a moderate party, championed by Cyprian, was eager to promote divine grace. The former sought to exclude any who through weakness of the flesh had turned back; the latter wanted to welcome weaker brothers into the fellowship of believers.<sup>11</sup>

A middle way recognised the weakness of the flesh. After open repentance, the *Lapsi* were restored to full communion with the churches. The reception was not unlike that extended to new converts when they come, confessing Christ in order to receive baptism. Though we encourage each believer to stand firm, we recognise the weakness of the flesh and extend mercy just as we have received mercy. We must expect repentance—confession of the sin and a request for restoration; but when our brother or sister seeks such restoration, we must act quickly to receive them as we are taught when the Apostle urges the Corinthians to restore the penitent [see 2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-8]. Paul cautions, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" [GALATIANS 6:1]. We must never forget that the aim of discipline is restoration [see MATTHEW 18:15]. Our purpose is to restore, not to destroy.

When Hugh Latimer and Nicolas Ridley were martyred, another man was condemned with them. Thomas Cranmer suffered mental harassment and physical abuse until in his weakened state he recanted his faith. Reflecting on the teachings of Christ, the old man repented. Before assembled dignitaries who came to hear his recantation, Cranmer solemnly testified, "I come to the great thing that troubleth my conscience more than any other thing that I ever said or did in my life, and that is setting abroad of writings contrary to the truth, which here now I renounce and refuse, as things written with my hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, and written for fear of death and to save my life if it might be—and that is all such bills which I have written or signed with my own hand since my degradation, wherein I have written many things untrue. And forasmuch as my hand offended in writing contrary to my heart, therefore my hand shall first be punished; for if I may come to the fire, it shall be first burned."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Literature to provide insight into this period of persecution includes, Walter A. Elwell, **Biographical Entries from Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Baker Reference Library** (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI 2011) 386; James D. Smith III, "Cyprian (c. 210-258," in Glen G. Scorgie (ed.), **Dictionary of Christian Spirituality** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011) 386; George Waddington, *A History of the Church from the Earliest Ages to the Reformation*, Second Edition, Revised, vol. 1 (Baldwin and Cradock, London 1835) 163-165; Stephen M. Miller, "The Gallery—Malcontents for Christ," *Christian History Magazine*, **Issue 51: Heresy in the Early Church** (Christianity Today, Carol Stream, IL 1996); F. Watson, **The Defenders of the Faith; Or, The Christian Apologists of the Second and Third Centuries, The Fathers for English Readers** (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge; E. & J. B. Young & Co., London; New York n.d.) 60-65

<sup>12</sup> Mark Galli, "Courage When It Counted," *Christian History Magazine*, **Issue 48: Thomas Cranmer & the English Reformation** (Christianity Today, Carol Stream, IL 1995)

Cranmer was immediately dragged away and rushed to the stake where his body was consigned to the flames. Friars assigned to accompany him to the stake were compelled to rush in order to keep up with the old man as he hurried to his death. He was bound to the stake with a steel band around his waist. The fire was kindled at his feet; and as the flame leapt up, Cranmer stretched out his right arm to hold his hand in the flame, holding it there as he had said. According to those who witnessed his death, he withdrew his hand only once to wipe his face, and then he returned it until it burned to a stump. He stood straight as long as he could, ringed in fire, saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." At last, he collapsed and was consumed in flame.<sup>13</sup>

When we follow Christ, the cost may well be high—much higher than many are prepared to pay. Jesus Himself taught us, "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" [MATTHEW 7:14]. Christ Jesus does not seek those who look for an easy religion; He seeks those who will follow hard behind Him. Peter cautioned early saints, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And

'If the righteous is scarcely saved,  
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" [1 PETER 4:12-19].

Surely, the Apostle to the Jews is cautioning those of us who live at the end of the age. We, also, must determine to stand with the Master. Each follower of the Christ must accept the call of the Master to "deny himself and take up his cross and follow." The path will no doubt be demanding and the cost may be great. However, we are assured that at the end of the path stands Him who conquered death and rose victorious from the tomb, waiting to receive His saint.

I am always encouraged by Paul's final words in his last Letter to Timothy. The Apostle doesn't minimise the cost of following the Saviour. In fact, the aged saint openly confesses the pressures a believer faces when he writes, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." It is what follows that encourages saints as they read his final words. "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" [2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8].

At the end of the trials, Christ the Lord stands to receive His child. In His hand is the Crown of Righteousness that shall be awarded to each one that has stood the test. Will that Crown be awarded to you? Will we stand the test? Let each believer ponder the call of the Master and encourage his or her heart in what He has promised. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> Galli, *ibid*.