

Taking Up Our Cross

John R Gavazzoni

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Sober words from the Master. When we read those words now that our Lord's crucifixion is in the past, we are inclined to miss the immediate impression his statement was intended to make on His disciples at that moment. They most certainly did not have in view His coming death as they tried to understand the meaning of his radical words. Though He spoke to them on occasions of His coming passion, they were unable to even entertain the thought of such an eventuality.

To be sure, they were dreadfully familiar with someone taking up their cross, since, as a people subjugated to Rome, they had seen that gruesomely effective method of the Romans that devastatingly discouraged any notions of revolt or even any action perceived to be a threat to the empire's civil order.

The immediate impact of Jesus' words on the disciples would not have been complicated by any understanding on their part of co-crucifixion with Christ. What they heard--- though I'm sure they hoped He was speaking in the manner of hyperbole--- was, "if you want to follow me, deny your instincts of self-preservation and resistance to mistreatment in its severest form, and be prepared to shoulder your particular burden of terrifyingly inhumane treatment, then to bear it until you die in pain; lonely, humiliated and devoid of the awareness of your Father's succoring presence."

When one imagines that the Lord was sent to bring to pass our dreams of emancipation from the cruelties of life; from people, structures, and situations that press upon us like some foreign occupying army, mentally we will, like a boxer, bob and weave in order to avoid being hit squarely on the jaw by our Lord's description of discipleship.

Is not our Lord the great Emancipator, Savior and Deliverer? Oh yes, be sure of that, dear ones. But what He most essentially intends to free us from is that alien inward bent to live our own lives as we see fit. To bring us from that sorry, pathetic little self-kingdom into the

kingdom of His Son, our Father does so by that singular Way which is through "much tribulation."

Listen, please; it is unavoidable. We must through much tribulation enter the kingdom. Only extreme pressure calls forth from our depths the kind of reliance upon God that characterizes life in the kingdom of heaven. As it is with the Son of God, the sons of God must live only by means of, out from, in utter dependence upon the Father.

To summarize: If the disciples could have allowed themselves to face the full brunt of Jesus' words, their question would have been, "Lord, are you seriously saying that true discipleship must involve being prepared for and following through with the acceptance of cruelty in the extreme and that you're not only not promising us a way of avoidance but telling us that there's no other way?"

If such a Way is necessary for the fulfillment of the purpose of perfect Love, how glorious must be that end. In His love, our Father would never use such means unless His intention is that we finally be so baptized in eternal bliss that the reward will be proven to be utterly disproportionate to the suffering on the Way. Are we able to be baptized in the baptism wherewith He was baptized? Yes, by His grace, we are. The baptism of suffering leads to the baptism of unimaginable bliss.

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