
Simon, Jesus' Cross-Bearer

"When they led Him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus" (Luke 23:26).

Pilate handed Jesus over to the chief priests and the Jews to be crucified (John 19:16). They took Him, along with two thieves, in a kind of procession to Calvary, the place of execution. It was customary for a condemned man to carry his own cross. Although Matthew, Mark, and Luke did not mention that Jesus bore His, John did. He wrote, "They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew ['Aramaic'; NIV], Golgotha" (John 19:17).

Somewhere along the route, maybe just beyond the gate, Jesus must have fallen beneath the weight of the cross that He was carrying. Either He fell under its weight or was struggling so with the carrying of it that it became clear to the soldiers that something would have to be done. After all, they did not want Him to die before they were able to crucify Him!

Matthew and Mark record that the soldiers found a man whom "they pressed" into service (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21). Luke wrote that they "seized a man" (Luke 23:26). His name was Simon.

The small detail of soldiers knew what to do when they were in need of help. They looked over the bystanders along the road for someone strong enough to assist them. Once that person was spotted, all a soldier had to do was to reach over and tap him on the shoulder with the butt of his spear, commanding him to step forward and carry the cross, and the man had to do it. Palestine had been occupied by Rome for some time, and this occupying power had the right

of impressment. That is, anytime one was needed to provide assistance to a soldier of the occupying army, he was required to do it.

The man who carried the cross of Jesus was from Cyrene, a fairly significant city in the northern part of Africa. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, Cyrene had a large Jewish population. The name "Simon" was of Jewish origin, which likely indicates that Simon was a Jew. Luke said that Simon was "coming in from the country" (Luke 23:26). Jerusalem, at the time of the Passover, would swell to several times its normal population, leaving little room for a visitor to stay inside the city. Simon may have been staying with relatives or friends who lived in a rural area outside of the city of Jerusalem.

On this particular morning, Simon was traveling into Jerusalem to prepare for the Passover, when he encountered a procession that was making its way through one of the gates of Jerusalem. He must have gone over to the edge of the crowd to get a glimpse at what was happening. Perhaps the procession, because of Jesus' need, stopped almost in front of Simon. He may have been a rather strong, robust-looking man. As the soldier on his side of the procession looked around for a cross-bearer, his eyes fell upon Simon. He pointed his spear at him, maybe even tapping him with it, saying, "I commission you to carry this man's cross!" Having no choice in the matter, Simon went over, bent down, picked up the cross, and began to walk behind Jesus with the cross balanced like a yoke across his shoulders. When

they arrived at the place of execution, Simon laid the cross down. Then the procedure of nailing Jesus to it began.

This incident of Simon's carrying Jesus' cross to Golgotha is described with only one verse each in all three Gospels that mention it (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26). It is briefly and almost incidentally related, but how full of pathos and meaning it is!

Simon's carrying this cross reminds us anew that Jesus gives His glory to whomever or whatever He touches. Jesus took this crudely cut cross, an instrument of shame and death, and turned it into a cross of glory, the means of our salvation. Simon was an unknown man when he entered Jerusalem that morning; but, after carrying Jesus' cross a short distance, his name was etched into the halls of immortality. Wherever the gospel is preached, the story of what he did is told. He will be forever connected with the sacrifice of Jesus, the greatest event that this world will ever know. Because of Jesus, Simon was changed from a nameless face to an ageless name.

The biblical pages tell stories about individuals who are among the most famous people of all time simply because of their relationships with Jesus. Consider just a few: the widow who cast into the treasury her two mites; the young man who gave the five barley loaves and two fish that Jesus used to feed a multitude; the centurion who acknowledged Christ after His death; and this man, Simon, who bore Jesus' cross.

Further, this event shows us that anyone who looks into the face of Jesus cannot remain unchanged. Undoubtedly, somewhere along the way, Simon must have looked into the face of Jesus as He was walking to Golgotha to give His life and blood for the sin of the world. In divine providence, Simon was permitted to be close to Jesus at this special time in history. Very few people had this opportunity. Surely, Simon never forgot this experience that he had with Jesus. If he later heard the name of Jesus or listened to a sermon about Jesus, his mind must have gone back to the moment when he bore His cross on the way to Golgotha.

In the Book of Acts, Cyreneans are listed among those who heard the great sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). In addition,

Luke pictured Cyreneans engaging in the preaching of the gospel (Acts 13:1) in those days when Christianity was spreading throughout the Roman Empire. Who knows what influence Simon's carrying Jesus' cross may have had on these events?

Still another truth that this episode reveals is that Jesus will bless us far more than we can ever bless Him. Simon did something for Jesus that Jesus could not do for Himself. The act of Simon, even though he was compelled to do it, was unique. At this moment in time, Jesus needed someone to carry His cross; Simon, being handy, was ordered to do it—and he did. He may have thought at first that he was being taken advantage of; after all, he was from North Africa, not Jerusalem. However, as Simon carried the cross and watched this figure in front of him, he no doubt saw something marvelously different about Him. He must have learned something about Him—not necessarily by listening to Him, but by observing the conduct, personality, and bearing that set Him apart from all other people.

Later in the New Testament story, the sons of Simon are spoken of as being popular men in the minds of Mark's readers. It must be that Mark included them in his record (Mark 15:21) because they were Christians and were well known in the church. It is altogether likely that Simon had also become a Christian. The Rufus mentioned by Paul at the end of his letter to the Romans (Romans 16:13) may well have been the son of Simon. The fact that Simon carried Jesus' cross not only made him famous, but it may also have started him on the road to learning about Jesus and coming to know the salvation that He provided for all people through the cross that Simon had helped to carry. It must have had a significant influence upon Simon—perhaps even leading him and his family to Christ.

The deepest desire of a godly father's heart is that his family might become Christians and lead faithful lives for Christ. The one sorrow that should break his heart more than all others comes upon him if his child departs into evil. In contrast, the one joy that should outshine all other joys is knowing that his sons and daughters have developed an abiding thirst for God and the truth. Simon bore Jesus' cross; in return,

Jesus opened the door for salvation to be offered to him and his family. This is the highest joy any family can know.

On the practical level, this incident reminds us that we are asked to do something similar to what Simon did. No one can do for Jesus precisely what Simon did; yet, in a sense, we are called upon in our daily living to carry Jesus' cross—that is, to walk after Jesus, bearing the shame and reproach of the cross. We are to take up our crosses, which really means resolving to do what Jesus did and to live the way Jesus lived. Simon did for Jesus what Jesus could not do for Himself; even so, we live in this world as the spiritual body of Jesus, serving as His hands and feet among the people around us. In this way, we do for Jesus what He no longer does for Himself in this world. We walk behind Jesus, carrying His cross for Him, spreading the gospel throughout the world.

As Simon entered Jerusalem that morning, he must have anticipated with great gladness the keeping of the Passover. Maybe he had not enjoyed that privilege before. Little did he know that this special day in his life would turn into his greatest day, a day that would no doubt

change him, his family, and even the world.

Eddie Cloer



Simon was “compelled” to carry Jesus’ cross (Matthew 27:32; KJV). “The word for such compulsion was aggareuein. In the end the word came to signify any kind of forced impressment into the service of the occupying power. In an occupied country citizens could be compelled to supply food, to provide billets, to carry baggage. Sometimes the occupying power exercised this right of compulsion in the most tyrannical and unsympathetic way. Always this threat of compulsion hung over the citizens. Palestine was an occupied country. At any moment a Jew might feel the touch of the flat of a Roman spear on his shoulder, and know that he was compelled to serve the Romans, it might be in the most menial way. That, in fact, is what happened to Simon of Cyrene, when he was compelled (aggareuein) to bear the Cross of Jesus.”¹

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 166.