

Mark 15:21

March 24, 2024

“And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry His cross.”

A donkey carries Jesus into Jerusalem. A passerby, Simon of Cyrene, carries Jesus' cross up to Golgotha. Which of these has the greater honor? The donkey is spoken of in prophecy. *“Behold, your King is coming to you...mounted on a donkey,”* writes Zechariah.

But of Simon, there is no such prophecy. Only three verses in Scripture even mention him. One here in Mark, one in Matthew, and one in Luke. We know nothing of this man apart from what we are told in these three passages. He is a Jew from North Africa. He is coming in from the country, He is the father of Alexander and Rufus. And he is compelled to carry Jesus' cross.

There is ancient literature which tells us that the victims of crucifixion were forced to carry their crosses through the streets of Jerusalem, and then out to the Place of a Skull to be crucified. St. John tells us that Jesus, too, carried His own cross. It would have been a horizontal beam, the patibulum, the crossbar. The victims were affixed to this beam, and then it was attached to the vertical post in the ground, leaving the victim suspended between heaven and earth.

This crossbeam weighed around one hundred pounds. A difficult task, even for a strong man, to drag it through the city and up the hill. But for Jesus, He had not the strength. Not after being whipped without mercy. A whipping so brutal that some victims died before they reached Golgotha.

And so, Jesus, we can picture the scene in our minds, He struggles on the way. He falls to His knees, perhaps even falling completely to the ground. This man, Simon, is walking in the other direction, heading into the city. The soldiers impress him into service. He picks up Jesus' cross, and he follows Jesus up to Golgotha.

There is more here than meets the eye. What is striking to us, or at least should be, is this question: Where is the other Simon? Where, in fact, are any of Jesus' disciples? It would be an honor for one of them, any one of them, to carry the cross of their Lord for Him. So, why don't they step up and help? Why is Jesus' cross placed on Simon of Cyrene and not on Simon Peter? Why not on James, or on John, or on the shoulders of any one of His disciples?

This man, Simon, carries Jesus' cross because the disciples are not there. They all fled in Gethsemane. In the courtyard of the high priest, Simon Peter had not the courage to admit that he even knew Jesus.

And thus, a stranger is chosen. Jesus' cross is laid on him. He bears this burden. He walks in silence behind Jesus. And on Golgotha, he lays down this cross and watches as the soldiers roughly affix Jesus to it with nails.

Wouldn't you watch? If you carried a cross for someone, would you, could you immediately walk away and erase, from your mind, what happened? This man, Simon, is given the privilege that no other man is given. The privilege, the honor of bearing for Jesus the cross upon which He will die.

Simon's own sweat and blood would have been on this cross from carrying it. And it would have been mingled with Jesus' sweat and blood. And so, think with me on this. Simon sweats and bleeds for Jesus

because of the cross he bears. He is forced to do this. Yet Jesus does this freely. He sweats in Gethsemane. He bleeds from His cross. And there is no greater honor than this. Not what the donkey does in carrying Jesus. Not what Simon does in carrying His cross. It's what Jesus does, freely, willingly, laying down His life for sinners, for all sinners. Shedding His blood, mingled with His sweat, for your forgiveness, your salvation.

And He does this for you and me even though we so often, like His disciples, are nowhere to be found. And like Simon, coming in from the country who would have passed by Jesus with His cross, we, too, are often nothing more than passersby. We have our priorities in life, and quite often they do not include Jesus and His cross.

But God intervenes. For Simon He intervened through the soldiers to compel Simon to become involved. This man being forced to follow Jesus. Forced to sweat and bleed because of Jesus' cross.

How has God intervened in your life? When you intend to go your own way, to turn away from Jesus and His cross, He steps in. Perhaps through an illness. Maybe through a profound and overwhelming difficulty. And possibly even through a tragic turn of events. And He lays a cross upon you. A cross which makes you sweat and bleed. A cross you would rather not carry. And yet we must if we want to follow Jesus.

But, my friend, you and I can only carry our crosses. For Simon, he carried Jesus' cross up to Golgotha. But then it was no longer his cross. From there, it was Jesus who took that cross from Simon. It was His on which to suffer, on which to bear the sin of the world – Simon's sin, the sin of His disciples, yours, mine, all sin was laid upon Jesus.

Whatever cross God has laid upon you, its purpose is to place you with Jesus, to make you sweat as did Simon, to make you bleed as he did. And to lead you up to Golgotha where you see your Lord crucified on His cross for you. And suddenly your cross isn't all that heavy anymore; not all that unbearable to carry. If Jesus can suffer the hell that you and I deserve on His cross, then the crosses that we carry behind Jesus are a blessing. They are not hell, but heaven. For their purpose is to keep us with Christ and in Christ.

My friends, God does give you a cross to carry as a burden. But He does not want you to carry the burden of your sin. If you have been carrying that burden, lay it down and let Jesus have it. Repent of your sin, turn away from it, and believe the good news that Jesus took your sin to His cross. He suffered the penalty for your sin. He endured its shame and its guilt. There is no burden for you anymore. God forgives you. He forgives your sin. Every one of you He forgives.

In a few minutes you will walk up to this altar. This is not Golgotha. Jesus is not sacrificed here. But what He did on Golgotha is given to you here. Here is forgiveness for you, and life, and salvation, for here is Jesus. He is in His Sacrament for you. And if you are still carrying a burden; if there is a sin in your past that bothers you; if there is any shame or any guilt, be like Simon who laid down the cross he was carrying. It belongs to Jesus now. It is His to bear. Go in peace, my friend, you are forgiven. Amen.