

**Take up your Cross – Good Friday Message**  
**Matt 16:21-25**

Brothers and sisters, tonight we have witnessed and remembered the significant events which occurred in the week prior to the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus.

It started out with Jesus' joyful arrival in Jerusalem, the crowds of people singing praises to him and shouting Hosanna – Lord Save Us, proclaiming that Jesus was King, the promised Messiah who would come and liberate them from their enemies and restore the Kingdom and fulfill the covenant promise that David would always have an heir on the throne of Israel.

And yet it went downhill pretty quickly from there...

Jesus visits the temple and discovers that the temple leadership had allowed the court of the Gentiles to be taken over by those serving the Jews who could enter into the inner courts of the temple, selling them their requisite sacrifices and temple tithes, effectively preventing any of the Gentiles who

may have wanted to seek Yahweh and pray to Him at His temple from have a free and quiet place to do so.

So, instead of going after the hated Roman oppressors Jesus chastises the Jewish religious leaders and clears the temple and they begin to turn against him.

Then Jesus celebrates the Passover with disciples, and in anticipation of what will happen... Jesus appropriates the Passover meal and turns it into a supper that teaches and explains why He is going offer his life and shed his blood in what will take place over the next few days.

From there we see the familiar course of events unfold... Jesus pleading with the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking if there is any other way, but ultimately submitting to the Father's plan. Jesus' betrayal and arrest, desertion and trial – if you could call it a trial.

Eventually Jesus is sentenced to death by crucifixion, and tortured and made to carry His cross and brought outside the

city to where He would be executed. Sentenced to death in a manner reserved for the lowest and most despicable of criminals.

It's quite the turn around isn't it, from entering the city to shouts of praise and the cheering of the crowds... to exiting the city a week later bloodied and beaten, the crowd jeering at Him as He stumbles under the weight of his cross, condemned to die.

From the disciples' point of view this was entirely unexpected and an absolute disaster. Whatever it was they had anticipated from Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, this was not it.

However, it wasn't for any prior lack of effort on Jesus' part, to warn them and prepare them for what needed to occur when He arrived in Jerusalem.

It says in Matt 16:21 that *"From that time on... Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and*

*the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*

You see brothers and sisters, if the disciples were in shock and disbelief over how Jesus' trip to Jerusalem turned out it wasn't because Jesus didn't warn them... it was because... they didn't want to hear what Jesus was telling them.

In Matt 16:22 we read *"Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"*

Peter didn't want to hear Jesus talking like this because it went contrary to who Peter believed Jesus was and what He had come to do. Peter understood that the Messiah would come in the Spirit and the power of Yahweh to restore Israel, and save them from their enemies - just like the mighty men of God had done in the past. Moses, Joshua, the Judges, the Prophets, King David... these deliverers spoke in faith of the mighty acts of the God who delivered, not in terms of suffering and dying and defeat.

But Peter's well-intentioned Messianic correction of Jesus is misplaced, Peter does not understand... in fact Peter has it wrong! Matt 16:23 *"Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."* That's a stinging rebuke to Peter but there's more going on here.

Remember when the Devil tempted Jesus in the desert, and Jesus did not fall for his temptations... and thus stayed perfect and was not swayed from His mission... We also need to remember that Luke 4:13 says - then the devil *"left him... until an opportune time."*

So here we see the Devil coming back at a more opportune time, manipulating Peter's good intentions, his correct understanding of how God had worked to deliver Israel in the past through mighty men who did great deeds and proclaimed victory, with words of faith, so as to tempt Jesus once again.

Dangling before Jesus the possibility that He could just ride into Jerusalem to save Israel through performing mighty acts in the Spirit and power of Yahweh just as others had before Him in accordance with God's will. He could take this route instead of suffering and dying, instead of what God had planned. He doesn't need to suffer and die to deliver Israel.

But Jesus does not fall for the temptation, He remains committed to pursue the means by which God will deliver not only Israel, but all nations, not from political oppression but from their sin and captivity to the devil.

The mighty acts of God in the past where the nation of Israel was delivered and set free through Moses, Joshua, the Judges and the Prophets and King David did not liberate them from the deeper spiritual reality of sin and evil that had led Israel into the covenant unfaithfulness that resulted in their political oppression.

Addressing the deeper issue required a different approach, a path of suffering and death.

It was only through offering His blood as a perfect sacrifice that Jesus would be able to set people free from the debt of their sin and break the power of the devil and death over their lives through being raised to life from death.

And it is crucial that Jesus' disciples understand this, if they are going to follow Him. So, Matt 16:24 *"Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves... and take up their cross... and follow me."*

Brothers and sisters, tonight we have been reminded of the suffering and death which Jesus willingly took upon himself, so that our sin might be forgiven and we can be set free from the power of the devil and death. Believe this, put your faith and trust in this – and act on this.

Brothers and sisters Jesus died for us – so that we can live for Him. That is how we show we have faith and truly believe and trust in what He did... it is in how we live our lives, in how we follow Him!

But we too, like the disciples, need to go to Jerusalem with Jesus, witness the suffering and crucifixion of our Lord so that Jesus' words to us about what it means to follow Him really begin to sink in for us...

Peter and the rest of the disciples heard Jesus tell them *"deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me"* but in Jerusalem they witness firsthand the path that Jesus walked and the path that they themselves would also walk after Him.

And later on, they would understand that by walking that path ahead of them, Jesus had secured forgiveness and broken the power of sin and the devil... in order to enable them to walk that path as well.

And when the disciples had been filled with the Holy Spirit, as Jesus' had been – they followed, they denied themselves, they took up their crosses and went out to make other disciples of all nations.

And because the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us as well brothers and sisters, tonight as we hear Jesus' words to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him, we too are enabled to walk the path that Jesus' walked.

In big picture gospel terms this means that we deny our own ability to save ourselves, we take up the cross and put our sinful nature to death upon it, we endure whatever ridicule or scorn may come our way in this life for putting our faith and trust in Jesus, and we face our own death confident that it is not death... but the path to heaven, to life with God in eternity, in the new creation. That's the big picture application...

But in our everyday Christian living, denying ourself and taking up the cross becomes the means by which we co-operating with the Holy Spirit's work to sanctify us and make us more like Jesus Christ.

Paul explains in Gal 5:16-17 that denying ourselves is to *"walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the*

*flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh."*

So, we must deny what our sinful nature wants as described in Gal 5:19-21 *"sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."*

and act on what the Holy Spirit wants instead, Gal 5:22-23 *"love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."*

And with regards to taking up our cross Paul teaches in Gal 4:25 that *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."* So that indeed as Paul says in Romans 6:11 *"In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."*

So in this way, this is the path of discipleship where we become more and more like Jesus Christ in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

But denying ourselves and taking up our cross is also circumstantial as well, and speaks to our willingness to endure the trials and challenges of life, and hardship and persecution for publicly confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Hebrews 12:7 exhorts us *“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?”* and reminds us in vs.11 that *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

And that is what we have to remember brothers and sisters... we must remember this about the gospel, we must remember this about how to co-operate with the Holy Spirit in our sanctification and we must remember this about our personal

circumstances... that it leads to something better, to victory, to life.

We do not walk a path of suffering, self-denial and death simply for the sake of suffering. Following Jesus is not a morbid, machoistic endeavor – there is victory and life! Jesus was very clear and specific that after three days after his death, He would be raised to life!

But the only way to that victory and life is to follow after Jesus on the path that leads through suffering – self denial and the cross – and to death, there is no other way. That is why Jesus says in Matt 7:14 *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and only a few find it.”*

Brothers and sisters, tonight you have witnessed Jesus showing you the narrow gate that leads to life, actually Jesus is not just showing you, He is proving to you that it leads to life.

What Jesus accomplished on the cross to pay for our sins, to make us right with God, so that we can be saved and filled with the Holy Spirit proves that the path of self-denial and taking up our cross leads to life.

And brothers and sisters you are in the midst of experiencing that.

Why else would you deny yourself the extra holiday and take the time to come out to a 5pm Good Friday service? Why else would you take up your cross to remember and embrace and trust in the brutality and scandal and horror of Christ's cross? Unless you believed that it truly leads to life...

So brothers and sisters as we remember how our Lord laid down his life – let us go from here tonight remembering His words about our own lives. Matt 16:25 *“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”*

Amen.