



# THE CHALLENGE OF THE CROSS

Is the cross still at the centre of Christianity today?

Miki Hardy

# **The Challenge of the Cross**

by Miki Hardy

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# Introduction

When we look at the Early Church in the book of Acts we see a strong, united, lively church that was separate from the world. Clearly, the gospel message preached at that time was powerful. It produced real repentance, true commitment, genuine forgiveness, evident unity and undeniable faith. The Early Church was on a journey towards spiritual maturity, and each Christian clearly understood that the Christian walk meant laying down one's life. They were ready to identify with Christ, in His sufferings, His death and His resurrection.

Apostle Paul received directly from Jesus Christ Himself the fullness of the revelation of the gospel: Jesus Christ and Him crucified, as he explains in Galatians 1:11-12: *"But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ."* Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the foundational message of the New Covenant Church.

As long as the message of the cross was preached, the early Christians remained steadfast and strong; firmly rooted in Christ. They walked in victory, holiness and faith. But as soon as the message was compromised and watered down, their faith wavered and they stopped walking in the ways of the Lord, as we can see clearly in the letters to the Galatians, Hebrews and Corinthians.

The author of Hebrews describes the zeal and commitment of the Jewish Christians once they had grasped the true message of the gospel. They were willing to endure much disgrace, suffering and affliction, and they happily shared all that they had (Hebrews 10:32-34). Yet later on, as the fire in their hearts began to cool, their faith weakened and we see how their

attitude changed as they began to fall under the demands of the Mosaic Law once again.

Many churches today prefer to ignore the preaching of the cross and opt for messages that, instead of drawing the hearts of Christians towards Jesus and becoming separate from the world, pander to man's fleshly desires for material things, despite the Bible describing such things as having no lasting value.

This is why we need to fully grasp the meaning of what happened at the cross, and its centrality to all Christian doctrine. Then we will begin to understand that the cross of Jesus Christ is the true foundation of Christianity, and integral to every aspect of its doctrine. What happened at the cross must become a living reality in our lives and not simply an event that took place two thousand years ago.

*“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that he lives He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:3-11).*

If we study this passage closely, we realise what actually took place when Jesus died and rose again. Out of His great love and desire to save mankind condemned by sin, God, our Father, included the whole of humanity in His perfect sacrifice. Apostle Paul affirms that we have all died, been buried, and raised with Christ. This means that the ‘old man’ (our unredeemed

nature) has been crucified with Christ, so that we can now walk in newness of life, free from sin and on the road towards holiness. Isn't it amazing to realise that one man (Jesus) died for all so that by His death, all men might be justified? (Romans 5:18).

Paul reiterates this by saying that in Jesus, God has made a way, "...*that we should be holy and without blame before Him...*" (Ephesians 1:4). The free gift of salvation that was planned from before the beginning of time has now become a reality through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus is God's gift and the manifestation of His grace towards all men. "*For by grace you have been saved through faith...*" (Ephesians 2:8). In the same chapter, Paul also declares that we have everything in Jesus, since we were dead in our sins but have been made alive with Him. He goes on to say that He has, "...*made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...*" (Ephesians 2:6). It is this revelation that gives us faith for a victorious and holy life.

How then, can we understand this and yet still live our lives in whatever way we please, driven by our carnal desires? Yes, it's true that Jesus did everything necessary at the cross for us to receive our full inheritance and to have victory over sin, but it will never become a reality unless we take up our cross (Matthew 16:24). As Paul clearly affirms: "*And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*" (Galatians 5:24).

Jesus Himself declared, "*And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.*" (Matthew 10:38). Could this be any clearer? Apostle Paul understood this fully, which is why he preached, "...*Jesus Christ and Him crucified*" (1 Corinthians 2:2) and spoke about a Christian's identification with the sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus.

This message is the foundation of the Christian life and we cannot expect to walk in victory if we ignore this call to identify our lives with Christ daily. This is the simple, yet powerful message of the cross.

## Chapter I

# Salvation and the Cross

The first thing we need to grasp is that salvation is received, “...by grace [...] through faith...” (Ephesians 2:8).

### Salvation, the proof of God's love

The key to our salvation is Jesus' death on the cross. When we hear the gospel preached the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin. We realise that our sinful nature, which is common to all man, separates us from God, and that Jesus had to suffer and die on the cross to redeem us. The Holy Spirit leads us to humble ourselves, repent and seek God's forgiveness as we discover His love for us, by accepting Jesus Christ as our Saviour. The Holy Spirit then testifies to our hearts that we have become children of God (Romans 8:16).

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is proof of our heavenly Father's incomparable and perfect love towards all men: “...in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8).

Apostle John writes that, “...God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16). Jesus went unreservedly to the cross to shed His blood so that God's wonderful plan of salvation for mankind could be fulfilled. He humbled Himself taking the form of a man and, in His humanity He conquered sin.

The infinite greatness of God's love and His plan for the salvation of mankind are made clear in the book of Isaiah chapter 53. The prophet describes in

detail the suffering that Christ had to endure. God laid all of our iniquity on His Son and the chastisement for our peace fell upon Him. It was God's plan to break Him through the suffering He had to bear to carry our griefs. He paid the price on the cross for us to be delivered from our sin that separates us from the Father.

Paul speaks of how Jesus became, "...a curse for us." The Law of Moses, having become a curse for man (because it revealed his sinful nature, thereby condemning him) was cancelled by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as He took the curse upon Himself (Galatians 3:13). Elsewhere, he goes on to explain that, "*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus took upon Himself the condemnation we deserved for our sin.

## **Repentance and faith: keys to salvation**

To receive forgiveness of sin, salvation, and the gift of eternal life, what we need to do is simple: repent, acknowledge Christ as the Son of God, accept what He did on the cross and receive Him as our Lord and Saviour.

There are several examples of conversions in the book of Acts. In chapter 2 verse 37, Peter preaches to a large number of Jews at Pentecost about salvation through Jesus Christ, "*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"*" Many felt the love of God for them and three thousand repented and were converted to Christ that day (Acts 2:41).

In Acts 8:26-38, we read of another account: an Ethiopian eunuch was travelling in his chariot, and reading the passage in Isaiah, which speaks of a man who gave himself as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. An angel of the Lord led Philip to him and he was able to explain to him that the passage was referring to Christ. He shared with him the good news of Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection and on hearing it, the eunuch repented, was saved and baptised by Philip in some nearby water.

Apostle Paul proclaims that the gospel, which is centred on Jesus' death, burial and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-4), "...is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes..." (Romans 1:16). He states clearly that, "...no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11).

## **The Cross and salvation: inseparable**

So, the cross of Jesus Christ is the foundation of our salvation. If Jesus had simply come to earth without dying on the cross and rising again, no one would have been saved. There would have been no perfect sacrifice, no blood shed by the spotless Lamb of God, and therefore no atonement for our sins.

## Chapter II

# Baptism and the Cross

### Neither a ritual nor a pre-requisite for salvation

In many churches today, sadly water baptism has become a purely religious act or compulsory step. Often believers do not fully understand that the decision to be baptised should reflect a genuine desire to live the rest of their lives in submission to the Lord. Christians are often taught that it is simply the next step to take after getting saved. They are encouraged along the lines of, 'Now that you are saved, you must be baptised', without someone fully explaining the true cost of following Jesus. As a result, water baptism becomes a religious act void of any real commitment to identifying one's life with Christ.

Another school of thought, which exists in the Church today, goes as far as saying that if someone is born again but hasn't been baptised, that person is not saved. However, we see from Romans 10:9, *"that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."* Since baptism comes after salvation, it is quite clear from this passage that someone who dies after his conversion, but before being baptised, is nevertheless saved and will inherit eternal life.

### Identifying with Christ

*"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."* (Romans 6:3-4).

In the previous verse Apostle Paul explains that if we have died to sin, then we cannot continue to live in sin. This becomes possible for us because in the same way that Jesus was brought back to life from the dead, we too can live in newness of life in Christ.

During baptism, a Christian is completely immersed in water, which speaks of dying to self. He then comes up out of the water, symbolising resurrection to a new life, and is now called to a holy life in Jesus. A believer, therefore, needs to understand the seriousness of his decision to identify his life with the sufferings and death of Christ before being baptised.

## **A commitment to lay down one's life**

Jesus also refers to baptism when answering a question from James and John, when He says to them, *"...Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? [...] You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared."* (Mark 10:38-40).

We see in this passage, that Jesus is asking His disciples if they are ready to go through the same baptism that He will have to go through. Why was He asking this question when He had already been baptised in water by John the Baptist? Obviously, He was referring to the suffering and death that He would have to endure on the cross. It was as if He was asking them: 'Will you be ready to take up your cross?' In effect, Jesus was showing them the link between baptism and the cross that every follower of Jesus is called to carry.

This, then, is the meaning of the verse in Matthew 16:24, *"...If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."* Baptism is a conscious act that exhibits the readiness of a Christian to lay down his life, deny himself and take up his cross, in order to follow Jesus. It is a serious, public commitment to live a new way of life: to be filled with Christ's life so we can serve Him effectively.

Baptism of itself does not change a Christian, but rather challenges him to lay down his life in exchange for Christ's life, and to live for Him. This is why it is so important to understand baptism in the light of the revelation of the cross of Jesus.

Evidently, if a Christian is not ready to die to himself, there is no point in him being baptised! We now see why Jesus said to His disciples that if anyone wants to be worthy of following Him, then he must deny himself and take up his cross. Baptism, therefore, takes on a whole new meaning when we realise how inextricably linked it is to the cross of Jesus Christ.

## Chapter III

# The Lord's Supper and the Cross

In the previous chapter we looked at the meaning of water baptism. So, what do water baptism and the Lord's Supper have in common? We have already seen that baptism is a public decision to identify ourselves with Christ. Partaking of the Lord's Supper is the confirmation of that decision and both are directly related to the message of the cross as taught by Jesus.

The Lord's Supper is first and foremost a reminder of Jesus' love for us. The bread reminds us of the suffering He went through when His body was broken, and the cup of His blood shed on the cross.

On reading 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, we see that the Christians in the Early Church regularly shared the Lord's Supper, often at meal times when they met together in homes. We even see Apostle Paul rebuking the Corinthians for not taking the Lord's Supper seriously, as there were times when some of them were even drunk.

### **A time to examine ourselves**

While sharing the Lord's Supper, the early Christians would remember their decision to identify their lives with the Lord, something He had asked them to do (1 Corinthians 11:24). In the same way, the Lord's Supper is a time for us to examine ourselves and consider our spiritual state, our commitment and our service to Him; to ask ourselves whether or not we have lost the vision of identifying our lives with Christ. Are our hearts right with God and man? It is also a time when we can be convicted of sin, are able to repent and experience His grace, before continuing the race. Equally, it is an occasion

to forgive each other since we are called to be at peace with everyone. This is the manner in which we should share the Lord's Supper.

Sadly, for many Christians, it has become simply a ritual and has lost the real meaning it carried at the time of the Early Church. In fact, in many churches today, the cross no longer has any place in the Lord's Supper.

So, should we be regularly sharing the Lord's Supper at home with our family, as well as whenever we come together as believers? My answer would be, why not? It can only serve to keep us closer to the Lord.

## **A reminder to take up one's cross**

Coming back to the verse mentioned in the previous chapter from Mark 10:38, we see Jesus asking His disciples if they are ready to drink the cup that He has to drink. Once again, He is referring to His suffering and death on the cross. In essence, He is asking them, will you be ready to take up your cross and follow Me? Will you be willing to identify your lives with My suffering and My death; to lose your life in order to have Mine? The challenge here is the same as when He asked if they were ready to be baptised with the same baptism with which He was to be baptised.

That is why Jesus said to them, *"...Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you."* (John 6:53). Jesus was not speaking here about literally eating His flesh and drinking His blood but rather about what His broken body and blood shed on the cross was going to mean in the lives of every believer.

The bread we break when we share the Lord's Supper is a portrayal of His body that was broken for us through His suffering. Jesus suffered in His flesh, was beaten and bruised, and as we eat the bread we reaffirm our decision to identify our lives with His sufferings. In other words, we show that we are ready to suffer for Him by echoing what Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 1:29, *"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."*

Jesus assures us that if we do not eat of His body or drink of His blood, that is if we do not want to identify our lives with His suffering and death, we won't be able to share in His resurrection life. The cup symbolises His death and the gift of His life and as we share in the Lord's Supper, we reaffirm our desire to deny ourselves and lay down our lives, so as to convey His life. Paul clearly states this in Galatians 2:20, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me...*"

## **Before or after baptism?**

Some Christians wonder whether they have the right to take the Lord's Supper before they have been baptised. I don't believe it is a question of having the right or not, but rather whether we have understood the true meaning of the Lord's Supper. If we do, then we will already have the intention to be baptised at some point since both relate to the same thing: our identification with Christ.

There is no doctrinal principle involved here, and the following testimony illustrates this. Not long after our conversion, my wife and I understood clearly that our lives belonged to Jesus and we were ready to follow and serve Him. At that time, we were part of a small group of believers who had just come to know the Lord and we did not know of anyone who could baptise us. As we were soon going to visit a church in South Africa, we decided to wait and get baptised there. Before leaving, we attended a number of meetings where we shared the Lord's Supper, something very important to us. Should we have waited until we were baptised to take the Lord's Supper? I don't believe so since our desire to share in it was right, and the fact that we wanted to get baptised showed that we were fully aware of our commitment to the Lord, even if we didn't have a full understanding of the meaning of baptism at that time. There are many other cases of believers who may have to wait for some time after their conversion before being baptised due to their church's programme etc.

The important thing about sharing in the Lord's Supper is the sincerity of our heart and our desire to identify with the suffering and death of Jesus.

## Chapter IV

# Prayer and the Cross

### Praying according to God's will

Looking back now, I remember how in my early years as a Christian, I used to spend most of my prayer time seeking the Lord for my own personal and family's needs.

'What's wrong with that?' you might ask. Nothing, but it does reveal how spiritually immature I was in seeking only my own interests. I was using prayer to try and provide for my personal needs and nothing else.

You might well argue, 'But Jesus said that we can ask anything in His name and the Father will give it to us.' So then, what's wrong with asking Him for anything and everything we desire?

Let us never forget that God is not there simply to give us absolutely everything we desire in answer to prayer; but instead He wants to give us the things that are part of His will for our lives. In 1 John 5:14, Apostle John writes: *"Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us."*

Remember that God's desire is to build a spiritual house. What matters more than anything else to Him is to see us changed into the likeness of His Son. So, what about praying for the Church? For our brothers and sisters in Christ? Or even for Him to break us and mould us as He wishes? Does that not sound more like praying in line with His will?

## **An opportunity to grow spiritually**

I will always remember the story of a Christian brother I once knew who was in financial difficulty despite him being committed to the Lord. He was praying, reading his Bible and giving to support the Lord's work. He shared with me that he could not understand why the Lord was not answering his prayers and providing for his needs.

I told him I didn't believe that this was the case, but that it may well just be a time of testing that he had to go through. However, he could be sure that the Lord would prove faithful and provide for his needs in His perfect timing. Sure enough, the Lord stepped in at the right moment, and in the meantime this brother had grown spiritually.

We all need to go through times like these as we walk with the Lord, whether it is in our finances, marriage, job or relationships, because as we wait for the Lord to intervene, our wrong reactions, lack of faith, and impatience are revealed. But if we keep the right attitude and allow Him to work in us, then this provides an opportunity for us to grow in the Lord!

The Lord looks after us in His way and according to Romans 8:28, we can be sure that all things work together for our good, because we love Him.

We must understand that prayer is not just a way for God to take care of us but also a means to build our lives spiritually.

## **Praying for the Kingdom of God to advance**

Our prayers should always be motivated by an underlying desire for the advancement of the Kingdom of God before anything else: the spiritual building of the Church of Jesus Christ should be every Christian's primary concern. In Acts 4:29 we see how the Christians in the Early Church gathered together to pray for the will of God to be done. They weren't concerned about their own personal needs, but instead fervently asked God for boldness to proclaim the gospel in the midst of the persecution they were facing. In the same way, when Peter was in prison, they prayed for him without

ceasing. Nowhere do we see them praying for their own personal needs whether physical or material. Relationships of this nature with the Lord are rare these days.

In Colossians 1:9-11 we can see the desire in Apostle Paul's heart for the Church. His prayer was for Christians to, "...*be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding...*" so as to walk in a manner, "...*worthy of the Lord.*" Like him, do we too see the need for God to continue the work He began in us? Do we see the need to pray for this?

Our lives are built through God's dealings in us, which is why we need to accept them. Prayer is not a means of escape from what He wants to build in us, nor of making our Christian walk more comfortable.

There is a great difference between the prayer of a broken and contrite person and one who is self-centred, only seeking things for himself. That is the distinction between a spiritual and a carnal Christian. A spiritual Christian who takes up his cross knows what to pray for and is convinced that God will take care of his needs without continually focusing on them in his prayers. After all, the Bible tells us that God, knows our every need even before we ask Him (Matthew 6:8).

I can say that for years now my wife and I haven't prayed for our own personal needs. I remember, as if it were yesterday, just after we had come back to Mauritius from South Africa to serve the Lord in full time ministry, our church rented an old run-down house for us to gather in. It was in very poor condition and rained as much inside as out! As we had sold our home in South Africa, we could have bought another, but we didn't feel it was the right time, as long as the church had no suitable place of its own. So, for many years we rented and moved from home to home, at times being more than just our own family, since we often had other people from our church living with us. It was not until the day we found a piece of land on which we could build our first church building that we finally bought a home for ourselves. Today we live in a magnificent location, inherited from my grandparents. As my wife often says, "If we had prayed for a home, we would never have even thought of asking the Lord for what we have today!

We would have limited Him enormously...” Yet knowing our hearts for Him and His Kingdom, and our needs, He provided us with a home in His time and in His way! It just goes to show that the choice we made in putting the church first, rather than our own personal needs was definitely the right one. The Lord did over and above what we could have asked or imagined, as it says in Ephesians 3:20. Our God is faithful and knows how to take care of each one of us.

Once we get to the point where we are ready to lay down our lives and take up our cross, our prayers will change drastically. They will no longer be centred on ourselves or on material things, but instead on the Kingdom of God and the things of the Spirit. This will be the fruit of a deep work of God in our lives that are no longer our own but belong to Him. We will pray for the Church, for mission work, for His plan and His guidance, and our needs will come last on the list. It will be the opposite of ‘me, my husband/wife, my children, my house, my car, my job, my finances, my personal needs...’

What we pray for shows where we are in our Christian walk. Let’s aim to live out what Jesus instructs us in Matthew 6:33: *“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”*

## Chapter V

# Repentance and the Cross

Once we have repented of our sins, and put our trust in Jesus, we receive the gift of eternal life. A wonderful illustration of this is when Apostle Peter preached to a large crowd at Pentecost. As he spoke about Jesus, His death on the cross and His resurrection, thousands of people were cut to the heart and asked him what they should do. His response was very straightforward and shows us the way to salvation: *“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* (Acts 2:38). Repentance, therefore, is the door to eternal life.

I remember the day I was born again. When I realised that I was a sinner, I was grieved and broken before God. I repented of my sin and my past life. It was this brokenness that led me to humble myself and acknowledge my need of Jesus.

But what is the place repentance should hold in our lives once we have become children of God? What do we do with our sin, our weaknesses, when we fail and with the things God doesn't approve of in our lives? We will all fail at times and sin, get angry, have bad attitudes and wrong thoughts. Do we just forget about it and move on?

### **Repentance: a key to our Christian walk**

Repentance should still form part of our everyday life, even after we are saved. As long as we live in our mortal bodies, we will never be perfect, and will always need to repent each time we sin in our words, our attitudes, our

actions or in any other way when we fall into temptation. But is the repentance we experience when we get saved any different to the repentance we should experience as a Christian? No, it involves the same conviction of sin and the same fear of God that is vital to bring us to true repentance.

## **Why judge him who sins?**

We often struggle to accept a brother or sister in Christ who falls into sin, but God doesn't; He knows that it's part of our life. As Jesus said in Matthew 26:41: "*...The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*" All that God wants from us is a broken and contrite heart that repents, as was the case for David. The Lord didn't reject him, even though he had sinned. When he repented sincerely, God not only forgave him, but also restored him.

Unfortunately, many Christians today feel condemned and judged by their pastor when they fall into sin, as if pastors were incapable of sin! Repentance is as much for those of us who are pastors as it is for all believers, none are exempt. Pastors are not perfect and we certainly do not always do the will of God.

## **The Corinthian experience**

In the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians we see the very superficial attitude they had towards sin in the Church. At the time of writing they were very carnal and there was much division amongst them. Clearly, the state of their hearts had hindered them from being able to rebuke their fellow believer who was in an alarming, sinful situation, as mentioned in chapter 5. In his first letter Paul expresses his deep regret over their lack of grief concerning the situation. He tells them that he expected the opposite from them: that they would be suffering because of this shameful set of circumstances in the church.

Consequently, Paul's relationship with the Corinthians had deteriorated and this concerned him greatly. He had not received any real response to his first letter, and yet he was hoping for one thing only: that his relationship with them

would be restored, for them to come back to the gospel and for the situation to be resolved.

In his second letter, he doesn't hesitate to share with them his earlier grief, as it was through his ministry that the church in Corinth had started: *"Open your hearts to us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have cheated no one."* (2 Corinthians 7:2). In other words, Paul was saying to them, 'Why should there be any division between us?' He explains that the situation and their reaction to it had brought about a separation in the spirit between them. His first letter may have come across as severe, but he had to speak the truth to them, even if it might have caused the church to split had they not repented. But, as Titus reports on his return from Corinth, they did repent and acknowledge their state, and Paul delights in saying: *"...he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more."* (2 Corinthians 7:7).

Consequently, the Corinthians had a renewed desire and zeal to support Paul. Now that they were one in spirit and heart with him again, he was able to handle the situation in such a way that the sinful brother was brought to repentance. It is worth asking, how did such a change of heart and repentance come about? The answer is simple: by the conviction of the Spirit alone!

The conviction and repentance experienced through that situation was the same the Corinthians had at their conversion and should be a continuing experience today for every born-again Christian who has been renewed by the Spirit of God.

In closing, Paul shares with the Corinthians: *"For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing."* (2 Corinthians 7:8-9). He goes on to explain in the next verse, *"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."*

## True repentance: the fruit of conviction

True repentance isn't a principle or a technique. It is a reality that every Christian should live. It isn't just a matter of saying the right words according to Scripture but it requires a real change of attitude and true brokenness within, which leads the believer to humble him or herself. And yet, unfortunately, many Christians and even pastors have not repented in this way for a very long time.

In Psalm 51, David describes a time of true repentance before the Lord. We can feel his brokenness and Godly sorrow. He writes, *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, you will not despise."* He admits his sin before the Lord and seeks His forgiveness, saying, *"For I acknowledge my transgressions..."* and again, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God..."* This is the kind of repentance that God is looking for in the Church.

## Repentance brings restoration

Whenever there is an issue between me and my wife or another brother or sister in Christ, it often feels as if a wall has gone up between us. Repentance brings down that wall and restores peace and joy. It first produces a time of sorrow as we realise that we have grieved God and offended someone, as well as a time of brokenness from which we are then able to make things right. It drives us to say, 'I should never have said or done that' and our sorrow at having grieved God and hurt another brings a brokenness that moves us to repent.

How many Christian husbands never repent before their wives? Surely there must be many opportunities to do so, whether it is for a wrong attitude, for getting angry, or for being indifferent, or hard, etc. And of course, the same goes for wives towards their husbands! Lack of repentance is a real problem in the Church today.

It goes without saying that our pride takes a beating when we admit to our failures and shortcomings. It's hard... But what great freedom comes when

we do! Disagreements often deteriorate into arguments in a marriage when both husband and wife stick to their guns. Yet, it is something else to accept losing an argument particularly when we think we are right!

I will never forget the day when my wife and I were having an argument. We didn't manage to resolve anything, and I opted to go off to work rather than try to sort out the issue. It was around the time that I was just beginning to grasp the importance of taking up my cross, humbling myself and allowing the Lord to break and change me. As I set off in my car, I realised that my peace had left me. A strong conviction from the Holy Spirit came upon me and I knew that I had hurt my wife and needed to go back and repent to her. But humbling myself before her seemed like a mountain to me! By that time, I had already been a pastor for several years, yet I realised that I had never before truly asked my wife for forgiveness; only the Lord knows how many times I should have! I turned the car around and headed back home. I truly humbled myself before her and asked her to forgive me. My wife was speechless! Without doubt, this was a turning point in our marriage.

Shortly after that, the Lord began to restore our relationship. When my wife speaks about that incident she always says, "It was the first time I really felt Miki's heart and that he wasn't just saying sorry because it was the right thing to do according to Scripture."

Repentance is an extraordinary platform that God uses to work on in our lives. It repairs, restores and redresses situations.

## **Repentance brings life**

What will bring true repentance back to the Church today? It has to be the preaching of the cross, which speaks of our identification with Jesus.

It is very easy for the Church to adopt a religious spirit and no longer feel the need to repent before the Lord. Yet the message of the cross will always show the way to repentance and to keeping a pure heart. The occasional message on repentance certainly won't achieve that. That is why the true

spirit of the gospel, which is the message of the cross, that of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, must dwell in the Church!

To come back to the example of the church in Corinth, what did repentance bring about in their lives? It produced life. This is the direct fruit of the message of the cross, our identification with Christ in His death enables us to carry His life.

This repentance brought about a new attitude, a new stance, restoration and reconciliation in the spirit. It also produced a hatred of sin, a fear of God, an ardent desire and new zeal to attach themselves to the Lord, as well as deep gratitude for what He had done in their hearts through that experience, even though it was a hard one. Once again things were clear in the spirit between Paul and the Corinthians. Everything was back in order and they had found the life and peace of Jesus once again.

Repentance needs to become a normal part of our everyday lives. It is the only way that our relationship with God and others can be restored. We must never be ashamed to repent. It is never a defeat, nor is it a sign of weakness. On the contrary, it is a victory. It is a means for us to humble ourselves and to allow the Lord to lift us up. It is an inescapable element of the Christian life not only to keep the peace but also for our spiritual growth. Sin takes away the joy of our salvation whereas repentance restores this joy and helps us to grow towards maturity.

## Chapter VI

# Forgiveness and the Cross

*“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* (Matthew 6:14-15).

Although we know that the Lord forgives us, we often find it hard to forgive others. We forgive some things, but struggle to forgive others, which is a big problem as Jesus Himself warns that the Father will not forgive those who do not forgive.

### Examples from Jesus and the apostles

When we speak of the message of the cross, we are speaking of forgiveness. Jesus is the perfect example of this: He accepted everything and forgave all the wrong that was done to Him.

Jesus constantly forgave His enemies without hardening His heart even though He was falsely accused, beaten and put to death. He went to the cross with a pure heart, *“Yet He opened not his mouth...”* (Isaiah 53:7). It is because of this that His victory was complete.

On the cross, afflicted and humiliated by insults, He still prayed, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”* (Luke 23:34). He lived out what He preached right up to the end.

Stephen had the same attitude when he was stoned for preaching the gospel. With a heart full of grace, he showed the same forgiveness as Jesus

towards his persecutors by praying, *“Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”* (Acts 7:60). Stephen was a man of the Spirit. He understood what it meant to take up his cross and follow Jesus. He chose to preach the gospel and identify with the Lord rather than to defend himself and remain embittered and unforgiving towards his persecutors. He wholeheartedly forgave the very Pharisees who stoned him to death. In a broken spirit he sent up this heartfelt prayer for them.

Apostle Paul also faced much opposition throughout his ministry, as many preachers stood against him and his doctrine. Even the Corinthians were drawn away by false accusations made against him by other men. In spite of this, he was not embittered towards them or the false preachers. Not only did he forgive them freely, but he even rejoiced as we can see in Philippians 1:18 when he declares: *“What, then, is the issue? Only that in every way, whether by false motives or true, Christ is preached. And in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.”*

What an example he is to us of what it means to carry one's cross!

## **Forgiveness under the New Covenant**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the crowd that another way of life was possible. He compared this new way with the old way of living under the Old Covenant. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.”* (Matthew 5:38-40).

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?*

*Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”* (Matthew 5:43-48).

Forgiving one's enemies, which was impossible under the Old Covenant, has become possible under the New Covenant. Jesus Himself is our example of this when He died on the cross.

## **Forgiveness: a daily experience**

Forgiveness is something we need to walk in daily and there is a price to pay in both humility and brokenness. We need to come to the point where we only have to deal with issues of the day and no longer with those from the past. In other words, once I have forgiven the things of the past, I can move on to forgiving on a daily basis. Every Christian should live this way: free from having to constantly go back to the past, whether it's one week, or even one day, because forgiving has become a daily exercise. Every day, I forgive and every day, it costs me!

Very often we don't realise that we need to be willing to forgive our spouse, our children, our parents, our co-workers, our employer, our employees and even those who reject and persecute us... We must forgive all those who mistreat, disrespect and hurt us, even those who accuse us of things we have not done, who scorn us or speak rudely to us. I am sure you agree that it happens to all of us at one time or another. Your husband has a go at you for nothing, your wife gives you the cold shoulder... these are everyday occurrences! Unfortunately, we often find ourselves going to bed with a troubled heart and a heavy weight on our shoulders.

To keep our heart right, it is crucial that we walk in forgiveness at all times. It is sad that we can believe that our heart is clear before the Lord when we are carrying unforgiveness. Once again, let us remind ourselves that Jesus warned that if we do not forgive men, our heavenly Father will not forgive us either. We cannot carry on living this way. We must give up the right to defend and justify ourselves, and forgive.

## **The consequences of not forgiving**

Resentment is like dragging around a ball and chain, restraining us in our service for God. When we do not forgive, whether for something great or small, we end up hardening our heart. And yet, God wants us to have a tender heart, one that He can work in and change. He cannot do much with a hard heart. And, when we hold onto a grudge we run the risk of backsliding.

Unforgiveness is something evil that eats away at us, depriving us of many blessings from the Lord. If we look closely, we often find that the offender who repents, or in some cases is not even aware he has caused offense, ends up better off than the offended person who is unable to humble himself and forgive. He who does not forgive remains bound to the person who offended him by continuing to bear a grudge, with the result that he walks in defeat. Unforgiveness is a refusal to take up our cross and humble ourselves. It amounts to allowing ourselves to be led by our own pride and flesh that the Lord wants to break.

Many Christians are weighed down, 'carrying' around with them all the people they haven't forgiven. 'He said this, she did that, I can't forgive them...' But we are not called to 'carry' people in this way in our lives! Yet, we remember everything they said and everything they did! Sometimes, we go even further by sharing our grudges with others and speaking negatively about our problems and experiences with people, without realising that we are sowing 'bad seeds' in their hearts. When we refuse to forgive, we always try to justify ourselves by criticising those who have hurt or offended us. Instead of building, we end up tearing down. Is this really how we want to live our lives?

Every Christian has the choice to forgive or harden his heart daily. Often, when a fellow believer says something hurtful to another, the latter will harden his heart and wait for the other to come and repent before forgiving in return. But true forgiveness is not dependent on the actions of the other person. We are called to let go of our hurt and forgive those who offend us, regardless of whether they repent of their actions or not in order to keep our heart right and at peace. This isn't always easy, but it is a decision we need

to make to ensure nothing stands in the way of our fellowship with God or causes us to miss out on the blessings He has in store for us.

## **Forgiving everyone**

What did Jesus say on the cross? *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* We often forget that the enemy can use non-believers for his own ends. Rather than being wise to the plans of the enemy, we look at the person who has wronged us. We consider the way they are mistreating us, we look at their attitude towards us. But what else can we expect from somebody who does not know the Lord? They are subject to being the enemy’s instrument from time to time. When people oppose us and bear false witness against us, what should our reaction be? Forgive! It is our calling. I’m telling you my brothers and sisters in Christ, we have no choice in the matter: forgiveness is not an option. It isn’t a law, but rather a response to the call of the Holy Spirit that will allow God to continue breaking and moulding us.

## **Forgiving leads to freedom**

*“Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.”* (Colossians 3:13). God is gracious towards us. He strengthens us so we can walk with Him, take up our cross and forgive. We must allow Him to break down our pride in order to live in freedom, without holding anything against anyone. What a gift, and what grace we have as children of God! We can forgive every day. Today, tomorrow, in a week’s time, we will be called to forgive and let go.

We need to learn to forgive quickly, and not to allow any bitterness or grudge to take root in our hearts, so that we can be free with all men. All it takes is the willingness to humble ourselves! And this is part of the cross that Jesus asks us to take up every day.

## **Forgiving without limits**

When answering Peter's question, Jesus said that we should forgive seventy times seven times. In other words, we must always forgive, even if it's for a repeated offense (Matthew 18:21-22). Usually we would end up hardening our hearts towards that person. Who likes to be hurt or humiliated? And yet, this is the very thing the Lord is asking of us. And when we find it difficult to forgive on the spot, the Holy Spirit is able to convict us that it is the right thing to do if we truly desire to please the Lord.

A little while back, a lady in our church responded to an altar call for prayer. My wife came to pray with her and quickly realised that she was carrying unforgiveness in her heart. She admitted that she had borne a grudge against her husband since the start of their marriage, which was forty years previously! She was unable to forgive him. My wife explained to her that there was no point in praying for her, as long as she was unwilling to forgive her husband. The lady said she was not yet ready to do so, and my wife moved on to pray for others who had come forward. After a while, she called my wife over and said she was now willing to take the step and forgive her husband. A few months later, her husband died. What grace that she was able to forgive her husband in time! What a victory... Moreover, her husband had felt the change in her before he passed away, and they saw their relationship restored.

It is incredible to see how Christians can remain bound to those who have hurt or offended them, sometimes carrying grudges for years, without seeing how their resentment and bitterness hardens their hearts and holds them back in their walk with the Lord.

When we look at our own lives, we realise that our heavenly Father is often very patient, forgiving us for the same mistakes, the same bad attitudes, the same sin, the same bad temper, the same criticism, the same judgment, time and time again... How can we enjoy His forgiveness while refusing to forgive someone for offending us?

## **Forgiveness: a source of healing**

Forgiveness is an aspect of the Christian walk that can resolve many issues particularly on a personal level. Forgiving heals and restores us, but it is also an opportunity for the Lord to break us and mould us into Christ's image.

In every conflict, I need to ask myself: what is God trying to do in my heart at this time? Shall I look at my own state, or shall I look at the person who is wronging me? If we are ready to take up our cross, the Holy Spirit will always help us to humble ourselves, forgive and let go. If we want to walk with the right attitude and please the Lord, our lives will constantly be tested in this way. The cross is the only way to have victory and remain at peace and in joy. There is no substitute. It is the foundation of a Christian's life.

## Chapter VII

# Grace and the Cross

God has shown His grace to all men through the salvation He offers in Jesus Christ. But there is another aspect to His grace, which remains available to us after having been saved. It is the divine power, and miraculous source of strength that we can draw on at any time throughout our Christian walk; to help us face the tests and trials that will most certainly come our way. Apostle Paul's life is full of such examples.

### Grace for salvation

Grace is first and foremost an unmerited gift from God that we do not deserve: *"...although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus."* (1 Timothy 1:13-14). Paul acknowledges how he received God's abundant grace the day he was saved. He saw himself as an example of that grace particularly as he had been a violent man before his conversion. Just consider how he persecuted the believers of the Early Church and even stood by and watched Stephen being stoned to death, as he recounts himself in Acts 22:4, *"I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women..."* Yet, the Lord still chose to reveal Himself to him, even going as far as making him the apostle to the Gentiles and using him to write half of the New Testament!

God is able to save anyone because Jesus died on the cross for the entire human race. Salvation is therefore available to everyone by His grace.

## Grace to serve Jesus in the midst of suffering

*“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).*

Here we read how the apostle Paul pleaded with the Lord to be delivered from a ‘thorn in the flesh’. Clearly, it was very hard for him to cope with, but the Lord’s answer, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness”*, encouraged and reassured him. He understood it was a test of his faith and part of the cross he had to bear. He also realised that it would in no way hinder his service to God, knowing that God’s grace would be readily available to help him continue serving the Lord. Moreover, it would be a means for him to identify with Christ in His suffering and death, and the Lord would use it to continue changing him into His image. What a revelation this is for the Church today, especially when so many don’t seem to have grasped that God’s grace is there for us when we are ready to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Paul ends by declaring that it is in his weakness and trials that God’s power is revealed through him. He even goes on to say that he delights in the hard times because he desires Christ’s power more than anything else in his ministry, and is ready to take up his cross for it. Anyone who understands the call of God, whether he is a believer, a pastor, or in any other ministry role, can only seek to serve God by His power and the life of Christ. We must understand that taking up our cross is the price to pay, but if we accept to do so God’s grace will always be sufficient.

The revelation of this grace and the certainty of being able to count on God’s strength at any time enables us to accept the hard times, to take up our cross and allow the Lord to break and mould us through them. It is impossible to do this in our own strength, but God’s grace helps us face

any and every situation. It carries us through while He does a deep work in our hearts.

## **Grace in trials**

*“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake...”* (Philippians 1:29).

This scripture reminds me of a sister in Christ who belonged to our church and whose husband was an unbeliever. He made her life very difficult and persecuted her heavily because of her faith and commitment to the Lord. I used to wonder how she managed to cope, often thinking that I myself would not have been able to put up with what she faced. However, as God brought the revelation of the power of His grace to my heart, I understood that in the midst of her suffering for Christ’s sake, God had given her the strength and grace she needed. And all the while, I watched her mature spiritually.

There are countless Christians who have lived through times of great tribulation because of their faith, and who have testified of God’s grace in the midst of these trials. The cross that Jesus asks us to carry is always accompanied by God’s grace and His work in our hearts.

Apostle Paul acknowledges that God’s grace helped him through all the tests and trials he faced, not least the times he spent in prison. *“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”* (1 Corinthians 15:10). He was ready to die to his own desires and crucify his flesh because he had grasped that God’s grace was always there, at every moment, to help him stand firm to the end. In 2 Timothy 4:7, he says: *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”* In that respect, our Christian life is no different to Paul’s; it is an endless battle, where our faith is constantly put to the test, so that we might grow spiritually.

The phrase ‘grace to suffer’ is rarely heard in Christian circles these days, simply because Christians no longer recognise the place the cross should

have in their lives. If we are determined to stay the course, God's grace will always be there to help us face every test, trial, difficulty or suffering without any regret, knowing that, "*...all things work together for good to those who love God...*" (Romans 8:28).

If there is one thing we need to help us take up our cross daily, it is a revelation of the power of God's grace in our lives!

## Chapter VIII

# Temptation and the Cross

*“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”* (Hebrews 4:15). It is clear from this passage that Jesus was tempted, just as we are. In chapter 4 of Luke’s gospel, we see how on three occasions in the desert, the devil tempted Jesus to submit to him rather than follow His Father’s plan. Despite the devil’s schemes, Jesus never once gave into temptation, but always walked in holiness and perfection.

‘Is it normal to feel tempted?’, you might ask. Yes! According to 1 Corinthians 10:13, there is nothing unusual about being tempted, and there is always a way out. As the Chinese proverb says, ‘You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.’ So, temptation of itself is not a sin, as long as we don’t give in to it.

### **Our flesh and temptation**

Wherever we go today, we are tempted in a multitude of ways, whether it is on the street, at the supermarket, reading a newspaper, watching television, etc. And temptations are increasing by the day. The spirit that reigns in the world is at work to keep Man in darkness, but also to lure Christians into sin.

We are tempted by what we see, hear, think and even imagine, which is a good reason to avoid places where temptation is at its strongest, and where the devil plays every trick to seduce our flesh, as Apostle Paul says in

Galatians 5:17: *“For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another...”*

*“But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”* (James 1:14-15). Here, Apostle James clearly describes the process that is set in motion when we give in to our carnal desires. It is up to each of us to resist those desires that lead to sin.

‘Easier said than done’, you might say. True! I know how weak, carnal, and doomed to sin I am, as Paul states in Romans 7:14. But once again the answer lies in taking up our cross, being ready to crucify our flesh with its passions and desires, determined to do all that we can in order to be free from sin. This is what taking the road of the cross is all about.

The Holy Spirit will always be there to help us when He sees our resolve to overcome temptation and resist the desires of our flesh. This is when God’s grace, His divine strength, comes into play. It does not mean that He takes total control, since we will always have our part to play in resisting the desires of our flesh. The Spirit works in us so that we don’t succumb to temptation, and our desire and conviction to obey Him enables us to have the victory. In fact, denying ourselves with the help of God’s grace is God’s provision of a way to escape temptation. It is the cross that makes victory over temptation (and therefore over sin) possible. And, this victory leads us to grow and demonstrate the life of Christ.

Paul confirms this in his epistle to the Romans 8:12, declaring, *“We are debtors - not to the flesh,”* meaning that we don’t owe our flesh anything, and are therefore under no obligation to submit to it.

Of course, we don’t always succeed, but the Lord sees our desire to walk in holiness. During the times when we do fall, and sincerely repent of our sin, the Holy Spirit helps us get up on our feet again and back onto the right path that leads to victory. In the end, all of these experiences are simply a means for us to grow spiritually, so as to become more and more like Jesus.

## **Temptation and the devil**

There is another important side to temptation I would like to mention. Temptation often comes directly from the devil, who wants us to make decisions that are not in our best interest and are contrary to the will of God. For example, he may tempt us to accept a job offer that will be damaging to our spiritual life. The devil is a liar and he aims to deceive us into believing something is good for us when it is not. Often, he will even attempt to blind us by presenting his plans in the guise of blessings from God in order for us to accept them and to be drawn away from the Lord. Such lies from the enemy often work against us by appealing to our carnal desires. Of course, the devil will never warn us of the traps ahead, and it is in these very times that we need to silence the desires of our flesh and listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Bear in mind that not every door that opens before us is from the Lord, so it is up to us to discern what is from Him and what isn't.

As long as we are in this flesh, we will constantly face temptation, but taking up our cross will always be the way for us to overcome it!

## Chapter IX

# Victory and the Cross

We may have a great job, excellent qualifications, lots of money, fulfilled ambitions and every desire met, but for us Christians, true success is defined as having victory over sin.

### **Sanctification: a Christian's goal**

Jesus commands us: *“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”* (Matthew 5:48). Apostle Paul also encourages us: *“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.”* (Romans 6:12). And in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, he confirms that God desires our sanctification. For many Christians, living according to these verses seems almost impossible. Yet God's plan is not simply about forgiving us our sins, but also to see us walk in victory over sin during our life on earth. This reassures us that He will also give us the means to achieve that... even if it doesn't happen overnight.

In Romans 7:21-25, Paul speaks about the war going on within him - the two opposing laws at work. The first is due to the sin that dwells in his flesh and the other is from God. He thanks God for the victory He gives us and concludes that the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made him free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1-2). For him, true victory is the one over sin.

We know that Christ overcame sin as a man, by living a perfect life. He lived in the same flesh that we do and was tempted as we are. Yet, having not inherited the sinful nature from Adam, and having not given in to sin, He

could take the sin of all mankind onto Himself when He died on the cross. His victory over sin allowed God, the Father, to raise Him from the dead. This particular victory encourages us, because it strengthens our faith and gives us the assurance that as we walk in the footsteps of Jesus, so we will achieve a sanctified life.

## **Victory over sin under the New Covenant**

Paul further states: *“For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”* (Romans 6:14).

Since we are not under the Law of Moses, we are not condemned because of our sins. However, that doesn't mean we can just give ourselves over to them. We mustn't forget that Jesus won the victory over sin for us to experience that same victory and the joy of becoming increasingly free. We are no longer called to be slaves to sin but slaves to Christ.

## **Victory, thanks to the cross**

This victory becomes possible to the degree we are prepared to take up our cross and follow Jesus. *“Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.”* (1 Peter 4:1-2).

Here, Apostle Peter clearly explains that if we want victory over sin, then we need to crucify our flesh. He invites us to have the same attitude that Jesus had when He went to the cross and to arm ourselves with the same mind. This victory becomes ours to the degree we are ready to submit to the Spirit, and not to our flesh.

Apostle Paul says the same thing in Galatians 5:24: *“And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”*

So, there aren't a thousand ways to have victory over sin, just one: identifying our lives with Christ and taking up our cross. Of course, it would be so much

easier if we could just say a quick prayer... but taking up our cross is the only way to victory.

Victory over sin opens the door for other victories as well as blessings in our life, because God rewards those who are ready to take up their cross and follow Him.

## Chapter X

# Suffering and the Cross

The Christian life is a medley of joy, sadness, rejoicing, tears, abundance, lack, sufferings, blessings, and victories. However we look at it, we are called to suffer for the gospel, not counting the trials of life that we all inevitably encounter along our way.

### Suffering for the gospel

We will certainly face persecution when we proclaim and defend the true gospel. There is nothing strange in that and we should not be surprised. Jesus Himself said, *"...A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you..."* (John 15:20).

The message that Jesus and the first apostles preached always brought persecution. That's why those who preach the gospel and never face any opposition should seriously question whether they are really preaching the true gospel. We are in the midst of a spiritual conflict and should therefore expect negative reactions. If everyone happily agrees with everything we as pastors preach, then we should take a good look at ourselves. Likewise, a Christian whose life is truly submitted to Christ cannot expect to receive everyone's approval.

*"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake..."* (Philippians 1:29). Apostle Paul suffered much unjust treatment for the sake of the gospel, but he knew it was part and parcel of the call on his life and that God's grace would be present for

him in every circumstance. The reason he didn't complain was because he had grasped the revelation of the gospel of Christ.

We must understand that as Christians we are involved in a spiritual conflict. Paul knew, for example, that being put into prison was a result of this. He didn't try to figure out in his mind what, or why he was going through this. He understood there was a battle going on between light and darkness and that suffering for truth and righteousness was a normal experience for any Christian serving the Lord.

Paul had many critics who rose up against him because they refused to take up the challenge presented by the gospel. He even warns the Philippians against those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ (Philippians 3:18).

Yet what is important to note is that he bore no grudge, nor was he bitter towards them. Instead he was proud and honoured to declare the truth of the gospel, the message of the cross, while suffering for it.

His critics used the difficulties and suffering he experienced to dissuade Christians from following his example and to turn them away from the true Christian life. They wanted to show that his weaknesses – the trials and persecution he faced – were evidence of a powerless gospel. What they failed to see was that the opposite was true: Paul's life was in fact the fruit and very illustration of the message he preached and lived. They preferred to oppose him rather than to be exposed by the truth of the gospel and to allow God to change them into the likeness of Christ.

*“For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.”* (2 Corinthians 13:4). The Corinthians were looking for proof that Christ was speaking through Apostle Paul. They knew that Jesus was powerful, but when they looked at his life, it seemed to prove the contrary. Paul therefore wanted to make them understand that although Jesus demonstrated His power during His lifetime, He showed no resistance when He went to the cross, also appearing weak and powerless. He drew

a parallel between Jesus' weakness and his own, being ready to humble himself in the same way and to suffer for God's plan to be fulfilled.

Jesus gave up His own authority and accepted to lose everything to submit to the will and plan of His Father. Likewise, Paul accepted to suffer for Christ and to face trials and hardships during his ministry, knowing that God's power and the life of Jesus would be revealed as a result in his service to the Church.

Not all Christians face persecution like those who are martyred for their faith in certain countries. But when we are falsely accused and attacked purely because of our faith in the Lord, and the stand we take for the gospel, this too can be considered persecution.

Some years ago, my family and our church went through a very difficult time when we became the target of false accusations that were splashed across the headlines of the local newspapers for several weeks. My wife and I had just begun to understand the message of the cross so it was a real testing time for our faith, and a time for us to walk in the light we had recently received. We had a choice, either to justify ourselves by answering the accusations or to keep quiet, forgiving those slandering us, praying for them, and putting our trust in the Lord. By God's grace we chose the latter.

It was a very tough time, but God was faithful right to the end and we came out of the experience changed and more mature. Looking back, I bless the Lord for those times because I strongly believe that the wonderful things happening in our church today are partly due to the fact that we chose to take the road of the cross during such a key moment of trial and testing. Our God knows how to reward His children; He is faithful!

As Apostle Peter says, *"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;"* (1 Peter 4:12), and in the following verse, *"...rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings..."* Reading this, we can see that persecution is something quite normal for Christians, and these are the times that we are called to take up our cross and identify with Jesus.

Of course, it goes without saying, as Peter emphasises, that if we suffer, it should not be for doing wrong! When this happens, it is simply a normal consequence of our actions (1 Peter 4:15).

Apostle James also speaks about suffering: *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”* (James 1:2-4). He helps us understand that the various trials we have to face are there to perfect and strengthen us in the faith. Remember that we are running a race towards perfection.

As we saw previously in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, Paul speaks about his ‘thorn in the flesh’ he had asked the Lord to set him free from, but God’s answer was clear: *“...My grace is sufficient for you...”* In verse 10, he explains, *“Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* Clearly, he had the promise and assurance that God’s grace would be revealed in his weakness. Now that’s a servant of God who is happy to serve Jesus in any and every circumstance!

## **Life’s trials**

It’s important for us to understand that, even as Christians, we will go through a number of trials during our lifetime. They might be physical or mental: sickness, injustice in the workplace, financial problems, unemployment, loneliness, rejection from our husband or wife, family issues... the list is long. However, we must never despair in these times. We can be confident that God has not forgotten us and that He knows best how to comfort and lift us up. His grace will always be sufficient to keep us moving forward.

The worst thing we can do is to compare ourselves to others or try to figure out in our mind why we are going through what we are experiencing. Going down that road could lead us to doubt God’s love and faithfulness towards us and could even cause us to resent Him.

Look at what Paul says to us in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18: *“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”* What a powerful encouragement if we are ready to dwell on these verses! Only then will we be able to cling to God’s grace, since nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:35).

Let’s adopt the same attitude and hope in our trials and sufferings that Paul had, and go through them in the right spirit, knowing that we can expect from the Lord in faith.

## Chapter XI

# Faith and the Cross

Faith is an essential element in a Christian's life. In Hebrews 11:6, the author tells us clearly that without faith it is impossible to please God. He also teaches us that the just will live by faith: this is the new lifestyle of every born-again Christian (Hebrews 10:38). Everything we look to the Lord for, everything we seek, desire, or long to be, must be received by faith. There is no other way to receive from God, even though He is sovereign and can intervene by His grace in any situation in whatever way He wishes.

## Seeking the Kingdom of God

Christians often see faith as a means to get what they 'need' or what they want. They don't realise that when they exercise their faith, the Lord may test them so that they become more like Christ. Faith serves first and foremost to help us grow spiritually.

Sadly, the Church has not always been successful in teaching this to God's people. For many Christians, faith serves the single purpose of meeting their own personal needs, as if that were God's main concern... Too much emphasis is placed on this matter today, drawing Christians away from seeking what should be their priority: the Kingdom of God. The Lord Himself said: *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."* (Matthew 6:33).

## Faith for our inheritance

The book of Hebrews shows us that one of the main reasons why the Lord gives us faith is for us to be confident of the eternal inheritance that has been promised to those who are called (Hebrews 9:15).

Hebrews 10:35-36 encourages us, *“...not to cast away our confidence which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.”* We are given faith to keep our eyes permanently fixed on the promise of the glory to come. We are encouraged to persevere in that faith while we wait for Jesus’ return. The faith spoken about here is not for material or temporal things but instead, faith to hold fast to the promise of our inheritance: that we will live for eternity with Jesus.

Over and over again, we find ourselves being urged not to become discouraged but to remain in the faith: *“But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.”* (Hebrews 10:39). This verse re-emphasises the role faith has to play in preparing us for when Jesus comes back for His Church. What a challenge for God’s people!

## Faith through trials

*“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”* (James 1:2-4). As we have already mentioned, persevering in the faith as Apostle James talks about here, equips us to endure trials, hardships, persecution and affliction. He points out that it is quite normal for us to go through such hardship, and that it is even essential for our spiritual growth. But often, believers are unwilling to face trials because they think that Christians shouldn’t have to go through such things. Because of a misinterpretation of what the Christian life and the gospel really are all about, this leaves them frustrated and looking for ways to circumvent difficulties and challenges. Some turn to casting out

demons, for example, believing that they are the source of their problems. Others respond to altar calls in church, thinking that if only someone prays for them the problem will automatically sort itself out. But all we're doing is trying to find quick fixes for difficult situations when in fact we are actually called to go through these times for a very good reason: our faith must be tried and tested for us to become mature.

## **Patience: the result of tested faith**

If we take a closer look at James 1:3, we will see that the testing of our faith produces patience, which is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). If our faith were not being tested, we would have no need for patience. When a Christian prays for something that is in line with God's will and doesn't get an immediate answer, which can often be the case, that is when he needs to be patient. It is in those very times that his faith is tested. He needs to wait on the Lord, and not doubt, if he wants to receive what he has asked for, and face these times with hope in his heart, for there can be no hope without faith. Faith is having the assurance now that we will receive what we have asked for, according to God's will, and hope is the assurance of its fulfilment; and this is apparent in our attitude while we wait. This is the testing of our faith, and it is essential for God to do His work in our hearts. During the time of waiting, the Lord breaks us, moulds us and transforms us into His likeness, so that we become whole and complete in Christ. This will always involve suffering, because whenever God wants to bring about change in our lives, it is certain to require taking up our cross and dying to self. This is all part of our identification with Jesus' sufferings and death.

Let's take the relationship between a husband and wife as an example. We often want to see certain aspects of our spouse's life change quickly and radically because we're not ready to accept them as they are. Yet, if we believe that God is able to change them then we will need to be patient and wait for Him to do it. It takes a work of God to break us so that we accept each other just as we are, while staying in faith for our partner, and for ourselves too, to change! This is where each one needs to take up his or her cross. As we wait for this change, our faith is tested, but if we stay

in faith and overcome our fleshly reactions by not harbouring bad attitudes towards our spouse, we will grow in maturity.

Even in the Old Testament we see how God tested the people of Israel: *“And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.”* (Deuteronomy 8:2). Their time in the desert was not without hardship and suffering, but it allowed God to test His people.

In everything we ask and receive by faith, including material things, God wants to build something spiritually in our lives. If we remove the cross from our faith, we strip it of its power, reducing it to a mere tool to get what we want from God. Yet faith is a key element in our spiritual walk: while receiving what God has for us, faith allows Him to work our lives in the process, so we can better represent Him, better serve Him and, above all, finish the race.

## Chapter XII

# Spiritual Maturity and the Cross

*“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”* (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Spiritual maturity, or spiritual growth, is the one aspect of the Christian life most mentioned by Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. Jesus’ teaching encourages us principally to live a pure and holy life. All of Apostle Paul’s epistles point us to becoming more and more like Jesus so as to convey His life as we serve Him.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul expresses his desire to see them walking towards perfection: *“Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labour, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.”* (Colossians 1:28-29).

### **The cross: the way to spiritual maturity**

So how do we become spiritually mature? In Matthew 16:24, Jesus urges His disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. He is showing them what they need to do to grow spiritually and become holy. Neither head knowledge, nor theological studies are the way the Lord has chosen for us to grow spiritually. One of the biggest mistakes the Church has made has been to try and produce spiritual men and women purely

through Bible teaching and Bible school attendance. Obviously, studying the Bible is important in itself, but it can never replace taking the road of the cross in bringing us to spiritual maturity.

In chapters 5 to 7 of Matthew, Jesus teaches us a new way of life, which requires dying to ourselves and denying our rights. Instead of hating our enemies, for example, He asks us to love them. I'm sure you'll agree that this is completely opposite to our natural, fleshly reaction!

Accepting to lay down our life and to be stripped of our old nature is the way to living a victorious and holy life. As Christians we are called to crucify our flesh with its passions and desires, as Paul reminds us in Galatians 5:24. This is what leads us to become more like Christ and to carry His life (Galatians 2:20). In the end, the only way to spiritual maturity is being ready to lose one's life in order to gain Christ's.

## **Dying to self in order to bear fruit**

Jesus used the illustration of a grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying to show the life that flows from us when we choose to die to ourselves. Having declared that the time had come for Him to be glorified, He said to His disciples, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."* (John 12:24). He was not just speaking about His own death and resurrection but also about the lives of the disciples after His resurrection. Taking up their cross would be the only way to pass on Jesus' life. The cross means dying to our carnal passions, desires, plans and ambitions. It is an exchange of our life for the life of Christ, because if we are to share in His resurrection life, we first need to share in His death by dying to our self.

As we have already seen, we are all called to go through tests, trials, and hardships in our Christian life. There will be challenges, suffering, persecution, and confrontations that we will have to experience. The way in which we face these various situations is what will determine whether we grow in the Lord, or whether we remain a spiritual baby. If we are willing

to take up our cross and go through them in faith, then God will be able to break and mould us. Walking in this way will result in the life of Jesus being revealed in us.

The prophet Jeremiah received a vision of the deep work the Lord desires to perform in our lives to mould us into His image: *“Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?” says the Lord. “Look, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!”*” (Jeremiah 18:5-6). As long as a potter is not satisfied with his work, he will keep on moulding it until he manages to achieve the result he wants. The question is: are we willing to let God do the same with us?

We regularly have to face arguments or deal with conflicts in our day-to-day life, whether it is with our spouse, colleagues or friends. When this occurs, we so easily want to justify ourselves. Even if we are in the right we need to learn to accept losing rather than trying to defend or justify ourselves. Jesus demonstrated the same attitude and it is this kind of maturity that we are called to aim for as Christians.

I know an African pastor who was co-head of a church. Everything in the church belonged to both leaders: the chairs, the sound system, the church car, etc. A time came when these two pastors no longer saw eye to eye, and so they decided to put an end to their partnership. But when it came to deciding how to part ways, they could not come to an agreement. Neither wanted to lose out and so things began to go sour between them. It was around this time that I met this pastor for the first time and shared Matthew 16:24 with him; a Scripture he obviously knew very well. Despite having been a pastor for many years, he had never realised the depth of that verse, nor considered how seriously it needed to be taken. I encouraged him to deny himself and give up his rights. After much hesitation, he did just that. Instead of fighting with the other pastor, he finally conceded to leave everything to him. As hard as it was, through it he understood what it was to take up his cross. He lost everything he had invested in the church but was peaceful and full of joy at having been able to identify himself with Jesus in this way. When you lose something for Christ’s sake, because you have

understood the call to take up your cross, there are far greater things that await you. Today, this pastor is serving the Lord, leading a great number of churches, preaching the gospel and being used by the Lord in a wonderful way throughout Africa. If we desire to become mature in Christ then there is no way round the cross or losing one's life and placing it on the altar.

Apostle Paul laboured to present every man perfect in Christ, in other words spiritually mature, not only understanding spiritual things but living them out as well. We are in a race towards perfection even if no one is, or ever will be, perfect while still on this earth. We can only gradually and progressively become more like Jesus which is absolutely possible if we submit to Him, are ready to humble ourselves and take up our cross. In doing this, a Christian is placing his life in the hands of the Lord, who knows how to complete the work He has begun in someone. In fact, Paul even states that he is, *"...confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."* (Philippians 1:6).

## **The cross: a challenge for Christians today**

Before grasping the revelation of the message of the cross, the church I pastored was facing many problems without any hope of solution. Despite the Word of God being preached, many couples were divided, there was an abundance of sin, and the youth were still very drawn to the world and what it could offer them. Once the message of the cross became a revelation to our hearts, the church elders and myself went through a radical change and this message then touched the lives of many others in the church. We all went through a time of genuine repentance. The whole atmosphere changed and many moved into a greater level of maturity. Of course, we are still far from perfect! But everyone has grown and has been strengthened in Jesus, being more determined than ever to enter through the narrow gate. Our greatest reward, today, is to see the unity that reigns in the church.

I remember visiting a pastor of a Pentecostal church in the United States some years ago. While we were sharing, I spoke to him about how the message of the cross was the answer for the Church. I told him that Christians were

not called to be taken up with material or personal things, but rather to lose their lives, take up their cross and follow Jesus and that this was the road to spiritual maturity and victory. He replied quite calmly, "I fully agree with you, but if I preach that, I will lose the large majority of my congregation." Shocked by his answer, I realised sadly that this church must have been spiritually very poor. In these conditions, it should come as no surprise that so many Christians are still spiritual babies, blown here and there by every wind of doctrine, and incapable of discerning the things of the Spirit.

The Church today has great difficulty in bringing Christians to be true disciples of Christ, committed to running a race where their lives are no longer their own. Spiritual growth does not interest them. Laying down their lives and taking up their cross is too great a challenge for them. They prefer to lead a 'religious' life without facing their flesh and the need for change. Yet, Jesus was very clear on the subject: *"He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."* (John 12:25).

However, it is also true that many have never heard the full message of the cross, which can bring them to maturity. Despite their genuine love for the Lord, they are not progressing. They faithfully come to church but are not hearing what they need to help them grow. Many are discouraged that they have no victory in certain areas of their life. Their love for the Lord grows cold and sometimes they even give up. Yet we can't blame them since their state is dependent on the spiritual food they are getting in church. How can they hope to become spiritually mature and not carnal Christians?

I once held a pastors' conference in Africa where I preached on the message of the cross. After the first day's preaching, a 70-year-old pastor came to see me. He was beside himself with excitement as he told me that he hadn't heard this message for a good number of years and that to him, it wasn't surprising that the churches in his country were divided and lifeless as a result. I was greatly encouraged by what he said, as I was more used to meeting pastors who react negatively to the message of the cross, either through a lack of revelation, or because they feel personally confronted by it and prefer to keep certain aspects of their life hidden. The message of the cross has always been and will always be opposed, even from within the

Church. Yet at the right time, the Lord knows how to open and touch the hearts of those who will receive the light of the gospel.

This was the Early Church's apostolic message, which was preached afresh in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century during the 50s and 60s. Then came a wave of prosperity doctrine that swept through a large part of the Church, drawing believers' hearts towards pursuing material things. Numerous pastors and preachers alike were seduced by this doctrinal perversion and took many believers along with them. This is how, slowly but surely, the message of the cross was removed from the teaching and preaching of many churches. It should therefore come as no surprise to see a large part of the Church weak and festering with false doctrines!

Apostle Paul was proud to take up his cross. He was free from worldly influence and became an example of maturity through his identification with Christ. That's why he could ask the Philippians to follow him and look to those who walked accordingly as examples (Philippians 3:10-17). In another passage, he speaks to them about how God's grace had been given to them, *"...not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake..."* (Philippians 1:29).

By accepting to die to self and laying down every weapon, we allow a deep, cleansing work of God and maturity to take place in our lives; this is the fruit of the Spirit that is mentioned in Galatians 5:22. The cross is not just an event that took place over 2000 years ago to save us, but it must become part of our everyday life if we desire to grow spiritually.

## Chapter XIII

# Freedom and the Cross

There are two sides to our freedom as Christians. On the one hand, we have been freed from the sin that held us captive for so long before we were saved. On the other, we are free to make our own decisions and act accordingly, because we no longer live under the rule of the Law of Moses, but under grace. These two facets of our freedom are interlinked, as it is only under grace that we can truly be set free from sin.

### Led by the Holy Spirit

In Romans, Apostle Paul tells the Church that they are now free in Christ: *“But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”* (Romans 7:6). He then paraphrases the same thing in his letter to the Colossians: *“...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”* (Colossians 2:14). In Galatians, he goes on to say: *“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law...”* (Galatians 3:13).

It is important to point out that the Law was a curse in the sense that it brought about condemnation. It was also unable to perfect us and set us free from sin. If we choose to remain under Law, we will never grow and reach maturity. We will remain as slaves to the very sin that condemns us. The author of Hebrews tells us that, *“...on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment”*, in other words, the Law, *“because*

*of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect...”* (Hebrews 7:18-19).

So, as New Covenant believers, we are not called to be governed by the Law, but rather to be led by the Holy Spirit who is our compass and our guide and who teaches us the ways of the Lord. The Holy Spirit, who has replaced the Law, helps us meet its demands in freedom (Romans 8:4).

When Paul writes, *“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death,”* he is referring to the Law of Moses (Romans 8:2). Although we are called to obey the Holy Spirit, we remain at all times free not to do so. It’s up to us, entirely our choice; thanks to the freedom Christ has given us through the cross.

Submission to the Spirit means dying to self; laying down our life and our desires. Obedience to Him is therefore a ‘crucifixion’ of our own flesh. It is in this way that we identify with the death of Christ. It’s what allows us to have victory over sin and to share in His life without being subjected to a collection of rules and laws. Paul confirms this when he writes, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free...”* (Galatians 5:1).

## **Can freedom be a danger?**

Paul also draws our attention to the dangers of freedom: *“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh...”* (Galatians 5:13).

However, pastors shouldn’t be scared by the fact that Christians are free to choose how they will live their lives. Even more importantly, they must be careful not to use this kind of fear as an excuse to force rules and laws onto the Church, and thus deprive believers from the freedom they have in Christ. Sadly, this is in fact the case in many churches today.

Let me make one thing clear: it is not freedom that drives us to give in to the desires of our flesh. Even if someone submits to the Law, if he is not willing to follow Jesus he will still live according to his flesh. But when the message

of the cross is preached in the Church, Christians are completely free to choose whether or not to submit to Christ. This choice and submission makes all the difference. This allows them to serve the Lord by relying on His grace and not on their own strength. Should they fall into sin, only the revelation of grace will protect them from feeling condemned. That opens the door for repentance, which allows them to get back on their feet and continue their race.

## **Freedom to please God**

As long as we are taking up our cross and following Jesus, our freedom in Christ will lead us to obey God and grow towards maturity. In the Early Church, the converted Jews found this idea of freedom hard to stomach because they were still so attached to the Law of Moses and the Levitical prescriptions. In Acts 10:13-15, we read that even Apostle Peter was still bound by these laws, when he refused to eat animals that were considered impure according to the Law. He even questioned the Lord on the matter! But in Galatians 2:11-12 we see that he had been set free from this bondage to the Law, when he shared a meal with born-again gentiles, even though this was forbidden for Jews under the Old Covenant. It can't have been easy for him to let go of the Law and its prescriptions, but it was a necessary step if he was to live and serve the Lord in freedom.

In the same way, because we are free from the Law of Moses, we are called to take up our cross daily, if we want to walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh. It is by dying to our fleshly desires that we will be able to live in freedom and to please the Lord.

## Chapter XIV

# The Cross and the Life of Christ Within Us

So, we have looked afresh at the foundation of the Christian life: Jesus Christ and Him crucified. We have seen that His suffering, death and resurrection are at the very heart of the gospel. If Christians identify with Christ in His suffering and His death, they will be able to identify with His resurrection, or in other words, convey His life.

The prophet Isaiah foretold Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection: *"Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days..."* (Isaiah 53:10). The resurrection of Jesus and His ascension to His Father's right hand are the result of His sinless life, of His obedience and complete submission for the fulfilment of God's plan and will. *"He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him..."* (Philippians 2:8-9).

### Imparting the life of Jesus

As New Covenant believers, an essential part of our Christian life is to display and impart the life of Jesus. It bears repeating, though, that we will not be able to share in the life of Christ if we are unwilling to identify with what He went through. There is a price to pay: the giving of our life in accepting to suffer for Jesus and dying to our own desires. This is the simplicity and essence of the Christian life; the very heart of Jesus' teaching to His disciples, and the message the first apostles preached to the Early Church.

I heard a preacher recently on Christian TV declaring he was going to call fire down from heaven to consume those who stood against him and his church. What utter nonsense! Someone like this clearly has no revelation of the gospel. How can such a man who has no understanding of the Lord's heart be trusted with the lives of his flock; who, instead of conveying a "broken and contrite spirit", is giving free reign to his flesh? Clearly, he has no idea about denying himself and his own carnal desires in order to display the life of Christ. Yet this is vital for a preacher, even more so than for any believer. As Apostle Paul clearly states, "*So then death is working in us, but life in you.*" (2 Corinthians 4:12).

Every Christian needs to wake up and stop accepting all kinds of teaching and preaching. Paul himself exhorts us to, "*Test all things; hold fast what is good.*" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

In the early 2000s, while I was speaking at a pastors' conference, I met a pastor from East Africa. He was getting on in years and had a large group of churches under his care. He found himself so discouraged in the ministry that he had made the decision to give it all up and retire by handing over the responsibility of the churches to a younger generation. During the meetings, the Lord touched him in a powerful way and he understood what it meant to identify his life with Christ. He knew that Jesus was calling him to take up his cross and follow Him, and that this wasn't the time yet to give up. Determined in his heart to respond to God's call, he was filled with a new faith and vision for his ministry and decided to take up the challenge, in spite of his old age. He went on to experience many changes in his own life and in his churches. He was filled with a renewed zeal for God's service. For many years after this brother continued serving the Lord with great joy and, above all, a fresh anointing from God. His ministry reflected the life of Christ like never before.

Doesn't every true servant of God want to serve the Lord by carrying His life? That is the very ministry of the Spirit. I remember the time in my own life when I was preaching and yet was spiritually dry, empty of the life of Jesus. Never again do I want to go back to that time... preaching the letter of the

Law, void of the ministry of the Spirit. My sermons were nothing more than simple Bible teachings that couldn't build anything in anyone's life.

Only when I began to understand what it meant to walk on the road of the cross did I begin to feel the life of Christ and the ministry of the Spirit at work in and through me like never before. There is nothing that can compare to conveying Christ's life in our service to the Lord, whether we are encouraging, exhorting, or sharing the message of the gospel. And this is within the reach of every believer willing to take up his cross and to follow Jesus.

It's wonderful to see Christians blessed and encouraged, not because they are trying to put into practice techniques and theories, but because they are receiving the pure, simple gospel and the life of the Spirit. If we are to build the Church and the lives of Christians, we need to impart the life of Christ to them. Bible knowledge alone is not enough. It is the ministry of the Spirit that brings the revelation of the gospel to people's hearts. That is why it is so important to highlight that the life of Christ in us is the fruit of the sacrifice of our own life as we accept to place it on the altar (Romans 12:1).

In Colossians 2:1-3, Paul expresses his heart's desire for all Christians: *"...that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."*

Why then chase after material things when true Christianity is all about carrying and imparting the life of Christ? It makes no sense to seduce Christians into using their faith to try and obtain earthly things.

Rather let us hold fast to the sound doctrine of Christ in every area of our lives, in line with the spirit of the Gospel. Let's follow Jesus so we can carry His life. In the difficult times we face, we will be able to rejoice in our service to the Lord in victory and freedom, even as we await our heavenly reward.

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Miki Hardy



# Salvation Through Jesus Christ

If this booklet has spoken to you, then take a moment to consider the next few lines... The Bible says in John chapter 3 verse 16, that, *“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

The Bible is the Word of God and teaches us that man is saved not by works, or religion, but only by faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who paid the price for our sin on the cross.

Speaking to Nicodemus, a Jewish priest, Jesus told him, *“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* He also said, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,”* (John 14:16).

The Apostle John explains it in this way, *“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”* (John 1:12-13).

Today, if you no longer wish to remain separated from God by your sin but desire to make peace with Him, then you can use the following prayer to help you speak to the Lord:

*“Lord, I come humbly before you and acknowledge that I am a sinner. I believe that Jesus is Your Son and that He came to earth to die on the cross for my sin so that I can be forgiven. I also believe He rose again and is alive today. Lord Jesus, I ask You to forgive me for my sin, and give my life to You today. I receive You as my Lord and Saviour, and thank You for the gift of eternal life.”*

May God bless you!

If you wish to contact us, we would love to help you get to know Jesus better and to follow Him.



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# The Challenge of the Cross

Christians may believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and sincerely desire to serve Him. Yet, have they fully grasped that we are called to take up our cross daily and follow Him; to identify our lives with His death, His suffering and His resurrection, as He Himself commanded us?

The apostle Paul refers to this identification when he expresses his desire, *“to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, [...] to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”* (Philippians 3:10).

If we read the New Testament closely, we will see that the cross is to be found at the centre of every aspect of the Christian life. It is what equips us to answer Jesus’ call, and to have victory over sin. Through it, God’s power and grace are revealed and by it we are protected from false doctrines that can destroy the Church.

There is no better way to know Christ than through experiencing His grace when He is deeply at work in us, like a potter moulding the clay. It is in the times of brokenness when we are dying to ourselves that we are closest to Him and will know His peace and joy.

It is time for all Christians to understand fully the depth of Jesus’ call: *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”* (Luke 9:23).

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*“The Gospel, and the changes that must follow our commitment to Christ are stated so clearly in this book. We cannot become true disciples of Jesus if we don’t understand or desire to embrace what the Word of God commands us. Thank you Pastor Miki for making this message so clear.”*

**Erin Georgiou - Joy! Magazine**

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Church Team Ministries International (CTMI) is a Christian network, formed in 2001 by a team of leaders from various African countries who are united by the message of the cross and the work of God in their lives.

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