

# “The Paradox of the Cross

## 1) Simon of Cyrene”

a sermon by

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Text: “And as they led him away, they seized on Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country and laid on him the cross to carry it behind him” (Luke 23:26).

One of the faces of the cross that has always captured my imagination is a man by the name of Simon of Cyrene. There is little we know about him, yet he is present in all of the Gospels. We know his name was Simon and that he was from the city of Cyrene in Northern Africa. The New Testament also identifies him as the father of Alexander and Rufus, two members of the early group of Christians who followed Jesus.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Simon comes into the picture of the passion at a critical time. After the Roman soldiers had beaten Jesus, taunted him, and flogged him, they made Jesus

carry his cross from Jerusalem to a place just outside the walls call Golgotha. At one point the weight of the cross became too heavy for Jesus. So the Roman soldiers looked around and there was Simon, a passerby, probably a pilgrim on his way to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, when all of a sudden a soldier said to him, "You there! Carry this cross!"

## I.

There is something heroic about the crosses that people choose to bear: a young person who chooses to lead a life of service and commitment to those less fortunate; an attorney who leaves an established law practice to work with Habitat for Humanity; a doctor and his wife who choose to practice medicine in the remote areas of Chad in Eastern Africa.

Simon of Cyrene, however, represents a great company of men and women who in every age are forced to bear a cross they did not choose. Where, if anywhere, is there to be found meaning in a cross not chosen.

Every detail in Simon's life, I believe, has some parallel in our own. I think, for example, of those individuals who find themselves facing a debilitating illness, which they never would have chosen. Suddenly, they find themselves face to face with a situation that they would have never imagined. Or, I think of those parents who find themselves struggling with a child that is mentally ill--uncertain of what to do, knowing that they face a lifetime of difficult decisions and inevitable heartache.

The point is that many of us will one day face a choice that we would not have chosen for ourselves. So what is the message that is spoken to us by this man Simon of Cyrene, whom they compelled to bear a cross?

## II.

One of the things that Simon had to do was to face himself. Long centuries separate us from Simon, but we know him very well. When he came face to face with this cross not chosen, he would have said, "Why me?" "Why not someone else?" "Why was I standing in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

There are two philosophies that often compete with one another. One is determinism, which says: heredity and genetic powers determine our lives. The other is free will, which argues that each person is free to choose what he or she wants to be. Each philosophy is wrong when taken alone. Determinism is wrong when it argues that our genetic makeup determines all of our lives. Free will is wrong when it says that we can do anything we want to do. The two must be held together if the whole story is to be told. For when heredity, genes, and parents have done their worst to us, there still remains in each of us that strange capacity to take what we have been dealt by forces beyond our control and to answer it with our own distinctive rejoinder.

Simon may have been compelled to carry that cross, but Simon himself had to decide how it would be carried. One of the saddest stories in the New Testament is the story of the death

of Lazarus (John 11). When Jesus comes to the house of Mary and Martha, one of the sisters says to him, "If only you had been here." How many times do we find ourselves saying, "If only I had married a different person, pursued a different career, and been more intentional about what I wanted?"

Simon made the cross not chosen his own, accepted it as his vocation, and carried it to the top of the hill. The story of Simon of Cyrene echoes the words of Jesus who said, "If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

### III.

Then, too, there is a second thing that happened to Simon, especially since he was not that different from the rest of us. He likely came to see that the cross not chosen had a positive and not a negative effect on his life. In some strange way this event called out of him resources and powers, capacities and faculties, that pleasant and prosperous circumstances rarely do. After all, no wilderness, no Moses! No exile, no Isaiah! No cross, no Simon. In fact, some of the great contributions are those that come from those who have had to come to terms with some cross not chosen.

I do not know why it is so, but I do know that the greatest spiritual experiences often come not in the soft palaces of life but in the wilderness, where the forces of evil and destruction are so strong. Where did Jesus say, "Not my will, but thy will be done?" In Gethsemane. When did Luther write his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God?" When he was risking his life. When did Sir Thomas More say, "I die, the king's good servant, but God's first?" On the scaffold.

I do not know where this truth finds you, but I bear you this witness. My deepest faith in God springs not so much from those periods in my life when everything was going my way, but from those times when the rains descended, and the floods came, and the wind blew and beat and God was there so that the house did not fall.

I believe that Simon of Cyrene was touched by that great cross he had not chosen and I do not think that it is an accident that when Paul's letter to the Romans lists the members of the early church, it includes the father of Alexander and Rufus-Simon of Cyrene (Romans 16:13).

### IV.

But how does this happen? How is it that some people crack under the strain of the cross not chosen, while others praise God for his mysterious ways? What makes the difference? I do not honestly know. But one thing I do know: staying power for the cross not chosen is commonly associated with the profound resources of inner strength that are associated by a great confidence in God. "I know," writes the Apostle Paul, "in whom I have believed, and I am sure that He is able to keep that which he has committed." That is a sentence from the Bible on which many people have staked their lives. For we do tend to faint, lose hearing, and give up, unless we have those interior resources that are nurtured by our faith in God. Amen.

