

Take Up Your Cross

by Gareth Evans

Gareth Evans' sermon emphasizes the importance of taking up one's cross as a transformative act of faith that impacts both the individual and their community.

Duration: 39:08

Scripture: Mark 8:34-38, Mark 15:18, Acts 13:1-3

Topics: "Obedience"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a story about a pastor who had a small plane accident and suffered brain damage, forcing him to resign from his position in the church. Despite his limitations, the pastor spent his days in tears, aware of his incompleteness. At his funeral, his four sons stood by his open coffin, and the oldest son addressed the congregation. The speaker then reads from Mark's Gospel, emphasizing the importance of denying oneself, taking up the cross, and following Jesus. The sermon concludes with an invitation to reflect on the cost of Jesus' sacrifice and to respond by living a life of self-denial and service to Him.

Transcript

I was just handed this earring. It doesn't fit me, I don't have a hole. Do you belong to anyone? Clare, come on Rob.

Why are you blushing Clare? Because mine aren't pierced. Thank you Lord. So we begin my last month with you at Departure Bay Baptist Church.

Communion service, my last communion service with you. And so I thought that I've prepared my heart this week. I needed to once again focus in on the communion table.

I'd like to read to you a few verses found in Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, verse 34 to the end of the chapter. When he had called his disciples unto him, he said to them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it.

For whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the Gospels, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall a son of man be ashamed when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the

holy angels. Not very comfortable words.

But ignoring them, I think, explains much of the reason why the church is so weak here in the West compared with many other parts of the world where the church is vibrant and dynamic and advancing powerfully. I think we have little understanding of what it means to deny ourselves and to take up the cross. I preached once on this message and taken two Sundays at my former church.

And after the first Sunday where the theme was to let a man deny himself, one of the elders came up to me afterwards and said, if you keep preaching like that, you're going to lose a lot of people from the church. And then he added, but keep preaching like that. We need to be challenged as I was able to do this morning in our adult Sunday school.

You're looking at Romans chapter 8 where it speaks about denying ourselves. Putting to death the flesh nature and learning to live in the reality and the freedom of the spirit of God. But this morning I want to concentrate more upon the thoughts of carrying the cross, bearing the cross.

Because bearing the cross, I believe, if we understand it truly, is a great blessing to us and is not a curse or a heavy thing. I meet Christians all the time and whenever problems come along in their lives, they say, well, I'll bear it out. I'll bear the cross.

As though it's something that the enemy would put upon us to hinder us in our joy and in our walk with God. But it is Christ himself who calls us to bear the cross, not Satan. And Christ calls us to bear the cross because there is a blessing in doing so.

We need to visit the cross often as Christians. Not just to come there when we ask for our sins to be forgiven. But we need to be people who come to the cross often.

The community table is a good time to focus our minds once again upon that call to visit the cross. To bear the cross and to be obedient to what the Lord has called us to. I was struck by a verse, I'm sure you've seen it yourself, many times you know of it.

It's also found in Mark's gospel just a few chapters later. Turn to this Bible in chapter 15. Where it describes the passage of Jesus from his trial on his journey towards Calvary.

And this is the words we read. And they began to salute him, verse 18. And he said, hail king of the Jews.

They smote him on the head with a reed and they spit upon him. And bowing their knees, they mocked him and worshipped him. When they mocked him, they took off the purple garment from him and put his own clothes on him and led him out to crucify him.

And they compelled one, Simon of Cyrene, who was passing by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus. They compelled him to bear the cross. This was Passover, this was the greatest feast of the Jewish calendar.

And Jerusalem was filled with travelers from many other countries who had come there to party, to celebrate. They were of Jewish heritage but they had come. Maybe some of them had saved up for many years to come for this once in a lifetime trip to Jerusalem.

Much like the Muslim today seek a once in a lifetime trip to Mecca. And Simon the Cyrenian, he's come from Tripoli in North Africa. He's one of those men.

I can imagine him coming there and he has spent some time journeying through Jerusalem. He's seen the wonders of the temple. Maybe he's seen and noted already the beautiful garments of the high priest and the ceremonies that accompany the Passover week.

And he's enjoying his visit to the city. And then he hears a crowd and he goes to see what, like most of us, whenever there's a crowd and there's a lot of noise, we like to see what's happening. So he goes along to see what's happening.

He discovers that they are leading out a man to be crucified. Now I like to speculate that maybe Simon had never seen a crucifixion. And so in his morbid interest he comes along and he presses in close to see this man, this criminal, who is bearing the cross.

And as the cross bearer comes near to him, Simon notices that he's already bearing large welts across his back. There is blood upon his garments. And on his head there is a crown pressed, bringing forth blood from his brow.

I don't know if he had any sympathy for the man. I suspect not because it is well known this man was a criminal and deserving of death. So it was assumed for a man who was being taken to crucifixion.

Maybe he was a murderer. Maybe he was a riot raiser. Simon didn't know.

But the whole spectacle is appealing to him. I don't know if you're like many people. I am not like this.

But if I'm driving along the road and I see a police car pulled in and there's evidence of an accident, I don't care to slow down. I try to get past it as quickly as I can. Some people like to stop and gawk.

I don't know if you're like that. And they slow up the traffic and I'm longing to get past. I remember once when we were in Wales driving at night.

I remember about the fourth car in a line of cars and we were swinging around in a bend. I saw these lights coming right across the road. And then I saw them going in the air.

There's lights landing in a field. I discovered later, as we stopped, we screamed to stop as the three or four cars in front of me did. And then we saw this body flying past the window.

We were four cars back. There was a motorcycle couple, two motorcycles with two people on each. And they come around the corner and they fail to make the corner.

They hit the front car and the motorbike and the couple went into the field. Another couple went past us on the road. And my little girls were in the car and they said, Daddy, is he dead? I didn't wait to see.

There were enough people there jumping out of cars already. And I was from that area and I knew the police station was barely a quarter of a mile further on. I wanted to get past there.

I'm not one who likes to gawk. And I went to the police station and informed them of this accident. All four people lived.

It's interesting, one of them lost an arm and other thing. But I'm not one, I'm squeamish, I guess, in moments like that. I don't know if Simon of Cyrene was squeamish at all, but he would have been fascinated, I'm sure, by the scene that it was not accustomed to have seen a man bearing a cross.

I pressed in a little closer. And then he felt something upon his shoulder. He turned probably to react against whoever was pushing against him.

And to his horror, he saw there was a blade of a sword. He looked up into the eyes of a Roman soldier. The Roman soldier said, You, carry the cross.

I don't know if there was any moment of hesitation, but if I had a sword pressing next to my neck, I'd have been very quick to respond. And so Simon goes forward and he takes the cross of the man who has fallen. He's compelled to take it on his shoulder.

And he has to go the rest of the journey to Calvary. When I see a little verse like that, my mind starts running. I start speculating.

I start putting myself in the place of Simon. Try to imagine what it must have been like. Because now the spitting and the hooting of the crowd is directed at him.

He is now suspected to be the criminal who's carrying the cross. People are shouting out at him. He wants to shout back, I'm not the criminal.

I'm not the guilty party. But when you've got a Roman soldier walk alongside you, you're very careful what you say. And I can imagine this man walking all the way with the cross.

What struck me about this verse the first time I read it was this. It says that this man Simon is from Cyrene, Tripoli, North Africa. Out of the city, out of the country.

But he is the father, says Mark, of Rufus and Alexander. So naturally my inquisitiveness goes further and I say, well who are Rufus and Alexander? Evidently Mark knew who they were. Evidently the people to whom Mark is writing his gospel know who they are.

Mark's gospel you may be aware is probably the recording of Peter's thoughts. Mark was not there most of the time in the life of Jesus. So this story that he has here that he records for us in his gospel is probably the recounting of Peter.

It is probably when Mark was with Peter even in the prison in Rome that this letter is written. And there's evidence throughout the letter that Peter is speaking to the Roman people. Many times in this letter it says things that give us that lead.

And he says here things that Jews would not need to be told. For example, when the man comes to the pool of Bethesda, says Mark, buy the five arches. For example, everybody in Jerusalem knew where the five arches were.

So Mark wrote it into his gospel because the people he is writing to were not from Jerusalem. He needed to tell them. It's in Mark's gospel we read that Jesus says to the daughter, the girl who is dead, Talitha cumi, which means rise.

You wouldn't need to say that to Jews in Jerusalem. It was in Aramaic, their mother tongue. But he says it because he is writing to Romans.

And so when I see this one verse about Simon, father of Rufus and Alexander, I ask myself, who were these men? And I begin to search. And the first place I'm going to look is in Rome. Because that's where

the letter is probably, the epistle, the gospel is probably directed.

And there indeed, in Romans chapter 13, I read of such a man. I'm very aware that the connection may be tenuous. But theologians down through the centuries have discussed this and wondered about these men.

Romans 16, Paul is commending people in Rome. He's never been to Rome. Paul is longing to go to Rome.

He's never been there. But he knows it's the center of the world. He wants to go there on his way to Spain so that from Rome he can reach out to the gospel that he's presenting to the world.

He expresses love and greetings in chapter 16. And there I come down to verse 13. He said, greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord.

Also greet his mother, for I consider her also to be mine. If this is the same Rufus, and I like to imagine it is, this is a man who Paul holds highly. Not only this man, but his wife also.

He never mentions his father here, but he mentions his mother also. Is it possible that this is Simon's wife and son Rufus? Very possible. Because certainly they were known to Mark.

And what about Alexander? Well, I don't find him in Rome, but I certainly find him in the book of Acts. Because when Paul was on his journey in the book of Acts, he comes to the city of Ephesus. And there in Acts chapter 19, we read of one Alexander.

In verse 33, Jews come to Ephesus and they raise up a crowd against Paul. They cried against him because they declared great is Artemis of Ephesians, the goddess that they had. And there was a riot coming, and people started to stone them.

They began shouting to one another, verse 32. Then some of the crowd concluded that it was Alexander who should come forward, since the Jews put him forward. So, motioning with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense of Paul to the assembly.

It's the only Alexander we read of, except Alexander the coppersmith, who Paul spoke negatively about. So, we see these two. Then what about Simon? Can we find anything about Simon, maybe, in the scriptures? Well, earlier in Acts 13, we read these words concerning the apostles and the disciples coming together.

Am I afraid to kick that over? Is that it, Larry? Somebody brought me a glass of water, and Larry's afraid I'll kick it over. Acts chapter 13, verse 1. It's when Paul is about to seek to go on his first missionary journey. Now, there were at Antioch in the church there prophets and teachers, Barnabas and Simeon, who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene.

The word Niger means that he is dark-skinned, probably, therefore, from Africa. So, is it possible? Is it possible that the Simon of Cyrene, who bore the cross of Jesus, is it possible that he later was in Antioch, as one of those who released Paul and Barnabas into the Christian ministry? It is very possible. We have no proof, but it's very possible.

Is it possible that his sons were those in Ephesus and in Rome, who were supportive of the Christian message? Is it possible that his wife became Paul's mother? Yes, it's very possible. But my message is not built upon speculation. But my message is this, that when a man bears the cross, there will be a

transformation in his life.

And I like to speculate that this man's life was so transformed on this journey, that he became known to Mark and to the apostles and the disciples, and his sons became known, because something happened on this journey. Was it the look in Jesus' eyes as Simon took up the cross? Eyes, I'm sure, that were full of compassion, and probably tears from the pain that he was bearing. Did Jesus speak any words to him, say thank you? I don't know.

But I do know this, that this man's life was such, that the apostles knew him and his sons later. There are many who knew Jesus. There were many who heard him teach.

There are many who have seen his miracles. Even in our churches today, there are many who sit week after week in the church and hear the stories. But I've never known the privilege of taking up the cross.

Something always happens in the heart when we take up the cross. There is always revelation that God gives to those who take up the cross. Have you ever felt the touch of the blade on your shoulder? Have you ever felt the weight of the cross upon your shoulders? Have you ever known what it is to bear the cross to come to Calvary, and there at the foot of Jesus' cross, to know what it is to be cleansed from sin, and the burden and the guilt that sin would weigh us down with? Jesus says to his disciples, I want you to deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me.

There is a burden that God has for each one of us. I've taught them this here in the past. There is a burden, of course, the burden of sin, the burden of cares, that each one of us is exhorted to share the burdens of others so that the burden becomes lighter.

But in his letter to the Galatians in chapter 6, Paul also speaks about a burden that God wants to place upon us. We don't like the word burden. It sounds hard.

It sounds heavy. But it is in carrying the burden that God has designed us to carry, we find revelation and liberty and freedom and blessing. Jesus said, learn of me.

Take my yoke upon you. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. There is a burden he desires us each one to have.

Maybe it's a burden for the homeless of Nanaimo. Maybe it's a burden for the crews of the ships that come in, like Denzel and others have in the church. Maybe it's a burden for the seniors.

Maybe it's a burden for the hurting. But God has called each one of us to carry a burden. And this burden is light because it is born in being yoked together with Jesus.

God calls us to that burden. I like to imagine that when Simon came home, his sons watched him. We do not know whether they were in Jerusalem, whether they saw the crucifixion too.

Maybe they did. We don't know that. I like to imagine that when he came home, his sons watched him and saw such a transformation in their father that they became leaders in the church.

The father is present here. When your sons and daughters watch you carrying the burden that God has designed you for, does it motivate them and call them and encourage them to become those who become leaders in the church? I told you a story, I believe, of a friend of mine. He was one of, I think it was four, maybe five sons.

Their father was a pastor with the Assembly of God in the States. He was involved in a small plane accident and had brain damage, the father. And so thereafter he had to resign his position in the church and he used to stay at home in a rocking chair.

And he was intelligent still enough to know that he was not whole, and so he spent much of the day in tears as he cried. He could not do much. At his death, his four sons stood by the open coffin and the oldest boy spoke to the congregation, a large congregation that had gathered together.

He said words like this. When our dad was alive, he could not do for us many of the things that American fathers do for their sons. When Gail played state ball for the state, dad was never there to watch him.

He never attended any of our weddings, he could not be there. When Mike went and represented the government and spoke in such and such a place, dad was not there. When the other son did this, dad was not there.

Dad was never there for the things that we did. But our father gave us something that most American fathers and Canadian fathers never give their sons, and that is a love for God and for his word. And we, his sons, stand by his coffin today to declare to you, we will serve our father's God.

I wonder if my testimony is like that. Have I borne the cross so that my sons, my daughters, look at me and see a transformed life? That's what bearing the cross means. It's not the cross of biting my lip when problems come or when circumstances press in and say, no, this is the cross I have to bear.

These are the thorns of life. It's not that cross that Christ calls us to carry. It is his cross.

It means death to self, but it means the glorious liberty of the Holy Spirit in my life. Is my life so transformed that my sons and daughters see in me that which motivates them to want to serve the Lord? Husbands. Simon's wife was also noted as Paul's mother.

It must have been a godly woman. What a transformation she must have had. Is it possible she washed her husband and in watching her husband bear his cross, it caused her also to become the woman of God she was? I think we need to understand that bearing a cross impacts others around us.

The way we carry the cross not only brings glory to God, but causes others to long to know him too. I want to live a life that causes others to get hungry for my saviour. I know that is your desire too.

And so as we come to the communion table this morning, Maren will sing for us before we do take the ambulance, but in this time I would like to ask you, have I taken up the cross? Have I felt the touch of the blade upon my shoulder? Paul said these words, the love of Christ constrains me. I am no longer free to do what I want to do. The love of Christ constrains me because it is his love upon me.

It is the weight of his love upon my shoulder that causes me to give up all my career all the things that I could have had, all the riches I could have had, for my education. I am constrained by Christ that I must do this, I must carry the cross. The call of every Christian is to deny ourselves, to take up the cross, to be the men and women that bring honour and glory to Christ, and through whom and to whom he wants to make a revelation of himself in such a way that our lives transformed and others see that transformed life and desire also to become men and women of God.

Have you ever responded to the touch of the sword? You've heard the stories, maybe you've come here to a Departure Bay Baptist Church, maybe you've been coming a long time. You've heard the stories, you've heard the singing, you've joined in the singing, but have you ever felt the touch of the sword? Have you ever felt the Lord touch you and say, my child, I want to come with you to Calvary? I want you to see my son upon the cross, I want you to see my love poured out for you as you see his life poured out. I want you to see what it cost me to give my child, my son, that you might have eternal life, that you might have your sins forgiven, you might know peace with God.

You might know what it is to learn how that the old nature can be put to death, that my new nature can grow and live in you, that you might know what it is to experience the love, the joy, the peace that my spirit gives, that you might know what it is to be in my kingdom, whether it's righteousness, peace, and joy. The way to that, my child, is by coming to the cross. And I invite you this morning as we come to the communion emblems to ask yourself, have I responded to the touch upon my shoulder? Am I willing to live a life of denying myself, taking up his cross and serving him? You see, the gospel in North America has become so watered down, it's almost this, do you want happiness and joy? Lift up your hand, give your heart to Jesus.

Hallelujah, I see that hand. Praise God, you're saved. What a tragedy.

And we have so many in our churches who have never learned the joy of taking up the cross and following Jesus. This morning, my last communion Sunday with you, my thoughts each Sunday as we come to the communion table, I've talked about the covenant meaning of this time. I've talked about the promises of Jesus and promises of peace the world cannot give or take away.

Promises of joy, pressed down and shaken, shaken and running over. Promises of an indwelling Holy Spirit, promises of a home that he's going to prepare for us. Promises coupled with requests that we serve one another, demonstrated by his washing their feet.

Promises accompanied by a commandment that we love one another with no options and an injunction that we take up the communion as a covenant meal where we come and we take the bread indicating we belong to the body of Christ, take the wine as an ingredient to that covenant. I talk to the covenant table as something we do until he comes, a promise, a hope, assurance that one day our savior will return. Causes to lift our eyes up and look beyond the circumstances of this world.

This is what this table speaks of. But today I want you to meditate upon the thought that this table speaks of taking up our cross. The burden that God has called us as each one to do.

Gladly carrying that burdened cross to the foot of the cross and there yielding ourselves that he, the son of God, by his spirit might transform us so that our lives will impact our families, our wives, our husbands, our children and all we come in contact with. I would challenge you this morning as we come and take these emblems a little while later that you will make a private pledge to the Lord that I want to be such a man, such a woman. And maybe, maybe there are some here who as yet have never felt the touch for the greatest weight of the touch upon our shoulders is that of repentance.

And come into a place of acknowledging that without Christ we do not know life. And maybe this morning at a time when we yield to that touch by saying to the one who died, the one who has risen again, Lord Jesus today, I come to the cross asking for your salvation, your forgiveness. May the Lord bless his thoughts to you as you meditate upon them as Mary now comes to sing about that same cross to us.

And all the love that filled my soul that day at Calvary. So what is your response this morning? As I turn your eyes to the table, as I turn your thoughts to Calvary, what is your response? Is it love? Is it amazement? Amazing love? Is it shame? I invite you as we take the bread and the cup in a short moment, each one of you and myself also, just to picture ourselves there at Calvary. Try to understand a little of what it costs the Holy One to send his son for you and for me.

To ask ourselves why it is that we shrug off the cross so quickly, not understanding his desire is that we also learn to bear the cross, that he might liberate us, become a man and woman of God he wants us to be. Denying ourselves, as we stand this morning at the foot of the cross. Would the service come forward please and join me here.

Paul declares, the Lord revealed unto him on the night that he was betrayed, he took bread. When he had taken it and broken it, he gave it to his disciples and he said to them, This is my body, it is broken for you. At that moment, he had not taken up the cross.

But very short hours later, after a surgeon in the Garden Gethsemane and a mock trial through the night, after beating and scourging, he was forced to carry that cross towards Calvary. The cross was so heavy after the beatings that he fell under its load a number of times until one Simon of Cyrene, until one Gareth Evans of Victoria. Put your own name there.

Was asked to take up the cross. It transforms your life. As you take the bread this morning, you identify yourselves with the body of Christ.

As a people willing here in Nanaimo to be people who have taken up the cross, that the men and women of Nanaimo looking at you will see transformed lives and will be drawn to the Savior. Gentlemen, would you take this bread and serve the people please. And we'll keep the bread together.

Thanks. This is my body broken for you, said Jesus, I take you all of it. Father, I thank you that I am part of the body of Christ.

I thank you in departure of a Baptist church that I see the body of Christ. Thank you for the privilege of traveling in many places and seeing the body of Christ. Many countries, many colors, many languages, people who are called the body of Christ.

Father this morning, I thank you for the privilege of being so called. May our lives be such that we function in the body of Christ because of our contribution to it. May we never be people who bring hindrance, a crippledness, a weakness to the body of Christ.

Thank you Lord. In the same manner also, Jesus took the cup when he had supped and he said, this cup is the cup of the new covenant in my blood. As we take the cup this morning, I ask that we would consider again the price that was paid on Calvary for you and for me.

That in responding to that price, feeling the touch of the blade upon our shoulders, we might be a people willing and eager and glad to bear the cross that he has called us to bear. Jesus, I and my cross have taken all to come and follow thee. May that be our theme.

So gentlemen, would you serve the cup. We will keep the cup again until we drink together. As high as the sea, there's room at the cross for you.

There's room at the cross for you. As millions have come, there's still room for one. Yes, there's room at the cross for you.

We're short. We have a little problem. We are short.

It's not a good problem to have. Thank God it is not the drinking of the cup that is important. It is the heart that responds to it.

Al, would you ask the Lord to bless the cup before we take each one, please. We invite you to drink the cup and we, in spirit of joy, with you. Thank you, Father.

As Denzel comes to lead us in our last hymn. Oh, he doesn't have one. Fine, we don't have one.

Did you know that song that Maggie was just playing? There's room at the cross for you. Maggie, will you just play that? Oh, she's gone. There.

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