

# The Cross

by Watchman Nee

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*The Lord calls us to lose our soul-life and take up our cross in order to experience the spiritual life and bear fruit for Him.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 53:12, Matthew 10:37-39, Matthew 16:24-25, Matthew 18:5-6, Luke 14:26-27, Luke 23:46, John 12:24-25, Philippians 3:8, Hebrews 10:34

**Topics:** "Discipleship", "Sacrifice"

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## Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the necessity of taking up our cross and losing our soul-life for the sake of Christ, as taught in Matthew 10:38-39. He explains that the soul-life, which encompasses our natural love and emotions, must be crucified to allow God's divine love to flow through us. Nee highlights that true discipleship requires prioritizing God's will over our natural affections, even when it conflicts with our closest relationships. The process of dying to our soul-life is a daily commitment that leads to spiritual fruitfulness and a deeper relationship with God. Ultimately, he calls believers to embrace the cross as a means of transformation and spiritual growth.

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## Transcript

In Matthew 10:38 through 39 the Lord Jesus says, "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his soul-life shall lose it, and he who loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it." These verses call us to lose our soul-life for the Lord's sake. The soul-life spoken of here is man's original life, that is, the organic life that makes us a living creature. This life is the life commonly shared by all men created by God and is different from the spiritual life. This life is the life that we brought with us when we came out of our mother's womb. It is absolutely different from the spiritual life which we received at the time of regeneration. The spiritual life is the very life of God Himself; it is divine, supernatural, and is not possessed by man before his regeneration. For His sake the Lord Jesus calls us to give up the soul-life and to crucify it on the cross.

We have said that the soul-life includes our love, emotion, mind, will, and so forth. The soul-life that the Lord Jesus mentions here includes all these things, but in Matthew 10 it seems that the Lord Jesus is paying particular attention to the matter of love. In the previous verses the Lord Jesus mentions an enemy being of one's own household. He mentions how the son will be set against the father, and the daughter set against the mother, and the daughter-in-law set against the mother-in-law. When God's will is contrary to the opinion of our own household, we can do nothing except set ourselves against our most loved ones

for the Lord's sake. This is a cross. It is a crucifixion. According to our soul-life, we love those whom we want to love. We like to listen to them and act according to their will. When those we love rejoice in their hearts, do not our hearts rejoice with them? But here the Lord Jesus is calling us and charging us not to disobey Him for the sake of man's love. At times, God's will may conflict with man's will. Although a certain person may be our most loved one or may be the one who loves us the most, and although hurting such a one is something that we would normally be most reluctant and unhappy to do, for the sake of the Lord we should take up our cross and crucify our love. We should never forget the meaning of bearing the cross; it is not just a suffering but an advance toward the place of crucifixion. The end of bearing the cross is crucifixion.

The Lord Jesus calls us this way in order to remove from us our natural love for men. Hence, in verse 37 He says, "He who loves father or mother above Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter above Me is not worthy of Me." In Luke 14:26-27 He says, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and moreover, even his own soul-life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." The Lord used the word hate to show the disciples the kind of attitude they should hold toward the love that issues from the soul-life. Strictly speaking, when believers love their kinfolks, their relatives, or their lovers, they should not love them because they are their loved ones. They should not love others just because these are their lovers or their father, mother, brothers, sisters, wife, or children. This kind of natural love comes from the soul-life. The Lord Jesus wants to remove all of our direct love toward men. The Lord has no intention that we would not love men. His intention is that we would not exercise our own love to love men, but that we would love with His love. What does this mean? It means that we should not love men because they are the ones we would love or because we have some special relationship with them. We cannot love someone just because he is a parent, wife, child, brother, or sister. This kind of natural love should be stopped. From now on when we love these people, it should be because of a new relationship in the Lord. We should love them only because the Lord loves them. We should not love them because we love them. For the Lord's sake, we should love others only through His love received from His hand. Simply put, the Lord's teaching here is that our love toward others should be under His control. If the Lord wants us to love, we should love even someone who is our enemy. If the Lord has not told us to love, we should not love even if someone is our closest relative.

To experience this, the soul-life must pass through death. This bearing of the cross, obedience to Christ, and rejection of our natural affection will cause the believers' natural love to suffer and to feel pain. This suffering and pain is the way to lose the soul-life with respect to its activities of love. When, on the cross before God, the soul-life loses its own love, it will indeed give room for the love of God to be poured out in our hearts. Subsequently, all of our love will be out of God who is abiding in us.

The Lord Jesus wants us to hate our soul-life. We should hate our own life and should not allow it to have the opportunity to act freely with respect to human love. We were those who simply loved whomever we loved. But the Lord wants us to take up the cross and to hate what we love. The Lord's demand and our own intention are diametrically opposed to each other. Those whom we formerly loved we must now hate. We must not only hate what we loved, but must hate the loving organ, which is our soul-life. This is truly a cross. If we will truly take up the cross in this way, we will afford our High Priest the opportunity to divide our soul from our spirit in the matter of love. Then everything soulish will no longer control or affect the spirit, and we will love others in spirit. This is the same way that the Lord Jesus loved His own household while He was on earth.

In Matthew 16:24 and 25 the Lord Jesus again mentions the relationship between the soul-life and the cross. "Then Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his soul-life shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it." In these verses, our Lord is calling His saints to come once more beneath the cross and to commit their soul-life to it, so that they would lose their soul-life. Superficially, what is mentioned here is the same as what is mentioned in Matthew 10. But in Matthew 10 the emphasis is on the part of the soul-life which pertains to love, while in chapter sixteen the emphasis is on the part of the soul-life that pertains to man's "self." If we read the previous verses, we will see that the Lord Jesus was telling the disciples of His coming suffering at the cross. Peter, in an earnest love for the Lord, told Him, "God be merciful to You, Lord" (v. 22). He cared for man's will and was not willing to see his teacher suffer in His flesh the pain of the cross. He did not understand that a man must first care for God's will, even at the expense of death on the cross. He did not know that one's love for God's will should far exceed his love for himself. It was as if he were saying, "Lord, if You die on the cross, You may have kept God's will and accomplished God's goal, and You may have acted according to God's plan, but what will happen to You? Are You not going to consider the suffering that You will face in keeping God's will? Lord, be merciful to Yourself!"

The Lord's answer to him reveals that such a thought of pitying oneself is from Satan. Then He seems to tell the disciples, "Not only will I have to go to the cross. Even you who are following Me and who desire to be My disciples must also go to the cross. As My way is, so shall your ways be. Do not misunderstand that I am the only One who has to keep God's will. You who are My disciples must keep God's will as I do. As I have not cared for Myself but have unconditionally kept God's will even to the place of the cross, in the same way you must not care for your own soul-life but must be willing to give it up and to do what God wants you to do." Peter told the Lord to "be merciful" to Himself. But the Lord's answer to Peter is that he should "deny himself."

There is a price to pay in keeping God's will. The flesh cannot help but tremble at this thought. When the soul-life takes a firm rule in us, we are not able to rejoice in God's will. When we hear God calling us to the cross, calling us to deny ourselves, to sacrifice, and to lose everything for His sake, our soul-life unconsciously responds with self-pity. The soul-life makes us unwilling to pay the price and to submit to God. Every time we consciously choose the narrow way of the cross and choose to suffer for Christ's sake, the soul-life takes a loss. It is through this that we lose our soul-life. Only by this, can we have the spiritual life of Christ reigning in us in a full and pure way. In this way we will be able to perform a work that is acceptable to God and a benefit to the world. If we consider the previous verses, we will understand even further the evil of the work of the soul-life. Peter spoke this word right after he had received God's revelation, understanding the mystery that cannot be understood by man. The Father revealed directly to Peter that the humble Jesus he followed was the Christ of the living God. But after he received such a revelation, he was immediately overcome by his soul-life; he exhorted his teacher to be merciful to Himself! Hence, we must realize that supernatural revelations and wonderful knowledge cannot keep us from being overcome by the soul-life. On the contrary, the higher the knowledge and the more supernatural the experiences, the more hidden is the soul-life and the harder it is to remove it. If it is not dealt with by the cross, the soul-life will continue to remain in man and will never go away.

Self-pity, self-love, the fear of suffering, and shrinking back from the cross are expressions of the soul-life. The greatest goal of the soul-life is to preserve its own existence. It is very reluctant to suffer anything. This is why the Lord calls us to deny ourselves and to take up our cross. In this way we will lose our

soul-life. Every time a cross is put before us, it calls us to give up ourselves, to have no more love for ourselves, and to lay down our lives for others through the power of God. Here the Lord says that the cross is ours; we receive it individually from God. When we set ourselves to do God's will, God calls us to take up the cross and bear it. This cross is ours; it is specially prepared for us by God. But it is also joined to the cross of Christ. When we are willing through the spirit of Christ's cross to take up our own cross, the power of Christ's cross will enter into us and enable us to lose our soul-life. Every time we bear the cross, we crucify the soul-life once more. Every time we dodge around the cross, we nourish our soul-life and keep it going.

We should notice that what the Lord speaks of here is not something that is done once for all. In Luke the word daily is added to the expression concerning the bearing of the cross. Hence, this kind of death is a continual one. We know that our death to sin is an accomplished fact, it has been completed. All we have to do is acknowledge and receive it. But the death of our soul-life is another matter. This is not an accomplished fact. Rather, it is an experience which we have to achieve and gain day by day. This does not mean that we will never die nor that we must die slowly. It means that the death of the soul-life is not like the death to sin. Our death to sin was accomplished by Christ on our behalf. When He died, we died with Him. But the death of the soul-life is not an accomplished fact. We have to bear our own cross daily through the power of the Lord's cross. We must be resolved to deny ourselves and to put the self to death. This kind of work must be done daily by walking according to the Lord's will, by taking up our own cross. By this, the soul-life will lose its power.

Our Lord spoke similar words in Luke 17:32-33. But there it refers to the things of the world: "Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his soul-life will lose it, and whoever will lose it will preserve it alive." Here the Lord tells us again how the soul-life is to be forsaken. But what the Lord is emphasizing here is the attachment of the saints' heart to earthly wealth. The Lord tells us that we should remember Lot's wife. In her danger she still remembered her wealth. She did not return back to Sodom; she did not even walk back an inch. All she did was just turn back her head a little. But how much this one turning reveals. This turning of her head speaks a long story concerning her heart.

A saint may forsake the world and outwardly part with everything, yet within him he may still crave the things that he has given up for the Lord. This is the work of the soul-life. A saint who is consecrated to the Lord may not go back to the way of the world and may not try to gain back what he has given up for the Lord. Yet if his heart still lingers on these things, it shows that he has not seen clearly the place the world occupies on the cross. The work of the soul-life may not necessarily turn men back to the way of the world. All it has to do is cause the saints to privately hold dear in their hearts those things they need to forsake or have already forsaken.

When the soul-life has indeed been lost, nothing in the world will move that saint's heart anymore. The soul-life belongs to the world. This is why it cannot give up the world. Only when a saint is willing to put the soul-life to death will he be able to steadfastly obey the Lord's "sermon on the mount." Although there is no explicit mention of the cross in the sermon on the mount, we know that unless the saints have genuine experience of dying with the Lord--not only to sin, but also with respect to the soul-life being put to death--there will be no seriousness in obeying the sermon on the mount. The reason for this is that unless the cross has worked deeply in the soul-life of the saints, any outward conformation to the sermon on the mount will not have an inward echo in the heart. A saint who has lost his soul-life can spontaneously and sincerely take off his outer garment and give it to him who would take away his inner garment. A saint who has committed his soul to death is one who has been cut off from the things of the world.

The condition for receiving spiritual life is for us to forsake certain things. Only by this will we truly gain. In the spiritual realm, we are not reckoned rich by how much we have gained; the richer we are, the more we have to lose. We should not measure our life by our "gains"; we should measure our life by our "losses." Our true measure is the measure of wine that we pour out, rather than the measure that we have kept. Those who lose the most have the most to offer. The power of love is seen in the sacrifice of love. If our hearts are not yet separated from the craving of worldly wealth, our soul-life is not yet on the cross and has not yet passed through the work of the cross.

Hebrews 10:34 speaks of a group of believers whose possessions had been plundered. Yet they "accepted [it] with joy." Not only did they accept it willingly, but they accepted it with joy. This is the result of the work of the cross. The saints' attitude toward their possessions indicates whether their soul-life is living or being put to death.

If we truly desire to have the soul separated from the spirit, we must allow God to work on us concerning these things. Then our heart will be truly severed from everything of the world, and we will no longer have a heart like Lot's wife. This indifference to the riches of the world is one condition for us to attain to the perfect spiritual life in Christ. It is only when the Holy Spirit reveals to the saints the reality of heaven and the fullness of the spiritual life that they can despise the things of the world. The reason for this is that there is no comparison between the two. This is the experience of the apostle in Philippians 3. At the beginning he counted "all things to be loss." In the end he "suffered the loss of all things" (v. 8) that he might gain Christ. The end result of this was Paul's knowing the power of Christ's resurrection. This is the perfect life. Many times we do not realize how strong our soul-life is. It is only manifested when we are tried in material things. Many times it seems to require less grace to lose one's life than to lose one's riches! The things of the world are indeed the acid test for the existence or death of the soul-life.

If God's children are too concerned about their food, drink, and dwelling, they need to receive the deeper work of the cross so that their spirit will not be surrounded and affected by their soul. In this way they will be delivered from everything worldly, and their spirit will be able to live before God unhindered. If a person is concerned for the things of the world, it means that his soul-life has not been lost, and he has not yet passed through the work of the cross.

In John 12:24 and 25 the Lord Jesus again mentions the question of the soul-life. "Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his soul-life loses it; and he who hates his soul-life in this world shall keep it unto eternal life." Later the Lord Jesus expounds the meaning of these two verses: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself. But He said this signifying by what kind of death He was about to die" (vv. 32-33). This chapter records the greatest moment of the Lord's life. Lazarus had been resurrected. Many Jews had believed because of Lazarus. Even some Greeks were coming to see Him. It was also at this time that He entered into Jerusalem and was welcomed by the people. Hence, in man's view, at this time there seemed to be no need of the cross. It seemed as if the Lord Jesus could draw all men to Himself without going to the cross. But He knew that there was no other way to save men except by the cross. Although His work was prosperous outwardly, He knew that unless He died, He could not give His life to others. If He died, He would draw all men to Himself and would dispense life to all men.

Here the Lord presents clearly the lesson of the cross. He likens Himself to a grain of wheat; unless it dies in the ground, it remains one grain. But if He were indeed crucified on the cross, He would give life to many. Here the Lord Jesus presents the qualification for all fruit bearing. Unless one dies, he will not bear

fruit. Other than death, there is no other way to bear fruit.

But our purpose is not just to study what the Lord Jesus is in Himself. What we are emphasizing is the relationship this has with our soul-life. The grain of wheat in verse 24 refers to the Lord Jesus Himself. But in verse 25 He points out that the kind of death He was to suffer and the result it was to produce would not be limited to Himself alone. All His disciples had to follow in His footsteps. He then tells us what the meaning of the grain of wheat is to a Christian. He points out that this grain is a symbol of our soul-life. As a grain of wheat will not live unless it dies, in the same way one will not bear fruit unless the soul-life dies. What the Lord emphasizes here is the matter of fruit bearing in our work. Although a believer may be quite powerful in his soul-life, this power will not help him to bear fruit. All the talents, gifts, knowledge, wisdom, and power that issue from the soul-life will not help a believer produce many grains. As the Lord Jesus had to die to bear fruit, in the same way a believer must die before he will bear fruit. To the Lord Jesus, although the soul-life is powerful, this power is useless in helping God bear fruit.

Here we see that the Lord Jesus was making a clear comparison between the soul-life and the eternal life, the spiritual life. He shows us that the soul-life loves itself. This means that the soul-life is self-centered. Hence, He charges the saints to take the attitude of "hating" their own soul-life. This "hating" is realized in the putting to death of our soul-life on the cross. There is a reason for us to handle the soul-life in this way. If we do not, we will suffer loss, an eternal loss. If the soul-life reigns within us, it will forever control the spirit, and the spirit will not be able to express the pure and divine life of Christ. This mixture of the soul and the spirit will deprive us of our fruit bearing, which can only come from one who is spiritually pure. Self-love is the greatest characteristic of the soul-life. If we do not put our self-love to death through the cross of the Lord, our spiritual life will be affected by it daily and will manifest impurities.

We have seen how the Lord has called us to the cross to put our soul-life to death. Unless we place ourselves on the altar in this way, our High Priest will have no way to apply His sharp knife to divide our spirit from our soul. We must allow the cross to work before we can receive the work of our High Priest. We should follow the example of our Lord Jesus. When He died, He "poured out His soul unto death" (Isa. 53:12). At the same time, He committed His spirit to God (Luke 23:46). What He did is what we must do. The soul-life must die. If we truly pour out our soul-life unto death and commit our spirit to God, we will soon experience being resurrected by God and have the fullness of the spiritual life in the glory of resurrection.

If we truly put our soul-life to death through the cross, our High Priest will divide our soul from our spirit with the word of God.

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