

# Survivors of the Cross

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

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A cynic once defined a sermon as “the application of faith people don’t have to problems the minister doesn’t understand.” I’m sure a good sermon is for more than this. But because I’m not sure *I* understand all the problems people deal with, I tend to do theological lectures instead of sermons. At least biblical theology is something I *try* to understand. Tonight I want to do a kind of “thought experiment” in biblical theology, and we’ll see whether it connects with how you understand your life as a Christian believer.

In the year 63 BC the Roman general Pompey invaded Judah and annexed it as part of the Roman province of Syria. Thereafter, for several centuries, the Jews were governed by a foreign power. During the time of Jesus’s earthly ministry there was an undercurrent of rebellion against the hated Roman conquerors. Finally, in the year AD 66, open rebellion broke out. It was, militarily, a hopeless cause. The Roman armies, led by the general Vespasian and his son Titus, laid siege to Jerusalem. In the year 70 the Roman forces burned the city and destroyed the Temple of the Jews.

Jesus had warned his Jewish community about this, a generation earlier. As the Gospel of Luke puts it, in chapter 13:

*There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:1-5).*

Jesus understood that if the Jews would not give up their false hope for a Messiah as a military leader they were destined for destruction, to be slain by the sword or crushed under falling fortifications. And that’s what happened during their abortive War of Rebellion. Of that day Jesus warned his disciples: “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it; for these are days of vengeance, to fulfil all that is written” (Luke 21:21-22).

Jesus wasn’t the only Jew who realized the futility of armed revolt against Rome. Another, a generation later, was one of the Jewish revolutionary commanders named Josephus. Seeing that the Jewish cause was hopeless, he deserted to the Roman side and became a friend of the Roman general Vespasian and his son Titus. One day he was riding with Titus and they came upon a place where the Romans had crucified a large number of Jewish rebels. In his autobiography, Josephus tells us what happened:

*I saw many captives crucified, and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance. I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus, and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery; yet two of them died under the physician’s hands, while the third recovered. (*The Life of Flavius Josephus*)*

After a day or two, perhaps, of hanging under the agonizing torture of crucifixion, Josephus’s friends were greatly weakened and near death. Nevertheless, one of these “de-crucified” men recovered. We know nothing more about him — who he was, or what became of him after this remarkable rescue. Nevertheless, whoever this man was he became a “survivor of the cross.”

This incident started me thinking; Is there a sense in which you and I, as followers of Jesus, are also “survivors of the cross?” Have we been crucified, and then taken down (as it were) to live on?

I would suggest that the New Testament does paint that sort of picture for us, in several places. I think the most famous passage is what the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Galatia, in Asia Minor: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by [the faithfulness of] the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Paul’s main topic, in his letter to the Galatians, is how the gospel of Christ creates unity between believers of all ethnic or cultural groups, and how anything that breaks that unity is a denial of the gospel. His problem was not what’s usually supposed — that the Galatians thought they had to keep the Jewish Law in order to be accepted by God. No, his problem was that some Christians were using the Law to divide one group of believers from another. That’s why Paul became so incensed when Peter wouldn’t eat together with Gentile believers, which was forbidden by the Law. So in this letter he wrote, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” Galatians 3:27-29).

If we decide that keeping our particular church tradition is more important than sharing fellowship with other believers who might be different in some ways, then we’ve *nullified the work of Christ* who was faithful to what God called him to do. (That’s why I believe these community Lenten services are such an important witness to the gospel.)

I’m sure Paul is thinking about his own life history here; at one time he fought other believers in God tooth and nail because they believed God’s Messiah had come, but after the living Jesus appeared to him he had to rethink his prejudices. He had to allow his preconceived ideas to be nailed to the cross, so the risen Jesus could work through him to reach the people *he* wanted to reach who weren’t part of Paul’s original group.

So the apostle Paul became a “survivor of the cross.” Crucifixion, for him, was the beginning and not the end. In fact, it wasn’t a one-time deal. When Paul talks about the things he has gone through to witness to the resurrection of Jesus, he says, “Why am I in peril every hour? I protest, brethren, by my pride in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!” (1 Corinthians 15:30-31). I think he meant that he refused to let his normal human self-protective motives — what he calls “the flesh” — dictate to him. If he had an opportunity to witness to the fact that Messiah Jesus has been raised and rules over the universe, he took that opportunity whatever it cost him. If he had a chance to live out, in his own behavior, the life Jesus lives through him, he didn’t pull back from that even if it brought criticism, or even vicious attack, from people who didn’t understand. “I die daily,” said Paul, yet he lived on as a “survivor of the cross.”

What does it mean to live as a “survivor of the cross”? We’ve seen a few hints in the writings of Paul, but that was more than nineteen centuries ago. What does it look like now? We all know about great figures in Christian history who’ve laid aside their own preferences to live for Jesus — people like St. Augustine, St. Francis, George Müller, or Mother Teresa. They became “survivors of the cross.” But what about you and me?

I don’t know about you, so I can only tell my own story. In my younger days (yes, I did have younger days) I was pretty focused on myself, and my own hurts. I don’t know why; perhaps it was due to family dysfunctionality or bad patterning, plus the fact that I really didn’t believe in God. But I was overly resentful of criticism, defensive about my own behavior, vindictive against people I thought had done me wrong. I often made sarcastic and cutting remarks. In other words, the world revolved around me and my emotions. And, believe me, it wasn’t a fun life. I really messed up in some areas by letting my emotions — my “flesh” — control how I responded to other people. I needed to get crucified in the worst way.

Well, it did happen. The time came when circumstances were right and I made a commitment to serve Christ. Things didn’t change right away, and in fact the process of change is still going on. But I think I’m

learning some different responses when things don't go my way. I'm learning that maintaining an open relationship with others who disagree, or criticize — especially people close to me — is more important than defending my pride or insisting that it's my way or the highway. When things go wrong, and they still sometimes do, I find it's quicker and easier than it used to be to set them right again. And I know that's because I am living in Jesus, and as a member of his body I need to be faithful to him as he is to me. As Paul said, "the life I now live in the flesh I live by [the faithfulness of] the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Sometimes I have to "die daily," as Paul said, and then go on as a "survivor of the cross." And I expect to go on. The Bible says we get 120 years, in Genesis 6:3. I'm 75, so I have 45 to go, and I plan to make them count.

If you know Jesus — really know him — the fact is that you're a "survivor of the cross." I just need to quote that famous passage Paul wrote in Romans 6:

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. (Romans 6:3-7).*

Do you hear what the apostle is saying? *If you've been baptized, you're a "survivor of the cross!"* Like that friend of Josephus, you've been taken down from the cross and given a chance to live again. We don't know what happened to that man, but each of us knows what's happening to us, and what we need to do to live out the life Jesus has given us.

Jesus was not a "survivor of the cross." Unlike Josephus's friend, he wasn't taken down from the cross alive. Jesus died, and was raised again in a glorified body *after death*. But you and I can become "survivors of the cross." We can be crucified with Christ, yet live on in the body we have now. One day that body will die, for as Scripture says, "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). In fact, friends, if you're a member of Jesus you've already died. As the apostle Paul says, "You have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). In other words, as he says, you're now "where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). If we belong to Jesus we're *already in heaven*. And when our earthly body dies we'll still be there, until God brings about the general resurrection, that new and expanded kind of life into which Jesus has already entered. When that happens, the New Testament tells us, we'll receive our glorified, incorruptible bodies, and go on to live in the renewed universe that has been the goal of God's plan all along. "Thy will be done *on earth*, as it is in heaven."

The Bible begins with God's creation of a universe that he calls "good." It ends with the appearance of the city coming down out of heaven, where God's people live with him in the restored heaven and earth — not a different universe, but *this universe made over* the way God intended it in the first place. As the apostle Peter puts it, "According to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). Meanwhile, in this present world with all its faults, we persevere as people who've already died the death that really matters, the death into the cross of Jesus, and have emerged as "survivors of the cross."

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