

## STUDY 18

### The Revelation of the Cross

**1. What does or could *denying yourself and taking up your cross* mean for you? Give an example.**

Examples might include:

- Speaking out on behalf of someone who is weak and vulnerable.
- Denying oneself a pleasure so that someone else can be benefited or helped.
- Refusing to go along with the crowd and being rejected or unpopular as a result.
- Turning down a job promotion to be more available to care for a sick relative.
- Making a decision to live in a poor neighbourhood and serving the poor, rather than a more prosperous area with material advantages.

**2. Can you think of a situation when you were thinking in worldly terms - like Peter - and you had to change your mind?**

Sometimes negative experiences lead us to be cynical, judgemental or pessimistic. Sometimes people are misled or fooled by charm or flattery. Sometimes we are hasty to come to conclusions without having given sufficient thought. Examples of such occasions might be:

- Thinking that Jesus was merely a good man or a great moral teacher.
- Dismissing Christians as hypocrites.
- Dismissing all preachers or leaders as exploiters of others.
- Making a premature or incorrect judgement about a person on the basis of appearance, age, nationality, gender or another prejudice.
- Not recognising that God can work good out of seeming failure.
- Jumping to a conclusion without first finding out all the facts.
- Being blind to the truth out of misplaced loyalty or confidence.
- Not recognising that God is a lot kinder and more merciful than we are.

One of the most fruitful ways in which we can learn is from our mistakes (or by noting the mistakes of others). We all make mistakes but the important thing is to learn from them. So we should avoid getting into a cycle of regret and recrimination and move on, hopefully a little wiser and with humility.

**3. When Christians talk about the cross, there are two different things in mind. The first is the cross of Christ and the second is the cross in the life of a follower or disciple of Jesus. If you had to explain the difference between these two and their connection to someone, what would you say?**

The cross of Christ was a one-time, all sufficient sacrifice by Jesus for the sins of every human being born into this world. Its benefits are available to all and received by all who accept this by faith, turning away from a self-centred life towards God.

The cross in the life of a follower of Jesus is the daily denial of selfish living, choosing to obey God when His will is different from our own inclinations and preferences. This is a matter of conscious and voluntary decision, not something imposed upon us against our will. Fortunately God loves us and for most of us, most of the time, we enjoy God's blessings and are not faced with these hard choices. But when we are, the disciple will take up his or her cross and choose to do the thing that pleases God, knowing that those who suffer with Him will *'reign with him'* (2 Timothy 2:12-16).

**4. "Come to Jesus! All your troubles will be over!" Is that an accurate Gospel invitation?**

**Explain the reasons for your answer.**

No, it is a distorted and unbalanced version of the gospel. To be sure the Christian does enjoy many freedoms and blessings which Jesus paid for on the cross. Jesus said, *"Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28-30). But as well as enjoying the benefits of the cross, we share in the task of making His benefits known to others and that will bring us into conflict with opposing spiritual forces and structures (see the next question).

**Imagine a young Christian says to you, "I don't really like the idea of taking up my cross or suffering. I think I'd rather not!" How would you reply? You might wish to incorporate thoughts from other parts of scripture in your answer.**

Becoming a Christian is not only a matter of personal benefit, although becoming an adopted child of God is certainly that. By becoming a Christian we become heirs to a wonderful inheritance. We become beneficiaries of all the wonderful promises of God to His children.

Jesus said to His disciples, *"Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"* (Luke 2:49), which means His Kingdom on earth. As adopted brothers and sisters of Jesus, we too share in the Father's Kingdom business - proclaiming the good news (the gospel invitation) of His rule of love and extending God's Kingdom rule in other ways - such as expressions of kingdom-compassion and care of creation. This will inevitably bring us into conflict with invisible spiritual opposition, anti-God social structures and people committed to other competing agendas, in addition to our own frailty. These have been traditionally summarised as *the world, the flesh and the devil* and are the reasons behind much of the suffering of Christians.

Both benefits and responsibilities go together. Salvation cannot be reduced to a matter of individual personal benefit. We become members of His family - the church - and participate in God's mission to the world. For those who find the thought of self-denial and suffering rather daunting, we can be reassured that God knows all about us. He knows how much we can take:

*'For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is His loving devotion for those who fear Him.*

*As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

*As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.*

*For He knows our frame;  
He is mindful that we are dust.'*

*Psalm 103:11-14*

There is one other point that our young Christian might like to ponder. There are promises in the Bible of great reward for those that suffer for the sake of the gospel.

*'This is a faithful saying:  
For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him.  
If we endure, We shall also reign with Him.'*

*1 Timothy 2:7*

A major theme in the *Book of Revelation* is the role of those who have suffered in bringing in God's end-time harvest and the return of the King:

*'They triumphed over him  
by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony;  
they did not love their lives so much  
as to shrink from death.'*

*Revelation 12:10*

**5. Scripture reveals other paradoxical truth. When Paul said, "When I am weak then I am strong!" (2 Corinthians 12:10) is an example. Can you think of any others and how does understanding them help us in our Christian lives?**

Perhaps the best way of understanding paradoxes is to think of them like the opposing muscles of the arm. The biceps folds the arm bringing the forearm inwards. The triceps do the opposite and extend the arm outwards. If we want to hold the arm in a fixed position we need to contract both muscles so that they oppose each other and keep the arm firm, which is what we need to lift a heavy object.

This analogy illustrates that it makes sense to have two opposing actions or statements to avoid going to the extreme where neither position really works. This doesn't of course resolve the two statements. It simply says, we need both.

Biblical paradoxes can usually be resolved when given some thought. In the example given in the question, Paul knows that his own human strength, willpower, skill or ability is equal to the situation. But that causes him to trust God who has promised to supply his strength when he is weak. To the extent that we are willing and able to let go of our own resources, we will create room for the power of God to work in us. So the resolution of this paradox (1) is to acknowledge our weakness and place our confidence in God's strength. God has not called us to do His will with our own resources. We do what we can but when we reach the limit of our abilities, we hand over the situation to Him. This is precisely the way it worked with the loaves and fishes.

Other paradoxes that may be mentioned:

Paradox 2

***'We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;  
as unknown, and yet well known;  
as dying, and behold, we live;  
as punished, and yet not killed;  
as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;  
as poor, yet making many rich...'***

*2 Corinthians 6:8-10*

Here we have a verse containing six paradoxes. The first is simply a matter of recognition. Paul, like Jesus, was not recognised as sent by God by many (the unbelieving Jews). Second, he was not known (understood) by many, even though he was quite notorious. Third, despite being mobbed, stoned and whipped he was still alive. Fourth, although he was continually sorrowful about his own Jewish people, he rejoiced over the turning of many Gentiles to Christ. Fifth, he was materially poor, no home to call his own, as he travelled from city to city, yet he left his Gentile converts spiritually rich.

Paradox 3

***"For whoever would save his life will lose it,  
but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."***

*Mark 8:35*

These paradoxes are resolved by the certainty of the resurrection and the following judgement. Those who had compromised to save their lives will be rejected by God. Those who had held fast their faith even to the cost of their lives will experience great reward.

Paradox 4

***'But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.'***

*Phil 3:7*

This paradox is resolved by thinking about what is truly valuable. The gain that Paul had, his standing as an outwardly approved Pharisee, counted for nothing when it came to following Jesus. He left it all behind.

Paradox 5

***"The greatest among you shall be your servant."***

*Matt.23:11*

There is, however, one paradox that is beyond resolving with our limited minds. That is the paradox of the **Trinity** (paradox 6). A brief interlude of church history is relevant here:

Jehovah's Witnesses will tell you that this world does not occur in the Bible. On that they are correct. The world was coined by a man called Tertullian (155 AD - 220 AD), who lived in Carthage and wrote in Latin. He used it to describe a concept that is clearly in the New Testament. God the Father is God. Jesus is not the same as the Father but He is also God. The Holy Spirit is not the same as the Father, nor

the Son but is also God. And yet God is ONE!

This is what Tertullian actually wrote:

*‘Two Beings are God, the Father and the Son,  
and, with the addition of the Holy Spirit, even Three,  
according to the principle of the divine economy number...  
the Father is God,  
and the Son is God,  
and the Holy Spirit is God,  
and each is God.’*

The close relationship between God the Father, the Son and the Spirit is mentioned in:

*‘And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me.  
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,  
baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.  
And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” ’*

*Matthew 28:18-20*

*“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father  
- the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father  
- he will testify about me.*

*And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.”*

*John 15:26-27*

*“He (the Spirit), will glorify me  
because it is from me that He will receive what He will make known to you.*

*All that belongs to the Father is mine.*

*That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what He will make known to you.”*

*John 16:14-15*

The Father is God, yet the Old Testament word *Elohim* is plural in form (*Genesis 1:1*). **‘God is One’** (*Deuteronomy 6:4*); the Jews call this verse the *Shema*.

So the word *Trinity* was in use from the second century. But there were other ideas at the time too; so sometime later a number of councils of bishops from a wide range of churches gathered to formulate correct (orthodox) Christian doctrine. In 325AD the Council of Nicea recognised the divinity of the Son and expressed this in the form of the Nicene Creed. Having settled that matter, in 382AD another council at Constantinople built on the work of Nicea to settle the matter of the Holy Spirit. As a result of their deliberations, the Nicene Creed was expanded to include mention of the Holy Spirit and referred to as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. So the formulation by Tertullian and those who followed him (almost a couple of centuries earlier), became the official and orthodox position of the Christian church.

People who call themselves Christian but do not accept the ruling of the Council of Constantinople are not, therefore, orthodox (true) Christians. This is why Jehovah's Witnesses, who do not worship Jesus, are not true Christians.

The *problem* or *paradox* of the doctrine of the Trinity is only a problem because of the limitations of the human mind. We know that each of Tertullian's four statements is Biblically accurate even though putting them together is beyond our limited understanding!