

Take Up Your Cross

Luke · Luke 9:18-27; Psalm 22:1; Luke 6:27-31

AT A GLANCE

Jesus redefines salvation as something you enter, not escape: to save your life you must lose it by denying yourself, taking up your cross daily, and moving into places of pain with love rather than a sword. This logic is counterintuitive and paradoxical, but it is also the only path to realizing full humanity — and to implementing the victory of the cross in the world.

- Denying yourself means surrendering your right to define your own life and trusting Jesus to define it instead.
- Taking up your cross daily means practicing small acts of self-giving love so you are ready for the large ones.
- You save your life precisely by giving it away — entering places of pain is not sacrifice, it is the way to become fully human.

“True peace is to be had not in retreat from the battle but only in the thick of the battle.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

Luke 9:18-27 — Now it happened that as he was praying alone, emerging from this prayer, the disciples were with him, and he asked them, who do the crowds say that I am? And they answered, John the Baptist, but others say Elijah, and others that one of the prophets of old has risen. And then he said to them, but who do you say that I am? And Peter answered, the Christ of God. And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And he said to all, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.

Psalm 22:1 — My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[Luke 6:27-31](#) — Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Offer the other cheek. As you wish that others would do to you, do so for them.

The argument

Peter's Confession Requires Redefinition, Not Celebration — Knowing the title and knowing the meaning are not the same thing

When Peter declares Jesus the Christ of God, the disciples believe they have arrived at the right answer. Jesus responds not with affirmation but with a silencing command and an immediate restatement of his mission on his own terms: the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected by the Jewish leadership, be killed, and on the third day be raised. The word 'must' signals divine necessity, not reluctant fate. Jesus suppresses public proclamation because the disciples hold a fundamentally wrong concept of what the Messiah is — a nationalist king who defeats Rome and vindicates Israel. To let them broadcast that concept would be to accelerate a misreading. As the preacher noted, quoting Paul Simon, 'a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.' Jesus must buy time to replace the inherited image with the actual one.

Insight — Confessing the right title about Jesus while holding the wrong idea of what that title means is not yet faith — it is the beginning of the problem Jesus must solve.

The Cross Replaces the Sword as the Instrument of Messianic Victory — Self-giving love, not force, is how evil is actually defeated

Against the backdrop of Jewish nationalism, taking up a cross rather than a sword is the sermon's most charged image. Peter himself drew a sword in Gethsemane — the instinct to fight for Jesus was not abstract. Jesus' instruction to take up your cross is therefore a direct displacement: put away anger, hatred, and revenge. The preacher frames this theologically: Jesus is not after Rome but after Satan, and 'you don't take on the Romans by taking up a sword — you take on the Romans by putting on love.' Evil perpetuates itself through retaliation. When you return evil for evil, evil stays in circulation. The cross absorbs rather than returns. Taking up your cross is therefore not passivity; it is the most aggressive available act against the mechanism by which evil reproduces.

Insight — The cross is not a symbol of defeat accepted but of evil interrupted — self-giving love is the only force that breaks the cycle of retaliation.

The Word 'Daily' Transforms the Cross from Event into Practice — Large crucifixions are made possible by small ones

Only in Luke's account does Jesus add the word 'daily' to the command to take up one's cross. The preacher treats this as the sermon's most precise exegetical detail: it shifts the cross from a singular heroic act into a habitual pattern of small decisions. Jesus himself did not appear in

Gethsemane unprepared for the hardest decision ever made — his entire ministry was a sequence of smaller choices made in the same direction. The preacher draws a clear structural principle: daily cross-bearing 'sets a pattern for your life so that you're ready when the big decision comes.' Lament — pouring out honest emotion to God before God, as the psalmists modeled and as Jesus enacted on the cross — is named as one of scripture's great secrets for sustaining this practice without hardening into either passivity or bitterness.

Insight — Spiritual courage in crisis is never improvised — it is the accumulated residue of a thousand prior choices made in the same direction.

Entering Places of Pain Is Not Charity — It Is Self-Realization — The one who gives his life away is the one who gets it back

The preacher presses on the paradox in verses 24-25 not as abstract logic but as anthropology: to save your life by losing it means to realize your humanity. This is what you were made for. Frederick Buechner's account of being called to the airport against his fear becomes the sermon's defining illustration of the moment the truth breaks in: 'the shattering revelation of that moment was that true peace, the peace that passeth all understanding, is to be had not in retreat from the battle but only in the thick of the battle.' Cross-bearing is not merely obedience; it is the path by which a person becomes fully themselves. Janet Gore, the food pantry director, voices the other side of this: the daily joy she experienced in entering places of pain 'overwhelmed everything else.' The preacher is careful to distinguish this from enabling or capitulation to others' expectations — Jesus himself left towns whose expectations he declined to satisfy.

Insight — The self you are trying to protect by avoiding pain is precisely the self you lose; the self you discover in love's risk is the one you were made to be.

Taking Up Your Cross Is How the Kingdom Advances — Individual discipleship and cosmic victory are the same act

The sermon closes by connecting personal cross-bearing to the large sweep of what God is doing in history. When the disciples take up their crosses, they are not merely following an ethical example — they are implementing the victory won at Calvary. The cross was not a defeat to be endured but a triumph over evil; resurrection confirmed it. Every act of self-giving love in a broken place extends that victory into the present. The preacher's assignment — finding one act this week that costs something, even five minutes — is not a moralistic addendum but a structural application of this logic: the kingdom comes through small, concrete, costly love. The closing image brings it full circle: just as the brothers saved themselves by grabbing a branch, followers of Jesus save themselves by grasping the Messiah — the Righteous Branch — and then taking up their crosses.

Insight — Each small act of cross-bearing love is not personal virtue but a concrete installation of Christ's victory over evil in a specific time and place.

Cross-references

- [Psalm 22:1](#) — Cited as the source of Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross, used to establish lament as a biblical and Christological practice
- [Luke 6:27-31](#) — Recalled as the Sermon on the Plain's definition of cross-bearing love: love enemies, bless cursers, pray for abusers, offer the other cheek
- [Jeremiah 23:5](#) — Alluded to in the closing image of the Messiah as the Righteous Branch, the thing to grab hold of before taking up your cross

DEVOTIONAL

There is a branch in the river. The current is running fast — faster, perhaps, than you thought when you first got in. The raft is taking on water. Everything you assumed would hold is going down. And the branch is there, and it will hold you. But here is what the branch asks in return: once you are on the shore, you do not stay there. You pick something up. Not the sword you might have reached for — the sword that feels so natural, so justified, so righteous when the current has swept you toward everything that has ever hurt you. No. You pick up a cross. And you move toward the place where it is heaviest to go. This is the revolution hidden inside the most familiar image in Christian language. We have stared at crosses on walls and around necks for so long that we have forgotten what the first disciples heard when Jesus said the word: execution, shame, the full weight of a world that is not yet what it should be, absorbed by a body that chose to stay. He could have left Gethsemane. He had practiced not leaving — in a hundred smaller Gethsemanes, in every town he departed on the Spirit's schedule rather than the crowd's expectations, in every moment he bent toward the person no one else was moving toward. The daily cross is the training ground for the large one. Every small act of love that costs you something — five minutes, comfort, the last word — is practice. It is how you become the person who, when the moment finally comes, does not flinch. It is also how you become yourself. Not the defended self, the self that retreated into candlelit safety. The other one. The one that stepped into the airport, the food pantry, the hard conversation, the place of someone else's pain — and found, inexplicably, that the peace it discovered there was the only peace that had ever been real.

Reflection

- Where in your life are you currently carrying a sword — returning anger, nursing a grievance, protecting yourself through retaliation — that Jesus is asking you to put down, and what would it cost you to do so this week?

- What places of pain are you avoiding, and what fear specifically is keeping you at the door — the fear of not having answers, of being rejected, of being changed by what you find there?
- When you imagine your life fully given away in love, what does it look like — and what does it tell you about who you were actually made to be?

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Christ — not the one we imagined, but the one who went to the cross. Forgive us for the swords we have picked up: the anger we have nursed, the retaliation we have rehearsed, the safety we have chosen over the place where someone was hurting and waiting. Teach us today, in some small way, to put the sword down. Give us the courage that is not the absence of fear but the willingness to move forward despite it. Show us one place of pain we can enter this week, one act of love that costs us something. And remind us, when we are afraid, that you are already there — that the peace we are looking for is not behind us in retreat but ahead of us in the thick of the battle. Amen.
