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SIMON OF CYRENE: THE MAN WHO CARRIED HIS CROSS **Luke 23:26**

INTRODUCTION:

Good evening. My name is Simon. I've come a long way to be with you this evening but I trust it will be worth my trip and that it will be worth your time. I am from Africa...North Africa...from Cyrene.

Oh, let me correct that. You see, I've not only come from far away to be with you this evening, I've come from long ago to be with you. Back when I was a youth, we called our little country, Cyrene. But I believe you now call it Libya. I hope you will forgive an old man his old ways but I shall still call it Cyrene for that is what it was when I lived and that is what it was when I died.

"When I died?" Yes, when I died. For, you see, I died nearly 2000 years ago. So when I say I've come a long ways to be with you this evening, I mean I have come a VERY long ways: a few thousand miles in distance, a few thousand years in time and a few thousand lives have all separated us from one another. Until tonight. And tonight, I am here with you to tell you my story.

I was born in Judea, of strict, observant Jewish parents. My devout parents moved to Cyrene when I was quite young. They, along with several other Judean families, immigrated to North Africa so they could secure some of the well-paying jobs they had heard were available there.

It seemed to me that we settled in to life in Cyrene rather easily. While we were foreigners in Cyrene, there were enough of our fellow countrymen that it felt a lot like home; only better. The climate was mild, the soil was rich and the sea was beautiful.

Cyrene felt especially like home because we even had our own synagogue. We could remain faithful to our Jewish religion even in this foreign land because we had enough Jewish men in our community that we were allowed to build a synagogue. We had our own rabbi. And that certainly helped make Cyrene feel like our own home.

Our lives seemed to ebb and flow like the tides of the Mediterranean Sea. There were good times and bad times, busy times and slack times, difficult times and easy times. But overall, life was good in Cyrene.

When I got old enough to go to work, I secured a job with an import/export firm. We had caravans along the trade routes. We would send local merchandise to foreign markets and bring foreign goods to our markets. Sometimes the taxes and tariffs would eat away at our profits. And occasionally bandits would make

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off with our inventory. But for the most part, business had been good and life had been interesting.

Over time, the owner of our company came to trust me enough that he sent me to other countries to negotiate the purchase of their products and to negotiate the sale of ours. I hated being away from my sons, Rufus and Alexander, but I enjoyed the travel and I felt like I had learned a lot because of my trips.

One of my trips didn't just enrich my life: it changed my life. And it is of that trip I wish to speak this evening.

I had been eagerly anticipating this trip more than all others because it was going to require me to be in Jerusalem during the time of the Passover Feast. I always enjoyed going back to Judea because it was the land of my birth and because I still had relatives who lived there. But I had never had the chance to be in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover Feast. For any serious Jew (and I did consider myself a serious Jew), the opportunity to observe the Feast of the Passover in the ancient City of David, was a thrill to be anticipated.

So I embarked on my business trip. I worked hard and managed to conclude my business early enough so that I could go into Jerusalem around noon on the Friday of Passover.

I expected to sense a buzz of excitement in the city. After all, Passover was the most important of our high and holy days. But the buzz was far greater than I had anticipated. The air was electric with tension. Crowds were teeming along the main streets. It was hard to get through the swarms of people who did not so much seem to be excited as they seemed to be agitated.

Along one of the streets, I got hemmed in on every side by a mob of angry people and I feared for my safety. I saw a bit of an opening ahead and pushed toward it, hoping to break free from the throng and find a quiet side street where I could look for a room for the night.

It turned out that the opening I had seen and toward which I had wormed my way, was actually a wide street. And the reason it was open was because Roman soldiers had been clearing people off of the street because of something that was passing down the street.

Unwittingly, I had squirmed my way to a front row position for what appeared to be a military parade. I knew better than to try to cross through the ranks of the soldiers in the street so I resolved to wait it out until they had all passed me by and then I would try to dart across the road and find a little side street I could travel.

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While the soldiers marched, the crowd shouted. They hurled insults, epithets and profanity into the air. I thought they were shouting at the soldiers but then I realized they were not. For in the midst of the ranks of the soldiers was the most bedraggled, battered and bloodied figure I had ever seen in my life. I assumed him to be a person but he looked like less. He looked like a mass of raw meat. The skin had been flailed from his back and then he had been beaten still more. The muscles and tendons were exposed and yet he had been beaten. Until now, as I saw him, bone was actually exposed in a number of places.

Onto all of that raw flesh, the Romans had laid a rugged wooden cross-member. It was a 4X4 beam that would become the horizontal arms of the cross upon which this one was to be executed. Part of his punishment was that he was required to carry that crossbeam in this macabre procession through town. I guessed that this beam weighed over 80 pounds. Soon enough, I would know for sure how much it weighed.

Probably because of loss of blood and undoubtedly because of loss of sleep but just as this beaten, broken man got in front of me, he stumbled, fell and could not get back up. One of the soldiers prodded him with a stick to try to get him to rise but each time he tried, he would stumble again and fall back to the street.

Finally, the soldier looked up, scanned the crowd and picked me out. "You," he ordered. "You, come pick up his cross and carry it for him. We've got to get going here. We've got a killing to attend," he added with a sick chuckle.

Another soldier grabbed me behind my neck, pushed me into the street and, having no other choice, I bent down to lift the ghastly burden off of this brutalized man. As I did, he glanced into my eyes and I thought I saw gratitude. He knew I had no choice but to carry his cross but he seemed grateful that I was doing it anyway.

Block after block, for more than a mile, I carried that piece of timber. Step after step I walked and I soon struggled with the weight of the wood but managed to stumble on. By my side, shuffled the man who would die on the wood that I carried.

As we walked, I not only bore the weight of his cross, I caught the wrath of the crowd as well. My ears rang with their taunts. My mind reeled with their insults. My face was wet with their spittle. I consoled myself with the thought that for me, this would soon be over. But then I thought of the man by my side. His agony had only just begun.

When we got to Skull Hill, I was ordered to drop the cross and told to leave. I did both. But I didn't go far. I went to the back of the crowd so I could see what was going to happen next. I watched as the soldier pushed the man to the ground and then dragged him onto the cross. I heard as they hammered spikes into his

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hands and feet. I saw when they raised the cross, positioned it above a hole in the ground and then dropped it into place. I winced as I heard the “thud” of the upright piece bottoming out in the hole and I could not help but feel pain in my feet, in my hands and in my shoulders when I heard that sound.

I looked at the man. I looked at his face. I saw on his head a wreath made out of thorns that the soldiers had placed there as a mock crown. And I saw above his head, a list of his crimes. It was the custom of the Romans to post the crimes over the criminal as he died. That way, it was a kind of a warning to passersby not to do the same thing or they would suffer the same fate.

His rap sheet was pretty short. And a little confusing. It simply said, “KING OF THE JEWS.” As a Jew I wondered what was behind that. I presumed that meant that he had purported to be the King of the Jews. Certainly that would have riled the Romans and perturbed the priests but it hardly seemed like a capital offense. I wouldn’t have thought they would have executed a man for something like that.

But they did. And I was there to see it.

I stayed in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. My mind couldn’t seem to stay on the Feast, however, with what I’d seen earlier in the day. I kept thinking about that man on the cross.

I intended to spend the entire weekend in Jerusalem and begin my travels again on Monday. But Sunday morning, there was a stir in the town. Rumor had it that the executed convict was no longer in his grave. Some said the Romans moved his body so his followers wouldn’t turn his grave into a shrine. Some said that grave robbers stole it. But some actually claimed that the dead man had come back to life.

On Monday, as I went on my way, I certainly wondered what had happened to his body.

When I finally got home to Cyrene, I told no one but my wife about my having to carry the cross of a condemned man. I somehow felt ashamed for having been involved in any way.

Seven weeks later, I was on the road again. And once again, my travels took me to Jerusalem. This time, I was there just in time for the Feast of Pentecost: a kind of harvest festival. After the emotional experience of the Passover in Jerusalem, I was anxious to replace those memories with some more pleasant ones.

On the Sunday after the Pentecost Sabbath, I heard a commotion outside the inn where I was staying. I looked out to see a crowd of people moving in one

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direction. Curiosity overcame my fear and I followed them. No one was saying anything but everyone was listening intently. Soon, I caught the sound that they were following. It sounded like a high wind and we were all seeking the source.

Presently, we followed the sound to a private home. As was typical of houses in Jerusalem, this one had a large second-story room with porches all around. People often retired to these upper floor rooms on hot days so they could catch cool breezes. But this sounded like more than a cool breeze. This sounded like the rush of a strong wind.

While we watched, people began to appear on the porches around the second story of the house. Each of these men had, what looked like a flame hovering over his head. The already quiet crowd now became totally silent.

In the silence, one of the men spoke. And here was an odd thing. When he spoke, I heard him speaking the language of the Cyrenians. But other people heard him speaking in the language of their home country. We all thought that was peculiar. It was as if the man had discovered the key to unlocked some universal tongue.

But if the way he spoke was startling, what he said was even more so. He reminded us about that man who had been executed seven weeks earlier: the one whose cross I had carried. The speaker said that this man was really our Messiah, God's anointed and the King of the Jews. He showed us from the Scriptures how God had promised such a one and he proved from his life how this man had shown himself to be the one. Then he said that we had killed God's anointed one who was the deliverer for whom we had been waiting.

I'm sure I was not the only one in Jerusalem that day who had also been there seven weeks earlier when that man was killed. I became certain of it when people began to shout out, "Well then what can we do to correct what we have done wrong?"

The man replied, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will received the gift of the Holy Spirit."

And so I did. I repented of my part in the crucifixion of Jesus and I was baptized that day. I and about three thousand others as well.

Now when I say that I repented of my part in the crucifixion of Jesus, I don't mean the part about helping to carry his cross. I've come to realize that was a singular honor that came to me. No, I mean that I repented of my part in causing him to be crucified. If I had never sinned, he would not have needed to die. But because I have sinned, he had to die to pay the penalty for my sins. I repented

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of the sins I had sinned. And when I was baptized, I was washed clean of all those sins.

Since then, I tried to live differently than before. I tried to stop doing those things that I know do not honor God. And on those occasions I did sin, in my spirit, I would distinctly hear the sound of a hammer driving nails through flesh and into wood and I would be reminded that it was my sins that nailed him there.

Not only did I try to live differently, I also tried to tell everyone I knew about this one who would save them from their sins. Of all the people whom I have told and who believed what I said, I was especially pleased that my sons, Rufus and Alexander, came to believe the truth about Jesus and that they became disciples of him.

In fact, they became quite well-known among the other Christians; so much so that when John Mark wrote his biography of Jesus, he identified me as being the father of Rufus and Alexander because so many people knew who they were.

I'm proud to be the father of Rufus and Alexander. I'm also proud to have carried the cross of my Savior. But think of this: I was compelled to carry his cross. I had no choice. But you do. If you are to carry his cross, it will be because you choose to. And so tonight, I must ask you, "Do you? Do you choose to carry his cross?"

INVITATION: #673 – *"Must Jesus Bear The Cross Alone?"*