

Take Up His Cross

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, we are going to turn together to the Gospel of Mark and chapter eight, looking again at verse 34. We're looking at this verse over three weeks, last week, this week, and next week.

And as we look at this verse, we are looking at a tiny sentence that is one of the most important statements ever made.

This sentence is a summary of what being a disciple involves. And in this one sentence, Jesus says three incredibly important things.

He called the crowd to him with his disciples. He said to them, if anyone would come after me, in other words, if anyone is going to be a disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

Last week, we look at the first one of these, let a man deny himself. And we saw how in terms of our culture today, these words of Jesus are words that both connect and confront.

[1 : 0 2] This whole idea of self is such a massive and dominant emphasis in our society today. And so when Jesus speaks of that, he's connecting very powerfully with the way our world thinks.

But when Jesus then says that we've got to deny self, he immediately confronts us. And as he does that, what he's doing is, he's pushing us away from the idea that if we just look within us, we will find everything that we need.

And instead, he's pointing us to himself, calling us to look to him, and to find our identity and our wholeness and our security, not in who we are, but in who he is, and in what he has done for us.

And what he's telling us is that as we do that, as we cast ourselves into Jesus' arms, that's where we find peace, wholeness, security, and purpose.

Today, we're going to look at the second thing that Jesus says. And again, these are words that connect and confront. They connect with us very powerfully because these words are speaking about an issue that every single person in here has to deal with, and an issue that we probably think about every single day of our lives.

[2 : 3 2] So these words connect, but these words also confront because Jesus is going to challenge us to think about this issue in a way that we've maybe not done so before.

So he's talking about an issue that connects with every single one of us with every day of our lives. He challenges us though, because he's wanting us to think about this issue in a way that we don't always do.

What's he talking about? What is the issue that Jesus is referring to? Well, when Jesus talks about taking up our cross, he is talking about suffering.

Suffering is something that every single one of us experiences. It's a massive, massive issue in our lives. Defects every individual human.

It affects every generation of humanity. And you see it everywhere. You see it nationally and globally. When I was preparing the sermon earlier in the week, I did a week's experiment.

[3 : 35] I thought, I'm going to go on to BBC News. I tried to avoid ever going on to BBC News during the day because it just distracts me. So I don't normally, but I thought, well, I'm going to go on today just to see what the headlines are. I clicked on BBC News, looked at the headlines.

Almost all of them were in some way connected to suffering. And the only one I could see that didn't connect to suffering was Celtic manager going to Tottenham.

That was the one headline. Now, I'm an Arsenal fan. So I would say that is a form of suffering, but not everybody would agree with that. Everything else connected in some way to suffering.

We encountered it locally. And when I wrote those words in my notes, I never thought that we would be meeting today with having lost Dennis so suddenly yesterday.

But you see just your community, people suffering and having to deal with awful things. And we feel it personally ourselves. Every person in here, every person watching online, experiences suffering.

[4 : 40] Sometimes physical, sometimes emotional, all too often, both. And I know that there are people in here who suffer a lot.

They suffer an awful lot. But it's a really interesting thing for us to think about because although suffering is such a reality in our lives, I think we live today in a culture that actually wants to do all it can to avoid suffering.

Now, when I say that, I don't mean reducing suffering. Reducing suffering is something that every generation of humanity should be engaged in. And there are so many amazing examples of compassion, of research, of humanitarian efforts that are reducing suffering.

Those things are amazing. We thank God for them. That's not what I'm talking about though. What I mean is that I think today individuals, perhaps more than at any point in history, we are desperate to avoid suffering and discomfort.

And in some cases, it can feel as though you come all across people who almost feel entitled to a life that does not involve suffering, or at least for whom suffering is kept to an absolute minimal.

[6 : 02] And that can manifest itself in loads of different ways. And you can see it in different places. I'm gonna sound probably like a grumpy old man.

I think I'm 40 now. I'm allowed to kind of embrace a bit of grumpy old man, I think, but sometimes it feels, especially when you look at younger generations sometimes, sometimes it can feel like, you know, there's a real aversion to discomfort in life.

And today what can happen is that you can end up with two opposites that we frequently come across, especially come across this in our island culture today. Sometimes you come across people who suffer a huge amount and they've got awful burdens to carry, but they don't let on.

And sometimes often that not letting on isn't just an act of courage. It's actually, you know, just, you just don't let on. And it means that people don't get the help and support that they need, even though they are having to carry so much.

So you get that opposite on one side, but on the other side, I think it's also fair to say that more widely in our society, people expect minimal suffering.

[7 : 17] And as a result of that, there are often occasions today when you will see people respond to something minor as though it is something major.

Now you see that in lots of places. You definitely see it when you watch football these days. Like ridiculous, but you see it everywhere. You see it with bad weather.

This is one that intrigues me. Like the last few years, I don't know if it was always like this, I don't know, but it intrigues me. Every winter you get a wee kind of, a wee sprinkle of snow and Britain shuts down.

And you go to France or Italy and they get two feet of snow overnight. No bother, they carry on. But there's just this kind of crisis mindset now, which is anything that's slightly, you know, that just seems slightly out of the ordinary.

Often it's a challenge for parents and children, sometimes children, I can remember being this myself as a child, you know, something small happens, but you think it's the end of the world. And there's a huge pressure for parents to try and just make sure that their children don't ever experience discomfort or anything like that.

[8 : 28] But children aren't the only culprits. Adults can be the same. If we're in pain, we want pain relief. If we feel tired, we want a break. If we're feeling unhappy, we want people to give us attention.

If things are hard, we expect them to be made easier. Now, I'm not saying everybody's like that, but I do think we can say that there's trends in that direction, in our society.

And an example of it was one thing I saw, most of my research comes from the BBC News website, an example I saw after the COVID pandemic. So after the COVID pandemic, there was, you know, that we had then the war in Ukraine, the rise in energy prices and a cost of living crisis, which has been a massive problem and caused a huge amount of suffering.

I'm absolutely not saying that that's not a problem. But I did have difficulty with an article I saw on the BBC website, which was an individual who they'd obviously just, I don't know how they'd got in touch, but anyway, there was sort of featuring the cost of living crisis.

And the kind of big headline was, so the big conclusion of the article was, I've got no money left for luxuries. And I kind of thought that is a very, very Western and very, very middle class problem.

[9 : 49] The majority of the world, they don't even think about luxury. And so you kind of think, we just have this strange mindset in our society today.

Jesus confronts this kind of thinking in two ways. First, he's telling us that suffering is going to be inevitable. We should expect it.

And we'll unpack that a wee bit as we go on. But secondly, it's actually the case that suffering is inevitable. Whatever, whatever your faith is and whatever path you follow in life, just existence in this world and in this universe is going to bring suffering.

Whether you follow Jesus or not, we don't actually have a choice. Life will always involve suffering. But what Jesus is getting us to think about is that we do have a choice in terms of our attitude.

And in these words, Jesus is calling us to a mindset that can utterly transform our view of suffering. In other words, in calling us to take up our cross, Jesus is giving us a magnificent statement about realism and about courage.

[11 : 02] And in a world that is so full of suffering, these are two things that we desperately need. So we're going to just unpack these a wee bit, looking at these four words.

And we're going to work through them backwards. We're going to start there, then we'll go there, and then we'll go to these two. Okay, so let's start at the end with the word cross. When Jesus says take up his cross, what does he mean when he talks about that word there?

What's that referring to? Now, well, immediately our minds will go, well, the cross Jesus died on the cross. That's the sort of great symbol of Christianity. That's what the whole gospel is leading up to.

That's what it's all about. But it's not necessarily that simple. And this verse has actually provoked a lot of debate in terms of what does Jesus mean when he's talking about the cross.

And so if we think straight away about the cross that Jesus died on, we might find ourselves thinking, well, that's the great emblem of Christianity, isn't it? That's the symbol that represents Christianity.

[12 : 03] So if we're taking up our cross, we're identifying ourselves with the Christian gospel. A bit like nailing our colors to the mast.

It's easy to think on those lines. Or we might think of Jesus as death and think, well, when Jesus says take up your cross, he's saying, well, I died on the cross, you need to be ready to die for me.

And there are Christians who've had to do that. And there's this need for a willingness to die for the gospel. That's where our minds can go. But now both of these things are true.

They are true that we absolutely want to nail our colors to the mast. We don't want to be secret in terms of our faith. And we do want it to be the case that our commitment to Jesus is so great that we would lay down our lives for him and for others.

And there are many, many people who by the grace of God have done that. But although these things are both true, generally, we don't think they're actually primarily what Jesus is talking about here.

[13 : 03] First of all, the reason for that is, first of all, that it's important to remember where we are in the narrative of Jesus's life story here. The gospels are taking us through Jesus's life. They're all culminating in the cross.

But at this point, Mark 8, he's not gone to the cross. And so although we immediately think of Jesus's cross when we come to this verse, the disciples wouldn't. The crowd wouldn't have.

So yes, they would have thought about crucifixions in general as a form of execution used by the Roman Empire. But they would not have made that connection with Jesus, because he hadn't died on the cross.

In fact, in the verses just before this, if you were to look later on, you'll see that Jesus had began explaining to the disciples, I'm going to go to Jerusalem and I'm going to die. And Peter was like, no, no, that's not going to happen.

So they didn't make those kind of connections at all. And so although there are connections to the cross, and we're going to look at these in a bit more detail in a moment, there are connections to Jesus's cross.

[14 : 01] That's not the first thing that would have come into their minds. Second thing, at this point, we need to remember, again, in terms of where we are, in terms of history, the cross was not the global symbol of Christianity at this point.

That only came much after. And thirdly, we're helped a little bit when we look at Luke's Gospel. So Mark records these words. Luke, in his Gospel, records the same words, but he adds an extra detail that when Jesus spoke about taking up the cross, he spoke about doing it daily.

So if we're thinking, OK, this means being ready to die for Jesus, well, when Luke says daily, that doesn't seem to be what it means because to die would be a one-off thing.

But this seems to be referring to something that we need to do on a day-to-day basis. So what does Jesus mean? Well, you need to try often to understand verses.

One of the things that's helpful to do is to think, OK, what would I... If I was standing in that crowd, what would I think of? When that word is mentioned. If you'd been standing in the crowd listening to Jesus, you hear the word cross, you would have thought of crucifixions as a form of execution.

[15 : 14] And I think that as you did that, there are two things that would come immediately into your minds. You would think about pain and you would think about rejection.

A cross, a crucifixion, was a means of execution that used torture. It was just a cause of horrific pain.

In fact, the word excruciating, the word that we use, comes from the word for crucify. It's that infliction of pain that that word is referring to.

And at the same time, the cross was a symbol of rejection because somebody who's been crucified, somebody who had to carry the cross, the beam of the cross, through the town, is somebody who's been condemned to death, rejected by the community and has been ruled by the governors that we are better off as a society if this person is dead and they need to be killed for whatever reason.

So there's the reality of pain, the reality of rejection. Now, what I think we can do and what I think is important for us to do is to recognize that those specifics that you find in a cross, pain and rejection are extreme examples of something that we all experience.

[16 : 47] Because we all experience pain and we all experience rejection. Yes, I totally say it's not to the same level of, you know, the awfulness of a crucifixion, but these are realities in all of our lives.

There are people here who live with pain, physical pain that just wears you down every day, mental and emotional pain that maybe at times is even worse.

And there are people here who've experienced rejection from friends, from colleagues, in a relationship where you feel crushed by the fact that others have pushed you away.

Now, these things might not always be a result, a specific result of being a Christian, they can just happen to anyone, they can happen because of just general life. The key point is that it's going to happen.

In fact, it probably already is happening. We all experience pain and rejection. Suffering is a reality for every single one of us.

[18 : 03] And that's emphasized really powerfully by the second word that we're going to look at, His. Now, the really interesting thing here is we ask the question, who's that His?

And the key point here is that the His is not Jesus. If you look at the construction of the sentence, Jesus is saying, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross.

So that His is not Jesus, that His is that person. The men and the women following Jesus.

In other words, the Him, or the hear of the His or the hear, if you put a hear in its place, it's not Jesus, it's you. It's you if you're a Christian or if you become one.

Now, that might easily sound a bit off-putting. It's like, oh, well, here's the slogan for today. We all want you to become Christians, come and suffer. Well, that's not a very appealing message at all. But you don't need to think for long to know that life and experience is not as superficial or as simple as that.

[19 : 11] And it's also important to say that if you ever hear the message that says, if you become a Christian, your life will always be easy and everything will be fine. That's a false gospel. You'll never find that in the Bible.

And anyone who preaches that is wrong because it's just not true. And in fact, often our experience as Christians will be one of suffering and hardship, but the point that's been made here is so important.

Jesus is giving us a recognition that suffering is going to happen in our experience. And that's why we said at the start, this is a statement of realism from Jesus.

And just as an aside, that's such a good thing. The gospel is not fantasy, airy, fairy, hopeful, nonsense. It's so real.

But in giving us that dose of realism here, Jesus, in that tiny little word, Jesus is doing something amazing and something incredibly important.

[20 : 14] He is recognizing that your suffering is a deeply personal thing. He's recognizing that the suffering in your life is your suffering.

He knows that the person who is suffering is you. In other words, Jesus knows every single individual, his or her, that this verse is talking about.

And that personal emphasis is so important and so beautiful and so helpful. It means that Jesus looks at you and he knows that you have got a cross to carry.

That might be physical. It might be a mental health difficulty. It might be something really hard that you've experienced in your life.

It might be a combination of all of the above. It's all emphasizing the fact that suffering is such a deeply personal issue because ultimately nobody else can feel what you feel.

[21 : 26] Nobody else can know what you know. And whilst we all suffer in different ways, for each one of us, our suffering is such a deeply personal and difficult experience.

Nobody else can really know what that's like except Jesus. Jesus knows that. He recognizes that. He doesn't look at your suffering as just another digit, another headline, another whatever.

It's not you just having to just lump it in the mass of suffering that exists in the world. Jesus knows that your suffering is yours.

He knows, he cares, he understands. In fact, Jesus is the ultimate realist because he's actually the only person who really knows the reality of you and your life and your suffering.

And I think that's incredibly helpful for us to recognize. He just knows and understands the his or the her behind that tiny word. But I think there's even more than that for us to take comfort from.

[22 : 43] And so remember I said a wee while ago that, you know, the disciples, they wouldn't have jumped straight to Jesus's cross when they read these words. I think that's true and we don't jump there straight away.

But I think that once we recognize that this verse is talking about the reality of our suffering, we can then make connections to the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

And I think it's really important to recognize that Jesus did use that word. He did use that word cross and that in so many ways has the dual emphasis of the reality of an instrument of awful suffering in society at that time.

But also the fact that it's pointing towards what Jesus has come to do. So what I'm saying here is that because Jesus used the word cross, I think he is linking our suffering to his suffering.

There's a link between our suffering in life and his suffering on the cross. So I don't think he's just saying, I suffered for you, so you better just lump it and suffer as well.

[23 : 47] I think he is saying, if you suffer, then your suffering and my suffering are connected. As you suffer as a Christian and as I suffered as your savior, there is a connection there.

And the reason we can say that with confidence is because the rest of the New Testament says it. And that's why I read from 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians chapter one, Paul talks about this so powerfully, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

So he's talking about all the suffering that we experience. But as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ, we share abundantly in comfort too.

Paul is absolutely clear here and in other places, we share in Christ's sufferings. And what does that mean? What's he saying?

Well, in order to understand that, the first thing that you've got to say is that at one level, Christ's sufferings are totally unique. If you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, your salvation is possible because he took your place.

[25 : 05] And the fact that he took your place in the cross means that he experienced what you will never have to experience. And he had to endure suffering that you will never have to endure. And in fact, the truth is what he suffered is beyond what we can take in.

So there's an element in which his suffering is totally unique in a category of its own. But at the same time, the Bible makes a very important connection between Jesus's sufferings and our suffering.

And there's two ways that we can see that and recognize that. The first is to see that a right understanding of suffering helps us to see that Jesus has come to us.

In other words, Jesus's suffering were all because he's come to us. When he was born, when he was baptized, when he was tempted, when he was rejected, when he had to endure the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane and when he had to go to the cross and endure all the horror that that involved, he did it all to bring you back.

He did it all to come to you. He did it all to get you. And that means that as we suffer now, we are being reminded that he has come to us.

[26 : 28] And that means that we can fall, fall into his arms when we are struggling. It's captured so beautifully in the letter to the Hebrews. It says, since then we have a great high priest who's passed through the heavens.

Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold faster confession. For we do not have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with their weaknesses, but one who is in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. In our times of need, in our times of suffering, we can come to him because he has come to us.

And so our sufferings just leads us into Jesus' arms and reminds us that he's come to us. But the second thing that this connection between Jesus' sufferings and our sufferings are important to think about is, it's not just that they remind us that Jesus has come to us as our Savior.

They're also teaching us that we are on a journey home to be with him. And that's why when we think about suffering, one of the emphasis of the New Testament is that we need to think about suffering eschatologically.

[27 : 41] Now, when we talk about eschatology, we're talking about the end of history when Jesus returns. And the New Testament wants us to place our sufferings in that context.

And in terms of that eschatology, there's a big emphasis in the New Testament is that you have what we call a first advent. Advent just means coming.

So that was when Jesus was born. We have a second advent when Jesus will return on the last day. And in between, you have what's called the inter-advent period.

In other words, just the time between Jesus' first coming and Jesus' second coming. That's the time we're living in just now. The Bible often calls it the last days. And that period is a time of amazing growth for the church.

You are all testimony to that, but it's also a period of suffering. A period of trials, of pain.

[28 : 44] We experience that as individuals. We share in that collectively as a church. But the point is this. If you are a Christian, if you become a Christian, every tick of the clock in that inter-advent period and every scar of suffering that you experience as that clock ticks, where's it taking you?

It's taking you one step closer to home. One step closer to the day when every tear will be wiped away and all your suffering will be gone forever.

And this is where it's good to maybe remember. I was thinking about how to illustrate this. I don't know if this is helpful or not, but I think it's good to think that suffering is a little bit like stitches.

You think about stitches. The pierce of a needle is sharp and sore. But all the time, that needle is pulling a thread that's binding you and Jesus closer and closer together.

And it's reminding us that if you're a Christian or if you become one, your sufferings will bring you closer to Jesus. Some of you have illnesses that are not going to go away.

[30 : 18] Some of you have wounds that are not going to fully heal. And some of you have gaps in your life that are always going to feel empty.

All of these can bring you closer to Jesus now. And all of them are landmarks on the path that is ultimately going to take you home to be with Him forever.

And so Jesus knows so clearly that the sufferings you experience are your sufferings. But all of them are bringing you closer to Him.

And all of that can help us change our thinking about suffering. And this is what I want to say very briefly at the end.

Jesus tells us to take up His cross. Now, here's a really interesting thing. See when you read a passage of the Bible, you need to think about your tone. So here's a really interesting question. So you read that sentence, let a man and let someone take up His cross.

[31 : 22] What should your tone be when you read those words? Should it be, let Him take up His cross? It's like, yes.

Take it up. It's going to be hard. Take it up. Or is it saying, let Him take up His cross? Take it up. So in other words, if you face suffering, don't think, oh, right.

Get in and be it, but think, no, I am going to take that up. And I'm going to stand strong in the truth of what Jesus has done. This is why I'm saying this is a statement about realism and courage.

Because Jesus is emphasizing the fact that because of what He's done for us, because of the reality of Him, of His death and resurrection, of all the promises that He has, when you face suffering, you do not need to capitulate under it.

And you do not need to run away from it at all costs. Instead, you can take it up in an act of courage and strength because of everything that He has done.

[32 : 21] He is giving us a hope that means that in the face of suffering, we do not need to capitulate. We can stand up in His strength. We can take it up.

We can go on looking to Him and trusting in Him. So these verses here, these words here, talking about one of the biggest realities that we face in suffering.

As we face that, we need realism. As we face that, we need courage. Jesus gives you hope. Amen. Let's pray.