

Kneeling at the Cross Beside the Holy Way

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Christian at the Cross

Prayer of Illumination

Holy God, Word made flesh, let us come to your written Word open to being surprised. Silence our agendas; banish our assumptions; melt our apathy. Confound our expectations; clear out the cobwebs; penetrate the corners of our hearts with your Word. We know that you can, we pray that you will, and we wait with great anticipation.

Amen.

Background

Well, we saw last week our fellow pilgrim Christian made it safely to the other side of the Swamp of Despond, with the help of Help. His journey continued, yet still hampered by his cumbersome burden.

So Christian continued on toward the Wicket Gate as he was instructed, and along the way he encountered a man named Mr. Worldly Wise. The two struck up a conversation and Christian shared about his burden and setbacks.

"If you don't mind, I have some advice for you," said Mr. Worldly-Wise. "You've got to get rid of that burden, because as long as you have it, you'll never have peace of mind or be able to enjoy the blessings God has given you."

"That's exactly what I want to do," agreed Christian, "but I just can't get rid of my burden on my own and I don't know of anyone in our country who can get this off my shoulders. But my goal remains—to get this burden off my back."

"Who told you that you had to come this way to unburden yourself?"

"A very honorable man named Evangelist told me so."

Mr. Worldly Wise's face puckered. "Ah, Evangelist. I most certainly disapprove his advice given to you. I can't think of a more dangerous or difficult way to get that burden off your back. It looks and smells like you have mud from the Swamp of Despond on you. If you continue in this way your sorrows will grow even worse—perils, hunger, lions, darkness, dungeons, death and who knows what else awaits you."

"Sir, you don't understand—this burden on my back is greater than all the things you mentioned." Christian shook his head, "No, I've given this great thought, and I don't care what perils meet me along the path—I must be rid of this terrible burden."

"May I suggest another way for you Christian? It's a way filled with safety, friendship, and contentment—with no dangers. It's just a short distance away in the Village of Morality. Ask for a man named Legality—and he can help you with your great burden. He and his son Civility, who is a very courteous boy, will assist you. In fact, you may just want to settle down in that village—the houses are of the highest quality and affordable. Just take the path up that high hill over there."

Well Christian listened to Mr. Worldly Wise and diverged from his current path and approached the hill. But the thing was, the closer he got, the steeper the incline became. In fact, he felt as if the very mountain would fall on him. Christian's burden seemed heavier than it ever had. Fire came flashing from the mountain. When all seemed lost, Evangelist appeared. Christian was relieved, yet ashamed that he departed from Evangelist's directions.

Evangelist listened to Christian's story and then let him know a little more about Mr. Worldly Wise and his motives. He thought only of the things of this world and above all, the cross was a great offense to him.

"Christian you can't be released from this burden you're under by doing good things or proving to all how worthy or admirable you are. You must go to a very different mountain—to the mountain with the cross atop it. There you will find the release you are looking for—but be careful not to turn aside again from your path."

Evangelist encouraged him with a smile and said, "Godspeed Christian."

Well, Christian retraced his steps and made it to the Wicket Gate where Goodwill greeted him there. "A door is open to you Christian that no person can shut." Goodwill walked with Christian, teaching him many things that would help on his journey, what is good and what is good to avoid. Goodwill then stopped and pointed—"do you see that narrow way up ahead Christian?—That's the way you must go. This path was dug out and laid by the patriarchs, the prophets, and Christ himself. There are no turns—it's straight and narrow, and the way is hard. There are many side paths and detours that will lead you astray—ignore them and press straight ahead along the Holy Way."

Now in my dream the highway Christian was to travel was fenced in on both sides with a wall called Salvation. With all his might, with his burden crushing upon him, Christian plodded his way up with great difficulty and exertion. He came upon a small hill, and atop the hill stood the cross he was told of. And a little below at the bottom of the hill was a stone tomb.

As Christian approached the cross, his burden loosened from his shoulders and it fell off his back. The burden tumbled down the mountain until it came to the mouth of the tomb where it fell inside and was never seen again. Christian was free!

He cried and overjoyed proclaimed, "Christ has given me rest by his sorrow and life by his death!"

Three bright and Shining Ones approached and greeted him, "Peace be to you Christian." One declared his sins were forgiven. Another took his ragged clothes and gave him a new set. The third anointed Christian's forehead and gave him a scroll. "Look upon this as you run and deliver it when you reach the Celestial City." And with that, the Shining Ones went on their way.

Let's hear now from today's Scripture readings:

Scripture Readings:

Micah 7:18-20 (NRSV)

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over the transgression
of the remnant of your possession?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in showing clemency.

He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.

You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our ancestors
from the days of old.

1 Peter 2:24-25 (NRSV)

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Kneeling at the Cross Beside the Holy Way

One of my all-time favorite movies is “The Mission.” It has an all-star cast of Jeremy Irons, Robert DeNiro, and Liam Neeson, and an incredible soundtrack by Ennio Morricone.

Robert De Niro’s character, Captain Rodrigo Mendoza, is introduced early in the film as a slave trader. He also murdered his brother out of revenge. The formerly proud and powerful man is utterly broken and despondent. The Jesuit missionary Gabriel, played by Jeremy Irons, challenges the captain to choose his penance, just as he chose his crime. He agrees. Tied to Mendoza is a large netted sack, crammed with swords, armor, and other weapons, which represent Mendoza’s old life.

Let’s see what eventually happens to Mendoza’s burden. To many, this is one of the most moving scenes in cinematic history. Enjoy.

Video Clip from “The Mission”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoJKszzC7L0>

Burdens.

What is your burden?
What’s pressing down upon you?
What do you need release from?

We all have baggage that we carry around with us—some more than others. Childhood wounds. Shame. Disloyalties. Hatred. Discouragement. Exhaustion. Bad habits or addiction that you just can’t shake. Whatever it is, come to the Holy Way with your burdens and your baggage and kneel at the cross with Christ. Find the release you’ve been longing for. Be unshackled from the weights that get between you and God and you and others. Come to Christ.

Let me share something important with you: You can’t do it. You can’t do it with your own blood, sweat, and tears. But the blood, sweat, and tears of Christ on the cross can. In him, you’re free. You can stop trying so hard. You’re released from trying to prove to God, to others, and to yourself what a fine person you are—how worthy you are. You no longer have to prove that you’ve got your act together, that you’ve got it all figured out on your own. You can stop waving for attention—look at me! Look how good I’m doing!

Stop. Rest. Kneel at the cross.

Think about it—anything that you do in your own strength, that isn't your strength, really. God gave you the strength you already have. It's God that you need help from—not you. You see, there's freedom in honesty, admitting that we're spiritually bankrupt. We need to reach a point where we say, *"You must do this God, I can't."*

Now this doesn't mean we stop struggling. Oh no. We struggle not to be saved or accepted or applauded. No, we joyfully struggle because God has begun to save us. The burden is lifted.

But we can get used to our burdens. Maybe even comfortable with them in a strange sort of way. We may even try to get them back from God. They become a part of our identity, our constant companions. We forget what our lives would be like without them. Or we feel resigned to living life with our burdens.

I'm not talking about what the Apostle Paul calls the "thorn in our flesh." God says to us about our thorn in the flesh—"my grace is sufficient for you." We must learn to live with our thorns in the flesh. I'm not talking about that here. But our burdens must go—these are things we must be rid of.

What Christian realized is that it's only God that can relieve the burden of our sins and selfishness. We can't do it ourselves.

One of the most beautiful and freeing and challenging words in all of Scripture is the word "forgiveness."

The Hebrew word for forgiven literally means "lifted off." When we confess our sin to God, He lifts it off our shoulders, rolls it away, and it disappears. When God forgives, he covers our sin and shields us from judgment. When we stop trying to cover-up, then God covers us. When God forgives, he erases our debts and accrued fees, that we could never pay off.

We are credited with Christ's righteousness. God removes our sins from us—as far as the east is from the west. He takes it off our back, tramples upon it, and then heaves it over his back into the depths of the sea.

The prophet Isaiah says that God sweeps away our transgressions like the rising sun burns away the morning mist. When God forgives, he completely washes away the stain of our guilt and cleanses us from our sin—so that we're washed whiter than snow. We may still suffer the consequences of our sin and decisions, but the sin itself has been entirely eradicated. God no longer holds it against us—it's nailed to the cross.

Somehow, somehow the death and resurrection of Jesus frees us from our selfishness and frees us to live the way God designed us to live. Forgiven, we're freed to be forgiving. Forgiven and forgiving. That's a good definition of a Christian.

The good news is that God WANTS to do this for us—God delights in showing mercy. God's majesty is most clearly shown by his grace, not his judgment.

Our burden is lifted...and then we daily take up our cross and follow Christ. This is an empowering weight upon us. Unburdened—we struggle forward.

Will more challenges come? Most definitely. New burdens will be laid upon us, we'll make new mistakes. But God can and will take those too. God will give us release and freedom once again. But it's all God. All grace.

As the Apostle Peter, one forgiven for denying Christ, reminds us what it's all about:

²⁴ "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness."

Amen.

Sermon Art: *Christian at the Cross*, "His burden fell off his back and began to tumble."
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