

THE LITTLE PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE: SIMON OF CYRENE, AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN

Mark 15:21

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Most of us feel little at times. Our names will never appear in headlines. Most of us aren't going to be famous. Our face will never grace the cover of *Time* or *Rolling Stone*. And yet there seems to be something about God that loves little people. Take Simon of Cyrene for instance. Mark tells us that "they compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus." This man who carried the cross of Jesus, who was he? Why was he passing by? Why did the soldier conscript him to carry Christ's cross? Why does Mark name his two sons? And whatever became of Simon?

If we read the Bible carefully we find answers. Simon, as his name implies, was an African Jew from the city of Cyrene. He was married and had at least two sons. I believe he was Black. I say that because a man named Simeon of Cyrene is mentioned in the book of Acts and we're told that his nickname was "Niger" which means "Black" – "Black Simon". We don't usually think of Jews being Black but several years ago a group of Black Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel. All Jews are encouraged to make a pilgrimage some time in their life to Jerusalem; Simon had traveled fifteen hundred miles to the Holy City to celebrate the Passover. As he was coming in from the country to fulfill his religious obligations he unexpectedly met Jesus. Now I want you to consider three lessons Simon's encounter with Jesus teaches us.

First, the story teaches that ^{like Simon} God has destined us for a rendezvous with Christ. Simon didn't know Jesus. He wasn't looking for Jesus. But that morning on his way to Jerusalem he found himself in the middle of a procession. "What is this?" "Don't you know? The Romans are crucifying three criminals." He looked and saw three pathetic figures marching to a hilltop shaped

like a skull. As he watched, one of the three wretches fell beneath the burden of his cross. If Simon had been an hour earlier or later he'd have missed the procession. If he'd missed the procession he'd have missed Christ. And if he'd missed Christ he'd have missed his salvation. But by God's predestinating grace Simon encountered Jesus.

Simon's life was forever changed. As a result of his encounter Simon came to faith in Jesus - maybe not that day. Maybe his faith came about slowly. But he and his family eventually placed their faith in Christ. We know this because Mark includes the names of Simon's sons? Alexander and Rufus were well known Christians in the early church. In Paul's letter to the Romans, we read these words written by Paul: "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother - a mother to me also." Furthermore, the book of Acts lists Sim(e)on of Cyrene as a missionary. It was no accident that led Simon to Jesus. It was the predestinating grace of God that led him and his family to place their faith in Christ.

Each of us has a rendezvous with God. If we miss our rendezvous our lives will be terribly impoverished. If we keep our rendezvous our lives will be transformed and enriched. God has destined us for a rendezvous with the Lord Jesus Christ. I see the hand of God at work in our lives, interweaving circumstances and orchestrating events to bring us to new life and a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Many unexplained things happen to us so we label them accidental or coincidental, but if we could see events from God's perspective, if we had all the facts we'd understand that there are no accidents or coincidences, there's only God's providence.

Secondly, the story teaches that the unwanted crosses we're compelled to carry are meant to enable us to trust in Christ in all things. Come back to the death procession climbing Mt. Calvary. Use your imagination and see Jesus sway, stagger and fall under the weight of the cross. The officer in charge doesn't know what to do. He can't order a Roman soldier to carry the cross. He dares not incur the hostility of Jewish priests by compelling a Palestinian Jew to carry the cross. But just then

the Roman commander spots Simon. Simon stood out because he was deep ebony black. Nobody would protest if he compelled a black man to carry a cross. "Pick up that cross." Simon either had to obey or end up on a cross. So, against his will, Simon was compelled to carry the cross.

Some of us, like Simon, bear crosses not of our own choosing - perhaps a job, a forced retirement, or a terrible illness. I think of the Detrich family whose life was forever changed when their second daughter was born with Cystic Fibrosis. Before her birth Don Detrich's life had been easy. After the diagnosis of Cystic Fibrosis his time was eaten up with daily treatments for his daughter. His family savings melted away. Life became hard. Worn out with worry, fear and sleepless nights Don nearly fell apart emotionally. Cystic Fibrosis was an unwanted cross his family was compelled to bear.

He wished he could accept his wife's simple faith. Business success and the materialism of the eighties had left him with almost no faith. Cystic Fibrosis completely destroyed what faith he had left. But one night he tucked his little girl into bed and kissed her goodnight. He noticed she was way over on one side of her single bed. "Why are you laying on the edge? You could fall off." She answered cheerfully, "I have to leave room for Jesus." Don writes, "My throat felt dry. My little girl had *not* thought her way to faith. She had *not* rationalized it, excused it, or struggled through it. She had simply accepted it as a gift. She believed Jesus was by her side to help her through whatever fears and problems she faced." And so Don Detrich chose to accept the gift of faith. The unwanted cross he was compelled to carry led him to renewed faith in Christ. God can transform our unwanted crosses and turn them into instruments of new life and hope.

Third, the story teaches us that God calls us to strengthen the fallen body of Christ. Simon of Cyrene looked down on the fallen body of Christ. Earlier, Jesus had been crowned with thorns. The fists of Roman soldiers had beaten him. A whip with nine lashes had beaten him. Into each lash were set pellets of lead, jagged pieces of bone, and shards of glass. Jesus' back was ripped to

shreds. The rough cross was then laid on his back. Jesus took a few steps and fell beneath its weight. His broken and bleeding body could take the burden no more.

The Church is the body of Christ. The Body of Christ lies broken around the world. In the Sudan and Pakistan the church lies bleeding because of persecution. Scandal, division and materialism weaken the Body of Christ in America. "This world sees her oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." The Church, the Body of Christ suffers. The Body of Christ will continue to suffer until Christ's little people do our part and recognize the wonderful gifts God has given each one of us for the building up of the church. Stop telling yourself, "I'm just a little person. I can't do anything for Christ." You can and must use your gifts to strengthen the body of Christ.

I think of a note from little, ten-year old, April Hansen in the Lamplighter. April organized the CF walk this spring. "Dear Friends" she writes. "Thank you for all your contributions. This year has really been a great year for us. We have raised over \$1,400. About \$500 was from our church family. All your contributions really help find a cure for cystic fibrosis. Thanks for your support." A little ten-year old girl shows us how God wants us to use the gifts God has given us to strengthen the broken body of Christ. There's a job for everyone. Are you using your gifts to strengthen the fallen Body of Christ?

Simon of Cyrene teaches us at least three lessons. First, God has destined us for a rendezvous with Christ. Be sure to keep it. Secondly, God can transform into a source of life, joy and hope the unwanted cross we're compelled to carry. Thirdly, God calls each one of us to strengthen and build up the fallen body of Christ.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, whose most dear Son, as He walked the way of the Cross, accepted the service of Simon of Cyrene to carry his physical burden for him: grant us each the grace gladly to bear one another's burdens, for the love of him who said, "As you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me," your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.