

“In the Cross of Christ I Glory”

In the name of Jesus the Christ, dear friends: I thought today would be a good time for an old army story. It happened back when I was stationed in California. My Lieutenants and I took some soldiers up into the Sierra Nevada Mountains for a five-day hike in the high country. Our goal was to provide some leadership and survival training in a very physically challenging environment – and, I have to admit, we wanted to have a little fun too. We broke the soldiers into twelve-man groups, with one of us officers in charge of each of them. We started at different places, with the plan to converge at a single point on the last day. The routes we’d chosen were all about 90 miles long – which, at high altitude and with a heavy rucksack meant that if nothing else, we would achieve at least the “physically challenging” part of the goal.

I subdivided my group of twelve into three-man teams. This was mostly for safety reasons; that way if someone got seriously hurt, one could stay and the other could go get help. Each three-man team had a map and compass, so it could operate independently of the group. So, in the morning, I’d meet with the teams, tell them the day’s destination – that is, where we’d set up camp that night, give them certain tasks that they were to accomplish on the trail during the day, and then leave them pretty much alone to get it all done.

One morning, the third day out, we were camped in a valley at about 7,500ft elevation. The hike that day was about nineteen miles – but it took us over a pass of about 12,500ft, and that was about five miles from where we were starting. So, think of it this way: over the first five miles we also had to go up a mile. Did I tell you that part of the reason we went was to have fun? We didn’t have much of it that morning.

My three-man team started out early, ahead of the other teams. It was hard going, but we paced ourselves well, took breaks as required, and drank lots of water – and we needed to because we were sweating gallons of it. And something you need to understand about hiking in the high country, there are times when the trail is not marked very well. It’s easy enough when you’re walking through the forests or an alpine meadow and there’s a nice path, but once you’re above the timberline, around 9,000ft, a lot of the trail is across solid or broken rock. Then there is no trail as such; instead, there will be little stacks of flat stones called “cairns” every fifty yards or so to mark the way – and sometimes it’s pretty hard to tell them from all the other rocks lying around. Well, anyway, after having gone about three miles, we came to this place where the trail seemed to fork. One way led up toward what appeared to be a relatively low pass through the mountain ridge we had to get over that day. The other led steeply down to avoid a rock slide about half a mile wide, and then it went up again steeply toward what appeared to be a sheer cliff face rising about 2,000ft straight up. Well, let me tell you, that second way didn’t look very inviting. The last thing you want to do when you’ve been gasping for breath in the thin air struggling to climb upward is to head back down again, especially when you know you’ve still got a long way to climb. And that wall at the other side didn’t look very attractive either. The first option looked so much easier and better.

Fortunately, we had the presence of mind to consult our map – which indicated that the path *downward* was indeed the correct route. Appearances can be deceiving in the mountains because you can never see everything from where you’re standing. The way that looked so easy only led up to high basin, a shallow lake, and a dead end. There was no pass up there. The less appealing way led to the true pass, which was concealed from where we were

standing. So, gritting our teeth (and cursing the idiot whose idea this whole adventure was) we pushed on.

We had skirted across the bottom of the rockslide and were straining laboriously upward again when we heard shouting from behind us. The second team had arrived at the fork and they were yelling at us to say that we'd gone the wrong way. Naturally, they thought it was quite funny that their leader (me) had taken a wrong turn, and were making quite a joke of it. Now, I could have ordered them to go the way we did – but this was to be a learning experience after all. So I checked the map, estimated that their mistake would take them about six miles out of the way (three up to the dead-end basin and three back down to where they were standing). I saw that there was no way they could get lost: there wasn't any other way they could go. So I hollered back, "Follow me, or you'll be sorry!" I won't repeat what they said in reply. Suffice it to say that they were convinced that they were right and they were looking forward to rubbing it in when, as they were so certain, I would later be forced to admit it. But hey, I gave them fair warning; so we kept going. The other two teams were close together behind the team that went astray. They had witnessed the exchange; but when they got to the fork, they also took the "easy way". They wanted to be part of this joke on the "old man" too. And I suppose that in a way they were. They just chose the wrong side of it.

Well, my team got to the top of the pass shortly before noon. We had a nice lunch break, and then had a relatively leisurely walk down the remaining fourteen miles to the designated campsite. It's a whole lot easier going downhill. We'd been there for at least four hours, having had time for a swim in the icy mountain stream and a nice supper when, about an hour after dark, the other nine came dragging themselves in. They were really hurting. You'll be happy to know that I resisted the temptation to say, "I told you so"; but the next morning, before we started out again, I did tell them, "As soldiers, you fellows ought to know that you're supposed to trust and follow the leader."

And of course, the same is true for those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ who "glory in his cross". But, you know, following our Leader a lot easier said than done, isn't it? This is especially true now, in the season of Lent, as we make it a point to retrace our Lord's steady march to Jerusalem. Like the disciples, we have no question about *who* he is. With Peter and the disciples we all confess that he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. We know that there is no other way to go and no one else to whom to turn because he alone has the words of life. But when he says, "Come on. I'm going to suffer many things. I'm going to be rejected by those in authority, and I'm going to be killed, and after three days rise again—so take up your cross and follow me" – when he says *that*, we start looking for the easier path. Like those soldiers who didn't want to head downward, or St. Peter who didn't like the path Jesus was describing, we want to argue about it. "No Lord, that can't be right. You're making a big mistake here. You're leading me in the wrong direction."

And let me be clear about this: we all have a basic understanding of what's good and what's bad. *Good* includes things like health, success, financial security, happiness, stability, good family relationships; and certain intangibles like respect, honor, and influence. These are the things to strive for. *Bad* includes things like suffering, sickness, sadness, loneliness, contention, hunger, poverty, failure, grief; and intangibles like humiliation, shame, and disgrace. These are the things to be avoided. We go so far as to describe times when we face these sorts of conditions as "hell on earth". And we also have a basic understanding of the way we think things are supposed to go – certain unwritten rules that make life fair. God is supposed to reward those who do well with good things and punish those who do wrong with bad things. And, of course, bad things are not supposed to happen to good people. And yes, as Christians

we understand that no one is good in an absolute sense; but since we are following Jesus, then everything should work out well. In fact, we rather expect that God should reward us for being faithful. We expect he should give us success, happiness, wealth, good health, and so on. The path should always lead upward to ever increasing glory in life, in family, in business, and in the church.

But that is exactly the opposite of what Jesus is telling us in today's Gospel. He says to follow me downward to suffering. Follow me into self-denial, humiliation, and self-sacrifice. Follow me to where you will be hated for speaking the truth. Follow me in setting aside your personal desires and ambitions, and give yourself in service to others. Follow me in surrendering your rights, your honor, your freedom, your reputation, and your property and possessions, and use them all to put others before you – especially those you deem least worthy of your sacrifices. Take up your cross and follow me.

And we naturally recoil at this. It doesn't seem right. Surely, we think, that can't be the path that leads to God or to godliness. Why, God is our great benefactor. He loves us and wants us to be happy all the time. He never wants us to experience any unpleasantness. And when it happens we complain, "Lord, just where do you think you're leading me?" But just so that we know how emphatic Jesus is about it, when Peter tries to set him straight according to our way of thinking, Jesus rebukes him before the group of disciples and says, "Get behind me Satan." This is not an innocent mistake, or a minor disagreement in points of view; this is the difference between the Word and plan of God and the lies and schemes of the devil. It's the difference between the path that leads to heaven or hell.

And the reason, I think, that we have such a hard time with it is that we really do not understand what the cross of Christ is all about. Sure, we believe and understand that the Lord suffered and died for our sins to pay the penalty we deserved. And we're grateful for that. But now that that sin thing has been taken care of we imagine that all we really need is for him to point us in the right direction, help us out a little along the way—maybe offering a few hints now and then, and for him to stay close at hand to answer our prayers, say, if we do run into any trouble, like if someone gets sick or something.

And right there is where we make the wrong turn. We are led astray by the faulty assumption that "now I'm all better, so lead on, Jesus, and I'll follow you to the heights of glory." What we want to forget is that even though we are forgiven, we still very much have the same old problems with sin. We are not "all better." But we are loath to keep heading downward to look at our problems and needs – they make us feel bad about ourselves and ashamed. So much better to see how far we've come: "See how good I am now? I'm almost to the summit!" We want to put the cross behind us and forget that our Leader is always, first and foremost, our *Savior*. We want to forget that as long as we journey here below we still always need him to keep being our Savior from sin – and the proof of it is how easily we slip back into Satan's agenda of reaching for glory and honor instead wanting to follow to the cross.

But it is downward to the cross that the trail always must lead – because it's only at the cross that Jesus can change us. He brings us low so that he can raise us up. Now, this happens here weekly as we are confronted by our sin in God's law and then we hear the message of forgiveness in the Gospel. By the Law the sin in us is killed, and the through the Gospel the Spirit breathes life and faith into the new person. We understand that. But very often this routine is like pounding on cold steel: it doesn't make much of a dent. No, when the blacksmith wants to shape a piece of steel, first he heats it in a very hot fire to make it more malleable, then he pounds it with the hammer to form it as he wills. So it is with us: when the

Lord really wants to shape us, he puts us in a fiery trial of some kind – he brings us low and gives us a cross to bear. Then we're a lot more pliant and responsive to the blows of his hammer. And then too the love of Christ quenches the heat and makes us firm – just like the bath of water the smith uses to cool the hot metal.

So we see that the fiery trials are not only to be expected, we should actually look forward to them. That's what Paul means in today's Epistle when he says, "... we rejoice in our sufferings." It's because we know that through them the Lord is changing us to be more like him in every way. First, Paul says, it allows him to instill in us perseverance – that's the faith and strength to hold fast when the going gets tough. Perseverance is a key component of the sort of love he wants us to have – the love that always gives and never fails. Also, perseverance keeps us directed toward the cross. We waste a lot of time and suffer more disappointment than we really need to because we don't persevere. Like the soldiers in the story I told: they suffered more than they really had to because they tried to avoid the hardship; but in the end that's the way they had to go anyway. Perseverance helps us to see that by trying to avoid the cross, we only make things worse for ourselves. Better to humble ourselves under God's hand and head straight for it to begin with.

From perseverance the Lord is able to build character in us – that's the positive gain made by a difficult experience. Through the Gospel, what we think of as bad can change our very nature and person for the better. With his Spirit at work, we don't have to become bitter or angry in times of trouble; instead, for example, a profound sorrow can make us become more kind and compassionate. After all, who best can console, comfort, and give encouragement to someone who needs it? Who is most motivated to do it? It's the person who has been there and suffered the same thing.

Finally, from character the Lord instills hope. This is the unfailing hope that is certain of the final wondrous outcome regardless of what is presently seen or felt. It's the confidence that no matter how hard the way, or how deep you must descend, the Lord himself is going to lift you through the pass that's currently hidden from view and get you safely to the other side.

So, in all these things, we see that the Lord has a great and loving purpose in calling us to take our crosses and follow him. May we then, repenting of the reluctance that makes us resist and try to avoid the cross he appoints, and receiving his forgiveness, obey his command to "get behind" him and truly glory in the cross of Christ, because it's only from there that we can follow – follow him to the cross, through death, to everlasting life. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!