The Popular Cross

SCRIPTURE

"Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." — Matthew 16:24 (KJV)

DEVOTIONAL

If you drive through the South—or really anywhere in modern society—you will quickly notice something: the cross is everywhere. People wear crosses around their necks and in their ears. They print them on their clothing, stick them on their cars, build giant ones next to the highway, and even tattoo them onto their bodies. The cross is a popular symbol. People really like the idea of the cross, as long as someone else is on it.

We love the cross when it represents Jesus dying for our sins, giving us a free ticket to heaven, and forgiving our mistakes. But when Jesus turns around and says, "Now take up your cross and follow me," our enthusiasm often vanishes. We want the benefits of Christ's sacrifice without the fellowship of His suffering.

A cross is not an aesthetic piece of jewelry; it is an instrument of death. To bear your cross means to die to your own self-will, your pride, your desire for revenge, and your worldly ambitions. It means submitting entirely to the will of the Father, even when it is agonizingly painful. As we prepare to meet a new day, we must ask ourselves a vital question: Do we just admire the cross of Jesus from afar off or are we willing to embrace the cross for our own lives?

PRAYER

Lord, forgive me for treating the cross as just a comforting symbol while refusing to die to my own selfishness. Give me the courage to take up my cross today. Help me to follow You not just to the mountaintop of blessing, but all the way to Calvary. Amen.

FURTHER STUDY / ADDITIONAL BIBLE READING

- Luke 9:23–24
- Galatians 6:14
- Philippians 2:5–8
- John 13:1–17
- Matthew 26:20–25

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between admiring the cross and bearing it?

2. Read Luke 9:23–24. How does this passage deepen today's understanding of God's work in our lives?

3. What would it look like for you to yield a personal preference for the good of another?

The Sop of Mercy

SCRIPTURE

"And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon... He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night." — John 13:26, 30 (KJV)

DEVOTIONAL

In the upper room, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, including the feet of the man He knew was about to sell Him out for thirty pieces of silver. As they ate, Jesus revealed that one of them would betray Him. To identify the betrayer, Jesus dipped a piece of bread (a sop) and handed it to Judas.

In our modern context, the significance of this act is often lost on us. In the ancient Middle East, the host of a feast dipping the sop and giving it to someone was a gesture of supreme affection. It was an honor reserved for a highly favored guest. Even in the very moment Judas was plotting His murder, Jesus was extending one final, heartbreaking act of love and mercy to His betrayer.

Tragically, Judas took the bread, but he completely rejected the love of Christ that came with it. He hardened his heart, stood up, and walked out into the darkness to betray the Son of God. The Bible adds a chilling detail: "And it was night". It was not just physically dark; it was the darkest moment in the history of humanity. The creature was about to murder their Creator.

How often do we act like Judas? We sit in the church, we partake of the communion bread, or on a personal note we read the Word of God (the bread of life), but we reject the life that comes with it. Do not just take the bread; let the self-sacrificing love and life of the Savior melt your heart today.

PRAYER

Jesus, Your mercy absolutely breaks me. You offered the highest honor to the man who was about to kill You. I have betrayed You with my own selfish choices. Thank You for extending mercy to me even when I have failed You. Soften my heart and teach me to receive Your love and reflect it to others. Amen.

FURTHER STUDY / ADDITIONAL BIBLE READING

- John 13:1–17
- Matthew 26:20–25
- Romans 5:6–8
- Luke 9:23–24
- Galatians 6:14

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Jesus' kindness to Judas reveal about His love?

2. Consider John 13:1–17. What does this passage add to the main lesson of today's devotional?

3. What would it look like for you to extend undeserved kindness without excusing wrongdoing?

A Different Kind of Glory

SCRIPTURE

"Therefore, when he was gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him." — John 13:31 (KJV)

DEVOTIONAL

Have you ever noticed the bizarre timing of Jesus' words in John 13? Judas has just walked out the door to finalize the ultimate betrayal. Jesus knows that in a matter of hours, He will be arrested, mocked, beaten to a pulp, spat upon, and nailed to the cross. He will die the death of a cursed criminal.

Yet, the moment Judas leaves to set this horrific chain of events into motion, Jesus declares: "Now is the Son of man glorified".

This statement completely contradicts our human understanding. The world's idea of glory is winning. To the world, glory looks like standing on a podium with a gold medal, accumulating massive wealth, crushing your enemies, or gaining millions of followers on social media. In the world, the victor gets the glory.

But the Kingdom of Heaven operates on an entirely different standard. In God's eyes, the ultimate manifestation of glory is self-sacrificing love. Jesus was glorified not by calling down fire to destroy His enemies, but by surrendering His will and submitting to the cross in order to save his enemies.

The cross is the glory of God. If we want to share in Christ's glory, we must completely redefine what success looks like in our lives. True Christian glory is found when you choose to suffer patiently under injustice, when you forgive the person who betrayed you, and when you lay down your rights out of love for another.

PRAYER

Father, my natural mind is so infected by the world's definition of glory. I want to win, I want to be recognized, and I want to be vindicated. Change my heart. Show me the breathtaking glory of the cross, and teach me the beauty of self-sacrificing love. Amen.

FURTHER STUDY / ADDITIONAL BIBLE READING

- John 12:23–28
- Philippians 2:5–11
- 1 Peter 2:21–23
- John 13:1–17
- Matthew 26:20–25

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the cross redefine glory and success?

2. How does John 12:23–28 help clarify the spiritual principle in today's reading?

3. What would it look like for you to respond to an unjust criticism without seeking revenge?

Sleeping Through the Preparation

SCRIPTURE

"And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation. ... And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow," — Luke 22:40, 45 (KJV)

DEVOTIONAL

As the darkness deepened, Jesus took Peter, James, and John into the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew the greatest test in human history was about to break upon them. He gave them a clear, urgent command: "Pray that ye enter not into temptation". Jesus knew they needed spiritual strength to endure what was coming. But instead of preparing, the disciples fell asleep. While Jesus was sweating drops of blood, agonizing over the fate of the world, His closest friends were asleep. They squandered their time of preparation.

These sleeping disciples represent the modern church, the ten virgins that fall asleep while awaiting the coming of the bridegroom. Jesus is urging us to pray, to study, and to allow the Holy Spirit to purify our characters so we can stand in that time of crisis.

Today, the vast majority of Christians are spiritually asleep. We are distracted by entertainment, consumed by the pursuit of wealth, and lulled into a comfortable, lukewarm religion. A religion that relies on creeds, ceremonies or emotionalism will never be enough. We need the true pure religion of Christ that transforms the heart and mind of its receiver and is brought into daily life.

We can't put off preparing for a crisis until it comes. The time to prepare for it is before it happens. When the mob arrived in Gethsemane, the time of preparation was over for the disciples and in the end each one abandoned their Savior.

The hour is late. The world is getting darker by the minute. Don't be satisfied with an external religion. It will not be enough. Allow the Lord Jesus Christ to come in and deal with every deeply rooted fault of character. Surrender every hidden sin. In the end our love for God and our love for our fellow man will reveal whether Christ has truly prepared our hearts for the test.

PRAYER

Lord, I confess that I am often spiritually drowsy. I spend hours on trivial distractions while neglecting my time with You. Wake me up from my Laodicean slumber. Give me an urgency to pray and prepare my heart for the great trials ahead by gaining victory in the little trials of life today. Amen.

FURTHER STUDY / ADDITIONAL BIBLE READING

- Matthew 26:36–46
- Luke 21:34–36
- 1 Peter 5:8–9
- John 12:23–28
- Philippians 2:5–11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did the disciples' failure to pray leave them unprepared?

2. Read Matthew 26:36–46. What connection do you see between this passage and today's Scripture?

3. What would it look like for you to set aside time to pray before a predictable temptation?

Ready for a Fight but Afraid of a Cross

SCRIPTURE

"Then Simon Peter having a sword drew it, and smote the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. ... Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" — John 18:10-11 (KJV)

DEVOTIONAL

The sleeping disciples awoke. The angry mob arrived to arrest Jesus and Peter's reaction was to fight. He sprang into action. He drew a sword, swung it, and chopped off the ear of the high priest's servant.

The disciples were totally unprepared to suffer, but they were perfectly ready to fight. Jesus on the other hand had already surrendered. They were willing to shed someone else's blood to defend the Messiah but they were unwilling to shed their own.

Jesus immediately rebuked Peter, touched the man's ear, and healed him. He demonstrated that His kingdom would not be defended by carnal violence, but by patient, self-sacrificing surrender. And the moment the disciples realized Jesus was not going to fight back, what did they do? They all forsook Him and fled. They wanted a conqueror, not a cross.

We see this exact same spirit in the church today. Many Christians love a good theological "sword fight." We love to debate on social media, attack other denominations, and aggressively defend our doctrines. We think our combativeness is proof of our faithfulness. But the moment we are called to actually suffer a wrong patiently, to bear a cross, or to love our enemies, we flee. Put away your carnal sword today. It cannot accomplish the righteousness of God.

PRAYER

Dear Father, forgive me for my combative spirit. I am so quick to draw my 'sword' to fight for the truth. Teach me that Your Kingdom is advanced through meekness and love, not aggression. Help me to fully embrace the cross. Amen.

FURTHER STUDY / ADDITIONAL BIBLE READING

- Luke 22:49–51
- John 18:36
- Romans 12:17–21
- Matthew 26:36–46
- Luke 21:34–36

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is readiness to fight different from readiness to suffer with Christ?

2. What encouragement or instruction does Luke 22:49–51 offer in light of today's devotional?

3. What would it look like for you to put aside a combative response and seek peace?

The Danger of "We Are Able"

SCRIPTURE

"But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able." — Matthew 20:22 (KJV)

DEVOTIONAL

Why did the disciples fail the test so miserably? Why did they sleep when they should have prayed, and run away when they should have stood with Christ? The answer lies in their false self-confidence.

Earlier in Christ's ministry, James and John arrogantly asked to sit at His right and left hand in glory. They wanted the highest positions of power. When Jesus warned them about the bitter cup of suffering they would have to drink, they confidently replied, "We are able".

Likewise, Peter boldly declared that even if everyone else abandoned Jesus, he would gladly die with Him. They possessed a tremendous amount of self-confidence. They genuinely believed their own willpower, their own courage, and their own love for Jesus would be enough to carry them through the crisis. But they vastly underestimated the weakness of their own flesh. When the terrifying reality of the cross finally stood before them, their self-confidence evaporated into thin air, and they fled in terror.

There is a profound warning here for us. As we anticipate the final test over the mark of the beast and the commandments of God, many of us confidently boast, "I will never bow down! I will stand for the truth!" Even now we self-confidently boast about our ability to discern between truth and error. But if you are trusting in your own abilities and are not completely surrendered to Christ, you will fail. Human strength alone cannot withstand the deceptions of Satan that he lays at our feet. We may be free from one error but he has set a dozen more along our path. Our only hope is complete, broken dependence on the strength of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, break my dangerous self-confidence. I confess that in my own flesh, I am weak, cowardly, and prone to error. I cannot pass the test on my own. I place my complete trust in Your power to hold me up. Amen.

FURTHER STUDY / ADDITIONAL BIBLE READING

- Matthew 26:31–35
- 1 Corinthians 10:12–13
- 2 Corinthians 12:9–10
- Luke 22:49–51
- John 18:36

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did the disciples underestimate when they said they were able?

2. How does Matthew 26:31–35 support or expand the lesson we have considered today?

3. What would it look like for you to acknowledge one weakness and depend on Christ in prayer?

Sabbath Summary & Reflection

SCRIPTURE

"Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." — 1 Corinthians 10:12 (KJV)

SABBATH REFLECTION

This week, we have been looking at the closing scenes leading up to the cross. We realized that we must embrace the agonizing reality of bearing our own cross, not just admiring Christ's. We saw Jesus extend the sop of mercy to His betrayer, demonstrating that true glory is self-sacrificing love. We confronted the tragic reality of sleeping through our time of preparation, and we were warned against trading the cross for a carnal sword. Finally, we recognized that self-confidence—boasting "We are able"—is the fastest path to spiritual failure.

On this Sabbath, we are reminded that passing the final test is not about memorizing a sequence of prophetic events. It is about character. • Reflect: Have you been "sleeping" spiritually lately? Have you been trusting in your own ability to obey God rather than relying on His grace? • Evaluate: When faced with opposition this week, did you draw a "sword" to fight back, or did you exhibit the patient, self-sacrificing love of Jesus? • The Invitation: As you enter a new week, the call is to Pray and Prepare. The crisis is coming, but if you abide in Him today, He will abide in you tomorrow.

Practical Application: Next week, dedicate an intentional, set time each day specifically to pray that you "enter not into temptation." Ask God to expose any areas of false self-confidence in your life. Stop fighting carnal battles, and start preparing your heart for the cross.

PRAYER

Dear Father, I am resting in your work on this Sabbath day. I know that a great test is coming to this world. I lay down my pride and my swords. Cover me with Your righteousness, fill me with Your Spirit, and give me the grace to stand faithful to You, no matter the cost. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FURTHER STUDY / ADDITIONAL BIBLE READING

- Galatians 2:20
- Hebrews 12:1–3
- 1 Peter 4:12–16
- Matthew 26:31–35
- 1 Corinthians 10:12–13

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of this week's encounters with the cross most challenges your understanding of discipleship?

2. How does Galatians 2:20 bring together the spiritual lessons of this week?

3. What would it look like for you to make prayer and surrender part of your preparation for the coming week?