

Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jehucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malkijah heard what Jeremiah was telling all the people when he said, ² “This is what the LORD says: ‘Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live.’ ³ And this is what the LORD says: ‘This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’ ”

⁴ Then the officials said to the king, “This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin.”

⁵ “He is in your hands,” King Zedekiah answered. “The king can do nothing to oppose you.”

⁶ So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king’s son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.

⁷ But Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, ⁸ Ebed-Melech went out of the palace and said to him, ⁹ “My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city.”

¹⁰ Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Cushite, “Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.”

¹¹ So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern. ¹² Ebed-Melech the Cushite said to Jeremiah, “Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes.” Jeremiah did so, ¹³ and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard. (NIV84)

Theme: Christianity Comes with a Cross

1. Carry your Cross
2. Look to Christ’s Cross Alone

When I was growing up I was a paper boy. Although it sounds strange to today’s ears, paper companies back then actually made young boys and girls—perhaps 4th, 5th, or 6th graders knock on people’s doors and ask for their payment.

To say the least, I dreaded this part of my job. A couple times a month I got on my bike and knocked on people’s doors. Most people paid, but some people were not home. And at least a few people a month claimed they didn’t have the money or they simply refused to pay—every once in a while they would get hostile and perhaps slam the door in your face. But as much as I didn’t like collecting money, I did it because it came with the territory and if I didn’t, then I didn’t get paid. Part of being a paperboy was collecting money for your papers. Part of being a Christian is suffering for your faith. We all must carry a cross one way or another. It comes with the territory of being a Christian. So willingly carry our crosses and we look to Christ Cross to deliverance.

In the days leading up to our text Jeremiah found himself in a dungeon. During this time the King of Judah, Zedekiah, went to talk to Jeremiah. The prophet told the king that the Babylonians were going to destroy his city. Then Jeremiah convinced the king to release him from the dungeon. So Jeremiah was put in the courtyard of one of the guards. In the courtyard Jeremiah was able to preach to people who walked by.

The Lord’s message through Jeremiah was similar to what got him through in the dungeon early. **Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live... This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.** Jeremiah warned everyone around him that Babylon was going to destroy Jerusalem. And if they wanted to live, they should desert the town and flee toward the enemy. The leaders of Jerusalem didn’t take kindly to this message. They accused him of treason. And they threw him into a cistern, a bell-

shaped hole in the ground used to hold water. Except it was during a famine and there was no water in the cistern. It was full of mud—which Jeremiah sunk down into. The plan was to feed Jeremiah some bread until they ran out. Then stuck in the mud, he would slowly die as he starved to death.

Jeremiah knew that what he preached wasn't going to be well received. It was going to make the Jews angry. He knew he might be thrown in jail, beaten, or even killed, because of his words. But he didn't care. He willingly put his life on the line because he wanted to spread the truth. He gave up his wants and desires, for God's wants and desires. He would have rather died than sin against God by not preaching his Word.

What about us? We are often afraid to tell someone the truth. We are afraid of what they will think of us. We might get laughed at. We may lose some friends, family members may be offended, or possibly even get fired from our jobs. Just try telling the people of the world that it is a sin to kill unborn babies, or to sleep with someone outside of marriage, or that homosexuality deserves eternal damnation. Try telling them that there is an absolute truth which is found only in the Bible. See what their reaction is. Don't expect a parade. Expect a cross. Expect some pushback—expect to suffer. People will act as if they are offended. And you will be persecuted simply because you spoke the truth.

Or try telling someone about Christ and his cross. Tell them that Jesus is both true God and true man. That he was born of a virgin. Yet he never did anything wrong. Try telling them that Jesus willingly died on the cross so he could remove the guilt of all our sins. That he had to suffer through hell because he became guilty of everything that we have done wrong. See what they say when you tell them that Christ rose from the dead three days after he died. And that now he is living in heaven where he rules over all things. Try telling them that there is only one true religion and only the followers of Christ will have eternal life.

Some might believe you, but many won't. It's offensive to their reason. So they'll laugh at you for being so gullible. They will say you believe in a fairy tale. But you don't want to suffer. You don't want people to look down on you. So you keep your mouth shut and pray that people don't find out you're a Christian. You really begin to

question if it's worth it to be a Christian. That your life would be so much easier and much more fun if you didn't worry about Christ and his Word.

When we are tempted like this, we listen to Jesus' in our gospel, **What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?**

The answer is obvious—it isn't good. If you wanted to, you could avoid all persecution by denouncing your faith. You could reject Christ and his teachings. You would be more popular. You wouldn't have to worry about people mocking you, or severing a relationship with you. Your temporary life would be great. But your eternal life would be a disaster. For if you chose the world over Christ, then you give up your soul. And you could have a good time for awhile, but eternity will be spent with the devil.

Jesus continues, **whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.** Losing your life, means that you give up the things you love life if you need to for the sake of Christ. It means that we get rid of everything that is contrary to God's word and detrimental to your faith. It is putting aside the things of the world for Christ. If we have to give up friends, family, fame, or fortune for the sake of Christ, we willingly do it. We would rather suffer all kinds of atrocities at the hands of men, then fall into the hands of the devil. We'd rather live as a homeless, moneyless, beggar and have eternal life, then have all the blessings of the earth but lose everything when we die.

Jesus also said **If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** As Christians we all have crosses. A Christian's cross is anything he suffers through on account of his faith. The cross comes when we have to deny ourselves. That is, to deny ourselves our sinful wants and desires. Our sinful nature wants popularity, happiness, and so on. It wants to satisfy that lust, to go after that money, it wants to party until you can't drink anymore. At times those wants and desires are against God's Word. So at times we must deny ourselves what we want, and follow Christ. That is contrary to what the world tells us to do. They tell us to do what we want when we want—to go ahead and satisfy those carnal cravings, to scratch our ears with whatever soothes them.

Contrary to what the world does, the Christian willingly carries his cross. He put's aside his wants and desires for Christ's. At times that cross is heavy, too heavy to bear on our own. So we turn to Christ and his cross.

When we find ourselves bearing heavy crosses we can find comfort in those who bore crosses before us. Take Jeremiah for example. He knew that he might be beaten, imprisoned, or even killed for telling the people the truth. Yet he wasn't afraid and preached God's Word. And it got him thrown into a cistern. It looked like he might die. But God watched out for Jeremiah by the way of a foreigner, named Ebed-Melech. Ebed-Melech knew that the way Jeremiah was treated was wrong, so he went to the king. It was a pretty bold thing to tell the king that what he did was evil—he was going to kill a prophet of God. He could have been killed himself—perhaps thrown into the cistern with Jeremiah. But God led the Zedekiah to realize that what he did was wrong. The King allowed Ebed-Melech to save Jeremiah from the cistern.

Although Jeremiah suffered for his faith, God was still watching over him. And he watched over Ebed-Melech. He took care of both of them. And he promises to take care of you. God is always watching over you. And he will guard and protect you. You have nothing to fear or worry about. So you carry your cross willingly. Just as he did with Jeremiah and Ebed-Melech he will take care of those who follow him.

But what if it seems as if God isn't taking care of you? Many of God's children have died because of what they believe. Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned to death for preaching Christ. Paul was beaten, flogged, and imprisoned many times because he shared God's Word. Eventually, he too was put to death. In fact almost all the Apostles suffered because they were Christians. Only the Apostle John escaped being put to death for his faith. But even he was exiled to an island because of Jesus. The list is long and plentiful of those who have suffered and died for being Christians. Still today, Christians in other countries are put to death simply because of who they believe in. Now, I'm guessing that no one here has ever died because of their faith. I have never felt physically threatened because I'm a Christian. Maybe some of you had. But, by and large—in this wonderful country

at this time, there isn't much physical violence toward Christians. And it is somewhat rare for Americans today so suffer monetarily—through the loss of a job, fines, imprisonment, and the like, simply because they follow Christ. Emotional loss? Sure. We are looked down upon. Mocked, laughed at, and ridiculed. Family members might disown us. Close friends may no longer want to talk to us. Neighbors may not invite us over for anything. They simply don't want anything to do with those who follow what the Bible says.

And at times the stress of that cross is too much. You love your family. The last thing you want to sever relationships with your loved ones. You avoid being a problem at work at all costs. And the last thing you want is to suffer at work. Or worse yet, lose your job. You are getting pressured by other to go along with their sinful ways. Others may mock and ridicule your for what you believe in. And the cross is becoming too much to bear. And you are getting crushed from under it.

So what do we do when the cross is too heavy to bear? Nothing—there is nothing we can do. That's the beauty of the cross. The crosses we bear lead us to realize how weak and fragile we really are. It forces us to look away from our own power and might to get rid of our problems. So we look elsewhere for help. And as Christians we realize that only Christ is able to help us. So we turn to Christ and his cross. Christ denied his wants and desires for us as he willingly suffered and died on his cross. And it was through his cross that he made us pure and holy in God's sight.

Therefore we rejoice in the cross. Although it is painful, we still a benefit to us. Even though the things we suffer through as Christians are not pleasant we praise God when he gives us the opportunity to suffer for him. Because it strengthens our faith as we turn to him. So although we don't look to suffer for the faith, we don't run away from it either. Through it, God strengthens our faith. If we have to take up a cross for being a Christian, so be it. We are glad to carry it. For Christ carried his cross for us. And no matter what happens—even if our crosses are too heavy, we simply have to look up to Christ's cross and know that everything is going to be ok.

Like collecting payments as a paperboy, carrying a cross as a Christian comes with the territory. It may not be pleasant, but it is necessary. In

fact, we rejoice in carrying a cross for Christ. For in the end it is to our benefit. When our crosses are too much, we turn to Christ who suffered through the heaviest cross so that we may have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. He makes our cross light—for he has already carried it. Amen.