

My Vocation in Christ

• Lesson Three •

God Sends Me a Cross within My Vocation

1. God intends nothing but good for me through my cross
2. Therefore I accept my cross willingly and bear it patiently

Worship

A man had underlined the words “It came to pass” every time they occurred in his King James Version of the Bible. When asked why, he answered: “To remind me that that’s how God sends us troubles. They don’t come to stay. They always come to pass—and before long God takes them away.”

While that’s not exactly what the phrase means, the thought is certainly scriptural. Let’s read responsively Psalm 30:1-5, which speaks of God’s rescue from troubles.

Leader: I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths

Group: **And did not let my enemies gloat over me.**

Leader: O LORD my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.

Group: **O LORD, you brought me up from the grave; you spared me from going down into the pit.**

Leader: Sing to the LORD, you saints of his; praise his holy name.

Group: **For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime;**

Leader: Weeping may remain for a night,

Group: **But rejoicing comes in the morning.**

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we trust you to send only what is good for us into our lives. Help us to live our happy times with thanksgiving and our sad times with patient endurance. Amen.

Introduction

“Become a Christian, and watch all your troubles disappear,” some preachers say. Neither Scripture nor experience will support a statement like that. Such blatant false teaching sets new Christians up for major disappointment. When troubles continue to come their way, even though they belong to Christ, they might wonder whether there’s something wrong with their Christianity.

“Serve God in your vocation, and you’ll have a trouble-free life” would be a false statement too. The fact that you experience troubles in your vocation doesn’t mean you’re doing something wrong. In fact, troubles may come because of what you’re doing right.

Studying God's Word

God intends nothing but good for me through my cross

“No pain, no gain,” professional bodybuilders say. To make their muscles grow, they first break them down through a program of rigorous exercise. Breaking muscles down doesn't always feel good. At times, it feels absolutely awful. But that pain is the necessary first step in the process of growth.

For Christians too, experiencing pain often is the necessary first step that God uses to prepare us for spiritual growth.

- Read John 16:33.
 1. According to Jesus, what are the chances that Christians will have trouble while in this world?

We have a one hundred percent chance of experiencing trouble in this world. It will happen.
- Read John 17:13-16.
 2. What are the sources of our troubles?
 - a. verse 14 The world, which hates everyone who belongs to Christ.
 - b. verse 15 The evil one, the devil.
- Read Romans 7:19-25.
 3. What is one other source of our troubles?

Our own sinful nature.

Some people don't include the struggle against sin in the category of cross-bearing. It is true that when we have to bear the consequences of our sins—for instance, if we have to restore something we stole—that isn't really the same thing as bearing a cross for Christ. However, as believers struggle with sin and temptation, they experience a kind of inner turmoil and conflict that unbelievers don't. It is appropriate to include these struggles against sin when we discuss Christian crosses.
 4. Each of the following passages points to a reason why a loving Savior—who forgives our sins, who has overcome the world (John 16:33), and who has defeated the devil—continues to allow us to suffer as we sometimes do. Identify each reason.
 - a. Hebrews 12:7-11

To discipline us. God's discipline marks us as his true children. It is evidence of God's love. And it “produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.”
 - b. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

To keep us humble and to teach us to depend on Christ's power rather than our own.
 - c. Romans 8:28

To work for our good in ways we do not always fully understand.
 - d. Genesis 50:19-21

To benefit others through our sufferings.

- Read Matthew 10:24, 25 and 1 Peter 4:12-19.

5. What is another reason Christians can expect to carry a cross?

The fact that Jesus did. The treatment we should expect from this world differs in degree, but not in kind, from the treatment that this world gave Jesus. At times we will suffer simply because we bear the name Christian.

God's Word in My Life

Describe the crosses that might trouble Christians who serve in the following vocations:

Husband

Wife

Son-in-law

Business owner

Garbage collector

Lutheran elementary school teacher

Pastor

The following are examples of the many possible answers.

Husband: May be disciplined at work, because he puts his role of family spiritual leader before working overtime for the company. His wife and children may express unhappiness because money that could raise their standard of living is given for the Lord's work instead.

Wife: Faces repeated insinuations that her work as a stay-at-home mom is not as important as an outside career might be. Or finding it necessary to pursue a job outside the home, she may be troubled when stay-at-home moms insinuate that she is neglecting the spiritual and emotional development of her children.

Son-in-law: Criticism by in-laws for not providing the material living they think their daughter and grandchildren deserve. In reality he has taught his family to focus on helping others rather than focusing on their own material desires.

Business owner: Loses a business account because he refuses to engage in unethical business practices. Struggles with the constant tension between the need to turn a profit and the desire to provide good benefits for his employees.

Garbage collector: Endures discipline by a boss who asks him to cut corners with substandard work in order to save money for the company. Endures ridicule from others who don't consider his job to be honorable.

Lutheran elementary school teacher: Exhausted trying to fill very demanding callings as a teacher of the congregation's precious children and as a mother to her own precious children. Blamed for the failure of students who may be receiving little help or guidance at home.

Pastor: Criticized for pointing out sin within the congregation. Constantly weighed down by the spiritual struggles of those who come to him for counseling.

Finally, all trials that Satan throws at Christians to try to turn them from the faith are crosses.

The following quotations from Luther remind us that no matter what our walks in life, we can expect crosses as we faithfully serve in our various vocations.

But a godly mistress of the household is not proud; for she is vexed and humbled in various ways when countless annoyances are put in her way by the domestics, by her husband, by the children, by the neighbors. Thus opportunities are nowhere lacking for the practice both of faith and of prayer.

—Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 3:204)

Of course, this "little while" [See John 16:19,20] called sorrow is a concomitant of all vocations ordained by God if one wants to lead a godly life in them and do what is right. For instance, he who wants to be a pious head of a household in the estate of matrimony will surely find out something about what this "little while" is. His servants and neighbors, in short, the devil, will be sure to tell him this in such a way that he need not learn it from any other source. Thus in secular government and administration a prince, magistrate, or burgomaster who wants to be pious and to administer his office faithfully will also surely learn from the world what sadness and misfortune are. He will discover how much malice, disloyalty, and treachery is found among his own subjects. I am speaking about pious and God-fearing men; for the others, who take their vocation lightly and care nothing about God but live and do as they please, do not concern us. In due time they will learn their lesson.

—Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 24:377)

These quotations from Luther also demonstrate why seeking our own crosses is not only unnecessary but also wrong.

God's Word in My Life

Optional Application

Evaluate this situation: Bob is fond of writing letters to the editor of his local paper. In some of his letters, he has insisted that our laws must authorize the death penalty if we expect our nation to be blessed by God. He has called for the execution of any doctor who has ever performed an abortion. He has insisted that the teaching of evolution be banned from the public schools. Bob's letters usually bring a flurry of angry responses; and when they do, he comforts himself by reflecting that he is suffering for Christ.

Bob is seeking his cross outside of his vocation. He has chosen his cross himself; it is not one that has been laid on him by God. In addition, in his "Christian" testimony, Bob is focusing on the law, not the gospel; and he is hardly offering his testimony with the "gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15) that Scripture commands.

Therefore I accept my cross willingly and bear it patiently

It's hard for people today to be patient. When I turn on my computer at work, I want network access instantly. When I get home, I want a dinner recipe I can make in 30 minutes.

Even as I read it, I think about ways I could get it down to 20 minutes, or even 15. And especially when I'm suffering, I want the pain gone right now.

But some things can't be rushed. The good work God does in us by letting us carry our crosses is one of them. Often it takes time—even a lifetime. With what attitude, then, do we bear our crosses?

- Read Luke 9:21-26.

1. At what point in his ministry did Jesus speak these words?

Just before he was transfigured. His sufferings, death, and resurrection were near.

2. What does it mean to “deny” yourself?

To say no to your own desires for comfort, acceptance, and happiness, when these get in the way of following Jesus.

3. What does it mean to want to “save” your life, only to “lose” it?

The person who is bent on saving his or her life to the point of denying Christ will lose that life eternally. These words also apply to us if we attempt to “save” our lives by fulfilling our own wants and desires instead of following Christ. This will bring us sorrow rather than happiness—particularly if we end up losing our faith and being lost eternally.

4. Jesus went on to say, “Whoever loses his life for me will save it.” In other words, whoever is willing to deny his own wants and desires in order to follow Jesus will save his life. Consider your vocation. How might you “lose” your life for Christ's sake?

Answers will vary, but you may need to give an example to point participants in the right direction. A father may give up a job promotion that would pay an exorbitant salary but would take him away from his family and his opportunities to worship. A working mother may endanger her career because she refuses to take part in unethical business practices.

5. Evaluate this statement: These words of Jesus run directly counter to the whole world's philosophy of life.

The world believes that we are in this world to realize our potential, fulfill our dreams, and be happy. Jesus says that pursuing these things will bring us only misery. The life Jesus gives to his followers is one of lasting joy and eternal peace.

6. What, then, can be our attitude toward bearing our crosses?

Willing acceptance.

7. According to Romans 12:12, what will characterize the Christian's life?

Joy, hope, patience, and prayer.

8. How are these (characteristics of the Christian's life) possible even when we are bearing crosses?

God's promises that he will provide for us, that he hears our prayers, that he will work all things for our good, and that he has a home waiting for us in heaven are still valid. They are valid whether others love us or hate us, whether we are rich or

poor, whether we are healthy or sick—no matter what the circumstances of our lives on earth might be.

God's Word in My Life

Jane is convinced that she made a mistake by marrying Bill. “We were very young when we got married, and we didn’t know what we were doing,” she says. “Now we realize that we have almost nothing in common. We barely communicate—except when we’re fighting. I know we would both be much happier being married to somebody else. And God wants us to be happy, right?” Respond.

Yes and no. God wants us to have the real, lasting happiness that comes from trusting him and doing his will—not the temporary, illusory happiness that comes from having our own way.

It may be that a rash decision (or even a sin) brought Bill and Jane together as husband and wife. That doesn’t change the fact that they are husband and wife now, and they cannot desert these vocations without sinning. What is more, if they focus on fulfilling their vocations faithfully, they will find innumerable opportunities to serve God and each other. In the end, they may learn that this is where to find real, lasting happiness.

God has arranged matters very well. He places people in such callings and offices before they know and are aware of what has been mentioned. He hustles young people into matrimony with pipes, drums, and dancing. They enter the marital estate joyfully and think that it is nothing but sugar.

—Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 24:377)

This comfort is necessary and must often be impressed upon men, for it makes hearts confident and prevents the dangerous abandoning of a calling, the abandoning that is never attempted without sin. For by nature hearts shun the cross and strive with blind ambition for what is high.

—Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 3:65)

Life with God

- Day 1: Read Genesis 50:15–Exodus 3. How did God use crosses to accomplish his purpose of saving his people?
- Day 2: Read Job 1:1–2:10. Why did Job suffer?
- Day 3: Read Psalm 22. Why did the psalmist suffer?
- Day 4: Read Psalm 73. What made Asaph envious? What did he come to understand?
- Day 5: Read Psalm 74. Why do you think God included psalms like this one in the Bible?
- Day 6: Read Hebrews 12:1–13. What are the things that hinder you and the sins that entangle you as you run the race of life?
- Day 7: Read 1 Peter 3:8–22.