

Hugo Bouter

Simon a Cyrenian

Bearing the cross after Jesus

'Now they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross.'

'Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus.'

'Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.'

Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26; Romans 16:13

Bearing the cross after Jesus

Following Jesus is not possible without bearing the cross. What does that mean? The Lord Jesus had also indicated this before (Matt. 16:24-28; Mark 8:34vv; Luke 9:21vv). He would have to suffer much and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes. He would be delivered up to the nations – the Gentiles – and put to death. And it was the ignominious death on the cross that He would suffer on the part of the Roman rulers. Crucifixion was a frequently used, very cruel way of execution in those days. Anyone who saw someone walking with a cross (i.e., its crossbeam) knew that this man was a person sentenced to death, making his final walk to the place where he was to die and where the vertical crossbeam was already lying or standing ready.

Following the Lord also implies for us an utter surrender of ourselves, a "denying of self" and "taking up the cross daily." Self-denial is certainly not popular, and it is the opposite of self-love (cf. 2 Tim. 3:2). And bearing the cross has to do with

following our Lord and Savior, Who was rejected and put to death by an evil world. His cross must become our own cross, it is not just the cross in a general sense. We must learn to identify with the Crucified One and learn to glory in His cross (Gal. 6:14).

This implies: Christ is rejected, therefore I am rejected by this world. He was crucified, so I am crucified. He died to the world, so I have died to the world as well. The word "daily" makes it clear that this is not a one-time event. Every day anew we must realize that we are united with a rejected and crucified Lord. It is only in this way that we can imitate Him (Rom. 8:36; Gal. 2:20; 1 Cor. 15:31). Taking up the cross and carrying it after Him is our duty as His disciples (Heb. 12:1-3). In the risen Lord we find the strength to persevere in this.

Simon a Cyrenian

Simon of Cyrene was *forced* to take up the cross and carry it after Jesus, but we as Christians do it voluntarily. It was indeed the cross of Jesus, it now became, so to speak, Simon's own cross. He carried it behind the Savior on the road to Calvary. This is an illustration of what discipleship is all about. Initially, the Lord Himself carried His cross (John 19:17). That someone else was now forced to take it from Him indicates that Jesus – after all He had already gone through – was about to collapse under the heavy burden of the crossbeam.

This new follower of the Lord was from Cyrene, a North African seaport located in present-day Libya. There were many Jews from the Diaspora present in Jerusalem on the occasion of the Passover, and many were also residents there (Acts 2:5, 10). They even had a synagogue there (Acts 6:9). Simon came from the countryside, "from the field," probably because he had spent the night outside the city. Possibly he was on his way to the temple for the morning prayer at nine o'clock (cf. Acts 3:1).

So he had not been present at the condemnation of the Lord, and had not agreed to the people's demand that He should be crucified. Simon, however, was forced by the soldiers to become a "follower" of the Lord. The evangelist Mark seems to assume that the readers knew Simon and his sons. Thus, Simon later heartily became a true disciple of the Crucified One. Possibly he himself stood by when the cross was erected, and the Lord was exalted on the tree. Did he then already realize the great significance of the sufferings of the Man of Sorrows?

After the day of Pentecost

In any case, Jews from Cyrene were among them some fifty days later, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the earth and the church was formed as the "body" of the risen and glorified Lord in heaven. They listened to Peter's preaching, they repented, and they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:10vv). Did Simon also listen to the speech of his namesake Simon Peter at that time? Did the Word of God touch his heart? It is quite plausible, given that Mark describes him as one who was well known to the Christians to whom he was writing. Mark served as an interpreter for the apostle Peter in Rome.

Later in the book of Acts we find Cyrenian Christians, who had been driven from Jerusalem by the tribulation, in turn preaching the gospel to the Jews throughout the land. Coming to Antioch, they proclaimed the Good News to the Greeks as well. And the hand of the Lord was with these evangelists from Cyrene, for a great number believed and came to the Lord (Acts 11:19-21). Lucius of Cyrene was among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1). Will not these Christians have carried the gospel further into the ancient world? Thus, the Good News also reached Rome, possibly in part through the efforts of Simon and his two sons Alexander and Rufus.

Within the family of God

This is confirmed by the testimony of Paul, who has a certain Rufus saluted in his letter to the Romans, "and his mother and mine" (Rom. 16:13). Comparing the few Scripture data, the conclusion is warranted that Rufus was the son of Simon of Cyrene. The apostle himself describes this brother as "chosen in the Lord". Did Rufus have a special task in the midst of these Christians? Or does the expression refer to the fact that he, like all of us, had been chosen by God before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4)?

Electing grace had thought of him, and God had a plan for him. Perhaps this can also be applied in a practical way. Just as his father Simon had been chosen to carry the cross of Jesus, Rufus had been chosen to be a true disciple, a follower of the Lord Jesus. He was a true Christian, there was no doubt about it. Apparently, Paul was warmly received in this family while still living in Jerusalem. The father is not mentioned here. It seems that Simon had already died; the letter to the Romans was written over twenty years after the crucifixion.

With Rufus' mother the apostle had a special bond, because she had taken care of him like a mother ("his mother and mine"). That is how close the bonds are among believers, the bonds of love in the midst of the family of God. We have become members of the household of God, His companions (Eph. 2:19). This is also the work of divine grace. Bearing the cross leads to infinite blessing.

OudeSporen 2021

