

(2.12) On The Royal Road of the Holy Cross



Jesus said to his disciples, "*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*"¹ If you do this you will never have to fear of hearing, '*Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*'²

The sign of the cross shall appear in heaven when the Lord shall come in judgment and those faithful followers of His on the road of the cross and crucifixion shall stand before the Judge in confidence. *The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*³ *For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*⁴

Why, then, are you afraid to take up your cross which guides you on the path to the Kingdom? In the cross is salvation, life, and protection from enemies; even infusion of heavenly sweetness, strength of mind, joy of spirit; in it is the height of virtue and perfection of holiness. Conversely there is no health of soul, or hope of eternal life except in the cross. Therefore take up your cross, follow Jesus into life everlasting. Jesus told his disciples, "*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*"⁵ *He carried His cross himself*⁶, died for you upon the cross that you may bear your cross and love to die on the cross. *If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.*⁷ If you share in his suffering you shall share also in His glory.

In the cross does all consist, and through it we die to the world. There is no other way to true life and to real interior peace but the way of the holy cross and of daily self-denial.

Go where you will and seek what you will, you shall not find a higher way above, nor a safer way below, than the holy cross. Arrange and order all things as you will, and as seems best to you but you will still find something to suffer, either willingly or unwillingly, and so you shall always find the cross and with it you shall either find suffering in the body, or else you shall suffer distress of the soul.

Sometimes you shall experience abandonment by God; at other times you shall be hurt by neighbor, and, what is more, you shall often be burdened with anxiety. These difficulties will not be alleviated by any remedy as long as God sees they are necessary for your salvation; hence must you bear them. With the psalmist you will at times pray, *Lord, why do you hide your face from me?*⁸ For God wills that you learn to suffer tribulation without comfort, and that you wholly

¹ Matt 16:24

² Matt 25:41

³ 1Cor 1:18

⁴ Romans 8:29

⁵ Matt 16:24

⁶ John 19:17

⁷ Romans 6:8

⁸ Psalm 88:15

submit yourself to Him, and by such ordeals become more humble. No man has so heartfelt a sense of passion of Christ than he whose lot it has been to suffer such things. The cross, therefore, is always ready, and everywhere awaits you. You cannot escape it wherever you turn. For wheresoever you go you carry yourself with you, and shall always find yourself. Turn upwards, downwards, inwards, outwards, but everywhere you shall find the cross. And everywhere you must of necessity be patient if you desire inward peace and be worthy of an eternal crown.

If you carry your cross willingly it will carry you, and bring you to the desired end, namely, to that place where there will be an end to suffering, though in the world there shall be no end. If you carry it unwillingly, you make it a greater burden, and you still must bear it. If you abandon one cross, there is no question you will find another, and even perhaps a heavier one.



Do you think to escape that which no mortal can ever avoid? What Saint ever was in the world without the cross and suffering? For even our Lord Jesus Christ was not for one hour of His life without the anguish of his passion. *Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?*⁹ And so why do you seek another way than His royal way, which is the way of the cross? The whole life of Christ was a cross and a martyrdom, and why do you seek for yourself rest and joy?

You are mistaken if you seek anything else than to suffer tribulation; for this whole mortal *life is short-lived and full of miseries*¹⁰, and everywhere marked with crosses. And the more a person is advanced in spirit, the heavier crosses shall he meet with, because the pain of his banishment increases in proportion to his love. Yet such a one, though many ways afflicted, is not without some consolation, because he is mindful of the great spiritual profit he reaps by his cross. *He keeps his faith even when greatly afflicted.*¹¹

For while he willingly resigns himself to it, all the burden of tribulation is converted into an assured hope of consolation. And the more the flesh is brought down by affliction, so much more is the spirit strengthened by interior graces; hence, *the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body.*¹² And sometimes he gains such strength through affection to tribulation and adversity by his love of conformity to the cross of Christ, that he is not willing to be without suffering and tribulation; because such a one believes himself to be so much more acceptable to God, the more and more grievous things he shall be able to bear for His sake. This is not the power of man, but the grace of Christ which can and does effect such great things in frail flesh, that what he naturally abhors and flees, even this, through fervor of spirit, it now embraces and loves.

⁹ Luke 24:26

¹⁰ Job 14:1

¹¹ Psalm 116:10

¹² 2 Cor 4:10

To bear the cross, to love the cross, to discipline the body and bring it under subjection, to forget honor, to willingly suffer insults, to overcome oneself, and to wish to be despised, to bear all losses and adversity, and to desire no prosperity in this world. None of this is according to man's natural inclinations. If you rely upon yourself, you can on your own do nothing of this sort. But if you trust in the Lord, strength shall be given to you from heaven, and the world and the flesh shall be made subject to you. Neither shall you fear your enemy, the devil, if you be armed with faith, and signed with the cross of Christ.

Set yourself then, like a good and faithful servant of Christ, to bear manfully the cross of your Lord, who for love of you was crucified. Prepare yourself to suffer many adversities and various evils in this miserable life, for so it will be with you, wherever you are and so indeed you will find it, wheresoever you hide yourself. *Do not give in to sadness.*¹³ It must be so and there is no way of escape from tribulation and sorrow other than patient endurance. Drink of the chalice of the Lord lovingly, if you desire to be his friend and to have part with Him. Leave consolations to God, to do with them as best pleases Him. But be prepared to bear tribulations and see that you account them the greater consolations. For, although, you alone could suffer them all, the sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared to the glory to come, that is to be earned by them, i.e., *the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us.*¹⁴

When you reach the point that suffering is acceptable to you, and you acknowledge it is for the love of Christ, and further think it is best for you, then you have found a paradise on earth. Consider the disciples who were flogged for preaching Jesus and that *they rejoiced because they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.*¹⁵ As long as suffering is so hard for you and you seek to escape from it, so long shall it not be well with you; and the desire of evading tribulations shall pursue you everywhere.



If you discipline yourself to follow His Way, that is, to let go of this worldly life, it will quickly be better with you, and you shall find peace. Even if you experience St. Paul's vision of the third heaven, you are still likely to suffer adversity. For Jesus said, *I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name.*¹⁶ To suffer, therefore, is what awaits you, if you are resolved to love Jesus and constantly serve Him.

Would to God you were worthy to suffer somewhat for the name of Jesus! How great glory would be yours, how great joy would it be to all the Saints of God, and how great also the edification to your neighbor! All men recommend patience, but few are they who are willing to suffer. With good reason ought you willingly suffer a little for Christ, since many suffer greater things for the world.

¹³ Sirach 30:21

¹⁴ Romans 8:18

¹⁵ Acts 5:41

¹⁶ Acts 9:16

Know for certain that you must live a dying life; for the more a man dies to himself, the more does he begin to live for God. No man is fit to comprehend heavenly things, who has not resigned himself to suffer adversities for Christ. Nothing is more acceptable to God, nothing more salutary for you in this world than to suffer willingly for Christ. And, if you had a choice, you ought to prefer to suffer adversities for Christ, than to be refreshed with many consolations; because then you would more resemble Christ, and be more likened to the Saints. For our merit and spiritual progress do not consist in sweetness and consolations, but rather in bearing afflictions and difficulties. If, indeed, there had been a better and more beneficial way for man's salvation than suffering, Christ certainly would have shown it by word and example. The psalmist says, *It was good for me to be afflicted, in order to learn your statutes.*¹⁷ Jesus clearly urges the disciples that follow Him, and all others that desire to follow Him to bear the cross, saying, *If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily* and follow me.*¹⁸ Therefore, when we have studied and searched all things before us, let this be the final conclusion, *It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.*¹⁹ The prophet notes, *This is the one whom I approve: the afflicted one, crushed in spirit, who trembles at my word.*²⁰



This article is based on Book 2, Chapter 12 of Thomas of Kempis' writing, "Imitation of Christ." It is not necessarily a translation, and there are many of those, but in many places a personal reflection on his writing; if any of it helps give credit to Thomas of Kempis; if any of it fails the responsibility is mine. (rfm)

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¹⁷ Psalm 119:71

¹⁸ Luke 9:23

¹⁹ Acts 14:27

²⁰ Isaiah 66:2B