

**“The ABC’s of the Christian Life:
(3) Following Jesus**

Introduction:

In our study of the basic truths or principles of living the Christian life, we first addressed what it is to initially come to Jesus Christ for salvation. But having come to Christ in repentance and faith, what are we then to do? We might say, rather simply, that after first *coming* to Christ, we are then *to follow Him*, or *to follow after Him*. We may see this responsibility of those who come unto Him quite clearly in the Word of God.

Now in addressing this subject of the Christian life, *following Jesus*, I am attempting to do more than just state *what* we are to do as Christians. It is also important for us to understand *why* we are to do what we do. We not only want to *analyze* the truth, that is, to break a matter down into its parts for better understanding, but we also want to *synthesize* those parts into a whole, so that we may have a single panoramic view of what God is doing, not only in our individual lives, but also what He is doing in His world through history. And so, in order that we might better understand our subject, we will begin to consider what it is to follow Christ from several vantage points. First, I would like us to consider two Old Testament passages which will enable us to see the larger picture of where it is that the Lord would lead us as we follow Him. And then second, we will consider more directly the often repeated words of our Lord Jesus that He spoke to people who had “come to Him”, that they then were to “follow Him.” And thirdly, we focus on one important passage that speaks clearly of what it is to follow Jesus.

I. Two Old Testament passages which speak of the Lord leading His people as they follow Him. (Isa. 35 & 52)

A. Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah 35 might at first appear to be an irrelevant passage to our subject. Here we read of God’s promise to a remnant of Israel, who had undergone God’s judgment for their sin. Isaiah had previously predicted God’s destruction of His people and Jerusalem through His use of the Babylonian armies. This occurred in 587 BC. Israel had broken its Mosaic covenant with God and the wrath of God had come upon the nation. The land had been decimated, Jerusalem destroyed, and the temple razed. But Isaiah also foretold that after 70 years of exile God would extend mercy to a remnant of Jews living in Babylon, bring them to experience His salvation from His judgment. The time would come when God would deliver His people from Babylon. This deliverance is set forth as a second exodus in several places in the prophets. Just as God had once brought His people out of Egypt and led them through the desert wilderness to their promised land, so God would deliver a remnant of His people from Babylon. He would send to them a Deliverer who would bring them out of captivity. They would then journey through the “wilderness” to their homeland, just as Israel had once journeyed from Egypt through the wilderness to their promised land. God declared through the prophet that He would lead them, and that they would follow Him, even as He directed them and provided for them in their return. He would lead them to their “promised land”, even “Jerusalem” that He would rebuild for them.

But the Lord had a greater, far reaching message through Isaiah’s words. He was foretelling the coming Messiah who would lead His people in the way of salvation. But this salvation was not from physical captivity, a deliverance from enslavement in the capital city of Babylon to the liberty of living in their homeland of Israel in a restored city of Jerusalem. Isaiah 35 (and in other places also) is a prophecy of the coming Messiah, even the Lord Jesus, who would come and deliver His people from the condemnation and enslavement to sin itself, and He would lead them out of the fallen world, to which “Babylon” was an

emblem, directing them to their final destination, the fully realized Kingdom of God, even the Jerusalem that is above, the city whose Builder and Maker is God.

And so, here is Isaiah 35, which describes their “wilderness” journey. And as we read it, attempt to understand the passage not only in its historical context of the 6th century BC, but consider its greater realization through the salvation God has given us through His Son Jesus Christ. Attempt to recognize those words and phrases in this passage that are directly quoted or alluded to in our New Testament record of God’s dealings with us in our salvation. Here is **Isaiah 35**:

The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them,
And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose;
²It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice,
Even with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
The excellence of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
The excellency of our God.

³Strengthen the weak hands,
And make firm the feeble knees.
⁴Say to those who are fearful-hearted,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Behold, your God will come with vengeance,
With the recompense of God;
He will come and save you.”

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.
⁶Then the lame shall leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the dumb sing.
For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness,
And streams in the desert.
⁷The parched ground shall become a pool,
And the thirsty land springs of water;
In the habitation of jackals, where each lay,
There shall be grass with reeds and rushes.

⁸A highway shall be there, and a road,
And it shall be called the Highway of Holiness.
The unclean shall not pass over it,
But it shall be for others.
Whoever walks the road, although a fool,
Shall not go astray.

⁹No lion shall be there,
Nor shall any ravenous beast go up on it;
It shall not be found there.
But the redeemed shall walk there,

¹⁰And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
And come to Zion with singing,
With everlasting joy on their heads.
They shall obtain joy and gladness,
And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

If we read this passage carefully, we must conclude that the Lord was revealing much more than a physical deliverance of Jewish people from Babylon, enabling them to return to the Promised Land. These people who are traveling this “highway of holiness” are *all* redeemed. On this journey to Zion, “the unclean shall not pass over it” (v. 8); that is, only those who are “clean” in the sight of God, only those who have salvation. Verse 10 declares that only “the ransomed of the Lord shall return.” The Lord will see to it that their journey is successful. Not one in this journey will fail to arrive at the destination. “Whoever walks the road, although a fool, shall not go astray” (v. 8). The Lord delivers His people from their captivity and enslavement to the fallen world, and He secures the final arrival of every one of His redeemed ones to their eternal inheritance. No “ravenous beast” will harm them. Even in their journey through the desert, He will provide water and food for them. He will see to it that they arrive at the destination that He had prepared for them.

Now let us turn to our second passage that also addresses this deliverance from sin accomplished by the Lord on behalf of His people.

B. Isaiah 52:1-12.

In conjunction with this prophecy in Isaiah 35 of God restoring His people, another passage of Isaiah that speaks of the same journey--**Isaiah 52:1-12**. This prophecy immediately precedes the familiar Suffering Servant prophecy of our Lord Jesus (52:13-53:12). It sets forth the command of the Lord to the newly released captives of “Babylon”, to make their journey back to “the Promised Land” and to “Jerusalem.” Again, although it foretells of the return of a remnant of Jews from the 70 year Babylonian captivity, it ultimately foretells of the redeemed of the Lord who are departing from this fallen world system, and making an arduous wilderness journey to the Garden of Eden, even Paradise, which the Promised Land was an emblem. As we read this chapter, recognize that “Jerusalem” is not just a “city”, but that it is an emblem of the collective, true people of God, who are redeemed by God. God Himself leads His people on their journey. And it is clear that this foretells of the Lord Jesus who not only delivers His people from this fallen world, but He then leads unto their final destination, to a “restored” Paradise to dwell with God and His people. They are to follow their redeemer unto their final destiny. Here is Isaiah 52:1-12:

Awake, awake!
Put on your strength, O Zion;
Put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city!
For the uncircumcised and the unclean
Shall no longer come to you.
²Shake yourself from the dust, arise;
Sit down, O Jerusalem!
Loose yourself from the bonds of your neck,
O captive daughter of Zion!

³For thus says the LORD:

“You have sold yourselves for nothing,
And you shall be redeemed without money.”

⁴For thus says the Lord GOD:

“My people went down at first
Into Egypt to dwell there;
Then the Assyrian oppressed them without cause.
⁵Now therefore, what have I here,” says the LORD,
“That My people are taken away for nothing?”

Those who rule over them
Make them wail," says the LORD,
"And My name is blasphemed continually every day.
⁶Therefore My people shall know My name;
Therefore they shall know in that day
That I am He who speaks:
'Behold, it is I.'"

⁷How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who proclaims peace,
Who brings glad tidings of good things,
Who proclaims salvation,
Who says to Zion,
"Your God reigns!"

⁸Your watchmen shall lift up their voices,
With their voices they shall sing together;
For they shall see eye to eye
When the LORD brings back Zion.

⁹Break forth into joy, sing together,
You waste places of Jerusalem!
For the LORD has comforted His people,
He has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰The LORD has made bare His holy arm
In the eyes of all the nations;
And all the ends of the earth shall see
The salvation of our God.

¹¹Depart! Depart! Go out from there,
Touch no unclean thing;
Go out from the midst of her,
Be clean,
You who bear the vessels of the LORD.

¹²For you shall not go out with haste,
Nor go by flight;
For the LORD will go before you,
And the God of Israel will be your rear guard. (Isa. 52:1-12)

Here we read of God's promise to restore and repopulate "Zion." But whereas Zion is most frequently a reference to the ancient city of Jerusalem, here it assumes a spiritual reality. This city is one whose Builder and Maker is God Himself (Cf. Heb. 1:11f, 16). Only those redeemed from sin will dwell there. It is said to "Zion", "For the uncircumcised and the unclean shall no longer come to you" (v. 1). The "uncircumcised" is not a reference to Gentiles. It is not saying that only Jewish people will dwell in this restored city. Here the "uncircumcised" are those who are uncircumcised of heart, whether Jew or Gentile. Only those circumcised of heart (i.e. regenerate), those who are truly "clean", will dwell there.¹ The announcement of their deliverance or salvation is through divinely appointed messengers. Verse 7 reads:

How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,

¹ Cf. Acts 10:15, in which God refers to redeemed Gentiles as "clean": "And a voice spoke to him (Peter) again the second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.'"

Who proclaims peace,
Who brings glad tidings of good things,
Who proclaims salvation,
Who says to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

Of course the Apostle Paul applies this prophecy to gospel preachers in this New Testament age (Cf. Rom. 10:15). These redeemed are not only those of a Jewish remnant, but this people comprise those called forth from the nations of the world. Verse 10 reads,

“In the eyes of all the nations;
And all the ends of the earth shall see
The salvation of our God.

And so, whereas God once called a remnant of Jews to flee from their exile in Babylon to return to their homeland, this is a prophecy of God calling Christians to an “exodus”, to depart out of this fallen world. The words of verse 11 are also quoted by the Apostle Paul, which he applies to Christians. He wrote to the Christians in the church at Corinth:

¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ¹⁵And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? ¹⁶And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will dwell in them
And walk among them.
I will be their God,
And they shall be My people.”

¹⁷Therefore

“Come out from among them
And be separate, says the Lord.
Do not touch what is unclean,
And I will receive you.”

¹⁸“I will be a Father to you,
And you shall be My sons and daughters,
Says the LORD Almighty.” (2 Cor. 6:14-18)

Just as the Lord called a remnant of Jews to come out of Babylon, to separate themselves in order to return to their homeland where they will experience and enjoy a renewed relationship with their God in Zion, so God has called Christians to separate themselves from this world, from this spiritual “Babylon”, which is destined for judgment, so that we may escape its fate and that we may experience and enjoy a relationship with our God who has redeemed us through Jesus Christ.

And so, we would argue, “to follow” the Lord Jesus, as He leads us in this life of pilgrimage, even a “wilderness” journey, unto our heavenly Zion, the City of God. What I am saying is that this imagery, this spiritual deliverance from this fallen world and our journey to our heavenly Zion, is what is being set forth when we hear our Lord’s words to us, “Follow Me.”

II. Our Lord’s call for people to “follow” Him.

When our Lord called people unto Himself, He frequently impressed upon them their responsibility to follow Him. When He called His disciples, He called them to “follow” Him. We read in **Matthew 4:18f**:

“And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁹Then He said to them, ‘**Follow Me**, and I will make you fishers of men.’”

A. Matthew 8:18-22

In **Matthew 8** we read that following Jesus must take precedence over all matters of life, even what we might think are the most important of duties. We read,

¹⁸And when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side.

¹⁹Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, “Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.”

²⁰And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”

²¹Then another of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”

²²But Jesus said to him, “**Follow Me**, and let the dead bury their own dead.” (Matt. 8:18-22)

B. Matthew 9:9

An incident in **Matthew 9** shows us that the Lord Jesus calls great sinners, even those excluded from the people of God, to follow Him. We see that when the Lord bids people to follow Him they should do so immediately, completely devoting themselves in doing so.

“As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, ‘**Follow Me**.’ So he arose and followed Him.” (Matt. 9:9)

C. Matthew 19:16-22

In **Matthew 19** we see that to follow Jesus results in everlasting life. But the failure or refusal to do so, choosing rather the things of this world, will result in one’s eternal ruin.

¹⁶Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?”

¹⁷So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”

¹⁸He said to Him, “Which ones?”

Jesus said, “‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ¹⁹‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁰The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?”

²¹Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, **follow Me**.”

²²But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Matt. 19:16-22)

D. John 10:22-30

In **John 10** we read that the Lord Jesus gives eternal life to those who “follow” Him. Only they that follow Him will be saved. Here we read also of what it is to “follow” Him. It is to hear His voice and then to do what He tells us to do.

²²Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. ²³And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch. ²⁴Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly."

²⁵Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. ²⁶But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. ²⁷*My sheep hear My voice*, and I know them, and *they follow Me*. ²⁸And *I give them eternal life*, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. ³⁰I and My Father are one."

Following Jesus is the way of salvation. Not only are we to come to Jesus for salvation, which was the subject of our messages for the last two weeks, but we are to follow Him. Coming to Jesus begins the life of following Jesus unto eternal life.

E. Mark 8:34-37

Let us look at one more passage that speaks clearly of what it is to follow Jesus that leads to everlasting life. Actually these words of our Lord Jesus are found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels², but we will read them in **Mark 8:34-37**:

³⁴When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ³⁵For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? ³⁷Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

Before us is the record of a very important occasion in the ministry of our Lord Jesus in which He informs His disciples of the nature and cost of discipleship to Himself. He is about to embark upon His final journey from Galilee to Jerusalem where He died. The words of our Lord in verse 34 and following are words to His disciples that *they must follow the same path in the same manner as He, if they desire to share in His glory*.

Please take note of what He is saying is at stake. The certain prospect of *eternal life* itself is set forth as outcome of a life of faith in Christ, a faith characterized by denying self, daily taking up one's cross, and following Jesus. But on the other hand, a failure or refusal to live in this manner will result in a person being "lost" and "ashamed" at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. And so, here our Lord describes the way all His disciples are to live before Him. Eternal life is assured to His disciples, those who deny themselves and follow Him. But eternal life is promised only to them who follow Him in the manner He prescribed for them. They are ones who deny themselves, take up their cross, they follow Him.

What a grand incentive for people to believe on Him, responding in their commitment to follow Him! Glory, honor, eternal life! On the other hand, the consequences of failing or refusing to follow Him are equally ominous as the promise of life is glorious. For the one who refuses to follow Him will "forfeit his life." *Clearly, the Lord Jesus is saying that there is no salvation apart from following Him*. Doing His will must take precedence over doing our own if we are to inherit everlasting life.

² The Synoptic Gospels are Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are so-called because they cover the similar material in a similar order. They are quite distinct from the contents of John's Gospel. This passage is also found in Matthew 16:24-28 and Luke 9:23-27.

Please note, what our Lord demands of His disciples with respect to the salvation of their souls is not inconsistent with the cardinal doctrine held by all true Bible believers--*the sinner's justification before God through faith alone*. Guilty sinners are forgiven all their sins, past, present, and future, upon *coming to Jesus Christ*, believing the gospel. Believing sinners are declared to be righteous by God upon their initial faith in Christ. Upon their faith Christ's righteousness is credited to their account so that they are no longer under God's wrath; they can never ever again come under God's condemnation. But then they are to follow Him, and unless they do so, they will die and be damned in their sins.

1. The one who follows Jesus must *deny himself* (Mark 8:34)

What does it mean to deny oneself? It involves several ideas.

a. To deny yourself means that you put your own interests as secondary to doing the will of God.

One characteristic that is natural to a fallen individual is the sinful tendency to live as though he is the center of all things. Our sinful nature will move us to do whatever appears to be least difficult for us and most pleasurable for us. Our own well-being is the center of our existence. We are inherently selfish creatures that order our lives primarily according to a way that will bring us most comfort and happiness. Oh yes, we will do for others but fallen nature will tend to do so because of some benefit that ultimately will be brought to self. "If I do this for them, I will be thought of better by them." Or, "I will feel better about myself if I do such and such." But ultimately, sinful nature is the tendency and drive to do one's own will and to bring glory to oneself.

The one who is following Jesus is also concerned about his own interests. This is not wrong in and of itself. The difference is that for the disciple his interests are not *primary*. If he comes to the place that he has a choice between serving himself and obeying God, He will, by the grace of God and if he is thinking rightly, deny himself, and obey God even if to do so brings difficulty to himself.

Our Lord Jesus lived in this manner. He did not order His life according to what would bring Him the most comfort, but rather He denied Himself so as to do the will of His Father. He refused to be self-serving. He had a responsibility to honor and obey His Father and He would do so even at great cost to Himself.

Let us consider for a moment His encounter with the devil in the wilderness. Our Lord had fasted 40 days and was hungry. The devil came tempting Him to sin. His Father had given to Him great authority that was to be employed in accomplishing His mission as the Savior. He could turn stones to bread. The devil put it before our Lord to do just that, to put His own interests above doing the will of His Father. He was tempted to be self-serving, to use His power to bring benefit to Himself rather than for others.

Another temptation was also employed. The devil took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth and he offered to give them to Jesus if He would worship him. Essentially the devil was again tempting Jesus to serve Himself. He was offered an easier course to glory, one which would entail no pain, no suffering of rejection. But our Lord in effect said, "***No, I will not take the easy way out and compromise obedience or fidelity to the Father for the sake of comfort, popularity, or self-exaltation, I would choose rather to suffer and die than to be unfaithful.***"

It should be so with us. Often times alternatives are set before us. One is the way of the Lord, which is the path of righteousness, but it entails difficulty and suffering. The other is a path to glory as the world counts it--wealth and honor and worldly happiness, and it has fewer obstacles; it *is* the easier, more pleasant way. But we are to choose the right, the good, the true, the noble over the easy, the pleasurable, and the wrong. This is what it means to deny oneself.

b. You do not seek to exalt yourself in the opinion of others, rather you seek to serve them.

Let us consider **Luke 14:7-11**. Our Lord was invited to a house for a meal. Others were also invited. He sees the guests scrambling for the places of honor. And so, He gives some instruction in etiquette. He speaks of what was practiced in that day. Places were assigned according to the prestige of the individual. If

you sought to sit in the place of prominence, you might be humiliated when you are asked to move downward when your host sees you sitting in the place that belongs to someone more prominent than you. The point is, if you strive to increase your self-esteem in the eyes of others, it will result in you being humiliated. The issue, of course, is really not table manners. What the Lord is stressing is recorded after the parable in v. 11. ***The Lord is the one who determines the honor that will be conferred on people. And our concern should only be what He thinks of us. We should not be scrambling about with the motivation of having others exalt us in their estimation.*** We should strive to gain the honor that God confers upon His faithful servants.

We read of our Lord's attitude and behavior in **Philippians 2:3-8**.

³Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

We read that Jesus denied Himself. He denied Himself of the rights of being worshipped and honored as God by becoming a man, the freedom and dignity of being a man by becoming a servant, the right to physical life by being willing to die, and even the right to die with dignity, by submitting to the death of His cross. He did not see being served these things as something to be grasped, but voluntarily denied himself of these things. And we are to have this same mind. Paul prefaces his words about Jesus by saying, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

A follower of Jesus Christ views the honor that people convey as secondary to receiving the honor of God that God confers. We seek to please Him so that He will esteem us rather than seeking to please men so that we gain their honor. The disciple of Christ no longer views social status and earthly honor something to be striven for. The disciple of Jesus Christ denies himself of these things. They are no longer important. In fact, as a disciple you shrink from these things if you perceive they detract credit (glory) from the Lord, when people give it to you instead. You do not seek to exalt yourself, but rather you seek to serve in whatever capacity the Lord has placed you and you wait upon Him to exalt you.

c. You deny yourself the notion that you are lord of your own life.

You have a responsibility to obey your master, Jesus Christ. His priorities will be embraced and His directives will be followed even though they may conflict with our own desires or inclinations. And so, your ***love of money*** is renounced, for one cannot serve money and the Lord. Your own ***lusts*** are denied, for they cannot govern your life if Jesus is Lord. Even your ***human relationships*** are subordinated and governed by your relationship with Him. For you cannot love father or mother, spouse or children, or even your own life more than Him. This is the way it is. And you have happily given yourself to this.

Now again, this is the only way which a disciple of Jesus Christ, a true Christian, may follow Christ which leads to life. And by refusing to do so, you ***"forfeit your very self."***

2. The follower of Jesus must take up his cross daily (Mark 8:34)

Crucifixion was a common form of execution in the first century. It was a tortuous, extremely painful way to encounter death. Coupled with the physical suffering was the public shame which was associated with this form of death. All regarded the person who was sentenced to this form of death as having been cursed and forsaken of God. And to carry your cross on the way to the place of execution would be accompanied by public ridicule heaped upon you.

What then, is the Lord saying to you, if you desire to be His disciple?

a. You must be willing to endure shame and suffering in your life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple must not refuse to follow Jesus. He must follow Him regardless of the cost to him.

Some cease to follow due to the *shame* they encounter. Take note of 9:26. This is not talking about being embarrassed when ridiculed about being a Christian. And it is not saying that here that we have to delight in being humiliated before others. The Lord Jesus Himself “despised the shame” of the cross. What is being emphasized is the willingness to be obedient even if it means enduring shame in doing so.

Some cease to follow due to the *suffering* they encounter. We must be willing to endure all suffering in our lives of faithful following Jesus in faith and obedience. We are not to set aside the commandment of God simply because the result of obedience will result in pain.

Some people, who profess to be Christian, have failed here. They argue that there are limits to which we have to obey. **“Surely God does not expect me to suffer so; therefore, I am free, why even right, to set aside the commandment of God!”** Frequently it is worded in this fashion, **“Yes I am to submit and obey, but God does not want me to be a doormat!”** And therefore they say essentially, **“I have gone this far and I have suffered a great deal. Why, I have suffered more than most. But now I have determined that I have suffered enough; and so here I will lay down my cross and walk away. I am sure it is God’s will to do so. He does not want me to go on suffering like this.”** They want the crown of glory that salvation will bring, but they are not willing to wear the crown of thorns that precedes that glorious crown. The pain becomes too great, and they turn away. What the Lord is saying here is that every disciple that desires to “save his life”, i.e. inherit eternal life, must forfeit his life here, if need be, in following Him.

b. You must regard your own life (apart from Him) as finished. This is the meaning and statement of baptism. You are saying by your burial in the water that your former independent, self-directed life is over; it is finished. And by your being brought forth from the water you are declaring yourself to live life anew as directed by your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But notice . . .

c. You must live this life daily, persevering in it. This is not a onetime decision, it is a daily-renewed commitment. “I must order my life today according to the Word of God regardless of the consequences to me.” Again, some only do so for a while and then say enough. Our Lord compared them to stony ground hearers who “receive the Word” initially with great joy, but only believe for a while, and in temptation “fall away.”

3. The disciple of Jesus must follow Jesus (9:23)

The Lord Jesus told His disciples that they must “follow Him.” What does this mean?

a. It implies that we only travel where our Lord has already been. He does not ask us to do anything that He has not done. Let me remind you of the context. Jesus is preparing to leave Galilee and proceed to Jerusalem where He would suffer and die. We are to follow Him in a similar journey of self-denial and if need be sacrifice and suffering if it comes to that, in order to be faithful in obeying God.

b. It implies that He is leading us in our course. He has gone ahead of us. And we are following the course He has blazed for us. This is the idea behind the book of Hebrews-- Christians are the wandering people of God, who are strangers in this world who are following our Lord Jesus through this life as we journey toward our heavenly Canaan where we may receive our inheritance, a place in the heavenly Jerusalem. As the Israelites followed the manifestation of God in the cloud and pillar of fire, we follow our Lord Jesus. As the Shekinah glory led them, our Lord Jesus leads us. But as some fell in the wilderness because they refused to follow Him, so too, those who cease or refuse to follow Jesus will not inherit the promise. But again, the idea is that He is the One Who has gone ahead and has opened up a way for us to follow. And there is no step we might take in our journey that He has not already passed.

c. It implies that He is leading to an appointed destination. He is leading us to our heavenly Zion, to a city whose Builder and Maker is God. He has gone on ahead and has arrived to His glory. He bids

us to follow Him in the same manner and in the same course He has blazed for us. We look to inherit all that God has promised us through Him, as we follow Him.

d. It implies obedience. It implies immediate obedience. He says essentially, “Begin to Follow me now and continue to follow Me no matter what comes.” We are not to put off--procrastinate--in our obedience. We are to “follow” Him *now!* We are not to tarry. We are not to say as King Felix did to Paul, “Go away for a time; when I find time, I will summon you.” No. We say, “Speak Lord. Your servant is listening and I am ready to respond.”

e. It implies complete obedience. We are not to procrastinate in obedience, but further, we are not to be selective in our obedience. Partial obedience is no obedience. Partial obedience reveals that you are yet lord of your life and you are choosing what it is you will do and what it is you will not do. You do certain things because it suits you, or you see that it will bring some kind of benefit to you.

Do not think that if you do this and that directive of the Lord Jesus you have somehow bought off the Lord and that you can excuse yourself from following Him in other areas. Consider King Saul. He was commanded to lead his army against the Amalakites. He was told to destroy everything. He did just that *except* he spared some sheep and cattle and other things that he deemed valuable. When confronted by Samuel, Saul was rebuked and judged for not having “obeyed the Lord.” ***“Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft”*** (cf. 1 Samuel 15).

Conclusion:

Let me say a final word of exhortation that I think will be helpful to some of you. Some here have been raised in church. You can never remember a time when you have not believed. Sometimes one such as you will come across a passage like this and be struck with the fact that you never heard or realized the total commitment involved in following Jesus. ***“Denying myself? Taking up my cross? Following Jesus in total faith and obedience?”*** Not only did you not understand these things, but also you have not practiced these things in your life. The question immediately comes to mind, ***“Have I ever been saved at all?” “Has my assurance and confidence that I am a true Christian been but an illusion?” “Perhaps I have never been saved? I made a decision to receive Christ years ago, or so I thought, but did I understand? Did I really exercise saving faith?” “Am I truly born again?”***

Now it is true there are many deluded persons who presume they are Christian but are not. And it is true that there are “many”, the Scriptures say, that will not become aware of their delusion until the Day of Judgment (Cf. Matt. 7:21ff). But let me encourage you in this matter if you believe yourself to be a believer. As you learn more about the Scriptures you may come to doubt whether or not you were truly saved at an earlier time. But do not let that trouble you. You may never conclude accurately what your condition was at any given time earlier in life, but you do not need to know in order to have assurance of salvation. ***What is important is your faith today, and what your faith will be tomorrow.***

As hard as I try, I cannot remember when I was ***physically born***. But I need not remember the details or event to know I am alive today. I am breathing, I have a pulse. I have consciousness. I can reason, to a degree. I can react and respond to others. Indeed, I am physically alive! And someone would be hard pressed to convince me otherwise even though I cannot remember or recount the day my life in this world began.

In the same way, if you were raised in a Christian home under the continual hearing of the Gospel, you may not be able to identify precisely when you were spiritually born. There was a time when you passed from spiritual death into life, but you may not be cognizant of the precise time of that event. Technically, it would be wrong to say, “I have been a Christian all my life”; that’s too long. But on the other hand, you do not know at what point God placed that seed of life in your soul which quickened you to respond to things spiritual.

But do not be troubled by that any more than you are not troubled because you cannot remember the day of your physical birth. *You know you are physically alive because you respond to that which is physical. And you can know that you are spiritually alive, that you are a true Christian because you respond to that which is spiritual.*

And so, when we come to a passage like this, it may confront us and convict us. We are struck with the truth of it. We are made keenly aware of just how shallow our profession has been, perhaps even to bring alarm to us. But if we are true children of God, true believers, we will respond to our Lord's words. But further, we *must* respond and obey these things for it is the way all true Christians are to order their lives. If we are children of God, true believers, we will respond to the teaching of this passage. We might *hesitate*, we might *resist for a time*, but we will, if saved, respond to its teachings--God's grace will see to it. Paul could write in **2 Thessalonians in 3:3 and 4:**

The Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command.

And so, we see that he was confident that God's grace would move His children to respond to his apostolic teaching.

On the other hand, if you refuse to respond to the teaching of this passage, if you dismiss it as an option and that you are free to disregard it, do not assure yourself that you belong to Him and salvation is yours, for you will be deceiving yourself. For this is the prescribed straight and narrow way that all children of God must travel. It is not an option. But it is as a road sign directing pilgrims traveling toward heaven, saying, "This is the way you must go."

Now it should be noted, that the disciples had little understanding of what was ahead of them. But they did not need to know what they were to face, all they needed to know was how to face whatever they would encounter. Through all they would face they were to remain true to their Master, the end would be glory.

And then this should be acknowledged and then we will close. *Who is sufficient for these things? Who in and of himself will resolve to order his life according to the way we have set forth today?* No one can, except by the grace of God. No one would desire to live this kind of life unless the grace of God was working powerfully in him to convince him of the truth of these things and worked in him the desire for these things. But further, *who is it who could continue in these things?* No one apart from the grace of God which He bestows upon His own. May we continually seek and trust Him for this grace we need.

I wonder what the results would be in our big *crusades* if at the invitation the preacher would say, *"Now wait, although salvation is free, you cannot earn it with any of your works, but coming to Christ will cost you everything. You must give up all for Him. You must put your family, your friends, your hobbies and sports, your longings and aspirations aside and secondary to this one thing: you must be willing to submit to Jesus Christ as your Lord and follow Him throughout all of life no matter what it may cost you. Now, knowing that, come to Him."* Would there be fewer come? I suspect so. Yes, there would be far fewer in our ranks that would claim to be Christian, but we would be stronger for it and our testimony in the world would be far greater. And we would not have the scores of people about who are deluded that they have eternal life aware of their true condition. This is how the Lord dealt with the crowds.

Here are *Spurgeon's* comments on our Lord's Words:

Our Lord Jesus was far too wise to pride himself upon the number of his converts; he cared rather for quality than quantity. He rejoiced over one sinner that repented, but ten thousand sinners who merely professed to have repented would have given him no joy whatever. His heart longed after the real, he loathed the counterfeit; he panted after the substance, and the shadow could not content him. His fan was in his hand with which to thoroughly purge his floor, and his axe, was laid to the root of the trees to hew down the fruitless. He was anxious to leave a living church like good seed-corn in the land, as free as possible from all admixture. Hence in this particular instance one might even think that he was repelling men rather than attracting them to his leadership; but indeed, he was doing nothing of the kind. He understood right well that men to be truly won must be won by truth, that the truest love is ever honest, and that the best disciples is not he who joins the class of the great Master in a hurry, and then

afterwards discovers that the learning is not such as he expected, but one who comes sighing after just such knowledge as the teacher is prepared to give... Nothing is more injurious to a church than a large dilution with half-hearted members, and nothing more dangerous to the persons themselves than to allow them to put on an untrue profession. Therefore did the Master take most care at the time when that care was most needed, that none should follow him under misapprehension, but should be made fully aware of what was meant by being his disciples, so that they should not say afterwards, “We have been misled; we have been beguiled into a service which disappoints us.” Unlike the enlisting sergeant, who sets forth all the glories of military service in glowing colours in order to gain a recruit, the great Captain of our salvation would have his followers take all things into consideration before they cast in their lot with him (Charles Spurgeon, **The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit**, vol. 20, pp 109f.)

³⁵Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. ³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: ³⁷For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. ³⁸Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him. ³⁹But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Heb. 10:35-39)
