

# TAKE IT!

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Easter Sunday—Resurrection Day on the Christian calendar—celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the grave after three days and nights. This miraculous event is the centerpiece of the Christian faith.

Those who disbelieve it may adopt the ethical and relational principles of Jesus, and consider themselves Christians by association, but they are not Christians by a new birth (John 3:3,5) and they do not follow the Person of Jesus as Lord and God (Luke 6:46).

He's alive!

What difference does that make? Isn't the Bible record of His words and deeds enough? If it were, there would not still be active argument about their truthfulness and relevance to contemporary living. Until you experience the presence and power of the Living God, you'll just be guessing—at your own peril.

Today, it is not my intention to persuade you of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus—so, if that's a bothersome topic, you can relax. But to be transparent, what I have to say will ASSUME that Christ's resurrection was real, because I believe it with all my heart. And to be clear, my faith is not the result of being told that it is what I must believe—for I am at least as naturally skeptical as you.

One day, I realized that I had been avoiding the claims of Jesus, or arguing against them when necessary, all the while trying to discover God for myself. I concluded that that was a foolish posture—a one-legged rationalism—which could only guarantee a spiritual, emotional, and rational handicap—a blindness of heart—but could never discover the whole truth.

Reason without emotion is dry and lifeless. Emotion without reason is unstable and aimless. The Bible makes the argument this way: *"If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?"* (1 Corinthians 12:17). The ear is for hearing, to stimulate reason. The nose is for smelling, to stimulate emotion. And the eye is for seeing, to stimulate your spirit.

Life without reason is empty. Life without emotion is bland. Life without spirituality is colorless—and in God's terms, dead inside (where it counts).

## Sacred Symbols

I will not try to prove the resurrection to you. In fact, only God Himself can do that for you, as He did for me.

Instead, I want to speak with you about two things—two sacred symbols—that find their meaning—and their power—only in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave.

Sacred symbols are intended to do at least three things: (1) identify the wearer, (2) authorize the bearer, and (3) inspire the viewer.

For instance, if my head was shaved and I was wearing a saffron robe, you would probably identify me as Buddhist. Or, if I wore a simple black suit and white buttoned shirt with a broad brimmed black hat and had long curly sideburns and a full beard, you would probably recognize me as an Orthodox Jew. Or, if I was a woman wearing a burqa with a veil over my face, you would assume I was Muslim. These symbols identify their wearers.

Other symbols are signs of religious authority. For instance, a white clerical collar usually permits a priest or pastor to conduct official religious duties. The Pope of the Roman Catholic Church uses a signet ring to authorize his decrees.

All sacred symbols are to some degree intended to inspire their viewers, as well as their holders. They remind us of great moments in religious history, or of great revelations of deity, or of great devotion to God.

But, sometimes, sacred symbols may distract a worshipper from the very object they symbolize, as when the symbol itself becomes more important than what it represents.

In Jesus' day, many Jewish leaders considered the Temple and its altar more important, in terms of day-to-day functions, than the God they represented. Jesus took issue with that.

In our day, sometimes such symbols are just religious formalities, evoking no awe or wonder.

At other times, sacred symbols lose their meaning altogether and become merely cultural icons. Not everyone who wears a cross on their neckchain is a follower of Jesus. As jewelry, the cross may be merely a symbol of general goodness or of humanitarianism or of clean living.

What's ironic about this is that the cross was a means of execution. To wear a cross around one's neck is essentially the same as wearing a miniature gallows or electric chair. Either of these would hardly be considered a symbol of humanitarianism.

So, why the cross?

## The Cross

The cross is the great symbol of Christianity, recognized around the world. On steeples atop churches, on the covers of hymnals, on the lids for communion ware, as wall art, and as pendants and lapel pins on Sunday outfits, the cross remains an enduring reminder that Jesus suffered for us.

The cross was an instrument of torture and death, used by the Persians, Carthaginians, and Macedonians, as early as 479 BC, and was used extensively by the Romans up until about 300 AD. Since then, crucifixion has been used in Islamic states, in Japan, in Burma, and in Europe.

Crucifixion, unless interrupted, is always fatal... eventually. It was not the nails nor the bleeding that killed its victims, but asphyxiation. The weight of the body, hanging from outstretched arms hyper-expanded the chest muscles, making breathing difficult-to-impossible. In order to draw a breath, the victim had to lift his body up, pulling against the nails in his wrists and pushing against the nail in his feet.

Thus, crucifixion was a slow and agonizing death, from which we get the word “excruciating,” and was generally reserved for the worst criminals. Jesus was falsely accused, illegally tried, and unjustly condemned as one of those.

Normally, the victim would hang until he no longer had strength to lift himself and could not draw another breath. In Jesus’ case, because sunset was approaching, signaling the beginning of a Jewish Sabbath, when crucifixions were forbidden (accommodating Jewish religious laws), the soldiers resorted to a common method of speeding up the process. By breaking the legs of the victims, the soldiers effectively eliminated their ability to lift themselves, causing rapid suffocation.

When they came to Jesus’ cross to break His legs, they discovered, to their surprise, that He was already dead. He had said, *“No one can take my life from me; I lay it down by my own choice”* (John 10:18). In fact, Jesus had died of a broken heart—literally. To verify that He had died, a soldier took a spear and penetrated Jesus’ chest wall, piercing His heart. Out came what John described as *“blood and water”* (John 19:34).

According to Dr. Stroud (1847), basing his remarks on numerous postmortems, John’s observation proved that the death of Christ was not due to the effects of crucifixion but to “laceration or rupture of the heart” as a consequence of supreme mental agony and sorrow. Such a death would be almost instantaneous.

The life blood flowing through the tear of the heart into the sac that surrounds it, would soon coagulate into the red clot (blood) and the clear serum (water). This accumulation in the heart-sac was released by the spear-thrust of the soldier.

Now, this is most significant, because, from the perspective of the divine plan of humanity's salvation, mapped out in the Bible by 40 different authors from different cultures and languages, over a period of 1500 years, the death of Jesus by crucifixion was designed as more than a symbolic event. It was our Creator's substitutionary redemption price for a sinful race—the "*Lamb of God*" who took away "*the sin of the world*" (John 1:29).

God came down—not to visit, but—to become one of us—God in human form—a pure and sinless Lamb.

Jesus was that Lamb, who willingly offered Himself in death as our Substitute, resulting in the forgiveness and liberation of all who trust in and follow Him.

If there are issues in your past with which you still struggle, due to guilt or shame, God had you in mind to redeem and forgive you and set you free—not because you deserve to be forgiven or have earned your freedom (for if you did, the guilt and shame wouldn't hang on as they do), but because Jesus took the consequential judgment that would have been yours eternally and dismantled the works of your accuser, the devil.

So, the cross—once merely a means of horrible execution—became the means of wonderful divine reconciliation (restoration to friendship with God!). Have you trusted Jesus for this? If not—or if you are uncertain—will you put your trust in Him today? Before I finish, I'll tell you how.

Jesus spoke of the cross as a symbol of Christian dedication. He said, "*If anyone wants to become my follower, he must deny himself, TAKE UP HIS CROSS, and follow me*" (Mark 8:34).

If there is any question as to what is meant by "deny himself," it is clarified with the words "take up his cross." Those words describe what Jesus did after He was condemned. He was made to carry His own cross to the place of execution.

Tradition shows Him carrying a full cross, but in all likelihood He carried only the horizontal crossbeam, which was hung on a vertical post or a prepared tree trunk. About one thing there is no question: He carried it to His death.

Let me suggest three lessons from the cross:

(1) SELF-DENIAL. "*He must deny himself.*" A Christian prayerfully relies upon God's grace and providence instead of his own wit and cleverness. In preference to determining his own way, a

Christian chooses to discover and follow God's plan (through prayer and Bible reading) as the means and the end of fulfilling his life's purpose.

(2) LOOK DEATH IN THE FACE. *"Take up his cross."* A follower of Jesus must be willing to suffer humiliation and mistreatment, even at the hands of his friends or family—graciously, not begrudgingly, trusting God to work out His plan through it. It was said of Jesus, *"When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly"* (1 Peter 2:23).

I don't say that you should SEEK humiliation or WALLOW in it, but when it comes (as it eventually does to all) manage it graciously and mercifully. *"Love is patient and kind"* (1 Corinthians 13:4). Jesus has not asked you to end your life on earth, but really to begin a new kind of life—here and now—led by and empowered by God the Holy Spirit.

(3) FOLLOW JESUS. *"Follow me"* means Jesus and not another. Make Him Lord. Let Him lead. Many voices, and philosophies will call for your attention and devotion, but no one else has died in your place, and no philosophy can be your Savior and Comforter. Adopting a philosophy is merely adopting a way of thinking and reasoning with yourself. It does not (and cannot) change WHO is in charge of your life.

The cross symbolizes all of this and more. That is why it is so important to us. And its symbolism has been validated by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. He really died and He really rose again—for you and for me.

Will you take it? Will you take up your cross today to follow the Savior? He lived to die for you. Will you now die (to self) in order to live for Him?

## **The Yoke**

But Jesus also used another symbol for Christian commitment. He said, *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30). A yoke is a wooden harness, especially one that connects two animals together to pull a load.

Let me suggest four lessons from the yoke:

(1) SUBMISSION. *"Take My yoke upon you."* A Christian willingly submits to Jesus Christ as Lord and Master. Jeremiah, the prophet, wore this yoke: *"I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps"* (Jeremiah 10:23). Jesus, too, wore such a yoke, as He prayed, *"Not my will, but Yours be done"* (Luke 22:42).

(2) OBEDIENCE: *“Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart.”* We enter life knowing nothing. We learn as we go. There are still many roads you have not yet traveled. You would be wise to ask for directions, and wiser still to follow them. Jesus said, *“Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock”* (Matthew 7:24). Jesus knows the way you need to go; let Him show you what He knows. He is not a taskmaster, but a Helper. Let Him share His yoke with you.

(3) SERVICE: *“My yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”* There is work to be done; there are people to be consoled, healed, and defended. But the needs are so many that the workload is overwhelming, if you try to carry it on your own. Thus, the yoke. The burden is divided when you share it. And when you share it with Jesus, it is light; it will not exhaust your strength. *“We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent [Jesus] here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over”* (John 9:4).

(4) FELLOWSHIP: *“All of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens.”* Christianity is a family-operation. We are not alone in Christ, but serve alongside others who have *“a faith just as precious as ours”* (2 Peter 1:1). Paul spoke of his colleague as a *“loyal yokefellow”* (Philippians 4:3), a true companion. A yoke enables two together to pull a load neither one could pull alone.

Yokes are not usually painted on church buildings, or printed on the covers of Bibles, or worn as ornaments on neckchains. Maybe they should be. The yoke, as much as the cross, is a symbol of commitment to Jesus Christ.

Consider the fact that the cross and the yoke are basically the same shape: a crossbeam that links the animals at the head, attached to a long tongue or reins. One crossbeam means certain death for one man, the other means productive service for two.

Paul W. Powell, in The Complete Disciple elaborates: *“The cross and the yoke symbolize for us the two different aspects of commitment. The cross is an instrument of death; the yoke is an implement of toil. The cross is the symbol of sacrifice; the yoke is the symbol of service. The cross suggests blood; the yoke suggests sweat... to be committed to Jesus Christ means that we are ready for either the yoke or the cross.”*

Are you ready for either? Are you ready, through faith in Jesus Christ, for whatever comes your way? To be ready, you need only take Jesus as your Senior Partner in life—receive His counsel and follow His lead. He wants not only to protect you but also to promote you!

He plans *“to give you a future and a hope”* (Jeremiah 29:11). He will make you *“the head and not the tail”* (Deuteronomy 28:13). The Bible says so.

But in order for His dreams for you to materialize, you must cooperate. You must take up your cross and take up His yoke.

Listen, He took up the Father's yoke in order to serve you and that's how He made it through HIS cross. Now it's time for you to follow suit. Take up His yoke and you can make it through your cross, too, and finish well.

There are some here today for whom church does not feel like home. You are not comfortable in the presence of God. Worship does not flow from your heart. You struggle with guilt and shame and hope others will not find out how inadequate and hopeless you feel.

I have told you today about His boundless love and strength. Will you put your trust in Jesus Christ today and be reconciled to God? Will you put your trust in the One who died for you, so that you can live with Him forever?

It's your decision to make, and I pray that you will. The "right time" is now. Today is the day of your salvation.

There are some here today who have been sitting on the spiritual fence. Christianity, for you, is a matter of casual interest and occasional convenience. But you have not been serious about following the Lord. You haven't asked Him what He expects from you and you haven't surrendered your will to His. It's Resurrection Sunday! Get off the fence!

Instead of continuing to have it "your way," will you become a true follower of Jesus today, and commit to take up your cross? Give up second-guessing Him and arguing or complaining. Instead, put your neck in His yoke and make Jesus your Senior Partner. It's time to make your choice. It's time to begin your service of faith. You can't do this alone, but with Him all things become possible!

You have a decision to make. There is a choice before you right now. Here in the presence of God, it's time to make a move. Are you ready?

The definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing but expect different results. Something old has to die, in order for something new to live.

Self-reliance is better than dependency, but independence from your Maker is sheer foolishness. You were made for more than you have within you, and you know it—that's why you have dreams. But it will take the love and grace of God to make your dreams come true, because He gave you greater dreams than you can fulfill on your own. He wants to help you. Will you let Him? It's time to make the choice.

Choose now to get off the fence of casual Christianity and take up Jesus' yoke. Choose now to "get your head in the game" and serve God with your whole heart.

Take it! Take up your cross and take up His yoke. Tell God that you've made your choice. Repent of any indifference, reluctance, or rebellion. Declare yourself to be "off the fence," on Jesus' side, for the long haul. Invite the Holy Spirit to fill you and protect you throughout the journey.