

Carry Your Cross

MARVIN J. ASHTON

Why don't you have crosses on your buildings of worship? Why aren't your chapels built in the shape of a cross? Why don't you encourage your people to wear and display crosses? What is the Church's policy toward crosses?

From Matthew 16:24–25:

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

We in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in response to these questions, try to teach our people to carry their crosses rather than display or wear them. Over the centuries the cross has been recognized as a symbol of Christianity in the minds of millions. The Savior himself has given us the bread and water as emblems of his sacrifice and death.

My message to you this day is take up your cross. Take yourself the way you are and lift yourself in the direction of the better. Regardless of where you have been, what you have done, or what you haven't done, trust God, believe on him, relate to him, worship

him as you carry your cross with dignity and determination.

We save our lives by losing them for his sake. As you find yourself, you will find God. This is true. I declare that to you. It is his promise. Take up the real cross of Jesus Christ.

What kind of cross do you bear? What is its shape, weight, size, or dimension? We all have them. Some are very visible, while others are not always evident. Sometimes the heaviest personal cross could be to carry no cross at all. Some crosses we bear are these (maybe you will relate to one or more): the cross of loneliness; the cross of physical limitations—the loss of a leg, an arm, hearing, seeing, mobility—obvious crosses (we see people with these crosses and admire their strength in carrying them with dignity); the cross of poor health; the cross of transgression; the cross of success; the cross of temptation; the cross of beauty, fame, or wealth; the cross of financial burdens; the cross of criticism; the cross of peer rejection.

Marvin J. Ashton was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 3 May 1987.

What if we are challenged with more than one cross? A beautiful young lady once said to me, “Elder Ashton, it just isn’t time for me to have another cross. I’m not quite used to the one I’m carrying now. How can I handle both?” Truly, suffering is part of our mortal existence, and suffering is not all bad.

Hidden Crosses

Today I’d like to talk in more detail about certain crosses in life that are real, but that are not always recognized or visible. Number one is the cross of the violated trust—on the part of a parent, a family member, a teacher, a bishop, a stake presidency member, a boyfriend, a classmate, a returned missionary, a girlfriend, and so on. Some of us let an act of mistrust on the part of someone close to us shatter our todays and tomorrows. A friend of mine said, “When my endowed father left Mom for a scheming secretary, it was more than I could bear.” She was bitter. This cross was causing her to crumble. She had never looked upon it as a cross, but it was a cross of hatred and resentment: “I can’t believe my father would let us down! What is the use?”

Another one: “When my boyfriend talked me into a couple of drinks and then took advantage of me morally, it caused me to never trust anyone again.” This cross is breaking her because she has not decided that with God’s help she can carry it. Another one I heard from a broken-hearted wife of a year and a half: “My husband, a returned missionary, told me it was okay, so I did it”—compromising immoral intimacies.

And I received this in a letter from the father of two BYU coeds who were the victims of improper conduct on the part of imperfect people on campus—the father and mother were shattered: “We can’t stand to believe and know that that could happen to our students at Brigham Young University!”

We’re proud of BYU, but it is made up of imperfect people, and sometimes very

imperfect things happen even though we thank God they are fewer here than at any other university we know of.

Can even these hidden crosses be carried for future strength instead of causing us to fall and not get back up? “Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42). Sometimes it is easier for the Lord not to remember our sins than it is for us. They become crosses because we will not do ourselves the favor of carrying on. “By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them” (D&C 58:43). Can you carry appropriately the cross of forgiveness? Some of us would rather carry a cross than confess and start anew.

George Q. Cannon, in his wonderful book *The Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, points out repeatedly that the greatest cross that Joseph Smith had to bear—and he had many—was the cross of trusted friends who were not worthy of the word *trust*. His heartaches, his death, his inconveniences were caused by those in whom his trust had been misplaced.

A Heavy Cross

Number two, another cross that isn’t always visible but on occasion can be very heavy and worrisome, is the cross of self-unacceptance—a continuing rejection of oneself through self-condemnation and low self-appraisal. Can you find it in your heart to once in a while give yourself a good grade on your behavior? Or do you give yourself low marks no matter what you do because you carry the cross of self-unacceptance?

An unannounced, but obviously self-imposed, personal-enemy-number-one status in regard to ourselves is a heavy cross. Sometimes in solitude and in humility there is only one person on earth that can be your advocate, and that must be you—someone

who will not condemn you under that cross and cause you to fail.

Being down on ourselves is destructive. As we bear this kind of a cross we have a tendency to reach only the low levels we expect of ourselves. What a cross it is to convince yourself, "I'm no good. I can't do it. I can't make it." What a cross! It doesn't even show. But by lifting that cross we can become more than we would have been had we not been required to carry the cross. Some of us spend too much time protecting our wounded selves.

Always wishing you were some other person with greater talents and greater strengths is a handicap—it's a cross that is not visible, but it is so real. Is it a cross to bear when we realize that with God's help we can overcome, we can be victorious, and we can accomplish much?

I love the following quotation. I suppose I use it more than any other one when I try to give encouragement to family and friends like you:

And it came to pass that when Ammon had said these words, his brother Aaron rebuked him, saying: Ammon, I fear that thy joy doth carry thee away unto boasting.

But Ammon said unto him: I do not boast in my own strength, nor in my own wisdom; but behold, my joy is full, yea, my heart is brim with joy, and I will rejoice in my God.

Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things. [Alma 26:10–12]

I wish we believed that. I wish we practiced that. I wish we knew that. There are days when people who have been called to positions of responsibility, as I have been, have to humbly say, "God, I'm weak, but with your help I can do it," and give him a chance to help lift that cross of inadequate strength.

Yea, behold, many mighty miracles we have wrought in this land, for which we will praise his name forever.

Behold, how many thousands of our brethren has he loosed from the pains of hell; and they are brought to sing redeeming love, and this because of the power of his word which is in us, therefore have we not great reason to rejoice? [Alma 26:12–13]

It is a fact of life that God can make our crosses easier to bear if we are but willing to admit we have them and then seek his help. In D&C 56:2 we read, "And he that will not take up his cross and follow me, and keep my commandments, the same shall not be saved."

A willingness to take yourself as you are and build from there is pleasing to God. If you have more than one cross—three or four—maybe you could build a ladder out of them and use them to climb to new heights. Sometimes becoming is more important than achieving or arriving. I'm not talking about self-indulgence. I'm talking about self-acceptance. All tomorrows can be in our favor if we carry on in a spirit of commitment and self-encouragement.

Resisting Counsel

Number three is the cross of resisting counsel. Some of us have a tendency to resent, resist, rebel, and delay, and to debate worthy direction, supervision, and communication. I plead with you to avoid the ranks of professional counsel resisters, who make such statements as, "Who are you to tell me?" "I didn't come here to be babysat." "Why all the restrictions?" "Where does the free agency come in?" "Why don't you just leave us alone?" Some carry that heavy cross of wanting to rebel or to resist counsel from friends. They reject that counsel because it may cause inconvenience, or because they may not be able to see far enough ahead to see its value.

In D&C 23:6, Joseph Knight was counseled to pray:

Behold, I manifest unto you, Joseph Knight, by these words, that you must take up your cross, in the which you must pray vocally before the world as well as in secret, and in your family, and among your friends, and in all places.

Sometimes we are given crosses so we can be taught to pray. Crosses become lighter and more manageable when we learn to pray and when we learn to patiently wait for the answers to our prayers.

An unwillingness to listen and learn can be a silent cross of considerable weight. Carry the cross of constant prayer even when answers are slow in coming or are difficult to accept.

The Cross of Complacency

Number four is the cross of living among many Mormons. Did you ever think of it as a cross? Having many Mormons for many Church assignments may not be as rewarding and developing as situations in which there are few Mormons to do many Church responsibilities. You may come from a location where your strength, commitment, and attendance made the difference. Sometimes it's easy to let the cross of many Mormons make us weak because we feel in our hearts that someone else will do what needs to be done. Complacency, lack of enthusiasm and involvement, can be the fruit of having too many of us together. Often there is great strength and development where Mormons are in the minority. It's like being the deacon (one of two in a small branch) who said, "I must be awfully important because I'm 50 percent."

How sad, and I hope untrue, is the statement, "There aren't enough Church jobs to go around." Beware of the cross of complacency and an attitude of not being needed. It is a cross when you say, "Someone else can do that. I'll wait for another assignment."

A Destructive Cross

Number five is the cross of caustic comments—taking pleasure in constantly putting people down, in murmuring, ridicule, contention, slander, gossip, and even putting yourself down and enjoying it. Avoid being a rumor reservoir. If you're part of a rumor reservoir, you're entitled to drown. Some people enjoy being caustic. Some have careless and sharp tongues as crosses. Our job is not to live with them, but to reshape and manage our own tongue and mind if we enjoy being caustic.

A home of contention is more than a cross, it is a curse. Some homes without decoration and rehearsal train the inhabitants to be critical. This is an invisible cross of tremendous power, and it is destructive if we carry it. From 2 Nephi 26:32: "The Lord God hath commanded that men should not . . . contend one with another." A caustic tongue can construct additional crosses that are so unnecessary. A critical tongue is a cross easily removed, but only you can do it.

Too Much Praise

Cross number six is the cross of adulation. Be careful, be aware, be wise when people speak well of you. When people treat you with great respect and love, be careful, be aware, be wise. When you are honored, pointed out, and recognized, it can be a cross, especially if you believe what is said about you. Being a BYU student, a Mormon, a returned missionary, a member of the BYU faculty or administration, a General Authority, a prophet, temple-married—some people know these identifications for you and, although you might take them for granted, they're lofty. But these can be crosses, and you must bear them well.

Praise of the world can be a heavy cross. How often I have heard it said over the years, "He was great until he became successful, and then he couldn't handle it." I'm not talking about money and position. I'm talking about recognition, even in Church responsibilities.

We should honor callings and responsibilities and realize that what we are and what we do will depend on the strength of the cross.

I would pray that we would avoid being carried away by praise, success, or even achieving goals that we have set for ourselves. In Mormon 8:38–39 we read:

O ye pollutions, ye hypocrites, ye teachers, who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God? Why are ye ashamed to take upon you the name of Christ? Why do ye not think that greater is the value of an endless happiness than that misery which never dies — because of the praise of the world?

Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not?

How great, how strong, how pleasing it is to be recognized, honored, and respected, but we must realize in our hearts that true greatness is visiting with the Savior Jesus Christ by helping those who are sick, afflicted, discouraged, homeless, and burdened with crosses.

Count Your Blessings

In conclusion, we do not reverence crosses. As stated in the beginning, ours is to carry them with dignity and power. Our right and responsibility is to carry our crosses, and while we are doing so to have the good sense and judgment to count our blessings. These phrases you'll recognize:

*When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings; name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.
Count your blessings; Name them one by one.
Count your blessings; See what God hath done.
Count your blessings; Name them one by one [as
you carry your cross].
Count your many blessings; See what God hath
done.*

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings; every doubt will fly,
And you will be singing as the days go by.
Count your blessings; Name them one by one.
Count your blessings; See what God hath done.
Count your blessings; Name them one by one.
Count your many blessings; See what God hath
done.*

[Hymns, 1985, no. 241]

There is an aid, there is a strength, there is a power when we count our blessings as we labor under crosses that sometimes seem unreasonable and unfair but that can be for our good and for our strength. I bear special witness to you that carrying our crosses and following our Lord will bring strength, peace, and purpose in our quest for the abundant life. God has made this promise. Carry your crosses with strength, with purpose, and while you do, count the blessings of God's strength. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.