

Simon and the Cross of Jesus (Mark 15:21)

1) Simon of Cyrene

In Mark 15:21, we read: “A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.” Let’s have a little bit view about this ancient city called Cyrene. It was a city with a port at the North coast of Africa, middle way between Carthage and Alexandria, built on a beautiful tableland, 2000 feet below sea level, but known as only sixteen miles from the seashore. It was one of the major cross roads for trade and commercials, and it was renowned as an intellectual centre. In New Testament times, it was a home to a large Jewish population which was scattered among the gentiles. “Alexander” was probably a popular name among the Cyrenians, for Alexander the Great had captured the city in 331 B.C., and it also became a Roman province in 74 B.C. Also, it was known to have had a very severe earthquake in 365 A.D. The Arabs captured the city in 642 A.D., and it is uninhabited, today. The location of the city has been found in modern Libya. Even though it does not exist any longer, the influence of the people of this city was known in the early church and does even have an impact on the modern church of today.

2) The cross and its meaning

A stake used for punishment and execution is the meaning of the cross. But crucifixion was not practised in the Old Testament. Their executions were by stoning, although dead bodies were occasionally hung on trees as warnings (Deuteronomy 21:22 ff; Galatians 3:13). Historians let us know that crucifixion at first was a practise of Carthaginians in North Africa. The Romans, later, used it extensively, rarely for Roman citizens, but usually for slaves, provincials and the lowest criminals. The fact that Peter (a Jew) was crucified, but Paul (a Roman citizen) was beheaded, confirms this tradition in line with ancient practises. The time when these believers were martyred in Rome was about 64 A.D., and today, archaeologists have found the grave of Paul. There were three types of crosses: the T shaped, the X shaped, and the dagger-shaped cross. The third one was likely to have been the one Jesus was crucified on, because of the inscription nailed to it above His head. After a criminal was condemned, he was beaten with a whip which had leather thongs, and then made to carry the cross-beam like a slave to the scene of his execution outside the city. He was stripped naked, laid on the ground with the cross-beam under his shoulder and his arms or hands tied or nailed to it. This was lifted and secured to the upright so that the victim’s feet (which were also tied or nailed) were just clear of the ground. The sentenced men had nothing to hold the weight of their body, and so they could only try to lean against the beam. He was then left to die from exhaustion. Many people had to walk by and see how their relative was suffering this agony of slow death. Contemporary writers describe this cruel and degrading form of death as very painful, but the Gospels give no detailed description of Jesus’ sufferings. The New Testament writers were more interested in the theological significance of what happened through the cross. They describe how God used this shameful and terrible agony to reconcile mankind with Himself and also, the Jews with the gentiles (Ephesians 2:14 ff). As the lowest form of execution, it illustrated Jesus’ humility (Philippians 2:8), a fact that the Jews found hard to understand in their long awaited Messiah (1st Corinthians 1:18-23).

3) Unrecognized favour

There is an old spiritual church hymn with an American Negro melody called “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Simon had been there, but he didn’t recognize the favour which was upon him. As we consider the faces beneath the cross, we find the face of this

favoured man who carried the cross to Golgotha where Jesus was, then, crucified. Let us use our imagination to fill in some of the implied details and see the story as it may have been. Simon had been born into a dedicated Jewish home in Cyrene or in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9) where the Cyrenian Jews had their own synagogue. His parents expressed their faith at his birth by naming him Simon, the name of one of the most famous sons of Jacob the patriarch. As Simon grew into manhood, he probably dreamed of going into the holy city of Jerusalem to observe the Passover (if he had not been born in Jerusalem). Such a pilgrimage was the aspiration of all faithful Hebrew people who were scattered around the world. It is possible that Simon had been in Jerusalem for the Passover already many times or he was there for the first time. Whatever the case may be, this time Simon saw the city in an uproar. Everyone was talking about this teacher from Galilee, from the land where the Jews of that time thought that no prophet could come from there (John 7:52). The crowd in Jerusalem was sharply divided over Jesus' identity. Some felt certain that He was the long awaited Messiah, but others considered Him a false prophet. There were reports that the leaders of the people had been plotting His death. On the day of the great Passover, Simon stumbled upon a strange spectacle as he entered the city. He saw a noisy crowd clustered around a band of soldiers. In the midst of the soldiers was an obviously worried man who was bearing a Roman cross. Most of the crowd was shouting at this condemned man. The soldiers were beating Him and forcing Him to do what they wanted. Any observer could see that the man was about to fall down because of the weight of the cross. When Simon saw what was happening, he decided to stay in the shadows. Just as the soldiers decided that they had had enough of the slow moving of the tired "criminal", they wanted to finish their assignment. They glanced around for someone to carry the cross, and their eyes fell on Simon whose body probably gave evidence of physical strength and that he was accustomed to hard work. One of the soldiers gripped Simon commanding: "You take this cross out to the hill!" And because Simon was a Jewish man, he was powerless to refuse. At that time, the Roman soldiers had the power to conscript any non-Roman at any time do what they pleased. This is why very often when the Roman invaders came and conquered a city, the native people who didn't want to cope with this brutality would leave all their property behind and try to seek refuge in some other land or in the wilderness. This was probably how the Essenes started to live in the wilderness and founded their religious brotherhood community. Unfortunately, nothing is known about these people in the New Testament, but there are references about them in ancient scripts from Jewish historians like Philo and Josephus or the Roman historian Pliny. Regardless all this inhumanity, the Jewish people did still journey to celebrate their feasts in Jerusalem at least twice a year. Now, Simon had the cross on his shoulders, following the soldiers to Golgotha. Maybe the out-crying of the following women caused him to take a second look at the condemned man. Somehow, along the way, he became aware that he was bearing the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. Nazareth was known as a place where people thought nothing good could come from there (John 1:46). Isn't it easy for us to see that the soldiers did unknowingly grant Simon a tremendous favour? Any of us who know Jesus would have been glad to carry the cross. Yet, in the real sense, the opportunity to bear His cross is always with us. The cross symbolizes all of the shame and the reproach that accompanied the life and death of Christ. The cross was what it cost our Lord to do the will of the Father. And if we choose to walk in His ways, we can't do it without the cross. The cross grants us the favour of being a Christian. Jesus said: "If anyone wants to follow me he must carry his cross" (Mark 8:34).

4) The favour of cross bearing may be hidden

No doubt, at first Simon saw nothing good in bearing the cross. At best, he viewed it as an inconvenience. Bearing the cross, took time and strength from doing other activities which Simon had planned for this special day. He had not planned on such an interruption. If it had been me, I would have asked: "Why me?!" Simon's resentment did probably go even deeper,

being treated like a slave on what was to be the greatest day of the Passover feast or, even of his life if it was the first time for him to be in Jerusalem. Would the people think that he was a disciple of Jesus? Or would someone think that he was a criminal bearing his own cross? What, if he met one of his friends on the way? Cross bearing does never seem to be a favour, at first. Think about the situation you are in at this particular moment, and have the assurance that Jesus is with you; you are a person of favour! What would have been your first reaction, if you had been in Simon's situation? Would you have been surprised to be treated like this because you were innocent? How would anyone question your motives and accuse you so wrongly? Jesus knew that this would be a problem for His disciples. Therefore, He gave frequent godly instructions on the matter of bearing our own cross. He was exalting His disciples to rejoice whenever they would encounter this shame of the cross. The favour of cross bearing may be hidden to the natural eyes, but it is truly seen by those who walk in the Spirit. The Apostle Paul described such suffering as a gift. We are favoured by the Lord when we suffer the shame with Him. Let us not be ashamed of the cross!

5) The favour of cross bearing should be acknowledged

Perhaps, after the dramatic events in which Simon played a small part, he stayed like many Hellenistic Jews until Pentecost. We are not being told about when Simon became a disciple of Jesus. The fact that his name is given, here, in Mark 15:21 can be taken as a proof that the story of his conversion must have circulated wildly among the early Christians. Likely, Simon was born again on the day of Pentecost. Luke reports that men from Cyrene were among the three thousand converts of that day (Acts 2:10). The manner in which Jesus died must have impressed Simon. Jesus showed no fear throughout the brutality and inhumanity which He suffered. He never applied for the soldiers for mercy nor accused them for injustice. And above all, later when the resurrection report of Jesus circulated throughout the city, Simon may have thought about this gentle man of sorrows for about fifty days until he heard Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost: Simon Peter, the one who had denied the Lord, did now stand boldly and preach that this same Jesus is both Lord and Christ. Simon of Cyrene was probably compelled to believe. He stepped out from the crowd and did willingly accept the baptism in water by one of the apostles as a public acknowledgment that he was not ashamed of bearing the cross. Have you also acknowledged the favour of bearing the cross, or are you ashamed of it? Simon of Cyrene translated this public commitment into active service. It is possible that he is the same Simon who later became a leader in the great missionary movement in Antioch (Acts 11:20; 13:1). He continued to be identified with Jesus by seeking to make disciples for Him. Many of us, today, are holding back from this public identification with Jesus Christ. Simon had no choice at the first time when he was identified with Him, but what he learned about Jesus made him a willing cross-bearer and a proclaiming of the simplicity of salvation through the cross which was foolishness to the ancient world and still is foolishness in the eyes of people, today (1st Corinthians 1:18-25).

6) Sharing the favour of cross bearing

Simon of Cyrene led his two sons to be true cross bearing Christians. He shared with them the privilege of knowing the Saviour. Even though we are not given more details about their family life, we have been given the names of Alexander and Rufus, and this mentioning of their names indicates that they had become well-known among the early Christians. As church historians let us know, the Gospel of Mark was written first of all the Gospels, and it was written to be used as a Gospel tract in the city of Rome. Could this be the reason why the birth and infant of Jesus is cut away, here? Mark started his Gospel when Jesus was thirty years old. When Paul wrote a letter to the Roman church, he sent greetings to Rufus and his mother. Could it be that this relationship of Paul with Rufus and his mother is dating back to Paul's ministry in the church of Antioch (Roman 16:13)? There is a belief that Simon, himself, was

killed by the sword on the Island of Chios in the first century. (The place is mentioned in Acts 20:15 as a small island nearby Samos just five miles off the coast of modern day Turkey in the Aegean Sea). Alexander also became a martyr for the cause of Christ, but Rufus became an effective church leader. And this all began with Simon's carrying of the cross. At first, Simon felt as though it was the worst thing that could happen to him, but it soon became his greatest favour of blessing. Unfortunately, we don't know whether Jesus and Simon had any conversation on their way to Calvary, but we know that this cross sharing favour turned bitterness into believe and hatred into hope and love. Then, shame moved into salvation. He heard Jesus praying: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing!" (Luke 23:34). Simon saw Jesus willingly giving Himself, and slowly, the hope of the prophets becoming reality, for He was pierced for our transgressions and He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). The way of the cross leads to forgiveness, an abundant life and the defeat of death. Simon of Cyrene, a man passing through the crowd, found this amazing hope in the cross. Have you, also? If not, I invite you to the Saviour Who gave His life on the cross and Who is not against you but for you.

7) What cross are you preaching?

Unfortunately, there are many crosses. The ancient world had three different types, but today there may be dozens of them. There is a military cross, a political cross, an economic cross, a social cross and a religious cross. All these crosses have nothing to do with the true Gospel cross. In 312 A.D., just before a battle with Maxentius over the emperorship, Constantine claimed to have had a dream, and he said that he had seen a cross in the sky with the writing "In hoc signo vinces" (which means, "In this sign conquer"). Therefore, he promised to become a Christian if he won the battle. He gained a complete victory, and he proclaimed religious tolerance for the empire. This was the beginning of the military cross. Constantine was persuaded by Pope Miltiades (an African church father who reigned in 311-314 A.D. and was also called Melchiodorus) to return the churches, cemeteries and people's properties which had been seized by the government. In the year 313 A.D., Miltiades presided over the first synod convened by a pope with governmental approval. This council settled the dispute within the church over the teachings of the splinter group known as Donatists. In perhaps his most memorable accomplishments, Miltiades succeeded in stopping the Roman persecution of Christians. He died a natural death and was the last pope who was buried in the famous Catacombs. But before his death, the church became a military, political institution. Constantine, himself, said: "One God, one church, one world". Therefore, he wanted to establish one worldwide empire with emperor and one people. And any idea that was against this caused the death of the group or person. So, in 400 A.D., Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, but it was brought through with violence. The truth of the cross was no more appreciated among the Christians. Therefore, true Christians like the popular North African church father Augustine (354-430 A.D.) did their best through writings about the doctrine of original sin, the fall of man and predestination to help people to receive Christ in their hearts and not by force. Augustine was one of the early pioneers who helped the church to develop and separate from politics. Later, he was greatly honoured for all this. But in his time, unfortunately, his bold engagement cost him his life. The power of the bishops grew into an imperial system until it was a question whether they or the political emperors ruled over the empire. So the church, instead of becoming heavenly-minded, continued to establish its own heaven on earth through violence in the name of the cross. They started to own nations, and for this, they chose the nations or continents which they wanted to possess. This violence went on until a new religious movement was born which is called Islam. And Islam started in a place where there had been Christian countries, before. This is where we have the beginning of the battle between the cross and the sword. Before, there had already started a battle between Jews and

Christians. The Christians made the Jews responsible for the death of Christ, and they were commanded by the people of their leadership to kill the “wicked race” and subdue the land for themselves. In the years 1088 and 1089, Pope Urban II said: “The city of Jerusalem has fallen into the hands of Arabs and Muslims.” Therefore, he wanted to use violence to deliver Jerusalem out of these peoples’ hands. So anybody who wanted to go and fight for Christianity was given a white cross as a symbol of defence. Had the Master Jesus Christ started His work with violence? This is the question which we as Christians of the twenty-first century have to ask ourselves, if we are willing to carry our true cross, daily, like Jesus asked us to do, and He didn’t mean we should use violence, but rather, that we should humble ourselves to serve the Lord and one another. For we all live in today cities with the sins of yesterday.

May God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ grant all of us the wisdom and understanding of His Son! Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him. Out of love for us, Jesus used the ugliest thing in the world, the cross, to triumph over sin and death, principalities and powers. Therefore, the cross reveals God’s love for us. Now you and I are called to take our cross and follow Him. May God through His Holy Spirit grant us courage and joy to remain the disciples of His Son Jesus Christ! The Word of God reveals to us in the life and teaching of Jesus that Easter means that the true way of Christian living leads us to the cross like Simon. Also, it teaches us that the reward of faithfulness and obedience in our own trials of suffering is that we will receive the crown of His glory. The Master wore a crown of thorns. He is the One Who has called us, and He has also already prepared for us the grace to learn to endure hardship as we follow Him. Therefore, individually, we must take our true cross and follow Christ in strength of patience and constancy of faith. Simon had fellowship with Christ through sharing in His sufferings. Then, he knew the secret of His strength and peace which is joy divine governed by love unspeakable. Even in our darkest hour, there will be the shining of His eternal light. The Almighty God will be the source of power, strength and stability in wisdom for all of us who are willing to take our true cross and follow Him, the only Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Yours in His service, F.P. Arthur (a missionary from Ghana/ West Africa)
Contact: peter-steffi@freenet.de