

"If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me."

You Are Carrying the Wrong Cross!

Introduction

If taking up your cross is not about carrying your suffering, what about the real hardships, the illness, the grief, the years that did not go the way you prayed? Those losses are not erased; the verse was never a command to keep them. A fair reader then asks whether dying to self is just a familiar churchy phrase dressed up. The difference is precise: the text does not ask you to feel worse or try harder; it asks you to disown one particular self, the one Peter showed when he tried to keep Jesus from the cross. Does total surrender then mean passivity? The grammar says the opposite, because deny and take up are a single, decisive act, whereas follow runs continuously. This is a deliberate turn rather than a slow resignation. And is crucified with Christ only Paul's mysticism? He is plain that the I that died is the self that had to stay in control, not the body still writing the letter. Read this way, the weight you were told to carry turns out to be the thing you were meant to set down.

In English, a cross slowly became a private hardship you carry without complaint, a weight handed to you by life and simply absorbed. But that meaning emerged long after the Gospels were written. When Jesus said take up your cross, the picture in everyone's mind was not hardship at all, but a public execution, and the command right before it carries a Greek verb far sharper than most Bibles render it. Put the picture and the grammar back together, and the verse stops asking you to endure something and starts asking you to set something down. The question it forces is the one the familiar reading never lets you ask.

The command in Matthew 16:24 opens with ἀπαρνέομαι (*aparneomai*), the verb most Bibles render as "deny yourself." Its range is not mild restraint but disowning, renouncing all claim. It is the same verb Jesus uses when Peter denies him in Matthew 26:34. Set beside it is σταυρός (*stauros*), the Roman execution stake, a death sentence rather than a chronic burden. One verse later, in Matthew 16:25, the life that can be lost is named ψυχή (*psychē*), the self. No single word carries the whole weight here. The range of the terms, the once-for-all grammar of deny and take up against the continuous grammar of follow, the immediate context of Peter being told he minds the things of man, and the parallel in Galatians 2:20, crucified with Christ yet no longer I who live, all converge on one reading. Take up your cross was never a call to endure pain. It names the death of the self that cannot stop trying to save itself and the strange relief of finally setting that old self down.

An Examination of the Text

There is a weight some people carry for years, and, strangely, they call it holy. It may be an illness that never lifted, a marriage gone cold, or a grief that never fully closed. Somewhere along the way, someone handed you a verse meant to explain it: “Take up your cross.” You were told that the suffering itself was the cross God asked you to carry. But the cross you were taught to carry is probably not the cross Jesus named.

When we read the verse in the language in which it was written and allow the original words to say what English softened, we realize that we carried the pain and called it our cross, as people do. But beneath the carrying sat a quiet belief that the suffering was the assignment and burden God had given us specifically, and that endurance was our obedience to His will. That is a heavy way to live. Many people live that way for decades, certain that it is what God asked, certain that the more it hurts, the more faithful they are. And very few, if anyone, ever told them there was anything wrong with that interpretation. The verse seems to bless the whole arrangement.

Carry your cross, the saying went, so they carried it, and the act slowly became one’s identity—the patient one, the one who refuses to complain. But few of them stopped to ask the question hiding in plain sight: whether the cross they were carrying was the one the verse actually meant. However, the phrase “take up your cross” has been used to mean something in your life that the first people who heard it would not have recognized. In the first century, only one kind of person ever carried a cross. We will get to who, and recognizing who the subject is changes the whole verse.

But for now, hold that question that cracks open the inherited reading. If “take up your cross” was never a command to endure your suffering, then which cross is Jesus actually telling you to pick up? The answer is not the one most readers carry; it was sitting three verses away from those words the entire time.

When you ask most people what taking up your cross means, you will hear a version of the same answer. It means bearing your burden and accepting the hard things God has permitted: the sick body, the difficult spouse, or the door that closed and stayed closed. People say it without even giving it a second thought; it’s just my cross to bear. It is one of those phrases that sound biblical precisely because they have been repeated in churches for so long. But repetition is not the same as accuracy. A saying can travel for centuries and still point in the wrong direction.

That phrase, “a cross to bear,” did not originate in the first century. It is an English expression that emerged long after the Gospels were written. Over centuries, it drifted into a meaning of its own—any chronic hardship a person is stuck with. The weight you did not choose and cannot put down; a burden handed to you by life or by God, which you simply accept. But notice what that drift quietly did. It turned the verse into a sponsor for *resignation*, not meaning “I quit,” but “I must endure this.” It mistakenly taught people that the holiest thing they could do with their pain was to keep it, to carry it without complaint, and to call that staying power “faith.” An entire posture toward suffering was built on a phrase Jesus never intended to be used as we now use it. It is a gentle teaching, in its way. It asks nothing of the self. It only asks you to

absorb. And that is the first clue that something is off, because the verse in front of us asks for the opposite of absorbing. Absorbing leaves the self in place and simply loads more onto it.

But this verse asks for the reverse. Keep that contrast close, because it is the hinge on which the whole thing turns. The inherited reading only adds to you. The original text is doing something else entirely. This is the problem: when Jesus said those words, that meaning did not yet exist. The people standing in front of Him did not hear “bear your burden.” The picture the word cross put in their minds was not a hardship at all; it was a death sentence. Therefore, the verse many have leaned on to explain their suffering was quietly answering a different question than the one they were asking. The English drifted from the original meaning. The image beneath it never moved an inch.

So, what did a first-century crowd actually see when Jesus stood up and said, “Take up your cross?” To them, a cross was not a metaphor but the most shameful way the Roman world knew to kill a man. It was used for slaves, rebels, and the people Rome wanted to erase in public. The disgrace ran so deep that Roman law prohibited its use on Roman citizens. A citizen could be put to death; a citizen was not to be crucified. The cross was the punishment for the lowest in society, and everyone in that crowd knew it.

To further emphasize the humiliation, the death was preceded by a parade. The condemned man did not simply appear at the crucifixion site. First, he was scourged, his back torn open by the whip. Then he was forced to carry the crossbeam himself, not the whole cross, just the heavy horizontal beam, laid across his shoulders and hauled through the streets to the place of execution beyond the city walls. This was the most deliberate part—*Rome wanted it seen*.

Frequently, a board was raised over the man, naming his crime for the whole street to read. This forced, humiliating walk was a sentence spoken aloud in front of everyone the criminal had ever known. The procession was the real punishment, and the crucifixion merely completed it. He carried it past the people who knew him, stripped of his name and standing, forced to drag the very wood on which he would die while the city watched. By the time he reached the hill, he had already died in every way that mattered to the people around him. The execution only made it final. The neighbors who had bought bread from him, the men he had worked beside, the children who knew his face, all of them watched him become a *warning*. That was the genius of the cruelty; it killed the man twice. Once in the eyes of everyone he knew, and once on the wood. The crowd understood exactly what they were seeing when a man took up a cross. They were not watching someone about to suffer through a hard season. They were watching someone die.

There is a phrase that still survives for it, and it fits the scene perfectly: “A dead man walking.” That was the whole meaning of the picture. Not a heavy stretch to push through, but an ending that had already been decided. The man carrying the beam had no future left to protect, and everyone watching knew it. It was the fate Rome reserved for the people it wanted erased from memory, not merely killed. That was the meaning the word conveyed when Jesus spoke it. Not difficulty, not a hard season, but the very worst the world could do to a person. And that is the exact piece the English fails to express. A burden is something you carry and still go home at the end of the day; this is the reverse. The beam on a man's shoulders announced there was no

home left to return to, no recovery waiting on the far side. The walk had one destination: the end of the man who walked it.

Now put the verse back in that first-century street. When the crowd hears “Take up your cross,” they do not hear “get through your hardship.” They hear, “pick up the thing you are going to die on and carry your own instrument of execution out to the hill.” Whoever you have been, that person does not come back from this walk. That is the weight of the word. Not endurance, but death. A chosen, public, and total end to the person you had been. The cross was never the image of a burden you keep. It was the image of a life you lay down.

This forces the question the English never let you ask. If the cross means the death of the self, then exactly which self is supposed to die? Before the cross in the verse, Jesus says something that the English renders almost mild, “Let him deny himself.” Most Bibles render that as self-discipline: skip a meal, give something up for a season, or hold back a little on yourself, that is, a small, manageable restraint.

Conversely, the Greek text will not allow it to remain that small. The word is ἀπαρνέομαι (aparneomai). Its plain range is not restraint at all; rather, it means “to disown, to deny utterly.” To say of someone, “I have no connection to this person; I do not know them.” And the lexicons carry a second shade of it that lands even closer to the bone: to lose sight of yourself and to stop treating your own interests as the center of everything. This is the detail that should stop you cold. It is the exact same verb Jesus uses a few chapters later about Peter, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” That denial, that frightened, total cutting of every tie, “I do not know the man,” is aparneomai. The same word is applied to a person.

Thus, when the verse says “deny yourself,” it is not asking for a smaller plate. It is asking you to do to yourself what Peter did to Jesus in that courtyard, disown it! Stand before it and refuse it as Peter refused to be caught holding a name he feared. Think about what disowning actually means. You have to sever the claim the thing has on you; you stop answering when it calls. Jesus is telling you to look at yourself and say exactly that. “Your demands are not mine to obey; I owe you nothing, and I will not go down protecting you.” That is a violent thing to say to yourself, and Jesus intends it to be. He is not after a tidier version of the same self; He is after a clean break with it.

Also, notice what he does not say. He does not say deny your body, or deny the world, or deny the people who wrong you. He says **deny yourself**. The thing to be disowned is the one doing the clinging. The very part now hearing these words and already calculating how little it can afford to give up. And the grammar sharpens it once more. In Greek, “deny” and “take up” are not slow habits you grow into over a lifetime. They are cast in a form that denotes a single decisive act. In one motion, cut the tie *once*.

Only the third command, follow, is designed to keep running after it, and we will come back to why that one is different. For now, sit with its shape. Two commands that happen once, and one that never stops. The denial is a door you walk through once. What waits on the other side is a road, and the road is the rest of your life. But that only deepens the mystery instead of solving it. You can disown a person standing in front of you, but how do you disown your own self? And

which self is Jesus even pointing to? You would think a command this severe would name its target. It does.

The answer was three verses earlier, where Jesus first says he must die, in a moment most readers walk straight past. Just before this verse, Jesus tells the disciples something they cannot accept. He is going to suffer, be rejected, and be killed. Peter cannot bear it. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, “Never, Lord. This will never happen to you.” That sounds like loyalty and like love for a friend. But Jesus answers with the hardest words he ever speaks to a disciple, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (NASB). Think about what just happened there. Peter’s instinct was to protect, to preserve, and to keep Jesus and himself from the cross, to save the life they already had together. But Jesus names that instinct “the things of man.”

Then, in the very next breath, Jesus turns to all of them and says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross.” That sequence is not an accident. Peter has just shown you, out loud, that it is the self that must die. The self always guards its own life at any cost. The self that says, “Not the cross, anything but the cross.” That is the self that Jesus tells you to disown, not your body or your pain, but the part of you that will do anything to avoid loss.

You know this self better than you would like to admit. It is the one that rehearses the argument at midnight so it can win; the one that needs the apology, the credit, and to always be right; and the one that tightens when control begins to slip. Just to be clear, Peter was not a villain in that scene. He was simply that self, speaking out loud. And most of us are that self most of the time, quietly arranging our lives to keep the cross from ever coming near.

The Greek word for cross, σταυρός (*stauros*), points in the same direction. *Stauros* is the upright stake, the execution post, first and foremost. But within its range, the lexicons note a second sense, “exposure to death and self-denial.” Thus, the word for the killing-post already carries the death of the self within it. No single word does all of this on its own; the two words converge. The death-march image in the street: *aparneomai*, to disown, and *stauros*, the Roman execution stake.

Peter’s self-preservation, named by Jesus as the things of man. And then, one verse later, Jesus says it almost plainly, “Whoever would save his life will lose it.” The Greek word there is ψυχή (*psychē*, meaning the self), the very life you keep trying to rescue. Paraphrasing Jesus, “Lose it, and you find it.” Clutch it, and it runs through your fingers. This is the math the whole passage has been building toward. The self that fights hardest to keep its life is the one certain to lose it, because it pours everything into a grip that never held. The self that lets go loses nothing that was ever real and gains the one thing it could never force into being. A life no longer braced against loss.

That is the trade the cross has always described. Not pain for reward, but a grip traded for freedom. This is what I hope you take away from this article: **The cross was never your suffering. It was the self that would not stop trying to save itself. The burden you were told to endure was never an assignment Jesus gave to anyone.** But if the self that dies is the self

that clings to its own survival, then what are you actually walking toward once that self is laid down?

Notice the sequence once more: 1) Deny yourself, 2) Take up your cross, and 3) Follow me. The first two are that single decisive act we already discussed, namely, disowning the self and picking up the cross. But the third verb changes character entirely; “follow” is not a one-time decision. In Greek, it is continuous, meaning “keep following, keep walking the same road, day after day.” This was never a single act of heroics. It is a death you choose once, and then a life you keep walking, free at last, because the self that had to be defended is no longer steering.

Paul says the very same thing, and he says it without a single layer of mystery. In Galatians 2:20, he writes, “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Read that again, but this time read it slowly and carefully, because it is far too easy to rush past it and continue reading the rest of the chapter. The “I” that was crucified is not Paul's body, because he obviously is still breathing as he writes the sentence. The “I” that died is the self that believed it had to run everything; the self that had to stay in control and be saved.

That is the whole picture, finally converged. The cross is the death of the self that clings to itself, not the endurance of pain; it is the release of the one inside you who could never stop defending its own life. Once you see that, the heaviness of the old reading finally makes sense. It was heavy because it left the self in charge. It told you to endure more while the part of you that needed to die kept running the entire operation underneath. It's no wonder this verse failed to uplift anyone. You were mistakenly asked to carry a cross while shielding the very thing the cross was meant to end. That is also why the relief is real, not just a softer feeling. Nothing about your circumstances has to change for it to arrive. The illness can still be the illness, and the loss can still be the loss. What changes is that you are no longer required to drag the self that has to win, has to be safe, and has to manage the outcome.

That self can be set down today. The strange thing is how much of the exhaustion was never the hardship itself; it was the carrying of that. Your suffering was real. None of this makes it smaller. But recognize that it was never the cross you were commanded to carry. You were handed *someone else's reading* and told that the pain itself was holy. And so you did the most exhausting thing a person can do. You kept the suffering, and you kept the self, too. You bore the hardship on the outside, while the part of you that has to stay in control, that has to be approved, that has to be safe, kept running underneath it, completely untouched.

You didn't realize you were carrying two crosses the whole time. Importantly, the one you were never asked to carry is the one that broke your back. The cross was always pointed at that other self, not at your pain, but at the self that cannot stop trying to save itself. There is a strange mercy in it: the lighter load. The very thing Jesus asked you to set down is the one that has been wearing you out. The verse was never asking you to carry more. It was asking you to put down the one thing you were never meant to keep.