

SIMON OF CYRENE

BIO-14

Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26

1. **Matthew 27:32** “And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross.” *KJV*
2. **Mark 15:21** And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross. *KJV*
3. **Luke 23:26** And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus. *KJV*

I. JESUS IS CONDEMNED TO DEATH

- A. Jesus was arrested in the late evening in Gethesamane. An olive orchard.
- B. He was tried before the Sanhedrin.
- C. He was tried before Pilate, before Herod, and before Pilate again.
 1. He is scourged and treated contemptuously.
 2. Finally, Pilate reluctantly gives him over for crucifixion.
- D. The picture – still early in the morning, perhaps before 9 A.M.
 1. They scourged him again.
 2. A centurion and four soldiers are charged to crucify Him (John 19:23)
 3. The criminals are made to carry their own crosses.
 - a. A part of the degradation. (Jesus was probably carrying the cross intended originally for Barabbas.)
 - b. They usually marched along wearing a sign around their neck stating their crimes.
 - 1) This sign would later be nailed over the heads of the criminals announcing for all to see the reason for their execution.
 - 2) Jesus’ sign was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek.
 4. Picture the procession going up the narrow streets of Jerusalem.
 - a. We don’t know Jesus’ order in the line.
 - b. But he was crucified in the middle – Luke 23:32.
 - c. Jesus talks with some women along the way – Luke 23:27f.
 5. Assuming that the palace of Pilate (the Fortress of Antonia) was near the Joppa Gate and the place of crucifixion as the traditional sight, the distance would be about 1/3 mile.

6. By the time the procession gets to the city gate Jesus apparently was having trouble carrying his cross. Tradition says that he fell beneath the weight of the cross.
 - a. Remember he was scourged twice with cat-o-nine tails.
 - b. He was up all night, had no rest, and is weak and exhausted, having already lost a lot of blood.
 - c. He may have fallen under the weight of the cross, or was just slowing the procession down so that the soldiers become impatient with the delay.
 - d. Whatever the reason, the soldiers look around for someone to help him.
 - e. They find Simon to bear the cross.
7. The reason why this particular man was seized to help Jesus is not suggested.
 - a. It may be that the Roman soldiers, afraid their victim would die before they got him to the place of crucifixion, just quickly picked the first person handy.
 - b. Some think that Simon was known as a secret-disciple and that someone in the crowd pointed him out to the soldiers.
 - c. Or that he had reproached the soldiers for treating Jesus so cruelly, and in spite, they made him bear the cross.
8. But bear in mind that Simon was not with that crowd on its way out to Calvary.
 - a. He met the death procession as he was coming into the city from the country.

II. SIMON OF CYRENE

A. Simon of Cyrene

1. Cyrene was an ancient city in Cyrenaica in North Africa.
 - a. It was founded as a Greek colony 631 B.C.
 - b. Following 96 B.C. its history was closely related to Rome.
 - c. We know there was a large Jewish colony there from Acts 2:10; 6:9.

2. Because Cyrene was in Africa, some have thought Simon was a black man.
 - a. This would explain, some think, why the Romans so quickly picked him to bear the cross.
 - b. It has been suggested that he is the same as Simon Niger in Acts 13:1, and that this may be another indication he was either a black man, or of a dark complexion, since Niger means “black.”
3. Most likely, he was a Hellenistic Jew of the Jewish colony of Cyrene.
 - a. He has probably come to Jerusalem for the Passover.
 - b. If he sailed to Joppa, and came to Jerusalem on the Joppa highway, he would come into Jerusalem at the Joppa Gate, the very one allegedly that Jesus was carried out on the way to Golgotha.
 - c. He arrives coming into the city as the march to Calvary comes out.
4. There were many Cyrenians that came to Jerusalem for the holidays.
 - a. Many were there on Pentecost – Acts 2:10.
 - b. There were enough of them to have their own synagogue – Acts 6:9.
 - c. The hellenistic Jews didn’t get along very well with the local Jewish leaders.
 - 1) The Palestinian Jews despised those of the dispersion.
 - d. They foreign Jews often had their own synagogues and sometimes they banded together with other Hellenistic Jews to form a synagogue.
5. It may be the Simon had arrived earlier and was staying in a village on the north side of Jerusalem.
 - a. Jesus did not stay in Jerusalem at night, but in Bethany to the south-east of Jerusalem.
 - b. Perhaps he was on his way to the temple or the Cyrenian synagogue for the morning hour of prayer.
6. As he approached the city gate, he meets the procession with Jesus.
 - a. He probably didn’t know anything about this Jesus.
 - b. Or if he had heard of him, it was just fragments he picked up on previous Passover visits.

B. THE INCIDENT

1. For a Roman soldier to bear the cross of a criminal was unthinkable.
 - a. To compel one of the Jews of the city to bear the cross would be sure to stir up more trouble.

- b. Part of the degradation of the criminal was to bear his own cross, and to have to bear it for him was just as spiteful.
 - c. Perhaps this was the reason the Roman soldiers picked this stranger to Jerusalem.
- 2. He too probably resented it at first as much as any other Jews.
 - a. A black poet has written the story of Simon of Cyrene. And he writes it from the angle that Simon was a black man too.
 - b. Simon at first resents the task of bearing Jesus' cross, but afterwards he does so willingly, because as the suffering man looks back at him he is conquered by the love and pity he sees in the prisoner's eyes.
 - c. At first, I said I will not bear
His cross upon my back;
He only seeks to place it there
Because my skin is black.

But He was dying for a dream,
And He was very meek;
And in His eyes there shone a gleam
Men journey far to seek.

It was Himself my pity bought;
I did for Christ alone
What all of Rome could not have wrought
With bruise of lash or stone.
- 3. The Roman soldiers "compelled" Simon to bear the cross.
[See "A New Testament Wordbook", William Barclay, Harper, n.d. p. 15f, for an excellent study of the word "compelled."]
 - a. This word has a definite rich meaning. It means to "forcibly impress someone into service."
 - b. In an occupied country this was a grave and serious thing. Anyone could be impressed to carry the baggage of the army for a certain distance; anyone could be compelled to perform any service the occupiers chose to lay upon him such as providing a horse or acting as guide.
 - c. This is what happened to Simon of Cyrene.
 - d. This is what Jesus had reference to in Matthew 5:41 "And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain."

- e. This business of impressment was one of the bitterest and most constant humiliations that subject nations had to endure.
- 4. Perhaps Simon didn't bear the weight of the entire cross.
 - a. Luke 23:26 sounds like Jesus carried the front heavy part of the it still. [**Luke 23:26** "And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus." *KJV*]
 - b. He may have not borne the full cross, but only the cross-piece. The upright part of the cross may have remained in ground, we don't know.
- C. Now for what Paul Harvey would call "**THE REST OF THE STORY**"

WHY ARE TOLD HIS NAME?

- 1. I'm sure that the reason we are told his name by three of the gospel accounts is that he later became a well known Christian.
- 2. **Mark 15:21** mentions, somewhat in parentheses, that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus.
 - a. Why would Mark write this?
 - b. Remember the Mark wrote his gospel for the Roman audience.
 - 1) His name was John Mark, or Marcus, like Mark Anthony, for whom he was probably named. He may have had a Roman father and a Jewish mother, like Timothy.
 - c. Those sons of Simon must have been will known to Mark's Roman audience when he wrote this gospel, and so he mentions a personal acquaintance of theirs.
- 3. Paul adds to this information in **Romans 16:13** when he wrote: "Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine." *KJV*
 - a. Rufus was a Christian in Rome and was well known. (Perhaps Alexander was still in Cyrene, or more likely already dead, as well as his father, by the time Mark wrote this gospel.)

- b. But it is gratifying to think that the one Paul mentions with respectful affection was the wife of that Simon who bore our Savior's cross.
 - c. So this man Simon, who bore the cross of Jesus, is blessed to have his name, his sons' names, and his wife made immortal and remember through the ages.
- 4. But there may be even more to the story. For instance, Paul must have met Rufus some place else before his letter to the Romans, for Paul had never yet been to Rome.
 - a. And Paul refers to Rufus' mother as "his mother and mine." At some location where their paths had intersected Rufus's mother, Simon of Cyrene's wife, must have become a very dear person in the life of Paul.
 - b. Do we know of anyplace in the life of Paul where his path crossed with that of a Cyrene Christian any length of time? Yes we do. And it was at Antioch of Syria. That very place where the disciples were first called Christians.
- 5. We read how the gospel was first preached in Antioch in **Acts 11:19-21**. One of the men most instrumental was a man from Cyrene who came preaching the gospel to the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus.
 - a. When the apostles heard about the growing church in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to encourage them – **Acts 11:22-25**.
 - b. Barnabas in turn, went over to Tarsus, a few miles away, and got Paul, or Saul as he was called at this time, to come over to Antioch and help. **Acts 11:26**. "and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch."
 - c. Now we read in Acts 13 of a Simeon who was called by a Latin nickname "black" or "blackie" and a friend of his from Cyrene name Lucius who were prophets in the church at Antioch.
 - 1) It was after spending a year at Antioch that Paul left on his first missionary journey.
 - 2) This year would have been ample time to get to know "Rufus" and for his mother to also be a mother to him.

III. SIMON'S BLESSED OPPORTUNITY

- A. Perhaps at the time Simon despised the job he had to do.
1. The Romans may have given him a job that seemed an insult, but in truth it was the highest honor. How many of us have not wished we could have been there to help bear the cross?
 2. However it was, we certainly envy Simon for the honorable and helpful service he was permitted to render our suffering Lord.
 - a. Fix attention on him as the one man who helped Jesus in his sorest needs.
 - b. From His arrest to his death, no apostle helped Him, no disciple was by His side to aid him, He was all alone.
 - c. This stranger, this unknown Simon of Cyrene breaks this loneliness and shares with Jesus, the burden of his cross.
 - d. One Simon, a friend of Jesus, denied Him; another Simon, a stranger, bare His cross.
 3. After Simon became a Christian, don't you suppose his great glory was in telling how he had the privilege of bearing the cross for Jesus.
 4. How Simon could tell over and over how he went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Pascal Feast and had unknowingly met the real Pascal Lamb of God and walked with Him to Calvary to be slain.
- B. We see the Cross-bearing Simon – **Luke 23:26**.
1. How well Simon fulfills the passages in **Matt. 16:24** "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."
 - a. Simon bore Christ's cross and followed Him.
 - b. We must bear our own cross and follow Jesus.
 2. The people were well acquainted with the Roman method of crucifixion when Jesus said this. It seems from the number of times "take up your cross" is repeated, it was perhaps a common expression among the people.
 3. Jesus in these six passages where he uses the expression, hints at the type of death he will suffer.
 - a. He at the same time challenges those who would be His disciples to pick up a cross and follow Him.

- b. The way we know this is symbolic and not a literal challenge to die on a cross for Him, is that in Luke 9:23 He says, “let him deny himself and take up his cross **daily** and follow me.”
- c. Our cross is the trials, persecutions, and ridicule that may be heaped on us for following the Lord, etc.

C. Think of the opportunity that Simon had.

- 1. There was no friend to Jesus in this hard ordeal.
 - a. How lonely Jesus must have been.
 - b. Now He has a companion helping Him to bear the cross.
- 2. We can't even imagine the conversation that might have taken place at this time.
 - a. We would gladly have helped Christ bear the cross in silence.
 - b. But to have the privilege to be near Christ and speak with Him in these historic moments– what a blessing of blessings!
- 3. If Simon was not a Christian before, and I don't think he was, perhaps it was these precious minutes so close to the Savior that brought him to his knees and caused him to confess that Jesus is the Son of God.

D. Have you ever wondered what was Simon's reward for this work?

- 1. From the Romans doubtlessly he received nothing.
- 2. But Christ was not one to ever let a deed done Him go unrewarded.
 - a. When invited to a wedding feast, He turned water into wine.
 - b. When a Samaritan gave Him water from a well for this thirst, He gave her to drink of the Living Water.
 - c. When He was simply “thanked” for one deed, He rewarded the person with another blessings.
 - d. When a sinful woman washed His feet and dried them with her hair, she was rewarded.
 - e. When a humble home offered Him hospitality on a Sabbath day, He touched its mistress and healed her of a fever.
 - f. No, He wasn't one to let a good deed done Him go unrewarded.

3. Well, what was Simon's reward?
 - a. I think it was this, the salvation of his soul.
 - b. There's no doubt that Simon became a Christian.
 - c. His deed for Christ brought him so close to God that he either then, or sometimes later, became His disciple.
4. But his blessing went ever further than himself.
 - a. He had two sons, probably waiting for back home in Cyrene, Alexander and Rufus.
 - b. And what a message he had to carry back to them.
 - c. When Mark wrote his account of the Life of Christ, these two sons had become Christians.
5. And it seems from **Romans 16:13** that the apostle Paul had probably made his home with the family for a period.
 - a. For he sent his respectful greetings to the wife of Simon in Rome as being a kind of mother to him.
 - b. Romans 16:13.

IV. WHAT BLESSINGS WILL COME OUR WAY ALSO WHEN WE FAITHFULLY BEAR OUR CROSS AND FOLLOW JESUS

- A. It will bring spiritual blessings to our lives that cannot be counted or measured.
 1. It will provide the proper atmosphere for our family.
 2. It will give us happiness and gladness years to come.
- B. I know of a true story that I want to tell you right here.
 1. This man's name was also Simon. He was attending a state university at the time this incident happened.
 2. He was meeting with much ridicule and opposition to his faith at the time and he was feeling very low.
 - a. He began to pray and opened his little New Testament.
 - b. He was intending to open it to one of the epistles, perhaps Philippians, and to read something that would comfort him.
 - c. But he had his Testament upside down, and when he turned it around, he found his fingers at **Luke 23:26**.
 - d. "They laid hold on one Simon ... and on him they laid the cross."
 3. He began to take courage and say within himself, "Let them lay it on me, Lord. Give me strength to bear it for thy sake to the end of life."

C. WILL WE BEAR OUR CROSS AND FOLLOW JESUS?

I think of the Cyrenian
Who passed the city gate
When the press was pouring forth
That bore Thy cruel fate.

I ponder what thoughts
Awoke within him that day,
As he bore his unchosen burden
Up Calvary's way.

Yes, Lord, Thou must have looked on Simon,
Turn Lord, and look on me,
That I may take up courage
And bear Thy cross for Thee.