

Devotional Thoughts :: The Imitation of Christ by Æ Kempis Thomas

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CHAPTER XII

Of the royal way of the Holy Cross

That seemeth a hard saying to many, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his Cross and follow Me.(1) But it will be much harder to hear that last sentence, Depart from me, ye wicked, into eternal fire.(2) For they who now willingly hear the word of the Cross and follow it, shall not then fear the hearing of eternal damnation. This sign of the Cross shall be in heaven when the Lord cometh to Judgment. Then all servants of the Cross, who in life have conformed themselves to the Crucified, shall draw nigh unto Christ the Judge with great boldness.

2. Why fearest thou then to take up the cross which leadeth to a kingdom? In the Cross is health, in the Cross is life, in the Cross is protection from enemies, in the Cross is heavenly sweetness, in the Cross strength of mind, in the Cross joy of the spirit, in the Cross the height of virtue, in the Cross perfection of holiness. There is no health of the soul, no hope of eternal life, save in the Cross. Take up therefore, thy cross and follow Jesus and thou shalt go into eternal life. He went before thee bearing His Cross and died for thee upon the Cross, that thou also mayest bear thy cross and mayest love to be crucified upon it. For if thou be dead with Him, thou shalt also live with Him, and if thou be a partaker of His sufferings thou shalt be also of His glory.

3. Behold everything dependeth upon the Cross, and everything lieth in dying; and there is none other way unto life and to true inward peace, except the way of the Holy Cross and of daily mortification. Go where thou wilt, seek whatsoever thou wilt, and thou shalt find no higher way above nor safer way below, than the way of the Holy Cross. Dispose and order all things according to thine own will and judgment, and thou shalt ever find something to suffer either willingly or unwillingly, and thus thou shalt ever find thy cross. For thou shalt either feel pain of body, or tribulation of spirit within thy soul.

4. Sometimes thou wilt be forsaken of God, sometimes thou wilt be tried by thy neighbour, and which is more, thou wilt often be wearisome to thyself. And still thou canst not be delivered nor eased by any remedy or consolation, but must bear so long as God will. For God will have thee learn to suffer tribulation without consolation, and to submit thyself fully to it, and by tribulation be made more humble. No man understandeth the Passion of Christ in his heart so well as he who hath had somewhat of the like suffering himself. The Cross therefore is always ready, and every where waiteth for thee. Thou canst not flee from it whithersoever thou hurriest, for whithersoever thou comest, thou bearest thyself with thee, and shalt ever find

thyself. Turn thee above, turn thee below, turn thee without, turn thee within, and in them all thou shalt find the Cross; and needful is it that thou everywhere possess patience if thou wilt have internal peace and gain the everlasting crown.

5. If thou willingly bear the Cross, it will bear thee, and will bring thee to the end which thou seekest, even where there shall be the end of suffering; though it shall not be here. If thou bear it unwillingly, thou makest a burden for thyself and greatly increaseth thy load, and yet thou must bear it. If thou cast away one cross, without doubt thou shalt find another and perchance a heavier.

6. Thinketh thou to escape what no mortal hath been able to avoid? Which of the saints in the world hath been without the cross and tribulation? For not even Jesus Christ our Lord was one hour without the anguish of His Passion, so long as He lived. It behooved, He said, Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and so enter into his glory.(3) And how dost thou seek another way than this royal way, which is the way of the Holy Cross?

7. The whole life of Christ was a cross and martyrdom, and dost thou seek for thyself rest and joy? Thou art wrong, thou art wrong, if thou seekest aught but to suffer tribulations, for this whole mortal life is full of miseries, and set round with crosses. And the higher a man hath advanced in the spirit, the heavier crosses he will often find, because the sorrow of his banishment increaseth with the strength of his love.

8. But yet the man who is thus in so many wise afflicted, is not without refreshment of consolation, because he feeleth abundant fruit to be growing within him out of the bearing of his cross. For whilst he willingly submitteth himself to it, every burden of tribulation is turned into an assurance of divine comfort, and the more the flesh is wasted by affliction, the more is the spirit strengthened mightily by inward grace. And oftentimes so greatly is he comforted by the desire for tribulation and adversity, through love of conformity to the Cross of Christ, that he would not be without sorrow and tribulation; for he believeth that he shall be the more acceptable to God, the more and the heavier burdens he is able to bear for His sake. This is not the virtue of man, but the grace of Christ which hath such power and energy in the weak flesh, that what it naturally hateth and fleeth from, this it draweth to and loveth through fervour of spirit.

9. It is not in the nature of man to bear the cross, to love the cross, to keep under the body and to bring it into subjection, to fly from honours, to bear reproaches meekly, to despise self and desire to be despised, to bear all adversities and losses, and to desire no prosperity in this world. If thou lookest to thyself, thou wilt of thyself be able to do none of this; but if thou trustest in the Lord, endurance shall be given thee from heaven, and the world and the flesh shall be made subject to thy command. Yea, thou shalt not even fear thine adversary the devil, if thou be armed with faith and signed with the Cross of Christ.

10. Set thyself, therefore, like a good and faithful servant of

Christ, to the manful bearing of the Cross of thy Lord, who out of love was crucified for thee. Prepare thyself for the bearing many adversities and manifold troubles in this wretched life; because so it shall be with thee wheresoever thou art, and so in very deed thou shalt find it, wherever thou hide thyself. This it must be; and there is no means of escaping from tribulation and sorrow, except to bear them patiently. Drink thou lovingly thy Lord's cup if thou desirest to be His friend and to have thy lot with Him. Leave consolations to God, let Him do as seemeth best to Him concerning them. But do thou set thyself to endure tribulations, and reckon them the best consolations; for the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us,(4) nor would they be even if thou wert to endure them all.

11. When thou hast come to this, that tribulation is sweet and pleasant to thee for Christ's sake, then reckon that it is well with thee, because thou hast found paradise on earth. So long as it is hard to thee to suffer and thou desirest to escape, so long it will not be well with thee, and tribulations will follow thee everywhere.

12. If thou settest thyself to that thou oughtest, namely, to suffer and to die, it shall soon go better with thee, and thou shalt find peace. Though thou shouldest be caught up with Paul unto the third heaven,(5) thou art not on that account secure from suffering evil. I will show him, saith Jesus, what great things he must suffer for My Name's sake.(6) It remaineth, therefore, to thee to suffer, if thou wilt love Jesus and serve Him continually.

13. Oh that thou wert worthy to suffer something for the name of Jesus, how great glory should await thee, what rejoicing among all the saints of God, what bright example also to thy neighbour! For all men commend patience, although few be willing to practise it. Thou oughtest surely to suffer a little for Christ when many suffer heavier things for the world.

14. Know thou of a surety that thou oughtest to lead the life of a dying man. And the more a man dieth to himself, the more he beginneth to live towards God. None is fit for the understanding of heavenly things, unless he hath submitted himself to bearing adversities for Christ. Nothing more acceptable to God, nothing more healthful for thyself in this world, than to suffer willingly for Christ. And if it were thine to choose, thou oughtest rather to wish to suffer adversities for Christ, than to be refreshed with manifold consolations, for thou wouldest be more like Christ and more conformed to all saints. For our worthiness and growth in grace lieth not in many delights and consolations, but rather in bearing many troubles and adversities.

15. If indeed there had been anything better and more profitable to the health of men than to suffer, Christ would surely have shown it by word and example. For both the disciples who followed Him, and all who desire to follow Him, He plainly exhorteth to bear their cross, and saith, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow

Me.(7) So now that we have thoroughly read and studied all things, let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.(8)

(1) Matthew xvi. 24. (2) Matthew xxv. 41. (3) Luke xxiv. 46.

(4) Romans viii. 18. (5) 2 Corinthians xii. 2.

(6) Acts ix. 16. (7) Luke ix. 23. (8) Acts xiv. 21.