

**Articles and Sermons :: The Subjective Working of the Cross - Watchman Nee****The Subjective Working of the Cross - Watchman Nee - posted by AbideinHim (), on: 2016/12/8 21:03****THE SUBJECTIVE WORKING OF THE CROSS**

We must keep before us now four passages from the Gospels. They are : Matthew 10. 34 - 39 ; Mark 8. 32, 35; Luke 17. 32 - 34; and John 12.24 - 26. These four passages have something in common. In each you have the Lord Himself speaking to us concerning the soul-activity of man, and in each a different aspect or manifestation of the soul-life is touched upon. In these verses He makes it very plain that the soul of man can be dealt with in one way and in one way only, and that is by our bearing the cross daily and following Him.

As we have just seen, the soul-life or natural life that is here in view is something further than what we have in those passages which are concerned with the old man or the flesh. We have sought to make quite clear that, in respect of our old man, God emphasizes the thing He has done once for all in crucifying us with Christ on the Cross. We have seen that three times in the Epistle to the Galatians the 'crucifying' aspect of the Cross is referred to as a thing accomplished; and in Romans 6. 6 we have the clear statement that " our old man was crucified", which, if the tense of the word means anything, we might well paraphrase: 'Our old man has been finally and for ever crucified'. It is something done, to be apprehended by Divine revelation and then appropriated by faith.

But there is a further aspect of the Cross, namely that implied in the expression 'bearing his cross daily', which is before us now. The Cross has borne me; now I must bear it; and this bearing of the Cross is an inward thing. It is this that we mean when we speak of 'the subjective working of the Cross'. Moreover it is a daily process; it is a step by step following after Him. It is this which is now brought before us in relation to the soul, and let us note that the emphasis here is not quite the same as with the old man. We do not have here the ' crucifixion ' of the soul itself, in the sense that our natural gifts and faculties, our personality and our individuality, are to be put away altogether. Were it so it could hardly be said of us, as it is in Hebrews 10. 39, that we are to " have faith unto the saving of the soul ". (Compare 1 Peter 1. 9; Luke 21.19.) No, we do not lose our souls in this sense, for to do so would be to lose our individual existence completely. The soul is still there with its natural endowments, but the Cross is brought to bear upon it to bring those natural endowments into death, to put the mark of His death upon them, and thereafter, as God may please, to give them back to us in resurrection.

It is in this sense that Paul, writing to the Philippians, expresses the desire " that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming conformed unto his death" (Phil. 3.10). The mark of death is upon the soul all the time to bring it to the place where it is always subordinate to the Spirit and never independently asserts itself. Only the Cross, working in such a way, could make a man of the calibre of Paul, and with the natural resources hinted at in Philippians 3, so distrust his own natural strength that he could write to the Corinthians: " I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God " (1 Cor. 2. 2, 3).

The soul is the seat of the affections, and what a great part of our decisions and actions is influenced by these ! There is nothing deliberately sinful about them, mind you, but it is simply that there is something in us which can go out in natural affection to another person, and which as a result can influence wrongly our whole course of action. So in the first of the four passages before us the Lord has to say: " He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that doth not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me " (Matt. 10. 37, 38). You note that to follow the Lord in the way of the Cross is set before us as His normal, His only way for us. What immediately follows? " He that findeth his soul shall lose it; and he that loseth his soul for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 10. 39, mg.).

The secret danger lies in the subtle working of the affections to turn us away from the pathway of God; and the key to the matter is the soul. The Cross has to deal with that. I have to " lose" my soul in the sense in which the Lord meant those words, and which we are seeking here to explain.

Some of us know well what it means to lose our soul. We can no longer fulfil its desire; we cannot give in to it; we cannot gratify it: that is the ' loss' of the soul. We are going through a painful process to discourage what the soul is asking for.

And many a time we have to confess that it is not any definite sin that is keeping us from following the Lord to the end. We are held up because of some secret love somewhere, some perfectly natural affection diverting our course. Yes, affection plays a great part in our lives, and the Cross has to come in there and do its work.

Then we pass to the reference in Mark chapter 8. I think that is a most important passage. Our Lord had just taught His disciples at Caesarea Philippi that He was going to suffer death at the hands of the elders of the Jews, and then Peter, with all his love for his Master, came up and rebuked Him and said to Him: ' Lord, do not do it; pity Thyself: this shall never come to Thee ! Out of his love for the Lord he appealed to Him to spare Himself; and the Lord rebuked Peter, as He would rebuke Satan, for caring for the things of men and not the things of God. And then to all present the word was spoken once more: " If any man would come after me let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his soul shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his soul for my sake and the gospel's shall save it" (Mark 8. 34, 35, mg.).

The whole question at issue is again that of the soul, and here it is particularly of the soul's desire for self preservation. There is that subtle working of the soul which says, ' If I could be allowed to live I would do anything, be willing for anything; but I must be kept alive!' There you have the soul almost crying out for help. ' Going to the Cross, being crucified, oh that is really too much! Have mercy on yourself; pity yourself ! Do you mean to say you are going against yourself and going with God ?' Some of us know well that in order to go on with God we have many a time to go against the voice of the soul, our own or other people's, and to let the Cross come in to silence that appeal for self- preservation.

Am I afraid of the will of God? The dear saint whom I have already mentioned as having had such an influence upon the course of my life, many times asked me the question: 'Do you like the will of God?' It is a tremendous question. She did not ask, 'Do you do the will of God?' she always asked, 'Do you like the will of God?' That question cuts deeper than anything else. I remember once she was having a controversy with the Lord over a certain matter. She knew what the Lord wanted, and in her heart she wanted it too. But it was difficult, and I heard her pray like this: ' Lord, I confess I don't like it , but please do not give in to me. Just wait, Lord, and I will give in to Thee.' She did not want the Lord to yield to her and to reduce His demands upon her. She wanted nothing but to please Him.

Many a time we have to come to the place where we are willing to let go things we think to be good and precious, yes, and even, it may be, the very things of God themselves, that His will may be done. Peter's concern was for his Lord and was dictated by his natural love for Him. We might feel that Peter had a marvellous love for his Lord, sufficient even for him to dare to rebuke Him. Only a strong love could bring one to attempt that! Yes, but when there is purity of spirit without that mixture of soul, you will not be led into Peter's mistake. You will recognize the will of God and you will find that that is what your heart delights in alone. You will no longer even shed a tear in sympathy with the flesh. Yes, the Cross cuts deeply, and we see here once more how utterly it has to deal with the soul.

Once again the Lord Jesus deals with the matter of the soul in Luke chapter 17, and now it is in relation to His return. Speaking of " the day that the Son of man is revealed", He draws a parallel between that day and "the day that Lot went out from Sodom" (verses 29, 30). A little later He speaks of the ' rapture ' in the twice repeated words: " One shall be taken, and the other shall be left " (verses 34, 35). But between His reference to the calling of Lot out of Sodom and this allusion to the rapture, the Lord says these remarkable words: " In that day, he which shall be on the housetop, and his goods in the house, let him not go down to take them away: and let him that is in the field likewise not return back. Remember Lot's wife" (verses 31, 32). Remember Lot's wife! Why? Because "whosoever shall seek to gain his soul shall lose it: but whosoever shall lose his soul shall save it alive" (verse 33, mg.).

If I mistake not, this is the one passage in the New Testament that tells of our reaction to the rapture call. We may have thought that when the Son of man comes we shall be taken up automatically, as it were, because of what we read in 1 Corinthians 15. 51, 52: " We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump . . . " Well, however we reconcile the two passages, this one in Luke's Gospel should at least make us pause and reflect; for the emphasis is here very strongly upon one being taken and the other left. It is a matter of our reaction to the call to go, and on the basis of this a most urgent appeal is made to us to be ready (compare Matt. 24. 42).

There is surely a reason for this. Clearly that call is not going to produce a miraculous last-minute change in us out of all relation to our previous walk with the Lord. No, in that moment we shall discover our heart's real treasure. If it is the Lord Himself, then there will be no backward look. A backward glance decides everything. It is so easy to become more attached to the gifts of God than to the Giver, and even, I should add, to the work of God than to God Himself.

Let me illustrate. At the present time, I am writing a book. I have finished eight chapters and I have another nine to write,

about which I am very seriously exercised before the Lord. But if the call to 'Come up hither' should come and my reaction were to be, 'What about my book?' the answer might well be, 'All right, stay down and finish it!' That precious thing which we are doing downstairs 'in the house' can be enough to pin us down, a peg that holds us to earth.

It is all a question of our living by the soul or by the spirit. Here in this passage in Luke, we have depicted the soul-life in its engagement with the things of the earth, and, mark you, not sinful things either. The Lord only mentioned marrying, planting, eating, selling, all perfectly legitimate activities with which there is nothing essentially wrong. But it is occupation with them, so that your heart goes out to them, that is enough to pin you down. The way out of that danger is by the losing of the soul. This is beautifully illustrated in the action of Peter when he recognized the risen Lord Jesus by the lakeside. Though with the others he had returned to his former employment, there was now no thought of the ship, nor even of the net full of fishes so miraculously provided. When he heard John's cry of recognition: "It is the Lord", we read that "he cast himself into the sea".

That is true detachment. The question at issue is always, Where is my heart? The Cross has to work in us a true spiritual detachment from anything and anyone outside of the Lord Himself.

But, even here, we are as yet only dealing with the more outward aspects of the soul's activity. The soul giving rein to its affections, the soul asserting itself and trying to manipulate things, the soul becoming preoccupied with things on the earth: these are still small things, and do not yet touch the real heart of the matter. There is something which is deeper yet, and which I will try now to explain.

#### THE CROSS AND FRUITFULNESS

Let us read again John 12. 24, 25. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit. He that loveth his life (Greek 'soul', as in the above passages) loseth it; and he that hateth his life ('soul') in this world shall keep it unto life eternal."

Here we have the inward working of the Cross of which we have been speaking, the losing of the soul, linked with and likened to that aspect of the death of the Lord Jesus Himself which we have already seen depicted in the grain of wheat, namely, His death with a view to increase. The end in view is fruitfulness. There is a grain of wheat with life in it, but "it abideth alone". It has the power to impart its life to others; but to do so it must go down into death.

Now we know the way the Lord Jesus took. He passed into death, and, as we saw earlier, His life emerged in many lives. The Son died, and came forth as the first of "many sons". He let go His life that we might receive it. It is in this aspect of His death that we are called to die. It is here that He makes clear the value of conformity to His death, which is that we lose our own natural life, our soul, in order that we may become life imparters, sharing thereafter with others the new life of God which is in us. This is the secret of ministry, the path of real fruitfulness to God. As Paul says: "We which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4.11,12).

We are coming to our point. There is new life in us, if we have received Christ. We all have that precious possession, the treasure in the vessel. Praise the Lord for the reality of His life within us! But why is there so little expression of that life? Why is there an 'abiding alone'? Why is it not overflowing and imparting life to others? Why is it scarcely making itself apparent even in our own lives? The reason why there is so little sign of life where life is present is that the soul in us is enveloping and confining that life (as the husk envelopes the grain of wheat) so that it cannot find outlet. We are living in the soul; we are working and serving in our own natural strength; we are not drawing from God. It is the soul that stands in the way of the springing up of life. Lose it; for that way lies fruitfulness.

#### A DARK NIGHT-A RESURRECTION MORN

So we come back to the almond rod, which was brought into the sanctuary for a night, a dark night in which there was nothing to be seen, and then in the morning it budded. There you have set forth the death and resurrection, the life yielded up and the life gained, and there you have the ministry attested. But how does this work out in practice? How do I recognize that God is dealing with me in this way?

First we must be clear about one thing: the soul with its fund of natural energy and resource will continue with us until our death. Till then there will be an unending, day-by-day need for the Cross to operate in us, dredging deeply that well-spring of nature. This is the life-long condition of service that is laid down in the words: "Let him deny himself, and take up

his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8. 34). We never get past that. He who evades it " is not worthy of me " (Matt. 10. 38); he " cannot be my disciple " (Luke 14. 27). Death and resurrection must remain an abiding principle of our lives for the losing of the soul and the uprising of the Spirit.

Yet here too there may be a crisis that, once reached and passed, can transform our whole life and service for God. It is a wicket gate by which we may enter upon an entirely new pathway. Such a crisis occurred in the life of Jacob at Peniel. It was the ' natural man ' in Jacob that was seeking to serve God and to attain His end. Jacob knew well that God had said: " The elder shall serve the younger", but he was trying to compass that end through his own ingenuity and resource. God had to cripple that strength of nature in Jacob, and that He did when He touched the sinew of Jacob's thigh. Jacob continued to walk thereafter, but he continued to be lame. He was a different Jacob, as his change of name implies. He had his feet and he could use them, but the strength had been touched, and he limped from an injury from which he would never quite recover.

God must bring us to a point, I cannot tell you how it will be, but He will do it, where, through a deep and dark experience, our natural power is touched and fundamentally weakened, so that we no longer dare trust ourselves. He has had to deal with some of us very harshly, and take us through difficult and painful ways, in order to get us there. At length there comes a time when we no longer ' like ' to do Christian work, indeed we almost dread to do things in the Lord's Name. But then at last it is that He can begin to use us.

I can tell you this, that for a year after I was converted I had a lust to preach. It was impossible to stay silent. It was as though there was something moving within me that drove me forward, and I had to keep going. Preaching had become my very life. The Lord may graciously allow you to go on a long while like that, and not only so but with a fair measure of blessing, until one day that natural force impelling you is touched, and from then on you no longer do it because you want to do it but because the Lord wants it.

Before that experience you preached for the sake of the satisfaction you got from serving God in that way; and yet sometimes the Lord could not move you to do one thing that He wanted done. You were living by the natural life, and that life varies a good deal. It is the slave of your temperament. When emotionally you are set on His way you go ahead at full speed, but when your emotions are directed the other way you are reluctant to move at all, even when duty calls. You are not pliable in the Lord's hands. He has therefore to weaken that strength of preference, of like and dislike, in you, until you will do a thing because He wants it and not because you like it. You may enjoy it or you may not, but you will do it just the same. It is not that you can derive a certain satisfaction from preaching or from doing this or that work for God, and therefore you do it. No, you do it now because it is the will of God, and regardless of whether or not it gives you conscious joy. The true joy you know in doing His will lies deeper than your variable emotions.

God is bringing you to the place where He has but to express a wish and you respond instantly. That is the spirit of the servant (Psalm 40. 7, 8), but such a spirit does not come naturally to any of us. It comes only when our soul, the seat of our natural energy and will and affections, has known the touch of the Cross. Yet such a servant- spirit is what He seeks and will have in us all. The way to it may be a painful, long-drawn-out process with some of us, or it may be just one stroke; but God has His ways and we must have regard to them.

Every true servant of God must know at some time that disabling from which he can never recover; he can never be quite the same again. There must be that established in you which means that from henceforth you will really fear yourself. You will fear to do anything ' out from ' yourself, for, like Jacob, you know what kind of sovereign dealing you will incur if you do it; you know what a bad time you will have in your own heart before the Lord if you move out on the impulse of your soul. You have known something of the chastening hand of a loving God upon you, a God who " dealeth with you as with sons " (Heb. 12. 7). The Spirit Himself bears witness in your spirit to that relationship, and to the inheritance and glory that are ours " if so be that we suffer with him" (Rom. 8.16, 17); and your response to the ' Father of our spirits ' is: " Abba, Father ".

But when this is really established in you, you have come to a new place which we speak of as ' resurrection ground'. Death in principle may have had to be wrought out to a crisis in your natural life, but when it has, then you find God release you into resurrection. You discover that what you have lost is coming back, though not as before. The principle of life is at work in you now, something that empowers and strengthens you, something that animates you, giving you life. From henceforth what you have lost will be brought back, but now under discipline, under control.

Let me make this quite clear again. If we want to be spiritual people, there is no need for us to amputate our hands or feet; we can still have our body. In the same way we can have our soul, with the full use of its faculties; and yet the soul is

not now our life- spring. We are no longer living in it, we are no longer drawing from it and living by it; we use it. When the body becomes our life we live like beasts. When the soul becomes our life we live as rebels and fugitives from God, gifted, cultured, educated, no doubt, but alienated from the life of God. But when we come to live our life in the Spirit and by the Spirit, though we still use our soul faculties just as we do our physical faculties, they are now the servants of the Spirit; and when we have reached that point God can really use us.

But the difficulty with many of us is that dark night. The Lord graciously laid me aside once in my life for a number of months and put me, spiritually, into utter darkness. It was almost as though He had forsaken me almost as though nothing was going on and I had really come to the end of everything. And then by degrees He brought things back again. The temptation is always to try to help God by taking things back ourselves; but remember, there must be a full night in the sanctuary, a full night in darkness. It cannot be hurried; He knows what He is doing.

We would like to have death and resurrection put together within one hour of each other. We cannot face the thought that God will keep us aside for so long a time; we cannot bear to wait. And I cannot tell you how long He will take, but in principle I think it is quite safe to say this, that there will be a definite period when He will keep you there. It will seem as though nothing is happening; everything you valued is slipping from your grasp. There confronts you a blank wall with no door in it. Seemingly everyone else is being blessed and used, while you yourself have been passed by and are losing out. Lie quiet. All is in darkness, but it is only for a night. It must indeed be a full night, but that is all. Afterwards you will find that everything is given back to you in glorious resurrection; and nothing can measure the difference between what was before and what now is!

I was sitting one day at supper with a young brother to whom the Lord had been speaking on this very question of our natural energy. He said to me, 'It is a blessed thing when you know the Lord has met you and touched you in that fundamental way, and that disabling touch has been received.' There was a plate of biscuits between us on the table, and I picked one up and broke it in half as though to eat it. Then, fitting the two pieces together again carefully, I said, 'It looks all right, but it is never quite the same again, is it? When once your back is broken, you will yield ever after to the slightest touch from God.'

That is it. The Lord knows what He is doing with His own, and He has left no aspect of our need unmet in His Cross, that the glory of the Son may be manifested in the sons. Disciples who have gone this way can, I believe, truly echo the words of the apostle Paul, who could claim to serve God "in my spirit in the gospel of his Son" (Rom. 1. 9). They have learned, as he had, the secret of such a ministry: "We . . . worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3. 3).

Few can have led a more active life than Paul's. To the Romans he puts it on record that he has preached the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Rom. 15.19) and that he is ready now to go on to Rome (1.10) and thence, if possible, to Spain (15. 24, 28). Yet in all this service, embracing as it does the whole Mediterranean world, his heart is set on one object only, the uplifting of the One who has made it all possible. "I have therefore my glorying in Christ Jesus in things pertaining to God. For I will not dare to speak of any things save those which Christ wrought through me, for the obedience of the Gentiles, by word and deed" (Rom. 15. 17,18). That is spiritual service.

May God make each one of us, as truly as he was, "a bondservant of Jesus Christ".

Taken from *The Normal Christian Life*