

Chapter 1

The Divine Plot: Simon of Cyrene

For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Philippians 1:29 NKJV).

God never leads His children otherwise than they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning, and discern the glory of the purpose which they are fulfilling

.Of all the gifts that Heaven can bestow upon men, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust and the highest honor (The Desire of Ages, 224, 225).

You have to believe a conspiracy theory of cosmic proportions to make sense of Simons story. The same is true of our own stories. Simon believed. Perhaps, after you have heard his story, you will too.

Under the midday sun, Simon walked in a river of pilgrims on one of the approaches to Jerusalem. It was the eve of Passover. Looking around, Simon saw hair styles and beards, headgear and sandals, that spoke of a hundred different cultures. He saw people from Gaul and Italy, from Cappadocia and Persia, from India and, perhaps, even from as far east as China. He could hear all kinds of strange languages in the babble of the crowd.

The traffic slowed as they neared the gate. Gazing up at the rough limestone blocks of the wall and the massive timbers of the gate, Simon choked with emotion. In all the miles since leaving his home town, Cyrene, in North Africa, nothing had stirred him like this. The Holy City, Mt. Zion, God's official earthly residence!

Tonight he would celebrate Passover in Jerusalem! He'd eat the bitter herbs and lamb. He'd recite the story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. With others he would share in the annual rekindling of the ancient hope that God would send the Messiah to subjugate Israel's enemies and propel Jerusalem to unassailable world dominance. God would compel the senate and Caesar to bow to Jerusalem's sovereignty. Priests in the thousands of heathen temples scattered across the Roman Empire would recognize Jerusalem's temple as the only seat of true worship.

Simon had talked and believed these things since childhood. But the celebration tonight in Jerusalem would be the ultimate experience in his lifelong pursuit of the Almighty.

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Finally, Simon made it through the bottleneck at the gate, but immediately he was slowed again. But what did he care? He was in Jerusalem! He stared, smelled, listened, oblivious to the jostling of the crowd, trying to fix the moment indelibly in his mind.

But this rapture was interrupted by shouts up ahead. People began squeezing themselves into the merchants' stalls that lined the crowded street. Craning his neck, Simon spotted the reason. Roman soldiers were opening a path through the traffic. Behind them walked three convicts, flanked and followed by more soldiers.

The procession was dogged by a mob of hecklers whose verbal venom stood Simons hair on end.

Just as the vanguard of soldiers was almost abreast of Simon, a gasp ran through the crowd. One of the prisoners had fallen. Simon stood on tiptoe to see. The middle convict was down on His knees, His face in the dirt, a cross astride His back and tied to his wrists.

"Wha'd they do to that man?" Simon gasped. The prisoner's clothes were dark with blood. His hair was matted with dried blood. A guard was shouting at Him.

"On your feet, scum. Up. Let's go."

It was no use. The wood was not that heavy, but the prisoner could hardly walk, and the extra weight of the cross was simply too much.

When Jesus fell, women in the crowd began wailing and sobbing, but Simon, horrified, scarcely heard them.

"Can't they see He's done for?" he muttered to no one in particular. "Why do they beat a dead horse?" He watched the soldiers snatch at the ropes that fastened the crossbar to Jesus' wrists.

Simon was still staring at the fallen convict when a soldier grabbed him. He recoiled, twisted... and looked down at the point of a sword. "Hey, big man, get over here." The soldier hustled him into the center of the mob. Pointing at the cross lying on the stones beside Jesus, he ordered, "Pick it up!"

"Hey, what d'ya mean? I'm not from around here. You can't make me do this!"

"Pick it up!" roared the soldier. "Pick it up, or we'll nail it to you!"

Simon could hear snickers in the crowd. "What a rubel!" somebody laughed. "That'll teach a pilgrim to open his mouth."

Simon was furious and bewildered. He had saved for years for this trip. Now here he was on Friday afternoon, Passover eve, being forced to carry the cross of a man accused of treason and sedition! Why are they picking on me? Simon wondered. He didn't realize that his dark

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skin marked him as a foreigner and made him a prime candidate for impressment as a cross carrier.

In contemporary Western society, there is no parallel to the shame of crucifixion. The cross itself bore the curse of God. No citizen of Jerusalem could have been persuaded, without dire threats, to touch it. If the soldiers had attempted to draft a local for the job, they would have risked a riot.

The soldiers would not carry it. No decent officer would have required one of his own men to shoulder the symbol of execration.

We simply cannot comprehend the humiliation Simon felt as the soldier forced him into the center of that crowd. The disgrace was much more profound, more intense than any other embarrassment. The soldier had summoned him to a bottomless, black pit of horror and loathing. In addition to the public shame Simon was experiencing, the close contact with Roman soldiers and convicts would disqualify Simon from participating in this evening's and tomorrow's ceremonies, the high point of the Passover celebration. He'd be excluded from the congregation of God's people on what was supposed to be the most tremendous day of his life.

What terrible luck! The slightest alteration of his day... If he had left the inn this morning five minutes earlier, if he hadn't stopped at that well in the last village on his way into Jerusalem...

Simon stooped, picked up the timber, and hoisted it to his shoulder. A guard dragged the convict to His feet, and the procession prepared to move on again. But the convict raised His hand and with that simple movement took control. Simon was stunned. What secret power was this wasted convict hiding?

Turning to the wailing women, Jesus spoke quietly, but with arresting force, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me. Weep for yourselves and for your children. Hard times are coming to our beloved city - times so bad that mothers will wish they were childless spinsters. They will wish themselves dead.

"Dear women, if the good die young and cruelly now, now in the summertime of God's favor, imagine what will be true in the winter of His indignation.

"Do not weep for me. Weep for the suffering that will ruin our city when the time for choosing is over."

Jesus nodded to the soldier, and they started forward. Simon, massive and erect, stared ahead unseeing, masking the cringing and rage in his soul as he walked along beside the battered prophet. One of the

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soldiers sniggered: “We have a real king with us today. He even has a courtier to carry His stuff.”

Jesus’ words to the women still gripped Simon’s attention. Before Jesus had spoken, Simon’s mind had been completely filled with outrage at the injustice. Imagine, shanghaied by Roman thugs on Passover eve! As a devout Jew, he believed God controlled everything. God had done this to him, and it wasn’t right. Simon had served God all his life - for this? Then Jesus had stopped the macabre parade with a gesture of His hand and quieted the wailing women with steel and velvet words about them and their city.

Simon was astonished. This Convict could hardly walk. He was on His way to His crucifixion! Yet, He spoke to these sobbing women with the dignity and compassion of a good king consoling His subjects for some grief in their hard scrabble lives. Who was this Man who cared more about the tears of these unknown women than about His own bloodied back and imminent crucifixion?

The abuse from the mob did not stop. The tears of the women and the veiled majesty of the Prisoner and His pain meant nothing to them. They were like sharks frenzied by the scent of blood. But as Simon walked, puzzling over the mysterious power and words of this Man, he discovered within himself a mysterious elation competing with his indignation. He held his head higher. He marched deliberately at the side of the Prisoner instead of slinking. His bold posture was no longer a facade. Whoever this Prisoner was, something inside Simon told him it was an honor to march with Him.

By the time Jesus was being paraded out of downtown Jerusalem toward Golgotha, Satan must have realized that when Jesus died on the cross, he, Satan, would suffer irreparable damage. He wanted to stop the juggernaut he had launched. He did not want Jesus to hang on Golgotha. When Jesus fell under His cross, Satan exulted; he had put off the final showdown. When Simon picked up the timber, however, Jesus’ victory was assured. Simon did not know it yet, but Jesus was sharing His triumph. He and Simon climbed to the summit together.

One of the richest forms of intimacy, especially among men, is doing something together - fixing a car or coaching a team, working together on the finance committee at church or going on a mission trip, climbing mountains or going to war together. The most intense friendships develop between humans who have endured tough times together. Simon would never share richer, deeper fellowship with God

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than when he helped God the Son make the summit of Golgotha with His cross.

The soldier who grabbed Simon out of the crowd meant to do him no favor. But in reality by drafting Simon to carry that cross, he was calling him to act as prime minister in the kingdom of heaven. None of Jesus' disciples were available to help. Angels were disallowed from taking the job. Jesus, King of the Jews, King of the universe, needed a man to help Him accomplish the salvation of the world. Simon was His choice.

Naturally, Simon had no idea, at first, that this odious detour was the supreme honor of his life. How could he have known that carrying a Convicts cross would mean walking side-by-side with God? To create the opportunity of eternal life for all humanity, Jesus needed to get to Golgotha with His cross. On that Friday afternoon, He did not have the physical strength to do it. Simons "bad luck" was, in fact, the privilege of helping Jesus save the world.

Jesus had once said, "If someone wishes to walk with Me, if someone wants to be My disciple, he must take up his cross and follow Me." There is no such thing as painless, effortless discipleship. But buried in the pain and effort is a treasury of joy.

Friday afternoon, surrounded by a jeering rabble, carrying a symbol of shame, Simon learned the truth of Jesus' words. That day's shame and ill fortune was his initiation into the joy of fellowship with Jesus. In time, he came to see that the cost of discipleship was itself part of the reward.

Simon's story speaks to us.

The pain in your life may feel like a curse; it may actually be a camouflage for God's presence. The birth of a retarded or deformed child can break your heart and rearrange your life. But it is not the curse of God. It may, in fact, be His richest blessing.

Before a child is born, parents dream. Their baby will be the most beautiful, the brightest, the sweetest ever born. Then comes the birth, and the parents confront the mind-numbing fact that their baby is retarded. The prognosis is twenty or thirty years of strenuous care before a premature death.

What a blasting of dreams! These parents hear the truth described in the cold facts of epidemiology - a certain number of every hundred thousand are born with defects just like your child's. But you wonder if perhaps God is punishing you for some blunder. Maybe He is repaying you for some offense against heaven. Or maybe God is just irritable,

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and you happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and caught His ire.

The good news, the sermon, in the story of Simon is that God is not mad at you. God is not punishing you. God is responsible at least to the extent that He allowed it to happen. He could have prevented it, but He didn't. So you can live with this confidence: in this suffering He can create an occasion for you and Him to walk together.

This applies to every difficulty: being abandoned to raise a disabled child all on your own, losing all your assets through business reverses or fraud, discovering you have a degenerative disease, finding yourself in a difficult marriage. God is able to transform every one of these disasters into occasions of camaraderie with Him.

Jesus did not leave Simon to carry the cross alone. Jesus kept company with Simon until he threw down the timber on Golgotha. Jesus will walk with the parents of a retarded or deformed or rebellious child until they can lay the burden down. Jesus did not allow Simon to be nailed to the cross he carried. And He will not allow you to be crucified on the cross in your life either.

If you are a mother whose husband has left you to rear the children alone, it may seem that God Himself has abandoned you. But God has not plotted against you. Your husband may be the personification of devilish self-centeredness. You may have made grave mistakes yourself that contributed to the difficulty of your situation. But the story of Simon reveals that in spite of these very real wrongdoings, your suffering can be turned by God into part of His plot to bring you into His presence.

If you are a pastor or pastor's wife serving in a difficult parish, you may wonder if you have missed your calling. Maybe God did not call you to the pastorate, or maybe He did not call you to this particular church. Conflict saps your strength and upsets your family. You wonder, how can I possibly be in God's will if my life is so miserable? The story of Simon demonstrates that sometimes what feels like bad luck or malicious politics or divine punishment is actually a disguised walk with Jesus.

Simon had almost no choice about whether or not to carry the cross. Similarly, there are some circumstances in which we apparently have little choice. We cannot ensure that all our children will be above average. We cannot make our spouses faithful and gentle and good. We cannot control the economy or even, ultimately, our own health. We may walk, at times, the *via dolorosa* - the way of sadness.

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God could easily have arranged for Simon to miss the encounter with the soldiers. And God could have arranged our lives differently, changing our opportunities, overruling our choices. But He has not. But neither has He coldly left us to fate. Instead, God acts as the great conspirator. He works within the stream of events - good choices, bad choices, happenstances, and even the scheming and anger of foolish men - to bring us to Himself. For those who will allow Him access to their inner being, He uses everything for their ultimate good.

In the New Testament there is evidence that Simon and his family became Christians. If that is so, then what had seemed at the time to be the greatest disappointment of Simons life became in later years the event in his life most treasured.

We can be sure that in his family for generations, the central story, the tale that gave them the greatest sense of family pride, was Grandpa Simon s afternoon on the via dolorosa carrying the cross for the Son of God - at the time, his bitterest disappointment; in reality, his greatest glory.

GOD MOVES IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

- William Cowper (1731-1800)