

SIMON OF CYRENE

Let us read the account of Simon of Cyrene from the three gospels in parallel to understand.

Luke 23:26-27	Mathew 27:27-33,36	Mark 15:20-23
<p>²⁶ Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus.</p> <p>²⁷ And a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him.</p>	<p>³¹ And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified.</p> <p>³² Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross. ³³ And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, that is to say, Place of a Skull,</p> <p>³⁶ Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. ³⁷ And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.</p>	<p>²⁰ And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him.</p> <p>²¹ Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross. ²² And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. ²³ Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it.</p>

Key Facts

- Ancient Cyrene [Cy-re'ne] is an important Greek colonial city in North Africa situated in a beautiful tableland several hundred feet above sea level, and a few miles from the Mediterranean. It constituted one of five Greek cities called Pentapolis, in Libya Cyrenaica, now Tripoli.
- From Cyrene to Jerusalem by land was 783 miles. Walking ~4 miles per hour for 8 hours a day, it would have taken 32 days to make the journey to arrive in the holy city for the Passover.

From the Journal of Simon the Cyrene [the day after Passover]

I experienced some strange things this week. After a long dusty and a tiring journey I finally arrived at Jerusalem. My supplies were nearly over and I was eager to find some succor and before high noon. I barely made it in time for Passover and was thankful to God for His mercy during the long journey.

I nearly was at the city gates when I ran right into this noisy entourage making its way out through the gates. It seemed like the prisoners were being led out for crucifixion. There was something unusual about the scene as I recall. The Roman soldiers were leading the condemned but within the motley crowd were Pharisees, Sadducees and leaders of the synagogues. Most unusual aspect was that there were a lot of weeping woman in the crowd. I come to Jerusalem each year but this procession piqued my curiosity. The lanes in the city were crowded. I decided to press into the crowd to get a peek of who was being executed this morning that seemed to be drawing all the crowd. It looked like there were three prisoners but the focus was on the one man who was so bloody and beaten up that he could barely carry the wooden beam on his shoulders. It was pitiful to see him carry the burden as he was obviously in much distress and pain. I wondered crimes he must have committed to have deserved this great a punishment and pain. Around this man's neck hung the accusation 'Jesus of Nazareth. King of the Jews'. He must be a lunatic I surmised to have chosen to antagonize the Jewish leaders and not to mention Herod to have committed such a preposterous supposition. I realized that I am stuck in this street with the crowds and really needed to push through the throng and head to the temple. Before I knew it a soldier seized my arm and pulled me in to the moving procession and insisted I carry the cross this beaten up man was struggling to carry. I knew the law required the condemned prisoner to carry their cross but this man was so wounded that I was afraid if he would even make it to the Skull Hill. I tried to tell this soldier that I was a visitor

from far country for Passover and cannot be defiled by another man's blood but it seemed to fall on deaf years. These were a cruel bunch and I really did not want to risk their anger. Carrying the bloody cross meant I am defiled according to the law and had to go through the cleansing ritual before I can go to the temple. Well, so much for the timely arrival to the city. I approached this man who seems to be the reason why all this motley crowd was gathered. I bent closer towards this man to relieve him off the cross and I looked into his face. On his head was a crown of thorns and as a result blood was trickling down his face from where the thorns were deeply pierced into the skin. The man was in obvious physical pain and he was being lead to his death but there was something else – he did not look like a victim. He was not crying or complaining like the other prisoners although he was bruised beyond recognition.

Just about that moment when I lifted up the cross from over his shoulder and on to mine, this man's eyes looked right into me. I felt a strange quiver pass through my entire body. Those eyes looked at me with knowledge as if this 'King of the Jews' knew me ...intimately. He barely managed to smile in an effort to thank me but I was captivated by the intensity of his gaze and something within me quietened and I took this man's cross and followed him to Golgotha. I knew by the end of that day that this was not an imposter king but my King...my Saviour. As I watched them carry this man whom they called 'Jesus' on to the cross, I knew in my heart that this encounter will change the course of my life!

- Simon was Jew from Libya (North Africa) and it was not unusual for a Jew to show up in Jerusalem from Cyrene. Cyrene in North Africa was a center of Jewish population. So there were many Jews living in Cyrene. In fact, these Jews were devout and loyal, and in Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost, when Jews came from all over the world not only to the Passover but many of them stayed for forty days as later came Pentecost. In the account we also find that when the Spirit of God came on those in the upper room and they went out and spoke the wonderful works of God, they spoke in the language of the Cyrenians who had gathered there at Pentecost. So, we are not surprised to meet a Jew from Cyrene.
- According to the sixth chapter of Acts, there was actually a synagogue called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians.

Acts 6:9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen.

Alexandria, of course, being in the north part of Africa as well. So there were so many Jews in the North African region that they had their own synagogue in Jerusalem. Some of them had then left their countries and were living in Jerusalem and had their own meeting place. So, when they came from Cyrene for things like the Pentecost event and the Passover event, they would attend a synagogue of their own countrymen and their own language. So we meet this man in Jerusalem.

- All the three accounts of the gospels (Mathew, Mark and Luke) mention Simon the Cyrene. We can ask the question why this was important. It is not that he played any significant role in the story of Jesus. It appears as if the Roman soldiers had randomly selected him from the crowd to assist Jesus. They seized this man and it says, “Coming in from the country.” This tells us that this man had nothing to do with all the events that preceded the cross. There is no reason to believe that Simon had anything to do with Jesus and neither did Jesus ever preach or teach or heal in his home country. He seems to have appeared on the scene rather randomly coming to Jerusalem for Passover as a devout Jew. It was not that he had arrived a week earlier and watched all that happened in Jerusalem surrounding Jesus. Yet as random as it seems like, it was an act of providence. It may appear to be insignificantly random that the soldiers chose him from the crowd but it was not random on God’s part. He had a name in the bible. The Roman centurion realized that Jesus was indeed the Son of God by the end of the day and the thief on the cross to Paradise with Jesus that day but Simon has a name and he is mentioned in the bible!
- The gospel of Mathew, Mark and Luke mention Simon where as John did not. **John 19:16-18 Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away. ¹⁷And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, ¹⁸where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center.**

John was adamant about telling us that Jesus bore His own cross because I believe John’s purpose was to draw attention to the parallel of Isaac bearing the

wood for sacrifice which is the type and shadow of what Jesus was going to accomplish. Jesus bore the cross.

Genesis 22:6 ⁶So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together.

Now Mathew provides us more information when he writes

Mathew 27:31-32 ³¹And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified. ³²Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross.

The Law of Moses forbade execution within the city walls and that it had to take place without the camp and they were leading Jesus out of the camp. We are able to reconcile Mathew and John by their statements that when until the point Jesus was out of the city, He bore the cross but as they were going out of the city and beyond the wall to the place where the crucifixion would take place, at that point we understand that Jesus staggered under the weight and the soldiers grabbed hold of Simon to make sure Jesus makes it to the Skull Hill.

- While the close friends of Jesus fled the scene very quickly and ran to the hills, this man – Simon from Cyrene actually carried the cross of Jesus and followed Him. That was the illustration in the natural of what Jesus asked of His disciples when He taught concerning the cross.

Mathew 16:24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

- The scripture reveals to us that the soldiers had to ‘compel’ Simon to carry the cross. Can you imagine the shame of having to walk behind a condemned man bearing his burden and in the same foot prints while the crowd around jeered and taunted as they made their way through the winding long path to the Place of the Skull?

We can wonder if:

- Simon stayed back and watched as the soldiers pierced the nails through the hands and feet of Jesus.
- Simon heard sharp whispers of those who passed by; soft sobs of the women who refused to leave and as some whispered that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Simon likely was there when he heard Jesus pleaded His Father to forgive the accusers. Who would do that? The Law required that justice be rendered. Why was this man wanting to forgive his murderers!
- Simon must have heard Jesus prophesy concerning Jerusalem in 70 AD and wonder if this man was perhaps a prophet.
- Simon must have hid and hear Jesus speak the last words 'It is finished' as took His last breath. Simon surely would have wondered what that meant.
- Simon surely must have realized that the man on the cross was not an ordinary Man.

Simon, who was walking into the city found himself physically turned around at the instructions of the Roman centurion and his life spiritually turned around after meeting the crucified Christ. This divine encounter with the Lord utterly changed his life and walk in the opposite direction. Jesus had crossed the path of Simon and this divine encounter impacted the heart of this Jew from Cyrene. The vibrations of this divine encounter went down in history.

- Matthew introduces us to Simon. Luke introduces us to Simon. Mark 15:21 introduces us to his two sons.

Mark 15:21 Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross.

Why does Mark do that? Mark doesn't explain. Why would you say this is Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus? Why would you say that unless you knew the readers would know who he was? You are trying to sort this Simon out from a lot of other Simons, why would you do that unless there was a familiarity

with this man? Now remember, Mark wrote his gospel in Rome, and Mark wrote his gospel between 50 and 60 A.D. The book of Romans was written about 56. It is possible the Gospel of Mark was written after the book of Romans so that there's already a church in Rome and there are people in that church knew well. Simon of Cyrene, Mark writes. And then he says - because he's writing in Rome, and the first readers will be the Roman church, "the father of Rufus and Alexander." You know them.

- In Romans 16:13, Paul says **Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.**

Amazing! And Rufus is an elect man in the Lord and so is his mother. That would be Simon's wife who had somehow become like a mother to Paul. Just incredible! Here's a stranger plucked out of nowhere to help Jesus carry the cross. We are unfamiliar with him, he's unfamiliar with Jesus. But my experience tells me that he that goes all the way to the cross, and arrived at the cross would leave. And so, he experiences the full reality of the crucifixion. And somewhere in the process he follows the story until he embraces the gospel of the Christ whose Cross he carried.

- Simon goes back to Cyrene and narrates the entire story and gospel to his family. His wife becomes a believer, and for sure his sons become believers and are known to the church, and one of them – Rufus - becomes an outstanding choice servant of the Lord. And this family becomes critical to the unfolding of the Kingdom so that they actually have a ministry in the life of the apostle Paul and Simon's wife is like a mother to him. What an amazing woman this must have been!
- **Acts 2:7-11 Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? ⁹Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."**

Simon perhaps received the Gospel and stayed back after the Passover for Pentecost. He must have been on the streets of Jerusalem that morning when 120 disciples spoke in tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

- **Acts 11:19-21** Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. ²⁰But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

In Acts chapter 11 and verse 20, it says there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. There's a church now in Cyrene. There's a church that's growing and developing, and out of that church are coming preachers, who preach the Lord Jesus, and they're being sent as missionaries to Antioch. From North Africa to Antioch, way north of Jerusalem, come preachers from Cyrene! And at least one of those preachers that came to preach the Lord Jesus from Cyrene all the way to Antioch stayed in Antioch and became one of the pastors of the church in Antioch that sent Paul out! Antioch was the first church of the Gentiles. It was all because one man took the gospel to Cyrene. It was all because this one man encountered Jesus.

- **Acts 13:1-2** Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called "the black man"), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul.

Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Simeon and Lucius from - "Cyrene." Out of nowhere, plucked out of the crowd by some cruel Roman soldiers is a man commandeered to carry a cross who becomes the instrument by which the Lord establishes a church in Cyrene, from which the gospel goes to Antioch, and from Antioch, Paul is sent to proclaim the gospel to the world. Purposes of God, providences of God, unfolding at a moment when Jesus looks like a total victim. But He is not.

- Notice it says Simeon (called the ‘black man’). Simon was from North Africa and it likely that he was a tall, dark skinned man. That may explain why the Roman soldiers picked him up the crowd. Racial discrimination existed even then. This man was chosen from the crowd to carry the cross like a criminal and bear the jeers of the onlookers. This man was called the ‘black man’. This is the same man who started the church in Antioch and was there when Paul and Barnabas were prayed over and sent on their first missionary journey! Simon of Cyrene – an ordinary man turned extraordinary.

Simon just walked in from the country out of nowhere and through his life God brought the message to Cyrene and then established the first gentile ecclesia where believers were first called ‘Christians’. God did a great work through Simon and his family. Missionaries are sent, Antioch is influenced, and Antioch sends Paul to the world. No wonder his name is here in the gospels!

How does this apply to us today?

- There are no random coincidences in God’s plan. Every person born on this earth has a unique purpose ordained by God. When God calls us to His purpose, we have an opportunity to elect that purpose or pass by. We have a choice to ‘carry the cross’ or ‘live in our loss’. We can look at each day as another opportunity that the Lord is giving to be an influence of His kingdom. For it is said “this is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it’ (Psalm 118:24). We are the sons and daughters of the Kingdom of God. Are we manifesting this awesome spiritual truth in the natural?
- Many met Jesus but a heart encounter with Him will turn your life downside up!

1 Peter 1:13 Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

Romans 16:25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began

Simon encountered Jesus at the cross and everyone who has been there and beheld the cross never returned the same. The revelation of the love of God in Jesus for all mankind and forgiveness for all eternity leaves us speechless. If there is judgement, then there is no freedom. When there is freedom, then there is boldness in the Lord and a heart cry – what shall we do?

Acts 2:37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

- Faith alone saves; but saving faith is never alone!
It is only the faith in the finished work of the cross that saves us but the same faith is never alone. It is always accompanied by fruit and good works for the Lord. Simon could not recover from the love demonstrated by God at the cross. His life was bearing the fruit of that relationship that carried the gospel to the outermost part of the world.
- Simon carried the cross of the Lord and followed Him. Carrying the cross does not mean suffer a financial, emotional loss or bear the burden or responsibilities. It is to choose Jesus and a Spirit led life and not be lead by our flesh. Because that is our ‘reasonable’ and not ‘great’ service but a ‘reasonable’ service to the Lord.

Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

Often times in the messages we hear, ‘carrying the cross’ leaves a sense of dread. As if it means we are asked to ‘put an end to all fun and carry the cross’. Why would one want to ever do that? Carrying the cross is a burden if we are doing it out of fear and obligation. When the revelation of the love of Christ is poured into your heart by the Holy Spirit, you will notice that you are carrying the cross as a by product of your relationship.



Are we willing to put aside lying, gossip, un-forgiveness, guilt, fear and exchange that for the cross? Jesus knew we would be better off not carrying all that.

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