

Conformed to Christ's Death

The Stepping Stone of Daily Dying

By Steve Pruitt

During the reign of Queen Mary of England in the 1500s, many Christians were martyred for their faith. Among those were two Catholic bishops by the names of Ridley and Latimer.

When brought before a panel of bishops, Ridley and Latimer answered to charges of heresy. The following articles were included in the charges: They did not believe the Pope descended from Peter, who was the foundation of the church; they did not believe that the bread and wine of communion was the literal body and blood of Jesus; they did not believe the mass was a propitiatory sacrifice for the living and the dead. When both men refused to recant their beliefs they were condemned as heretics and sentenced to be burned.

Having embraced the flames, it appeared as if Latimer died with little pain. However, Ridley suffered for a longer period of time because the fire did not immediately rise on his side of the stake. Ridley's legs were consumed before the flames reached his shirt. In terrible pain he cried, "I cannot burn." Mercifully, a person watching the execution removed some of the wood that kept the flames from rising. Having been given some gunpowder by his brother, Ridley then leaned toward the fire until the gunpowder exploded.

In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul wrote that everything he deemed valuable to him he counted as rubbish that he might, among other things, be conformed to the death of Christ.

*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, **being conformed to His death**, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

Philippians 3:8-11

The Greek word Paul uses for conformed in verse 10 means to be a co-imitator or fellow votary. The American Heritage Dictionary defines a votary as a person bound by vows to live a life of religious worship or service; a monk or nun. Any person fervently devoted to a religion, activity, leader or ideal.

The Amplified Bible renders the last part of Philippians 3: 10 this way; *and that I may so share His sufferings as to be continually transformed [in spirit into His likeness even] to His death...* It seems that Paul was saying, "I have suffered the loss of all things, count them as rubbish and have vowed and fervently devoted my life to following with Christ in his death and to be like Christ in his death"

Through the life of Paul we find several clues which point us to the way of being conformed into the death of Christ. Let's begin with the things Paul said he counted as rubbish. Of what was Paul speaking when he said that he had suffered the loss of all things? Earlier in Philippians 3 Paul wrote, *If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.* (Philippians 3:4b-6)

Paul was a Jew among Jews; having received all the rites and privileges. He received an exemplary education having studied under the renowned Gamaliel (Acts

22:3). His understanding of the law exceeded his contemporaries and his zeal for the law won him a respected seat among the Jewish elite; the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were one of the two groups that sought for religious control over Israel; the other being the Sadducees. Since the Pharisees distained the Roman Empire they maintained the most influence over the Jewish people and carried the most religious authority. They were “experts” concerning the law of Moses and interpreted it to the strictest letter. Their position gave them authority to render judgment and punishment on all offenders of the law.

When Paul said he counted all things loss he wasn’t merely talking about giving up his country club membership. He gave up a political position with the prestige and power that came with it. And he traded it for the distain of the very people who had promoted him. He wrote the following to the Corinthians:

*Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? — I speak as a fool — I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. **From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.** Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, **in perils of my own countrymen**, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness — besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.*

2 Corinthians 11:22-28

Paul’s journey to be conformed to the death of Jesus began on the road to Damascus. While on his way to Damascus to arrest and imprison anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus appeared to Paul and gave him a new mission. In Damascus Paul was given a new spirit and later a new name. Paul’s old man had died and a new man was born. He echoed this message throughout his writings.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me...

Galatians 2:20

But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Galatians 6:14

Not only did Paul acknowledge that he died with Christ on the cross, but he also lived a life of daily dying. He wrote to the church in Corinth; *I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.* (1 Corinthians 15:31) In other words he “became a corpse.” Paul died daily to his desire to be in charge of his own life. He died daily to the mirage of safety and security so he might fulfill the call of God on his life. That was his cross to bear. That was also the cross Jesus endured.

The cross in the life of Christ meant physical death, however Christ died to his own will before ever experiencing the agony of the cross. He spent his entire life doing only the will of his Father. Jesus understood that the purpose of his life and death was to glorify his Father. His words confirm his mission.

Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name. Then a voice came from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.

John 12:27-28

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You...

John 17:1

And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

John 17:5

Jesus counted not his own life as precious to live in perfect obedience to the Father. Paul said this about Jesus; *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.* (Philippians 2:8)

The cross that Jesus and Paul bore is the same cross we must bear if we are to be conformed to the death of Christ. First we must die to sin. We begin that journey by coming to the cross. Our old man must die so that a new man can live. When we surrendered to the saving work of Christ's blood we died with him on the cross. Our old man was crucified with him and we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We died in order that the sinful nature might be destroyed so we would no longer serve sin.

*Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, **knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him**, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.*

Romans 6:4-6

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:11

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13-14

For you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Colossians 3:3

The cross is not optional for anyone who desires to be conformed to the death of Christ. Jesus himself said, *If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.* (Matthew 16:24) Paul understood this when he wrote, *And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* (Galatians 5:24)

Our trek to be conformed to Christ's death doesn't end with salvation; it only begins. We must dedicate our lives to the glory of God by being obedient to his will. Total obedience not only comes through suffering it leads to suffering for the cause of God's glory. Even Jesus learned obedience by the things that he suffered (Hebrews 5:8) and Paul wrote to Timothy *that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution* (2 Timothy 3:12). It is in suffering for Christ that we know we will share in his inheritance.

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

Romans 8:16-17

It is also in our suffering that we are conformed to Christ's death.

*We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed — **always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus**, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are **always delivered to death for Jesus' sake**, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*

2 Corinthians 4:8-11

It is in suffering for Christ, the carrying in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, always delivered to death for Jesus' sake that our lives bring glory to our Father. First of all it is a testimony that Christ is infinitely worthy of the sacrifice of our lives whether in persecution or death. Suffering for Christ's sake further testifies that the power of his resurrection has the power to sustain and preserve us in the midst of persecution or death. That is what Paul meant when he said that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal body.

Our Father is furthered glorified when we embrace our suffering for his sake with joy. Paul wrote to the Colossians that he rejoiced in his sufferings for them (Colossians 1:24) and Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him. Jesus' joy came in knowing that his suffering and death would be glory to his Father.

As the torch was laid at Bishop Ridley's feet, Bishop Latimer called out, "Be of good comfort, brother Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as I trust shall never be put out."

For us to mature as Christians we must be conformed to the death of Christ. Only God knows what the will mean for each of us. When that time comes will we "play the man" or shrink back? Will our light so shine, as Ridley's, Latimer's, Paul's and Christ's that men may see and glorify our Father in heaven?

We have this promise: *Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.* (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

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Note: The story of Bishops Ridley and Latimer was used from Foxe's Christian Martyrs of the World published by Barbour and Company Inc. © 1989.