

# Doctrinal Brief: The Christian Cross

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Theologians past and present have debated the Christian cross. Does it involve all the suffering a Christian faces in life? Or is the cross limited to the specific suffering a Christian may endure for his or her faith?

First, let's look at those sections of Scripture where Jesus uses the word "cross." On three occasions Jesus spoke about the need for Christians to carry the "cross." In Matthew 10:38 Jesus states, "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Jesus gives this injunction to the twelve disciples as he sends them out to proclaim his Word. This task would not be easy. There would be hardships and persecutions that they would have to endure. They should expect this "cross" for "a student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master" (10:24). If Christ was persecuted, why wouldn't his followers receive the same treatment?

The second recorded account of Jesus referring to the "cross" follows Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23). Jesus had once again informed his disciples of his impending suffering and death. After stating some strong words to Peter and rebuking him for his rebuke of Jesus, the Savior adds, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). Once again the context seems to be the suffering they would have to endure for the faith. Jesus was going to suffer. They would have to do the same for their faith.

The final occasion when Jesus mentioned the "cross" is recorded in Luke 14:27: "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Here Jesus is asking people to count the cost of following him.

Because the passages in the gospels which use the term "cross" refer to the suffering a Christian endures for his faith, some conclude that the Christian cross involves only the suffering a Christian faces for his or her faith and not all the suffering of life. However, this fails to view the Christian cross from the broader perspective of Scripture. God's Word is filled with what we could call "Cross Chapters"—sections of Scripture that speak about the role of all suffering in the Christian life, whether that suffering involves a prolonged illness, a sudden death, or a financial loss. Examples of "Cross Chapters" would be the Book of Job, Psalm 73, Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 4,5,6,11,12, Hebrews 12, James 1, and 1 Peter 1 and 4. There we find a much broader view of the role of suffering in the Christian life, one that would not limit it to the suffering we endure for our faith.

Consider Hebrews 12. The writer has just given us a tour through "Faith's Hall of Fame." These men and women endured many challenges and hardships as they lived their lives. In Hebrews 12 the writer encourages us to display this same perseverance: "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons" (12:7).

The account of Job also views suffering in a believer's life from a much broader perspective. Job's sufferings were not a direct result of faith (though his faith was Satan's motive for attacking him). Yet his personal suffering involves the sudden death of his ten children, the loss of his sizable estate, health problems, a troubled marriage, and confused friends. However the purpose of this suffering was clear—Job came out of this ordeal with a stronger faith than when he entered it.

And how can we possibly overlook the common comfort of Romans 8:28 nestled in the heart of another Cross Chapter: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Adolf Hoenecke provides us with a rich understanding of the Christian cross:

Now it is asked whether all of the suffering and sorrow of Christians is to be called a cross. Many theologians want to designate as crosses only those sufferings borne for the sake of the confession of Christ. This is an unjustified constriction of this scriptural concept and at the same time an encroachment on the Christian state. To be sure, we are to carry for Christ's sake all suffering imposed on us and to make every sacrifice

demanded of us for Christ's sake (Mt 10:37; 5:11), but Scripture does not limit the name "cross" to suffering for his name's sake. Thus not only dishonor, insult, and persecution that befall us directly because of the confession of Jesus are crosses, but also the sufferings of Christians that have no direct connection to this confession (Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, III, p 403).

He explains further,

There is certainly an analogy between Christ and us Christians. Christ, the sinless God-man, had to carry no suffering at all, neither suffering for the sake of the Word of God and its fulfillment nor any other; but he did carry it in his state of humiliation. As those justified before God, we believers have no sin, and we ought not have to carry suffering for the sake of the Word or otherwise, for it no longer belongs to us; but we are in the state of humiliation and thus have all kinds of suffering. Therefore, all suffering is to be called a cross, when it does not belong to us by law but is imposed on us by paternal grace, so that we may conform to our Lord. The great comfort for all suffering is that it is to be a beneficial cross (p 404).

Luther would concur with Hoenecke:

A Christian, just because he is a Christian, is subjected to the dear cross, so that he must suffer at the hands of men and of the devil, who plagues and terrifies him with tribulation, persecution, poverty, and illness and inwardly, in his heart, with poisonous darts. The cross is the Christians' sign and watchword in their holy, precious, noble, and blessed calling, which is taking them to heaven. To such a calling we must render full due and accept as good whatever it brings (quoted by Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, III, p. 69, footnote).

When we look exegetically at the gospel passages which use the word "cross" in reference to a Christian's suffering, we can say that in the immediate context Jesus is talking about the cross as suffering we endure for our Christian confession. We may call such sufferings the cross in the narrow sense. Jesus' words about this cross are something we need to take to heart. There is a strong desire on the part of us Christians to "fit in" and be "just like everyone else." Young people can face this temptation as they search for their place in life and deal with pressure from peers. Not being a part of the "in" crowd comes with a price, yet as Jesus indicates in the gospels, this is part of the cost of confessing Christ. Christians young and old need to realize this.

A broader view of the Christian cross, while not excluding the suffering we endure for our Christian confession, will also include the other hardships a Christian faces in life. Such a broader view seems to be more consistent with Scripture since we are to face all these sufferings with the same spirit. When we look at the concept of the Christian cross and note all that Scripture says about the role and goal of suffering in the Christian life, we cannot help but see our suffering—which in Lutheran theology is called the "Christian Cross"—from a much broader perspective. We may fail to provide all the comfort God would have us share with those who suffer when we take too restrictive a view of the cross. The woman who so misses her husband of 50 years, the parents who stand over the grave of their son or daughter who preceded them in death, the person who wrestles with a legion of health problems—all of these people need to know that they have a cross to bear, not because God is punishing them, but because God is treating them as his sons and daughters. In some way—unknown to them at this time—God will use this suffering for their good.

So we see that this brief discussion on the Christian cross is not just an academic exercise. It applies to real Christians who are experiencing real suffering in a real world. They need to know that they will always be

strangers in this world and with that status comes suffering for their confession in Christ. But God would also have them rejoice in all their sufferings, painful as they may be, because such sufferings also bring blessings from God (James 1:2,12). Let's offer them all the comfort God's Word and the Lutheran doctrine of the Christian cross provides.