

JESUS, THE CRUCIFIED MESSIAH AND THE IMPLICATION OF PENTECOSTAL DENIAL OF SUFFERING

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ABSTRACT

Christ criticized the religious cum ethno-socio and political institutions of his time. At Golgotha, he suffered and died on the cross. He left us an example to follow. Genuine Christians accept the reality of Christ's suffering. For this fact, we all will walk through the crucibles, thorny and stony roads of life. However, in the face of hunger, unemployment, insecurity, that is, the incessant killing and kidnapping of the citizens, etc., some Pentecostal pastors have trivialized suffering, by teaching that "those who suffer are not real born-again Christians." This claim contradicts the biblical affirmation that "the son of man must undergo great suffering" (Lk. 9:23); and we all must suffer tribulations before we enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22-23). This work uses Historical Biblical Method with its diachronic and synchronic analyses. Its hermeneutics is the affirmation that Christ suffered and died on the cross. Disciples of Christ will also suffer. It raises research questions such as: Why did Christ suffer? Why are Pentecostals denying suffering? Are those whose loved ones were killed by insurgents not suffering? Is it possible not to suffer in life or is suffering part of life? Its aim is the statement of the reality of suffering.

Key words: Messiah, cross, crucifixion, suffering, pain and sorrow.

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Introduction

The cross is the peak of suffering. Christ suffered and died for the salvation of the world. This work is centered on Matthew's understanding of Christ as the suffering Messiah and its hermeneutical application to the denial of suffering by Pentecostals. Matthew is one of the Synoptic writers. He is a Jew and a tax collector (Matt. 9:9-13; Mk. 2:13-17; Lk. 5:27-28). The two texts that will be analyzed are Matt 10:38, in which Christ denies those who refused to take up their cross and 16:34 which calls on his disciples to take up their cross and follow the Lord. To deny the cross is to deny Jesus Christ who suffered and died on the cross. To embrace our cross and to carry it with patience is the sign of true discipleship.

Literature Review of the Suffering Messiah

This section gives the foundation of Jesus as the suffering Messiah from both Old and New Testament. It supports its position with relevant literatures.

Jesus, the Suffering Messiah: The Old Testament texts speak of the suffering servants of Yahweh. Some prophets were treated with ignominy (cf. Amos 7:10-17; Micah 2:6-10; Jer. 20:7-18). Isaiah 50:6-7 reads, "I gave my back to the smiters and my cheeks to those who pull out the beards, I hid not my face from shame and spitting." This text is literally fulfilled in the scourging at the pillar. The soldiers blindfolded Christ, spat on him and hit him with their fists (cf. Matt. 26:67; Lk. 22:63). The Gospel of Mark builds up to the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah who must suffer (Mk. 8:27-33). According to PHEME PERKINS, "Jesus' mission does not depend upon using divine power to get the crowds to follow him and to destroy his various enemies. Jesus' mission is one of suffering and death."² The rejection of Jesus at different points of his ministry culminates in his crucifixion on the cross. There are reasons why Jesus is called the suffering-Messiah. "His prophetic condemnation of corruption

²PHEME PERKINS, *New Testament. Introduction* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1992), 266.

in the temple evokes the same official plotting to destroy him that his teaching had in Galilee (Mk. 11:18; 3:6) ... As he dies, the Roman centurion will be the only one to see the truth: 'Truly, this man was the Son of God' (15:39). God does 'rescue' Jesus, not by giving him great earthly power, but by freeing him from death. Though his opponents may have appeared to have been victorious when they crucified Jesus, they were not successful. Jesus did not remain dead in the tomb (Mk. 16:1-8)."³ By his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus becomes the leader who experienced suffering with the criminals.

Christ's Suffering on the Cross: By carrying his cross, Christ becomes our model. He commanded all to "take up your cross and follow me." The context of this directive shows that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He knew the suffering that awaits him. Peter took him aside and tried to persuade him against the idea of suffering. Jesus rebuked Peter and called him Satan, an obstacle to God's plan. Christ's suffering is on the cross. Henry W. Holloman gives the description of the cross as "a crosspiece, on which criminals were nailed for execution."⁴ The cross was an infamous gibbet, "an exposure to death; a painful way to a miserable death ... Crucifixion was a cruel method of protracted and agonizing execution ... A person's hands were nailed to the crossbeam and his feet to the upright. To extend the torture, sometimes a peg on which the body would rest was attached. Death was by a combination of blood loss, asphyxia, shocks, dehydration, and stress on the heart. Healthy victims might linger for days unless their legs were broken to hasten death (Jn. 19:31-33). Without the capacity to raise oneself, asphyxiation came quickly."⁵ Death by execution on the cross was horrible. And no one wanted to be associated with it.

³ Perkins, *New Testament*, 267-268.

⁴ Henry W. Holloman, *Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and the Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 93.

⁵ Holloman, *Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and Theology*, 93.

Kings and emperors used execution to induce obedience. Criminals and rebels were put to death by crucifixion. “This mode of punishment was known to the Persians (Ezr. 6:11; Est 7:10); and the Carthaginians. However, it was most common among the Romans for slaves and criminals, and was introduced among the Jews by the Romans. It was not abolished until the time of Constantine who did so out of regard for Christianity ... Persons sentenced to be crucified were first scourged and then made to bear their own cross to the place of execution. A label was usually placed on the chest of or over the criminal.”⁶ Those who died on the cross were seen as cursed by God. Their bodies were not allowed to pollute the earth (Deut. 21:21-23). Joshua practiced this when he took down the bodies of the five kings and buried them in the cave. (Joshua 10:26-27).

Those crucified were mocked by passersby. Even the thief on the cross made mockery of Christ. “The average persons and the passersby mocked and abused Christ. There were a large number of passersby (Jn. 19:20). Golgotha was close to the city, sitting on a hill that was probably close to a main road and a large gate leading into the city ... The passersby saw Christ’s hanging there, believing He had claimed to be a King. Being spurred on by His accusers, they hurled insults at Him ... They also shook their heads at Him. This was a gesture of that day which shows insult, contempt, and mockery.”⁷ These mockeries take us back to the Old Testament. “All who see me mock at me; they shake their heads ... (Ps. 22:7). “I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads.” (109:25). But Christ’s death on the cross is different from those of criminals. He redeemed us through the cross. “Thus, the cross was the instrument of redemption and it has become, with death, suffering, and blood, one of the essential terms calling to mind our salvation. The cross is no longer a sign of disgrace, but a challenge and the way to glory, first for Christ, then for all

⁶ The Preacher’s Outline & Sermon Bible 1(India: Authentic Media, 2000), 604.

⁷ The Preacher’s Outline, 604.

Christians.”⁸ Although Paul speaks of the scandal of the cross (1 Cor. 1:23; Gal 5:11), he goes on to show that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law through his death on the cross (Gal 3:13). Hence, these poetic expressions: “By metonymy, speaking of the total experience of dying on the cross spoke only of Christ’s death as the atonement for our sins (1 Cor. 1:17, 18; Gal 5:11; 6:12, 14; Eph. 2:16; Phil 3:18; Heb. 12:2).”⁹

The Study of Matt 10:38

Introduction: Matthew 10:38 states that anyone who denies the cross is not worthy of Christ. When Jesus made the above statement, the disciples understood him. They would remember the sad history “which Roman rule had made familiar to them, the procession of robbers or rebels, each carrying the cross on which he was to suffer to the place of execution. They would learn that they were called to a like endurance of ignominy and suffering.”¹⁰

Textual Study of Matt 10:38

This text reads: and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. The conjunction *and* connects verse 38 with what were previously said, which include the love of God above every other thing. *Whosoever* is an inclusive pronoun that occurs eleven times in this pericope. Matthew intentionally repeated it. *Whosoever* can also be conditional. You are free not to accept your cross. But “not to take up your cross” has consequences, being rejected by Christ. Its implication is self-disqualification from the discipleship of Christ. *The* is a grammatical article that denotes persons or things already mentioned. *Cross* is an upright stake, the instrument of Roman crucifixion and the yoke of death. *Take* is the singular present verb. *Your* is the possessive pronoun. Jesus’

⁸ Xavier Leon-Dufour, Dictionary of Biblical Theology (Great Britain: Biddles Publication, 2004), 102.

⁹Spiros Zodhiates and Warren Bakers, Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible (South Korea: AMG Publishers, 2008), 4716.

¹⁰“Ellicott’s commentary for English Readers.” Matthew 10:38 Biblehub.com, accessed August 18, 2022, <https://biblehub.com/bible/mattew/10-38.htm>.

demand is, take your cross. The ancient aphorism is: every cross has its own inscription. Jesus has an inscription on his cross. The acronym *INRI* means *Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum* (“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”) The Jewish authorities protested against this and demanded from Pontius Pilate to rewrite the inscription, but Pilate said *Quod scripsi, scripsi* (“what I have written, I have written”), that is, *dixi*, that is final (cf. Jn. 19:19-20). Each person has their cross and names on them.

To take your cross has numerous meanings. It could mean “to be exposed to death,” “self-denial,” “to undergo suffering, trial, punishment; expose oneself to reproach and death.”¹¹ Furthermore, “‘to carry the cross’ is a figurative expression, denoting that we must endure whatever is burdensome, or is trying, or considered disgraceful, in following Christ.”¹² Remember, there is always a reason for carrying the cross. Christ carried his cross for the salvation of the world. Hence, you will always see the acronym *IHS* which means, *Iesus Hominum salvator* (Jesus the saviour of humanity). Paul asks the Corinthians to accept their suffering because it is for their consolation and salvation (2 Cor. 1:5-6). The expression “take your cross” might not have made all the meanings to the disciples. But “when they saw their Master Himself carrying His own cross, the words would come back to their minds with a new significance.”¹³ In our time, “take up your cross” means to willingly “undergo the severe trials” that fall on one’s part. The cross comes in different forms. “Our crosses are to carry whatever life hands us and to walk through this world back to Him. The cross is basic to Christianity. It signifies the present cost of living, of loving and of following the Lord.”¹⁴

¹¹Zodhiates and Bakers, Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, NO. 4716.

¹² Barnes’ Notes on the Bible, Matthew 10:38 Biblehub.com, accessed August20, 2022, <https://biblehub.com/bible/mattew/10-38.htm>.

¹³ Ellicott’s Commentary, Matthew 10:38. Biblehub.com.

¹⁴ James McKarns, *Go Tell Everyone* (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1985), 63.

Follow me, v 38b: “To follow” is an imperative. It can mean “to come behind” or “to go with.” The person addressed must leave off everything and follow Lord. When Jesus called James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and Peter their companion, they left everything and followed him (Lk. 5:10-11). Anyone who carries the cross must follow in Christ’s footsteps, and without looking back because anyone who puts the hands on the plough and looks back is not worthy of the kingdom of heaven (Lk. 9:62). Christ is our leader and teacher and we are, in all things to follow his footsteps. *Is not worthy of me, v 38c*: The verb “is” is in the present singular form. It refers to the particular individual who wants to follow Christ. The adjective *worthy* means being in good relationship with Christ, is negated by the article “not.” The pronoun “me” refers back to Christ. You are either worthy of Christ by accepting or unworthy of Christ by denying your cross. “Being worthy of Christ” is the primary reason why all should carry their cross. To be worthy of the Lord’s calling, one has to carry the cross joyfully, willingly, patiently and cheerfully. You accept all afflictions, reproaches, insults and persecutions, even death that might come your way because of Christ.

Textual Study of Matt 16:24

The text reads: “Then Jesus told his disciples, if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The expression, “Jesus told his disciples” gives the context of Jesus talking to the disciples. The conditional conjunction “if” introduces a conditional clause. Everyone is free and you are also free not to follow Christ. No one is coerced into following him. The indefinite pronoun “anyone” makes it open to everybody. There is no different rule for anybody. The verb “wish” is in its present continuous form. If you desire to follow the Lord, there are conditions for this: (i) deny yourself. (ii) Take up your cross. (iii) and follow Christ.

The “*self*” is a reflexive pronoun. The verb “*deny*” is in third person singular form. The self is that stubborn *you*, the proud *ego*. Self-

denial is not only abstaining from earthly pleasures such as food and drinks, sex and concupiscence, wealth and worldly fame. The demand is, crucify the old self (Col. 3:10) and live for Christ (Rom. 6:6). You must lose your will and become the slave of Christ (1:1). No matter how painful it might be, you have to accept the cross. Often, the arrogant self comes into conflict with Christ's demand. If you do not deny yourself, you run the risk of denying Christ. Christ asked the young rich man to deny even the dead parents because there will always be people to bury the dead (Matt. 8:19-22). This self-denial is exemplified in Christ's self-emptying, which Paul calls *kenosis*, taking the form of a slave, be born in the likeness of men and accepting death on the cross (Phil. 2:7-11). Paul rightly says that his life has been poured out like a libation (2 Tim. 2:17; 4:6). Once you empty a cup of water on the dry floor, it cannot be taken back. Christ emptied himself on the cross of Calvary.

The verb "take up" is an imperative third person singular verb. The weight of the cross is heavy. The challenge is, lift up your cross. The cross could be punishment, suffering, hunger or death of a beloved one. Christ challenges all to accept and carry them with joy (cf. Rom. 8:35-39). *Follow me* is also an imperative. Christ carried his cross and left us an example to follow. We must carry our daily cross in imitation of Christ who was not ashamed to carry his own (Heb. 12:2; cf. 13:13). If we grow impatient under suffering, and endeavor to avoid the cross which God lay upon us, we will displease God.

The Hermeneutics of the texts

When Christ says "you are not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:38c) what does he mean? It means that you are denying the reality of his suffering and death on the cross. What could make anyone unworthy of the Lord? Christ makes this clear: It is the refusal to carry one's own cross, in imitation of Christ. This renders anyone unacceptable to the Lord. "From anyone who wants to be his disciple he demands the giving up of all the dearest and most natural feelings, such as the love for one's parents and children. This may help us to understand

why one day the Jews asked him, ‘who are you claiming to be?’ (Jn. 8:53).¹⁵ Christ was asking them to do what they know is difficult but not impossible.

The Pentecostals’ Denial of Suffering

The sufferings in the world and in Nigeria in particular cannot be deemphasized. “The suffering, pain, agonies, sorrows and death caused by the Corona Virus and the pandemic therein (Covid-19) are facts that prove the realities of suffering and death.”¹⁶ Suffering like death is no respecter of anyone. Unfortunately, Pentecostals seem to deny this fact. *De facto* is, “as Africans, our sun is harsh, deep hot and in dry season, it rises up to forty degrees. Many people are artisans who long for shadow but those who hired them do not give them the opportunity. Many trek to farm and also trek back. Many trek for miles looking for dirty water; in the name of drinking water. Many struggle for buses only to reach home very late. In the course of struggling to reach home with your rickety car, the road safety, the police and the army are on the way trying to extort some money out of your empty pocket. The Okada and Keke drivers harass you mercilessly. These are our daily sufferings.”¹⁷ Most Christians accept the reality of suffering. Paul wishes to know nothing and to boast of nothing except the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 6:14). The fact is that Nigerians are suffering. We have no food, no functional institutions like hospital, school and our unemployment rate is high. In the face of the current hyperinflation, we all live from hand to mouth. However, some Nigerian Pentecostal pastors deny suffering. According to David O. Oyedepo, “it is not your lot to be buffeted by the winds of life, neither is it your lot to be afflicted.”¹⁸ Although no one wants to suffer, but we are suffering in Nigeria. This catalogue of questions affirms suffering. “Is that child hawking grains of groundnut, few oranges

¹⁵Fernando Armellini, *Celebrating the Word*, Year B (Nairobi, Kenya: 2000), 203.

¹⁶ Orji, *Suffering and Pain in Christian Life*, 13.

¹⁷ Orji, *Suffering and Pain in Christian Life*, 129-130.

¹⁸ David O. Oyedepo, *Exploring the Riches of Redemption*, (Nigeria: Dominion Publishing House, 2015), 11.

and bananas under the sun not suffering? What of those ones knocked down by cars, are they enjoying their sorrow and pain? What of children who should be in school but they are at home because of finance, what are they enjoying? What of those who sleep under the bridge? What of those who go to bed with empty stomach? What of those who feed from the refuge dump? Do we have industries around our cities? Are we not seeing millions of unemployed youths? Are they enjoying their misery? Do we not see those women carrying logs of wood from the forest? Are they enjoying it? Do we not see children lined up in front of ponds? They are waiting for dirty water. Are they comfortable? What are the Keke, Okada and bus drivers under the sun enjoying? Nothing!!”¹⁹ The reality on the ground shows that the *hoi polloi* (the common people) are dying. They are murdered in cold blood like Evangelist Eunice Olawale who was killed at Kubwa, Abuja, for going on morning evangelism,²⁰ Deborah Samuel was killed and also burnt for blasphemy against Mohammad.²¹ Father Emmanuel Silas was killed, Philemon Obod, Peter Udo and the Methodist prelate, Samuel Kanu-Uche were kidnaped and tortured.²² To deny these realities doesn't make suffering an illusion, rather it is the denial of the truth. Those who follow Christ but deny the cross act like fair-weather Christians.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Jesus' demand from everyone is, take up your cross and follow me. “We all” are called upon to carry our cross. In embracing his extended hands of love on the cross, we must carry our pains and

¹⁹ Orji, M. Joseph, *Suffering and Pain in Christian life*, (Nigeria: Advocate Publication, 2021), 10-11.

²⁰ “Photos: Abuja Evangelist Murdered during ‘Morning Cry’.” Vanguard News. Accessed on 16/05/2022. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/07/photos-abuja-evangelists-murdered-morning-cry/>

²¹ Noah, Banjo. “CAN demands justice for Deborah Yakubu, calls for Nationwide Protest,” 14/05/2022. Punch. Accessed on 17/05/2022. <https://punchng.com/can-demands-justice-for-deborah-yakubu-calls-for-nationwide-protest/>

²² Benedict Mayaki. “Nigeria: Catholic Priests abducted in Edo, Kaduna.” Vaticannews.va. Accessed on 07/07/2022. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-07/nigeria-riest-kidnap-edo-kaduna-violence.html>

sorrow to the man who loved us first (1 Jn. 4:17-19). James McKarns opines that “When we do our work well and uncomplaining even though we don’t feel like doing it, that is carrying a cross. When we suffer a terrible tragedy and we still believe in God’s eternal goodness, we are carrying our cross. When we welcome an insignificant person and treat him or her with honour and respect, we are carrying a cross.”²³

Even Christ cried out *eloi eloi lama sabachthani*, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Matt. 27:46). Paul asked the Lord three times to remove his suffering from him, the Lord said to him “my grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:4). One of the thieves crucified with Christ wanted to be saved from the agony on the cross (Lk. 23:37-39). All these point to the fact that nobody wants to suffer. But suffering is bound to come. When it comes, we have to accept what we cannot change. However, Pentecostals denial of suffering in the face of the Nigerian realities sound illusory to say the least.

The level of insecurity, socio-economic and political instabilities in the country are alarming. But some Pentecostals appear to be blind to these facts. They prefer denying suffering rather than challenging the obvious. The meaning is that some Pentecostals seem to lack the radicalism of the prophet Amos (Amos 7:10-10), the will power of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 20:3-6). “The same thing is applicable to the prophet Micah. He was sent to the wicked rulers, who hate justice and love evil. They skinned the people alive and broke their bones into pieces. (Micah 3:1-3).”²⁴ They appear to lack the cord of Jesus who drove away the merchants in the temple (Matt. 21:12; Mk. 11:15). Today, the temple appears to be “the den of robbers,” money making industry and home of cheats (Lk.19:46). The greatest worry is the denial of the suffering of Nigerians.

²³McKarns, *Go Tell Everyone*, 63.

²⁴ Joseph M. Orji, *Religion: A Business?* (Nigeria: Advocate Citizens’ Press, 2021), 56.

The sons of Zebedee who went to seek the position of power were reprimanded. “Jesus does prophesy that they will suffer martyrdom.” The followers of Jesus must be ready to accept suffering, humiliation and even death, because “discipleship will not be easy. Mk 13:9-13 prophesies suffering for those who preach the gospel. At the same time, they are to be confident that God is with them in suffering and that they will be saved.”²⁵ No one should be naïve to think that following a suffering Messiah will be easy. No one should think that setbacks and failures are excluded from the life of Christians. They are part and parcel of life.

²⁵ Perkins, *New Testament*, 268.