

# Lifted Up upon the Cross

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To be a follower of Jesus Christ, one must sometimes carry a burden and go where sacrifice is required and suffering is inevitable.

Years ago, following a graduate school discussion on American religious history, a fellow student asked me, “Why have the Latter-day Saints not adopted the cross that other Christians use as a symbol of their faith?”

Inasmuch as such questions about the cross are often a question about our commitment to Christ, I immediately told him that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints considers the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ to be the central fact, the crucial foundation, the chief doctrine, and the ultimate expression of divine love in God’s grand plan for the salvation of His children.<sup>1</sup> I explained that the saving grace inherent in that act was essential for and universally gifted to the entire human family from Adam and Eve to the end of the world.<sup>2</sup> I quoted the Prophet Joseph Smith, who said, “All ... things which pertain to our religion are only appendages” to the Atonement of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Then I read him what Nephi had written 600 years before Jesus’s birth: “And ... the angel spake unto me ... , saying: Look! And I looked and beheld the Lamb of God, ... [who] was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

With my “love, share, and invite” zeal now kicking into high gear, I kept reading! To the Nephites in the New World the resurrected Christ said, “My Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; ... that I might draw all men unto me, ... and for this cause have I been lifted up.”<sup>5</sup>

I was about to quote the Apostle Paul when I noticed that my friend’s eyes were starting to glaze over. A quick look at his wristwatch apparently reminded him that he needed to be somewhere—anywhere—and he dashed off to his fictitious appointment. Thus ended our conversation.

This morning, some 50 years later, I am determined to finish that explanation—even if every single, solitary one of you start looking at your wristwatches. As I attempt to explain why we generally *do not* use

the iconography of the cross, I wish to make abundantly clear our deep respect and profound admiration for the faith-filled motives and devoted lives of those who do.

One reason we do not emphasize the cross as a symbol stems from our biblical roots. Because crucifixion was one of the Roman Empire's most agonizing forms of execution, many early followers of Jesus chose not to highlight that brutal instrument of suffering. The meaning of Christ's death was certainly central to their faith, but for some 300 years they typically sought to convey their gospel identity through other means.<sup>6</sup>

By the fourth and fifth centuries, a cross was being introduced as a symbol of generalized Christianity, but ours is not a "generalized Christianity." Being neither Catholic nor Protestant, we are, rather, a *restored church, the restored New Testament Church*. Thus, our origins and our authority go back *before* the time of councils, creeds, and iconography.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the absence of a symbol that was late coming into common use is yet another evidence that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a restoration of true Christian beginnings.

Another reason for not using iconized crosses is our emphasis on the complete miracle of Christ's mission—His glorious Resurrection as well as His sacrificial suffering and death. In underscoring that relationship, I note two pieces of art<sup>8</sup> that serve as backdrops for the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in their sacred weekly temple meetings each Thursday in Salt Lake City. These portrayals serve as constant reminders to us of the price that was paid and the victory that was won by Him whose servants we are.

A more public representation of Christ's two-part triumph is our use of this small Thorvaldsen image of the resurrected Christ emerging in glory from the tomb with the wounds of His Crucifixion still evident.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, we remind ourselves that President Gordon B. Hinckley once taught, "The lives of our people must [be] ... the symbol of our [faith]."<sup>10</sup> These considerations—especially the latter—bring me to what may be the most important of all scriptural references to the cross. It has nothing to do with pendants or jewelry, with steeples or signposts. It has to do, rather, with the rock-ribbed integrity and stiff moral backbone that Christians should bring to the call Jesus has given to every one of His disciples. In every land and age, He has said to us all, "If any man [or woman] will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."<sup>11</sup>

This speaks of the crosses we bear rather than the ones we wear. To be a follower of Jesus Christ, one must sometimes carry a burden—your own or someone else's—and go where sacrifice is required and suffering is

inevitable. A true Christian cannot follow the Master only in those matters with which he or she agrees. *No*. We follow Him everywhere, including, if necessary, into arenas filled with tears and trouble, where sometimes we may stand very much alone.

I know people, in and out of the Church, who are following Christ just that faithfully. I know children with severe physical disabilities, and I know the parents who care for them. I see all of them working sometimes to the point of total exhaustion, seeking strength, safety, and a few moments of joy that come no other way. I know many single adults who yearn for and deserve a loving companion, a wonderful marriage, and a home full of children of their own. No desire could be more righteous, but year after year such good fortune does not yet come. I know those who are fighting mental illness of many kinds, who plead for help as they pray and pine and claw for the promised land of emotional stability. I know those who live with debilitating poverty but, defying despair, ask only for the chance to make better lives for their loved ones and others in need around them. I know many who wrestle with wrenching matters of identity, gender, and sexuality. I weep for them, and I weep with them, knowing how significant the consequences of their decisions will be.

These are just a few of so many trying circumstances we may face in life, solemn reminders that there *is* a cost to discipleship. To Araunah, who attempted to give him free oxen and free wood for his burnt offering, King David said, “Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: ... [for I] will [not] offer ... unto the Lord my God ... that which doth cost me nothing.”<sup>12</sup> So too say we all.

As we take up our crosses and follow Him, it would be tragic indeed if the weight of our challenges did not make us more empathetic for and more attentive to the burdens being carried by others. It is one of the most powerful paradoxes of the Crucifixion that the arms of the Savior were stretched wide open and then nailed there, unwittingly but accurately portraying that every man, woman, and child in the entire human family is not only welcome but invited into His redeeming, exalting embrace.<sup>13</sup>

As the glorious Resurrection followed the agonizing Crucifixion, so blessings of every kind are poured out on those who are willing, as the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob says, to “believe in Christ, and view his death, and suffer his cross.” Sometimes these blessings come soon and sometimes they come later, but the marvelous conclusion to our personal *via dolorosa*<sup>14</sup> is the promise from the Master Himself that they do and will come. To obtain such blessings, may we follow Him—unfailingly, never faltering nor fleeing, never flinching at the task, not when our crosses may be heavy and not when, for a time, the path may

grow dark. For your strength, your loyalty, and your love, I give deep personal thanks. This day I bear apostolic witness of Him who was “lifted up”<sup>15</sup> and of the eternal blessings He bestows to those “lifted up” with Him, even the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. See Jeffrey R. Holland, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (1992), “Atonement of Jesus Christ,” 1:83.
2. Amulek speaks of the Atonement of Christ as the “great and last sacrifice,” being “infinite and eternal” in its reach (Alma 34:10). For “all are fallen and are lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement” (Alma 34:9; see also verses 8–12). President John Taylor adds: “In a manner to us incomprehensible and inexplicable, [Jesus] bore the weight of the sins of the whole world; not only of Adam, but of his posterity; and in doing that, opened the kingdom of heaven, not only to all believers and all who obeyed the law of God, but to more than one-half of the human family who die before they come to years of maturity, as well as to [those] who, having died without law, will, through His mediation, be resurrected without law, and be judged without law, and thus participate ... in the blessings of His atonement” (*An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* [1892], 148–49; *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: John Taylor* [2001], 52–53).
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 49.
4. 1 Nephi 11:32–33.
5. 3 Nephi 27:14–15.
6. There are, of course, references to the cross in Paul’s teachings (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:17–18; Galatians 6:14; Philippians 3:18), but these spoke to something much greater than two wooden beams nailed together or any smaller symbol of such. So when Paul speaks of the cross, he is using doctrinal shorthand to speak of the majesty of the Atonement, an arena where Latter-day Saints readily join him and quote him.
7. Early and traditional Christian figures such as Martin Luther’s associate Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541) were arguing by the late Middle Ages that “the crucifix [on its own] depicted only Christ’s human suffering and neglected to display his resurrection and redemptive [powers]” (in John Hilton III, *Considering the Cross: How Calvary Connects Us with*

*Christ* [2021], 17).

8. Harry Anderson, *The Crucifixion*; Harry Anderson, *Mary and the Resurrected Lord*.
9. See Russell M. Nelson, “Opening the Heavens for Help,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2020, 72–74.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Symbol of Christ,” *Ensign*, May 1975, 92.
11. Matthew 16:24.
12. 2 Samuel 24:24.
13. “His arm is extended to all people who will repent and believe on his name” (Alma 19:36; see also 2 Nephi 26:33; Alma 5:33).
14. *Via dolorosa* is a Latin phrase meaning “a painfully difficult route, passage, or series of experiences” (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, “via dolorosa”). It is most often associated with Jesus’s movement from His condemnation at the hand of Pilate to His Crucifixion on Calvary.
15. See 3 Nephi 27:14–15.