Pentecost 17 Jeremiah 38:1-13
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It's Not Easy Being a Christian (But It's Still Great!)
I. As Christians we have Jesus' cross for our salvation.
II. As Christians we must take up our own cross.

Dear Christian friends,

Today Jesus asks EACH ONE of us, ***"What about YOU? Who do YOU say I am?"*** The answer to that question is the KEY to understanding today's readings.

IF as so many believe Jesus is NOTHING MORE than a wonderful teacher and role model – WHY would I want to ***"deny myself and take up my cross"*** – just to follow His **example**? **Why** would I want to PUT UP with all the hassles of **being a Christian** that Peter talked about or that Jeremiah endured here?

IF, however, Jesus is indeed, ***"the Christ, the Son of the living God"*** – if Jesus is not just our ROLE MODEL but most especially our SAVIOR from sin – our peace with God and our hope of heaven – **then** there's NO WAY I want anything to COME BETWEEN Jesus and me! **Then** I will daily strive to ***"deny myself and take up my cross"*** to follow Jesus **all the way** to heaven. **Then** I will put up with WHATEVER the **unbelieving world** may throw my way RATHER than **give up** my Savior.

Today's readings make the point – IT'S NOT EASY being a Christian but it's STILL GREAT! 1)**As Christians** we have Jesus' cross for our salvation and 2)**as Christians** we must take up **our own** cross.

I. As Christians we have Jesus' cross for our salvation.

"This is what the LORD says. Whoever remains in this city will die by sword, famine, and plague, but whoever goes over to the Chaldeans will live."

God sent Jeremiah **to proclaim** His CERTAIN JUDGMENT on His impenitent people. The Jews just wouldn't listen to God. They refused to repent and GIVE UP their **sinful ways**. They refused to give up their **false gods** and return to the only real God. **Earlier** we're told, ***"Neither (King Zedekiah) nor the people paid any attention to the words the LORD had spoken through Jeremiah."*** This had been going on for **centuries**. The people foolishly thought they could GET AWAY with ignoring and defying the living God. They were going to learn the HARD WAY that ***"it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."*** God is SO VERY **patient** but there is a limit to God's patience.

Reading the OT is like looking into a mirror – we can see a LOT OF OURSELVES in those **stubborn** Israelites. "Lord, You be there IF I NEED You but otherwise leave me alone. You will take care of me but DON'T YOU DARE try to control me or tell me how to live my life. I'll be a Christian but it will be ON MY TERMS not Yours." Or in the light of the gospel reading, "Lord, I'll take up my cross and deny myself AS LONG AS You don't ask **too much** of me." Can you see yourself doing that?

It's NOT EASY **being a Christian** because it means repenting of our sins and praying, "Lord, do ***'not keep a record of my sins'*** or ***'treat me as my sins deserve."*** It's NOT EASY praying that because our sinful nature is KICKING AND SCREAMING **the whole time** – making all kinds of **excuses** – arguing that God needs to UNDERSTAND us.

It's NOT EASY to repent but it's SO GREAT **because** we have Jesus' cross for our salvation. Jesus is ***"the Son of the living God"*** – our God Himself come to rescue us **rebels** from that CERTAIN JUDGMENT of **death** and hell's **eternal punishment**. That meant Jesus HAD TO LIVE for us that life of perfect loved and **obedience** that we owed God. That ALSO MEANT the cross for Jesus – the betrayal – the ridicule and **rejection** – the scourging and **spitting** – the nails pounded through His hands and feet. There **could be** NO AVOIDING the cross for Jesus to be our Savior. Yet as horrible

as the PHYSICAL PAIN was – FAR WORSE was the hell – the **real hell!** – Jesus endured on His cross. ALL SINS of **all** people of **all** time ALL PUT on the **innocent** Jesus. He who ***"knew no sin"*** was treated **as if** He was the ONLY ONE who had ever sinned. **On the cross** Jesus was punished IN OUR PLACE – Jesus shed His blood and sacrificed His life to ***"take away the sin of the world."*** Only let's be careful NOT TO LEAVE Jesus dead and buried! As promised – on Easter morning Jesus **came out** of His grave ALIVE and **victorious** over death and the grave.

That's what makes it SO GREAT to be a Christian – we have Jesus' cross AND His **empty grave**! **As Christians** we are COUNTING ON Jesus to save us from our sin and death. HAVING Jesus **and His cross** we have God's forgiveness of all our sins – **we have** a whole new relationship with God – GOD SAYS SO! **Having Jesus** – His **cross** – AND His **empty grave** we have eternal life in heaven the **very moment** we die – God PROMISES us just that! It's SO GREAT – so fantastic – to be a Christian – TO HAVE Jesus and His cross.

It's GREAT – but please understand that it's NOT EASY. How God wants us to **get that through** our often THICK HEADS! God never promises us an EASY life as Christians. Loved so dearly by God **doesn't mean** everything just FALLS INTO PLACE and goes smoothly for us **until** we suddenly find ourselves in heave. Listen again to Jesus. ***"If anyone wants to follow Me, let him DENY himself, take up his CROSS, and follow Me."*** There's NO BEING a Christian WITHOUT Jesus' cross AND our own crosses. It's GREAT TO BE a **Christian** but it's not easy because…

II. We must take up our own cross.

With our ***"crosses"*** we're not talking about the ACHES and pains – the hardships and hassles – of **everyday life**. Health problems – losing our job – the house burning down – are NOT BY THEMSELVES ***"crosses."*** All people **have to deal** with stuff like that WHETHER they're **Christians or not**. That's just part of life in this **sin-cursed** world.

With the ***"cross"*** we're talking only ABOUT CHRISTIANS. ***"Cross"*** refers to ANY AND ALL the pains and hardships – the sufferings and **sorrows** that come our way JUST BECAUSE we are Christians. Jesus carried **His** cross FOR US and now we carry **our** cross FOR HIM. Oh, there's a WORLD OF DIFFERENCE between Jesus' cross and ours and we must ever be clear about that. Jesus' cross earned our salvation – paid for all our sins. **Our crosses** don't earn us anything. Our cross is a CONSEQUENCE of our trusting in **Jesus** and **His cross**. AT THE HEART of **our** crosses is as Jesus put it ***"denying ourselves."*** **In us Christians** there is an ON-GOING – never-ending – DAY after day battle between the **new man** – the Christian in us – and our old sinful nature. It's that daily battle to SAY "YES!" to God and whatever God wants for us and to SAY "NO!" to our sinful nature and **whatever** it wants. It's NOT EASY doing that **even though** IT'S GREAT **to be a Christian**.

Jeremiah's life and ministry were NOT EASY. These verses take us to the LAST DAYS of **Jerusalem** and **David's dynasty**. Jerusalem was under siege by King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army. Jeremiah's message – the ONE GOD GAVE him to speak – was not going to win Jeremiah any **popularity contest** – especially with those in power. PLAIN and simple Jeremiah told whomever **would listen**, "SURRENDER or die."

That message got Jeremiah IN TROUBLE with the officials. They didn't immediately kill Jeremiah. They wanted Jeremiah to **first** SUFFER MISERABLY. There's a ***"cistern"*** – an underground water storage place. It's DEEP – they can't just push Jeremiah **down into** it. They had to ***"lower"*** him down with ropes. It's DEEP and **undoubtedly** DARK. There's no water in it, just mud - ***"and Jeremiah sank down into the mud."*** Got the PICTURE? And it was all because Jeremiah wouldn't keep his MOUTH SHUT. It's NOT EASY **being a Christian** when God's Word is SO UNPOPULAR.

Being faithful to God's Word – ALL of God's Word – in our own lives AND in telling others **what God** has to say – brings a ***"cross"*** into our lives. In our personal lives that FAITHFULNESS MEANS our

morals and **priorities** in life are shaped by WHAT GOD SAYS and not by what EVERYBODY ELSE is doing or what our sinful nature wants. That makes for some REAL STRUGGLES as we ***"deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow"*** Jesus instead of THE CROWD. It's NOT EASY doing that but then we draw our strength from **Jesus** and **His cross**.

Faithfulness in telling others what God says can easily lead to RIDICULE – to being told to BUTT OUT and MIND your own business. It can cost us friends or PEACE in the family – unless we JUST TELL ourselves to **keep quiet** instead. But that's not what God tells us to do. It's NOT EASY to talk to someone about how they're ignoring and defying God with HOW they're living their lives or by WHAT they believe. **God's Word** isn't popular but ALL still need to hear – and **heed!** – it. We are not to GO LOOKING for trouble but faithfulness to God's Word **will bring** trouble. It's NOT EASY…

The same thing happens with CHURCHES. Faithfulness to **all** of God's Word – being PICKY about doctrine – doesn't sit well in society. God speaks so clearly about CONTROVERSIAL things like abortion – homosexuality – the role of men and women in the church – who can come to Communion, etc. It's NOT EASY standing firm when there's SUCH PRESSURE to be liked and **not offend** anyone. It's NOT EASY when so many other churches GIVE IN to popular opinion. It's NOT EASY but it is taking up our ***"cross and following Jesus."***

Yet all is NOT DOOM and gloom even while we're UNDER the cross. For Jeremiah, ***"Ebed Melek the Cushite*** (Ethiopian)***, an official in the king's house"*** spoke up and got the king to order Jeremiah's release. Our God is still IN CONTROL and taking care of His people. His kingdom is coming – His will is being done. It still wasn't EASY for Jeremiah but that truth gave him – and **gives us**! – GREAT COMFORT.

NOT EASY but still great. Great **because** we have Jesus and **His cross**. Great **because** the One who calls us to ***"deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow"*** Him is the Son of God – our Savior from sin – our Hope of heaven. Amen.

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