

Lifting Up
A Personal Cross

Carl H. Stevens Jr. is pastor of Greater Grace Church located in Baltimore, Maryland. Pastor Stevens is also chancellor of Maryland Bible College & Seminary and host of the international Christian radio program "The Grace Hour." This booklet was created from messages preached by Pastor Stevens.

Pastor Stevens can be seen weekly on cable television stations throughout the United States. Call us for information regarding programming in your area.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version. Italics for emphasis are ours.

GRACE PUBLICATIONS

P.O. BOX 18715

BALTIMORE, MD 21206

Printed in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A.

Copyright © 1997

Cover Photo: © 1996 SoftKey International Inc. and its licensors

Grace Publications is a ministry of
Greater Grace World Outreach, Inc.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	5
-------------------------------	---

<i>Chapter 1</i>	7
----------------------------	---

THE CURSE OF THE SOULISH LIFE

<i>Chapter 2</i>	14
----------------------------	----

DISCONNECTING FROM THE OLD MAN

<i>Chapter 3</i>	19
----------------------------	----

THE RENEWAL OF THE MIND

<i>CONCLUSION</i>	26
-----------------------------	----

INTRODUCTION

Many Christians are plagued with problems that never seem to go away, because they will not take up their cross, accepting their death, burial, and resurrection with Jesus Christ. As a result, they do not grow from faith to faith (Romans 1:17), from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3:18), or from grace to grace (John 1:16).

We must make a decision to take up our cross each moment of the day. If I am passive toward that decision, my passivity reveals that I am taking up my cross only occasionally—usually when I receive material blessings.

For example, when an employee takes up his cross daily, he always has more fun in the office and he always works with the same level of energy. He doesn't get mad at co-workers, because he has disconnected himself from the 'old man' who is angry all the time.

Within each of us is a power that wants to take control and cause us to live like the devil.

At times, we can feel that power come against us like an army, but it must connect in order to trouble us. Even Jesus, though He was without sin, faced strong temptations in His humanity, especially after He had fasted for forty days (Matthew 4). But Jesus refused to connect with those temptations. He made choices to honor the Father's will in every situation. "Not my will but thine be done." This is what it means to take up a personal cross.

Chapter One

THE CURSE OF
THE SOULISH LIFE

When Adam and Eve partook of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they were overwhelmed with an understanding that was outside of the Cross of Jesus Christ. They had exposed themselves to a knowledge that led to exalting the ego in human viewpoint.

Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil gives way to overindulgence in uncontrolled knowledge. This results in an overgrowth of human reasoning detached from divine viewpoint. ¹Human reasoning, left on its own, produces self-defense mechanisms—self-justification, self-deception, self-absorption. Then, “logical” reactions based upon human viewpoint spring up, along with the vocabulary to complement Adam’s ego.

A Christian who continues to eat from the Tree of Knowledge is growing in Adam without

losing his life. For a season, he appears very healthy. He seems to have it all together, and he seems to have a new self-image. But ultimately, this Christian is in a process of spiritual self-destruction, living as if he were accountable to no one.

Accountability is the key to spiritual growth in the soul, where the life of Christ increases and the soulish life of Adam decreases. As the child of God is accountable to live by every Word of God, he will become accountable to the Holy Spirit, the pastor-teacher, and the Body of Christ.

Leaning on Human Understanding

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

As a pastor, it is overwhelming to counsel people who acknowledge the truth, but refuse to *pursue* the truth. They acknowledge everything about the truth, but they will not change. What’s happening? The objective light of God’s Word is not allowed to bring about a subjective conversion.

“For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light” (Psalm 36:9). In God’s

light, we receive more light, meaning in objective light, we receive subjective light. People who acknowledge truth in the objective mind but are never converted in the subjective mind become very strange. Churches are filled with these people today. Pastors, don't try to discover how many there are in your church—that's God's business. He will reveal them soon enough.

I have a group of people in my church who will not draw near to the messages or the fellowship. Yet, they want appointments for counseling. Even though years have been spent investing in their lives, they still want to be pampered and babied as they withdraw into their flesh. Instead of coming to church, they stay home, depressed because they want to enter into sin but they don't dare to do it now. Behind the subtle deception controlling their lives is arrogance, pride, and stubbornness. Their souls resist the Cross and the Body of Jesus Christ.

“Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name” (Malachi 3:16).

God records in His book of remembrance

every time a Christian attends a church service. I can't understand how anyone would want to miss an opportunity to experience the inspired Word of God as it is manifested in an assembly meeting. A man in my church who has faithfully attended three services a week for the past twenty years shared with me how he heard more than twenty new things in a recent message. He has not become familiar; he is still very receptive to the truth.

You can't talk someone into spirituality who has decided that he doesn't want God. Jesus sought the lost sheep who wandered in frailty and weakness, but He never pursued the disciples who turned back and followed Him no more.

Every person has a free volition; each one can live as he chooses. If he wants to forsake the truth, it's between him and God. Please understand that rebuking this person won't do any good. We are to let God deal with him.

To some, Christianity is just an option. They have no desire for heaven, nor do they want God's power in their lives. But, we cannot take the Cross of Christ and force it on them. We must follow God ourselves, going forward with our eyes on Him.

“Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2).

“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10.)

These verses teach *stewardship*, which is accountability to God’s Word and grace. A caretaker of the Word of God must be found faithful as a steward of categorical doctrine.

It is a frustrating thing for a pastor to counsel someone who will not receive what the pastor has to say. The pastor may be equipped with all the right answers, but unless a person accepts co-burial with Christ and co-resurrection in the New Creation, nothing the pastor says can help.

Healing for the Snakebites

“And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass,

he lived” (Numbers 21:8-9).

The Hebrew word for *pole* is unusual in this case. It carries the meaning *brilliant light*. Many of the Israelites had been bitten by poisonous serpents, but as soon as they looked at the brazen serpent, they were healed. In the same way, we are healed from all of our “snakebites,” the moment we look to the Cross of Christ.

Snakebites of lust, drugs, pride, indifference, smoking, pornography, insecurity, depression, stubbornness, and rebellion have poisoned many Christians. Spiritually, these believers are dead. But they can be instantly healed by looking at the brilliant light of the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Looking to the Light

The word *look* in Numbers 21:8, in its spiritual application for the believer, means to gaze into the life of Jesus Christ, who was lifted up for us on the cross to draw all men to Him. In looking to the Cross, we allow Christ’s death to become our death. His life then penetrates our souls, bringing in life, because internalizing Christ’s life ushers in resurrection power.

“When men are cast down, then thou shalt say, There is lifting up; and he shall save the

humble person” (Job 22:29). Resurrection life is imparted when we lift up the brilliant light of the purity of His death. Christ’s death reconciled us unto God, but it is His resurrection life that saves and delivers us from the snakebites.

“Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his [resurrection] life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement” (Romans 5:9-11).

1. The problem is explained in depth in the booklet *Uncontrolled Knowledge*, published by Grace Publications, 1997.

Chapter Two

DISCONNECTING
FROM THE OLD MAN

“But whoever denies and disowns Me before men, I also will deny and disown him before My Father Who is in heaven. Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

“For I have come to part asunder a man from his father, and a daughter from her mother, and a newly married wife from her mother-in-law; And a man’s foes will be they of his own household.

“He who loves and takes more pleasure in father or mother more than in Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves and takes more pleasure in son or daughter more than in Me is not worthy of Me;

“And he who does not take up his cross and follow Me [that is cleave steadfastly to Me, conforming wholly to My example in living and, if

need be, in dying also] is not worthy of Me. Whoever finds his lower life will lose it [the higher life], and whoever loses his [lower] life on My account will find [the higher life]" (Matthew 10:33-39 Amplified Translation).

This can be a difficult passage to preach upon because it deals with dying to self and confronting natural affections that disrupt the human soul. In Matthew 10:38-39, Jesus said that those who follow Him must cleave steadfastly to Him, conforming themselves wholly to His example in living and in dying. He went on to say that those who preserve their lives—in soul-ish personalities and temperaments—will lose the higher life of God.

"Whoever loses his life on My account," Jesus said, "will find the higher life. And he who receives, welcomes, and accepts the men I send, receives, welcomes, and accepts Me. Those who accept My preacher *because* he's a preacher shall receive a preacher's reward. Those who receive and accept a righteous man because he is righteous shall receive a righteous man's reward" (Matthew 10:40-41, Amplified Translation).

Jesus Christ came to bring a sword. A sword is painful. It pierces, it wounds. For this reason, many disciples went back and followed Him no

more. It is difficult for some to think that the Savior, the Lover of our hearts, the One who sacrificed Himself to pay for everything we ever did, also came to bring a sword into families and relationships.

“And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child [Jesus Christ] is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35).

Some become upset after hearing messages on these verses. The preacher quotes the Bible, but these people are still unhappy about what Jesus says. This kind of person is always seeking a church that doesn't preach the truth so he can continue to be sentimental in human affections and natural relationships. Pastors who are not afraid to confront people with these verses are generally not well accepted.

The Struggle of Denial

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

The word *deny* limits the original meaning of

the Greek text. If I am living in my old sin nature, how can I “deny” myself? I have tried to deny myself thousands of times and have never gotten to first base. I have tried to disregard myself, but my problems continued.

Typically, some preachers will try to get you to deny something you *can't* deny. Our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked. We cannot deny the power of sin that is within us any more than the leopard can change his spots (Jeremiah 13:23). We have all tried it. A person who has a terrible problem with drugs may say, “I am just going to deny that problem today.” But the problem returns that afternoon. I don't know how many people have sincerely said to me, “I am never going to take another drink” or “I will never worry again.” They don't realize that they can't keep such promises.

Deny himself is *aparneomai*, which means to have no connection with the person. This is the same word used to describe how Peter denied Christ: “I know not the man,” Peter said. He meant, “I have no connection with the man you're going to crucify.”

In Matthew 10:33, Jesus said, “Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.” Christ

will never deny a believer's salvation, but everything that person ever did on earth will be burned up as wood, hay, and stubble at the Bema Seat (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

"You denied me when trials and persecutions came," Jesus will say to these people when they stand before the judgment seat. "You did not confess me before men. When you failed, you only confessed how bad things were. You are saved—you will spend eternity in heaven. But now you must suffer loss of all rewards because I could not connect with your lifestyle on earth."

Wood speaks of things that are done in human energy. *Hay* refers to emotionalism. *Stubble* is objective doctrine that was never allowed to convert the subjective mind. A person can have objective understanding but still live in subjective defeat. A part of his mind will not formulate truth, therefore Christ isn't formed in the *whole* man.

Chapter Three

THE RENEWAL OF THE MIND

“And be renewed in the spirit of your mind”
(Ephesians 4:23).

Renewed is *ananeo*, which means to receive brand-new vigorous energy from a divine resource. It is an intransitive verb, with an instrument of agency and an ablative of source. The source is the Word of God—the mind of Christ—and the instrument of agency is the Holy Spirit. The voice is passive, meaning, the subject receives the action of the verb.

The principle here is that I am delivered, not by denying myself, but by receiving the operation of the kingdom of God through the Spirit and the Word of grace. This is God’s *elative conclusion*—His divine option for subjective minds.¹ When I choose God’s provision, a new emotional structure is formed in my soul as the Holy Spirit combines the simplicity of revelation with my humility.

You can try to change in your emotions, but it will not work. Years ago, I was always the first person to go forward when the preacher would ask people to rededicate themselves. I was very sincere, but it never worked for me. “Oh, my God, I must be the most wicked person in the world,” I can remember saying. “I come to all the services. I tithe. I don’t go out on my wife. But I have secret sins, and I can’t get rid of them through these rededications. Even though I keep studying the Bible, I can’t forsake those sins.”

My problem was that I was spiritually insane, trying to deny myself. 1 Corinthians 15:56 says that the strength of sin is in the law. Trying to deny yourself is like putting yourself under a law. For example, if you are overweight, you want to deny yourself the desire for food. But all the time that you are “denying” yourself, you can only think about your next meal! Through your denial, you are doing worse than ever.

Aparneomai (deny) means that I make a decision to refuse any connection with my ‘old man’. I choose to be disconnected from anxiety, jealousy, envy, and fear. This means that I take up my cross and live in resurrection life.

What It Means to Take Up the Cross

Then what does it really mean to take up your cross? Your burdens are not your cross. The problems you have caused for yourself do not produce a cross. The things people do to you are not a cross.²

Years ago, a woman on one of my sales routes lost a child. "I never thought God would give me this cross," she told me. But that wasn't her cross. If five of my family members died, I would certainly mourn and miss them terribly. Still, this wouldn't be my cross. *Taking up our cross has nothing to do with outward circumstances.* It has to do with the subjective mind being converted by the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Not my will, but thine be done." He said, in John 5:30, "I can of mine own self do nothing...because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me." When there is something that I want to do, I check it out with God. I say, "Not my will, but thine be done." *That* is taking up my cross.

As I take up my cross, I make choices moment by moment to connect with Him and His will, and because I'm disconnected from my

will, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. I don't have to talk about something I *want* to change; neither do I require counseling. I just take up God's will with God's provision: God's grace, and God's mercy through God's love in the power of the Holy Spirit. *That* is taking up my cross. Christ bore my sins on His cross. Now, I bear His cross internally.

Christ: Our Example

Christ made Himself an example by taking up His cross. Philippians 2 describes Jesus Christ's *kenosis*, or, self-emptying. He was and is always God the Son. But emptying Himself meant that during His time on earth, Jesus would never exalt or glorify Himself. He would never do anything apart from the Father's plan. Certainly, Jesus used His deity to perform miracles, but every miracle was for the sake of others in order to glorify the Father and not Himself. Every day, He derived His life from the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Word of doctrine.

Jesus never allowed Himself to be led by His human emotions, even though He did weep out of compassion and love for people. He was never led by His feelings but by the words of the Father through the Holy Spirit.

“Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin” (Romans 6:6-7).

Considering the example of Christ, we have a choice to make: Follow self, or follow the Cross. We will either live in the defense mechanisms of Adam or in the provision of Christ. Christ wants us to see ourselves as crucified once and for all and then to reckon upon that crucifixion *daily* (Hebrews 10:10; 1 Corinthians 15:31).

The Purpose of Wounds

“...For I have wounded thee with the wound of an enemy, with the chastisement of a cruel one, for the multitude of thine iniquity; because thy sins were increased” (Jeremiah 30:14).

“For her wound is incurable, for it is come unto Judah; he is come unto the gate of my people, even to Jerusalem” (Micah 1:9).

Why would God wound one of His children? Because this person will not accept the teaching of His Word in certain areas. Rather than letting him live in self-occupation for thirty years, God wounds him so that, in pain and agony, the believer will get on his knees and ac-

cept God's provision for healing. "For I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the LORD" (Jeremiah 30:17a).

"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart....Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:12, 16).

Sometimes God needs to bring the sword into your soul, and that can be painful. God has to wound you because of your lifestyle. It isn't the church that wounds you. Your first husband didn't wound you, neither did your children wound you. You can't blame it on your boss, nor on what happened when you were fifteen. It is *God* who has wounded you.

Everything that comes into my life must go through God. A drunken driver cannot kill a child unless God permits it. I cannot have cancer or a nervous breakdown unless God allows it. My business cannot fail unless God permits it to fail.

Wounds come into our lives to crush us so

that we will come to the Father through the Son and receive grace and mercy. When we do, God heals the wounds and puts ointment on the scars, making us brand spanking new creations. The old reactionary, defensive life is taken away and a new spiritual life comes in.

The Cross has done its perfect work. Daily, we live refreshed in the vision, dead to self and alive unto Christ, as we gladly lift up a personal cross.

1. The principle of the *relative conclusion* is discussed in the booklet *Motivated by God's Provision* from Grace Publications, 1997.
2. *The Cross: A Burden or a Blessing*, Grace Publications, 1996, presents this issue in depth.

CONCLUSION

I cannot perform God's will through religious effort. I am not going to try to live the Christian life. It is impossible. Instead, I am going to receive from the Word of God and allow the mind of Christ and the Holy Spirit's power to become the instrument to establish God's Kingdom within me.

By grace through faith, I receive objective transformation followed by subjective conversions. If I lose my soulish life, I will find God's life.

God's estimation of His Son is, "Thou art *worthy*." And, the Father sees me hid in Christ. Therefore, when I lift up a personal cross, rightly esteeming His character, I realize that I am worthy of the Father's provisions for my life because I am hid in the Son.