

There's an old phrase used by German theologians that I've always found interesting. "Das Liebe Kreuz." For those who don't "sprechen sie deutsch," that means "The dear cross." When you understand that the cross was a torture device used to execute the vilest criminals, "The dear cross" is kind of like saying, "The dear guillotine" or "dear lethal injection." But as Christians, we get why the cross is "dear." On the cross, Jesus died to forgive our sin and win us eternal life! That's why we hang one front and center in church.

But what makes "Das liebe kreuz" really paradoxical? That phrase isn't just talking about Christ's cross, but...our crosses too. The kind of crosses Jesus refers to when he says, "***If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.***" It's easy to call it the "dear cross" when it's hanging in the front of church. But when we have to heft it on our own backs and shoulders? That's different.

First, we need to point out that Jesus isn't talking about literal wooden torture devices when he refers to our "crosses." Rather, the cross of a Christian is any suffering that comes as a consequence of our faith in Jesus. So essentially, "Das Liebe Kreuz" means "dear suffering." In a world seeking to reduce or eradicate suffering, that sounds crazy. Yet, as Jesus tells his followers, The Way of the Cross means we can expect to carry crosses and suffer for following Jesus.

We sometimes hear people say about some difficulty, "This is my cross to bear." Sometimes that's true, because the Christian cross always includes suffering. However, not every kind of suffering is a cross.

There are really three different kinds of suffering humans face. All three are the consequences of something—**1.) The consequences of our own sin** **2.) The consequences of living in a sinful world** **3.) The consequences of following Jesus in faith.** Only the last kind are "crosses."

Sometimes we suffer the consequences of our own sins. The longtime alcoholic gets liver disease. The unfaithful husband breaks his marriage bond. The murderer spends life in prison. The teenager gets kicked off the team for drinking. People sometimes suffer the direct results of their sin.

Other times, we suffer not as a direct result of our own sin, but the consequences of living in a world corrupted by sin. The hurricanes that tore through Texas and Florida; a woman who unexpectedly discovers breast cancer; the families who suffered loss at the latest tragic school shooting. People sometimes suffer because they live in a sinful, fallen world inhabited by sinners.

And sometimes we suffer the consequences of following Christ in faith--crosses. Being persecuted for your faith—like the 30 Coptic Christians beheaded by ISIS, or the 80 Christians executed in North Korea for owning Bibles; the struggle of denying the desires of our sinful self to follow God's Word, even though so many others freely satisfy their desires. Sometimes Christians suffer because they're Christians.

Don't we naturally assume that following Jesus should shield us from all suffering? But that reveals a sinful flaw in our hearts. We're selfish. Self-focused. Self-reliant. The only way I believe God is blessing me, is if everything in my life is free of suffering, because I selfishly only focus on how I feel about it. That's why "the dear cross" sounds contradictory to the ears of my heart.

But in feeling that way about suffering, we're like a child who refuses to take medicine because it tastes bad. They don't realize they need it. They just know it doesn't seem good. Those crosses-- that suffering, is what we need. But often, we don't realize we need it, because it doesn't seem good.

It's precisely because of our selfishness, self-focus, and self-reliance that crosses are necessary. As our worship theme states, crosses aren't meant to drive us away. **The Way of the Cross Keeps Us Close to Christ!** And it's not just crosses that God promises to use for our eternal good, but every kind of suffering we experience.

We see that play out in our sermon text from Genesis, which begins, ***"Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran."*** Now, Jacob wasn't going to Haran on vacation. He was fleeing for his life. Jacob is the grandson of Abraham, and the son of Isaac. We heard about both those men in last week's sermon. After Abraham passed God's test of faith, Isaac had twin sons ---the firstborn, Esau, and the younger, Jacob.

The firstborn son usually received the family's blessing and inheritance, including being the line of the Savior. However, for this family, God switched things up, informing Isaac, ***"The older will serve the younger."***

But Isaac loved Esau, the rugged hunter, more than he loved Jacob, the mama's boy homebody. So despite God's command, Isaac planned to give the blessing to Esau. However, Jacob, which means "heel grabber" -- euphemistic for deceit-- was aptly named. He and his equally deceptive mother Rebekah devised a scheme that tricked Isaac, who was blind, into giving the blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. Outraged that Jacob stole his blessing, Esau vowed to kill Jacob.

And so we find Jacob fleeing for his life, traveling 450 miles to Haran. Imagine his fear, always looking over his shoulder for the brother who wanted him dead. The pain of a homebody forced to leave home and throw himself on the mercy of extended family he'd never met. Wracked with guilt over his deception; feeling the weight of his now shattered family because of his self-reliant deceit. Alone. Afraid. Ashamed.

Stopping for the night, Jacob, who had nothing to his name, ***"took one of the stones there, put it under his head, and lay down to sleep."*** Under an open sky, with a rock for a pillow, and a boulder of guilt in his gut, Jacob settled down for a restless sleep.

In love, God was allowing Jacob to suffer some of the consequences of his sin. But again, don't our self-focused hearts object. "Love? How can allowing suffering be loving?" Our sinful nature always misreads suffering or crosses as God's wrath. But God was allowing Jacob to suffer-- not to drive him away, but to bring him back.

At his father's tent, Jacob showed his sinful self-reliance. He trusted in his own deceit, rather than simply trusting that God would keep his promise and bless him. So, in love for his soul, God allowed Jacob to suffer consequences, so he would realize his sin and need for forgiveness.

In the same way, we sometimes need to suffer the consequences of our sins to crush our selfishness. Really, all sin stems from selfishness. Every sin I commit is me deciding that my will is more important than God's will. As we suffer the consequences of sin, we're forced to realize our sinful destructive patterns, and turn to God for forgiveness.

When we suffer the consequences of living in this sinful world, we're forced to loosen our self-focused grip on the things of this life, and realize that this isn't home. We're made for something more--our heavenly home.

When we're faced with the painful persecution and stinging self-denial of cross-bearing, our self-reliance is shattered. We can't carry it ourselves. We're forced to rely on Jesus' cross for forgiveness, strength, and perseverance to take up our crosses.

In every suffering, in every cross—God lovingly directs us away from self, and toward our Savior. As Jesus tells his disciples, ***"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"***

Jacob must have wondered if his sinful deceit had disqualified him from God's blessing and love. But God didn't want him to despair. That's why he reassures Jacob in a dream. ***"He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to Heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth...I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land."***

In a visual way, God reminded Jacob that he wasn't alone. God hadn't abandoned Jacob. His sin hadn't disqualified him from God's love or blessings. Rather, the LORD reassured Jacob by reiterating his promises.

God's promises and presence transformed Jacob's mindset about that suffering! Jacob didn't know what his future held, but he knew God's promise, ***"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go,"*** and that was enough. In the same way, God's gracious promises and presence equip us to face any cross or suffering with confidence and joy!

God reassured Jacob just as he'd promised Abraham and Isaac, ***"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."*** He was pointing to the promised Savior who would come from Jacob's family line—the Savior who would save all people from sin...through a cross.

That promised Savior, who we hear telling his disciples, ***"The Son of Man must suffer many things...and he must be killed and after three days rise again."*** Christ's cross was necessary—to save us from our sinful selfishness, self-focus, and self-reliance. The one who bridges Heaven and earth through his cross, makes it possible for us to take up our crosses and follow him.

Despite what our selfish hearts desire, it's possible for short term suffering to serve our long term good. I think parents especially understand that. When Faith was 20 days old, I held her as the doctor snipped her tongue and lip ties. And my heart broke. When the child you love more than anything screams and looks up at you, betrayed, like she's saying, "Dad, this hurts. Why would you let this happen?" And you fight back tears and whisper, "I know it hurts. But it's for your good." You know it hurts. But you know it's necessary. And so you hang on to them with all your strength and promise, "It's OK. I've got you."

And in every suffering you face, your heavenly Father who loves you more than anything, wraps his arms tightly around you. And when we cry out, "Father, it hurts! Why would you let this happen?" he whispers, "I know it hurts. But it's for your eternal good. Cling tightly to me. Cling to the cross. I'll never let you go." We don't know what our future holds, but we know Christ's promise, ***"I am with you...I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you."*** He's promised. And it is enough.