

5503U

ECHO LAKE STUDY WEEKEND - 2007

FROM EDEN LOST TO EDEN RESTORED

Speaker: Bro. Roger Lewis (NZ)

Exhortation: Simon of Cyrene

Reading: Mark 15:16-28

Well, thank you brother chairman, and good morning my dear brethren and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ.

This morning as our chairman has said, we're going to take a story from the bible at the time of our Lord's crucifixion, concerning Simon of Cyrene, the champion of the cross! You know, it's a funny thing about stories, b&s, we love to hear stories, and the bible is full of stories, and I think that those stories are there, that we might learn spiritual lessons. I hope that by the time we finish our story today, the story of Simon of Cyrene, we will feel that we've been encouraged in the truth to do better for our Lord.

This particular story begins in Matthew 27 for purposes of our exhortation this morning. The story of Simon is found in all the synoptic gospels, it's in Matthew, it's in Mark, it's in Luke, but the story of Simon is not in John's gospel, in fact, there it's something quite different. John says, and John is quite adamant that the Lord bore His own cross, 'He bearing His cross went forth unto Golgotha' (John 19:17), and by the way, John says so for a reason, he wants to draw attention to another aspect of the Lord's work, but Matthew 27 tells us this in verse 32, 'And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene'. You see what it says is, '**as they came out**', now what that tells us, b&s, is that they've arrived at the gate of the city. I think John is right, I think Jesus bore the cross from wherever it was placed upon Him, but when He got to the gate of the city, the Lord couldn't bear the burden anymore, and by the way, they were coming out because the Law forbid judicial execution within the city walls, it had to take place without the camp, and so they were leading Christ to Golgotha which was beyond the wall (or without the camp) as Hebrews would say. Christ who had been bearing His own cross now staggers under the weight of the cross and finds that His strength has failed Him when He gets to the gates of the city. Of course, it wasn't the full cross, you realize, the main beam of the cross was already lying at Golgotha; when a crucifixion would take place, the Romans would dig the hole and lay the stakes out in readiness for the arrival of the condemned men. What the condemned man would bear was the cross beam upon his shoulders, and that was heavy enough, in fact, too heavy for the Lord on this occasion, and He couldn't bear it any longer when He got to the city gates. So the record says, Matthew 27 verse 32, 'when they came out, they **found** a man!' They

found a man',

now what do you think, b&s, caused the Romans to single out and select this one man out of all the crowds that lined the streets that day? You know we're told at the time of the Lord, there could be upwards of a million visitors to Jerusalem in the city for the time of Passover! a million people! there are crowds lining the streets, why did the Roman centurions single out this one man, Simon of Cyrene, and ask him to bear the cross? Well, we shall see by and by while our story unfolds.

And the record says, 'having found a man, Simon of Cyrene by name, verse 32 says, 'him they compelled to bear His cross'. That word 'compelled' (29) is the same word in chapter 5 verse 41, where the Lord said, 'if you are compelled to go a mile, go twain', and it's a reference to the law of the Roman empire, that any Roman soldier could compel a Jew to carry a burden for a length of time; and Simon was compelled by the Roman centurions under Roman law, in fact, the word comes literally from the Persian word from which the Latin one is derived, it means **'to be pressed into the service of a king'**. Well, so Simon was this day, he was pressed into the service of a king, but what Simon didn't yet realize was that the king's service into which he had been pressed this day was not the king of Rome, but the king of Israel; and Simon bearing the cross that day, would find the king that he would serve for the rest of his life!

Oh yes, b&s, this day was going to change Simon, singled out in the providence of God, for an action that he wouldn't have wanted to perform at all. He had to walk behind the Lord bearing the condemned man's burden, and all the taunts and all the jeers of the multitude that rained down upon Christ, it felt to Simon that it had come to him as well, as he walked trudging along behind the Lord. By the way, the Romans made the journey as long as they could; they made sure that the journey wound up and down and through all the roads so that as many people might see and fear the power of Rome. Simon walked all that distance, and in fact, if you come to Luke's account in chapter 23 where Luke tells us something that Matthew doesn't; and it says this concerning Simon of Cyrene, it says this in verse 26, 'they lead Him away, they laid hold upon one Simon a Cyrenian coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus. So what Luke tells us is that the entire cross beam was taken off the back of Jesus and it was laid on the back of Simon who then walked behind the Lord. Now when it says 'he bore the Lord's cross, as it were', and as he walked, Simon heard all the words that Jesus spoke on that journey.

By the way, Luke alone records them, verse 27 through to verse 34. Only Luke records for you, that walk bearing the cross; verse 27 says, 'There followed Him a great company of people and of women, which also bewailed and lamented Him. But Jesus, turning unto them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves and your children. For, behold, the days are coming in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck. Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, 'fall on us', and to the hills, 'cover us'. For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?' This condemned man who was walking along and Simon behind Him, he didn't hear the

man railing on the multitude, casting curses back to them; but a man, b&s, more concerned for the nation itself, more concerned for the calamity of AD.70 about to come on His people than Himself.

This was no ordinary man that Simon walked behind! and don't you think, b&s, he probably heard these words, verse 33, 'When they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left'. When they got to Calvary, Simon would have knelt down and had the beam taken off his back, and the cross beam would be laid on the cross and the Lord laid on it, and as they hammered the nails through the hands and feet of Christ into the wood, Simon heard the prayer of verse 34, 'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (and in the Greek it is continuous) Father, forgive them, Father, forgive them, Father, forgive them', and Simon heard the prayer of priestly intercession for others.

It must have astonished him, but only Mark, b&s, only Mark's gospel tells us, that this would be **a life changing experience for Simon!** Because you see what it says in Mark 15 (which was our reading for today), Mark is going to tell us something yet again, that the other gospel writers didn't, because Mark says, verse 20, 'When they had mocked Him, they took off the purple from Him, and put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him. They compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear His cross'. It says of Simon in verse 21, who passed by coming out of the country', so you realize what that means, b&s? what it means is that Simon was coming out of the country into Jerusalem, through the gate, and as he came into the city of Jerusalem through the gate, the Lord was coming out through the gate but Simon and Jesus were walking in absolutely opposite directions. What we're being told is that Simon was walking in to the city and Jesus was walking out of the city, and that for Simon the experience of meeting our Lord Jesus Christ for the first time, would be to utterly turn his life around the other way! He was walking in and he suddenly finds himself walking out, his whole life had been dramatically turned around, turned around to walk in the footsteps of Christ. You know, it was later on in this gospel, Mark 15 verse 28, that the record will say, 'the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And He was numbered with the transgressors'. And Mark will take us back to the words of Isaiah 53, and only later would this Jew from the land of Ham realize, that although he had carried the Lord's beam on this day, in reality Isaiah was right all along, when Isaiah said, 'surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows'.

Although I can't prove this, b&s, because the record doesn't say so, I think that one of the things that impressed Simon was this, that when he was bidden to bear the cross of Christ, he looked into the eyes of the man and the funny thing was, that when he looked into the eyes of Jesus, he didn't see the eyes of a guilty man, he didn't see the eyes of a condemned man, he didn't see the eyes of a broken man, he saw the eyes of blazing determination of a man who wanted to go to Calvary, that wanted Simon to help him, He wanted Simon to bear that cross and help Him to that destiny. He would never

forget those eyes! And when He got to Calvary and the beam was laid off Simon, do you think perhaps the Lord looked at Simon and said, 'thank you'. Oh, Simon, would never forget that moment in his life, he was going to be transformed by contact with the suffering Servant, b&s.

I think the record suggests that Simon's life was changed, b&s, do you see what it says, Mark 15 verse 21, 'They compelled one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country; the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear His cross'. Oh, now why do we need to know that Simon was a father and Simon had sons? and why do we need to know the names of the sons of Simon might be? Alexander and Rufus, and by the way, the only reason that Mark mentions those names, b&s, because probably they meant something to the believers, otherwise, there's no point in mentioning them, and I think the reason the names meant something to the believers is because the family had come into the truth. Those to whom Mark was writing, knew those names and something about that family. Oh, yes, I think Simon's life was changed by this encounter with our Lord Jesus Christ, when he was asked to bear the cross and walk behind the Lord on this occasion; I think Simon was converted to the truth.

Now let me show you why I believe that! If you come to Acts 11, we're told a rather intriguing piece of information about the spread of the gospel. We're told in verse 19 of Acts 11, that there had been a persecution of the ecclesia in Jerusalem, and they that were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen - they travelled'. So the believers in Jerusalem were scattered to other parts, and as they scattered they took the truth with them, and they preached the truth. In verse 19 it says, 'Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jew only', which of course, was the common thing, Jews preached to other Jews. But there was something different at Antioch, and see what it says, verse 20, who lead the charge here? 'and some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene'. Now why do we need to know that, b&s, why was it when the truth came to Antioch it was lead by men of Cyprus and Cyrene? given we've already met someone from Cyrene in the gospels, you see, Simon of Cyrene. We're told that these ones when they came to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, and that word 'Grecians' (1675) means 'not Jews'; these are Gentiles, in fact, Antioch was going to be the first really Gentile ecclesia, the next phrase of the truth. First Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, and now to Antioch, one of the greatest cities of the Roman empire, but a Gentile city and a Gentile ecclesia, and who brought the truth to these Gentiles? Why, men of Cyprus and men of Cyrene says the record.

Why would the Spirit bid us know that that was the case? Oh, and by the way, do you see what it says in verse 21, look at the action of these preachers. 'And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord'. Now you see that

word 'turned' (1994) in verse 21, the word in the Greek is 'epistrepho' which means 'to

turn completely around and face the other way', now who do you think might be able to preach the message of the truth that would require people to turn completely around to the other way? the man who learned to do that himself when Jesus was coming out of the city and he was going into the city. Simon's life had been completely turned around; and men of Cyrene come to Antioch, in Acts 11, and tell them the truth, and as a result of that people turn completely around the other way and come into the truth. Oh yes, I think the hand of Simon of Cyrene was in the story when the truth came to Antioch!

Do you know why? b&s, well come to Acts 13 and I'll tell you why? Now this is what Acts 13 verse 1 says, 'There were in the ecclesia that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them'. And what we're going to find when we look at the Antioch ecclesia, if you read Acts 13, is that Antioch is a mirror of the Jerusalem ecclesia. There's going to be elders, and prophets, and teachers, and the Holy Spirit power is going to be in evidence amongst the community, it's like a mirror image of the Jerusalem ecclesia. This is the first great Gentile centre for the advancement of the truth. Now in the Greek of Acts 13 it suggests in verse 1, when it mentions these names and says, 'there are prophets and teachers', the Greek suggests that the prophets were Barnabas and Simeon and Lucius, and the teachers were Manaen and Saul. Now I want you to notice the prophets in particular, b&s, the prophets of Antioch; now it says, 'there were in the ecclesia at Antioch certain prophets and teachers, and the first of them was Barnabas. Oh, now where did Barnabas come from? can you remember? didn't Barnabas come from Cyprus? why yes he did! Barnabas of Cyprus. But hadn't Acts 11 said when the truth came to Antioch it was brought by men of Cyprus, and men of Cyrene. So Barnabas came from Cyprus, and by the way, you see where Lucius comes from, well Lucius comes from Cyrene! Well now, men of Cyprus and men of Cyrene, this is Acts 11 now being outworked in Acts 13; the great prophets of the Antioch ecclesia are a man from Cyprus, Barnabas, and a man from Cyrene, Lucius.

But the burning question, b&s, of Acts 13 verse 1 is, who's the man between them? the man called Simeon? Well, you probably know that the word 'Simeon', is simply a Hebrew variant of the name Simon, it's exactly the same name, and isn't it true that in Acts 15 which we won't turn up but just a few chapters on, we're going to be told in Acts 15, that Simon Peter is called Simeon, 'Simeon hath declared', they're interchangeable names, so in between Barnabas and Lucius of Cyrene, is a man called Simon. Now where do you think the Simon might have come from? b&s, well, presumably he's a man of Cyprus or a man of Cyrene, don't you think? which one? Well, given that we already know a Simon of Cyrene, I think that's the man who's called Simeon in Acts 13 verse 1. Now you know where Cyrene was, b&s, it was along the coast of Africa in the region we call Libya today but was called Cyrenarica in those days, and Cyrene was the capital city of Cyrenarica, but it was an African place. The people that lived in Cyrene,

b&s, were black skinned, and the man in Acts 13 verse 1 is not just called Simon, he's called Simeon that was called Niger (3526) (that's the Greek word) and the word 'Niger' means 'the black one'. Now I think we know, b&s, perhaps why the white skinned Roman centurion picked one man out of the crowd in Jerusalem to bear the cross. He said, 'you there, come and bear this cross', and I think Simon was a black man, b&s, our black brother; he was Jewish in origin, but his family had married into the descendants of Cyrenarica. You see, racial discrimination is not a new thing, is it? but you see what the Roman centurion didn't know, b&s, is in calling out Simon to bear the cross that day, for whatever reason he called him, he conferred upon Simon the greatest blessing of all time, because he brought him into contact with Christ, and it would change Simon's life forever.

Here he is! he's now in Antioch, he's not bearing the cross but he's a prophet of the cross, he's a teacher of the cross, he's a champion of the cross; in fact, I think, b&s, that Simon was probably revered in the early ecclesias, because do you remember what the Lord had said in the gospel records, He said, 'if anyone would be My disciple (just like the hymn we've just sang) 'let him take up his cross and follow Me'. But Simon had done more than that, b&s, Simon had borne the very cross of our Lord and followed Him; oh, he was a respected man, he was a prophet in the Antioch ecclesia, b&s. Did you notice what it said at the end of the verse, b&s, Acts 13 verse 1, another man who was there at the time who knew Simon, his name was Saul, who would later become the great apostle Paul to the Gentiles. He was there at Antioch at the same time; he was a teacher and Simon was a prophet.

Now that's interesting because if you come now to Romans 15, let me show you something interesting in the story of the Roman ecclesia. By the way, you do realize that Mark's gospel was written for Romans; Mark writes with Latin language and Latin terms, Mark writes for a Roman audience and it was only Mark who tells us that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. See what it says in Romans 16 verse 1, 'I commend unto you Phoebe our sister which is a servant of the ecclesia which is at Cencrea: That ye receive her in the Lord as becometh saints', and now he's going to write to this ecclesia and send fraternal greetings to a number of brethren and sisters, amongst whom verse 13 says this, 'Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord', Rufus! well, where have we heard of Rufus before? b&s, but Mark 15, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Do you know that this is the only other place in the bible that Rufus's name is found; do you think he's the same man? I'm sure he was! This is the son of Simon, he's 'chosen in the Lord', well, so he was; the whole family was dramatically chosen by the providential circumstances of God, that brought Simon the father into contact with our Lord Jesus Christ - 'Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord', he's the son of Simon, he's in the ecclesia in Rome, b&s, the family came into the truth, you see!

And not only Rufus the son, b&s, see verse 13, 'Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord; and his mother and mine'. Oh, can you just feel the warmth in those words, **his mother and**

mine. You see, there were certain places where the apostle Paul travelled, where women ministered unto him and they looked after him and the needs of the apostle. You just get that feeling as the apostle Paul says that in this epistle, 'Rufus's mother and mine', that he's probably remembered many a happy day spent in that household with that lovely sister cooking for him and caring for him. Oh, you can feel the warmth of the apostle, can't you? 'Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord; and his mother and mine', says the apostle. Funny thing though, did you know this b&s, that when Paul writes this letter to the Romans, he's never been there, he's never been to the Roman ecclesia, he's never once visited, not yet, so how does he know Rufus and his mother? unless at some earlier time of the apostle's ministry, he met this family before and experienced the hospitality of the mother of Rufus, such as in Antioch where Simon was a prophet and Paul had been a teacher. Oh yes, b&s, I think that this is the family which the Spirit would bid us recognize!

Of course, we notice something else about Romans 16 that it doesn't recognize the other boy, it never mentions Alexander. So where was Alexander? Well, I don't think he was in the Roman ecclesia, but I think I know what happened to Alexander! In 1941, professor Sukenik who was a great archeologist in Israel, was excavating a burial chamber in the city of Jerusalem in the Kedron valley, and they were excavating it very carefully, and found it was a burial chamber of a family. Around the burial chamber were what was called, **ossuary pots**; now an ossuary pot was simply a little stone box into which the bones of the man, or the woman, or the child would be placed after the body had decomposed, the bones would be collected and put in a little stone box and put on a ledge and the family would keep the bones of the deceased members of the family in the burial chamber. Now what's interesting about this particular burial chamber that they excavated in 1941, was that there was something in that chamber that marked the last possible time of its use, and that was a Herodian lamp dating to the first century AD at the very time of the Acts of the Apostles. In the burial boxes, the markings on the boxes indicated the names of the people. There were about 12 names, they were Jewish names, but 8 of the names were not common in Palestine at all, they weren't Jewish names used by the Jewish community in Palestine, but they were used somewhere else. They were all names found in the Jewish community in Cyrenaica where Cyrene is, and on one of the boxes, marked on the front of the box inscribed in the stone were the words 'Alexandros Simonos' which means 'Alexander son of Simon'. And on top of the box on the lid it said, Alexandros Cyrena, which means 'Alexander of Cyrene'. And the conclusion of the archeologists, b&s, was that this particular burial box, in this burial chamber in the Kedron valley in Jerusalem, contains the very remains of none other than Alexander the son of Simon of the gospel records who died in Jerusalem. That's why he's not mention in Romans 16.

Now stop and think about this! So we've got a son, presumably in the truth who was in Jerusalem, whose name was Alexander a member of the Jerusalem ecclesia, And we know that he died there. We have a father who we know was in Antioch, the third greatest city of the Roman world, and the first Gentile ecclesia and that man is a

prophet of the truth, a champion of the cross, who perhaps died in Antioch and left the remaining son, Rufus and his mother to travel further abroad; and we have a son and a mother who were in Rome and members of the ecclesia there. Now let me tell you what's interesting about that! because you see, the Lord had said, hadn't He? that His followers would witness to the truth to the uttermost parts of the earth, and in particular He says this in Matthew 24 verse 14, 'this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the 'oikoumene' (3625) (all the Roman world) for a witness to the nations'; and here in this one family, b&s, the family of Simon of Cyrene, is the story of that triumph of the cross. In that one man and his immediate family members, the message of the cross was spread from Jerusalem (the centre of the seed of the woman) right through to Rome (the centre of the seed of the serpent), and that story of Christ and His cross was taken by one family, our black brother, and preached to all the ends of the earth, as a witness to Christ.

Who would have known how that story would unfold, b&s, isn't it marvellous? Now come back to Genesis 9, and the ancient prophecy of Noah. Do you remember what Noah said to his sons, verse 25 of Genesis 9, 'He said, Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren' (that's the sons of Ham, the offspring of Ham). Verse 26, 'And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem (Yahweh Elohim of Shem) and Canaan shall be his servant'. Verse 27, 'God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem'. So what we're being told here in verse 26, is that Yahweh was the Elohim of Shem, which indicated that Shem was already in covenant relationship with God, and therefore blessed by his association with God. Although the destiny of Japheth, verse 27, was to enlarge his seed, as we have seen earlier, that his spiritual hope could only come by his association with the tabernacle of Shem; and when it says in verse 25 that the children of Ham would suffer servitude, I think that means that they would suffer tribute and servitude through service to Japheth, but the prospect of release and acceptance through service to Shem. In the prophecy of Noah, b&s, was the destiny of his three sons! Now don't you think it was in the providence of God that day in Jerusalem so long ago, that the Roman centurion picked out Simon to bear the cross? How could that centurion have ever known at that time, that his selection would bring the prophecy of Noah into focus on Golgotha's height? How could he have ever known, b&s, that his command to one man to bear the cross of Christ would bring together momentarily, but what a moment in history, a man of Shem (Jesus of Nazareth), a man of Ham (Simon of Cyrene) and a man of Japheth (the Roman centurion) all brought together at the cross for the outworking of Noah's prophecy? How could that Roman centurion have known that redemption for the man of Japheth lay in his readiness to accept that access to God rested with that man of Shem? and that salvation for the man of Ham lay in his willingness to become the servant and burden-bearer for that same man of Shem, but in that one man of Shem, b&s, there was release and there was redemption and there was salvation for both the man of Japheth and the man of Ham, if they would but come to Him. Oh, yes, b&s, Noah's prophecy was outworked on Golgotha's height?

You know it says in Hebrews 13 verse 13, 'We then, let us go forth unto Him without the camp (and you know what Hebrews says) bearing His reproach'. The word 'bearing His reproach' in Hebrews 13 is the same word in Luke's gospel chapter 23 verse 26 which says, ' that on Simon of Cyrene they laid the cross, that he might bear it behind Jesus'. So we're asked to bear our cross and to follow our Lord; by the way, b&s, bearing our cross, doesn't just means being patient or showing fortitude under trial, or accepting the burden of responsibilities, I think cross-bearing means more than that! Cross-bearing involves **sacrifice and pain**. So here's a lesson that emerges from the story today. Can you think of one thing that you or I could do for the truth's service that doesn't come easily to us? See, there's no special merit in offering to God something we're already good at, or already capable of! What about something that you're not naturally suited for or naturally strong in? It might be deciding that you'll speak to someone about the truth this next month, even though you feel naturally shy; it might be you decide to open your house in hospitality although you feel naturally private; it might be that you accept some responsibility in ecclesial service even though you feel naturally inadequate, whatever it is it will involve some measure, some feeling of pain and sacrifice, because that's what cross-bearing is about! But whatever it is that we might decide to do, I think the lesson of Simon of Cyrene is that only when we've shouldered our cross and borne it aloft and felt its burden and then looked up and seen Christ ahead and we following Him in His very steps! Only then will we understand the cross of Christ and only then will the meaning of that cross help to transform us. Because at last, we've learned to suffer with Him, as Simon learned on that memorable day.

There's a hymn that says this, b&s, it's the hymn that will close our meeting this day, and I'll remind you that when we sing we're going to change the words of the last verse to make the pronouns plural so that we're all joined together. The hymn (334) says this,

We gave ourselves to Thee, O Lord,
Content to be despised,
When we, obedient to Thy word,
Believed, and were baptized.

Then we avowed that we would die
Unto the world and sin;
And live for immortality:
And be forever Thine.

O! never may our souls forget
Those solemn, joyful days,
Which live in grateful memory yet,
And prompt our hearts to praise.

And we who own his Lord today,

O keep us true and pure;
May we Thy glorious grace display,
And to the end endure.

So then, b&s, let us make a pledge, shall we? to decide upon a task, or a service or a labour to Yahweh's honour that will involve us with the sacrifice of Christ. You with me, and I with you, and we all with Him, that we might take up our cross and follow Him.