

Luke 9:18-22

Sermon: **Church bell by the window**

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1. In the last sermon I said at the end that I want to lose my life in order to save it¹. The words I spoke—and more importantly, the words Jesus spoke to His disciples—are the main theme of this sermon. Let us remember: Jesus had entered a new phase of His ministry, and one of His main goals was to prepare His disciples for the coming trial which He must endure, and which they must accept as necessary.

1.1. We continue reading the text in **Luke 9:23–25**:

Then He said to them all: “Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for My sake will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”

CHRISTIANS OF THE 21st CENTURY

1.2. These are very powerful words from our Teacher. It took me a long time to understand both the strength and the beauty of them. Before I begin to interpret this text, I want you to know this: here Jesus is first and foremost speaking to those who were listening to Him then, not to us. In other words, the condition He lays out is directed specifically at His disciples because of all they had personally witnessed up to that point. They had heard His teaching, they had seen the miracles, they had seen other disciples abandon their Teacher, they had witnessed the hatred of the Pharisees toward Him—they knew, at least to some extent, what awaited them if they chose to carry their cross (to follow their Teacher).

1.3. On the other hand, here we are—Christians of the 21st century. What about us? In what way does this text affect our lives today? We have not witnessed Jesus’ life, we have not seen

¹ Sermon 62. § 7.2.

His miracles. Some of us, though raised in church, have never truly heard the pure apostolic teaching. We've heard fragments, but not the fullness. Some of us have never even been in a church, and all we know about Jesus comes from movies aired on national television during Christmas holidays. So how does this text apply to us, coming as we do from such different backgrounds and with such different worldviews shaped by the information we were given (whether by parents or by the community we were born into)?

1.4. I believe you will better understand my answer once I give you the lenses through which you can see more clearly what it looks like to carry the cross in the 21st century. That answer will unfold through the rest of this sermon, so I ask you to be patient.

GOD WANTS TO BE GOD

2. Jesus tells His disciples that they must leave their lives behind and follow Him. What does that actually mean? Up until this point, following Jesus had been at a moderate pace. But now the pace intensifies, and following Him is no longer an easy task. They knew it. His condition forced them to decide immediately:

1. There were those who wanted their lives to go according to their own plan. They wanted to live here and now. They did not understand Jesus' words, nor did they want to. They loved what they had, what they had achieved, and they didn't care about God's promises (the coming of the kingdom of God).
2. Then there were those who loved God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, more than themselves. Those disciples ultimately took up their cross (the role God had appointed for them) and carried it.

2.1. I believe one truth applies universally to every human being who has walked, who walks, and who will walk this world before life presents them with a choice about how to go on: something deep within us cries out, *"You want me to walk the path You determined for me? You promise me trials along the way? Isn't that cruel? What kind of God are You if You demand that my life be marked by worry, loss, and suffering? I will not allow it—I want my own way, a way that will give me a better life than the one You planned."*

2.2. There is something within us that resists the idea that God has the right to do with our lives whatever He wants. *"God just wants to be God—please, who does He think He is? I decide where I go, what I do, and how I do it. Nobody needs to tell me what I must or must not do."* That is often our attitude toward life. And it is a universal truth every one of us carries from the moment our heart first beat in our mother's womb. We cannot escape it. But we can decide what to do with it.

2.3. I deeply believe that all wisdom lies in a single word: CREATED. Yes—we are created. I believe we should remind ourselves of this every single day—from the moment we wake up

until the moment we go to sleep. Maybe then we would say: *"I would not even be here. I would never see the blue sky, the sea, the mountains. I would never taste the endless variety of food. I would not know what a bird, an elephant, or a lion looks like. I would not hear music, I would not know what it means to dance. And above all—I would never know love—if He, as the Creator, had not decided to give it to me. I would not exist at all unless He had created me."*

2.4. And if we had such an attitude, it would be easier to accept even the trials we don't want to go through. We would want to be obedient to our Father, understanding that He is our God who has the right to be God. You might ask: *"Danijel, how can I persuade myself to obey God? What do I get out of it?"* My dear friends, obedience flows out of knowledge—knowledge of what God has promised us. And that is what I believe modern Christians often lack: KNOWLEDGE! Unlike us, the apostles had knowledge, and the condition set by their Teacher was in line with that knowledge. In other words, they knew what He was asking of them, and He told them: *"On your journey through this reality, life will ask you—based on the circumstances—whether you want to accept the role your Father has prepared for you or not. Just as for Me, God the Father has prepared for you a journey whose very core is to strengthen your faith and glorify His Name. You will not like it—I am certain of that. I didn't like Mine either. But just as I accept the cross so that God's grace may be revealed to the whole world, so you must decide whether you will glorify His Name, or glorify your own, living the life you have already planned for yourselves. If you follow Me, the kingdom of God is yours. If you don't, you will lose what every human being was created for in the first place—to live forever."*

2.5. Let me say this: neither the apostles nor we can be obedient to the Father unless we know the Father. And to know the Father, we must know Jesus. And once we know Them, we either fall in love with Them or we don't—there is no middle ground. In the same way, our reward for obedience is life after this life.

2.6. To sum it up: our main motivation is to inherit eternal life. If anything else becomes our motivation, we will not take up the cross, and we will not want to carry it. And let me add this before moving on: in my view, eternal life is not even the greatest reward for those who choose to carry their cross. From where I stand now, I know that my greatest reward will be this—to see my King face to face, and to one day thank Him personally for everything He has done for me. In other words, what good would eternal life be if my King Jesus Christ and my God the Father were not there?

2.7. I know this may not be a popular statement, and I don't want it to be. I am not writing these sermons to tickle your ears or to win your approval. My desire is that you truly understand what God asks of all of us: He asks that through our role, we glorify His Name. And through these sermons, my prayer is that you gain the wisdom to carry the role you've been given, and that you carry your cross proudly to the end of your journey.

SOLOMON

3. “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”

There was one man who, in a sense, gained the whole world—and I know his name. It was King Solomon of the Old Testament. A little about him: King Solomon was the son of Israel’s King David and Bathsheba, remembered as the third king of the united kingdom of Israel. He reigned around 970–931 BC and is remembered as an extraordinarily wise ruler, whose wisdom, wealth, and building achievements are described in the Bible, particularly in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles.

3.1. He is most famous for building the First Temple in Jerusalem—Solomon’s Temple—which became the center of Jewish worship. His judgments and stories of wisdom, such as the account of the two women claiming to be the mother of the same child, became symbols of justice and discernment.

3.2. Solomon is also credited with, or inspired, several biblical books, including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. His reign was marked by peace, trade, and cultural flourishing. Yet toward the end of his life, he strayed from God’s commands under the influence of many wives and foreign gods, which ultimately led to the kingdom’s downfall after his death.

3.3. As I said above, Solomon truly did “gain the whole world.” Kings from all over came to hear his wisdom and to see his kingdom, which was admired by surrounding nations. Sadly, he turned away from God and His commandments, driven by a stronger desire to gain the world. Proof of this is found in **1 Kings 11:1–4**: “King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, ‘You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.’ Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been.”

3.4. Tragically, Solomon refused to keep following God, even though he knew that everything he had came from the blessing the Lord had chosen to give him. The condition God placed before Solomon was simple: “*Keep My commands, Solomon, and walk in them.*” One of those commands was that no Israelite was to marry foreign women from surrounding nations, because they would turn their husbands toward other gods. And that’s exactly what happened—Solomon wanted to have the world. In other words, he wanted his life to go according to his plan, not God’s.

3.5. Here we have a man who was blessed in every way: wealth, fame, political power, wisdom admired by others. But it wasn’t enough—he had to have seven hundred foreign wives. In other

² (Luke 9:25)

words, Solomon lived the best possible life “here and now,” and yet he refused to carry his cross—to be the righteous and wise king who reflected God’s image through obedience to His commands.

3.6. For those of us who love the figures of the Old Testament, there may be some comfort. There are hints that Solomon repented in the end. In **Ecclesiastes 12:8, 12–14**, we read: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless.” ... Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

3.7. This suggests that in the end Solomon realized that everything he had—his kingdom, wealth, fame, and many women—was meaningless if a man does not do the very thing he was created for. And what is that? To carry his cross, through which God glorifies His Name.

3.8. I hope Solomon repented at the end. I hope to see him one day in the kingdom of God. But what we need to understand is this: a person is foolish when they believe their own plan will fully satisfy them, that they will then be the happiest person alive. It won’t happen. I know many people who are “living their best lives now,” but every so often I see it in their eyes—their eyes say, “*Everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*” But they won’t admit it. They still sell themselves for the cheap things that enslave them.

On the other hand, I know people who live through hardships but proudly carry their cross—and they are happier than the first group I mentioned. Their eyes and mouths spread joy, and their words carry wisdom. And why are they happier? Because they are fulfilling the purpose for which they were created—to glorify His Name, not their own.

THE DESERT

4. Let’s continue with Luke. In **Luke 9:26** we read: “Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

4.1. In these verses, Jesus is simply confirming everything He has already said and painting a clear picture of what will happen to those who refuse to take up their cross.

4.2. What struck me personally are His words: “*Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words.*” If we put those words in the context of the apostles’ lives, we realize that throughout their entire ministry—which lasted until the very end of their lives—they were tested by those very words. In other words, they lived their whole lives facing trials, constantly having to decide day after day: is it worth believing in Jesus’ words, or not?

4.3. And why am I telling you this? When I was part of one Christian community, they used to tell me that the “desert” (trials) only lasts for a while, and then comes the blessing of a good

and fruitful life with Christ here and now. At first, I really wanted to believe them. I imagined that one day I would surely be healed and live a life without suffering and pain—after all, that’s what they indirectly told me must happen. But as time went on, my illness did not fade, my pain did not go away. I was confused because I didn’t know what to think: Am I cursed? Am I one of those who doesn’t believe enough? Am I one of those on whom God will not have mercy?

4.4. Yet all of that only stirred in me a greater hunger for truth. And when I came to the very passage we are studying now, I realized that my illness is the role God has given me, and that I will most likely carry it for the rest of my life. Now I am at peace with that. I have taken up my cross and I carry it proudly; the man writing these words to you is not the same man who lived a few years ago. Today I am a joyful and free man, eagerly waiting for the coming of the kingdom of God—because I have the knowledge of what awaits me when it comes. (§1.2.)

4.5. With that said, my dear friends, I want to share this with you: from this perspective I can confidently say that the idea of a “short desert” is an illusion believed by those who don’t want to carry their cross. Walking in faith is not a desert that lasts for a while and then everything becomes easy afterward. The desert—the trials—remain as long as we remain. The journey through the desert ends only when we die. The desert is heavy at the beginning, but over time it becomes easier to live in, because through God’s wisdom we receive the tools to endure its conditions.

THE BELL OUTSIDE THE WINDOW

5. I’ve chosen for us a Psalm written by Asaph. But who was Asaph?

Asaph was a Levite, the leader of temple music during the reign of King David. He is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 6:39 and 1 Chronicles 16:4–7, and his name means “GATHERING” or “ONE WHO GATHERS.” The Psalms attributed to him often focus on God’s justice, His historical works, and the call to repentance.

5.1. In **Psalm 77** we can feel Asaph’s anxiety and confusion. This psalm was written in the midst of Asaph’s doubt about God’s mercy and consistency. Driven by hardship, Asaph speaks with God and, in the end, convinces himself that he must stop doubting God and trust Him—because of who God is and what He has already done: “I cry aloud to God; aloud to God, and He hears me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, the years long ago. I said, ‘Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart.’ Then my spirit made a diligent search: ‘Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has His steadfast love forever ceased? Are His promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up His compassion?’ Then I said, ‘I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.’ I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember Your wonders of old. I will ponder all Your work, and meditate

on Your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; You have made known Your might among the peoples. With Your arm You redeemed Your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. When the waters saw You, O God, when the waters saw You, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; Your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of Your thunder was in the whirlwind; Your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, Your path through the great waters; yet Your footprints were unseen. You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”

5.2. Why was Asaph able to comfort himself? Because he had knowledge. But even more importantly, because he decided to put his faith in God rather than in himself. Asaph had not seen the deliverance from Egypt with his own eyes. He had only heard about it, he had been taught about it—but he had not witnessed it. In other words, Asaph could have easily said in his heart: *“That never really happened. Those are just stories our mothers told us when we were children.”* In his time, the people of Israel had already forgotten that God was the one who had led them into the promised land. Asaph belonged to that generation, a generation that had forgotten the LORD. He could have joined them in saying: *“I built my house, I planted my vineyard, everything I have I made with my own two hands.”* But he didn’t. In the end, Asaph decided to trust the LORD because he had enough evidence to believe. Even though he did not see God’s promises fulfilled in his own time, he knew they would come to pass when God chose. Asaph carried his cross—living among a people who hated God—in the hope that one day he would see God’s promises fulfilled.

5.3. Let me now bring in a story that is unfolding in the lives of some people I know through a dear friend. It’s about a man who is a doctor. He is divorced and has a child with autism. The doctor’s father—the child’s grandfather—is a devout man who goes to church every day. His wish had been to raise his son in the faith, to love God and the church. But when the doctor grew up, he rejected the church and faith in God, becoming an atheist. The doctor and his son live in a small town, in an apartment. The child’s room has a window facing the church tower. Every day when the church bell rings, the child reacts badly—the sound irritates him deeply. The doctor’s reaction to all of this is often bitter, aggressive, and full of contempt toward the church, and therefore toward God as well. Sadly, this has been going on for years. The only change is that the doctor has become more and more resolute in his hatred of his life, of the church, and of God—whom, ironically, he says does not even exist.

5.4. The doctor does not carry his cross, but he is living out a role through which God is calling him to repentance. Since we (Christians of the 21st century) often lack knowledge of God, we are frequently left confused in our troubles, trying to endure hardship without real answers as to why it is happening. But even when we are confused, we still make choices, don’t we? Isn’t that interesting? In this doctor’s case, with a child with autism, though he was confused for a time, he still made his choice. He decided not to believe in God. He decided to become an atheist. He decided he would not carry his cross.

5.5. But why don't we investigate? Why don't we ask the right questions? Why don't we want to know the truth? I ask these things because of how the doctor made his decision. In other words, before rejecting knowledge, why not decide on the basis of genuine investigation, rather than simply saying: *"I don't want to believe because I've decided not to."* The answer is simple: we do not want God to be God. That is a truth buried deep inside each of us from the moment we entered this world. I know I'm repeating myself, but this deserves to be said a thousand times: every decision we have made in life is the product of who we are—sinners. And this includes the most existentially important decision of all. That is why we prefer to reject knowing the truth—reject carrying our cross.

5.6. *"But Asaph knew God—he had a clear picture of who God is. This doctor doesn't. And Daniel, you yourself said that 21st-century Christians lack knowledge, right? So how can the doctor carry his cross if he doesn't have knowledge?" (§ 2.4)*

5.7. The doctor's father and I represent two kinds of 21st-century Christians:

1. The doctor's father is a churchgoer: he loves his church, attends Mass, and keeps the rituals prescribed by the priests. And though he may not have knowledge, he accepts carrying his cross. God gave him a role where his grandson is autistic, and his own son mocks the church and faith. But he still goes to church, he still loves God, he has accepted carrying his cross.
2. Then you have me—a man who was never a churchgoer, who lived his life loving only himself. Then came illness, which stripped me of everything I had built my existence on. Pressed by life's hardships, I began to investigate, and after several years, I arrived at the truths I am now sharing with you in these sermons.

5.8. To answer the question posed above: the doctor can, just like Asaph, and just like me, arrive at the conclusion—by studying the Bible, studying history, and gathering evidence—that God truly exists, and that He really does expect us all to carry our cross so that in the end we might receive the blessing of eternal life. But even after reaching that conclusion, he must take the leap, he must do the most crucial thing—he must believe. And that, in itself, is a miracle.

CONCLUSIONS

6. The doctor's father and I have both chosen to carry our cross. But the fundamental difference between us is this: I believe—I know why what is happening to me is happening, and because of that I am free and joyful. He, however, does not have a clear picture of why things are happening in his life. Having been taught a distorted and shallow gospel by the church, he remains bound, not free—chained by Christian tradition. In other words, both of us will inherit the kingdom of God, but our journeys are radically different.

6.1. As for his son, the doctor, I feel deep sorrow when I hear that someone has hastily (without investigation) decided to reject God. I know where that leads: into depression, bitterness, anger, fear—and tragically, the doctor passes all of this onto his son without even realizing it. Instead of accepting his cross and, in freedom, loving his son regardless of the hardship they are enduring together, he has chosen instead to focus on self-pity, which is destroying both of their lives. I hope the day will come when he, like Asaph, will sing Psalm 77. Then he will realize that the heavy burden pressing on his chest must be given over to God, so that, light and free, he can carry his cross toward God's promise—His kingdom.

WHOEVER IS ASHAMED OF ME AND MY WORDS

7. Returning to Luke, where Jesus says that whoever is ashamed of Him and His words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes again to establish God's kingdom on earth. In the time of the apostles, this meant exactly that—whoever rejected Jesus' teaching and gave in to the pressure of the religious leaders would ultimately not inherit the kingdom of God. (§ 1.2.) As for us, Christians of the 21st century, being ashamed of Jesus means refusing to carry the cross, however it may look in the life of an individual. One such example I gave above. (§ 5.3.)

7.1. Here I will stop with this sermon, my dear ones. I hope I have been clear enough in addressing the question raised above (§ 1.3.)—a question that troubles many, yet so few actually want the real answer. I hope you will be among those who choose to belong to the group called: THE FEW.