But those who wait on the Lord, shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Crucified With Christ
Just for TEENS
Mighty Champions Spring Edition

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Crucified With Christ

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MIGHTY CHAMPIONS
A PUBLICATION OF THE COPTIC ORTHODOX DIOCESE OF THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES
My Beloved Youth,

Crucified with Christ is the greatest honor bestowed upon all Christians. Not only in the shedding of one’s blood for our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ, but in rejecting to engage in any act or language that is offensive to the teachings of the Lord. He taught us to go beyond the great Ten Commandments by adding the commandment of love. This commandment stretches from your closest of kin to your ardent enemy.

“I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

By setting our eyes upon the cross, we are reminded of the Lord’s immense love for us, and our eternal life with Him. Thus, when you lose sight of purpose in life, and the concerns of the world overwhelm you, and you begin to get desensitized to the vulgarity and violence in the world, hold fast to your cross and remind yourself that you belong to Christ the King—and remain strong.

The articles in this edition of the Mighty Champions Magazine will uplift you with the joy and honor of the holy cross that ultimately resulted in the Lord’s resurrection, ascension, and sitting on the right hand of the Father. He carved for us a place in His heart and a seat beside Him on His throne. Thus, being crucified with the Lord is our greatest glory and the sign of our salvation and restoration, which the Lord Jesus Christ paid for with His own blood.

“God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

God bless you,
Bishop Youssef,
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
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You may have heard these terms before: ‘crucifying the flesh/body,’ ‘crucifying our desires,’ etc. Is it easy to put aside your desires? When something you really, really wanted and worked very hard for does not go the way that you wanted it to, is it easy to let go of the situation and put it into God’s hands? I will speak for myself – I’m a stubborn mule. I have trouble putting things aside that I really want.

When you have a desire for food or physical contact, is it easy to put that desire aside if the time is not right? Definitely not! How many times have you been sitting in class, your stomach doing somersaults, and you cannot focus on what the teacher is saying because of this raging desire in you. Although it is not easy, it is important to be able to put aside your desires if they are not fit for the present time. Let me be clear: being crucified with Christ and crucifying your flesh/body/desires does not mean that you take all joy out of your life. Of course not! God wants us to be happy and to enjoy the blessings that He has given us in the right time.

Crucifying your desires does mean accepting God’s will in your life. God’s will for us includes where we go to school, who we marry, etc. Part of God’s will for us also includes what is good for us and the avoidance of what is bad for us. He wants all that is good for us. He is working the events of our life for our good. How do we know what is good vs. bad? Simply put, His commandments. It is fascinating that, as we grow in spiritual maturity, we see more and more just how exactly perfect His commandments are and how they are meant to protect us and to help us grow. Take the command not to fornicate for example. Are sexual relations bad? No! They are a very beautiful part of God’s creation. However, in the wrong time, they become theft that is destructive to both you and your partner. Can you crucify this desire until the right time? It is difficult, but with God’s grace and some effort on your part, you can discipline these desires until the right time. And, that means more time and energy that you can devote to developing yourself now! That can be in the form of exercising, hymns, playing instruments, basketball, singing, football, reading, serving, baseball – the list goes on!

Is it possible to crucify and put away untimely or wicked desires? I believe that it is. Even if the only life you have known so far has been indulging in these desires? 100% yes. Ask St. Moses the Strong. He was a thief, a fornicator, a murderer, and a glutton. Yet, he left all this, crucifying his desires. Once he found out who the true God is, he underwent the greatest miracle known to man – that of a heart transformed. Can you overcome that one sin that has been your downfall for so long now? Challenge yourself. Christ thinks you can.

1 Gal. 5:24-25.
“Your ego might hate submitting to God. It might escape surrendering to Him. In the meantime, you would be making much of your own power – attributing your intelligence, virtue, and success to yourself. In this case, God will deliver you to continual discipline; discipline after discipline, tribulation after tribulation, until you succumb and surrender in brokenness. But if you reject discipline and cannot stand tribulation, God will forsake you forever.”

We must, out of our own will, sacrifice our pride and our ego and trust in God’s plans for us. We must always keep in our minds that He knows what is best for us- He is our Creator and our Father, our Shepherd and our Protector. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” When we sacrifice our pride and willingly submit to the will of He who knows all things, we experience Christ working within us, and are able to taste of His goodness. We become one with Christ, and although our unity with Christ may result in ridicule or tribulation, i.e. ‘crucifixion,’ we endure this crucifixion with our God and are crucified with Christ. By removing our own will from our mind we make way for the will of God. It is through prayer that we continually ask for His guidance, and with an open mind He grants us His grace that we may be one with Him. Saint Habib Girgis the archdeacon tells us,

“If you subdued your will, quieted your ego, and trained yourself to be guided by God, you have achieved freedom and conquered your desires and lusts, which are alien to you. Doing so allows you to have the image of God reprinted in you along with His wisdom. His grace will overshadow you, and you will become a candidate for His divine dwelling, for God wants to capture your heart to fill it with peace, calmness, and tranquility.”

2. The Flesh: The flesh can often be another obstruction to our strife to become like Christ, whether it be occupation with self image, gluttony, or lust. One way we crucify the flesh is through fasting. As Copts, contrary to common thought, we are actually blessed to be a part of a Church that gives us the opportunity to fast 210 days a year. Fasting is not just for the sake of self control- although self control is a significant component of fasting- but also, the very act of fasting is a sacrifice, and when God sees that we sacrifice our desires for His sake, He is pleased. When God sees that we sacrifice our energy and physical ability through prayers, metanoia, standing for extended periods of time, and Church related services, He is pleased by our willingness to please Him. We deny all earthly and bodily desires and run after the heavenly. For one cannot be of the world and of God at the same time, he must chose one or the other, and because sin is separation from God, we must cut off sin as much as is humanly possible in order to achieve union with God through crucifixion. Abba Poemen once said,

“As smoke drives bees away, and men take the sweetness of their labor, even so also does the ease of the body drive away the fear of God from the heart, and it carries away all the good effect of its labor.”

3. The Self: The difference between the self and the ego is that the ego refers to one component of the self and its identity, and the self refers to the individual as a whole- their life, emotions, interactions, and everything that is or concerns them. One must deny himself, i.e. all his comfort and life, and devote it to Christ. This does not necessarily mean, however, that one must become a monk to deny himself. St
Athanasius of Alexandria states,

“The expression “I live, yet no longer I,” was the voice of one denying himself, as of one who had laid aside his own life and taken on himself the Christ, in order that He might live in him as Righteousness, and as Wisdom, and as Sanctification, and as our Peace and as the power of God, who works all things in him”

We are called by God to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him. We rid ourselves of our pride and throw ourselves at the feet of the Pantocrator, asking Him to guide us with His merciful hand to eternity with Him. We completely place our trust and our love before His feet that were washed with the tears of the sinful woman, and like her, we plead and beg for forgiveness and strength to cast off the old man and to put on the new, superior one, free from all cares for carnal pleasures. This is self denial. We take up our crosses, accept the struggle of becoming like Christ in a world full of sin and temptation, and we enter through the narrow path, bearing not only our sins as did the great Moses the strong, but also following in the very footsteps of Christ until we die, withstanding every tribulation to the best of our ability. We finally follow him, having full trust in His plans for us. Fr Matthew the Poor speaks about this trust and faith in God,

“Imagine you are standing on the third story of a building, and I am on the ground and say to you, ‘Jump!’ Would you? I don’t think so. But now put Christ in my place, and He tells you, ‘Jump!’ as He’s standing below with open arms. Would you?”

Crucifixion is a voluntary act of sacrificial love. We sacrifice the most significant and controlling elements that overtake the human nature and drive it into sin, and with a wholehearted effort, we crucify it to be with God, to be crucified with Him, to achieve His grace and His peace.
A Statement from His Grace Bishop Youssef regarding the Martyrdom of Christians on Hosanna Sunday in Egypt.

With palms in their hands, hymns on their lips, and peace in their hearts, new martyrs were ushered from their churches in Alexandria and Tanta into the Paradise of Joy on Hosanna Sunday, the day and feast of the Lord.

To all Christians, know that you are a light in the world, a source of good, and a means for peace. The whole world is under siege by an ideology of hatred—a cancer of the conscience. The same hands that skillfully designed weapons of harm could have discovered tools for cure. This violent act against Christians is because evil cannot coexist with good, darkness cannot overcome light, and hatred cannot befriend peace, but death cannot separate us from God.

“He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 25:8).

All our churches and noble citizens throughout the world are praying for the peace and safety of all persecuted Christians, confessors, and martyrs. Holy Week is a time devoted to the Lord’s passion. At all times, the Lord loved. Even when afflicted and crucified, He loved. This is a time for prayer for the entire world.

We remain in prayer for the safety of His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, all the confessors of the Christian faith, the families of the martyrs, and all the injured victims.

On behalf of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, I offer our deepest condolences to everyone afflicted by this sad day in Egyptian history.
Often I have tried to imagine what it was like for our Lord, to kneel in the Garden of Gethsemane and ponder the fateful hour to come. What is it like to feel the kiss of his friend and betrayer upon his cheek? What was it like to limp through the streets, bloodied and broken, trailing that hulking wooden cross? We are told we each have our cross to bear, but what of the ultimate cross? The cross we each accepted when we chose to forsake the world and instead lifted our eyes to God the Father. Like Christ we live among those who would meet our joy with mockery, our peace with provocation, and prayer with skepticism. Let these distractions be a sign of growth in faith, for every obstacle overcome is an illustration of God’s strength in us.

“I can not go on.”
“My grace is sufficient.”
“I am afraid.”
“I have not given you fear.”
“I feel all alone.”
“I will never leave you.”

I highly recommend the book Jesus Freaks: Stories of Those who Stood for Jesus, the Ultimate Jesus Freaks. A collection of stories and meditations from men and women who have been crucified with Christ. People from all walks of life that did not shy away from persecution but found strength in God to pursue the faith in the most harrowing of circumstances. Expect a young Chinese girl during the Red Guard era (1966-1969) who kept the secrets of her underground church through continuous torture, “I relied on the promise of Jesus: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ I purified my heart of the fear of men, and I learned to see God.” A man named Reck from Romania c.1950s said to his torturer: “You have not been created to become a torturer, a man who kills. You have been created to become like God, with the life of the Godhead in your heart.” these words struck a chord with his captor who went on to become a Christian. The stories of the saints and martyrs aid us in realizing our potential to stand apart from the world. Individuals who felt the same struggles of fear and desire that we do. Let the stories of these saints give us courage my friends.

Many Copts possess the small cross tattoo on their wrist that is cause for much speculation by the civilian majority. An enduring symbol to mark us as “other” and a tangible, unapologetic way of saying, “I know what I believe.” My mother, lovely Egyptian woman that she is, always requests I keep a cross on my person (preferably a golden heirloom from Egypt). However, what are tattoos, golden crosses, or even the name Christian without the action behind them? It was beautifully explained to me that a Christian is one who looks for the image of Christ in every soul they meet. No doubt easier said than done. At times I would like nothing more than to walk in the way of the world, to curse out those who have wronged me and not look back. But where would that life lead? To a hollow existence, living off one immediate satisfaction to the next. God calls us to a higher understanding than this, to choose the path of most resistance that would only ever be navigable with Him. A path richer than all the treasures of King Tut.

“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.” God told us we would be persecuted in His name and although we mourn for the families of the martyrs and the souls of the transgressor, we count it a blessing that those martyrs are finally at peace with their Heavenly Father and are spared the suffering of this world. We pray in their intercessions and empathize with these people who felt the same gnawing hunger for God in this world that pulls at us left and right. So consider the feeling of discomfort in this world a blessing and evidence that you seek a greater connection.

The feeling of isolation is heartbreakingly common for a world with so many social avenues. Another lost soul cannot fill that wanting inside of you. Uplifting people are a blessing and a necessity to be sure, but at the end of the day God wants you to lean on Him. Only He can supply that infinite love and understanding that come from knowing every thought, dream, and heartache of His children. Turning to the very world that left you with these feelings of loneliness and despair would be like running back into a burning building because the air outside felt a tad stifling. I understand why our first instinct is to distract ourselves with worldly entertainments, to distract us from emotions we are afraid or too exhausted to face. It is easier to grasp the tangible smartphone in front of us than to speak our hearts to what feels like thin air. I can with full confidence say that you are not speaking to thin air. God knows every word even before they cross your mind. I also know that sometimes, to be told these truths is not enough and the truth does not resonate until a moment of clarity is had after bawling your eyes out for five minutes, or Ṭasbeha at 12:00 p.m. where the world seems to stand still and His love and grace seem to radiate from the soul.

“When confusions my companion and despair holds me for ransom I will feel no fear cause that I know that you are near.”

1 2 Cor. 12:9.
2 2 Tim. 1:7.
3 Heb. 13:5.
4 Jn. 15:18.
5 “Shoulders” for King & Country.
My sin, my joy,  
These worldly ways  
Have caused me to veer far  
Go astray  
I've left the Captain behind  
Manned my own ship  
My life, my future, is within my grip  
I'm on a mission to find my treasure  
Captain said that's also where my heart will be  
But little did I comprehend  
I needed His light to steer and see  

I've brought myself to the valley of death  
Though in my mind it's the promised land, full of riches and wealth  
My illusion  
My delusion  
My mirage  
My facade  
I lean on myself instead of You as my rod  

Wandered into the darkness deep  
Terrified and trembling on this mountain so steep  
Trying to reach the top to feel fulfilled  
But when I reach my high I feel the chill  
The chill from my choices, it's harder to breath  
Beginning to suffocate, I cannot heave  
Loosing my footing  
I've lost my ground  
I'm falling  
I've fallen  
Without a sound  

Slowly...  

I remember the vanity  
And the lusts  
I recall my pride  
Now acquainted with dust  

I've fallen  

Who hears the pain of a bleeding heart  

The sound of tears falling before they start  
I've hit the ground so hard  
No strength in my soul  
Shameful as the one who dipped in Your bowl  

I liken the rain from this storm  
To the tears falling from my eyes  
Saddened I've brought upon myself my own demise  
I gaze before me in the puddle so clear  
I'm Judas  
I've betrayed You  
Lord are you near  

You've got the remedy  
The power  
To heal my ailing soul  
To save me  
from the fire  
And from the depths of Sheol  

I need refuge from this wreck  
From this sunken ship  
I need haven  
Give me healing  
Release me from these whips  
Of self infliction, affliction  
Torment, vivid pain,  
Cleanse me with Your precious blood  
As for the earth does the rain  

Make me whole  
Sew me up  
Revive me  
So that I can once again worthily sup  
With You in Your kingdom  
Full of beauty and wonder  
Your Power roaring like thunder  

Bring me back to You  
Your prodigal son, Your lost sheep  
Please accept my plea  
Your Word, help me keep  

This is a cry for earnest repentance  
To help me avoid death's final sentence  
I can't do this alone, with You I will walk  
My faithful, unconditionally loving Shepherd and rock
Q: What happens when one is crucified with Christ according to the book of Galatians?

Answer:
“It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” (Galatians 2:20).

General Q & A

Q: What sacrifices must I make in order to be a Christian?

Answer:
None! Christianity is a fulfilling faith. We lack nothing in Christ. We gladly and joyfully offer Him a sacrifice of praise and a contrite heart.