

In Return for Your Life

Matthew 16:21-28

All of us want to be great and faithful Christians, but do we all want to pay the price for discipleship? We want the crown, but not the cross. In our scripture immediately after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus turned his attention to the cross—his own cross and the one appointed for each person who follows him. "From that time on" suggests that the cross started to make sense only in connection with knowing Jesus as "Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16). Only if Jesus is who he says he is—and he identifies himself as Savior and Son of God by blessing Peter's confession—does the gospel build to redemptive climax and hope-filled conclusion.

Peter did not grasp that the Christ must suffer and be killed. Either he failed in his anguish to hear the end of the sentence ("and on the third day be raised"), or the notion of resurrection was beyond his imagining. But Jesus "began to show" his disciples that suffering and death awaited him in Jerusalem. Rather than simply "telling" them or "explaining" it to them, perhaps he accompanied this crucial teaching on his mission with action, illustration, gesture, or physical demeanor. Jesus *showed* people the gospel in all he did and said. His was a full-bodied revelation of God, not just lecturing but revealing in parables, healings, exorcisms, and acts of compassion and confrontation.

Jesus made his future of suffering so painfully clear; (**Charles Hambrick-Stowe**) but we have to hand it to Peter! How many of us would have the audacity to rebuke Jesus? Having just been given the "keys of the kingdom" with the power to bind and to loose (v. 19), Peter sought to use his newfound sense of authority to bind Jesus! He clearly had a certain narrative in his mind about what it meant for

Jesus to be the Messiah, and Jesus was suddenly going off script. The Messiah is supposed to come and restore the Jewish kingdom by overthrowing oppressive empires, but Jesus was talking about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. So Peter stepped in to correct and save him: "God forbid it, Lord!" With my new authority I will not let you and the promise of the coming kingdom be destroyed! How could the Anointed One be tainted by suffering and death?

It is easy to shake our heads in disbelief at Peter, but has this not been the struggle of the church throughout history? How do we keep that which bears God wholly pure and undefiled by the world of sin, suffering, and death? For the Roman Catholic Church in its recent history, this has meant asserting that Mary, the mother of God (*theotokos*), must have been immaculately conceived. While we Protestants do not make this assertion, is there not sometimes a sense in Lutheran and Reformed traditions that Martin Luther and John Calvin were immaculately conceived—not in a biological sense, of course, but in the sense that theologically they give us the pure doctrine of God descended straight from heaven, whether it is in the Ninety-five Theses or in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*? We might say the same about the Biblicism of American fundamentalism.

As the Reformers rightfully protested against the excesses and corruption of the Roman Church, they quickly realized that they themselves were not immune from corruption. As a result, they recovered Augustine's notion of the invisible church—true and elect believers united in supernatural fellowship around the world—in contrast to the visible church filled with conflict, corruption, scandal, and all the humiliations that typical local congregations go through. Many of us are tempted to dwell abstractly on the purity of the invisible church rather than endure in love the mess of the visible church.

Again we hear Peter, "God forbid it, Lord!" This kind of suffering must never happen to you because you are head of the pure and holy invisible church. You

cannot go through the tears and the sweat, the blood, and the muck of humanity, because you are God—you have to save us! But Jesus—who had affirmed Peter's testimony—issued the startling rejoinder, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (v. 23). The tables had turned. Peter was attempting to protect Jesus in order to protect himself, but Jesus made clear he was living into and reinterpreting his identity as Messiah by suffering and dying with his people.

Jesus was clearly not the professor or scribe who taught from a distance, but the good shepherd who lived with, led, and fed his sheep, healed their wounds, protected them from their enemies, slept in the same fold as them, and was willing to lay down his life for them. He was to undergo great suffering at the hands of elders, chief priests, and scribes because he desired to be the shepherd of the real, messy, flesh-and-blood church instead of the invisible, pure, and undefiled church. If we want to follow him, then we are also going to have to bleed, weep, sweat, and die, "for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (v. 25). **J in S. Kim**

Astonishingly, Jesus offered crucifixion to those who would follow him, who would have life. In a bold assertion of God's boundary-crossing grace, Jesus took as his logo the grim killing tool of the world's superpower: "Take up [your] cross" (v. 24). (**Charles Hambrick-Stowe**) To "take up one's cross" is a vivid metaphor for self-denial that may include, but is not restricted to, martyrdom. The condemned criminal who carried the horizontal bar of the cross to the site of crucifixion would have been subjected to taunts, humiliation, rejection, and shame before finally enduring an agonizing death. The disciple who "takes up the cross" is one who is willing to surrender pride, ego, status, comfort, and even life for the sake of the kingdom of God. **Mitchell G. Reddish**

If you want to follow me, deny yourself; if you want to find your life, give up your life. Jesus died in our place, but not to exempt us from the cost of discipleship. The gospel is an invitation to death before it bestows new life. This is how God's love will redeem and resurrect sinners from the futility of life devoted to profit in this world. Because Jesus died for our sin, we may now give ourselves to him and die to the powers that possess and control us. Atonement that is *for* us will *involve* us. **Charles Hambrick-Stowe**

The amazing thing about the gospel is precisely that God chose to become *not* so immaculately conceived by coming as a despised Jew in the Roman Empire, a lowly Galilean among the Jerusalem establishment, living in the mess of humanity and ultimately becoming a victim of our collective dysfunction. If we are going to become followers of Jesus, we cannot become any less vulnerable with, toward, and for others. Our concern is not first and foremost the purity of the church or the rightness of our doctrine, but our willingness to follow Jesus into the world and onto the cross. We do not control God or give Jesus the conditions to our discipleship; instead, we risk contamination and insecurity by releasing the need to protect our own lives and institutions.

Once we no longer cling to our respective concepts of immaculate conception, the invisible church, then we are confronted with having to enter as fully into life as Jesus did. Therefore, as the body of Christ, we participate in the ongoing reformation of the church—not primarily into greater purity or holiness, but into solidarity with Jesus' own way of life in this world. Instead of binding Jesus for our own self-preservation, the church must faithfully follow and bear witness (*martyrs*) to him, "even at the risk of losing its life." It is precisely in participating in this way of Christ's body in the world that we find ourselves being resurrected to new life. **J in S. Kim**

Jesus says we must be willing to sacrifice to have real life. There is a story of a runner who learned this lesson. She ran the 26-mile Boston Marathon despite pain and discouragement. She was willing to endure the pain to reach her goal. Jesus says we may endure pain to be his disciple. This is a hard invitation to accept, but he says he will make good on his promise. Although new life during this life will not be an easy life, the day is coming when the "Son of Man" will appear in glory and "will repay everyone for what has been done" (v. 27). That is, "he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev. 21:4). The power of his promise of full redemption is unmistakable. **Charles Hambrick-Stowe**

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