

THE CHRIST AND THE COST

MARK 8:27-9:1

The ministry and miracles of Jesus within the predominately non-Jewish regions have brought his outward journey described throughout the first half of Mark's account (1-8) to a close, and now Jesus is set to begin his inward journey back into the heart of Israel which culminates within the walls of Jerusalem and around the area of the great Jewish temple.

This particular section in chapter eight is the transitional section in the book of Mark. It culminates the first half of the book which is full of the miraculous and the manifestations of Jesus' authority over demons, disease, nature and even death. Now, we come to a decisive point in the narrative in which Jesus' disciples must determine and confess who they truly believe Jesus to be before they continue "on the way" with him into the suffering, rejection and death that awaits him in Jerusalem. He has manifested his majesty, and now he must fulfill his mission.

Up to this point in his ministry, the disciples haven't fully understood the person, plans or purpose of Jesus and his message. They are beginning to have a clearer vision of Jesus, but like the blind man in Bethsaida, they still aren't seeing things clearly (8:22-26).

Their distorted vision of Jesus becomes apparent when we see Peter's answer to Jesus' question regarding who the disciples believe him to be, but then Peter's rebuke of Jesus when he begins to explain what that means. Peter answers correctly in declaring that Jesus is "the Christ" but then acts wrongfully out of his obvious misunderstanding concerning the implications of what it means for Jesus to be "the Christ".

You see, Peter, like many Jews of his day, had grown up with a perception and a particular expectation of who the Christ would be and what the Christ would do. Peter was anticipating Jesus to be the perfect Savior King who was eternally chosen by God to deliver Israel from their enemies and establish eternal peace and prosperity for Israel as a nation and people upon the earth. He was expecting deliverance from Roman rule and a return to glory as a nation with a new King of Israel reigning powerfully like the days of David and Solomon.

Peter looked to Jesus as a Savior but misunderstood what kind of salvation was truly needed. Peter looked to Jesus as the King of kings but misunderstood what kind of Kingdom he was going to establish.

How often do we look to Jesus as a Savior from things like sickness or suffering and yet misunderstand that he is ultimately our Savior from the reign, curse and bondage of sin? How often do we call Jesus our Lord and King and yet misunderstand that his lordship demands our unrelenting allegiance?

Jesus says, "Yes Peter. You're right in saying that I am the Christ. I am the King eternally chosen and promised to come, but I am not the type of king you're expecting. I am the King who is coming to die for his people."

Peter (and the rest of the disciples) were expecting power, peace and prosperity for themselves and the people of God. However, Jesus informs them that power was going to be gained through suffering rather than a sword. Peace was going to be gained through pain. Prosperity was going to be gained through great loss. And the fullest life was going to be gained through death. This was a King and a Kingdom truly not of this world.

And in the midst of their confusion, we see the way in which the wrong perspective on Christ as King will lead us into a wrong perspective on our own lives as his Kingdom people. Jesus is the Christ who must suffer the cross, and therefore following him will come with a cost.

A Confession

Now, in observing this passage, we might take note that the phrase "on the way" is mentioned eight times over the next five chapters signifying that Jesus is now set and focused on the predetermined course of God's plan of redemption through his death and his resurrection. Jesus is "on the way" to Jerusalem. Jesus is "on the way" to the cross. Jesus is "on the way" to his predetermined death. And so Jesus is asking his disciples a question concerning their allegiance to him before they follow him "on the way" to what their allegiance would inevitably cost them.

Jesus asks this question in two parts (8:27-29). He first forces the disciples to consider the popular opinions about who he is before forcing them to make a personal decision in light of these opinions confessing who they in themselves believe him to be. This is the central question of Mark's gospel and indeed the central question of every gospel presentation.

Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

Before they are to continue "on the way" any further, Jesus forces the disciples to separate themselves from the crowds and opinions surrounding him and definitively decide for themselves through their own understanding and experience who this is that they are following and whether or not they're willing to continue following him no matter the cost.

You see, following Christ often gives us more than we were asking for and sometimes requires more than we were expecting to give. Therefore, we are not to remain wishy-washy or wavering among the popular opinions about who Jesus is. We must settle in our heart, mind and soul who we believe him to be and confess what this means for us moving forward.

His identity as the Christ means that salvation and the Kingdom of God is no longer a future hope but an already present reality that was fulfilled in his work on the cross and will be consummated in his return in glory. We live as citizens of the Kingdom under Christ's reign as King here and now. Those who confess Jesus as the Christ (Lord and Savior) inevitably have then confessed what they must become. And so, Christ calls everyone who desires to be a citizen of his Kingdom to be willing to suffer and sacrifice their lives for the sake of the King's Name and for the sake of the King's Gospel.

A Call

The disciples had rightly identified Jesus as "the Christ," but Jesus goes on to teach them what this means for himself and for them as well. He describes that being the Christ means that he "must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31).

It's interesting to quickly note that Jesus was not killed at the hands of barbarians but rather at the hands of those who upheld the highest standards of morality and service to God.

James Edwards writes:

"Jesus will not be lynched by an enraged mob or beaten to death in a criminal act. He will be arrested with official warrants, and tried and executed by the world's envy of jurisprudence - the Jewish Sanhedrin and the principia iuris Romanorum."¹

Often times, those who cause the most harm and trouble for Christ and his gospel are those from within the ranks of religion and Christianity. The worship of morality can lead to a blinding madness.

Now as we've mentioned, Peter and the rest of the disciples thought this was outrageous that Jesus was saying he "must suffer many things, be rejected... and be killed." How could the King of all kings who was to come and make all things right among the world and for the people of God indeed make all things right by suffering and dying?

Peter had found this teaching so unthinkable and contrary to what he believed that it led him to also do the unthinkable and rebuke Christ Himself!

The disciples couldn't see that Christ's death and resurrection would benefit them infinitely more than a revolution and deliverance from Roman rule. The expectation was a conquering Christ; a crucified Christ was inconceivable. The disciples had assumed that they were on the way to triumph and power when in fact they were "on the way" to great loss and eventual persecution.

Instead of calling his followers to take up a sword and prepare for war, Christ calls his followers to take up a cross and prepare to die. Today, many in our culture view *taking up our cross* as overcoming tough times or inconveniences in life. However, imagine what a phrase like *take up your cross* might imply for Jesus' original followers living in the first century under Roman rule.

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 254

The cross in the first century was a horrific instrument of cruelty, shame and dehumanization designated for the lowest of criminals and the most hated among the Roman Empire. The order from Jesus to *take up your cross* was a scandalous call for one's total allegiance and radical relinquishment of everything to Jesus as Lord.

The call to follow Christ cannot be compartmentalized as *a part of our life* or *a part of who we are*. It is either a total abandonment of everything for the sake of Christ and for the sake of his gospel or a total abandonment from Christ into the eternal consequences of being cast out from his Kingdom. The subjects of the Kingdom are to follow their King into battle and this battle is won through being slain rather than slaying others.

How many of us like Peter find this call to be outrageous and utterly inconceivable? How many of us come to Christ expecting an elevated status in life rather than the humility of suffering, rejection and even death?

Many people choose to focus their attention on more uplifting passages of Scripture and ignore this important passage at the very heart and crossroads of Jesus' ministry with his first disciples. But these words cannot simply be ignored. If this is truly the cost of following Jesus then how many of us, if we're honest, find this to be an unthinkable and impossible call to actually undertake?

A Cross

The truth of the matter is that we will never be able to lovingly and submissively surrender to a King who orders us to *take up our cross* until we come to see that this same King has willfully taken up a cross first and foremost for us.

Suffering and selfless sacrifice is the way of salvation, but it is a way paved before us with the blood of Jesus himself. If taking up his cross has promised us eternal life then taking up our cross is simply a way to receive this promise. In Christ, it is no longer the impossible demand but the incredible reward.

If Christ came as a King reigning and ruling on a throne then we would be forced to submit to him out of obligation and because we have to. However, in coming as the King who first gave his life as a substitutionary sacrifice for his own people then we can submit to him out of a heart of true love and total trust. What a tremendous burden it would be to *take up your cross* for a king simply telling you to do so. However, what a tremendous encouragement it is to know that the King who calls us to *take up our cross* is the One who *took up a cross* first on our behalf.

The death and resurrection of Christ has proven that the worst thing that can happen to you in this life is in fact the best thing that could happen to you. Death becomes the doorway into the Kingdom and household of God. Taking up a cross becomes an instrument that brings eternal life rather than just an instrument symbolizing an earthly death. The cross of Christ has secured the ultimate deliverance and victory over humanity's most formidable foe – death itself.

The apostle Paul expresses this hope to the Corinthians when he writes:

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory... O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:53-55)

Christ indeed has come as the conquering King, but he conquers with a cross. For what could we possibly give him in return for the gift of eternal life that he paid for with his own life? May the Christ and his cross captivate our hearts to continue following him *on the way* to his Kingdom no matter what it may cost us.