

Cross Before Crown

Matthew 16:21-28

Peter makes the great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (Matt. 16:16). Christ will build His church on the rock and the gates of Hades don't stand a chance (16:18). It's exciting to hear the apostles will teach and rule, bind and loose, that the gospel and the people of God will be victorious in the world. But now Jesus lays out what He will do and it sounds so much like failure that Peter rebukes Him. And it's not just Jesus. All of His followers must take up their crosses. The way to life is through death; the only way to receive the crown is by means of the cross.

The Plan

From Caesarea Philippi Jesus begins to unfold the plan. We don't know exactly when Jesus came to realize His mission was to die and rise, but it's at this point that He starts telling His disciples. Despite His incredible power over nature, unmatched teaching and correcting, His ability to heal and forgive, the elders, chief, priests and scribes will inflict evil upon and ultimately kill Him, and He'll be raised the third day (v. 21). If you've been reading the gospel of Matthew to this point it makes sense to shout "Why?!" The first word translated "Far be it" (*hileos*) in verse 22 is sometimes rendered "God forbid it" and more literally is "merciful" (v. 22). Peter is saying that Jesus doesn't trust the Father for the right outcome and instead should look to the Father for deliverance from any such trouble. But not only did God not forbid for Jesus to go the cross, He absolutely predetermined it in every detail, which Peter will come to preach: "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it" (Acts 2:23-24). Why did Jesus have to die? Why can't He just keep teaching, healing, restoring, and overcoming His enemies with signs and wonders? If Jesus is going to conquer death, He has to die. If He is going to save you from your sin and the grave to which it leads, He has to die in your place and rise again. This is how the gospel works. We know that this was the only way to do it because Jesus asked the Father if there was any other way possible: "He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will'" (Matt. 26:39). We don't like evil and suffering, and many name it something that prevents them from believing in and trusting God. They say He is either not good because He allows evil to exist, or not powerful (that is, not God) enough to prevent it. But if there is no God, what is evil? In a godless universe there is no transcendent absolute standard of right and wrong, no ruler to measure Him by. In order to attack God for ethical failure you have to assume what can only come from Him—His own goodness. Jesus came to destroy sin and death, but in order to do so while saving us, He had to take it head on. He had to do it from the inside. He had to represent you and have your sins placed upon Him, be swallowed by death, and burst out of the grave three days later with the keys of death and Hades in hand (Rev. 1:18). "He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him" (Is. 53:5).

Satanic Opposition

Peter's response goes further than trying to understand how this works. He takes Jesus aside to rebuke Him. First, we see that you never sit Jesus down to give Him the come-to-Jesus treatment. Peter is humble and wise enough to confess the true identity of Jesus the Messiah and Son of the living God. He is also proud enough to try to explain to Him that He will not suffer and die for His people. This context makes plain how Satanic his response is. We think of occult practices or highly visible 10-commandment breaking sins

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as devilish, but Jesus says “Get behind Me, Satan!” (v. 23) because Peter opposes His plan to suffer and die. Peter must get behind because the cross is front and center and no one will stand in His way. The last time someone tried this move was the devil in the wilderness. He tempted Jesus to use His power to fulfill the desires of the flesh, to test God, and to receive all the kingdoms of this world by worshiping Satan (Matt. 4:1-11). Both enemies and well-meaning friends tried to get Jesus to abandon His suffering-and-death wish. People today oppose the truth of the cross, the idea that Christ had to suffer and die for His people. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent’” (1 Cor. 1:18-19).

Find Your Life

Having heard what Jesus has to do to save us, He lays out what we must do to follow Him: “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (v. 24). The apostles don’t yet know how He will die, but they know crucifixion is an instrument of death and public humiliation. People who died on Roman crosses were naked, shameful criminals and an object lesson of what comes to those who cross the empire. Following Christ necessarily involves suffering but this is not the end of the story: “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (vv. 25-26). If you would choose your life over Christ, you have lost Him and will lose your life as well. But if you would rather have Christ and death than life without Him, then you will have Him and find your life as well. This applies to physical death and eternal life, but it applies to your earthly life now. Though eleven of the twelve disciples would die martyr deaths, the vast majority of Christians do not. So how do we lose our lives now and gain Christ? We die to ourselves, to our sinful and selfish desires. This is what Jesus means by “deny”, and it applies all day every day. You are told *ad nauseum* to believe in yourself, trust yourself, focus on yourself, help yourself, work on yourself, and above all care for yourself. Martin Luther said the state of sinful man is *incurvatus in se*, curved in on oneself. Jesus requires the exact opposite: deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me. This is how you find your life. You forget about yourself—your selfish desires and accompanying insecurities—and find joy and life in Christ. This is daily dying as we are always engaged in the fight against sin, and therefore daily resurrection of living and walking by faith in Christ. Death is the way to life. Jesus didn’t die so that we don’t have to. He died so that we would die with Him and lives so that we would live with Him. Dying this way is no loss to our persons as Screwtape says: “When He talks of their losing their selves, He means only abandoning the clamor of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever.” Death is not the worst thing. Clutching at your life in a vain effort to gain the world or anything in it while losing your soul is the worst life. We are not saved by works, but we are rewarded (v. 27). Where do you need to die? Do you want your children to live for Christ or to be comfortable? Find your life by losing it for Christ’s sake. You will never look back.