

Introduction

This article is based on Mark chapter 8, verse 31 through to chapter 9 verse 8. It would be helpful if you read the section from Mark.

Our subject is *the way of the cross for Jesus and his followers*. For many these verses are familiar. Yet 'apparent' familiarity can rob us of the power and depth of a passage. Do we really understand what the way of the cross meant for Jesus? Do we really understand what the way of the cross means for us, as his followers? This material comes alive in the culture in which we are living. Taking up your cross, suffering for the gospel's sake, is now closer to home as we shift from abnormal to normal Christian experience.

Context in Mark's Gospel

The context in Mark's Gospel is Peter's confession of Christ. In light of his teaching and evidence of identity, in answer to Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ" (8.29). You are God's Messiah, God's King, come to rescue his people. What a marvellous confession. Yet Peter's vision is still blurred. He does not yet see things clearly. There's more he needs to understand about Jesus, about the nature of Jesus' messiahship. That's why, verse 30, 'Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about Him.' Before the disciples can speak about Jesus, they need to be absolutely clear in their understanding about Jesus and what He has come to do. That is true for us. Before we can speak *of Him* we need to be absolutely clear *about Him*.

The way of the cross for Jesus (8.31-33)

As the Messiah, Jesus must go to the cross, suffer and die, and then be raised to life.

Principle (v31)

Verse 31: 'He [Jesus] then began to teach them [the disciples] that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again.' This would have come as a real shock to the disciples, not least because Jesus refers to himself as the 'Son of Man'. Peter and the other disciples knew the Scriptures of the Old Testament and their minds would have immediately gone to Daniel 7, the glorious vision of 'one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed' (Daniel 7.13-15). What a magnificent vision of the power, authority, dominion and rule of the son of man. This is the kind of text Peter and the others would have lived and breathed, held on to in anticipation of the coming Messiah. And now the Messiah has come, and He is calling himself the Son of Man, but He is saying that He has to die – a real shock to the disciples. It is true that the vision in Daniel 7 would be fulfilled; the Son of Man will have authority and glory, power and dominion. But first, the Son of Man, the Messiah must die, He must suffer and die on a cross. Later in Mark (arguably the key verse in the Gospel) Jesus says: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10.45). The death of Jesus, the Son of Man was the price of our forgiveness. Stuart Townend's hymn captures this powerfully:

*This, the power of the cross,
Christ became sin for us,
took the blame, bore the wrath,
we stand forgiven at the cross.*

The way of the cross for Jesus was necessary for our salvation. If Jesus had not become sin for us, not taken the blame and borne the wrath we would not stand forgiven.

Peter's response (v32)

Verse 32: '[Jesus] spoke plainly about this, and Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.' At this stage, it was too much for Peter to accept Jesus must die. He rebuked Jesus, put Him down: 'No Jesus,

it's not going to be this way. The way of the cross is not for you!

Jesus' response to Peter (v33)

Strong words from Peter and even stronger words from Jesus in response: 'But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, He rebuked Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" He said, "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (v33). We can imagine Peter, deeply hurt at the Lord's words, slinking away to the back of the group. Yet the strength of Jesus' words, his brutal honesty with Peter, only because the Lord Jesus is determined that Peter, the other disciples, we, understand the necessity of the way of the cross for Jesus.

At this point we might have expected here some soothing words from Jesus to encourage Peter and the others. That will come, but not yet. First Jesus has more to say.

The way of the cross for Jesus' followers (8.34-38)

The way of the cross is not just for Jesus, it is for all who would follow Him.

Principle (v34)

Verse 34: 'Then [Jesus] called the crowd to Him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" Jesus does not ask of us anything He has not done himself. The way of the cross He calls us to, is the way He walked. The fact that Jesus called the crowd to Him along with his disciples is very important. He is making the point that there is one brand of Christian discipleship: "If *anyone* would come after me..." The way of the cross is for all who would follow Jesus. It is not a particular brand of Christian discipleship, in the sense that there are others that avoid the way of the cross. There is one brand, one path for all. Indeed, the way of the cross is the authenticating mark of what it means to be a true follower of Jesus.

There are two things Jesus calls his followers to do.

- i) To deny self
- ii) To take up their cross

To deny self means a radical reversal in the way that I live. It is a radical renunciation of 'me' as the centre of my life; to God and others as centre of my life. To deny self is a radical shift from self-serving, self-advancement, self-satisfaction to total submission to God and a servant-hearted attitude that looks to the interests of others. To deny self is to submit to God and serve others, to love God and to love others. When a Christian really lives like that, it is a powerful thing. When I am no longer driven by my ambitions, but my ambitions become devotion to God and others, then I am an effective disciple of Jesus in the advance of his Kingdom.

Jesus not only calls his followers to deny self but to take up their cross: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and *take up his cross*..." To take up your cross means to suffer for Jesus, to suffer for the sake of the advance of the gospel. Likewise, Paul's instruction to Timothy is that '...everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim.3.12). Taking up your cross and being persecuted is the Christian's life. There are no exceptions.

Persuasive logic (vv35-37)

If verse 34 is the principle, verses 35-37 the persuasive logic as to why it is worth it. The life Jesus is calling us to is not easy so why should we follow Him?

Verse 35: 'For whoever wants to save his life (that is, say 'no' to Jesus, 'no' to denying self, 'no' to taking up your cross in this life) will lose it (eternal judgement), but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel (that is, say 'yes' to Jesus, 'yes' to denying self, 'yes' to taking up your cross in this life) will save it (eternal life).

Verse 36: 'What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?' What good is it to say 'no' to Jesus, 'no' to denying self, 'no' to taking up your cross in this life, even if you gain the whole world – success, reputation, wealth – yet forfeit your soul and face an eternity in judgement?

Verse 37: 'Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?' If you say 'no' to Jesus now, when you face Him on judgement day, as we all will, what will you offer Him then in exchange for your soul? Will you offer Him the reputation or the possessions you amassed in this life? Will you offer Him your moral uprightness? None of it will count for a thing. The only thing we take from this life that counts is a soul secure in Jesus or not. Eternal life if we say 'yes' to Jesus now, in this life. Eternal judgement if we say 'no'.

That is persuasive logic. Compare this life with all eternity. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul for all eternity? Saying yes to Jesus now, saving our souls, denying self, taking up your cross to advance Christ's Kingdom and his gospel, is worth it a thousand times over, ten thousand times over, with everlasting glory ahead of us.

*Yes, when this heart and flesh shall fail,
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil,
a life of joy and peace.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise,
than when we first begun.*

Will it be worth it? It will be worth it ten thousand times over.

Searching challenge (v38)

What stops people from answering the call to follow Jesus? They are ashamed of public loyalty to Jesus. Jesus' words in verse 38 are deeply challenging: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of Him when He comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Digging a bit deeper

It is helpful to dig a bit deeper and ask some practical questions.

(i) Denying self – what does it look like?

What does denying self look like, *practically*? What kind of life-style that denies self should I be aspiring to live more and more as a Christian?

From chapter 9 verse 14 through to the end of chapter 10 Mark describes a Christian life of denying self. It means a life of prayer (9.28-29). We can achieve nothing in our own strength. As disciples of Jesus in a despairing, disordered world, we need to depend on Jesus. Denying self means to turn from rivalry and ambition and seek to be the very last and servant of all (9.33-35). Practically that means welcoming and serving the very least (9.36-37). Think of the church. Who, in worldly terms, is the very least, insignificant? Welcome them, serve them. Denying self is also reflected in our attitude to others, in particular our attitude to others in ministry (9.38-40). Is our habitual attitude a critical spirit that puts others down, or one that values the ministry and service of others? In 9.41 Jesus presses his point even more. The true servant hearted disciple values the least significant act of Christian service and the person who does it. To deny self means to take sin seriously (9.42-50). Denying self also means giving up stuff for Jesus. In the account of the rich young man (10.17-31), he walked away from Jesus because he would not give up his wealth. He said 'no' to denying self. He would not give up wealth in his life for treasure in heaven. 'What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?' (8.36) Tragically that is exactly what he did – forfeit his soul! At the end of the account, Peter reflects on the radical demands of denying self, the life of Christian discipleship: "We have left everything to follow you!" (10.28). Materially they had left everything – homes, families, jobs. Denying self means being prepared to give up stuff for Jesus – the loss of security, money, sometimes estrangement from family and friends because we are Christians. The cost of discipleship is real. But the Lord Jesus promises to provide everything we need in this life and eternal life (10.29-30). These are some of the practical ways

we are called to deny self as we follow Jesus on the way of the cross.

(ii) Taking up your cross – what does it look like?

What does taking up your cross look like, *practically*? For many in the world today, as in the early church, the persecution is intense, the loss of livelihood, family, freedom, even life. It is important, that as Christians in our context, we are aware of what is happening to other Christians across the world that we might stand with them in prayer.

In our part of the world, after many generations of ‘abnormal’ Christian experience we are returning to more ‘normal’ times. Opposition is real and if, as a church, as Christians, we are committed to the Word of God, submitting to it in our lives, we *will* experience opposition. The Word of God, the message of the gospel is so counter-cultural. The opposition might be little more than a raised eyebrow, a cynical response. It might be the cost of being marginalised, feeling more and more like a stranger in the world. It might be much more. Are we suffering for Jesus, for the sake of the gospel? The Lord Jesus says we should expect it as normal experience. At its heart, suffering for the sake of the gospel is a factor of our public loyalty to Jesus, especially in evangelism.

(iii) Why does it have to be this way?

Why denying self? Why taking up our cross? Why is it necessary? It is how the Kingdom of God advances. The Kingdom of God advances through the power of weakness. The advance of the Kingdom of God will be opposed with worldly power, but the power of weakness will overcome the power of the world, the progress of the gospel unstoppable, and through it all God is glorified. When the Son of Man was lifted up on his cross, God was glorified, because through that act of utter weakness and humility, millions and millions of people have been brought to glory. The way of the cross for Jesus – that’s how we get to glory. The way of the cross for his followers – that’s what God uses to lead people to Jesus.

Looking forward to glory, listening to Jesus (9.1-8)

We might be persuaded by the logic of verses 34-38, but like Peter we might be reeling. What Jesus does next is kind and encouraging. He takes Peter, James and John away by themselves. They are not the chosen three. At this stage they are the ones struggling most to come to terms with Jesus’ teaching. A bit further on in Mark, James and John ask Jesus for the best seats in glory (10.35-45). Like Peter they don’t yet understand the way of the cross for Jesus and for themselves.

Jesus takes them up the mountain where He is transfigured before them (9.2). What Peter, James and John get to see is what Jesus will be like when He returns at the end of time as the King of Glory. We know that from chapter 9 verse 1 and from Peter’s own reflection on these events in his second letter (2 Peter 1.16-18). They get to see beyond the cross to the returning King of Glory in all his splendour, majesty, power and authority. They get to see beyond the serving and suffering that characterised Jesus’ life to glory. The path of self denial and suffering Jesus walked led to *his* glory. The path of self denial and suffering Jesus walked has led *many millions* to glory. The path of self denial and suffering his disciples walk, will lead *them* to glory and many others to Jesus. It is, therefore, a path well worth walking in this life!

The key to understanding the purpose of the transfiguration in Mark’s narrative is the voice from heaven, the voice of God. Verse 7: ‘Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!” As you look at Jesus is all his glory, the majesty of the returning King of Glory, listen to what He says about how you should live now. Listen to what He has just said about the way of the cross for himself and the way of the cross for his followers:

8:31 – ‘And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again.’

8.34 – “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Conclusion – Peter gets the last word

I want to give Peter the last word. Peter figures prominently in this narrative, but not in a particularly

prominent light. He cannot accept that the way of the cross is necessary for Jesus. He rebukes Jesus and finds himself on the end of an even tougher rebuke. He cannot accept that the way of the cross is necessary for all who follow Jesus. The hike up the mountain hadn't convinced him. A few days later instead of denying self, he would deny Jesus. The bitter tears, the waiting, Jesus' resurrection, Peter's restoration at the end of John's Gospel. "Do you love me?" Jesus would ask Peter three times. "Yes, Lord!" Jesus would tell Peter that he would stretch out his hands, be led where he did not want to go, that he would suffer and die. Then Peter began his ministry at Pentecost. He wrote two letters. It is striking that the two dominant themes in Peter's letters are the way of the cross for the Lord Jesus and the way of the cross for his followers.

Peter writes: 'For you that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Jesus, a lamb without blemish or defect.' (1 Peter 1.18-19)

And later in his first letter he writes: 'Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you...if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.' (1 Peter 4.12-16)