
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen (Romans 1:8)

"What was Peter thinking?" There are many places in the Gospel accounts that cause us to ask that question. Today we hear how Peter dared to take the Lord aside as if he, Peter, were going to school Jesus. **"Mercy, Lord! This will never happen to you!"** Why was Peter so upset? Peter and the other disciples must have seen Jesus' humble ministry of struggles and setbacks as building toward something. This crazy call of following Jesus everywhere he goes, sleeping outside and depending on the hospitality of others *must get better* at some point! By the time we get to the events of Matthew Chapter 16, Peter may have been sensing an upward trend. There were certainly setbacks. Whenever Jesus seemed to be winning all the popularity contests and the crowds were growing, the Lord had a way of whisking the disciples off to somewhere else. That was frustrating. But still, the crowds were growing. Jesus' teachings were getting deeper. The miraculous signs seemed to be growing more and more spectacular. Ministry was on an upward trend that seemed to culminate with Peter's confession of faith that you heard preached about last Sunday. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

At last! Someone said it. Now, what will this Messiah do? The fact of the matter is that Jesus' life and ministry were building towards something but it wasn't what Peter and others expected. **From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day raised to life.** It is easy to imagine that the reason Peter was so upset by these words was that they completely shattered his view of "how things should go." It is easy to imagine Peter thinking that life with Jesus was on an upward trend, because by nature that is how we are tempted to view things. Think about how people viewed the Internet back in the year 2000. "This will make everything better!" And how did that work out? Some things got better, but one could make the case that in the past twenty years the Internet has generally made us dumber, more depressed, more anxious and has made some people much more violent. But...Christians say...the world is evil and you can't control it but as individuals we think "If I work hard, make good choices, and don't give up, at least my life should improve. Right?" You don't have to be a "progressive" to believe that your life, your family, your church, your country, your money should be growing and progressing towards some good goal. In many ways, that is one of the bedrock assumptions of America. But is it real? What recent events in your life have disrupted the upward trend or made a mockery of the upward trend you imagined for yourself? When you understand that the point of history is not progress, the point of history is a cross, then, Jesus says, you are free! You have life as it really exists not as we imagine it. Today we will see that true life is ordered around the cross. His cross is central. Our cross is constant.

The cross of Christ is the central teaching of the Bible. We see it foreshadowed and prophesied throughout the Old Testament (Genesis 3:15, Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, Zechariah 12, 13 et al). Then there are the accounts of our Lord's life. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Two thirds of each Gospel is devoted to Holy Week, making absolutely certain that people understand the reality and the meaning of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. The epistles, the letters of the New Testament that come after the Gospels, tell us how we are to understand our Lord's life and work. They tell us things like, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). And how did he do that? "By his death, he destroyed him who holds the power of death, that is the devil" (Hebrews 2:14) And then, in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, Jesus is constantly pictured as the Lamb who was slain. And the saints in heaven are praising the Lamb who was slain to cleanse us with his blood and make us holy, forgiven, fit for heaven (See Revelation 5, 12, et al).

Given that the cross of Christ is central to everything, we can understand why Jesus would get a little sharp with Peter here. **"Get behind me Satan! You are thinking of human things."** Human things like...I want my life to go a certain way. Watch out! **"If anyone wants to save his life, he will lose it."** All of us, by nature, want to save our lives in the sense of "have life go a certain way." All of us, by nature, want to deny ourselves as little as possible—which inevitably weakens us and makes us prone to sin. It is because we are not good at handling unexpected hardships, we so often fail at self-denial and we harm ourselves and others in the process—for that very reason, the Son of Man says **"I must."** For all your failures and mine, God's Son willingly endured the agony and shame of the cross for our redemption. This was necessary for Jesus to do for you because of God's great love for you. The cross is central to the Bible, because God's great love for the world in Christ is central to the Bible (John 3:16).

Have you ever heard someone use the term "crucial?" "This is the crucial issue." "Crucial" is Latin for "of the cross." In 18th century English, the word "crucial" was used to label things as "decisive" and "of the utmost importance." I find it interesting that so many people use the word "crucial" without knowing

that they are saying what many of our ancestors from three hundred years ago believed: The cross that Jesus carried for us is the center of everything. And to drive that point home, Jesus, in love, promises that the cross we bear for him will be constant. **"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.**

Sometimes Christians present the gospel as if they were selling life insurance. "Don't worry. It will be there when you die." For young, healthy people with no children and limited funds, life insurance is a tough sell. So also, for those who are heavily invested in this life, telling them "Don't worry, heaven will be there when you die" doesn't always make an impression on their heart. Jesus teaches us that cross bearing is meant to happen right now. The cross he gives us to bear is constant, which is another way of saying that our life of sanctification will be a constant struggle. And why would anyone want that? Well, what's the alternative? The next time you are playing mahjong with some of the senior citizens, ask yourself, which of these elderly people do I want to be? Do I want to be the one who talks about how much money my kids make and how big their houses are? I don't care that they never call or come to visit me, I'm just so proud about how busy they are because that means they're successful. Or do I want to be the elderly person who talks about how much my children love me, and check in on me. How they take my grandbabies to church every Sunday and tell the next generation about Jesus. What kind of spouse do you want to be in your middle years? Do you want to be the married couple that comes home to a house of tension and unresolved bitterness? Or do you want to be a couple united in Christ that works through their issues with God's Word and grows in love for God and for each other. What kind of young person do you want to be? Do you want to be a slave to a screen with brainrot who knows every popular song and perversity but doesn't know how to interact with other humans? Or do you want to be the one who stands up straight, looks people in the eye and makes righteous choices and says life giving things, based on the Word of life.

Look around. Not everyone is living that life. Because that life is hard. A life ordered around work and money and pleasure is hard too, but in a very different, soul crushing way. A life ordered around the cross is love, joy, peace, patience kindness gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). And it lasts forever! This is what Jesus gives us right now as we deny ourselves and listen to his Word. And sometimes things do get better! Sometimes you do influence your children or your grandchildren or your spouse or your friends in a positive way. Sometimes that temptation, or that thorn in the flesh that you struggle with does get taken away. Praise God! And sometimes, the answer God gives to the struggling Christian is the same answer he gave to Jeremiah. In our Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah asked why things are so hard. God says, "I will make you harder than the times you are living in. You will be a wall of bronze to these people if you cling to my Word" (Jeremiah 15:15-21). And that's not a bad life either!

I don't want anyone to think that your pastor has been "black-pilled." Christians are not called to be pessimistic and see everything going down the tubes all the time. There is no joy in that. But we're not exactly called to be pie in the sky optimists either. That kind of life is a set up for disappointment. We are realists in the truest sense because we see the center of all reality. The cross of our salvation. With each of us carrying their own unique cross in this life, we are constantly being turned back to Christ to rely on his strength. To use the things of this world with a different "cost-benefit analysis." **What good would it be to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?** Your soul is safe with Christ, your body will also rest secure and be raised on the Last Day. As the Apostle Paul reminded us, the whole creation groans and we groan inwardly, but we await redemption of our bodies, the full enjoyment of what Christ has won for us (Romans 8:18-25). That's where your life is headed. That is the beauty of life ordered around the cross! Amen.