

Following Jesus ... from death to Life!

Matthew 16:21-28

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based on a message by James Douthwaite

Peter thought he had it all figured out. Jesus as the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Savior. It seemed like everything was coming together nicely. Everywhere Jesus went, the crowds were getting larger. And the signs Jesus was doing just kept increasing His celebrity; increasing his popularity - healing the sick, cleansing lepers, making the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak, casting out demons, raising the dead, calming the seas, feeding the multitudes, and preaching the kingdom - that in Him, the kingdom of heaven had come. And it sure seemed like heaven on earth when you were with Jesus.

Oh sure, there were some bumps along the way. Jesus had His naysayers and those who opposed and challenged Him. But He always one-upped the religious types at their games. He was always able to put them down and put them back in their place. No one knew God's Word better than Jesus. No one ever won an argument with Jesus. Yes, life was good with Jesus.

And Peter was feeling pretty good about himself as well. In the verses right before our text this morning, Peter had just made the great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And for this, Jesus had called him blessed! Yes, things were on the right track, and Peter could only be excited about the future and what Jesus would do next. Peter thought he had it all figured out.

So how unexpected, then, how completely out of left field, how absolutely, utterly, 100% wrong were the next words to come from Jesus' lips. *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*

Now, if Peter were a modern-day GPS system, the words coming out of his mouth next would have been what? "*Recalculating!*" Jesus was making a wrong turn here. Speaking nonsense! And Peter - Peter the blessed - Peter to whom Jesus as the Christ *had been revealed to him by the Father in heaven Himself*, as Jesus had said - Peter had to get Jesus back on the right track. So out it comes - the rebuke: *Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never, no way, not in a million years, happen to you. Not gonna happen!*

Jesus had heard this all before. Following the easy way. Following the comfortable way. Following the crowd. Following self. The things of man. The voice of the tempter.

Luke 4 *And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."*

... "To you I will give all this authority and their glory ... If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

... "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here [from the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem], for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you ... lest you strike your foot against a stone." ... And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him, until an opportune time.

Now, was that opportune time, through the mouth of Peter. Time to get reasonable. Time to follow the easy road. Time to follow the road expected. The road to self. The things of man. Temptation. But Jesus recognizes that voice. That voice from of old, first spoken to Adam and Eve in the Garden.

And Jesus turns to Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." The things of the devil. The devil's way. Man's way.

The things of the devil; the things of man are what? Following self. Ease for self. Comfort for self. Glory for self. Whatever self wants. Everything ... for self. Why? Because self is more important than anything else. Self is our native god. And so, Jesus says what?

"If anyone would follow after me, he must what? He must deny himself, [deny his false god, turn from him] take up his cross, and follow me."

Suffer, die, rise? It can't be! "Never! This shall never happen to us! The voice of the tempter. Following the easy way. Following the comfortable way. Following the crowd. Following self. The things of man.

Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. And Peter the blessed, becomes Peter the goat. Peter who thought he had everything figured out, Peter the Ph.D., becomes Peter who couldn't be more wrong.

The Messiah he had confessed, is not the one he had in mind. Jesus must go to Jerusalem and suffer at the hands of His enemies. He must be killed, and on the third day be raised - for you. He must. There is no other way. No other way to save you. from your sins. For our real enemies - sin, death, and the devil are too powerful for us.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

And how often, we think like Peter. "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to ME." Because like Peter, we think we've got it all figured out too. Our plans. Our life. Spouse, family, job, home, success, achievement, retirement. And as a child of God, your Father promised He'd take care of you and all your needs. So it's full steam ahead! Life is good with Jesus.

But then, like Peter, the cross comes. The cross intrudes on all you think you knew; all your plans. All you thought was good and right. So, what do you do? You try to recalculate - figure out how you can throw off that cross and get back on the road to your plans. Or if that's not possible, maybe you rebuke God too, like Peter. "God, why are you doing this to me? This isn't right! This isn't how it's supposed to go."

Oh, but it is. This must happen. For your good. For your life. You can cling to your plans. You can cling to your life. You can cling to the way you think things should be, and throw off God and His cross and His work in your life. You can do that. And many do.

Obey my parents? But they're stupid! (So are my teachers, and my boss ...) Give up my favorite TV show or hobby or activity for my family? Not gonna happen. For my enemy? Never! Forgive? Not after what they did to me! Help my neighbor? Maybe if she'd do something for me once in a while! Repent? But Pastor, you just don't get it. Everyone else is doing it! You can do that, in these and lots of other ways.

But know this too: *whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits [his soul,] his life?*

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. It's common to think that means that Christians have to suffer. It doesn't mean that at all. You might. Maybe even you will. But to take up the cross means more than that. A lot more than that. For Jesus doesn't want you to suffer, He wants you dead. Dead, and then alive in Him.

Dying, to your "I got it all figured out." Dying, to your "it's my way or the highway." Dying, to your clinging to the things of this world, and life ... and living in Jesus. And clinging to Him. Clinging to His forgiveness. Clinging to His victory, which is much bigger than what we see and know here and now. A life; a victory, that will never end, no matter what happens to you here and now.

And so, to pry your fingers, to pry your heart away from the things of this world, to humble your proud mind and your "I got it all figured out" attitude, the Lord allows the cross into your life. Not to hurt you. Not to harm you. Not just to make you suffer. But to help you. To save you. That you die to self. That you rise with Jesus every day, and so live. Really live.

And what does such a life look like? We heard it earlier in Romans 12. *Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ... Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ... Bless those who persecute you ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The things of man. The things of God. Who will you follow? The way of man is to save your life now. Hoard it. Hold on to it. Cling to it. Grasp it. Try to get hold of it for yourself. The way of God is to lose your life. Let it go. Like Jesus in the desert, turning from the tempter's voice; turning from the way of man, and following God, who lost His life for you - so that you might live, forever with Him! Following Jesus ... from death to life.