The Meaning of Following Jesus

Mark 8:31-38

Key Verse: 8:34b, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Last Thursday I met Carsen, a Wash U sophomore, and talked about the true value of human life. This is because these days so many people are dying from the virus, and because of the war between Ukraine and Russia. We started with a question about the origin of life and ended with the meaning and purpose of life. People say that a person’s life is worth the whole world, yet how can we justify the death of so many innocent people in war? I explained God’s sovereignty over human life and world history. We promised to talk more after spring break. What is the meaning and purpose of life? This question has been asked from generation to generation, and still it remains unanswered to those who are not enlightened by the knowledge of God.

In today’s passage, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection to his disciples, who had no idea about it at all. Jesus explains the work of the Messiah, the meaning of his death, and the cost of being his disciples.

First, the work of the Messiah (31-33). In verse 29, when Jesus asked his disciples the question, “Who do you say I am?”, Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” Peter gave the right answer. Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) and the Son of the living God. As we studied in previous chapters, Jesus preached the good news, healed the lepers, and raised the paralytic. He opened the eyes of the blind, drove out demons, and raised the dead. Jesus had compassion on the hungry crowd and fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. Jesus was the good counselor, defender and savior. In John 3 &4, Jesus counselled Nicodemus at night and a Samaritan woman at noon. Jesus defended his disciples who had been falsely accused by the religious leaders. Jesus calmed the storm while his disciples were in the middle of storms. Jesus was the good friend and shepherd for all people around him. All these works of Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah about the Messiah to come. (Isaiah 61:1)

According to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus was pleased with Peter’s answer and promised to build his church based on Peter’s confession of faith. (Mt 16:18) Now Jesus teaches them how to become the Messiah, as Peter had confessed. Look at verse 31. “***He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again***.” According to this verse, the work of the Messiah is to suffer, be rejected by people, die, and rise again. In Jesus’ day, the picture of the Messiah was quite different from what Jesus said. The Messiah must be powerful and glorious like Moses, who had delivered his people from out of Egypt with the mighty power of God. They didn’t even imagine a weak and suffering Messiah for their people.

What, then, does Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection as the work of the Messiah mean? This goes back to the age of Genesis. As you know, when God created this world, it was very good. God repeated this, saying, “It was good! It was very good!” This world was the Garden of Eden, which means the paradise with perfect joy and peace. We don’t need to sing John Lennon’s song, “*Imagine*.” But the first men messed up this world by sinning against God. They fell into Satan’s temptation. This world was cursed and death came into this cursed world. Fear, shame, hatred, and murder began to spread throughout the human world like coronavirus. Do you know why the war between Ukraine and Russia broke out? Russia doesn’t want Ukraine to join NATO, which could become a possible threat to the Russians. Ukraine claims its own national sovereignty and freedom of choice. Russia and Ukraine don’t trust each other. Distrust, fear, greed, and pride gave birth to the war. All these are the fruits of human sin which started from the Garden of Eden. Men had to suffer on this cursed ground to survive and finally die as the price of their sin. The Bible says that the price of our sin is death. (Ro 6:23a) There seemed to be no hope for the fallen men in this cursed world.

But this is not true. When God cursed the serpent, He promised to send the Messiah from a son of a woman. (Ge 3:15) God promised to send a Savior as a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who would save this cursed world and perishing people. The work of the Messiah is to solve men’s sin problem, which brought death to this cursed world. The work of the Messiah is not just to make us rich and successful and provide better living conditions on this earth. The work of the Messiah is to solve men’s sin and death problem and to provide the way for eternal life. The war between Ukraine and Russia will not end until their greed, pride, and selfishness are gone. Their essential problem is sin. The Messiah Jesus must die for our sins on the cross. This is because someone must die to pay the price of our sins. No one could take on this role except the Son of God. There is no one righteous, not even one, no perfect one who satisfies God’s standards for our salvation. So, God sent his One and Only Son, Jesus, who is the perfect God and the perfect man, as the Messiah who satisfies God’s standard.

Jesus suffered and was rejected by those who would not accept him as the Messiah. Jesus died on the cross, shedding his holy blood. His blood, which has the perfect power and validity to cleanse our sins, became the sacrificial offering for our salvation. After his death, he rose again. After his resurrection, he stayed with his disciples for 40 days and then went up to heaven before their eyes. Jesus’ resurrection proves that he is the Messiah who solved our sin and death problem. His resurrection set us free from the power of death and gave us hope for our own resurrection. Jesus said, “*Because I live, you also will live.*” (Jn 14:19)

What was his disciples’ response? Did they understand Jesus’ teaching? Look at verse 32. “***He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.***” Peter rebuked Jesus. This means Peter didn’t understand Jesus’ teaching at all. Just a minute ago, Peter answered correctly by saying that Jesus is the Messiah. But he didn’t understand what the Messiah really meant. Look at verses 33. “***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 concerns of God, but merely human concerns***.” Jesus counter-rebuked Peter, calling him ‘Satan.’ In fact, Jesus didn’t call Peter Satan, but Satan, who was working behind Peter. The work of Satan is to stop the work of the Messiah. The work of Satan is to prevent Jesus from taking up the cross and dying. Satan tempted Jesus in the same way at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Satan showed him all the glories of the world and promised them to Jesus only if he would worship Satan. Satan tempted Jesus to go the easy route without taking up the cross. But Jesus defeated Satan’s temptation by obeying God’s will and dying on the cross.

Jesus corrected Peter from his earthly messianic dream. Peter expected Jesus, his master, to become a powerful leader like Moses. Jesus called the expectations in Peter’s heart human concerns. The concerns of God are to suffer and die and rise again for the sins of the world. The concerns of God are to save perishing souls and to bring the kingdom of God onto this earth as it is in heaven.

Second, the cost of following Jesus (The way of the cross) (34-38) Now Jesus continues to teach them how to follow him as his disciples. He taught them the cost of being his disciples. Look at verse 34. “***Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me***.” Mr. Buddha taught his disciples to empty themselves from all desires in order to follow him. But Jesus taught his disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. One of the most difficult works for all of us here is to deny ourselves. For example, a Christian wife wants her husband to be like Jesus. They seek for and pray for a Christ-like husband. Where, then, can they find a Christ-like husband? In order to become a Christ-like husband, he must get up early in the morning for prayer devotion, quit playing card games, spend time with his wife, clean all the piling dishes before his wife comes home, etc. Without denying himself, it seems impossible to become a Christ-like husband. Here, the cross indicates our duties and responsibilities. For students, they must learn how to manage their time wisely to finish all their homework before they hang out with their friends. Temptations are always coming anytime from anywhere. Following Jesus requires more than this. They must follow Jesus in all aspects of his life, such as his humility, holiness, love, compassion, patience, sacrifice, obedience, and so on. Jesus denied himself to obey the will of God and took up the cross. Jesus repeats, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*."

Look at verses 36-38. “***For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels***.” Jesus teaches us the value of our lives. No one gives in exchange for their life. Here the word ‘life’ is *psyche* in Greek, which means ‘physical life’ or ‘earthly life.’ *Psyche* is contrary to *zoe* in Greek, which means ‘spiritual life,’ eternal life, and heavenly life.” Those who sacrifice their temporary earthly life *psyche* for Jesus and for the gospel will receive *zoe*, which is the eternal and heavenly life. Our *psyche* is important. No one would exchange their *psyche* for the whole world. But after we die, everything that belong to us is useless and unnecessary for our *zoe*. Wise men are those who sacrifice their *psyche* for the sake of *zoe*. The American missionary Jim Eliot was killed by native Indians in the jungle of Ecuador during his mission trip. He died by following the life of Jesus. He sacrificed his life for the sake of perishing Indians. But his death was not in vain at all. One of the Indians who had killed Jim later was converted and became a pastor who evangelized his whole townspeople. The town church was built on the blood of Jim. Jim lost his life for Jesus and for the gospel. Now he lives with the Lord forever in glory and honor in heaven. He wrote this just before he was killed. “*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose*.” Amen!