Mark 8:31-38

31 Then Jesus began to teach the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,\* will save it.36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words\* in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

Hearing Words of Life

Mark Twain once said, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Many of us share his sentiment. There’s a lot in the Bible that can leave us puzzled; there are even verses where the translators must confess that they don’t have a clue what a particular word or phrase means. But those parts don’t make us lose sleep. The parts of the Bible that make us anxious or uncomfortable are **those that speak truths that we don’t really like to hear**, the parts that make your heart race and your blood pressure rise. I remember when I was young and my mother or father would say something like, “Matt, we need to talk to you.” Whenever their talk began with those words, I pretty much knew that they were going to say something that I did not want to hear, but something that my parents knew I needed to hear, and they would say it even though they knew that I did not want to hear it. They were about to share with me some truth that I didn’t want to listen to.

Today, Jesus tells Peter and the disciples and the crowd and us things that we don’t like to hear. We would have had the same emotional reaction to the news that Jesus shares with his disciples, whether or not we would have openly rebuked or challenged what Jesus was saying. Why? Because we would have had the same hopes and dreams that Peter had, hopes that things would keep moving along the same trajectory, that this new movement would continue to grow, that Jesus would continue to heal and feed and teach, and as his own power and influence continued to grow, his followers would enjoy job security that comes with a successful boss. Everyone was happy with the way things were going. So why does Jesus say that he is going to be rejected, arrested, and executed?

I don’t think that Peter would have been quite so upset if Jesus had been just an ordinary man. A leader of a rebellion might tell his followers that he is going to die in battle, and his followers would likely agree with his prediction and offer to die with him in battle. But Jesus is no ordinary leader, and his revolution is not characterized by swords and shields. Jesus’ whole ministry is one of healing where the emphasis is on life and wholeness. Furthermore, Jesus has shown himself to be above the fray. He commands demons, he calms storms, he brings life from death. It makes no sense that his life should end in the way he is predicting. Indeed, if Jesus was going to die in the manner that he predicted, Jesus himself would have to allow that to happen, to will it, **and that is what upset Peter**. Jesus can control his own fate, *so why does he choose to be handed over and killed, particularly when one could easily envision a much rosier scenario?* For a moment, Peter and the disciples must have thought that Jesus had lost his mind; “*Uh…Jesus, have you forgotten what you are capable of doing? Why would you voluntarily be handed over and killed?”* Peter feels a need to pull Jesus aside (“Jesus, can I have a word with you in private…What are you crazy?! We have a mission here. You can’t just give up. Think of all the good that we can do, all the lives we can save, all the sick people we can heal. All the hungry we can feed.”)

Churches, too, can rebuke Jesus. How do they do this? By substituting their own mission for Christ’s mission. There are many churches in every denomination that embrace wonderful programs for many good causes. Bethel also has many worthwhile missions – we recently brought lots of food to St. Paul’s food pantry, we’re planning to prepare and sever a meal for Project Hospitality, we have Sunday School, we’re involved with the Council of Churches, we’ve supported overseas missions, we give to the Methodist Children’s Home, and the list goes on. But only one thing matters: FOLLOWING JESUS CHRIST. Peter and the other disciples could have left Jesus on the very day that he made it clear to them that he was going to be turned over and killed. They could have had their own meeting and decided, “We’re not going to Jerusalem. We can do a lot of good right here in Galilee, and not have to face any real danger. It’s been nice knowing you, Jesus.” And a church too can play it safe, giving without risk, making a mark in the community, offering valuable programs and services and a very beautiful worship service. But is Jesus there, or has gone on to Jerusalem alone, without us?

Jesus doesn’t merely rebuke Peter for attempting to redefine his mission, like Satan tried to do in the wilderness and on the Mount of Olives. Jesus rebukes Peter, then calls the disciples and the crowds together in order to make himself perfectly clear*; “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake,* ***and for the sake of the gospel****,**\** *will save it*.” Jesus is not interested in safe charity. Jesus is hard core. It’s not about giving something; it’s about giving *everything!* It’s not about giving what you think you can spare; it’s about giving extravagantly, not holding back. It’s about the love of God which gives and gives and gives regardless of the cost. It’s about Jesus Christ!

And we have the same problem that Jesus’ disciples have; we think in worldly terms, not in heavenly terms. That’s why Peter jumped all over Jesus for saying that he would be handed over and killed and didn’t even ponder what Jesus meant by “and in three days rise again.” Jesus said it quite openly according to Mark, but what Peter heard was “die,” not “rise again.” Why? Because their experience and ours is that when you’re dead, you’re dead. We *expect* to die, but we don’t expect to rise again. That’s why we are reluctant to take risks, to *lose our lives* for the sake of Jesus and for the gospel.

And what do we do instead? Some try to find a balance between being generous and being selfish, between giving and holding back. Others simply hold back saying to themselves, “This life is all I have; I better get as much as I can from it.” And both end up frustrated because they learn that as much as they try to manage their lives, things happen that fail to meet their expectations. Relationships go sour, a child is born with a condition that will make him extremely dependent on others for his entire life, your company downsizes and your job is eliminated. Things happen that we have no control over, things that don’t seem fair to us. And it’s okay to feel upset, to be disappointed with God for not helping things go the way you had planned; the psalmists felt that way all the time (“Lord, why do you let my enemies put me to shame? When are you going to deliver me? Why have you forgotten me?”) The Bible is full of laments just like our own.

And as we fuss and ask God, “Why? Why? Why?” Jesus stands next to us and invites us to come to Jerusalem, to give up the life that is really no life because we can never truly manage it and to be born into a new life, a life lived for God, full of risk and danger, just like the life we try to cling to, but a life that sees the resurrection and has Jesus with us every step of the way.

1. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/marktwain153875.html#ixzz1o3osFpAe> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)