

March 26, 2021

Read Mark 8

Key verses: Mark 8:35

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.

Let Jesus' Vision Guide Us

Reflecting on my faith journey there wasn't much about the church that appealed to me as a child; my parents used positive reinforcement techniques like giving me a Lifesaver during the worship service (it kept me quiet) or promising a 'drink-with-a-cherry' (a carbonated soda with a maraschino cherry in it) if we attended church on any given Sunday. I didn't learn much, except that a really nice guy named Jesus was killed by a bunch of bullies only to rise from his grave a few days later. It was a fascinating story, but as I grew older I took less and less interest in it.

Until I was a teenager and had accumulated enough dirt on my record to instill a high level of guilt within me. Then I heard Christians tell me that Jesus had died for all those sins I'd committed, and if I just believed in him (I wasn't sure what it meant to 'believe' in him) I would be cleansed of all my dirt, forgiven of all my sins, and have a pretty nice afterlife as a result. It felt good to confess, to trust in God's forgiveness and love, and I truly felt that God was real and that I was transformed.

But something about the whole crucifixion-resurrection formula didn't make sense. What did Jesus' death have to do with *my* sins? And why would God want an innocent man to suffer so horribly for the sake of humanity? And if Jesus died for our sins, why do we still sin? And if we still sin, how are we "saved"? And if Christians who sin are saved, why are non-Christians who *don't* sin *not* saved? And it was under the weight of these questions and the unsatisfactory answers that I was receiving that I left the Church for awhile, only to return when I began to meet Christians who were not only open to my questions but also gracious and loving in their demeanor. They encouraged me to prayerfully read the Bible and not just trust a pastor to tell me what it says and what it means. Since then I haven't stopped.

And I have learned that Jesus came with a message that he called *Gospel* (i.e. good news). The message was not so much that he was going to die to wipe away our sins but that God's kingdom was upon us, and we are *all* invited to be part of that kingdom. How do we do that? We believe in God's infinite love and we follow Jesus (who is now risen!) wherever he leads us. Jesus presented the description of God's kingdom throughout the Gospel writings and he himself lived into that kingdom. And it was his faithfulness to God's calling that brought him into conflict with forces that opposed the kingdom of God, forces that tried to subdue him and dispel the vision that he shared. Our greatest challenge as Christians is to follow Jesus and live into God's kingdom as we communicate it to all people through our thoughts, words, and deeds. Let that be our mission.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me faith to walk in God's kingdom and lead others into it. Amen.