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Lent 2 – Mark 8:31-38 – First the Cross, then the Crown

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He should have known, but his feelings got in the way. He should have seen it coming, but his own ideas about God had to come first. Peter understood very well who this Christ was. He was the Son of God, in the flesh... and Peter couldn't wait for him to start acting like it!

But then Jesus started talking about suffering and dying, and that wasn't the way this was supposed to work! But Peter should have known. I mean, God had been telling people for thousands of years, and planning this from eternity. God had been saying all along that the sole purpose that the Christ would come to this earth wasn't to be a conquering king, but a sacrifice for sin. Jesus wasn't saying anything new in this job description that he gave here for what it meant to be the Christ. First the cross; *then* the crown.

Peter should have known, but *he still just didn't get it*. He and a lot of other people wanted Jesus to be an earthly bread-king so they could be his good-old-boy inner circle, just kicking back and taking life easy, riding his coattails down easy street.

Well, suffering and being killed in Jerusalem on a Roman cross didn't exactly fit that concept. So Peter rebukes Jesus and tries to stop him from talking like that. Thinking he has everyone's best interests in mind, Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to correct him about the path his ministry should take from here on out. But Jesus didn't mince words: "*Get behind me, Satan!*"

See, just beforehand, Jesus had commended Peter for his bold confession: "*You are the Christ!*" But now all of the sudden, it wasn't Peter's faith talking; it was the devil talking through him. Of course the devil wouldn't want to see Jesus die on the cross; that would mean humanity was saved and all their sins were paid for! No, the devil wanted to keep Jesus as far away from the cross as he could, and he used Peter to try to do it.

See, the idea of Jesus hanging on a cross disgusted Peter. He wanted to see Jesus as a king, not beaten and bloody, tortured and dying. And really, isn't it the same for us a lot of times, too? We maybe want Jesus to be our buddy, our BFF, our life coach, someone who gives us a good Facebook quote every

now and then, someone who wants us to be happy and prosperous – we just don't like to see Jesus on *his* terms, because it's not very nice to have to look at him as the Christ who had to suffer and die because of *our* sins.

What Peter didn't understand was that Jesus was interested in so much more than just filling Peter's stomach – he wanted to save his soul, and there was no other way to save sinners than by the perfect sacrifice of the Christ. Satan knew that very well, and so even though he lost against Jesus during their 40-day showdown in the desert, here he came again looking for a rematch. If Jesus had given in to the devil's temptation here to spurn the cross, to spurn his whole Purpose and his Father's Will in order to live in all that glitz and glamour as a worldly king – appealing as that may have been to so many people – there could have been no perfect sacrifice and therefore no salvation for us. Everything could've been lost right then and there – but our Savior was way too loving and way too determined to let that happen. Yes, it would be torture worse than anyone has ever suffered, but only by taking up his cross would Jesus once and for all defeat sin, death, and the devil and free us from their power forever.

But notice that Jesus doesn't stop at Calvary. It seems almost like an afterthought here, but he also promises the disciples that there will be an empty tomb three days later. The devil won't succeed in his temptations; he will finally be crushed, like God promised even all the way back in the Garden of Eden. Jesus will rise victorious, and his resurrection assures us that through faith in Jesus as our Savior, there is something so much better in store for us than just a temporarily privileged life and a bread-king. There is a crown of glory waiting for us in heaven with Jesus and one day we're going to rise, too.

But remember – first the cross, then the crown. See, Jesus has a job description for us, too: "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*" There is a very definite light at the end of the tunnel that is the Christian life, but the journey getting there won't always be easy. Jesus promised that if the world hated and persecuted him, we can be sure it will do the same to us who bear his Name. Now that may sound foolish to a lot of people – why would you put yourself through that? But when we come to understand who Christ really is and that we follow him in faith not just through this life but ultimately to eternal life, then we can see why we bear the crosses that we do here in this world.

See, the world hated Jesus because he confronted them with their sin and called them out of their evil lifestyle. He told them that only by believing in Him could they be saved from hell. But you know sinful people – they don't like to be told that they're wrong; they don't like to be told to change. So they hated Jesus, so much so that they crucified the one trying to save them. They didn't care that Jesus was telling them what they most needed to hear; all they knew was that they didn't *like* it and they didn't *want* to.

And we might not like to admit it, but there's even a big part of us who *are* his followers that feels that same way when Jesus tells us that we have to take up our crosses. Is it not thinking about human concerns rather than the concerns of God when we cry foul to God for the treatment we get as his children in this world? I mean, doesn't Jesus live and reign in this universe? Then why does it seem like all we do is get stepped on and laughed at by the rest of the world? Why, God, am I the one that gets *anceled* for taking a stand against abortion or sexual immorality? Why do people look down their noses at me when I tell them that everything in the Bible is really your Word? Why am I the intolerant one for believing that the only way to heaven is through Jesus?

But are we really coming to grips with what Jesus said here? None of those things are worth selling him out for. A few moments of what might seem like pleasure or peace in this sinful world isn't worth an eternity of separation from God, because apart from Jesus those things are always hollow and fleeting – they never last like we want. In fact, even if we could gain the whole world in exchange for our souls, we would then still have suffered infinite loss rather than gain, because we would have lost Christ.

But friends, even when we don't value our souls like we should and even when in our weakness we try to shirk our crosses, just like Peter did, our Savior still loves us, still forgives us, still motivates us anew to follow him. What he did on his cross and the heaven he won for us makes our crosses bearable and worth the trouble. And so Jesus tells us without apology that his followers must deny their sinful selves and take up their crosses, because that's the only way for a Christian to live faithfully in this sinful world.

So then what exactly did Jesus mean when he said, "*whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it*"? Well, he doesn't want us to have a death wish, if that's what you're thinking. He wants us to die to our sinful natures – that means saying "no" to the desires of that sinful part of us that hates and disobeys God, and saying "yes" to what we know God wants from

us, no matter what other people might do or say or think. That's bearing our crosses, that's suffering for faithfulness to Jesus – suffering physically, but benefiting spiritually.

Being an outsider among a circle of friends because you won't get drunk or join in gossip, dirty jokes, or talking bad about the president or police or anyone else – that might be a cross you have to carry. Not being the most popular family on your weekend traveling sports team because you prioritize worship first – that might be a cross you have to carry. Shifting your work schedule or maybe even looking for a new job so you can care for your family's spiritual lives – that might be a cross you have to carry. Bearing our crosses might not be pleasant, but we bear the cross of Christian faithfulness because it pleases our Savior who bore the cross of sin for us, and because he promises strength to help us through and a reward of heavenly life in the end.

But the truth is, bearing our crosses also has benefits for this life, too. See, just as Jesus' cross was God's plan for our eternal salvation, our cross is God's plan for how to live in truth and love in this sinful world. Bearing our crosses is a way for us to worship God with our lives and testify to our higher calling to people on the outside who don't understand why we don't live like everyone else. It's a mystery of Christianity that only by bearing our crosses does this life take on real meaning and purpose and fulfillment. When we take up our crosses willingly and turn away from sin's guilty pleasures, we're telling people that our relationship with God and our hope for heaven is more valuable to us than all the riches in the world. And the reason we can do that – the reason we can bear our crosses faithfully and cheerfully here – is because we rest on our Savior's certain promise for us and for all people that cross-bearers below will be crown-wearers above.

So people of God, remember: first the cross, then the crown. Life under the cross will be painful sometimes, there's no doubt about it. But be assured that the Lord is with you to help you, and better days are coming. Soon our troubles will be a thing of the past. One day Jesus will take away every cross that comes from being his disciple, and he'll make your life and everything in it right again. One day Jesus is going to wipe away every tear you've shed in service to him and he's going to put on your head a crown of glory. The crown *is* coming. So when the cross seems heavy and the Christian life seems hard, look toward heaven. Know that now is the time for crosses, but soon, soon we're going to get that crown. Amen.